

CHRISTIANITY (*defined*)
A Study of 1 John
“How to Spot a False Prophet a Smile Away”

1 John 4:1-6

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INTRODUCTION: I’m sure you’ve all heard the question, “Is the glass half-full or is it half-empty?” Some of you are engineers or you know engineers, and this week I read an interesting answer to that question. A pessimist says the glass is half-empty. An optimist says the glass is half-full. A realist says it’s a glass of liquid. But an engineer says that the glass is twice as large as it should be! I smiled at that. Pessimists are often skeptical of others, whereas optimists can sometimes be gullible.

The passage before us today warns us about false prophets. A false prophet is a religious scam artist. Perhaps you read this week that Bernie Madoff died in prison this past Wednesday. He was 82 years old. He had scammed \$65 Billion from investors in the largest Ponzi scheme in history. There was a religious component because Bernie was Jewish – and he convinced many Orthodox Jewish organizations and families to trust him with their endowments and life savings. He promised them astronomical returns on their investments, but it was all a lie.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we must be careful to guard against believing the messages of false prophets. They are many religious scam artists in the world today. Many of them are on television, the internet, they write books, and some of them are or have been pastors of churches.

The Apostle John gives us some instructions on how to spot a false prophet a smile away. Let’s read **1 John 4:1-6: Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits** (*the Greek word for test is dokimazo, was used for physicians who had passed a test to practice medicine*). **Test the spirits to see if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not confess Jesus is**

not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming; even now it is already in the world. (He's been writing about false prophets, now he addresses the Believers) You are from God, little children, and you have conquered them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world. Therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Anyone who knows God listens to us; anyone who is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception.

There are two spirits at work in our world. One is the Spirit of truth – that's the Holy Spirit. Jesus told the disciples this about the Holy Spirit in John 16, **“When He the Spirit of Truth comes, He will guide you into all truth.”** But there is also a spirit of deception in the world. And it is led by the evil spirit, the devil and his demons. Jesus said this about Satan in John 8, **“He is a liar and the father of all lies.”**

In this message I want to talk about the way to recognize a false prophet who leads people into deception. Then I want to show you the marks of a faithful servant of God who leads people to the truth.

1. THE TEST OF A FALSE PROPHET. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned us to watch out for false prophets. He used a powerful word picture. He called them “wolves in sheep's' clothing.” That's an amazing analogy because Jesus said it's like a wolf dressed in a fleece that sneaks into the flock, and the sheep mistake him for a lamb. And then the wolf devours them. So Jesus said to be careful and watch out, because there are false prophets. And there weren't just false prophets in Bible times, we have plenty of them today, and they are no less dangerous to the flock of God, the church. Let me give you three ways to recognize a false prophet.

(1) Judge every messenger by their content. First, what do they teach? John wrote that every spirit that confesses that Jesus has come in the flesh from God is truthful, but everyone who doesn't confess that truth is a liar. Even false prophets may speak truth at times. We used to say that even a stopped clock is right twice day. But that was when we used analog clocks – even stopped digital clocks are right once a day –

usually a flashing 12 o'clock. That reminds me of the guy who walked into a store and said, "I want to buy a clock." The salesman asked, "Analog?" The guys said, "No thanks, I just want a clock." Some of you will get that later.

Even a false prophet is right some of the time. You might expect me to talk about Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, but in the last few years, we are facing a greater danger of false prophets. Over the last decade there has been an alarming growth of neo charismatic/Pentecostal influence into conservative politics. I have always considered myself politically and theologically conservative, but there are some religious nuts who have hijacked part of the conservative movement. There has been a rise in the number of people who are calling themselves modern day prophets and are making predictions – about world events.

One of them is best-selling author, **Jonathan Cahn**, who wrote a book called *The Harbinger* in which he claimed that the 9/11 attacks were predicted in the book of Isaiah. Now, if you read my first novel writing as David Orlo, part of that plot was that the 9/11 attacks were predicted in the Dead Sea scrolls – but that was FICTION. His book is nonfiction. He wrote another book the *Mystery of the SHEmeeTAH*, in which he predicted the end of the U.S. as we know it would happen on September 13, 2015. Whoops. It didn't happen. In 2018, he wrote a book called *The Paradigm* in which he claims that President Trump's election two years earlier was prophesied in the Old Testament. He along with many other modern day "prophets" predicted that Donald Trump would serve four more years. When that didn't happen in November, it fit the narrative of a stolen election and led to rallies and was part of the motivation behind the attack on the Capitol on January 6.

Many of these prophets are mixed in with the QAnon conspiracy, which has hijacked 2 Chronicles 7:14 and the term "Great Awakening." If you don't know what this, don't worry about it. But if you are into Qanon, let me just say it's a dangerous hoax and that you can't follow Q and Jesus at the same time.

