

Confidence to Combat False Teachers

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[0 : 00] Well, please do keep your Bibles open at 1 John chapter 4. And let me start, though, with a question. I wonder, how well do you listen?

I know for a lot of us blokes, we have selective hearing. It's not just us blokes. I think kids have it as well. But more specifically, how well do you listen to sermons or Bible talks?

Not just here at HGD, but wherever you hear them. Whether you're visiting another church, watching something online, reading a devotional book, or perhaps hearing devotions at a Christian school.

I think I may have told you before I was starting out as a minister at a church in Sydney. And I remember preaching and someone actually fell asleep. And I was only going for a couple of minutes.

I'm pretty sure. I don't think I was that boring. I was only a couple of minutes in. And it wouldn't have mattered so much, except for the fact that the person who fell asleep was the organist and fell onto the keyboard. I said this this morning at 9 o'clock, and then suddenly our organist, Bruce, went and it woke everyone up.

[1 : 09] But how well do you listen? And by listen, I don't just mean stay awake, although that helps. I mean with the Bible open, at testing what you hear from the preacher with what you read from God.

Because that's effectively what John wants us to do this morning. Point one, verse one. 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 says there are many false prophets in the world. A prophet, of course, is someone who speaks God's word on God's behalf.

Like preachers and teachers, really. And he says there are many false ones out in the world. In John's day, you might remember it was those antichrists that we've heard about before earlier in the letter.

So in chapter two, he talks about the person who's the liar who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Hence, antichrist. And notice they're now trying to lead others astray.

[2 : 18] They're teaching them falsely. But it's actually a constant warning in the Bible from almost every writer. Jesus says, watch out for false prophets.

Paul talks about people gathering false teachers to say what they want to hear. It's not just Jesus and Paul. It's Peter who talks about false prophets. Jude and here, John.

Almost every writer in the Bible. It's a constant warning because it's a constant or clear and present danger for us even today. But notice also in verse one that John says to test every spirit because there are many false prophets.

He seems to be equating spirit with prophet here, doesn't he? And he'll do that again in verse two where he talks about every spirit that acknowledges and every spirit that doesn't acknowledge.

Why does he talk like this? Well, because there's a spiritual realm in life. Even non-Christians know it and they kind of call it different things.

[3 : 22] And behind every prophet is a spirit prompting them to speak what's true or false. It's often characterized in cartoons like, you know, the devil on the shoulder and the angel on the other one whispering, prompting to say certain things.

And so in verse two, it could be the spirit of God, the Holy Spirit prompting the prophet, you know, who works in our conscience, tells us to do the right thing.

Or verse three, it could be the spirit of the Antichrist who is already in the world. And who is the biggest Antichrist there is in the world? You know, who lies and leads people astray?

It's the devil, isn't it? And so John says we're to test the spirits or prophets to see which spirit actually stands behind the prophet. Is it the Holy Spirit from God or an Antichrist spirit from Satan, devil?

I remember when I was at my previous church, a yoga instructor came to me and wanted to hire our church hall to hold some yoga classes. And because she knew I was a minister, she started sharing her experiences of God with me.

[4 : 32] And she said this, she said, God told me to leave my husband for this man at work because I'd fallen out of love with my husband and God wanted me to be happy.

Now, do you think God would say that's a good reason to leave her husband? No domestic violence? No, nothing like that. And so was it really God's spirit prompting her to do that?

Or was it another spirit prompting her to follow her desires? So John says, test the spirits, test what these prophets, preachers and teachers are saying and see which spirit stands behind them.

See if they're really from God or not. Because there are many false ones in the world. And to give us confidence to test, to give us confidence to combat these false prophets, John gives us some tests to use.

So the first one, point two, verse two. He says, this is how you can recognize the spirit of God. Every spirit or prophet, spirit behind the prophet, that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, well, they're from God.

[5 : 43] But every spirit or prophet that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you've heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

You see the test? It's basically the Jesus test, isn't it? Do they acknowledge, confess, believe in Jesus? That he is the Christ.

Remember, Christ is not his surname. It's a title that means God's anointed king. The one who's a claim over our lives. John has already pointed out, as we saw before, that these false teachers deny Jesus is the king.

But here he amplifies or adds to it. He says, whether they believe Christ has come in the flesh. In other words, whether they acknowledge that Jesus became a real human in history.

And not some angel or figment of our imagination. And this is important for John and for us, actually, because if Christ didn't become human, he could not pay for our sins.

