

Trying the Spirits

by J.C. Philpot

The sermon emphasizes the importance of discerning between the false and true spirits, and the need for self-examination to avoid being entangled in a false spirit.

Scripture: Psalm 139:23, Isaiah 57:15, Matthew 7:16, 1 Corinthians 2:15, 2 Corinthians 13:5, 1 John 4:1

Topics: "Discerning Spirits", "False Teachings"

Description

J.C. Philpot preaches about the importance of discerning between the true spirit of God and the false spirits that abound in the professing church. He highlights the need to test the spirits by the word of truth, the work of God in our own soul, the effects of the spirit in our bosom, and the influence on others. Philpot emphasizes the necessity of having a tender, prayerful, careful, faithful, and loving spirit as marks of the true spirit of Christ, contrasting it with the Antinomian, self-righteous, worldly, proud, and unforgiving spirits of error. He urges believers to be discerning and cautious in identifying and rejecting false spirits that deny the reality of Jesus Christ's incarnation and work.

Transcript

Preached at Gower Street Chapel, London,

on June 18, 1865, by J. C. Philpot

"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God." 1 John 4:1

Has it never struck you as a remarkable circumstance that in what are called primitive times, no, in the very days of the apostles themselves, there should spring up in the professing church a crop of men, some of whom were abandoned to the vilest sins, and others given up to believe and propagate the grossest errors and heresies? We would naturally have thought that when such manifest dangers awaited every one who professed to believe in Jesus Christ; when Christians were objects on every side of the deepest enmity and hottest persecution; when every convert carried his life as if in his hand; above all, when there was such a large outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the churches, that there would have been generally, as well as individually, both purity of doctrine and purity of life. But that such was far from the case is evident from the testimony of the New Testament Scriptures.

With what burning words, for instance, does holy Jude stamp some of the professors of his day- "These are spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear- clouds they

are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withers, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever." What! were there such men as are thus described in the primitive church? and not merely here and there, timidly and cautiously concealing themselves and their real sentiments, but avowing themselves without shame? "Ungodly men," that is, openly so, "godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality" by their base and licentious conduct, and "denying by their works as well as their words the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ;" as ignorant as they were impudent, "speaking evil of those things which they know not;" not merely falling through the power of temptation and mercifully restored, but "walking," that is, habitually living "after their own lusts," and debasing themselves to the lowest level "as brute beasts, in what they know naturally corrupting themselves."

Now how gross must have been their errors, how abandoned, their conduct, that an inspired apostle of God should denounce them in language which, for a parallel, has scarcely an equal in the word of truth, except such as Peter, in his second Epistle, has made use of to describe the character and end of the same or similar ungodly professors. You will have observed that those against whom Peter and Jude drew their flaming pens were chiefly men of ungodly, abandoned life- whom we should call in our day "vile Antinomians."

But besides this crop of openly ungodly professors, there were in those days very many erroneous men, I mean such as held great doctrinal errors. Some, for instance, denied the resurrection altogether, as was the case at Corinth (1 Cor. 15:12); others, as Hymeneus and Philetus, said that it was past already. (2 Tim. 2:18.) John tells us in the verse from which my text is taken that "many," not a scattered few, but "many false prophets are gone out into the world." Of these, some denied both the Father and the Son; others that Jesus was the Christ; others that he was come in the flesh, that is, had only come in a kind of mystical way, and that his human nature was not real flesh and blood, but only so in appearance- the effect being to deny altogether the reality of the atonement. Into these various errors I cannot now enter, contenting myself with this observation, that there is scarcely an error, a false doctrine, or a heresy that has ever come abroad in the professing church, of which we have not some indication or intimation in the New Testament, either in a way of positive denunciation, or of solemn, affectionate warning, or of prophetic anticipation.

Of this last we have a remarkable instance in both the Epistles to Timothy, where the apostle declares in the spirit of prophecy the corrupt doctrines and no less corrupt practices which would be manifested in the last days (1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-5); describing errors which had not then made their appearance in the professing church, or, at least, only in their first buddings.

But if it excites our wonder that such fearful errors and such gross evils should have manifested themselves at so early a period, yet it may also raise our admiration at God's providence, if they were to appear at all, in allowing them at that time to appear. It certainly was a very remarkable provision of the wisdom of the all-wise God, that, if error and sin were to spring up in the church, as tares among the wheat, they would first raise their head in the apostolic times, when inspired men of God could denounce it with their pen, and leave upon record, for our instruction in all ages, a clear description of who the men were that gave them birth, both in their character and in their end. The church was thus forewarned, forearmed. Spiritual weapons were laid up as in an armory, which every Christian warrior might take down as fresh enemies of truth in its purity or in its practice might arise, and hew them down, as Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal. Those who contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the

saints, are generally accused of a bad and bitter spirit. Such accusations have often been launched at my unworthy head. But that there may be a union of the tenderest spirit of love with the sternest denunciation of error and evil, is very plain from the character and writings of John; for which, of all the inspired epistles, breathes a more tender spirit of love, and yet contains stronger denunciations of error and evil?

But let us now approach the words of our text. John gives us in it a very solemn warning- "Beloved"- addressing himself in most tender and affectionate language to the church of God- "Beloved, believe not every spirit." Do not receive everything which comes abroad under the name and guise of religion. "Try the spirits." Weigh the matter well; examine for yourselves whether these spirits are of God. And why? "Because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

Believing that John's words and John's warnings are as applicable now as they were then or ever have been, I shall endeavor, with God's help and blessing, to lay open the mind of the Spirit in the words before us, and, in doing so, to bring these three things before you:

First, the false spirit- what holy John calls in a succeeding verse "the spirit of error."

