

Complete Joy: Loving the Word

1 John 4:1-6 (NIV)

¹ 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. ² 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, ³ but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. ⁴ 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. ⁵ They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ 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.

Last month at our Outreach meeting, I gave a pop quiz written test. One of the first time attendees said with a smile on their face said, “I didn’t know that there was going to be a test. I’m out.” Thankfully, everyone stayed and took the test, giving me valuable feedback. They got an unexpected test sprung on them, but do you realize that everyday you and I are getting tests from God? It’s almost never a written exam (unless you join our Outreach group or attend Catechism class). It was a test that was being administered 2,000 years ago in John’s day. “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.” (verse 1) Whenever you hear anything about God, about faith, about spirituality, about right and wrong, you and I are called to test it. When you come to church, you are not to be a passive observer but an active listener, testing what this guy up here in the white robe says to you and see if this truly is the Word of God.

How do we test these spirits? John wrote, “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. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.” (verses 2-3) So, what you’re saying is that as long as they are saying that Jesus is a real person, then we are all on the same page, right? Well, there’s more that John has packed into that test than just a cursory understanding that Jesus Christ of Nazareth was a real person.

In John’s day, there was a group of people who claimed that Jesus of Nazareth was a real man but that he wasn’t really God. They would say that the heavenly Christ and the man Jesus were two separate beings since a pure spirit such as God could not live in sinful human flesh. They also claimed that the only way that you would know this is if you received special knowledge that wasn’t written down or told by apostles and prophets. These people were called Gnostics.

By and large, the world knows Jesus, and they make statements about him, like these Gnostics. Some say that Jesus was just a man – a really good man, but a man nonetheless. Some say that he was a prophet, an exceptional teacher of good things, but that’s where it ends. Some say that he was not God but a man who rose the ranks through his efforts and became God. Well, who’s right?

When someone says something about spirituality, something about religion, something about Jesus, we have to critically examine it. Start by considering the source. Is this a reputable reporter? Is this an unbiased news network? Is this a professional who takes their job seriously? Do they have a history of reporting accurately? At the same time, we have to take a look at ourselves. Am I trusting what these people say mainly because they already agree with what I think? Am I looking mostly to have people say what I think they should say or am I honestly assessing and challenging my own view and beliefs?

John says to use this measuring stick when testing the spirits: “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.” (verse 6) That’s a bold statement from John. So, let’s test him, think critically about what he’s writing.

Consider the source. John had seen Jesus with his own eyes, touched him with his own hands, listened to him with his own ears – miracles, suffering, death, resurrection, and more. Jesus himself claimed to be the Great I AM, God himself. The apostles and other writers of the Bible understood that Jesus was and is fully God and never had a time when he wasn’t. So, either Jesus is what he says he is or he’s a liar or he’s a lunatic, believing these crazy things about himself. People tried to kill Jesus, not because he was spouting crazy talk, but because he did things that they could not explain, because he claimed to be God, and they just thought he was a mere man, despite what they saw and heard. John was willing to be publicly punished, jailed, persecuted, and even die for this truth. Many of his fellow apostles did. Why would he be willing to die for a lie? When push comes to shove, who dies for a cause they know is a lie? What would he possibly gain for dying from preaching Jesus as true God and true Man, the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world, if it wasn’t true?

Thinking critically and testing the spirits, we also consider who Jesus is because of the track record – the prophecies that came before John. Prophecies about Jesus with specific details were told and recorded hundreds of years before they happened: the virgin birth, born in Bethlehem, fled to Egypt, hailed from Nazareth, healed the paralyzed, gave sight to the blind, made the deaf hear, had no beauty to attract us to him, was assigned a death with the wicked and was buried with the rich, would not see decay. And there are so many more. What are the chances of all these foretold events line up in one person? When history and eyewitnesses all agree in their details on proclaiming Jesus as true Man and true God who is the perfect substitute for our righteousness and perfection and is also our total atoning sacrifice for our sins, why would we believe what anyone else has to say about Jesus?