I know I'm making some of you mad by saying this, but that's okay. At the end of my life, I only have to answer to God. But I'm saying this as a shepherd, who wants to protect you from the wolves in sheep's clothing.

It breaks my heart that many Christians have bought into these online conspiracy theories.

So what about these modern-day prophets whose predictions don't always come true? Some of them say, "Well, at least SOME of what they predict comes true." That's not God's standard. In Deuteronomy 18:22 we read: **"When a prophet speaks in the LORD's name, and the message does not come true or is not fulfilled, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him."** So if anyone claims to be a prophet and make a single prediction that doesn't come true, you can mark them off as a false prophet.

(2) Judge every messenger by their character. We've all heard of preachers/teachers who have experienced moral failures over the years. Some of these do so without apology and say, "Don't do what I do, do what I say."

Jude penned a short epistle toward the back of your Bible. It's just 25 verses. Most people don't even know it's there. When you find it you say, "Hey, Jude." But it's a powerful book and God willing, Pastor Michael and I will preach from it this summer. Jude warns about the immoral character of false prophets in verse 4. **"I say this because some ungodly people have wormed their way into your churches, saying that God's marvelous grace allows us to live immoral lives. The condemnation of such people was recorded long ago, for they have denied our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."**

Garner Ted Armstrong is a sad poster-child for religious leaders whose lives are characterized by immorality. Garner Ted inherited the leadership of the Worldwide Church of God from his father Herbert W. Armstrong. He was a televangelist and at its height of popularity the Worldwide Church of God had over 100,000 members and was receiving \$70Million annually in donations. They operated Ambassador College up in Big Sandy. Garner Ted was excommunicated from the church for immorality, but he continued to lead churches of former cult members. He once said: **"What you do in your private life is strictly between you and God. What you do in your public life is what other**

people are to see.” He's saying that it doesn't matter what you do privately, as long as publicly you're okay. That is a lie from hell. What you do privately is who you are. That's who you really are, who you are when no one's looking at you. That reveals your true character.

(3) Judge every messenger by their commercialism. Ever since Simon tried to buy the power of God with money in Acts 8, there have been money-loving religious charlatans. When I was growing up, I can recall channel surfing by turning the dial of my large transistor radio at night. I could pick up WGN in Chicago. The reason we could receive AM signals at night from long distances was because the radio waves would bounce off the atmosphere -it was like satellite radio without the satellites. I can remember listening to a radio preacher out of New York City named **Reverend Ike**. He was one of the first prosperity gospel preachers. He would say, “the LOVE of money is not the root of all evil. The LACK of money is the root of all evil.” He would then tell the listeners that they would get rich if they would just send him money. False Prophets who are in the ministry only for the money are nothing new. They were around in the days when Peter wrote his second epistle. In 2 Peter 2:3 he wrote, **“They will exploit you in their greed with made-up stories. Their condemnation, pronounced long ago, is not idle, and their destruction does not sleep. (2 Peter 2: 3)**

The health and wealth prosperity gospel is a false gospel. **Jessie Duplantis** is a charismatic televangelist in Louisiana already has three private jets. But a couple of years ago, he told his viewers that God told him to buy a Falcon 7 jet that costs \$54 Million – so he could fly non-stop across the ocean. He once appeared on a broadcast with Texas televangelist, **Kenneth Copeland**, who owns several jets, the largest of which is a Gulfstream V, which he bought from Tyler Perry for about \$25 Million. Copeland described flying commercial as **“being stuck in a long tube with a bunch of demons.”**

I've seen first-hand the damage of the prosperity gospel in Africa. There is a pastor in South Africa who calls himself **Prophet Mboro**. He leads a church in Johannesburg called **The Church of Incredible Happenings**. But his television and radio ministry is broadcast throughout Africa and has poisoned the minds of many Christians. A

few years ago, he pulled a resurrection stunt, where he claimed to raise a person from the dead at their funeral -they live streamed it. You can **YouTube Resurrection Stunt** – not now. He is being sued by two funeral homes that he claimed certified that the man was dead. A couple of years ago Prophet Mboro claimed that on Easter he was transported to Heaven. While there he took pictures with his iPhone. So what picture did he take in Heaven? A selfie, of course. And now he is selling those pictures to his church members 5000 rand, which is \$340.

Even in spite of false prophets, God can use often use their message. In Philippians 1 Paul writes about some preachers who are preaching from selfish ambition. But instead of criticizing them, he wrote in Philippians 1:18, **“What does it matter? Only that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is proclaimed, and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.”** I had a seminary professor who used to say, “God can strike a mighty lick with a crooked stick.”

2. THE TESTIMONY OF A FAITHFUL SERVANT In verse six John writes, “But we are from God and everyone that knows God, listens to us.” A person who truly knows God can often discern in their spirit when truth is being shared, and when there is deception. Let me give you three marks of a faithful servant.

