

Prayer

Set a fire in our hearts, Holy Spirit, which burns and never goes out. May it burn to consume all our sin; may it burn to purify us as the people of God, may it burn with a zeal for the will of the Lord, may it burn with a un-flickering flame of love, and may it burn brightly to bring light to the world. Holy Spirit; set our hearts on fire! ALLELUIA!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Water

Pray for those in government who have the task of planning the water supply and provisions for your country in years to come. Pray that if they are not thinking ahead, they soon will.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for scientists who assess the phenomenon of 'global warning'*
- *Give thanks for neighbours, friends, and people you meet regularly*
- *Pray for justice and personal freedom in the countries of S.E. Asia*

Meditation

Brother, sister, live your life to the full,
But never forget that God is Judge.

Make your decisions, make your judgements,
But do not point the finger; God is Judge.

Enjoy your work, your living and loving,
But He who gave you life is God; and He is Judge.

Take your choices, select what is best,
But do not exploit the poor; God is Judge.

Use your earnings, enjoy the fruits,
But your eternal reward is God; and He is Judge.

Choose to let Him be your friend, this Judge,
Lest He become your enemy
The choice is yours and yours alone;
He longs to be your friend;
Do make it so.

Bible Study - 1 John 4:1-6

¹ Fellow believers, do not believe every spirit, but discern the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² This how you recognise the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come as a person is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and is now already in the world. ⁴ Little children, you are from God and have conquered them; for He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵ They belong to the world, and so what they say belongs to the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We belong to God, and anyone who knows God listens to us, and anyone who is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Review

None of us can read this passage of scripture and doubt its essential meaning, which is that every Christian must make it their business to assess whether what they hear is from God or not. We should not be side-tracked from this quest by questioning what John means by the antichrist (4:3); he has already discussed this earlier in 2:18-25. Neither should we imagine that the discernment of the 'spirit of truth or the spirit of error' (4:6) is something that our leaders should determine for us, because John addresses this passage to

all 'fellow believers', not elders or apostles. This vital message is addressed to every Christian, and to this day, it remains the most cogent scriptural advice about the spiritual discernment of what is right or wrong.

The issue is this; when someone says 'this is a message from God ...' are they right or are they wrong? In John's day, the issue arose because of false teachers who made claims about the faith that disrupted the life of the church (as we saw in chapter 2 of this letter). He knew that there was good scriptural advice about this but he felt it necessary to extend what was said in the Old Testament. Firstly, Moses had said this:

²¹ You may say to yourself, 'How can we recognise a word that the LORD has not spoken?' ²² If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it. (Deut. 18:21-22)

Here, Moses dealt with the fact that people could claim to have messages from the Lord and yet be wrong; a prophet's words were only to be accepted if they proved to be right. This advice sounds good, but it is only partially helpful, because as Jonah found out, a prophetic word from God (for example, when he said that Nineveh would be destroyed) might be intended to get people to respond rather than state a 'truth' (Jonah became very angry when he found out that God did not destroy Nineveh because the people repented). However, Moses said more:

If prophets ... appear among you and promise you omens or portents, ² and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, 'Let us follow other gods' (whom you have not known) 'and let us serve them,' ³ you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul. (Deut. 13:1-3)

This warns us, just like our reading from John, that the test of a prophet is whether a message is consistent with what God has revealed in Scripture. Moses said that any message at odds with the first of the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 5:1f. and also 5:4f.) was obviously not of God. John added to this scriptural advice by saying that any truthful spirit (or message) must surely be consistent with the Gospel, which says that Jesus is the Son of God (John 20:31). He said this to deal with the problem of people teaching that Jesus was not really the 'Son of God', and they had a philosophical way of teaching what they suggested was a more mature way of understanding things (a type of belief system we call 'Gnosticism').

However, what does this all mean for us? Of course, we should always be on the lookout for philosophies that divert us from our core beliefs in Jesus. However, the devil uses more subtle ways to divert our eyes to the things of the world. If someone stands up in church and says 'I have a message from the Lord', the unfortunate tendency of people is to believe or disbelieve it according to who says it! People prefer to trust a church leader rather than check something out for themselves. However, John's message is that every Christian should be like the people of Berea, who 'welcomed the message eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so' (Acts 17:11). I have come across many Christians who believe what they read in books or what famous preachers say without ever checking this against scripture, and the result is that they believe the well meaning but sometimes wayward opinions of people (however godly) rather than the truths of God's Word. The best preachers and teachers proclaim 'don't believe what I say because I say it, but check it out with the Spirit of God and His Word'!

John's appeal rings out to all today; 'do not believe every spirit; discern the spirits to see whether they are from God' (4:1).

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group any instances of prophecies or words of knowledge given in your church. Were you able to tell whether they were 'true' or 'false'?
2. If someone comes and tells you they have a message from the Lord for you, what do you feel? How would you check it out?
3. Do you feel confident that you can discern what is of God and what is not?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

One of the famous phrases in this passage is; 'He that is in you is greater than he who is in the world.' It is a confirmation that the Spirit of God is greater than anything we may encounter in the world including the devil or his demons, and it is an encouragement to God's people to trust in their Lord. The text has enabled me to

maintain my own poise and confidence at times when I have felt very insecure, because of the troubles I have felt around me. Satan will quickly tempt any of us to believe that we are not good enough to discern truth and or error. However, a phrase like this when said as a prayer works wonders!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Have you ever attempted to search out the truth of something by checking it in scriptures? If not, then try reflecting on this phrase; 'God blesses those who help themselves'. You may have a 'gut' reaction to this, but does scripture suggest this is either a worthy or an unworthy Christian expression for today?*
- *Pray that all God's people would be willing to search His Word for the truth today. Pray that the leaders of God's people encourage them to do this by word and deed.*

Final Prayer

Lord God, you have trusted Your disciples with the message of eternal salvation; help us to follow You and do Your will. You have confidence in Your people to be victorious over the evil one; strengthen our resolve to stand with You against the enemy. In trust, confidence and determination, may we always be doing Your will. AMEN
