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Testing the Spirits

1 John 4.1-6

Series: Blessed Assurance (Communion Series)

The Village Church

January 4, 2026

I. Introduction

- A. I remember the good old days
 - 1. Now, the “good old days” is a relative term
 - a. It could refer to many kinds of days
 - b. Days which evoke nostalgia of one sort or another
 - 2. And quite frankly, my use of the term “good old days” is said with at least a tinge of sarcasm
 - a. I really don’t want to go back there to those days
- B. The days I’m referring to has to do with research
 - 1. I remember the days when, as a graduate student, I had to collect data for a research project
 - 2. And once I had collected the data, I had to go to the computer center and type the data on punch cards
 - 3. Then I had to submit the punch cards to manager of the computer center who would then have one of the staff put the cards into a machine
 - a. And generate whatever statistical analysis I wanted to use for those data
 - b. Then I would have to come back in a couple of days and pick up the report
- C. It was a time consuming task, from start to finish
 - 1. And the computers we were using were about the size of the Hospitality Room
- D. But not long after, I had a computer in my office at the university
 - 1. And I was able to directly enter data into that computer
 - a. And generate the results immediately
 - b. I never had to darken the doors of the computer center ever again
 - 2. And now, there is more computing power in my phone than there was in the main frame computer we had to use at the university
- E. Now, I would never want to have to go back to the punch card days
 - 1. But those days were good in at least one sense – hence my “good old days” comment
 - 2. The amount of information we had to process was at least manageable
- F. Today, we are bombarded with data from multiple sources, every minute it seems
 - 1. I receive hundreds of emails a day
 - a. And spend way too much time deleting most of them
 - 2. And while I’m happy to do texts on my phone, I’m not on social media

- a. I don't do Facebook
- 3. Now, I don't have any fundamental objection to using Facebook (though the social media in general is probably a net negative in terms of its cultural effects)
 - a. My problem is that I just don't have time for such things
- 4. So with all this information coming at us, it makes me think that the days of punch cards and main frame computers were actually kind-of "good"
- G. All of this is the result in what has come to be known as the **Information Explosion**
 - 1. Just in our lifetimes the world's technological capacity to receive, store and exchange information has increased exponentially
 - 2. And the units used to measure the increase, well, you and I wouldn't understand what those units mean anyway
 - 3. So just take my word for it
 - a. We are being overwhelmed with information
- H. Remember when you got your news in the evening news program
 - 1. And you had three choices – three major TV networks – to choose from
 - 2. Today those three networks can't keep up with the digital age
 - a. Where cable news generates news all day long
 - b. But even now, many people get their news in the many hundreds of podcasts and news feeds
 - 3. How many of you had to consciously work at putting away your phone so you could come and worship God for an hour or so!
- I. But the worst part of all of that information is how much of it can you trust?
 - 1. How much of it is reliable?
 - 2. How much of it is accurate?
 - 3. How much of it is even relevant?
 - 4. And how do you tell if it is reliable, accurate and relevant
- J. "Fake news" and "misinformation" are the words of the decade
 - 1. They are thrown around so much that they are essentially meaningless
 - 2. Much of what people take for granted turns out to have been false or misleading
 - 3. And a lot of what some call "misinformation" turns out to have been true!
- K. Well, even though the information explosion is new in our generation, the issue of determining the validity of the information received is as old as, well, the Bible!
 - 1. Even back in the New Testament times there are warnings about "Fake news" and "misinformation"
- L. **1 John 4:1–6** (ESV) —
 - 1. 1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.
 - 2. 2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,
 - 3. 3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

4. 4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.
 5. 5 They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.
 6. 6 We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.
- M. We return this communion Sunday to our series **Blessed Assurance** which focuses on John's first epistle
1. His purpose in this epistle is stated explicitly near the end
 2. **1 John 5:13** (ESV) —
 - a. 13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.
 3. So, it's one thing to *think* we have eternal life
 - a. But it's another thing to *know* we have eternal life, to be assured of our salvation
 4. And as you recall, John provides a series of tests to make sure we don't have false assurance
 - a. **The Test of Love** – our love of our brothers and sisters assures us of our salvation
 - b. **The Test of Obedience** – our obedience of the commands of Christ further build our assurance
 - c. **The Test of Truth** – our confidence that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God further supports our assurance
 - d. **The Test of Abiding** – our continuing in our commitment to follow Christ is yet another pillar support our edifice of assurance
- N. But in this text this morning we are awakened to the possibility that some of the information we receive about our salvation may come from sources that are suspect
1. That's right – from Fake News, or from misinformation
 2. But John leads us through a process that helps us navigate through the falsehoods and lies
 - a. He gives us an exhortation that we must take seriously
 - b. Then he gives us a test to use
 - c. And finally he gives us an encouraging application