(1) A true messenger identifies with the Son of God. A true messenger has one topic of every sermon. That topic is “Jesus saves.” A good preacher takes a text anywhere in the Bible and makes a bee-line for Jesus. 1 John 4:2 says, **“Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.”**

Why is John so adamant about preaching that Jesus is God in the flesh? John wrote this message to all Christians, especially during that time and day. But what do we have today that they didn't have then? They didn't have the written New Testament. We have Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We have Acts. We have all the Epistles. We have Revelation. But they didn't have it. And that's why it was so important that when someone got up to preach that they emphasize that Jesus was God in the flesh.

Children are precious when they are little. Then they become teenagers. But that's just part of growing up. I can recall when our daughter Jenni was five or six years old, I would sometimes ask her to imitate me preaching. She would always do the cutest thing. She would hold up her two hands and says, "Come to Jesus!" I'll always treasure the fact that those were the three words that she took away from hearing me preach. And I pray that one day when someone asks you what I preached on most of the time that you'll be able to say, "All his sermons were about Jesus." That's the highest compliment any preacher can have.

(2) A true messenger is indwelt by the Spirit of God. John keeps coming back to this theme over and over again. Jesus had died and risen from the dead. He ascended into Heaven, but then He sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us.

There is a lot of deception in the world around us, but we should never despair because God's truth will always win. 1 John 4:4 is one of the great promises of God I have claimed many times. **"The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."**

Who's in the world? The devil. Jesus said he is the Prince of this world. Don't make the mistake of overestimating the old devil. We don't have to fear him. Some Christians shake their heads in despair and think the devil's crowd is winning. I have a good Bible word for that attitude: Hogwash. Satan is already defeated.

Martin Luther wrote that great hymn A Mighty Fortress is Our God. For years I sang that song and thought it was talking about God when it says, **"His Craft and Power are Great; And armed with cruel hate; On Earth is not His equal."** I thought God was mysterious, and terrible and his Hatred for sin was great. Only later did I come to understand Luther was talking about Satan. And then in the third verse Luther sends Satan down for the count when he wrote: **"The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure; One little word shall fell him."** And that word? In the beginning was the Word. And that word was with God and that word IS God. Jesus is the Word that has dealt a fatal blow to our enemy. And the Spirit of Jesus dwells in us. That's why we are MORE THAN conquerors through Him who loves us.

(3) A true messenger is inspired by the Word of God. There was a time when John, Paul, and Peter had to depend on the Holy Spirit to give them a word of prophecy so they could preach the truth. They only had the Old Testament. But now we have the full Bible. And as Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1 that we now have a “more sure word of prophecy.” He was talking about what he and the other eyewitnesses of Jesus wrote down. We have that now to read and follow. A true Bible teacher doesn’t teach lessons or sermons, he or she teaches and preaches the inspired Word of God.

The Bible is different from any other writing in the history of the world. **In 2 Timothy 3:16 we read: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”**

CONCLUSION: The most important reason you need to test the spirits of messengers is that a false prophet will give you faulty information about how to go to Heaven. The most important teaching you’ll ever hear from a faithful messenger is that faith in Jesus is the only way to be sure that when you die you will go to Heaven. Before Paul died, he wrote to Timothy these last words found in 2 Timothy 4, **“The time of my departure is near.”** Paul knew that this life was just a preparation for his departure for everlasting life in Jesus.

This life isn’t our final destination, it’s just like the airport where you go to board the flight until your final destination. Dr. Jim Denison had an interesting article this past week about the strange stories of travelers who get stuck in an airport and end up living there.

The strangest case is the true story of an Iranian refugee named **Mehran Karmini** who arrived at Charles de Gaulle airport in France in 1988. He lost his immigration papers to travel to England. He couldn’t enter France legally, and he refused the offer to return to Iran where he would be arrested. He ended up living in the secure area of the airport for eighteen years. You might have seen the movie based on his experience named **“The Terminal”** starring Tom Hanks. He finally left the airport

in 2006 when his declining health necessitated him being put in the hospital.

That airport experience is a parable of our lives. We spend all our lives in an airport named planet earth. We are not yet at our final destination. Can you imagine planning a trip and then going to DFW and staying there for decades? In the same way, this world is not our home, we're only passing through. There is only one flight to Heaven and that is on Air Jesus. False prophets give you the wrong gate information and the wrong flight number. Faithful servants give you the correct boarding pass that leads you to the right gate and the right flight. Jesus said, "I am the gate. All who enter through me will be saved." He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, but through me."

If you're listening to the wrong messenger giving the wrong information, you may end up at the wrong destination. Instead make sure you are listening to a messenger who identifies with the Son of God; is indwelt with the Spirit of God; and is inspired by the word of God. That way you know you'll end up at the right destination.