Secondly, the true spirit, or what he calls "the spirit of truth."

Thirdly, the trying of the spirits, "whether they are of God."

I. "The spirit of error." But before I show you the marks and features of the false spirit, I must explain a little what is intended by the word "spirit," or, rather, what meaning it bears generally in the New Testament, and especially in the words before us; for you will observe that John does not bid us try men or the words of men, but try the spirits, that is, as I understand, the minds, breathings, and influences of men.

A. There is something in "spirit," in its New Testament sense, which goes far beyond words. In spirit; taking a broad view of the subject, there is something eminently subtle. We see it in the very wind, of which the word "spirit" is merely another name. There is something keen and penetrating in the wind. Some of us feel how it can search the very bones, especially where there is not much flesh upon them to keep it out. By this subtlety it can, so to speak, propagate itself as well as penetrate into every corner. Like the air, it cannot be kept out, but will enter through the least opening, and make itself felt wherever it penetrates. Words come and go- they are mere sounds, which have often no more real power or effect than the beating of a drum or a shrill blast from a trumpet. Thousands and tens of thousands of words have been spoken, aye, and sermons preached, which have had no more influence on the minds of men than the tunes of an organ in the street.

But in spirit there is something eminently penetrating, diffusive, suggestive, influential. Have you caught my idea? Do you see the distinction between the words of a man and the spirit of a man, whether for good or evil? And do you not see that it is not what a man says, nor even what a man does, but the spirit which a man breathes which carries with it the influence which acts upon the minds of others?

In nothing is this more true than in religion. Observe this especially in the ministry of the word. It is not a man's speech which has an influence, that is, a vital, permanent influence upon the church and congregation. It is the spirit which proceeds from him; the spirit which he breathes, whether it be a spirit of error or a spirit of truth, the Spirit of God or the spirit of Satan, which stamps his ministry with its peculiar effect. I have watched and observed this for years, and have seen how a hard spirit in the pulpit communicates a hard spirit to the pew; and, on the contrary, that a tender, Christian spirit in the minister, a

humble, solemn, reverent, God-fearing spirit in the ministry of the word carries with it a similar influence, and moulds according to the same pattern the minds of the people who habitually listen to it. We almost insensibly catch and drink into the tone and spirit of those with whom we associate; and though we scarcely understand the process, or mark its growth and progress, we gradually drop into it, become, as it were, imbued with it, and in our turn propagate it to others.

It is quite right that we should try men's words; for, as Elihu speaks, "the ear tries words as the mouth tastes food" (Job 34:3); and we should also narrowly watch men's actions, for our Lord has said, "You shall know them by their fruits." (Matt. 7:16.) But neither words nor works so much discover the real minds of men as their spirit. Is it not the possession of a tender, gracious, humble, and godly spirit which so particularly distinguishes the living family of God, which indeed we can hardly describe, yet sensibly feel when we are in their company? that meek and lowly spirit of Christ in them, which draws our heart towards them in admiration and affection, creating and cementing a love and union which cannot be explained, and yet is one of the firmest, strongest ties which can knit soul to soul? And do we not see also in most that we casually meet with- a worldly, carnal, selfish, proud, unhumiliated spirit, which sets us as far from them as the broken spirit of which I have spoken brings us near to the others?

B. Having thus taken this slight view of the meaning of the word "spirit," as bearing upon the words of our text in which we are bidden to try the spirits, I will now bring forward, as the Lord may enable, a few marks of this false spirit, the spirit of error, against which we are to be upon our guard. And do try the spirits as I go on, and see whether you can trace anything in your bosom of the false spirit; for bear this in mind, that we would not be interested in such an admonition as John has given us, unless there was in our nature a corrupt principle, which could drink into a wrong spirit. If we could stand separate and isolated from the influence of a spirit, whether good or bad, it would little affect us what spirit we inhaled from others, or breathed in turn ourselves. But our soul, in one sense, resembles our body, to which it makes a great difference whether we breathe pure or impure air, whether we inhale the breeze which brings health in its wings, or that which comes loaded with the vapors of the pestilential marsh. The pure air can purify the blood, as well as the impure can taint and defile it; the one can be the source of health, the other of disease. Let us not think that our soul is so fortified as to be able to neglect all precaution. Our blood may be tainted before we are aware, and poison may even now be circulating in our veins, which will not indeed kill us if we are the Lord's, and yet may have a very pernicious influence upon our spiritual health. It is because we have deeply imbedded in our very nature a corrupt principle, which is akin to, and but for God's gracious help and interference, would greedily drink into a wrong and false, a corrupt and erroneous spirit, that we need some close self-examination to ascertain whether we have drunk into that spirit or not.

Let no man think himself beyond the necessity of self-examination. How strongly does the apostle urge this Christian duty- "Examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith; prove your own selves." (2 Cor. 13:5.) It marks an honest spirit when we can say, "Search me, O God, and know my heart- try me, and know my thoughts- and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalm. 139:23, 24.) The Lord give us grace and wisdom to "prove all things; and hold fast that which is good." (1 Thess. 5:21.) "That we may approve things that are excellent; that we may be sincere and without offence until the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God." (Phil. 1:10, 11.)