II. **The Exhortation: Test the Spirits**

- A. **1 John 4:1** (ESV) —
1. 1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit,
 2. but test the spirits to see whether they are from God,
 3. for many false prophets have gone out into the world.
- B. The first thing we notice is that we are in the domain of truth v. falsehood
1. This is typical of John
 - a. He paints in stark contrasts

- b. No gray areas in the way he addresses such critical issues as the assurance of our salvation
 - 2. The final sentence in the last verse in our text serve as a bookend
 - a. **1 John 4.6**: “By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error”
 - 3. So, in the first verse he speaks of false prophets v. God, and in the last verse he speaks of truth v. error
- C. You know we live in a divided nation in many ways
 - 1. Some would say we are more divided than at any time since the Civil War
 - 2. My son Matt works with an organization that seeks to diminish the toxic polarization that infects our nation’s discourse
 - a. He works with faith leaders from various religious groups who share the same concern about the awful rhetoric we all hear through the media
 - b. Christians, Jews, Muslims, and others are involved in the project
 - c. It is a noble venture
 - 3. They often discover that while the media likes to portray the stark divisions, most Americans of whatever religious persuasion are more alike than different
 - a. And that’s an encouraging discovery to make
 - 4. At the same time, they often struggle to find a common commitment that everyone can agree on, so that genuine progress can be made in our nation’s discourse
- D. I have a modest proposal to make toward that end
 - 1. If we’re going to seek to find what can bring us together, how about **Truth**?
 - 2. How about a commitment to discovering what’s really true?
 - 3. I know that may seem simplistic
 - a. And maybe I’m naive
 - b. But if we are all committed to the truth, we may be able to be willing to change our minds, or at least our rhetoric
 - c. Tone it down a little; have a little humility!
 - d. When we discover that what we thought we knew wasn’t actually the case
 - e. It’s attributed to Mark Twain, though there’s some doubt that it originated with him, who said “It’s not what we don’t know that’s our problem; it’s what we know that ain’t so”
 - 4. But the world wants to make it more complicated
 - a. This was driven home to me years ago at a conference where I was presenting a research paper
 - b. And I made the mistake of using the word “truth” in my presentation
 - c. When the Q&A time occurred, a young scholar in the front row raised his hand, and asked “Whose truth?”
 - 5. You see, the game is over when you relativize truth

- a. When everyone has their own truth
 - b. There's not way for any kind of common understanding
- 6. No, I'm talking about real, honest-to-goodness, objective truth
 - a. Truth that is true whether you and I believe it or not
 - b. What Francis Schaeffer used to call "true truth"
- 7. Certainly John would agree
 - a. If you want to know if you are truly saved – want to be assured of your salvation – you must be committed to the concept of truth
 - b. True truth!
- 8. So, there's the domain of truth v. error or falsehood
- E. The second thing we observe is that there is a spirit behind that which is true or false
 - 1. This is a spiritual matter
 - 2. V. 1: "... do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God..."
 - a. V. 6: "By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error."
 - 3. This is no academic, or purely intellectual matter
 - a. Our contest is not with flesh and blood, but with "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6.12)
 - 4. That shouldn't surprise us; Satan is the "father of lies" (John 8.44)
 - a. And so his minions are all about sewing lies
 - 5. And he doesn't care where the lies come from – from the right or the left politically, or from one particular religion or another
 - a. Satan is happy if we're so mixed up about truth that we throw our hands up and say, "whose truth?"
 - b. Or like Pilate said when Jesus declared, "... I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."
 - c. Pilate: "What is truth?" (John 18.37, 38)
- F. So we need to recognize that behind every propositional statement is a spirit
 - 1. And that, in itself, ought to make us pause when we hear or see or read anything
 - 2. And that's especially the case in this age of AI
- G. So, here's the exhortation
 - 1. 1 John 4:1 (ESV) —
 - a. 1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit,
 - b. but test the spirits to see whether they are from God ,
 - c. for many false prophets have gone out into the world.
 - 2. Don't believe everything you hear!
 - a. Test the spirits!
 - b. Check it out! Verify!
 - c. Some people these days would say, "Trust but verify"
 - d. John would say, "Verify, then trust!"
- H. That's the not the only place we find an exhortation like that
 - 1. 1 Thessalonians 5:20–21 (ESV) —