[6 : 51] And so he cannot be the way to know God or the way to life eternal. You see, to exchange places with us, Jesus had to be like us.

Human for human. For it to work. For it to be fair. And because he was, then he could die in our place for our sins. He can be and is the only way to God because he's the only one who became human and died in our place for our sins.

And so it kind of matters that we believe Jesus is the Christ who came in the flesh, doesn't it? Last week, my son and all VCE students had the Year 12 GATT, the General Achievement Test.

It's pretty important. As I understand it, it helps determine your ATAR if you miss a VCE exam. I think we've got some teachers in the room. You can correct me afterwards if I'm wrong. But I think that's how it works.

But once you do the VCE and once you get into a course or you get an apprenticeship, the GATT kind of loses its relevance. It becomes irrelevant, doesn't it?

[8 : 00] But the Jesus Test determines not your ATAR, but your eternity. And it remains relevant for the rest of our lives until we get to eternity, doesn't it?

Kind of makes it a much more important test, doesn't it? But it's also an important test, not only for us to believe, but also to determine the kind of spirit behind these teachers.

If these teachers do believe Jesus is the Christ who became man for us, then verse 2, the spirit behind them is the spirit of God, the Holy Spirit.

After all, the spirit's job is to point people to Jesus. But any teacher who does not acknowledge this, then verse 3, the spirit behind them is not from God, but the spirit of the Antichrist from Satan.

That's how the test works. So who are these teachers today? Well, they're teachers of other religions who deny some part of the gospel. For example, Muslims say Jesus was a human prophet, but they deny he was the Christ and they deny that he died on a cross for our sins.

[9 : 11] Buddhists believe Jesus was a holy and enlightened man. And both religions hold Jesus up in high regard. But Buddhists, again, don't believe he's the one who became a man to die for our sins.

Some time ago, I saw this article from a journalist from the Washington Post who argues that Jesus didn't even exist in history.

The subtitle is a bit hard to see, but it says, clearly there are good reasons to doubt Jesus' historical existence. Really? Mind you, some even deny the Holocaust happened today.

But here's a false teacher behind whom is the spirit of the Antichrist leading people astray because the truth is there's plenty of good evidence. To use another newspaper, The Guardian, at this time, a few years later, I think it's 2017, this one.

Again, the subtitle is hard to see, but he says there is a good deal of written evidence for Jesus' existence. Now, I doubt any of us will be fooled by this kind of false teaching, but some of it can sound really convincing.

[10 : 20] I mean, how did you feel when you first read that one from the Washington Post? Oh, were we convinced for a split second? And so John gives us and his readers some confidence to combat false teaching.

And here, the next part, not just the test, but some encouragement to do it. Point three, verse four. He says, You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, the false teachers, because the one who is in you, the Holy Spirit, is greater than the one who is in the world, the devil.

See what John's saying? Take heart. Have confidence. You haven't been fooled by these false teachers, but you've overcome them. You do know the truth. You do believe in Jesus.

You do believe in Jesus as the king who died for you. And the reason we believe is because the Spirit of God is in us, enabling us to believe.

And that Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is greater than the spirit of Satan trying to fool us. And John's point here is that we can have confidence to combat this false teaching because we have the Spirit who is greater and has already helped us to overcome it.

[11 : 39] It's like I was saying a few weeks ago. I remember I tried a bit of false teaching on you. I don't know if you remember this, but I tried to teach you that two plus two does not equal four, equals five. And you all looked at me like you're looking at me now, like, because you lost the plot.

I don't know if you remember this, but I did this. And someone at nine o'clock actually called out, which school did you go to? Because you've already been taught the truth that two plus two equals four.

That's right, isn't it? Yeah, four. You've been taught that by another teacher. You've already overcome my false teaching. And it's the same thing here. The Spirit has already taught us the truth about Jesus.

You've already overcome that false teaching that denies Christ. So you can have confidence to keep combating that false teaching if it comes along again.

And we need this confidence. We need to remember we have the Spirit's help, that we know the truth. Because our society says these days that everyone's right, doesn't it? You know, it's true for you, it's true for you, we're all right.

[12 : 44] It doesn't quite work, though, does it? Now, if person A says one thing, which is contradictory to person B, they can't both be right. Religion A says something different to religion B.

They can't be both right, can they? What's more, our society also says we're not allowed to say anyone is wrong. Have you noticed that? Tolerance is no longer we both have the right to disagree and to say our own opinions.

