

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Testing the Spirits of Our Time

by Dan Trygg

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are out-from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world...⁵ They are out-from the world; therefore they speak out-from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are out-from God; the one who experientially-knows God listens to us; the one who is not out-from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”

1 John 4:1,5-6

“So the great dragon was thrown out -- the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the one deceiving/misleading the whole inhabited-earth. He was thrown to earth, and his angels with him.”

Revelation 12:9

“We know that we are out from God, and that the whole world lies in the evil one.”

1 John 5:19

“Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is out-from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God.”

1 Corinthians 2:12

I have been praying for a number of weeks about what God may want us to focus on for this next period of time. One of the most difficult parts of being a pastor-teacher is discerning what to talk *about*. There is *so* much! Every group, every person, is different, ...and they have different needs. Moreover, we go through different seasons, where one topic may be merely academic, while another may be very applicable and timely. Of course, God sees it all, and can point us in a direction that will be beneficial for us all. This past month has been a lot of praying and seeking, ...and getting one message at a time. Then, the other day, I had one of those “breakthrough moments” where the Lord seemed to open my mind to a topic, and a whole series unfolded before my mind’s eye. It was very exciting and invigorating for me, ...and I hope I can communicate effectively the insights God opened up for me to share.

It began with the first verse at the top of this page, 1 John 4:1, “**Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are out-from God...**” *Why?* “...because *many false prophets have gone out into the world.*” We might think it strange to “test the spirits” until we realize that *these spirits are speaking through people.*

What is a “prophet”? We tend to think narrowly of a biblical prophet, ...someone who is claiming to speak for God. The word, however, is not necessarily that narrow in its definition. **A prophet is someone who “speaks before” others.** In a religious context, it is often someone who claims to be uniquely passing along a message from God, ...but from a larger perspective, *a person who “speaks before” others could be a teacher, a preacher, a public figure, a spokesperson, an advocate, a counselor, an employer, a parent, or any person who is trying to convey a message to someone else.* I am not trying to “water down” the word for “prophet”. It *does* tend to have a more specific definition in the Bible, but the word itself can have broader implications. **The question John would ask is, “What is the source of this person’s thoughts? Is there a spiritual influence at work here?”** John would tell us, **“Test the spirit to see if it is from God.”**

Our American culture tends to downplay, or be oblivious to, the larger spiritual realities at work in our world. Our world is *not* a neutral place, or a blank slate. We are like fish that have grown up in a fishbowl of polluted, or at least “flavored”, water. Of course, *this is “normal” to us, because it is what we grew up in.* We don’t know anything else. But, as we read our Bibles, we become aware that there is something else going on. **The Bible tells us that we live in “the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). **What does *that* mean?** It means that ever since the fall of humankind into sin, our world has been corrupted by evil.**

It has affected nature itself. Human sin introduced death into the world (Rom. 5:12). Think of that! There was no death in the original creation that God had made. There was no predator/prey relationships among the animals. There was no sickness, or disease, ...no natural disasters or catastrophic events. Nature itself has been subjected to the futility, brokenness, upheaval and corruption brought into our world through sin (Rom. 8:19-22). Yet, the world we grew up in had all those characteristics. **We *don’t* live in the world God *made*; we live in the world that *has been scarred by sin, death and corruption.*** Because it is what we have always known, we are *not surprised.* We have just learned to deal with the world as we experience it, the best we can. It is the “water in our fishbowl”.

There is another reason why this time period is called “the present evil age”. Not only has our world been scarred and corrupted by the brokenness caused by sin, there is another reality at work in our world that we may not be fully aware of. **Lurking in the murky water of our “fishbowl” are spiritual beings who desire to influence, control and exploit us.** Revelation 12:9 informs us that the “dragon, the ancient serpent (who was in the Garden, and enticed Adam and Eve), the devil and Satan, ...was thrown down to this earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.” Ephesians 6:12 describes different levels of authority among these beings. **There are “rulers, authorities, world-powers (*kosmo-kratōr*) of this darkness”, and “spiritual beings of evil, malicious-intent”.** These beings have been at work around us our

entire lives. **We have largely been oblivious to them. They are part of the murky water of the “fishbowl” of our experiences in this world.** But now, we are told that we are in a spiritual war *with them!* They are in opposition to us, and our battle is with *them*, not so much with *people*. **They can influence people, indoctrinate them, entice them, arouse them and stir them up, and can even work through them, at times.** But, Paul wants us to clearly understand that *they* are the underlying problem, *not the people*. **Our battle is *not* with the people, but with the spiritual beings who are influencing these people.**

God wants us to work with Him to rescue these people, deliver them from the grip and authority of the darkness, and transfer them to the kingdom of His beloved Son, Jesus (Col. 1:13), so that they may find redemption and forgiveness from sins, just like we have!

