

Sermon Series: Where the Lover Meets the Road
“The Great Contest”
Sunday, July 24, 2022
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Have you ever seen a great contest? E.g., I recall when I was a teenager my Dad took me to one of the greatest championship fights in history— Muhammed Ali vs. Leon Spinks in September, 1978. Spinks had just beat him in a fight and Ali was coming back for revenge. I had never been to a prize fight before, and have not been since, but I do remember that event in the Superdome and all the hype surrounding it. I recall during the week Spinks made the news because he was a bit careless in the way he took care of himself by getting in a softball game and sliding into a base. Many thought that was foolish because he could have hurt himself before the big fight. The fight happened, and Ali won an overwhelming decision in 15 rounds. The contest was a tough contest, where they were exhausted after their battle. Christianity says that we are in a battle, a great contest, everyone of us. And the contest is for every person’s soul. Do you believe that? Paul said that our fight is not against flesh and blood, but “against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). John picks up on this theme of the great contest that every Christian faces.

READ 1 John 4:1-6 (pp. 240-241)

CONTEXT: John has just showed some special aspects of Christianity that make it work. We are not condemned, we can come in God's presence with boldness, and we have God dwelling within us through the Holy Spirit. Now we need learn that there is different spirit working in people who challenge the Holy Spirit.

READ v 1. "In v 1 John told believers that there was a contest of sorts between two polar opposite forces, thus causing spiritual confusion, so the believers must be discerning. Is this still true today? 'No matter how charming, how plausible, how eloquent the prophets in question may be, the test of their witness to Christ and His truth is the test by which they must be judged' (F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 105)." Apparently in the early church there was the belief that if someone claimed to be speaking by the Spirit of God then that person would be heard and heeded. For example read in 1 Corinthians 12:2-3, "You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." Have you ever seen such confusion? As I asked above, is this still true today? E.g., I recall talking to one pastor years ago, and something seemed a little amiss, and I asked him whether he believed in hell, and he said no. I was testing the spirits, and found this person wanting in biblical truth. E.g., I recall someone telling me a pastor preached once that God doesn't answer prayer, and thus we don't need to make requests of Him. We have to test the spirits— what is the source of such teaching? And we need to know what are some tests that will help us know if that person is following the Spirit of God. E.g., I recall after Katrina we had many people leave New Orleans and settle out of state, and I tried to equip them to help them find a suitable church, so I gave them some questions to ask those pastors whose churches they may attend: do you

believe Jesus is God? Do you believe Jesus rose bodily from the dead? Do you believe Jesus took our place on the cross? Do you believe in marriage between one man and one woman? Are you pro-choice or pro-life? Unfortunately, it is as important today as it was in the first century AD to test the spirits. Look again at the quote above from New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce. There is basically a contest between two spirits.

READ vv 2-3,5-6. “The first force represented those of the spirit of error, who were in essence children of the world and embody a human - centered worldview. ‘ . . . the philosophy to which they [false prophets] endeavor to accommodate the gospel, depriving it of what makes it the gospel in the process, is current secular philosophy, the prevalent climate of opinion’ (Bruce, p. 106). Cf. Ephesians 2:1-2.” It is of interest that the word in the original language, *πλάνη*, can also be translated, “deceit, delusion, deception”. It is also of interest that a related word, *πλανήτης*, means “wanderer, roamer”, and we get our word “planet” from it. Thus John is talking about a spirit of deceit, which can even cause deceit and delusion in people away from God. I.H. Marshall points out that *πλάνη* can mean both “error” and “cause of error” (*The Epistles of John*, p. 209 n.22). Part of the problem in the John’s church was that some people were docetists who believed that Jesus was a spirit person, that the incarnation of Jesus did not happen where God became a human being. Such a belief was part of the pagan spirit of the age, where spiritual was good, physical was bad. We live in a world, even in the church, where we spiritualize our morality and ignore the physical. E.g., I recall in the movie “The Godfather”— a movie I have never seen all the way through and only saw snippets on TV— where the mob family attend a baptism and then go outside the church and plan someone’s murder. This is an extreme example of what is often lived in the church in a less obvious fashion. E.g., I recall talking to someone who wanted to follow Jesus and listened to Christian

music, but also loved to smoke pot. E.g, I recall a single young woman who was a leader of a small group in a church and yet told me that she believed in friends with benefits, and she told me she was offended that I believed God intended sex for marriage only. Paul expresses this well in Ephesians 2:1-2, “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of his world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.”

READ vv 2,4,6. “The second force represented those of the spirit of Truth, who are in essence children of God and embody a Bible - centered worldview. Cf. John 14:6.” We have to be careful here, because there are those who are in the Christian Church who claim to have a Bible-centered worldview but come to radically different conclusions from us. E.g., when I was going for ordination back in the 1980’s I was rejected for ordination because I said I would not baptize an infant, and I was told I had to study on the issue and resolve it before I could be ordained; at the same time of the ordination interviews I recall there was a woman who was seeking ordination who did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus, and she passed through the interviews and was accepted for ordination. Afterwards I spoke to the chair of the Board of Ordination as to how this situation could be, and he said it was simply a matter of interpretation— implying that her interpretation of a non-literal resurrection was just as legitimate as my literal interpretation of it. The problem that he did not apparently see is that there are indeed correct and incorrect understandings of the Bible, and the evidence of Scripture is clear that Jesus was physically raised from the dead. John says that the test of whether someone is in line with God’s Spirit is twofold here: what do they believe about Jesus, specifically that He came in the flesh on earth, and whether people will actually listen to the church. The second of these is especially important today— that people have a hunger and desire to listen and learn what the church is

teaching about God. E.g., I recall a single guy who was a Christian was dating a girl and the relationship was getting serious, and he asked brother in the Lord to hold him accountable so he could honor God in the relationship, and he met regularly with this mature Christian. E.g., I recall once having to confront Roger about some of his salty language, and I knew it was a struggle for him, and every time I confronted him there was never a defensiveness or resistance or making excuses—just a humble attitude and admitting he needed to work on that area.

“Are we aware of this contest? If so, how discerning are we?” Like Ali and Spinks, we as Christians know what a great contest is like. Do we follow the Spirit of Truth or the spirit of error, deceit, where we only want to hear what we want to hear and obey? May we have humble hearts to follow the truth and to be able to grow into maturity in the truth and be able to articulate it and defend it. Truly, greater is He who is in us than he that is in the world!