

Good morning, everyone. My name is John and I'm happy and humbled to have the opportunity to teach the Bible to you today as we continue our study of 1 John. I'm grateful for the elders of our church who are gracious enough to let this young preacher take my training wheels off and learn by doing. All my notes will be up on the church website today, so you can feel free from trying to scribble anything down and just listen. But it is God's Word you want to hear and I want to preach so we'd better pray and ask for God's help.

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## Prayer

*God, we're grateful to gather here this morning to worship you. Now as we study we ask that you would guide us, teach us and convict us by Your Holy Spirit. Please open up our minds and hearts to your Word. Would you renew our minds so that we might think rightly about you and avoid false teaching? And would you change us in this place, so that our beliefs, actions and relationships reflect the Lord Jesus more and more. Please grant me clarity and boldness that I might proclaim your Word as I ought to proclaim it, for your honor and glory. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

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## Introduction

With money as tight as it is for many people right now, can you imagine if the money you did have was not the real thing but a counterfeit? The US Treasury, estimates, "that the total value of counterfeits in circulation at any moment is approximately \$70 million."<sup>1</sup> Having counterfeit money you thought was genuine would be terrible. Years of labor would have been for nothing. Savings for the future would be instantly worthless. Paying off debts or even this month's bills would not be happening because only true US currency has value.

But what if something even more precious than money had the chance of being counterfeit? What if that something was your understanding of God? According to the Bible this would be disastrous since our beliefs about God reveal:

- Whether we are following the truth or the lie
- Whether we love others or hate them
- Whether we walk in the light or the darkness
- Whether we belong to God or Satan
- Whether we have eternal life or not!

The implications of having a counterfeit understanding of God are far more serious than having counterfeit money.

So how do you know? Well, in the last 10 years the US Treasury has changed the bills so that it is easier than ever to spot counterfeits. There are specific tests to quickly examine if you have a genuine bill<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, the Bible also prescribes a few easy tests to examine whether or not we've got the real thing. We can hold our beliefs up to the light, so to speak, to see if they have the right watermark and security thread so that we know they're genuine.

From 1 John, we've already considered 2 tests of true Christians. The first test was, have we seen real life change in our *actions*? In other words, are we making progress by the grace of God to stop making a practice of sinning and start practicing righteousness? Secondly, we've asked, do our *relationships* demonstrate a sacrificial love for God's people? So we've considered the test of righteousness and the test of love; a test for our actions and a test for our relationships. And this week we come to the third major test of 1 John: belief in the truth.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/reports/the%20use%20and%20counterfeiting%20of%20u.s.%20currency%20abroad%20%20part%203%20september2006.pdf>... "or about one note in 10,000, and is highly unlikely to exceed \$200 million, or about 2.5 in 10,000."

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.divinecaroline.com/22354/73997-spot-counterfeit-money/2>... "(1) Looks and feels like a US bank note, (2) Has color-shifting ink, (3) Has a watermark that matches the portrait, (4) And has a security thread with the text that matches the denomination."

This letter of 1 John, penned by Jesus' closest friend and disciple was written to a group of churches in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century to help them work through the same issues we face. The whole letter is an application of the gospel to our (1) beliefs, (2) actions, and (3) relationships. We'll be considering a passage that answers the question: **How, in our beliefs, do we discern between true Christian teaching and false distortions?**

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### What does Scripture say?

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Our passage begins by saying that we shouldn't just believe everything we hear. To believe everything that you hear from religious teachers—whether it's on TV, the Internet, or even in church—is not a sign of maturity, but immaturity. We need to be discerning about who we follow because not everyone claiming to be a spokesman for God's truth really is one.

*If you have a Bible with you, please open it to 1 John 4:1. 1 John, chapter 4, verse 1. 1 John 4:1.*

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

This is a negative warning to not uncritically accept “every spirit”. The idea behind ‘spirit’ comes from the background into which this letter was written. “There were certain people who claimed unusual authority from God, who claimed to have the Spirit in an unusual and marked manner and were impatient of teaching and definition and doctrine.”<sup>3</sup> When people claim God's authority in their teaching, we must not believe it without testing it first. To be slow to believe is not always a bad thing. Jesus did criticize the disciples for being “slow of heart to believe” but this was because they had sufficient evidence for his resurrection in the Old Testament but were still dragging their feet in disbelief. But here, we are warned to be careful before jumping on the bandwagon of following current spiritual teachers. The reason for this is that some are false prophets who are not from God.

