

Reading: 1 John 3:23-4:6

Theme: Do Not Be Gullible!

During the gold rushes in the mid to late 1800s in America and Canada, many dreamt of becoming fabulously rich, were excited and thrilled when they found rocks with gold in it. It shone and glimmered as gold does, but in their excitement, with their uneducated eyes and minds they were fooled, deluded and they found “*fool’s gold*”. It looked like the real thing, but it wasn’t! In 4:1-6 John is writing of fool’s spirit - looks like the real, but was not and they needed wisdom to discern the true, especially in the excitement of the thought that God was working or moving. This makes it an important section for us to know, learn of and rightly apply to our ourselves at all times. This is part of the word of God and relevant for us now in our confusing days. I want us to consider v1, to see what John says to all who read this. I have 3 headings:

1. A Word of Tenderness.

John is going to challenge his 1st readers to shake them out of an unthinking gullibility and thoughtlessness. He does not do so in a hard, aggressive, abusive or abrasive way. He is concerned for them. He doesn’t write of loving the brothers and sisters etc. in 3:11ff and then slam into them as if he had a Christian split personality. He certainly doesn’t reason “*Well they know I care and so I can slam into them...*”

John wrote that the Spirit God was given them and all believers (3:24) and now he’s going to deal with claims made by a number of those bothering, affecting, even deceiving his 1st readers. It is thought these false teachers had claimed God’s Spirit, had shown them these new things and many of his readers were impressed, were misled, were fooled and John has to burst their pneumatic (*spirit*) bubble! As he begins to do so, John assures them of their

preciousness to him and he calls them “*Dear friends*” (v1 & 4 NIV) or “*Beloved*” - a better translation as the word comes from agape - to love deeply, freely and unconditionally. John expresses his love for these ones.

John was not bashing them with his theological sledgehammer, but was tenderly, gently warning these ones he loved deeply. He loved them too much to let them remain deceived, duped and deluded. He loved them too much to leave them gullible and thoughtless. He wrote strong words in terms of deep tenderness and did so for their good and benefit. Be assured that if I tread on any toes in preaching God’s word, it is not intentional, but I care and love you too much to let the truth be neglected. I pray I’ll say things with the power of God, but with the gentleness and meekness of Christ as I speak the truth clearly and relevantly. Let’s see that John says:

2. A Word of Warning.

There were those who claimed to speak of the things of God, who had revelations from God - new and exciting things, things which allowed you to live as you please, to know God’s blessing on you, your families, possessions and situations of life (*that sounds familiar!*) John sounds a warning to these early believers and to all believers since - “*many false prophets have gone out into the world*”. These ones claimed to be of God and spoke for God, but were false. In John’s day there was still direct revelation from God through the apostles and prophets, through John himself as an apostle. The Church was in its infancy and God was still speaking in ways children respond to, but the word of God, by apostolic testimony and record was being completed and when the written record of God’s word by the apostles was complete, there was no longer any need for direct revelation. This is broadly known as cessationism – that direct revelation from God ceased because the

word of God is fully authoritative and sufficient for all matters of faith and life.

In John's days some would claim new revelations - which were often contrary to what the apostles taught and it embraced pagan ideas and novelties. John warned of such ones as being false prophets. They are those around us today who claim new and direct divine revelations. The question is what do we make of them? It is very impressive to hear words such as: "*Thus says the Lord... The Lord told me to tell you... The Lord gave me this word of knowledge or insight...*" It is much, much more exciting than the minister getting up and saying he's wrestled with the text and the text with him; this is what he feels it means and how it is relevant for us today. To have someone get up and say "*God says, now listen and act*" is dramatic and more exciting.

We are to be warned that there are false prophets even today. Not necessarily always acting as I said, but also as they speak, they ignore, dismiss the Bible and its standards. No doubt we've all been in funerals and the minister has spoken about a godless, foulmouthed person and that they are with their Saviour in heaven. Sadly, many churches, preachers deny God's word is true; they say it needs to be reinterpreted, this bit can be overlooked or passed off as poetry, or irrelevant or a product of their age. Others openly or subtly deny God's existence, or Jesus is real, or His resurrection happened; they say all will be going to heaven because God is love and that there is a universal salvation - God has made many ways up the same mountain to the same God!

