

In these six verses John warns us about the abundance of false prophets that are in the world. We can't trust everything that claims to be of God, whether it's on the radio, TV, or the shelves of our local Christian bookstore. However, John tells us how to recognize the difference between teaching that comes from the Spirit of God and that which does not.

In the last verse of chapter 3 John gave us a new evidence that we belong to God: the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. **1 John 3:24b** "...And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us." John continues to develop this theme in chapter 4, including a warning that there are other spirits in the world that want to lead us astray with lies.

¹ Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.

"Beloved, believe not every spirit" - There are many voices out in the world that claim to be speaking for God. We can turn on the TV or radio every Sunday morning and hear all sorts of people claiming to proclaim the word of God, but unfortunately not all of them are. We can go to a Christian book store and see shelf after shelf filled with books that claim to enlighten us in the things of God, but sadly not all of them can be trusted. There are movies, books, and people on talk shows that give advice for life's problems (things like "follow your heart") that sound good on the surface but lead us to look to other sources besides God for our answers. John is warning us that there are other spirits in the world besides the Holy Spirit and these other spirits are not trustworthy. In this context, however, John doesn't seem to be referring to Christians who are teaching falsehoods through an honest mistake in doctrine. Instead, he seems to be warning against false prophets who claim to be Christians but are not and are being led by a spirit promoting teachings that are contrary to Biblical truth.

"but try [test; examine; scrutinize] the spirits whether they are of God" - We are to examine the spirits to determine their source rather than accepting them at face value. How do we examine and test the spirits? By comparing the teaching to what the Bible has to say on the subject. Never accept anyone's teaching/preaching if it disagrees with scripture. Many false teachers will use scripture quotations to support their viewpoint but they will take a passage out of context or twist it to suit their purpose. Genuine teachers from God will adjust their doctrine to match scripture instead of trying to adjust scripture to match their doctrine. We should follow the example of the Christians at Berea when the Apostle Paul came to preach to them. **Acts 17:11** "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." The Berean Christians did not accept Paul's teaching without first checking that what he taught was in agreement with scripture. **"because many false prophets are gone out into the world"** - The danger John is warning us about is due to the abundance of false prophets who are following other spirits besides the Holy Spirit and thus are teaching things that are contrary to scripture. The word "many" implies that these false prophets will outnumber the true ones speaking by the Spirit of God. Paul warned Timothy about these false prophets and where their doctrine would come from: **1 Timothy 4:1** "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;"

² Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God:

John states that we can recognize which teachers have the Spirit of God in them because they will confess [profess; declare openly] that Jesus Christ came in human flesh. The title "Christ" implies His deity and so anyone who declares that Jesus is the Son of God Who has come in the flesh is speaking by the Holy Spirit. Jesus acknowledged that Peter was speaking from divine revelation when he declared that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God:

Matt. 16:13-17 ¹³ When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? ¹⁴ And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. ¹⁵ He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? ¹⁶ And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. ¹⁷ And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven."

There were false prophets teaching that Jesus came only in spirit or angelic form and did not have a human body during His 33.5 years on this earth. Why is this important? Christ had to come in human flesh in order to be an appropriate sacrifice for us. As a spirit or angel He could not legitimately die on the cross and would not have been able to pay our sin debt.

Heb. 2:16-17 ¹⁶ For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. ¹⁷ Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people."

³ And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.

"And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God" - John does not say that if the spirit denies that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh then it is not of God. These teachers could just never mention that they don't believe it. Instead, John states that the test is that they never confess this truth then it is evidence that they are not of God. A true Christian will not have any problem stating their belief in Who Christ is.

"and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world" - John reaffirms his earlier statement about the nature of the spirit of antichrist (1 John 2:18, 22). The Antichrist is coming, but the spirit that will empower him is already at work in the world. Any spirit that denies the true nature of Jesus Christ (that He is God come in flesh) is the spirit of antichrist. The spirit of antichrist is "against" Christ and wants to be "instead of" Christ.

⁴ Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.

After the warning of false prophets John's readers may have been afraid that they might not be able to identify these false prophets and thus be deceived. However, John reassures his readers by reminding them that the God they serve is greater and more powerful than the spirit that is behind all of the many false prophets that are in the world. There may be more false prophets than genuine prophets of God in the world, but God is greater and will protect us from being deceived. He will enable us to recognize the spirit of truth and the spirit of error, as John describes in the next two verses.

⁵ They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them.

In vs. 5-6, John states the way to distinguish between the prophets of God and the false prophets: through their message. In verse 5 he characterizes the message of the false prophets as worldly. The false prophets know nothing about the things of God for they are "of the world." As such, they speak of what they know and so their message revolves around worldly things. The prosperity gospel is just such a message for it centers around material things of this world. It claims that wealth and prosperity are the signs and result of God's blessing and little attention is given to sin and our need of a Savior. This type of message appeals to the world and they willingly accept it ("the world heareth them") because it caters to their fleshly desires.

⁶ We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.

John contrasts the worldly message of the false prophets with that of the true prophets speaking by the Spirit of God.

"We are of God" - "We" apparently refers to John and the other apostles and anyone else who teaches the same things as the apostles of Jesus Christ. John is reminding them that he (and everyone else included in the "we") are speaking by the Spirit of God.

"he that knoweth God heareth us" - The word "heareth" carries the idea of acceptance and approval. Just as the world accepts and approves the message of the false prophets, anyone who knows God will accept and approve of the genuine message that comes from the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit will draw those who belong to God to the truth being proclaimed by teachers/preachers led by the Spirit of God.

"he that is not of God heareth not us" - However the genuine message from God will not be accepted by those who are not of God. Unless the Spirit of God is working in their heart to draw them to Christ, they will not approve of or accept the true message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Instead they are drawn to the worldly message of the false prophets.

"Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error" - The context of this passage is testing the spirits to determine if they are of God, and so John summarizes vs. 5-6 as the method to use to distinguish between the Spirit of God and the spirit of error. We must judge the spirit in question by the message and the message is judged by observing who is being drawn by the message. The world will reject the message of the Spirit of truth in favor of the worldly message of the false prophets (the spirit of error) but God's people will reject the worldly message of the false prophets and embrace the message that comes from the Holy Spirit.