- a. 20 Do not despise prophecies,
 - b. 21 but test everything; hold fast what is good.
 - I. Most of us have our favorite news station, our favorite news feeds, our favorite podcasts, our favorite newspaper
 - 1. Fine – I understand; I do too
 - 2. But if you believe everything you hear on your favorite news source, you're a fool!
 - 3. And same goes for preachers!
 - a. We all have our favorites – people we've learned to trust
 - b. Don't believe everything they all say
 - c. Check it out! Do your homework!
 - J. There are a lot of false prophets out there
 - 1. John says there were lots then
 - a. There are even more now!
 - 2. So, be on your guard
 - a. Don't believe every spirit
 - b. But test the spirits
- III. **The Standard: The Spirits' Test**
- A. So, how do we test the spirits?
 - 1. How do we determine whether a prophet is speaking the truth?
 - B. Well, the Old Testament gives us the ultimate criteria for judging prophets
 - 1. There are two tests, actually
 - C. The first test is whether what the prophet says about the future actually comes to pass
 - 1. **Deuteronomy 18:22** (ESV) —
 - a. 22 when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true,
 - b. that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.
 - 2. **Jeremiah 28:9** (ESV) —
 - a. 9 As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes to pass, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet."
 - D. But then, even if the prophet correctly predicts the future, there is yet another test
 - 1. Does the prophet speak what is consistent with what God has already revealed
 - a. This is a doctrinal test
 - 2. **Deuteronomy 13:1–3** (ESV) —
 - a. 1 "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder,
 - b. 2 and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,'

- c. 3 you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.
 - 3. So, there is a doctrinal test as well as predictive test
- E. Now, John applies those same principles to a specific problem that his audience of believers was facing
 - 1. We're not precisely sure of what heresy was infiltrating the church at this stage, but it was probably some form of **Gnosticism**
 - a. Gnosticism is the heresy in which certain super-spiritual people claim to have special knowledge that the ordinary believers don't have
 - 2. And one of the gnostic heresies was called **Docetism**
 - a. It was the denial that Jesus Christ was the Son of God come in the flesh
 - b. A denial of the incarnation
 - c. In fact, as the heresy goes, it claims that Jesus just seemed to be in the flesh; but he really was a sort of phantom!
 - 3. So John gives the church the following test:
- F. **1 John 4:2–3 (ESV) —**
 - 1. **2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,**
 - 2. **3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.**
 - 3. **This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.**
- G. So, no matter what the prophet is able to do – for Satan and his demons can manufacture counterfeit miracles
 - 1. If the prophet denies that Jesus is the Son of God incarnate – God come in the flesh
 - 2. Then that prophet is not from God
 - a. That prophet is a false prophet
 - b. That prophet has a lying spirit
- H. Indeed, the church struggled with the identity and the nature of the Jesus Christ in its early history
 - 1. Ignatius of Antioch, who was a contemporary of John in John's later years, took John's exhortation and test to heart
 - 2. He argued persuasively that if Jesus had not actually been a flesh and blood human being, then his death on the cross would have been meaningless
 - 3. He takes his confidence from Paul, especially as it concerns Jesus' death and resurrection
 - 4. **1 Corinthians 15:3–8 (ESV) —**
 - a. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,
 - b. 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,

- c. 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.
 - d. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.
 - e. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.
 - f. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.
- 5. **1 Corinthians 15:17** (ESV) —
 - a. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.
- 6. The appearance of Jesus to the disciples was a flesh and blood encounter
- 7. **Luke 24:38–43** (ESV) —
 - a. 38 And he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?
 - b. 39 See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”
 - c. 40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.
 - d. 41 And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?”
 - e. 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish,
 - f. 43 and he took it and ate before them.
- I. So, the test is doctrinal and concerns the nature of Jesus Christ
 - 1. He is the God-man; God come in the flesh
 - a. Fully God and fully man
 - 2. And to deny the incarnation of the Son of God is declare one to be a false prophet!
 - 3. In fact, to be one who embodies the spirit of the antichrist
 - 4. **1 John 4:3** (ESV) —
 - a. 3 ... This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.
 - 5. Whoever the antichrist is – and that’s a subject for another day!
 - a. The false prophet who denies the incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus, has the same spirit
 - 6. And that’s the test
- J. Now, it’s not the only doctrinal test
 - 1. There are others that might also apply
 - a. The Trinitarian nature of God
 - b. The sovereignty and supremacy of God
 - c. The personality of the Holy Spirit
 - d. The atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ
 - e. The resurrection of Christ
 - f. The ascension of Christ to the position of supremacy
 - g. And others
 - 2. But that’s why we study the scriptures
 - a. That’s why we hear the Word preached week in and week out
 - b. So that we will know an aberration from the truth when we see it

