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I John 4:1-11

TEST BEFORE YOU TRUST!

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Have you ever gotten lost driving? I mean really lost, so lost that even a husband would have to stop and ask for directions. No one ever intends to get lost. It just happens sometimes. You take a detour, and someone takes the sign down along the way. The road is winding. You started going south and now it seems like you're going north. Nothing looks familiar at all. You finally come to a town. You want to stop going the wrong way and start going the right way. You decide that you are going to ask for directions from two different sources because one might be simpler than the other.

The first person says, "I've lived here for over fifty years and I hate to tell you this but you're going in the wrong direction. You have to go back twenty miles to Highway 42, take a left and go for another three miles to Highway 3. Take a right and you will reach your destination." You don't like the idea of having to retrace your steps for another half hour, so you get advice from the second person. He tells you, "Take any road and you will get there. They all lead to the same place." You say, "Any road? But some go north, south, east and west. Some are paved and some are dirt roads, some are dead ends and cul-de-sacs." The second person says, "It doesn't matter. If you believe that you will reach your destination by taking any road, you will get there."

All right, which of those two people are you going to listen to? Does the second one's advice make any sense whatsoever? How could you reach your destination by taking any road? You have to follow a certain path to reach your destination. Everyone knows that, don't they? New York is east of Detroit, Los Angeles is west, Miami is south. You have to travel certain road in certain directions to reach your destination. That makes perfect sense.

Not in the realm of religion, it doesn't. Here we are told by some that all roads lead to heaven. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere in believing it. If you believe that you can stay afloat in the ocean by hugging an anchor, then you will stay afloat. It doesn't matter if you believe in one god, many gods, or no gods. Every religion has the truth, so it doesn't matter which religion you choose. Have you ever heard such things? I'm sure that you have. All religions are not the same. They do not all have the truth. How can we find what is right? Listen to the Apostle John this morning as he tells us TEST BEFORE YOU TRUST!

"Dear friends, 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." John sends a warning. It is the same warning that Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Peter, Paul, and our Lord Jesus himself had issued. There are a lot of false prophets out there who want to deceive God's people so that they fall away from the truth and listen to lies. They are all Satan's agents. Their ultimate goal is to lead people away from Christ.

These false prophets are antichrists. The prefix "anti" can mean either "against" or "in place of." Both meanings make sense. An antichrist is someone who is against Christ or he puts himself or someone else in the place of Christ. We have witnessed a number of people who were antichrists during our lifetimes. There were cult leaders like James Jones who led his followers to commit mass suicide in Guyana and David Koresh. These men claimed to be the Christ sent from God. Many fell prey to the Rev. Sun Myong Moon. His followers, the "Moonies" could be found selling flowers at the airport.

You have to understand that false prophets are always attractive to people. If they weren't attractive, they wouldn't be dangerous. What are some of the things that make a false prophet attractive? Well, he or she might be very good looking or successful. There is something about them that people want to be around. He might be a very good speaker, skilled in oratory. He knows how to turn a phrase and sound convincing. He might be able to perform miracles and wonders (or at least convince you and others that he is able to do this.) People are always looking for something new, something else. He might be very learned. He might have written forty books and have any number of advanced degrees. He might be famous having had buildings or even entire campuses named after him.

Yes, this person is even more attractive than Jesus. That should not be surprising. The prophet Isaiah spoke of the coming Christ: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." That was the thing about Jesus. There was nothing special about his appearance. He looked just like any other man. He grew up as a humble carpenter from Nazareth. While others were looking for a Messiah who was handsome with a body chiseled out of stone, riding into battle with white stallions driving his chariot, Jesus simply went about his business preaching and teaching. He was rejected by most because he didn't fit their profile of what a Messiah should look like. Well, these false prophets are much more attractive.

But how can you recognize them? How can you "test the spirits" as John would have us do? You can't read people's hearts. Only God can do that (although I think that there are a lot of people who think that they can do that.) You have to evaluate their confession. What do they say? There must be some statement of core beliefs. There really is no such thing as a non-denominational church. Everybody believes something.

Getting a statement of what certain people truly believe and confess is sometimes as easy as nailing Jello to the wall. You're not going to be able to do it easily. They use a lot of deceptive double speak. But there are a couple of things. "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God."

What do they say about Jesus? Or what do they not say about Jesus? That will expose them for who they truly are. How do we come to know God? We come to know him through his Son Jesus Christ. John said in his Gospel: "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at his Father's side, has made him known." Jesus is the eternal Son of God made flesh. The writer to the Hebrews says: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe."

Satan sends his agents to destroy people's confidence that Jesus is truly and fully God, coequal with his Father in the Holy Trinity and also fully man, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary as the Scriptures had foretold. Those people were around in John's day. They were called Gnostics. They are around in our day as well.

The heart of the Christian message is always going to focus on the person of Jesus. Who was he? These people will speak highly of him. They will say he was a good man, a prophet, perhaps the greatest of the prophets. They may even say that Jesus was the greatest human being to ever walk this planet. Isn't that enough? Jesus asked his disciples, "But what about you? Who do you say that I am?"

Does it really matter? Of course, it did. If Jesus is not God, then his death on the cross would not pay for the sin of the world. If Jesus is not God, then his righteousness is not enough to credit us. If Jesus is not God, then he could not rise from the dead on Easter Sunday. If Jesus is not God, he could not ascend into heaven. If Jesus is not God, he could not return as Judge of all mankind. If Jesus is not God, he could not make the promises that he made to all believers.

Yes it matters! Battles were fought over every word that we confess in the creeds. Every Christian church confesses Jesus as the Son of God. Every cult denies that. They ask, "Does it really matter? Can't we all get along? Why

split hairs? Why make mountains out of molehills? We'll all accept Jesus as a good person and leave it at that. They see him as Godlike or "God lite."

The Apostle John would not agree. He said previously: "Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist – he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also." Anyone who denies that Jesus is God is worshiping a false god. Yes, we say that those people are wrong. They are taking the wrong road. They will not reach the destination without Christ. He says, "No one comes to the Father except through me." It doesn't matter how sincere they are. It doesn't matter how good looking or kind they are. It doesn't matter how many followers they have. If they don't have Christ, they have nothing.

The second way we test the spirits is by looking at the source of authority. Do they follow Scripture alone or do they look for other sources of truth? They apostles were humble, but they had no hesitation about claiming apostolic authority for their teaching. These were men who were eyewitnesses of our Savior's life, death and resurrection. The Scriptures tell us everything we need to know. They don't tell us everything we want to know, but they do tell us everything we need to know.

But that's not enough for many. Children like to tell other children, "I know something you don't know. I know a secret." These false prophets always promise people more. They promise secret information. That was what the Gnostics of John's day promised and that is what every cult leader promises as well. They will tell their adherents that they need more than the Scriptures. They need another book like the Book of Mormon or the Koran that pick up where the apostles left off. The word of the prophet supersedes the sacred Scriptures. As John says: "They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood."

The Bereans tested the spirits. They eagerly listened to the Apostle Paul when he preached and taught. And then they studied the Old Testament Scriptures and what they said about the coming Messiah. They tested before they trusted. Remember that numbers don't matter. False teachings will always attract more followers than the truth. Look at Noah, Moses, Elijah, and our Lord Jesus. Popularity is not the same as truth; it might mean simply that there are a lot of fools standing in the same place.

Test before you trust! May God give us the willingness and ability to stay faithful to Christ! AMEN.