

1 John 4:1-6 “Knowing the Spirit of Truth” 2/25/24

Eureka! Is a Greek word meaning “I have found it!” - It is a word that most of us recognize because of the 49ers - These were not the San Francisco 49ers, who recently made a Superbowl appearance - But the thousands of California gold prospectors in the mid-1800s

The word Eureka summed up every treasure hunter’s dream and expressed the thrill of striking pay dirt - For James Marshall, who was the first to discover gold in California in 1848 and the 49ers who followed him, the term eureka meant instant riches, early retirement, and a life of carefree ease

Imagine picking up some gravel from the bottom of a stream that had a fortune in gold in it - Would-be prospectors quickly learned that not everything that looked like gold actually was gold - Riverbeds and rock quarries could be full of rocks with golden specks but they were entirely worthless

That’s because “fool’s gold” which is iron pyrite, is also common in California - Experienced miners could usually distinguish pyrite from gold simply by looking at it - But, in some cases, the distinction was not quite so clear - So, they developed tests to discern what was genuine from what was not

One test involved biting the rock in question - Real gold is softer than the human tooth, whereas fool’s gold is harder - A second test involved scraping the rock on a piece of white ceramic - True gold is soft enough to leave a yellow streak

Spiritually speaking, Christians often find themselves in a similar position to the California gold rushers of the mid-1800s - When confronted with various doctrines and religious teachings, all of which claim to be true, believers must be able to tell those that are biblically sound from those that are not

As was true in the gold rush, just because something glitters does not mean it's good - Christians need to be equally wary of spiritual "fool's gold" - They must not accept something as true without first evaluating it to see if it meets with God's approval - If it fails the test, Christians should discard it as false and warn others

California gold prospectors would cry "Eureka!" only when they found true gold - When it comes to spiritual things, Christians should be careful to do the same¹

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"²

We should not believe everything we hear just because someone says it is a message from God - False teachers are popular with the world because, like the false prophets of the Old Testament, they tell people what they want to hear

John warns that Christians who faithfully teach God's Word will not win any popularity contests in the world - People do not want to hear that they are sinners - They don't want to hear that they need to change their behavior - In this "me first" culture of selfishness, people do not want to hear that they should put others first

There are many ways to test teachers to see if their message is truly from the Lord - One is to check to see if their words match what God says in the Bible - If someone is trying to tell you something that does not agree with what you know in the Scripture - That is a big red flag

God does not contradict Himself - Some passages may be difficult to reconcile with each other - But if something is totally opposite of what God's Word says, it is a false teaching

¹ Eureka! Illustration adapted from The MacArthur New Testament Commentary,
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² Scripture quoted has been taken from The Holy Bible, New King James Version,
© 1979, 1980, 1982, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN)

Where is this idea originating from? - Is this someone with a serious commitment to the body of Christ? - Some people make some incredible profit from the Church - Is this the teacher's only motive? - If so, they may be a false teacher

It tends to be more profitable to tell folks what they want to hear - Than to open the possibility of exposing wrongdoings by teaching the Word

What's the teacher's lifestyle like? - In other words, do they practice what they preach? - Those of us who are parents learn extremely fast that "do as I say, not as I do" does not work at all - Our actions always speak louder than our words

The same goes for a false teacher - Their advice may sound great - But if they don't even follow their own advice - Why should they think anyone else would?

