

At the turn of the century, the world's most distinguished astronomer was certain that Mars had canals. Sir Percival Lowell, esteemed for his study of the solar system, had a particular fascination with the Red Planet.

In 1877, Lowell heard that an Italian astronomer had seen straight lines crisscrossing the Martian surface, and so Lowell spent some 15 years squinting into the eyepiece of his giant telescope in Flagstaff Arizona, mapping the canals he saw. He was convinced the canals were proof of intelligent life on Mars, and he theorized that some advanced but desperate culture had built the canals to tap into polar ice caps which were the last source of water on the planet. Lowell's observations excited the public, but the scientific community was skeptical as other astronomers could not see these canals, and if there were canals, few believed they were as extensive as Lowell had claimed.

*Now, of course, things are different today. Space probes have orbited Mars and even landed on its surface. The entire planet has been mapped, and no one has seen a canal. **So, how could Lowell have "seen" so much that wasn't there?***

It's hard to say, but maybe he wanted to see canals so badly that he did – over and over again, or it could be that he suffered from a rare eye disease that made him see the blood vessels in his own eyes. Essentially, the Martian "canals" he saw were nothing more than the bulging veins in his eyeballs.

It is easy for us to see something that's not there. Many times, we simply see what we want to see, we hear what we want to hear, we believe what we want to believe, and we can become deceived. Deception – that was a real concern for the Apostle John, wrapped up in a warning to the early Christians – Christians without a Bible like you and me – and visited by false preachers and teachers and missionaries who would claim to speak for God.

So, if you have your Bible, turn to **1 John 4** and I'm going to read the first six verses where John writes,

¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. ⁴You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world; therefore they

speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Now, before we dive into our passage, I want to make a quick observation. Last week John's focus was on loving one another – in fact much of Chapter 3 is devoted to the subject of love for our Christian brothers and sisters, and after the first six verses of Chapter 4 which I just read, John once again returns to the subject of love, which prompts a question:

Why would John sandwich a warning about deception between his writings about love for one another?

Well, let me answer that question with a question. **Is there any other topic more important, more appealing, and yet more distorted than the topic of love?** John knew these false preachers and teachers and missionaries sought out their followers in the name of love – at least their version of it, and with arms open wide, they offered their followers a sense of community and belonging, and people thought – *“Hey, they must be of God.”* They appeared loving on the outside when, in fact, they were nothing more than wolves in sheep's clothing who sought personal gain and the favor of men.

For these early Christians – and for us as well, John is saying we are to be people of faith, but we should not believe everything we see and hear. Listen to what John has to say beginning with **verse 1**.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

According to John, and this is going to sound really odd – every Christian is called to be an *unbeliever*. We talk so much about being people of faith – and rightly so, but there is a time when unbelief is absolutely called for. The very same Scriptures which encourage us to believe, also tell us not to believe, or said in another way, if we are going to accept the truth, we have to detect and reject the lies.

If you recall from last week, John told us that the Holy Spirit gives us confidence that God abides in us and we abide in Him, but John also knows that there are other spirits – spirits in the unseen world, spirits of deception who inspire and influence people – religious people, with lies and spiritual non-sense, and therefore John tells us that we are to **test the spirits to see whether they are from God** or not.

John does not want us to be deceived and therefore, we must not believe everything we see and hear. We shouldn't be drawn to people who claim to speak for God merely because they are smooth talkers, slick dressers, and are able to attract large crowds. On top of that, we are never to assume that every spiritual experience and every demonstration of spiritual power is from God.

Years ago, back in the early 80's, I was stationed at the Coast Guard Air Station in Warrenton, OR. Trish and I attended a small church in Astoria, and one Sunday morning, two women approached me and described an experience they both just had. They explained an evangelist came to town, holding services in a local auditorium, where at the end of the service the evangelist gave an invitation to receive a fuller experience of the Holy Spirit. These two gals walked up front to the stage during the invitation, and this evangelist walked up to them, she touched them on the forehead, and both of them fell backwards unconscious into the arms of men who were standing behind them.

I told them I had heard of this – the charismatics call it being “slain in the Spirit” and they claim that in this event people can experience feelings of peace, and relaxation, and religious ecstasy. Well, both of them told me that what they experienced was not peace or relaxation or ecstasy – instead it was nothing but fear and confusion. They told me this evangelist was still in town, she had a service scheduled for the following night, and I should go check her out.

Well, as a fairly new believer and also very curious, I went to the service the following night. The large auditorium was packed with people, and according to the bulletin, she was to preach on demonic activity.