1. There is first, then, an ANTINOMIAN spirit, and that spirit has been, if not now is, very prevalent in the Calvinistic churches. In avoiding one rock men have fallen upon the other. Disclaiming, justly disclaiming, and disavowing all good works as matters of justification, many professors of the doctrines of grace seem

utterly unconcerned whether there should be in heart, lip, or life any good works at all; setting aside, justly and properly, human merit upon which to stand before God, and making salvation to be, as indeed it is, wholly of grace; men, many men, both ministers and people, have, I am sorry to say, perverted and abused these glorious doctrines of grace to bad ends. I am well convinced from long observation, that among many professors of the glorious truths of the gospel, there is a sadly and widely prevailing Antinomian spirit- that is, an ungodly spirit, a spirit of carelessness, if not open immorality, a spirit of worldliness and self indulgence, of levity and looseness in their general conduct and conversation, a spirit of hardness, negligence, and allowed indulgence in things which are altogether opposed to the fear of God in a tender conscience. We may almost wonder that there could be such characters among those who profess "the doctrine which is according to godliness."

A little examination however will clearly show us the reason why this Antinomian spirit manifests itself in the way that I have described. The word of God has very clearly pointed it out in various places. The way in which this subtle spirit works and acts seems to be much in this way. Convictions of sin lay hold upon men's 'natural' conscience, the effect of which is to compel them to relinquish their sins, that is, the open practice of them. This change in them taking place under a minister of truth, attaches them to his ministry; and therefore the next step is to receive from his lips and the example and conversation of the people who meet at the same place, a scheme of sound doctrinal truth into their natural mind, without any real change of heart or any work of grace upon the soul. Thus by a conjunction of convictions in the natural conscience with a knowledge of the truth in the judgment, they, as Peter speaks, for a time "escape [literally, fly from] the pollutions of the world," make a profession of religion, consider themselves, and are often considered by others, true and undoubted children of God.

But not having the right spirit, the fear of God in a tender conscience; not having the teaching and operation, work and witness of the Holy Spirit in their bosom, it happens to them, as Peter speaks, "according to the true proverb; The dog returns to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire." (2 Pet. 2:22.) The reason of this is because they never were really divorced from sin by the separating power of the Holy Spirit, piercing by the word of God even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow." (Heb. 4:12.) Thus, the tie that united them to the works of darkness was really never broken. The Spirit of God never really broke up the love and power of sin in their breast, either by a series of spiritual convictions, or by planting the fear of God in their heart, or by a gracious discovery of the Person and work, love and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Their old corrupt nature was 'covered over by a gilded profession'; but after all it was only the original, rotten, worm-eaten wooden casket. When, then, their convictions had become lulled asleep by a reception of the truth merely into their 'judgment', without any real work of grace upon their 'heart', the natural bent of their mind towards sin began to manifest itself; and as they could not decently throw away their profession; and as this was their grand salve if conscience felt uneasy, they became in spirit if not in practice Antinomians.

But we would greatly err if we thought that none had this spirit except such characters as I have just described. For a time and to a certain extent, through the power of temptation; the influence of a loose and careless ministry, or the example of ill-chosen associates, even one who fears God may be entangled in this Antinomian spirit; and as this spirit is very subtle, he may hardly see how far he is possessed of it until the Lord is pleased to break the snare, and by his chastening rod convince him what secret poison he has drunk of, and how it has enervated his strength, hidden from him the face of God, and brought leanness and death into his soul. There are few of us of any long standing in a profession who have not at some

period or other of it been tempted by this spirit, or been entangled in it, like Bunyan's pilgrim, falling asleep in the arbor, or turning into By-path meadow.

2. But there is a spirit the exact opposite to this. I mean a SELF-RIGHTEOUS spirit. You may divide men, generally speaking, who have a wrong spirit, into two grand classes- there are those who have drunk more or less deeply into an Antinomian spirit, who think little of sin, and indulge it secretly or openly. And there are those, who, from natural temperament, general strictness of life and conduct, absence of powerful temptations, and having been shielded by various restraints from the commission of open evil, are secretly imbued with a strong spirit of self-righteousness. These having been preserved from the corruptions of the world and the open sins of the flesh, frequently manifest in their religious profession a Pharisaical, self-righteous spirit, which, though not so gross or so palpable as an Antinomian spirit, is hardly less dangerous, and casts almost as much contempt upon salvation by grace as that which abuses it to licentiousness.

Deer justly observes, that the space between 'Pharisaic zeal' and 'Antinomian security' is much narrower and harder to find than most men imagine. It is a path which the vulture's eye has not seen; and none can show it to us but the Holy Spirit. This witness is true; and the longer we live and the further we walk in the ways of God, the more do we find it so. As the same vessel in the same voyage may have to encounter opposite winds, and be exposed to the same peril from both, though in opposite directions, so the very same believer may sometimes be caught by an Antinomian spirit, and be driven out of his course in one direction, and sometimes by a self-righteous spirit, and driven out of his course in the other.

3. A WORLDLY spirit is another spirit of error, against which we have to be upon our guard, and to try ourselves whether this spirit be in us or not.

The first effect of sovereign grace in its divine operation upon the heart of a child of God is to separate him from the world by infusing into him a new spirit, which is not of the world, but of God. We see this in the case of Abraham. When God called him by his grace, he was bidden to "get out of his country, and from his kindred, and from his father's house." (Gen. 12:1.) The words of the Lord to his chosen Bride are- "Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear; forget also your own people, and your father's house; so shall the king greatly desire your beauty, for he is your Lord; and worship him." (Psalm. 45:10, 11.) When our gracious Lord called his disciples, they forsook all and followed him. The apostle expressly tells us that Jesus "gave himself for our sins that he might deliver us from this present evil world" (Gal. 1:4); and God's call to his people is, "Come out from among them, and be separate." (2 Cor. 6:17.) Indeed there is little evidence that grace ever touched our hearts if it did not separate us from this ungodly world.