John tested these spirits, these Gnostics, and found that they were preaching some other Jesus, a counterfeit Jesus. He calls us to test spirits in the same way. In order to test them, though, we have to love the Word of God, our reliable primary resource.

Do you love the Word of God? Hopefully, you all immediately say, “Yes!” But take a moment and reflect. Over the past year especially, I’ve heard many and varied strong opinions about masks or no masks, Republicans, Democrats, or Independents, racial injustice, vaccines and anti-vaxxers. If you are passionate about these things, good. But are you more known for your love and strong opinion on these things or for your love and strong belief in God and his Word? Do I religiously watch the news every night but only hear God’s Word 1 hour a week? Do I never skip a practice, but ignore God’s playbook, letting the Bible gather dust on a shelf? My Xbox will tell me how many hours I’ve played a game. What would it say if it kept track of how many hours I’ve spent interacting with the Word of God? Would an unchurched person you know come up to you and ask you questions about God because they know you love your God and his Word? Do I treat the Word of God as it actually is, the Word of Life, like the spiritual food that it is - that I need God’s Word in my life everyday or I will die just as if I went days without food or water?

God, forgive us for when we have not loved your Word. Be the atoning sacrifice that we know that you are to purify us from all our times of neglecting your Word. Thank you, Jesus, for loving the Word of God for us. You were in the synagogue, in church, every Sabbath. You read the prophets. You sang the Psalms with joy. You asked questions of the priests, of the Bible teachers, to learn more, to think critically. You talked about the Word of God with your close disciples, friends, people you stayed with. Thank you that your perfect love of God’s Word now covers us. As John assured us, as we have confessed our sins, you have purified us and cleansed us from all unrighteousness. We are made new to love the Word of God and so test what people say about you.

Now, how do we love the Word of God more? Maybe the answer’s too easy, but we love God’s Word more by being in it – by hearing it, reading it, thinking about it, talking about it, diving deeper into it, thinking critically about it, examining it. We love God’s Word when it is a part of our everyday lives, carving out time to personally be in it. This might be signing up on wels.net for their daily email devotions. This might be going to Time of Grace’s Youtube channel and watching their weekday devotions. This may be a devotion book you buy from Northwestern Publishing House. This might be using a Bible reading plan from Biblegateway.com.

But don’t read the Bible like Lord of the Rings or Game of Thrones, not like fiction. Read it critically. Reflect on it. Take it seriously. And don’t reflect alone, in the vacuum of your own thoughts and ideas. Make use of the fellowship we have as Christians. Be challenged. Read God’s Word together in Bible study with other adults and kids. Read what other people of our faith have learned about God’s Word by grabbing a People’s Bible commentary for a book of the Bible that you want to read. Parents, read the Bible with your kids. Kids, ask your parents questions about what God is saying to you. Consider getting a small group of people together just to read and talk about God’s Word. And, of course, love God’s Word by being here with brothers and sisters in Christ where God’s Word is proclaimed and administered through his Sacraments – baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

This is how we can grow in our love of God’s Word, but how does loving God’s Word to test what people say about God make our joy complete? For one, the Holy Spirit is always working wherever his Word is heard or read. This means that when you’re loving God’s Word by being in it, God will increase your trust in him, make you confident in the Jesus you know from the testimony of the apostles and prophets, having a sure and certain hope that Jesus is your atoning sacrifice, that your sins are forgiven, that you are right with God as God walks with you through life, shepherding you all along the way. Loving his Word will connect you more to your brother and sisters in Christ who are also reading it, studying it, thinking critically about it, increasing that shared joy of fellowship. Loving God’s Word, being in it, will give you new mercies and joys every morning because God’s Word never gets old and never will fade away or become obsolete. As some people have told me, their favorite Bible passage is the one that they read today because it applies to them today.

So, we love God’s Word to know Jesus better, to know his love for us better, to be filled up with the Holy Spirit, and thus be able to test all spirits and not be led away from God. This loving of God’s Word goes to make our joy complete. Amen.