That was what it used to be. Now, tolerance is you don't have the right to say anything unless you agree with me. That's what it is now. Social media, it's all over the place. But John gives us confidence not to fall for that, but to quietly recognise false teaching for what it is.

And if we need to speak up, to speak up gently and lovingly and disagree. For you know the truth. You've already overcome what is false.

And the one in you is greater than the one in the world. But to give us even more confidence, John gives us a second test. Point four, verse five. They, that is the false teachers, are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world.

[14 : 03] And the world listens to them. We, John and the apostles, 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 recognise the spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood. The second test is the listening test, I think. And in verse five, the false teachers are from the world and so they speak from the viewpoint of the world.

And of course the world listens to them. And so to apply this test, we've kind of got to work backwards and ask, does the world listen to this teacher because they're speaking from the viewpoint of the world?

And if they do, then this teacher is not from God, but from the world. They're false. That's how the test works.

For example, the world loves money, especially with the rising interest rates, again, and the cost of food. And at the end of this month, I think it's the 29th of September, all our petrol prices are going to jump by 22 cents.

[15 : 12] Woohoo, can't wait. And so if I started preaching a series at Holy Trinity called God's Way to a Billion Bucks Now, do you think we'd have more people from the world in our pews?

And they'd listen to me. But if they do, it shows that I'm speaking what they want to hear. I'm speaking from the viewpoint of the world, not from God's word.

Just like the false teachers did in our first reading, which in turn shows that I am from the world and not from God. It shows I'm a false teacher, you see.

Now, of course, we hope that many from the world will listen to the gospel and become Christians. And many do. But sadly, not all will. It said most people don't want to hear about Jesus.

And so don't listen to the apostles in the Bible. And so the test is, does the world listen to this teacher because they're speaking from the viewpoint of the world?

[16 : 17] If it's yes, then that teacher is not from God, but from the world. They're false. That's the listening test, part A. Part B is verse 6.

John and the apostles are from God, and whoever listens to them and their teaching in the Bible, whether it's a person in the pew or a preacher in the pulpit, whoever listens to the apostles in the Bible, then those people know God.

Verse 6 says, as Jesus himself said, my sheep listen to my voice. And so if we listen to John and the apostles, then we know God.

And if a teacher listens to John and the apostles in the Bible, then they know God and are from God. But whoever does not listen to John and the apostles in Scripture is not from God.

And so to apply this test, does the teacher listen to the apostles' eyewitness testimony in the Bible? Do they teach according to the apostles' word from here?

[17 : 26] If yes, then they're a true teacher who knows God. If no, they're a false teacher who does not know God. One has the spirit of truth, verse 6, behind them.

The other has the spirit of falsehood behind them. Now, again, John is thinking particularly of those antichrists who deny Jesus came in the flesh. And so they don't listen to John and the apostles about Jesus, which means they're false teachers.

But that's only one group of teachers we see today. Today, I think there are three groups of religious teachers. And so on the side, there's the total false teacher who are not Christian.

I mean, if you deny Jesus is the Christ, you can't be a Christian, can you? It doesn't work, does it? And they may claim to know God like many religious teachers of other religions claim.

But it's not the true God of the Bible. Because Jesus says, you need to believe in me to know the true God. Rather like these antichrists, they are total false prophets who are totally misled by the spirit of falsehood.

[18 : 34] That's the first group. I think the second group are partial false teachers who are probably Christians. They do believe in Jesus. But they teach falsely in many other areas of the Christian faith.

And they often teach according to the viewpoint of the world. Because they want the world to listen to them and like them. And we find this group in lots of churches today.

And even Christian schools and church-based aged care centres. I was talking with Helen Baxter, our partial care worker, who was visiting someone a little while ago in a church-based aged care centre.

And this resident gave Helen this newsletter from the centre. And in the newsletter was a column from the chaplain. And the chaplain was writing, putting forward the teaching of Buddha as a way to kind of grow as a Christian, along with other New Age self-help stuff.

Now, there may be some wisdom, but is that how the Bible says we grow? It's not true teaching, is it? Now, don't get me wrong, they're all nice people. I've spoken to some of them myself.

[19 : 44] I know they believe in Jesus, but they've been misled by the temptation to water down God's Word and teach other stuff that's more acceptable to the world. To be listened to by the world.

They've been partially misled by the spirit of falsehood. And so they're the partial false teachers, you see. And the third and final group are the imperfect true teachers.

They're Christians who not only believe in Jesus, but also listen to John and the apostles in the Bible. They teach according to God's Word.