Notice here in verse one it says that the false prophets “have *gone out* into the world.” In studying this I asked the question: Where have they “gone out” from? And I believe that John answers this question by saying they have gone out from the church. Look over at chapter 2, verse 19. 1 John 2:19 says,

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

These false teachers had been teaching lies instead of the truth in church. They claimed to have a message from God, but instead they were leading people away from God. Even among Christians and in church, we need to be careful that we examine what people say without just automatically agreeing or assuming since they're in authority they are speaking God's truth. Some of you know this from personal experience. You've been at churches that have started teaching things outside the Bible or ignored certain teachings in the Bible. Many false prophets will even use the same terms found in the Bible, but mean very different things by them than the Bible does. Some churches and denominations today are in fact not Christian churches. This is a tragedy, when the Bible says that the church is to be “the pillar and buttress of truth” (1 Tim 3:15). In Revelation 2 & 3 Jesus rebukes several churches for tolerating false teaching which he says he hates. We need to learn discernment that we might recognize true and false teaching even within the church.

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<sup>3</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in Christ*, p. 401.

This means that in an experience-driven culture, we must slow down long enough to test and examine religious teaching and spiritual experiences. This doesn't automatically mean that we become cynical or sit around with veto stamp ready to reject everything, but it does mean that it's Biblical to be careful about what you accept and what you reject. Despite what Oprah preaches, **not everything spiritual is automatically good.**

- Not every spiritual experience is from God
- Not every religious teacher comes from God
- Not every book in the spirituality section is from God
- Not every book with 'Jesus' in the title is from God
- Not every spirit/angel is from God.
- Not every dream comes from God.

A popular lie in our culture says that everything spiritual is automatically good. But this is not a Christian idea, this is a pagan idea. We must be careful and discerning.

So the next question is: **How are we supposed to test if a teacher's message originates from God's Spirit or from an evil spirit? What are our criteria for discerning the truth?**

There are two answers we'll look at. The **first criterion** for discerning true teaching, you guessed it, is Jesus. The key to recognizing who speaks the truth of God and who does not hinges on what they say about Jesus. True teachers are led by the Spirit of God to communicate the truth about Jesus, while false prophets are led by another spirit not from God to distort the truth about Jesus. Let me show you. Look at verse 2 of chapter 4. 1 John 4:2 says this,

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, <sup>3</sup> and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.

This test of truth is one of doctrine. You might be thinking, 'doctrine, isn't that just for the professionals, all the guys with PhDs who study theology as a vocation?' But here, the Bible is saying that we all must think carefully about our doctrine, and most especially what we believe about Jesus, our Christology. We all are theologians! The question is, whether we are good ones or bad ones. Does our position about Jesus line up with the truth of who he really is?

For example, one of the most common views of Jesus is that he was a good moral teacher.

- **Jesus is just a good example, but not the Savior of the world. Jesus is a spiritual teacher, but not the King of Heaven & Earth you need to submit to**—But C.S. Lewis classically said its foolishness when people say, "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." To say that Jesus is a good religious teacher is foolishness because Jesus made the most unparalleled claims about himself.
  1. Jesus claimed he was God.
  2. Jesus claimed he came down from heaven.
  3. Jesus claimed he was without sin.
  4. Jesus claimed he could forgive sin.
  5. Jesus claimed he was the exclusive way to God.
  6. Jesus claimed he would conquer death and rise again after 3 days.

No one else has made such monumental claims. If Jesus made these claims but knew they weren't true, he'd be a liar. If Jesus believed his claims were true, but they weren't, we'd say he's a lunatic. But

if his claims actually were true, than he would be the Lord of heaven and earth. He's a Liar, a Lunatic or the Lord, but it's inconsistent to say that Jesus was a good moral teacher. Who do you say that Jesus is?

**Obj:** Now, some of you might be thinking, "This sounds extreme. People have all kinds of different beliefs about Jesus, but you don't need to demonize them. Are you just trying to make me believe in *your Jesus?*"

**A:** What I want to do is to hold up what the Bible says is true about Jesus and at the same time expose the lies about Jesus in our day. We can think so little about this, but we have an enemy who wants to lead us away from God. He is described in the Bible as the "father of lies" and "the deceiver". Satan is strategic about "corrupting and distorting an understanding of who Jesus really is, what he came to do, and what he is about to do."<sup>4</sup> "If he can't prevent people from turning to Christianity, he can alter the Christianity to which they turn and make it into something that is not Christianity at all."<sup>5</sup> And so this matters because we need to be on guard against the lies, errors and deceptions that our enemy attacks us with, particularly those lies about Jesus.

Let me give you a few examples of distortions of Jesus which we can commonly believe in.