But where there is not this divine work upon a sinner's conscience; where there is no communication of this new heart and this new spirit, no infusion of this holy life, no animating, quickening influence of the Spirit of God upon the soul, whatever a man's outward profession may be, he will ever be of a worldly spirit. A set of doctrines, however sound, merely received into the natural understanding, cannot divorce a man from that innate love of the world which is so deeply rooted in our very present being. No mighty power has come upon his soul to revolutionize his every thought, cast his soul as if into a new mold, and by stamping upon it the mind and likeness of Christ to change him altogether. It may be checked by circumstances, controlled by natural conscience, or influenced by the example of others; but a worldly spirit will ever peep out from the thickest disguise, and manifest itself, as occasion draws it forth, in every unregenerate man.

4. A PROUD spirit, an unhumbled, self-exalting, self-esteeming spirit, is a spirit of error. It is not the spirit of the meek and lowly Jesus. It savors not, it breathes not of the spirit of Christ, who said of himself, "Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart." The foundation of this proud spirit lies deeply imbedded in the human heart, and is one of the most marked features of the fall. Wherever, then, you see pride, whatever form it assume, worldly or religious, pride indulged, pride not confessed, mourned over, and fought against- for we all have pride working in us- there is the very spirit of anti-Christ; there is the false spirit, the spirit of error.

6. Again, a CARELESS spirit, a reckless, thoughtless, light, and trifling spirit, is a spirit of falsehood and a spirit of error. To trifle with God in a light, frivolous manner; to profess the solemn verities and heavenly realities of our most holy faith, and yet to carry into the house of God or into the things of God that light, trifling spirit which we see manifested in the world- all with eyes to see and heart to feel must see and feel that this is opposed root and branch to the Spirit of Christ. And yet how prevalent it is in the professing church! How we seem surrounded on every hand with a company of light, trifling, carnal professors, who not only in their habitual life and demeanor, but even at those very moments when we think their minds should be solemnized and their levity subdued, seem more given up to it than at almost any other time. Mark them as they come tumbling out of the house of prayer; hear their light conversation with each other; watch their smiling countenances, and the loud familiar greetings with which they hail those of the same spirit as themselves; and see how all those solemn impressions, and that grave, reverential demeanor which befit the saints of God after hearing the word of life are swallowed up and buried in an overflowing tide of almost crude merriment. Surely there is enough of what we see and feel of evil within us and evil about us, and of what the Lord suffered to deliver us from it, to solemnize if not sadden our spirit. But instead of this chastened spirit of grave and solemn recollectedness, which is a very different thing from a mere sanctimonious appearance, in how many places are rather seen almost the exuberant spirits of a worldly holiday.

6. An UNFORGIVING spirit, a bitter, harsh spirit, a dividing spirit, a spirit that, like the storm-bird, is most at home in a storm; that loves contention for its own sake, and is never so pleased as when it is in the midst of it, has marks upon it of being the very spirit of falsehood, the very spirit of error; for it is directly opposed to the gentle, kind, loving, affectionate, tender spirit of Christ. How this bitter, contentious spirit has again and again ruined the peace of churches, rent asunder the dearest friends, sown the seeds of prejudice and ill-will in fellow-worshippers and fellow-members never to be eradicated, broken the heart of godly ministers, grieved and troubled tender consciences, scattered causes of truth to the winds, made truth contemptible, and put into the hands of its enemies one of their strongest weapons against it.

II. But I pass on now to show you by way of contrast some of the marks of the true spirit.

But here, at the very outset, lies a great difficulty, because as we possess a corrupt nature, as well as a nature born of God, both of these two spirits will be in our own bosom! It is as the apostle speaks, "the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary the one to the other." Now the effect of this is, that a man who truly fears the Lord, finds in his bosom two different spirits, two adverse winds blowing opposite ways, and driving him, or threatening to drive him into two contrary directions. But in this as in so many other instances, God has given us a gracious provision to meet with and overcome this difficulty. First, he has given us his holy word to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, which is full of instruction to show us the difference between these two spirits; and secondly, by the teaching of the Holy Spirit, he gives his people a measure of spiritual discernment to guide them aright in this important matter. He therefore enlightens the eyes of their understanding to see, and renews them in

the spirit of their mind to feel, what the true spirit is as distinct from the false. He plants his fear in their heart as a fountain of life to depart from the snares of death, of which this false spirit is one of the most subtle and seducing. He makes them of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord, for his fear is their treasure. He gives them the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:16.) And as he thus breathes the Spirit of Christ into their soul, that Spirit of Christ in their bosom becomes a guiding light, who sheds his rays and beams through all the secret recesses of their breast. He searches out, brings to light, and passes sentence upon everything which is evil, for it is "the candle of the Lord, searching all the inward parts of the heart." (Prov. 20:27.)

And thus, with all the sagacity of a detective hunting out the perpetrator of some crime, or of a policeman turning the eye of his lantern to bear upon a suspected man in the dark, so the spirit of Christ in a believer's bosom hunts up each track of evil, and casts a clear broad light on everything which would hide itself in the dark chambers of imagery. In fact, so needful is the possession of this inward light, that if a man has not in his bosom a measure of the Spirit of Christ, of the grace of Christ, of the presence of Christ, and of the power of Christ, he is not in a position to see the spirit of error or of sin in himself or others. He follows blindly on where Satan leads him. Traps and snares are spread for his feet, and into them he recklessly falls. There is nothing in him to keep him back from evil or to hold him up from error. He has not the guiding light of the Spirit of God in his breast, nor any warm, tender life breathed into his soul out of the fullness of Christ. Therefore, lacking light to see, and life to feel, and destitute of the spirit of gracious discernment, he is almost sure to slip into some evil, or be entangled in some error.