John is quite clear in his warning - there are and there continues to be false prophets gone out into the world and are still about in our day. We are not to be fooled by fine sounding words, by great phenomena, by a person's experience. We are not to be naïve or

cynical, but wise and certainly not gullible and taken in and so John gives:

3. A Word of Necessity.

Knowing that there are false prophets should cause us to be on our guard and not to be gullible. Christianity is not about switching off or dumping our minds and being mindless, but using our minds in a service of worship and especially as we hear something taught - whether it is or not accompanied by great oratory, emotional stirring events or even by wondrous phenomena.

The tenses John uses in this 1st part of v1 (*present continuous*) gives the impression that his 1st readers were tending to accept uncritically and unthinkingly all teaching which claimed to be inspired. The false teachers came and said great things, even did “miracles” and so these ones assumed they were of God. There is a vast difference between the supernatural and the Divine. John called on these ones, calls on us to test the phenomena, the teaching - not cynically, but lovingly. He does so by calling all to examine what was said (v2-3) and how these ones lived (v4-6). We will cover these areas when we deal with those verses. John is going to show there are standards against which we measure their words and lives and if they come short, are found wanting, then they are false teachers, have false spirits. John wanted them and us to be able to recognise such things c.f. v2 & 6b.

Here John commands every believer - “Beloved ones” - not just church officers, or mature Christians, but every believer is to keep on testing the spirits to see if they are from God. These are commands, imperatives, as if John is saying “*Do this...*” as individuals and also as a church. God has given believers His Spirit (3:24), but there are other spirits. John refers to the Spirit of God and the spirit of the antichrist (v2-3) the Spirit of truth and

the spirit of falsehood (v6). We need to know which is which, who is who. John is in the area of truth, of doctrine and we are in the repeated area of the doctrinal test concerning who Jesus is.

We are to be cautious, to be careful. Behind every speaker for God, or a god, is a spirit and the Bible makes it clear that the spirit is either of God or the devil and that is why we must test the spirits! We are to see beyond the claims, the phenomena, the glitz and glamour and test the spirits.

We may not like this. Perhaps we are lazy and cannot be bothered, or we may feel it does not matter; but it is a command, so it does matter and we are all to do it. Perhaps we feel it is unloving and therefore unscriptural - to challenge what a person says or how they live, or even doubt their experiences. Yet the word of God says continually "*test the spirits*". True love will always want what is right and not be content with lies and deception. It is not to be done in a hypercritical, nit-picking way, but with an honest and loving examination – so that a person who is a believer, but in error, should welcome and be glad of such (*although that is not guaranteed!*) Perhaps we do not like controversy and feel it would be upsetting. Is it more upsetting to let a believer go on deluded and duped by the devil, or an unbeliever continue on the path to hell? At times love has to be wise and tough. We need to have the grace, the grit in the gumption to be such as children of God.

Now I guess I have to deal with how do we test the spirits, test all who claim to speak on behalf of God or speak God's word - preachers including me. **Here are some dangerous tests to apply if we rely upon them alone!** **A. Gifts of the Spirit:** here is a controversial area! Some claim that these are "proof" of God being in and with them. So much so that some say you **must** have certain gifts, or a gift - usually tongues or you do not have the Spirit and

though a believer you are a “lesser” Christian. There is this emphasis on gifts on phenomena. Some 20 or more years ago there was the emphasis on “Power Evangelism” - do miracles etc. and people will be converted, it can’t fail! Yet it did! Also, it was claimed the so-called Toronto Blessing would come and sweep the country and many would be converted, but not so.