I'm in the very back row, because I want to see everything, and before the service begins, I am praying that God would protect me. In fact, I'm praying for protection all through the service, and then she gives the invitation – and I am the very first one who walks up, again praying the whole time. I'm telling God, “Lord, I am going to let this woman touch me. If this is of You, then do with me as You want, but if this is not of You, then keep me strong. Don't let me fall.”

So, I am standing up front facing the stage. I'm at the center and other people also come up to the stage on either side of me. This evangelist steps down from the stage to the floor where we are all standing, and starting at the far right of me, she begins to touch people on the forehead, and one by one, they fall into the arms of men standing behind them. As she gets closer and closer to me, I am praying harder and harder, and before I know it – she is standing right in front of me. She

raises her hand to touch me on the forehead, and when she touches me, she quickly draws her hand back as if she received an electrical shock. I looked at her and she looked at me, and then she continued down the line doing her thing. I was the only one left standing.

Let, me say that was probably a stupid move on my part as a fairly new believer, but with that said, we can't assume that every spiritual experience or every demonstration of spiritual power is actually from God. Consider what was said to Jesus in **Matthew 7** beginning with **verse 21**. You know this passage. I have shared it with you many times – but this time listen carefully to what these people did.

²¹ “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. ²² Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ ²³ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’”

What did they do? They cast out demons and they performed many miracles, and yet Jesus said He did not know them – meaning they were not from God, nor was their spiritual power.

Now, here's the hard part. These false preachers and teachers and missionaries – people who may have demonstrated spiritual power, don't walk around with name tags which read, “*Hi, I don't really know God. I'm a Deceiver*” and that's why John tells us to test those who preach and teach us, and thank God there's an easier test than standing in front of a stage to see if you are going to pass out if touches you on the forehead.

So, beginning with **verse 2**, John says here's how we are to test what we see and hear.

²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.

Now keeping this in context, if you remember, the Gnostics had crept in the early church, and they said that Jesus, being God, could not also be a man because God could have no partnership with matter, with flesh and blood which they considered

evil. They had a hard time believing that Jesus was a real man – instead they suggested that Jesus was only a spiritual being, like a phantom or an apparition, denying that He was God in the flesh, and the problem with this false teaching was that it undermined a core truth of the Gospel – namely the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Think about it – if Jesus did not have a real physical body, then He did not really die and His suffering on the cross was merely an illusion. If Jesus did not have a real physical body, then He could have not risen bodily from the dead, and without the actual death and resurrection of Jesus – there’s no salvation for us.

So, in a nutshell, John is saying this: *“The right teaching about Jesus is the test – for if we don’t get Jesus right, nothing else will be right.”* Jesus is the key – He has to be. He is the central focus and figure of the Word of God, and if preachers and teachers and missionaries don’t agree with God concerning His Son – in both the way they *talk* and in the way they *walk*, then they have failed the test and do not know God.

Now, some today will surely call this narrow-minded, and some will say I’m not being “politically correct” but I would rather be biblically correct than politically correct. Those who do not see Jesus according to the standard of God’s Word are inspired and influenced and motivated by a spirit of deception – **the spirit of the antichrist** – a spirit that was at work in the early church and is working overtime today.

One religious researcher estimates that there are over 4,000 religions and cults in our world today, and many of them name the name of Jesus – but a wrong Jesus. For example, the Mormons talk about Jesus, but to them He is the brother of Lucifer. They teach that Jesus is the first created spiritual child, the result of a union between God the Father and one of His wives.

Jehovah Witnesses believe that Jesus is actually Michael the Archangel – another created being, who became a man.

Muslims believe that Jesus was a prophet, but not God. Christian Science teaches that Jesus was simply a man in tune with the divine consciousness. Unitarians believe that Jesus was a good man who was mistakenly treated as God by His followers.

Now, just to be fair, I can’t ignore what is happening within the Christian community these days. In a survey taken last year by a research group called

Probe Ministries, more than 60% of the professing Christians they surveyed in America, between the ages of 18-39, believe that Jesus is not the only way to salvation, contrary to the Word of God. That's a scary thing to think about because each generation of believers has the responsibility of passing down their faith to the next, but we are living in a world where Christianity is only tolerated if it is viewed as simply being another path of spirituality and unfortunately, many professing Christians have adopted that same view. Yes, they may be spiritual, but they are not biblical – they are deceived.

So, here's the bottom line – any spiritual leader or any religious group that attempts to reinvent, to redefine, or to reimagine Jesus – contrary to the Word of God, bringing discredit to His deity or diminishing His humanity is not of God, and let me tell you, the devil doesn't worry one single bit if you claim to know Jesus or love Jesus or pray to Jesus – as long as he is the wrong Jesus, for if we get Jesus wrong, nothing else will be right.