- **The Jesus who is just my Ticket to Heaven**— Some of you believe Jesus is not concerned about your daily life or an ongoing relationship. To you he's just security for your eternity. This is like getting married just for the tax benefits. Do you think you're fiancé would be cool with that idea? "Sweetheart, I'm not really interested in a relationship, just what our status does for me long-term." Yikes! The Bible teaches that everything in this life and the next centers on Jesus. So you should focus most on your relationship with Jesus and get to know him. Then, I guarantee you'll really enjoy the party in heaven.
- **The Jesus who is Without a Body**— The church is called the body of Christ and some of you think that you can walk with Jesus alone. You're Mr. Independent with no need to be connected or accountable to the church. You show up to church once in a while, probably because your wife or girlfriend wants you to, but you're just a spectator. You're missing the point. The way we grow up to know Jesus better is in and through community, living and working together as a body of people who unique reflect Jesus to one another through our gifts and personalities.
- **The Emergency-Hotline Jesus**— Some of you say that you have a relationship with Jesus, but only talk to him when you're in a mess. If things are going well in your life, Jesus is irrelevant, but when trouble hits, you give him a call. Your relationship with Jesus is based on your personal crises and you don't love Jesus, but you use him to get your version of 'the good life'.
- **The Healthy, Wealthy Jesus**— According to this view, Jesus exists to give us everything we've always wanted. This one could also be called "The American Dream Jesus" who promises life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Some of you grade Jesus' love for you according to how well you're doing financially. If you're comfortable, he loves you. If you lost your job or your house, he loves you not. You minimize the fact that Jesus once and for all proved his love for you in the most sacrificial way possible, he died on the cross, laying down his life for you that you might be forgiven and reconciled to God.

<sup>4</sup> Clint Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions*, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> Clint Arnold, *3 Crucial Questions*, p. 60.

- **The Intellectual Jesus**— Some of you know a lot of facts and figures about Jesus. You grew up in church, consider yourself a good religious person and may even have studied the Bible and theology, but you don't really walk with Jesus. You have grown more comfortable reading about him than relating to him. You might never admit this, but you have lost your love for him and have ceased to be amazed by him. Don't be deceived! Wake up and return to him so that you are not "led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ." (2 Cor. 11:3)
- **The Jesus who is My Homeboy**— Others of you think so little of Jesus that he could never disagree with you, confront you, or convict you of sin. He's a pal or buddy. Essentially, he's Jesus in your own image, as you want him to be, rather than as he really is presented in Scripture. Yes, Jesus was the incarnate Son of God who worked as a carpenter in an obscure Galilean town, but he is also a strong and courageous King and the ultimate Judge of all men. He is holy and hates sin and its destructive effects in our lives and therefore will someday fully pour out his wrath on all sinners as punishment for their sins. Therefore, Jesus "commands all people everywhere to repent." I don't think most homies, repent to their homeboys.
- **The Jesus with No Mission**— Often times we Christians can think that Jesus provides forgiveness for our sins and then we get on with our lives as normal, as if Jesus left his people with nothing to accomplish. This is certainly not the case. Jesus came to seek and save the lost and commissioned his people to reach others with his gospel. We are to teach and spread the truth about Jesus. We are to be the light of the world, doing good works in such a way that God gets the glory. We're to use our time, talents and treasure to show hospitality, pray for those who persecute us, rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, live at peace with everyone. This means caring for the poor, the outcasts, and those in need. Ultimately, this looks like acting for the good of everyone around us.
- **The Jesus who is Not Enough**— In one way or another many of us will be tempted to think that Jesus is not enough, he's insufficient. Like trying to get more cash from the bank than you put in, you'll get the message 'insufficient funds'. Some of you might believe that Jesus couldn't have died for *all* your sins— you think you'll pay for some of the bad things you've done. Or others of you may believe that Jesus forgives you, but doesn't cleanse you— you're still a dirty person. This is saying Jesus' death for you is not enough to wash away the guilty stains from your past. That the new birth that Jesus offers really doesn't make us new, just gives us a makeover or a remodel. Still others of you think that you have to add to Jesus' record by your efforts. You must do certain things for God to accept you. You need to strive really hard to keep a list of rules and be really religious. You might add certain prayers you think you need to say. Others of you think you need to add in a couple of other spiritual gurus to follow just to cover all your bases. Still some of you might add some sort of mystical or spiritual experience, thinking that if only you had that then you'd be certain of your position before God. If you add anything, ANYTHING, then you are saying that Jesus' righteousness is not enough for you. His perfect life lived for you and his sacrificial death in your place were still not enough for you. You need to add something else, something more.

Christians, beware of these demonic attacks to diminish and distort the truth of Jesus and his sufficiency. These are all counterfeits, not the true Jesus. We must not be ignorant of our enemy's schemes. Let us press on to know Jesus, to know him as the Bible presents him. Let us take care that our doctrine is shaped by God's word.