These things and other novelties are always promoted as “*See what is happening, the phenomena, the experiences!*” Sadly, many of the things carried out in God’s name under the guise of extremes like this do not have their roots from Christianity and a work of God, but are often traceable back to pagan religions and practices, many of which are anti-Christian religions and so we need to question what spirit are they of? We are to realise the devil can mimic and imitate any of the gifts of the Spirit of God - except pure godly love. World religions teach about tongues, utterances, prophetic visions and revelations, of healings. Just because someone does phenomena and even speaks of Jesus does not necessarily mean they are true. The Lord Jesus warned of those who spoke in His name, did miracles, cast out demons and yet He never knew them (Matthew 7:15; 21-22).

B. Passion: people can appear to be so on fire for God. That is no guarantee of their faithfulness. Doncaster Rovers’ supporters can be most passionate about their team, speak with great fervour of all they will do, but they can be wrong and often disappointed! Passion, even eloquence and power in preaching is not an evidence of speaking the truth. Many evil men have been passionate, powerful and persuasive speakers e.g. Adolf Hitler.

C. Experiences: some claim feelings, leadings, experiences, events and the like - they claim God prompted, lead them, His Spirit inspired them. We are to test such claims. Personally, I’m

dubious about such - how do they know or how do we know it was God - such claims need to be tested and questioned.

We need to look at, identify and use **safe tests by which we can examine the claims of all who profess to speak God's behalf:**

A. Conformity to Scripture: we are given the standard in v2 - the standard is what God has revealed Himself and safeguarded in His word. Always check if a person's teaching and life conforms to Scripture. What matters most is **what they say** above and how they say it or what accompanies it. The test is always not to be as to whether it is spectacular, or feels good, makes us feel good, **but is it true.** John goes on to open up this in v2 and we'll look at this next week, but our test is to be rooted in and on the word of God.

It is not only about what they say, but also how they themselves are willing to receive God's word and live by it. Some dismiss God's word as irrelevant to them, or superseded now, or they have the attitude of "*How dare you try and teach me*" attitude. We are to see if their lives and doctrine are governed and conformed by and to God's word. The Spirit and the word are to always go together. It is Truth on fire, not wildfire. The word without the Spirit is dead, but the Spirit without the word is dumb. Both are needed in balance. While there are many glorious experiences of God we can have - knowing Him, His nearness, His love, His answers to prayer, His leading, guiding and keeping; His provision and company; of Him being with us in life and in the dying process and then in His presence. These are all possible, so God's word says, but all are to be in line with and tested with God's word.

B. Glorifying the Lord Jesus: as we test things against God's word, we will soon realise that the Spirit of God will always glorify the Lord Jesus (John 16:14). As the Spirit moves and works He will keep the Lord Jesus at the centre, always draw attention to

Him and what He does. In the book of Acts, we see this as Peter and John did miracles and then preached and pointed away from themselves to the Lord Jesus. Miracles and right phenomena are not ends in and of themselves, but are used to glorify Christ. A true messenger of God always speaks of Christ and not focus on what they have experienced, felt, seen or done, but always of the Saviour they have and they want people to recognise what a lovely and wonderful Saviour they have and do not want the applause and adulation from other people.

C. Order and balance: The Spirit of God is that of order. It is not a regimented order, but a living order, sometimes a disturbing order, but things are done decently and in order and not with wildfire. Many a true revival has been marred by wildfire - people thinking that things were of God and as one person wrote many years afterwards that they *“were as new born chicks running about with shell over their eyes!”* People will be balanced as they will examine their own lives and others lives by the word of God so that they are sure they are living in line with it and not letting their imagination, feelings and desires be taken as the guidance of the voice of God.

We need discernment. We need to know God’s word and the wisdom of God given by His Spirit. One of the ongoing gifts of the Spirit is that of discernment - to be able to distinguish between the spirits (1 Corinthians 12:10). In such a life there will be doctrine and Spirit, doctrine and experience, doctrine and love, doctrine and obedience. We are not to be gullible Christians, but wise, loving, gracious and discerning. As such, we are to live out the truth empowered by the Holy Spirit of God.