- K. Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see when they are from God
 - 1. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus has come in the flesh is from God
 - 2. And every spirit that denies that great truth about Jesus is not from God
 - a. And, in fact, embodies the spirit of the antichrist

IV. The Encouraging Application

- A. Finally, we conclude this text with a wonderful set of three encouragements
 - 1. They are easy to identify
 - a. Simply follow the pronouns!
 - 2. The first is “you”
 - a. The second is “they”
 - b. And the third is “we”
- B. You are from God
 - 1. 1 John 4:4 (ESV) —
 - a. 4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them,
 - b. for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.
 - 2. You are from God
 - a. If you get this, that Jesus is God come in the flesh
 - b. If you understand that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God
 - c. You are from God!
 - d. You have your spiritual origin from God himself
 - 3. John has expressed much the same thing in his gospel
 - 4. John 1:12–13 (ESV) —
 - a. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,
 - b. 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.
 - 5. If you have received Jesus Christ as God come in the flesh, that wasn’t your special inspiration
 - a. That came to you because you were born of God!
 - 6. Remember Peter’s great confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16)
 - 7. Matthew 16:17 (ESV) —
 - a. 17 And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”
 - 8. And you have overcome the lying prophets!
 - 9. Remember what John said: “he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” (1 John 4:4)
 - 10. If you want a visual image for this spiritual reality, recall the episode of Elisha and his servant when they were surrounded by the Syrian army with all their horses and chariots (2 Kings 6:14-15)
 - a. The servant says, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?”
 - 11. 2 Kings 6:16–17 (ESV) —

- a. 16 He said, “Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”
 - b. 17 Then Elisha prayed and said, “O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.” So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.
 12. Just imagine those resources resident within you by the Holy Spirit!
 - a. You have already overcome the evil one!
- C. **They are from the world**
1. By contrast, there are the false prophets
 2. **1 John 4:5** (ESV) —
 - a. **5 They are from the world;**
 - b. **therefore they speak from the world,**
 - c. **and the world listens to them.**
 3. It’s not surprising that the false prophets and false teachers speak falsely
 - a. They are from the world, and not from God
 - b. And the world listens to them – to their own destruction
 4. Just because some famous, talented, persuasive influencer happens to have an audience, doesn’t mean you have to be their audience
 - a. You don’t have to listen to them
 - b. In fact, you can give it right back to them if you want!
 5. I took an English class in my undergraduate days on the media
 - a. And one of our textbooks was the classic by Nicholas Johnson, *How to Talk Back to Your Television Set*
 - b. So, go ahead – talk back to you television set
 - c. Or whatever form of media spews its lies
 6. Because they are from the world, and they speak from the world, and the world listens to them
 - a. But you are from God!
- D. **We are from God**
1. Finally, there is the “we”
 2. **1 John 4:6** (ESV) —
 - a. **6 We are from God.**
 - b. **Whoever knows God listens to us;**
 - c. **whoever is not from God does not listen to us.**
 - d. **By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.**
 3. The “we” here is John and the other apostles
 - a. They speak authoritatively
 - b. They are from God
 - c. And those who are from God – like you, believer – listens to these prophets
 - d. And those who are from the world, don’t
 4. That’s why a preacher can have the same message preached from a pulpit like this one

- a. And some will get it, will resonate with the message, will respond to the message
 - b. And others will find nothing in it and leave unchanged
 - c. Oh, they might shake the preachers hand and say nice things
 - d. But spiritually, they would have had the same experience had they stayed home and watched the world's pablum on the tube
5. But, dear friends, when you encounter one who is from God
- a. Who speaks the truth of God
 - b. Who speaks about the incarnate Son of God
 - c. You better pay attention!
 - d. Because those who pay attention are from God
 - e. And those who don't, are from the world

V. Conclusion

- A. So, where are you from?