

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.

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

-- 1 John 4:1-8

¹⁹ Do not put out the Spirit's fire. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²² reject whatever is harmful.

-- 1 Thess 5:19-22

Growing up Baptist in Saskatoon often meant experiencing a particular kind of Christian faith: no drinking, no dancing, and definitely no smoking. Unless, of course, the thing that was smoking was the tip of your rifle barrel after having shot a six-pointer deer buck. One indelible childhood memory I have is of playing Atari in the pastor's basement while sitting on piles of deerskins surrounded by deer heads mounted on the walls. Although some think hunting to be barbaric, God has made Creation for us to enjoy—and occasionally kill for meat and interior decoration.

Despite my pastor's penchant for bow hunting deer, the one thing that a good Baptist did not do was to think that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were something that continue to this day. We were all Cessationists, which for some of you think means we were all in the process of

quitting smoking, but for us it meant denying that the wonderful and sometimes strange gifts of God are still given to us.

From those early days, I moved to a church with Christian and Missionary Alliance leanings. That is to say, the idea of Spiritual gifts now entered my Christian vocabulary for the first time—but only as surveys and inventories that indicated that I have the gifts of prophecy and teaching—and, on good days, encouragement. Still, there was never any mention of the *other* gifts, the ones that were too freaky to talk about in broad daylight. We never did openly discuss gifts of healing except to say that God occasionally worked through the hands of doctors and nurses to make people better. And we most certainly never discussed the exotic-sounding gift of glossolalia—the gift of speaking in the language of angels—let alone touch on the possibility that God might speak to us in other ways than just the Bible. Being conservative, rational people meant being materialists. Yes, we were materialistic too—blocking church neighbour's driveways with our Mercedes and the like—but we were materialists first. Things that could not be empirically proven by means of our five senses and the most rigorous scientific testing were things to be feared.

It was with this background that I left for Hong Kong as a teacher-chaplain in 2000. And it was one afternoon, as I was marking the numerical scrawl known as grade nine remedial math tests, that I began to wonder just what the point of marking could be. I longed for Vancouver, for home. Fresh air, cool rain, the smell of soil. In my heart, I started to think of ways to get out of my contract a year early.

A few days later, as I was still slogging my way through more math papers, the phone on my desk rang. It was the wife of the director of Human Resources for my school—a lady

with grey hair so long that I wondered if she often sat on it by mistake. She introduced herself as an approved prophetess for her church in Sha Tin, and then told me in a very serious tone:

“I have a word from The Lord for you.”

After reassuring me that she had passed this word (which turned out to be a long, orderly collection of words known as a paragraph) by her pastor, this is what she wrote out for me, a man she barely knew:

The Lord says to you, Edward, “You are no longer to be a teacher, but a sword in the hand of the Almighty.”

Thus began a series of events in my life as an adult Christian that changed my perspective on God. No longer could God be the benign old man in the sky. No longer could I see Him as sedentary and silent. He became the living God; active, strong, and involved. As for whether this word had an impact on my life, judge for yourselves: I stayed in Hong Kong for another three years.

Some of you may not have had some of the experiences that I have had. Some of you may have had even more. Yet this in itself does not matter, for what the passage before us today challenges us to do is to test everything we receive. This goes for prophetic words, inner healing, teaching, and even preaching itself.

The Apostle John writes in his first epistle to a divided church. From what we can glean about this church, there may have been self-styled teachers tramping around the fringes and spreading lies that split the congregation. The issue? Is Jesus a real person at all.

John lists two tests for telling whether or not someone was an approved teacher. The first test was simple: if he or she says that Jesus came in the flesh from God, then listen to

them. Otherwise, have nothing to do with the people who only cause more confusion. Jesus is a real person. He is the Son of God. He is the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah.

It is worth pausing here to note that there is very little that is interesting in the original Greek text of 1 John. There aren't many long or obscure words—a marked difference from the intricate letters of Paul. It is as though John is doing his level best to make himself clear and easy to understand. Yet it is his topic that we often find confusing in any language. When John writes about discerning the spirits around us, what does he mean?

There are a variety of ways of understanding what John means by “spirits”. John uses the word *pneuma*, which literally means “breath” or “air”—and which is used by New Testament authors to also mean “spirit”. Whether this refers to denizens of the spiritual realm such as demons or angels, or whether this refers to the motive behind the words false teachers were giving isn't clear. What is clear, however, is that mature Christians are those who learn to tell the difference between what is of God and what is not.