This point, however, I shall have occasion to enter more fully into when we come to the last head of my discourse. Bearing then in mind these remarks which I have thrown out by way of anticipation to guide your judgment for the present, now look at a few marks of the TRUE spirit- the Spirit of Christ in a believer's bosom.

1. The first mark of that spirit, due to its birth and origin, and as being a copy of the Spirit of Jesus, is that it is a TENDER spirit. I pointed out as one of the marks of a false spirit, a spirit of error, that it was a hard, harsh spirit, what the Scripture calls "a heart of stone." Now the opposite to this, as the Spirit of Christ in the believer's bosom, is a spirit of tenderness. We see this eminently in young Josiah, and it was that special mark on which God put the broad seal of his approbation, "Because your heart was tender." (2 Chron. 34:37.) But what makes the heart tender? When God begins his work of grace upon a sinner's soul, he puts his finger upon his heart, thus doing to it what he did to that band of men who went home with Saul, of whom we read, "whose hearts God had touched." (1 Sam. 10:26.) The touch of God in a man's soul makes it soft and tender. It is with the soul as with the earth and the hills- "He uttered his voice, the earth melted." "The hills melted like wax at the presence of the Lord." (Psalm. 46:6; 97:5.)

This tenderness of spirit thus produced, manifests itself in its actings, movements, and dealings towards God and man. First, it is tender toward GOD; for it is often very sore under divine pressure. The hand of God is very weighty and powerful wherever strongly laid on. This made the Psalmist cry, "Day and night your hand was heavy upon me." (Psalm. 32:4.) "Your hand presses me sore." (Psalm. 38:2.) So also, "Remove your stroke away from me; I am consumed by the blow of your hand." (Psalm. 39:10.) Under the pressure, then, of this hand, sin is felt as a heavy burden, and very many keen sensations agitate the breast, making the conscience sore, and causing it to smart under painful apprehensions of the anger of God, and of his displeasure against the sins we have committed and the evils that work in us. This tenderness of spirit, God notices and approves of, for there is in it that brokenness of which we read- "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit" (Psalm. 51:17), rising up as it were before him like the smoke of an

acceptable sacrifice.

Now it is by the keen sensations which are thus produced by the Spirit of God in the soul, that the gracious convictions of a child of God are distinguished from the natural convictions of a reprobate. A man may have the deepest convictions, may be, to use a common expression, shaken over the mouth of hell, and yet never have the fear of God in his soul, never possess any one feature or mark of that tenderness of spirit of which I have spoken, of that contrite and humble spirit with which God dwells (Isa. 57:15), or of that poor and contrite spirit that trembles at God's word, to which he especially looks. (Isa. 66:2.)

Natural convictions, however severe, if they are but natural, may drive a man to desperation, but they will never produce real tenderness of spirit Godwards. After a time they will wear off, and his heart will become as hard toward God as a piece of the nether millstone; hardened, one may say, as the blacksmith's anvil, by the very blows which have fallen upon it. But the grace, the Spirit, and the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is tenderness itself, will ever manifest themselves by producing in the soul a tender spirit Godwards. This is especially shown in the tender sensations of a living conscience under a sight and sense of sin, not only in its guilt but in the discovery of the dreadful evils of the heart as they rise up to view, and as their exceeding sinfulness is more and more opened up as being hateful and detestable to God.

But as this tender spirit is thus manifested toward God and the things of God generally, so it is also to the PEOPLE of God. The soul under divine teaching is led to see and feel that he who touches God's people touches the apple of God's eye. This makes him tender of wounding the feelings of God's saints, of speaking anything to their injury, even thinking anything to their detriment; for having a tender feeling toward the Lord, he has a tender feeling toward those who are the Lord's. This tender spirit manifests itself as one of the first evidences of divine life in the warm love and gentle affection which spring up in the believing heart toward the people of God. The grace of God making the heart and conscience tender, kindles, produces, and keeps alive a tender affection toward God's saints as a conspicuous part of this tenderness; and it thus becomes the first sensible evidence of its divine origin; as John speaks- "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren." (1 John 3:14.) And again- "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and every one that loves is born of God, and knows God." (1 John 4:7.)

2. But this spirit, this new spirit, this true spirit, this Spirit of Christ in a believer's bosom, is a PRAYERFUL spirit. I have no good opinion of any man's religion which did not begin with a spirit of prayer. I know that mine began so, and that it came upon me without my seeking to produce it, and has more or less abode with me to this day. This spirit of prayer indeed is one of the chief marks which distinguish gracious convictions from those which are merely natural. Do you find that Saul, or Ahithophel, or Judas ever prayed? "They have not cried unto me with their hearts," says the prophet, "when they howled upon their beds." (Hosea 7:14.) Is not this spirit of prayer a special gift of God? Has not he declared that he will pour upon the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem the spirit of grace and supplication? (Zech. 12:10.) And what is the effect of this heavenly shower? "They shall look upon me whom they have pierced; and they shall mourn for him as one mourns for his only son."

Here we have the union of three gracious marks- a spirit of prayer to cry for mercy, a looking unto and upon Jesus whom they have pierced, and repentance and godly sorrow over their sins and over him. None of these things are found except in those on whom God shows mercy.

The same mark is given by another of the prophets- "They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them." (Jer. 31:9.) We see this mark eminently in the case of Saul. "Behold, he prays," was God's word to Ananias to assure him that this bloodthirsty persecutor was a new-born soul; and that he who had no mercy upon Stephen was crying to God for mercy to himself. (Acts 9:11.) Wherever then there is a prayerful spirit, it is a blessed mark, and that it is the Lord's purpose to grant him every desire of his heart. Indeed, until God is pleased to pour out upon us the spirit of grace and of supplications, we cannot worship him aright; for God is a Spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24); nor can we, without this Spirit, offer up that spiritual sacrifice which is acceptable to him through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 2:5.)

