

**Sermon Response Guide - February 4, 2024**  
**"Testing the Spirits" 1 John 4:1-6**  
**Pastor Phil Rushton**

### **Sermon Overview**

Throughout this series we have been talking about discernment. Two weeks ago, we explored how there are numerous sources of deception at work in our life - the devil, the flesh, and the world. John Mark Comer summarizes, "We battle deceptive ideas (the Devil), that play to our disordered desires (the Flesh), that are normalized in a sinful society (the World)."

Our text today reminds us that these deceptive forces are often cloaked in spiritual or religious language. The lies of the evil one and the influences of the flesh and the world are sometimes at work in our religious communities. Eugene Peterson paraphrases 1 John 4:1 saying, "My dear friends, don't believe everything you hear. Carefully weigh and examine what people tell you. Not everyone who talks about God comes from God. There are a lot of lying preachers loose in the world."

This poses an important question. How can we test what is genuine and authentic? How can we, "test the spirits to see whether they are from God?"

If you look at the book of 1 John from a broader vantage point, you'll notice two significant ways we can test the spirits: Broadly speaking, we could call these the behavioral test and the theological test.

By behavioral test, I mean that authentic discipleship is going to bear the fruit of Christlike behavior. 1 John 2 says, "By this we may be sure that we are in him: <sup>6</sup> whoever says, "I abide in him," ought to walk just as he walked. Next week, we are going focus specifically on the "Love test." 1 John 4:20 states, "Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

This test cannot be applied in a way that leads to legalism. We remember that John commends a humble recognition that we are sinful and dependent on mercy in 1 John 1:9. So one of the behaviors that we use to test authentic spirituality is humility and dependence on God, not heroic perfectionism!

The second test that shows up in the book of 1 John is a theological test. This is where we spend the majority of our time in the sermon this week. In 1 John 4:2 we read: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God." This is repeated back in chapter 2, where we read "Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?"

John is telling this congregation that spiritual discernment involves appealing to something beyond our own subjective experience or opinions. We discern what is said in light of what has been revealed to us about Jesus. John reminds us that theology matters. There is toxic theology at work that we need to sift through.

The hope our text is that we are not left to our own limited human resources as we seek to discern what is true. John reminds us that the spirit of God is at work helping us discern what is true. Our text ends with this hopeful word: "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

**Questions for Reflection:**

1. What stood out to you in the text / sermon today?
2. How can we test the spirits and discern what is really from God?
3. Are there theological ideas that you used to believe that you no find to be rooted in false teaching? How did that shift take place for you?
4. Where do you see false teaching at work in the American church right now? How about in your own life?