How extensive is the influence of this spiritual kingdom of evil? The Bible tells us that “the devil... deceives the whole world”, and 1 John 5:19 seconds that statement. John tells us that “the whole world lies in the evil one.” **Everyone on the planet has been and is influenced by Satan and his minions every day!** This means *you*, and this means *me!* The word for “world” is the Greek word, *kosmos*, which means “an organized system of things”. In addition to the natural world, or the “ecosystem” of plants and animals, there is also a complex spiritual network of interconnected dynamics that influences human life on virtually every level. **It is *this* “world-system” that Satan works through to groom us, control us and exploit us, if he can.**

What has happened to us that we should suddenly be put in this place? What has awakened us, so that we can begin to see this hidden backdrop, and understand these underlying, hidden dynamics?

When we chose to trust in and follow Jesus the Messiah, we were born from above by the Holy Spirit. At that moment, a new life, a new person was brought into existence. ***This new person is not out from this world, it is born of God*** and its existence and identity is out-from God. **At that moment, we were given the Spirit of God, so that we might come to know the things freely given to us by Him, and so that we might be able to discern the Spirit of Truth** (the Holy Spirit – Jn. 14:16,17) **from the spirit of error** (1 Jn. 4:6).

It is important to see that this is a new capacity, ...a new possibility and potential ability. It is *not* a fully-formed, precisely-calibrated, and inerrant skill. This is a *fresh and new potential*, an ability that did not exist before, but **one which must be developed, trained and exercised.** There is education, application and skill-building involved. Being a disciple is not simply an education process. **It is not just about learning facts, truths and ideas. It is about putting the truth into practice.** It is about implementation.

What is it that we are to be learning to do? We are to be developing the ability to discern between what is out from the Spirit of God, versus what is out from the spirit of this evil age. We are to become adept at looking and listening with a deeper awareness, so that we can recognize what is from God, and what is from the spirit of this age. We are to look and listen beyond the surface to recognize the reality of what or who is speaking. **We are to develop the compassion and heart of Christ, who came to seek, serve and save those who are lost and misled.** It does no good to judge a blind person because they can’t see. *They* are not the enemy; *they* need to come to know Jesus, so that they *can* see, even as we can see.

In this series, we will seek to get to know the Spirit of God. What is *He* like? How is *He* different from the spirit of this age, or the spirits that are not from God? In order to recognize what is error, we need to know the truth. **In order to discern what is *not* the Spirit of God, we need to become very familiar with Him, His heart, His character, and His ways.** When a masquerading spirit may come, we should be able to quickly sense that something is awry, and note that something is “off”. **We should develop an intimacy with the Holy Spirit so that HE will be our *first line of discernment*, not our human understanding.** Furthermore, I think it is important for us to pursue this discipleship skill *together*. **We need the perspectives and insights we can gain from one another.** We are not limited to our own set of eyes, or our own understanding. God has placed us in relationship with others in the body of Christ who can help us with this, and who can even look out for one another. **There is NO ONE who sees it all, except Jesus Christ. There is NO ONE who will discern faultlessly all of the time.** From the least to the greatest, if we are “out-from God” we have the Holy Spirit, who can guide us into the truth (Jn. 16:13). Sometimes *He* does that by “speaking the truth in love” from one member of the body to another brother or sister. **Because we are “out-from God” and have the Holy Spirit, we are able also to admonish or speak truth to one another, provided we are being prompted by Him to do so** (Rom. 15:14).

“We have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is out-from God, in order that we might know the things freely given to us by God.” **These are two very different sources for our minds and hearts. What is important to you? What are you after?** Are you enamored with what the spirit of the world presents to you? Is that where you spend your time and attention? Or, do you want what the Spirit of God can reveal to you? **You must make a choice. You must put aside the misleading spirit of the world, in order to discover what God has for you.**