And does their ministry bear fruit? - Jesus said, "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? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit"³

But the most important test of all, says John, is what they believe about Jesus Himself - Do they teach that Jesus is fully God and fully man? - If they teach that Jesus was just a good man, or that He was only a Spirit - They are not in agreement with the word of God

Do they agree that our Lord that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; and that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus - Or do they join with other false teachers in claiming that there are many ways to God - Acts 4:12 does not agree - Speaking of Jesus, that verse says, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

³ Matthew 7:15-17

Many, if not most, of the eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry had died by the time John wrote this letter - It may have only been a couple or a few generations later, but some Christians began to have doubts about what they had been taught about Jesus

Some Christians with a Greek background had a hard time believing that Jesus was human as well as divine, because some in that day thought that the spirit was all-important

They imagined the body as being only a prison from which one desired to escape - Heresies developed from the uniting of this philosophy with Christianity - A particularly widespread false teaching in that day held that Jesus was actually a spirit who only appeared to have a body

They claimed, He cast no shadow and left no footprints; He was God but not man - Another heresy taught that all physical matter was evil, the spirit was good, and only the intellectually enlightened could enjoy the benefits of religion

Both groups found it hard to believe in a Savior who was fully human - John responded to these false teachers as an eyewitness to Jesus' life on earth - He had walked with Jesus as one of the disciples - John had talked with him, touched him, seen him eat, drink and shed tears - John knew that Jesus was more than a mere spirit

In the very first sentence of this Epistle of 1 John, John establishes that Jesus had been alive before the world began and that he lived as a man among men and women

In the Gospel of John, he wrote in chapter 1 verse 14, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" - In other words, he is both divine and human

Through the centuries, many heretics have denied that Jesus was both God and man - In John's day people had trouble believing he was human; today more people have problems seeing him as God

But Jesus being both divine and human is the pivotal issue of Christianity - Before you accept what religious teachers say about any topic, listen carefully to what they believe about Jesus - To deny either his divinity or his humanity is to consider him less than Christ, the Savior

The phrase Wesleyan Quadrilateral has recently come into use to describe the principal factors that John Wesley believed make up the core of the Christian faith for the believer - I think I'm allowed to call 1960 recent - I was in the 1st grade that fall

According to Theopedia, "Albert C Outler is widely credited with being the first to recognize, in 1960, John Wesley's method for using what Outler referred to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Church Tradition, Reason, and Personal Experience. This understanding of Wesleyan theology is prevalent throughout Methodism, particularly in The United Methodist Church. Using this model, Outler was a key figure in organizing the theological statement put forth by The United Methodist Church at its formation in 1968."⁴

For United Methodists, and other Christian faiths, Scripture is considered the primary source and standard for Christian doctrine - If whatever you are testing does not agree with the Bible you don't need to look any further - It is a false teaching

Tradition is experience and the witness of the Church through the past centuries and in many nations and cultures - Basically is whatever doctrine you testing in agreement with the doctrine of the Church in the past 2,000 years?

Experience is the individual's understanding of the faith in the light of his or her own life - Through reason, the individual believer brings their own intelligence into the doctrine's evaluation - Does such a thing sound reasonable - These four elements, taken together, bring a solid test of whether a doctrine is false or true

⁴ <https://www.theopedia.com/albert-c-outler>

Next, John pushes into encouragement - After this discussion of spirits and false teachers, he writes in 1 John 4:4, "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"

Here is the key to our survival - This verse teaches us that while we are not stronger than the spirits who fail the test of being able confess Jesus as Lord - The Holy Spirit who is in you certainly is stronger

Here's how it works - When we first accept the free gift of salvation by inviting Jesus into our lives to bring us forgiveness and be our Lord and Savior, we are indwelt by God's Holy Spirit - At that point we are saved, not only from our sins - But from the spirits of this world

God's Holy Spirit is stronger than any of the created spirits of this world - And God is not going to share a believer with any other spirit - Once God indwells us, we cannot be possessed by a demon or indwelt by any other spirit

Ephesians 6:12 "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

It is a battle we are sure to lose without the indwelling of God's Spirit - But once we know Jesus as our Savior, "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world"

So, in conclusion, if you don't already know Jesus as your Savior, don't wait - Ask Him to be your Savior right now - All the benefits of salvation is a topic for a different sermon - But as far as today's passage about the spirits of this world goes, we are lost without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit

And don't automatically believe everything you hear - Test everything against the truth of God's Word