When this spirit has been once given and kindled in a believer's breast, it never dies out. It is like the fire upon the bronze altar, which was first given by the Lord himself from heaven, and concerning which God gave this command- "The fire shall ever be burning upon the altar; it shall never go out." (Lev. 6:13.) This fire might sink low; it might be covered with the ashes of sacrifice, but it never was allowed to go out for lack of supply of fuel.

So at times it may seem to you as if there were scarcely any spirit of prayer alive in your bosom; and you may feel as destitute of a spirit of grace and of supplication as if you had never known its lively movements and actings. But you will find it drawn out from time to time by circumstances. You will be placed under peculiar trials, under which you will find no relief but at a throne of grace; or God will in tender mercy breathe again upon your soul with his own gracious Spirit, and by his quickening breath will revive- I will not say kindle, for it is not gone out, that holy fire which seemed to be buried under the ashes of corruption, that inward spirit of prayer which he gave you at regeneration, and which will never cease until it issues in everlasting praise.

3. This new and true spirit is also a CAREFUL spirit- by which I mean, it is utterly opposed to, and distinct from that careless spirit which I have denounced as eminently a spirit of falsehood and error. There is nothing of this recklessness and thoughtlessness in the new spirit, the spirit of truth. On the contrary, it is jealous over itself with a godly jealousy. It fears to be wrong, it desires to be right. Whatever the consequences or the sacrifices which to walk in the right way of the Lord may entail, the soul born of God desires to be right. "Lord, lead me right;" "Lord, keep me right," is the constant, the earnest desire of every new-born soul. And by this spirit of godly jealousy over self, by this earnest and unceasing desire to be made right and kept right, it is preserved from many of those snares into which others heedlessly fall, and by which they bring either destruction or misery upon themselves.

4. Again, it is a spirit of FAITH. There is a distinction to be made between faith and the spirit of faith. "We having," says the apostle, "the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believe, and therefore have I spoken, we also believe, and therefore speak." (2 Cor. 4:13.) The spirit of faith is faith in exercise. Faith sometimes is like a day in which there is no wind blowing. It is so calm, that there scarcely appears to be any air stirring to move a leaf. But after a time a gentle breeze comes and blows over the earth. Thus it is with faith and the spirit of faith. Faith in repose is like the calm air of a summer's day, when there is nothing moving or stirring; faith acting, faith in exercise, is like the same air in the gentle breeze which makes itself sensibly felt. If God has given me faith, that faith is never lost out of my breast. If once a believer, I always am a believer; for if I could cease to believe, I would cease to be a child of God; I would lose salvation out of my heart, for I am saved by grace through faith.

And yet there may be many times and seasons when I may not have much of the spirit of faith. Faith may be very inactive, I will not say stagnant, for that would almost imply death, but still, quiet, calm, sleeping like a bird with its head under its wing. But in due time there is a stirring, a movement; a gracious blowing of the Spirit- "Awake, O north wind, and come O south wind; blow upon my garden." (Song 4:16.) "Come from the four winds, O breath." (Ezek. 37:9.) This heavenly breath of the Holy Spirit acts upon faith, awakens it, revives and reanimates it, and draws it forth into lively operation. It thus becomes a spirit of faith, acting spiritually and energetically according to its measure. John was "in the Spirit on the Lord's day." (Rev. 1:10.) He was not always in the Spirit by lively action, though he was never out of the Spirit by his extinction. So faith is sometimes, so to speak, in the Spirit; and then its eyes are open, like the eyes of John, to see spiritually what he saw visibly, the Person of Christ, and its ear open to hear inwardly what he heard outwardly, the words of Christ.

5. But the spirit of LOVE is one of the grand characteristics of this new and true spirit; for "love is of God, and he that loves knows God and is born of God." I can have no satisfaction, real satisfaction, that I am a partaker of the Spirit and grace of Christ except I feel some measure of the love of God shed abroad in my heart. I may have hopes, expectations, and evidences, fainter or brighter; but I have no sure, clear evidence in my own soul that I have the Spirit and grace of Christ there, except I am blessed with the love of God; for until love comes, there is fear which has torment. And while we have fear which has torment, there is no being made perfect in love. You have no clear assurance in your own breast that God has loved you with an everlasting love; nor have you any bright testimony that the Spirit of God makes your body his temple until this love comes into your soul. But when the crowning blessing comes of the love of God experimentally felt and enjoyed by his own shedding of it abroad in the heart, with the communication of the spirit of adoption to cry "Abba, Father," that is the sealing testimony of your possession of the true spirit; for it is "a spirit of power, and of love, and of a sound mind;" and where there is this there is also a spirit of love and affection to all the family of God.

I am obliged to pass by various other marks of this true spirit, for I must not omit to bring before you the 'trying of the spirits' as one prominent feature of my present discourse.

III. The TRYING of the spirits. Observe the strong and striking language of John- "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world."

A. John here addresses himself to the family of God. "Beloved." It is these beloved ones, beloved of God and of himself, whom he warns, and upon whom he urges the necessity and the importance of this trial. He would not encourage that foolish, childish credulity which receives everything and everybody that makes a profession of religion. And this warning cry is addressed to us as well as to them, if we are among the "beloved;" and indeed was never more needed than now. There is much delusion abroad, many errors, many abounding evils. There is then with us a kind of spiritual necessity not to believe every spirit, not to receive with superstitious credulity whatever any man or minister, however high in a profession, may tell us. We are to be upon our guard not to be imposed upon by erroneous men, however plausible or however popular, not to be beguiled by any false spirit, from whatever quarter it blows or from whatever mouth it comes; but in the calm, quiet depths of our own bosom, in all simplicity and godly sincerity, with meekness and humility, to try the spirits, to weigh them, to examine them well, and come to some decision in our own conscience what manner of spirit that is, which calls upon us for our acceptance as of God.

