“Don’t believe everything you hear.”

I heard about this man and wife who had a massive argument about something silly and so the man ended up in the doghouse with his wife. So he ordered her some flowers and told the florist that the card should read, "I’m sorry, (comma) I love you." Unfortunately, the woman at the other end of the phone didn’t hear the message very clearly and so when the flowers arrived, the card read, "I’m sorry I love you." (no comma)

And I guess the point of the story is that sometimes we need to listen very carefully to what people are saying, especially if it is a preacher or teacher of God’s word.

In 1 John 1:5+6 John describes what our relationship with God should be like. In 1 John 2:3+4 he describes what our relationship with Jesus should be like. He also described what our relationship with the world should be like in 1 John 2:15. In 1 John 3:4+5 he describes the relationship we shouldn’t have with sin and in verse 11 of the same chapter he spoke about how our relationship with our brethren should be like.

Now all this is worth bearing in mind as begin to look at 1 John 4:1-6 where we will see that John is going to tell us about a very real danger which was around back in their day and is still very present in today’s society. He’s going to talk about false prophets.

1 John 4:1-6 “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. 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. 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. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. 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.”

John is going to teach us three things today from his letter concerning false prophets. He is going to warn us not to believe every spirit but test them first. Then he is going to tell us why we should test them and then finally he is going to share with us how we test the spirits.

He says in 1 John 4:1 “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit.” Now what does John mean when he says “don’t believe every spirit.” Well it’s obvious that he’s saying that there are spirits around which don’t come from God.

I believe he is warning his readers and us to be careful, in other words don’t believe everything you hear, or everyone who claims that they are from God. Now there are certain religious groups that claim that God speaks to them in visions and dreams and they claim they speak in tongues and some have a revelation from God. But when you think about it sensibly and understand what John is teaching here you can see how foolish it would be not to take John’s advice.

I remembering speaking to a friend of mine who went along to one of these meetings and he wasn’t in there two minutes when confusion set in. One man stood up ready to preach his sermon, when another man stood to preach his sermon and do you know how they settled the matter about who was to preach that morning? One man asked to the other, “When did God tell that you were to preach?” And the guy said that, “he got a revelation from God late last night.” Do you know what the other guy said? “Well you sit down because God spoke to me first thing this morning.”
“Don’t believe everything you hear.”

Do you see and understand just how foolish this makes the whole thing look? I mean we would be in a constant state of confusion, believing one thing one moment, and another thing the next. But Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 14:33 that God isn’t like that, he says that “for God is not a God of confusion, but of peace.” And so because of that confusion we would be easily misled by those who are teaching error.

That’s why we shouldn’t just believe everything which is being taught and that goes for everything I teach too. That’s why John goes on to tell us in 1 John 4:1 “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.”

That word test there is the Greek word “dokimazo” which means to try or prove. It’s the idea of examining closely what is being said. What John is saying is, test the words to see if they are genuine or not. Don’t just accept what some teacher or preacher is saying, examine what is being taught.

You need to have that testing spirit within you, you need to have the spirit of the Bereans, where Acts 17:11 tells us that, “the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”

We need some of the testing spirit like the Ephesians had in Revelation 2:2, “I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.”

We need to have that same testing spirit which they possessed when anyone preaches or teaches or even talks to us about God. And why is this so important? Well John tells us following on in 1 John 4:1, “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.”

That’s why it is important to test the spirits. And John isn’t the only one in the Bible who has warned us about this. Jesus Himself warned us in Matthew 7:15, where He said, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”

Peter also warned us in 2 Peter 2:1-3 where he said, “There were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.”

And finally the apostle Paul warned us in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 where he said, “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.”

Let me say it again, we must examine, prove, and scrutinize anyone who would teach us. Even though some teachers might consider it rebellious. Even though some might not like the possible controversy it can cause. Whether someone teaches in our classes, pulpits, radio, newspapers, or even on the street corners, we must "test the spirits!"

So let me ask you, how do we test the spirits? Do we try and work it out for ourselves and rely on our own understanding? Absolutely not! John tells us how to test the spirits.
“Don’t believe everything you hear.”

1 John 4:2-3 “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.”

John says if anyone denies the claim that Jesus Christ actually came in the flesh has a false spirit. Now it’s important for us to remember that John is dealing with the problem of Gnosticism. The Gnostics denied the very fact that Jesus Christ actually came in the flesh.

Now the Gnostics were going around, confusing Christians and leading many of them away from the truth because they themselves claimed inspiration. John talks about this in 2 John 7, where he says that, “Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.”

John says that anyone who would teach falsehood is not led by the Spirit of God, but are being led by the spirit of the antichrist. Another test John asks us to apply when testing the spirits is this, do they listen to the apostles of Christ?

He says in 1 John 4:6, “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.”

This is how we know the difference between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. We have in our possession today the complete revelation from God in the form of the book we call the Bible. And all Christians need to read their Bibles to find out what that truth is which God has revealed to all of mankind.