However, we are not left alone in our discernment. Christian Spiritual discernment is not merely about separating worldly from Godly, but rather it is about attending to the voice of the Holy Spirit as he speaks to each one of us. John writes that “he that is in us is greater than the one in the world¹” for a purpose—to reassure us that we are protected and that we have no need to fear. What we need to do, however, is to humbly listen. Humility is the fundamental disposition of a person who wants to be with God—and it is also the starting point for all who would hear from Him. Insisting on our own way is the spiritual equivalent to putting our fingers

¹ John 4:4

in our ears. Humility means taking your fingers out of your ears and trusting that he that is in us is not only greater than the one in the world, but is also good.

The second test John lists is more difficult to perform. He says in v.7 that *“Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.”* The second test, then, is something that helped John earn his nickname as the Apostle of Love: that whoever knows the living God is one who loves. The mark of the people of God, as it ever has been, is that we love one another. Yet how are we to perform such a test? The answer is that this is one that requires time and patience. It’s easy to say “yes” to the question of “do you love me”. What is far more difficult is to prove it, because proving it can only be done by intentionally living intimately with each other in real community. Out of all the Spiritual gifts that we could possibly have, the ability to speak in a secret language is not the mark of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. Neither is the power to cast out demons or heal sickness or be covered in gold dust or be given gem stones that grow. Love is the supreme gift. Love is always the most excellent way, the way of the people who are walking with God by dwelling in Jesus the Christ.

Whatever it is we wish to discern, we reach out from a safe place as long as we remain in Christ—and his Spirit in us. Paul reminds us in 1 Thessalonians that the call to develop discernment is for all who say they belong to Christ, not just elders or pastors. Yet how are we to exercise discernment? Although we often think of the Spirit’s witness as entirely external to our beings, we have already been given the faculties to listen to God: through our minds and hearts together.

Being people raised in a largely rationalistic culture, we are used to using our minds to think our way through decision-making processes. We sometimes make lists of pros and cons,

hoping that one side will outweigh the other and so tell us what we ought to do. We might also receive teaching or words that need to be filtered through our minds. And it is tough work. The easiest thing to do is to say “that’s nice” and leave the process of discernment because it’s too difficult to do. Yet even as we are commanded to love God with our heart, soul, strength and *minds*², we must also turn every faculty we possess towards listening to God speak. And the way in which we begin to discern with our minds is that we attend to the voice of God speaking through Scripture. Every prophetic word, extraordinary Spiritual experience, and all guidance from Spiritual friends must be held up to what we know of God’s character as it is revealed to us in black and white—and sometimes red. But even as we bend our minds to engage the Word, we must never lose sight of the way the Spirit moves our hearts.

The capacity to feel things deeply is never to be underestimated. Indeed, to grow in Christlikeness necessarily means responding with integrity to the events around us. Christ did not skip like a happy little girl to the cross, but submitted himself to the agony of death. And again, neither did Christ deny himself happiness—his first miracle in John was intended to keep the wedding party going.

All this is to say that we do not pay enough attention to how we are feeling. We may *have* a feeling, but too often, we do not *know* what we are feeling. We are often tempted to believe that the Christian life should be representative of the extremes of emotion. We sometimes think that we should either give into wild emotionalism or else dry up our emotional lives so that we never experience anything but a vague tickle. But becoming Christlike means

² Mark 12:30

ordering our emotions and feeling rightly about everything that happens to us. Christlikeness means emotional integrity, responding in appropriate ways to each moment of our lives. We are to grieve when we see the plight of the poor around us. And yet, we exuberantly rejoice in the fellowship of friends and the delight of good food.

God meets us here in our hearts. The trick is to order our affections so that they are aligned to the Spirit of God, and in so doing, we know where we are being led. And we order our affections by paying attention to the heart of God revealed in Scripture. The Spirit's witness to our hearts will never contradict Scripture, but only confirm and strengthen it.

This is how we can begin to say "The Spirit of God is speaking to me"—by the exercise of our minds *and* hearts. And it is in this exercise that we learn to attend to the voice of God and follow Him. Yet the question remains: how do we know these things, these thoughts, these feelings are of God? By attending first to the apprehension of God's love for us. This is the first and fundamental rule of all Spiritual discernment: that we are loved by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and that we are loved *well*.

- 1.) What experiences have you had in hearing and responding to God?
- 2.) Have you ever used "God's will" as a cover for your own plans or ideas? Are you doing so now?
- 3.) What is God saying to you now in your current context?