The **first criterion** for testing the truth is to discern what is being said about Jesus. A.W. Tozer has famously said, “What we believe about God is the most important thing about us.” I would qualify that by saying, “what we believe about Jesus is the most important thing about us.” And getting Jesus wrong has awful implications.

But in case you are beginning to have a panic attack thinking that this is all up to you, let me encourage you to breathe deeply. It is not you being so bright or sharp that keeps you from error, but God who has given you his Spirit. When you become a Christian, God gives you his Spirit to dwell within you to help you walk with God and learn to discern between truth and error. God is the one who allows you to overcome the evil spirits that would lead you into false teaching. Look at 1 John 4:4:

Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

Here this phrase “From God” means to be a Christian. It is contrasted with being “In the World” or “From the World”. If you’re a Christian you can overcome false teachers, not giving into their lies, because God is with you and his Spirit dwells within you. As you study the Bible, the Holy Spirit will guide you into the truth, particularly about a) who Jesus is, b) what he came to do and c) what he is going to do.

We have said that the **first criterion** for discerning between true Christianity and counterfeits is to examine what is being said about Jesus. Does it match up with the truth about Jesus we have in the Bible? The **second criterion** is: does the spiritual teacher listen and submit to the word of God? Even though false teachers can often gather a big crowd and can be quite popular, their teaching can be identified because it doesn’t conform to scriptural teaching. False teachers will find some excuse to not come under the truth and authority of the Bible. Let’s look at verses 5 & 6. 1 John 4:5-6 says,

They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

In verse 5 it says, “the world listens to them.” Their empty teachings turn away from the truth and wander off into the kinds of things people want to hear. May it never be that we would love the opinions of the world, listening to talk shows and talk radio, reading blog after blog on the internet which can make so much of things which are so trivial, while our Bibles sit on shelves collecting dust. God’s truth is held out to us in his word as the means for discerning between “the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”

The false teachers do not listen to “us”. Who is “us”? The “us” includes John and the other apostles. The false teachers do not listen to the apostles and their teaching that we have recorded in the Bible. They might make the excuse that the Bible is too outdated. Or is incomplete and needs to be added to. They might also say that the Bible is not as important as spiritual experience. But at when it comes down to it, they don’t submit to the Bible because they are not from God.

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**How is Jesus the hero?**

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The first step to avoiding false teaching is to become a Christian.

**Obj:** You might be thinking, 'Yeah, I'll get right with Jesus, but first I want to clean up my life.'

**A:** No! Only the truth sets you free and cleans you up and Jesus is the truth. You must come to Jesus first. Getting right with God means embracing Jesus and rejecting all false teaching, false religions, and false teachers you have believed in.

Before Jesus' crucifixion he was on trial before Pilate. Pilate seemed as if he was trying to figure out who Jesus was and why there was all this noise about him from the Jews. In response to a question from Pilate, Jesus said, "Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Exasperated with Jesus, Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" (John 18:37-38)

I'll tell you the truth. **The greatest truth in all of history is Jesus' death and resurrection.**

Pilate went on to have Jesus flogged. This meant Jesus was stripped and a whole battalion of soldiers mocked him, spit on him and beat him within an inch of his life. They pressed a thorny crown into Jesus' tender scalp and placed a purple robe on his mangled back and a reed in his hand as a mockery of a king's scepter. Jesus' truth claims we're shoved in his face in the hours of his agonizing torture and yet he didn't recant. If he didn't mean it when we said he was the true God why didn't he just give it up to stop this brutality? In his final moments, as 6 inch spikes were driven through his wrists and his bloody back met the rough timber of the cross, Jesus wasn't thinking about revenge. Instead he prayed for his executioners' forgiveness. No one could suffer this much for a lie.

At the heart of the Christian message is a man who claimed he was God and willingly died to atone for the sins of his enemies. And 3 days later he proved it by rising from dead just as he said he would, appearing to over 500 eye-witnesses. In his death and resurrection, Jesus conquered Satan, so that those who trust in him as the Truth might be forgiven and reconciled to God. As we press on to know Jesus, we're set free by the Truth to live for him everyday of our lives. This is good news!

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**Response**

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I'd like to give you some time now to quietly reflect and get right with Jesus. Take this opportunity to respond to what God might have convicted you of. If you're not a Christian, this is the time to become one. You can commit your life to Jesus, repenting of your sins and unbelief and putting your faith in Jesus, the true God, who died that you might be free to live for God. For those of you who have been running from Jesus, I invite you to come back and believe in Jesus' love for you. For all of us, let us repent of our false beliefs about Jesus and again commit ourselves to knowing him above all things. And as you do this, there will be people around the room to pray with you if you'd like.

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