We are continually thrown into the company of professors of religion. What must we test then, in them that we may follow John's directions? Not their words altogether, though words sometimes are quite sufficient to manifest a man's real character, for a "fool's voice is known by the multitude of words." (Eccles. 5:3.) But men may say anything; and the more men's consciences are hardened the more boldly and presumptuously they can speak. What man in business trusts men's words, unless they have other evidence? How deceptive words are! What imposition is continually practiced by plausible words and strong protestations, loud declarations, and repeated promises. Men of business look for something beyond all these words- they want realities, substance, facts, deeds and documents, responsibility and security. And shall we be less wise than they? Shall the children of this world be wiser in their generation than the children of light? We then have to try the spirits, our own and others, to see whether they are of God, leaving to novices and self-deceivers to be beguiled by the plausible words of 'hypocrites in Zion'.

B. But how shall we try them? There are four ways whereby we may try the spirits, whether they are of God.

1. The first is by the word of truth. God has given us the Scriptures, blessed be his holy name, as a perfect revelation of his mind and will. There he has deposited his sacred truth in all its purity and blessedness, that it may shed a continual and steady light from generation to generation. We must then bring ourselves and others to the test of the Scriptures to know whether the spirit which is in us or in them is of God or not. Now in this chapter John gives us several tests whereby to try the true spirits. One is the confession that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. In those days there was a set of pestilent heretics who denied the real humanity of our blessed Lord. They held that his body was not real flesh and blood of the substance of the Virgin, but a mere shadowy appearance. But what was the effect of this vile and damnable error? To destroy in a moment all the effects of Christ's suffering and death; for if his body were a shadowy body, there could be no taking of the nature of the children, no substitution of himself in their place and stead, and therefore no true sacrifice, no real atonement for sin. In this day we do not hear much of an error like this, for it seems quite to have died out. And yet men may deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh if they deny the fruits that spring out of his coming in the flesh.

An Antinomian, for instance, still denies it, because Jesus Christ came to make us holy, to keep us from ungodliness, and purify unto himself a peculiar people zealous of good works. The Antinomian spirit, therefore, really denies that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh; for it denies the power of his resurrection in raising us up to a new life, the efficacy of his blood to sanctify as well as to atone, and indeed all that Jesus has done to reconcile us unto God, as far as regards its manifestation in our hearts and lives.

So also the Pharisaic spirit equally denies that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. If you can save yourself by your own works, what do you need Jesus Christ for? Why need Jesus Christ have come in the flesh if your works could save you, and you can stand upon your own righteousness? Thus the Pharisee denies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh as much as the Antinomian.

And could we pursue the point through all its various bearings, we would find that every manifestation of the spirit of error is a virtual denying that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; for his coming in the flesh is the root of all blessings and of all blessedness, as the root of all our standing in him and of every blessing with which we are blessed in him. The spirit, therefore, of error, in all its branches is a virtual denial of Jesus Christ having come in the flesh.

But again, John gives us another test, the hearing of the apostles. "He that is of God hears us." A listening to God's word as revealed in the Scriptures, a drinking into the very spirit of truth as delivered by the apostles and handed down in the word of God, a receiving tenderly and graciously, with a child-like spirit, God's truth, so as to be saved and blessed thereby, is a test to which we must bring every spirit, whether the spirit of truth or the spirit of error.

2. But I said that there is another test whereby we are to try the spirits, and that is by the work of God upon our own soul. Many have the word of God in their hands and in their mouths; but what is the word of God to them? They have no light to see its meaning; no understanding to enter into its holy and gracious declarations; no faith to believe what it reveals; in a word, it has no effect upon them. To bring them therefore to the word of God would be like taking a blind man and putting scales in his hands to weigh an article of merchandise. He has no eyes to see scales or weights. You must have eyes to see the tests in God's word that you may apply God's word as a test to try whether you possess a true or false spirit. The work of God upon your own soul, the life of Jesus in your own breast, the operations of the Spirit upon your own conscience, the gracious feelings produced within you by the power of God- this is a test besides the Scriptures whereby we try the spirits.

Let me open up this a little more fully and clearly by appealing to your own experience. You are thrown sometimes into the company of some of those characters which I have just described, and get into conversation with them; for they are generally very forward to talk. Say then that you meet with a man, a great professor of religion, but full of that light, trifling, carnal, careless spirit, which I have pointed out as marking a spirit of error. Is not your soul grieved? Do you not see, do you not feel that the grace of God is not in that man, or, at least, sadly buried by his worldly spirit? Can you not come to some decision in your own breast that this carnal, trifling, worldly, proud, covetous spirit which you see in him or in others is not the Spirit of Christ, and that the man who is so thoroughly under its influences and manifests it so clearly and visibly in his life and conduct, is not a partaker of the grace of Christ? But why do you come to this decision? Because you know what the Spirit of Christ does in you, and that you are a living witness of the tenderness it communicates, the fear of God it implants, the reverence of the name of God it produces, the carefulness and jealousy over self, the desire to be right, the fear to be wrong, which are the effects and fruits of the grace of God. You find these things in your own breast if you are a partaker of the grace of Christ. You bring then the spirits which you daily encounter in your path to the test; and if these are directly opposed to what the Spirit of Christ has done for and in you, you say, "The Spirit of Christ is not here. There is no tenderness of conscience in this man, no reverence of God, no fear of his great name, no sense of the evil of sin, no holy mourning nor godly sorrow for it, no forsaking it, no walking as becomes a Christian. Call this the Spirit of Christ? The Spirit of Christ is not in it."

