

4/21/2024

1 John 4:1-6

Today is “Good Shepherd” Sunday. Why do we have a Sunday dedicated to that? The Bible uses many pictures and analogies to describe our relationship with God and how he saves us. The Bible uses the image of a Father and his dear children, a husband who loves and cherishes his wandering, unfaithful wife, or a doctor who heals his sin-sick patients, all ways of communicating God’s love for us. One of the profound pictures that explains our relationship to God, one that Jesus used in John 10 and David in Psalm 23, has captured the imagination of Christians for thousands of years- a shepherd and his sheep. This is a beautiful, tender, powerful way of speaking about Jesus’ relationship to us, but it’s also a bit insulting.

Sheep are not particularly impressive creatures. They don’t see well, they aren’t fast enough to run away from predators, they don’t have claws or fangs to defend themselves, they are typically skittish and prone to wandering away from the flock and getting themselves lost and stuck and isolated and killed. The Bible is not complimenting us when it calls us sheep. But sheep can do one thing pretty well: hear, and over time recognize, trust, and respond to the voice of their shepherd. Using the sheep analogy, the Bible tells us that there are always false shepherds, or wolves pretending to be sheep, trying to lure us into danger and death, and when they do so, they call us, they tell to come and follow them, and it’s important for Jesus’ sheep to know his voice, listen to his voice, respond only to his voice. The question that John is answering for us today is this: **How do Jesus’ sheep know his voice? And John says 1. His voice tells the truth about himself 2. Use the Word.**

1. The truth about himself. Pastor John tells his beloved members to “test the spirits.” It’s fascinating that he would say it like that and not say, “test your pastors,” or “test your teacher’s doctrines.” The reason he says it like this is because all spiritual truth comes from spiritual sources. Teachers would, and still do come and say that they had a revelation from a spiritual source, and when a teacher comes and says, “God told me this,” people are not supposed to just automatically believe- they should test the spirits. More broadly, John is echoing a profound spiritual truth: When Satan wants to destroy you, he isn’t going to do it through sickness, poverty, disaster, death, sadness, or hardship- he is going to do it through lies, and he will purposely make his lies as sensible, reasonable, moderate, acceptable as possible- and they are going to come from people who claim to be *Christians*. Just because a person has the title of “Pastor” or is extremely kind or well-educated or loving or good at teaching doesn’t mean that you should listen to them. We as Christians have not only the right, but the duty to test the spirits, test the pastors, test the spiritual leaders and what they are saying.

The specific test that John gives to his people is this: Do they confess, acknowledge, believe, and teach that Jesus Christ came in the flesh- that he is a true human being? It’s fascinating, today, the vast majority of people, Christian and non-Christian, would admit that Jesus was a human being that existed- but what they would struggle with is that he is truly God. But in Early Christianity, people generally didn’t have a hard time believing Jesus was God, but that he actually became human. Specifically, the

Gnostic teachers undermining John held that Jesus was a divine being that appeared human, or perhaps possessed another human being but then left when the physical human named Jesus was killed, but they taught that God would never become truly a human being because they taught that the physical body was dirty and evil. The problem with this is that if Jesus didn't truly become a human being, and he, true God, didn't truly die on the cross, then our sins are not paid for and we are lost. This wasn't just an alternative idea or another way to look at Jesus, it was a lie that completely undermined everything that Jesus taught and the salvation that Christians have by believing in him. And John isn't saying that this is the *only* test for whether or not a teaching should be trusted: *Any teaching, pastor, doctrine, or idea that presents Jesus inaccurately is not from God, and should be rejected.* Another way to say what John is saying is this: Anyone who teaches or gives the impression that Jesus is human, but not true God, which includes Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and many others, are presenting a false Jesus who cannot save you from sin. Anyone who teaches or gives the impression that Jesus is not the only way to salvation and that you must trust in him as your savior, which would include Unitarians, Freemasons, lodges in general, and many churches in America, and many others, are not from God and should be avoided- and this isn't slander- it's on the websites- go look. Any who teaches that we are not saved by Jesus' sacrifice alone or that we have to do some good things for God to save us is not from God because it presents a false Jesus- the real Jesus was crucified and punished for every single sin and and you are completely and fully forgiven through faith in him- anyone who teaches differently robs God of his glory and robs you of the comfort and joy that God wants you to have.