You can always find out what kind of a person you are listening too by the way they view Scripture. 2 Timothy 3:16 says that, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”

If anyone doesn’t agree with that, then they are not worth listening too. Because those people who truly know God listen to what He has to say in His word and live their lives by His word. Those people who truly know God listen to the apostles teachings. And those who are not of God will reject their teachings.

In other words, when someone is preaching or teaching from God’s word, does their teaching agree with what the apostles teach? Because we cannot disagree with the apostles teachings and agree with Jesus’ teachings. Because Jesus says in John 13:20 “I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me.”

If a person rejects the teachings of the apostles, they reject the teachings of Christ Himself. If the apostle’s teachings were important to the early church then their teachings should be important for us. That’s why the Bible says in Acts 2:42, that these first Christians “Devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” That’s why according to 1 Corinthians 14:37 Paul reminds them and us that these early Christians recognized their words as the commands of the Lord.

So if we claim to be true Christians, we need to listen and agree with what the apostles have to say through God’s word. And when you have a high regard for the Bible this test can easily be applied today on virtually every issue which comes up.
“Don’t believe everything you hear.”
Mark Twain once said that, “The difference between truth and fiction is that fiction has to make sense.”

Now there are religious groups who claim that they are prophets from God and the stories they tell you seem to make a lot of sense. But how can we test their spirits? I remember when I worked with the church at Summer Lane I met this couple with their little daughter. Well they came to along to our meetings for a few weeks and the guy asked me why we don’t believe in modern day prophets, modern day prophecy and modern day miracles, signs and wonders.

And so I pointed him to 1 Corinthians 13:8 where Paul tells us that, “Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away”.

Now after much discussion we came across a dilemma, not for me but for him. He told me he received a vision from an angel while he was lying in bed one night and it told him a new revelation and it told him something which was already written in Scripture.

Now I said he was in a dilemma and his dilemmas is this, does he believe this new revelation or not? Does he believe the word of God where Paul told us that these prophecies, tongues and supernatural knowledge has ceased or does he believe this spirit which appeared to him?

Does he believe this angel or does he believe Jude 3, where he says, “Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.”

You see if someone’s or something’s doctrine contradicts what God has already revealed, they are to be rejected. Even Paul warned the Galatian church about angels and false prophets, he told them in Galatians 1:6-9 “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel- which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”

You know there are lots of lessons to be learned from nature. For example have you ever seen a leaf insect? This is a very large green insect and very ugly but the interesting thing about them is their shape. They bodies are flat and they have extensions on their bodies to make them look like a leaf. Now what is interesting about their shape is that they look exactly like the plant they are feeding on. Now you may ask what the point is and what lesson can we learned from them?

Well the lesson we can learn is that not all things are always what they seem to be sometimes. Paul reminds us again about false prophets and even the devil himself in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.”

I’ve said it a few times already loved ones we need to be aware of what is being said and who is saying it. But it’s not all about warnings; John does give us some comforting words in 1 John 4:4-5 “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. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.”
“Don’t believe everything you hear.”

John says that because they have listened to and obeyed the words of God they can overcome the false prophets. And how did they do that? They did it because the One who is in them is greater than the one who is in the world. And who is he that is in the world?

Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:1-2 “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”

People who have been baptised into Christ, posses the Holy Spirit living within them. Those who haven’t been baptised into Christ are still under the control of the devil himself. Listen loved ones; don’t be surprised to see the world following after the false prophets. Because false prophets are a lot like politicians, they speak to the people the words the people want to hear just to get their vote.

For false prophets are of the world and speak in a way as to appeal to the world. But don’t be fooled or disheartened. Just because a denominational congregations have what looks like on the surface a lot of success in terms of numbers of members. Please don’t take this the wrong way but the only place ‘size matters’ is in the world. There are many religions and groups and sects and cults doing loads of things in the name of Christ.

But let me tell you if you haven’t obeyed the gospel of Christ. If you don’t confess your sins to God. If you don’t remain faithful unto death. All your works in Christ’s Name means nothing to Christ.

Now you might think, now Mike you can’t say that, that’s not fair! Well let me tell you I didn’t say it, Jesus Himself did in Matthew 7:21-23 "Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’"

In today’s society where many people claim many amazing and miraculous things and they come along and they bombard us with all sorts of weird and wonderful doctrine. It’s time now more than ever for us as the Lord’s church to take John’s advice, 1 John 4:1 “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.”

And if you’re not a Christian this morning, then you can test the spirit of the message today, by reading God’s word for yourself. Examine it closely and you will see how to become a Christian and then you too can have a new ruler over your life, His Name is the Name which is above every Name. His Name is Jesus Christ.

We’re here to help you if you want help. We can organise a Bible study with you or you can start a home Bible correspondent course free of charge and you can study at your own pace, in the comfort of your own home.

We’re not here to convert you; we’re here to point you to towards the Bible and to encourage everyone we meet to read it for themselves. It’s my prayer that you will take up this offer. If after reading this you want to know more about testing the spirits or false prophets or if this sermon has raised other questions in your thoughts then please just contact me and I will get back to you as soon as possible.

God bless and thanks for taking the time to grow in your understanding of God’s Word.