

Back to Basics

Detecting False Teachers

1 John 2:18-27

Introduction

We've been studying 1 John, a letter written by one of Jesus' disciples to Christians in SW Turkey. These believers had become confused about Christianity, and how to live it, so John is writing to clear up this confusion. Now John goes to the heart of the problem, pointing out that false teachers are responsible for this distorted spirituality. John devotes two sections of this letter to this. One is Chapter 2:18-27. And the second is Chapter 4:1-6.

"And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but *they went out* that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also. Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that He has promised us—eternal life. These things I have written to you concerning those who *try to* deceive you. But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him. And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him." (1 John 2:17-29 NKJV)

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world. Therefore they speak *as* of the, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." (1 John 4:1-6 NKJV)

John writes about the dangers Jesus predicted in the gospel of Matthew. In verse 18, he writes, "Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour." (1 John 2:18 NKJV)

In verse 26, he writes, "These things I have written to you concerning those who *try to* deceive you." (1 John 2:26 NKJV)

1 John 4:1, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1 NKJV)

1 John 4:3, "Every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world." (1 John 4:3 NKJV)

An antichrist is someone who opposes Jesus by deception. John reminds them that they could expect not only the emergence of the Antichrist—but also that many antichrists would precede him. Specifically, John refers to Jesus' warning in Matthew 24, "And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many." (Matthew 24:4-5 NKJV)

In verse 11 He says, "Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many." (Matthew 24:11 NKJV)

In verse 24 Jesus said, "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. (Matthew 24:24-25 NKJV)

Satan cannot stop the spread of the good news about Jesus throughout the world, so instead, he "floods the market with counterfeits" in order to deceive people.

But in verse 14, Jesus said, "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come." (Matthew 24:14 NKJV)

Many false teachers and prophets would come between Christ's first and second coming. People would claim to speak for him, talk like him, and even do miracles like him, but they are actually working against him, or "antichrists." Jesus taught that these opponents were forerunners of the ultimate Antichrist, a diabolical false Messiah, just before Jesus returns. John is saying that the false teachers/prophets have emerged, just as Jesus predicted.

And they continue to emerge today, so it's important to know how to spot false teachers.

I. How to Spot False Teachers

How can we identify false teachers? Jesus said in Matthew 7, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?" (Matthew 7:15-16 NKJV)

Deceivers are not going to say, "Hi. I'm a false teacher, and I've come to deceive you. Wolves in sheep's clothing can even masquerade as faithful followers of Jesus. Deceivers know and can quote the Bible. They will even speak positively about Jesus and claim to be advocating his mission. They are often gifted teachers or speakers, highly educated and college trained. They can have religious backgrounds, write best-selling books, lead large churches, and sometimes hold roles in time-honored denominations.

But Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits." They will inevitably betray themselves if you know what fruit to inspect. John has alerted us to two fruits to inspect, and they both have to do with the kind of life leaders and teachers live or promote.

First, do they "walk in the light?" Do they live lives of moral integrity, free from sexual immorality, drunkenness, or drug abuse? Are they financial honesty and modest, or do they teach or practice an immoral lifestyle? False teachers place themselves above God's moral law by denying any connection between sin and spirituality. Extra-biblical records indicate that they practiced and advocated sexual immorality as a means of spiritual enlightenment. Some false teachers love to humanize Jesus to the level of an ordinary man, no deity involved. It's a standard feature for them to make Jesus immorally sexual with Mary Magdalene or other women. Someone who suggests such things is obviously not connected in any way to God. Their life is a life of rotten fruit.

Secondly, do they "walk in love." Do they treat others with respect? Do they advocate serving others as primary, or do they teach or justify contempt for others? These false teachers openly despised genuine Christians. Those who preach or justify hatred in the name of Jesus are connected to false teaching. But here is the heart of the issue—what do they teach about Jesus?

Jesus is the heart of Christianity, so what better way to deceive people than to teach a counterfeit Jesus? John asks, do they affirm or deny Jesus' unique identity? John says in verse 22, "Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son." (1 John 2:22)

In Chapter 4, verse 2, he says, "By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world." (1 John 4:2-3)

The phrase, "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh," is not just a trite religious slogan. It is packed with important theological content. It means that "Jesus is fully God and fully human, humanity's only Savior and Messiah."

False teachers try to deny Jesus by rejecting his true identity. The Gnostics denied Jesus by reinventing him as a human-only teacher who was temporarily indwelt by the Christ spirit and taught salvation through secret spiritual knowledge.

Today we have many counterfeit versions of Jesus. We have the New Age Jesus, a guru of God-consciousness and the star of the "Jesus Seminar." We have Jesus, who was a wandering sage/religious revolutionary. We have the *Da Vinci Code* Jesus, a religious mystic who taught enlightenment through sexual intercourse and fathered children through Mary Magdalene. We have the Jesus of Eastern religions who is one of the many manifestations of God. We have the therapeutic Jesus who becomes whatever you want him to be to help you with your problems as you define them. We have the Jesus of Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, and others who are more than human but not fully God.