I'd like to think that's us here at HGD. And because we are, the world often ignores us or belittles us. I remember being laughed at for believing some parts of the Bible that we were talking about with this other person.

And the other person who I was talking with and was laughing at me was actually an Anglican minister who just didn't believe this part of the New Testament and couldn't believe that I would.

[20 : 43] And the irony was we were both at a minister's conference talking about the Bible. But even though we work hard to teach according to the Bible, we can still sometimes get the details wrong. Because no one is perfect.

You know, I get things wrong. Vijay got things wrong. No one is perfect. We are imperfect true teachers. But because no one is perfect. And because there will always be false teachers, whether total or partial, then we all need to do what John says, don't we?

We all need to test what we hear. We're to test what the teacher says. And John has given us confidence that we can do that. He's given us these tests, the Jesus test, the listening test.

Plus, he's reminded us that we have the spirit who is in us and who is greater than the spirit who's in the world. And you have the eyewitness accounts of the apostles collected for you in this nicely bound book so that we can check.

And so you can combat false teaching. But it does require effort, doesn't it? It requires effort to be an active listener and not a passive pew sitter.

[21 : 54] Because it's easy to lose concentration, isn't it? You know, to start counting the rafters. One, two, three, four, five. I know what it's like.

I've been there in the pews. It's easy to lose concentration. It does require effort to be an active listener and not a passive pew sitter. But here's the thing. Most things in life that are worthwhile require effort, don't they?

Families, kids, careers, even holidays require effort. To plan. So, too, getting the most out of teaching. It requires the effort to be an active listener and not a passive pew sitter.

Listening with the Bible open, which helps you to concentrate anyway. Seeing if what the preacher says matches what God says. Which is why I always work through the passage and get you to follow along and read it with me.

And it means willing to be asking questions if it doesn't seem to make sense to you. Last week, someone emailed me a question about Psalm 19, which I sent out on the e-news as a devotional.

[22 : 58] It was fantastic. I loved it. And we could kind of dig into the Bible and work out exactly what God says, who's way more important than any preacher. Isn't he? Big application is be active listeners, not passive pew sitters.

And so, here's an active listening test to finish with. One of my kids was given some religious teaching this year. And I've spoken with the person who gave it to them. And I think they really are a Christian.

But John says to test it. So, here we go. We're going to do it. The person who gave my son this teaching called it Holy Habits, Sacred Ways, Spiritual Practices. But the first one he suggested for the kids to grow as a Christian was to eat something raw.

Okay. The next one was stillness. Stand in a tree pose. Okay. We'll keep going. Next one is a gesture. Hold one hand open in front of your belly and the other hand up like a stop sign.

And this is a traditional Buddhist discipline. And in the first bullet point he says, ask the spirit what you need to be open. And I'm thinking, I've just crawled.

[24 : 07] I should have whited it out actually. I just crawled, which spirit is he talking about here? Because is this what John and the apostles says grows us in Christ? The Buddha might have great wisdom for us.

Other religions, you know, wisdom is not just the province of Christians. There's other wisdom out there. But is this the way the Bible tells us that we are to grow as Christians? Or on the last slide then.

Sacred texts. I read a psalm from the Bible or Torah, which is great. And then he also says, or a poem by Rumi, who is a Muslim or Islamic poet. Beautiful poems.

And again, they can offer us wisdom. But is this what the Bible says we're to do? And says, don't overthink it. Romans 12, 1 and 2, the apostle Paul says, to be renewed.

Have your minds renewed to think about it. And so, having tested this against God's word, is this true or false teaching?

[25 : 09] I know we don't want to say, the world tells us we're not allowed to say, but say it. What is it? It's false. Yeah. Now, I need to say I've met with this person over several hours. And we've spoken openly and gently about this.

And I think we've made some progress. And this is just one teacher. There are others who are spot on. But this is a real life example of what we're to do, you see. Whenever we hear a talk or read a devotional book, whether it's a sermon here at HTD or somewhere else, we're to be active listeners, not passive pew sitters, checking what we hear against what we read in God's word.

And you can do it. In fact, you just did it. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we do thank you so much for your word, the Bible, that was written down by those who are eyewitnesses to the Lord Jesus.

Father, we thank you that it was being reliably handed down to us through the ages, as we saw a number of weeks ago. And so we can trust it. Help us, we pray, therefore, to be active listeners with the Bible open, testing what we hear to make sure it matches what you say, that we might continue to be followers of you and grow as your children in Christ.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.