And, as John says, this is the spirit of the Antichrist. What is that? The prophet Daniel, Jesus himself, John, and Paul all prophecy about a certain figure or spiritual force that is going to come from within Christianity, and is going to deceive many people, and is going to undermine Jesus and his teaching, and ultimately- according to 2 Thessalonians 2, claim to have the authority and power that belongs to God himself and use signs, wonders, and attractive teachings deceive and pull sheep into death. Can you think of anyone who claims to be a Christian religious leader, who presents himself as a kind, generous, loving, tolerant teacher of God's Word, who claims to have the power of Jesus to forgive and withhold forgiveness of sins and ultimately decide what spiritual truth is, and puts himself in the place of Christ- which is what Antichrist actually means? The most obvious fulfillment of these prophecies, not the only one- all false teachers have the spirit of the Antichrist, but the biggest fulfillment of the Antichrist prophecy is the Roman Catholic Pope. Look at the prophecies, and look at what the Roman Catholic Catechism claims about the Pope- not necessarily the person himself, but the office of the Pope. And then go listen to what Francis and the popes of the past have taught about Jesus and how you are saved and you'll see. I'm sorry, but anyone who teaches that Jesus requires you to pray to saints, angels, and Mary, that Jesus will have you go to purgatory to work out your salvation because his death wasn't enough to pay for all of your sins, is presenting a false Jesus. It's that simple. Why am I telling you this? It's not because we believe that we are the only ones to go to heaven- you are saved by believing in Jesus, not for having the right theology. And I'm not recommending that we immediately go to our catholic friends and say, "Did you know that. . . ?" But what I am saying is this: Do not assume that when your friends and family members say, "I go to church," that they are saved. Do not assume that they are

hearing the truth about Jesus. Test the spirits, and encourage them to test the spirits, to test their pastors and if their pastors are not preaching the truth, to find one who does. If John is right, eternal life and death are at stake.

2. Use the Word. John needs us to know that the believers in the truth will always be in the minority. It will often look like Satan and his false teachers are winning. We shouldn't be surprised when we see people flock to false teachers and reject the truth. We shouldn't be surprised when Christians reject the Bible and embrace whatever sin is being celebrated by the culture. We shouldn't be surprised that the churches that lead people astray have fuller pews than the ones that don't. Why? Because the people of the world are going to listen to the message of the world. And we shouldn't be discouraged by it either. Because we have already won. We have already overcome. When Jesus suffered and died in our place, we won over Satan because he won over Satan and Satan has no power over us. When Jesus rose from the grave, he won, and because he was raised we will be too and that means not even death can truly defeat us. It may look like we're losing. It may look like we're behind. It may look like no one cares about Jesus anymore, that no one wants to hear what the Bible says, that no one wants to believe in the real Jesus- firstly I don't think that's even true because when I see out in the pews, and when I look at my college students actually carving time out of their schedules to hear their Shepherd's voice, and when I see people in these pews that were not here a year ago listening to their Shepherd's voice, and when I see a woman in the hospital not sure if she's going to live another week and she's not afraid because she knows her redeemer lives and death can only bring her to Jesus, what John says is affirmed: God is not losing. And he never will. Therefore it is not our job to defeat false teachers or win battles against them. God does that. Our job is to recognize false teaching and avoid it- false teachers, Pastors included, are going to answer to God for what they preached, and that includes me, your pastor.

Notice what John says, "We are of God. Those who are with God listen to us." What's he talking about? He's referring to those who sat at Jesus' feet and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit have written the Word of the Lord for God's people- both the prophets before Christ came and the ones after- the Old and the New Testament- the Bible. Test the spirits, including me. I don't tell you this enough, and shame on me for it- it is your job and duty as Christians to hold me accountable to God's Word, and the minute I say anything that is not in line with God's Holy Word, stop listening to me and tell me so that I can repent. I am not infallible. I am not inerrant. I am a sinful man who has the undeserved privilege of teaching you God's Word, and I must be held accountable to God's Word. Every pastor should be saying this. Every pastor should hold the Word of God above all and say, this is the standard, this is how we know who God is and what he says. This is infallible and true and inerrant- and anyone that doesn't, they are not of God- including me. Why is this so important? Why does God care about doctrine and truth so much? Why does he inspire writers to be so passionate about true and false teachers? Because all good shepherds love their sheep and will give their own lives to save them and will do whatever it takes to make sure they know and trust his voice. Jesus' sheep know his voice. It's right here in this book. This is how we know our shepherd's voice. Amen.