But John says all of these versions of Jesus are "antichrists"—deceptive distortions to be identified and decisively rejected.

II. Be A Tenacious Defender of Truth

This deception requires believers to become tenacious defenders of the truth of scripture.

Yes, but isn't John being judgmental and intolerant? Our culture has always emphasized religious tolerance, respecting people's freedom to believe/disbelieve what they want. More recently, this has morphed into agreeing that all religious views are equally valid and that America is no longer one nation under God. Some make John sound like a nasty, unloving, intolerant dogmatist. But it is possible to be insistent and urgent about something for different reasons.

First of all, John is insistent on this because he knew that Jesus claimed this about himself. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.* (John 3:16)

Jesus said to them, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM."* (John 8:58)

"I and My Father are one." (John 10:30)

John was a tenacious defender of the truth about Jesus. Remember, John was an eye-witness disciple of Jesus. He heard Jesus speak these words, He saw the validation of these claims, and he was persecuted and probably martyred for this testimony.

John isn't disrespectful of others to insist on this portrait of Jesus—he is being honest and faithful to the truth about Jesus. What is deceitful is to re-create or misrepresent Jesus to be something other than what he claimed for himself. We should have the integrity to let Jesus speak for himself and then accept or reject him, but to reinvent him into what we want him to be lacks integrity. John insists on this because he wants people to be saved, and the salvation Jesus offers depends upon his unique identity.

According to the Bible, salvation is being reconciled to God by being forgiven for the guilt of our sins. Our sins can be forgiven only through the death of God's chosen Savior, Jesus Christ. The Substitute for our sins must be both a sinless human (to die for sinful humans) and fully divine (to pay for all of our sins). Jesus is the only one who lived a perfect life to qualify to lay his life down for our sins.

Only Jesus claimed to be God so that his death could extend complete forgiveness to all people who are willing to receive him. John does not speak as a nasty dogmatist. He speaks as one who has been healed from a fatal disease through a wonderful medicine and then discovers that others with the same disease are being offered a counterfeit medication that will leave them to die in their sickness. He is passionate about saving people, and that is the spirit in which I speak to you.

We must be faithful to report the wonderful news that Jesus can save people from the negative effects of this life and even offer eternal life. We were alienated from God because of our sins, but Jesus forgave us of our sins and reconnected us to God, and God's love has changed our lives. That's why we introduce people to the real Jesus; not some counterfeit Jesus who can't help you at all.

When you put your trust in Jesus and ask him to forgive you through his death on the cross, He will come into your heart and center your life through God's love.

III. Respond With A Biblical Warning

How should Christians respond to this warning?

First, we need to learn what the Bible teaches about Jesus well enough to spot false teaching about Jesus. 1 John 4:1 says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world." ([1 John 4:1](#))

They say the best way to detect counterfeit currency is not to study counterfeits but to become so familiar with the legitimate money that counterfeits jump right out at you. John says handling the truth is our responsibility. Don't trust someone else's teaching about Jesus (including mine) just because they have a seminary degree, are a powerful speaker, or are part of a long-standing denomination.

Genuine Christian teachers root their teachings in the Bible, and they encourage you to test their teachings by the Bible.

Always check out the teacher and the teaching against what the Bible says.

Second, be careful about calling people false teachers unless they genuinely fit the description.

Just because we disagree about matters of lesser importance like worship style, positions on more secondary ethical issues; the role of ritual; church structures and methods, etc. is no reason to discredit someone.

If a teacher upholds the real Jesus and has moral integrity and genuine agape love, the term; false teacher doesn't apply.

Third, we shouldn't support false teachers with our fellowship or financial support.

2 John 1:7-11 says, "For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ *as* coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but *that* we may receive a full reward. Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds."

(2 John 1:7-11)

This is not a license to be mean or nasty to such people. But suppose someone is teaching a counterfeit Jesus. In that case, we cannot embrace them as fellow Christians or financially support their ministry without compromising our commitment to Jesus and hurting his cause.

Fourth, we should warn other Christians of false teachers. This is the reason for John's letter and virtually every New Testament letter. When we warn others, we may save them from being damaged by false teaching, and they can continue growing spiritually and being effective workers for Jesus.

Conclusion

Finally, we should reach out to those who have been influenced or damaged by false teaching.

The disciple Jude wrote, "But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling *them* out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh." (Jude 1:20-23)

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air. But I discipline

my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9:27)

Avoid fruitless arguments. Relate to people with genuine love and keep to the good news of God's complete love and forgiveness. It can have a powerful impact on those who have been deceived by a counterfeit Christianity.