Now, in these next few verses, John wraps up his warning with both a note of encouragement and a call to discernment. Beginning with **verse 4**, John says,

⁴ You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. ⁵ They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

In this passage, John first encourages his readers. He knows they are genuine believers – he says “**You are from God**” and he also says they have **overcome** the deceivers in this world – **and how did that happen?**

Was there any mention of superior intelligence or deep theological knowledge? Was there any reference to intense training in the cults? Was there talk of clever arguments to answer the lies of false teachers?

No, John said they **overcome** because they are born of God and Spirit of God lives in them. The Holy Spirit is greater than the deceptive spirits in this world, and every true believer owes their understanding of God to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. If we stand with Jesus, it is because the Holy Spirit is greater than all other spiritual forces in this world and in the unseen world who seek to deceive us.

Dean Niferatos was riding the Number 22 Chicago Transit Authority bus. The bus was filled with dozing office workers, restless punkers, and affluent shoppers. At

the Clark and Webster bus stop, two men and a woman climbed in. The driver, a seasoned veteran, immediately called out, “Everybody watch your valuables. Pickpockets are on board.”

Women clutched their purses tightly. Men put their hands on their wallets. All eyes fixed on the trio, who, looking insulted and harassed, didn’t break stride as they promptly exited through the middle doors.

Just as the seasoned bus driver warned the passengers, so the Holy Spirit warns us. As we walk in the Spirit and walk in obedience, He guides us, He keeps us straight, and He prods our hearts to discern what is true and what is false. To protect us from spiritual pickpockets, He reveals the truth found in God’s Word, and He prompts us to ask questions like: **What are they saying about Jesus? Is it consistent with Scripture? How do they live their lives? Do they obey God? Do they love their Christian brothers and sisters?** And lastly, **who is following them?**

John said that those of the **world** – those who prescribe to the system of the world, **listen** to these false preachers and teachers and missionaries, and this should not be surprising to anyone. Listen to what the Apostle Paul said in **2 Timothy 4**, beginning with **verse 3**,

³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, ⁴ and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

Paul is talking about us. That’s where we are right now. Just look around. Just turn on the television. We are in the last days, and there are false preachers and teachers who are telling the people of this world exactly what they want to hear – tickling their ears. Their services are entertaining, their ministries are massive, their buildings are packed, they promise that God will help them fulfill their own desires, and of course, to remain popular they offend no one.

That means they can’t say that Jesus is the only way – the only name given under heaven by which we might be saved. They can’t call sin a sin, they can’t mention judgment by a holy God, and they must remain silent when it comes to eternal damnation. So, people swallow what they say without question because it makes them feel good about themselves, people can believe what they want to believe, and they can live their lives the way they want to, and if they are challenged by true believers, then they rise up and call us narrow-minded, divisive, bigoted,

mean-spirited, and hateful. If this were a popularity contest, Christians would lose, but it's not a popularity contest – it's a spiritual conflict – a battle, and greater is He that is in us than he that is in this world.

Now, John concludes with **verse 6** by telling us that the apostles are from God – sent by God, entrusted by God with the authority to lay the foundation of the church through their teaching about Jesus Christ, and John says that those who know God will listen to them.

Today, we have their inspired teaching recorded for us in the Bible – our standard by which we can rightly discern truth from a lie. Yes, we are to be people of faith, but with that said, we must also be unbelievers. We must not believe everything we see and hear.

Source Material:

David Walls and Max Anders, I & II Peter, I, II & III John, Jude, vol. 11, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999).

Charles R. Swindoll, Insights on 1, 2 & 3 John, Jude, vol. 14, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2018).

Warren W. Wiersbe, The Bible Exposition Commentary, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996).

The Bible Knowledge Commentary – Walvoord & Zuck

Thomas L. Marberry, Shaw Craig, "Commentary on the Books of 1, 2, 3 John," in 1, 2, 3 John & Revelation, ed. Robert E. Picirilli, First Edition., The Randall House Bible Commentary (Nashville, TN: Randall House, 2010).

John F. MacArthur Jr., The MacArthur Bible Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005).

Curtis Vaughan, 1, 2, 3 John, Founders Study Guide Commentary (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2011).

Figuring Out Falsehood – Brian Bill

When Unbelief is Right – Ray Stedman

Enduring Word – David Guzik

Daniel L. Akin, Exalting Jesus in 1,2,3 John (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014).