Thus, as you have divine teaching in your own bosom, you bring to that inward test the spirits which are continually presenting themselves; and by weighing them tenderly, cautiously, and carefully- not in a proud, dictatorial way, but with great caution, fearing lest you may deceive yourself from a wrong judgment, you weigh in this inward balance the true spirit and false, and from the inward testimony of God in your soul spiritually discern for your own guidance which is the spirit of truth and which is the spirit of error.

This may seem harsh doctrine; and indeed it would be so unless it were scriptural, and unless this spirit of judgment were carefully regulated by the Spirit's inward teaching. Does not the apostle say, "He that is spiritual judges [or "discerns," margin] all things?" (1 Cor. 2:15.) "You have an unction from the Holy One," says John, "and you know all things." But where is this unction? "The anointing which you have received

of him abides in you." (1 John 2:20, 27.) In this way the Lord is "a spirit of judgment to him that sits in judgment." (Isa. 28:6.) Are you not sensible, you discerning people of God, what spirit is breathed from the pulpit by the minister under whom you sit?

And here let me drop a word to all who fear God now before me. Don't look to the words of the minister you hear so much as to his spirit. Of course, if he preaches the truth, his words will be in harmony with it; but he may preach the letter of truth without being under the influence of the Spirit of truth. Is the Spirit of Christ in him? Does the blessed Spirit communicate through him any gracious influence to your soul? Is there any softening of your spirit under his word; any unction resting upon your soul; any tenderness drawing up your affections Godwards; any sweet reviving and blessed renewing of the love and power of God in your soul, as known and experienced in the days of old? Or are you searched, rebuked, reprov'd, admonished, warned, cautioned by an inward light, life, and power which flow into your heart through his word? Are you sensibly humbled, broken down, and softened into contrition, humility, meekness, and quietness of spirit, with confession and supplication before the Lord? I repeat the word- Try the man's spirit; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

How many ministers breathe a harsh, proud, contentious, self-exalting spirit; a spirit which, call it what you will, or disguise itself as you may, is alien altogether to the Spirit of Christ. No humility, no brokenness, no tender regard for God's honor and glory, no separation of the precious from the vile, and no commending themselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God, show themselves in them. Again, I say, try the spirits whether they be of God.

3. There is a third test, whereby we try the spirits; that is, the effects and influences of this spirit in our own bosom.

This test is closely allied to the preceding, but is of a more practical nature. If you are possessed of the light and life of God in your soul, you will watch the influence of your own spirit. You will observe how it influences your thoughts, your movements, your words, your actions; how it is in you as a guiding light to all that is good, and a sensible bar to all that is evil. Sometimes, for instance, you feel softened, humbled, melted down before the footstool, sweet spirituality of mind flowing in, heavenly affections flowing out, a separation from the spirit of the world, making you desire to be alone with God, and to enjoy a sense of his presence and love in your heart. This is a right spirit- the very spirit of truth, the very spirit of Christ. It has right effects, right influences, and by this you see it is the spirit of truth.

Or sometimes you may find a different spirit working in you- pride, harshness, self-justification, covetousness, rebellion, self-pity, entanglement in business and worldly cares, and all these secretly quenching the life of God in your soul. You are sensible of this wrong influence in your breast; you can see it is not the spirit of holiness nor the Spirit of Christ, but an alien spirit, a spirit diametrically opposed to the spirit of truth and love.

4. There is another test, the influence which the spirit has upon others. You will have an influence upon those with whom you live. There will be an influence emanating from you towards your families, your servants, your friends, and those with whom you are brought into daily contact. And you may trace in your own bosom, for you will be honest with yourself, the workings of a gracious spirit and the workings of an ungodly spirit. Sometimes you find peevishness, fretfulness, hasty temper manifesting itself in words and expressions highly unsuitable the grace and spirit of Christ. You are condemned; you go to bed with a heavy heart; you can hardly go to sleep because through the day you have manifested an angry temper,

or been too much entangled in business. Here you trace the effect of a wrong spirit.

Or you get into argument and find working in you a dividing spirit, a spirit of jealousy, or prejudice, or enmity, or dislike to some of the dear family of God. You are conscious you have an unforgiving spirit that you cannot master, but you are not insensible to it; you hate its workings and abhor its influence. Now watch the influence of your spirit upon others.

And a minister has to watch this especially- the influence his spirit has upon the people. Are there effects and fruits following his word? Are they searched, tried, examined? Is their conscience made more alive and tender? Is there a gracious influence attending the ministry of the word? I would not be fit to stand here in the name of the Lord unless I stood up in the Spirit of Christ; and if I stand up in the Spirit of Christ, and with the grace of Christ in my heart, the word of Christ in my mouth, there will be communicated to you a gracious influence which you will sensibly feel- not always feel; but from time to time there will be a gracious influence attending the word to your heart, by which sometimes your doubts and fears are removed, your burdened soul encouraged, your difficulties cleared up, Christ made precious, and the things of God sealed upon your heart with fresh life and power.

Thus, by these tests-

the word of God,

your own experience,

the effect and influence of the Spirit upon yourself,

the effect and influence of your spirit upon others-

we may try the spirits whether they are of God. And if we find that we have the right spirit, or are seeking more of its influence, let us thank God and take courage.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jc-philpot/trying-the-spirits/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net