

Easter Means...We Overcome!

A sermon based on 1 John 4:1-6.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Are you becoming wary of the media these days? It's getting hard to read or watch or listen to anything they have to say. I mean, how can you choose which media outlet to believe anymore?

Take President Trump's first 100 days in office, for instance. One news source says he's been the most productive of any President since Ronald Reagan, while another source is fact checking and saying, no, not really, citing legal action striking down some of his executive orders on refugees coming in, the first failed healthcare plan, the exorbitant budget proposal. So, to be honest, I don't know...was the only worthwhile thing he's done so far was to push through his Supreme Court Justice appointee, has he laid the basic blocks for some great work to be done in the next 3 ¼ years, is he ruining our country? Well, depends on who you're listening to.

Or, the incident involving that United Airlines flight a few weeks ago. Most of the media sided with the passenger, sensationalizing the situation, making him out to be the helpless victim, while others were looking at it from the airline's view, sharing the fine print, exposing the man's belligerent behavior. So, hearing so many differing opinions, I don't know how I'm supposed to feel.

Even from those couple of examples, it's no wonder why we're caught up in such a postmodern society, where people are choosing right and wrong for themselves, where they're choosing what they want to believe...where, like Pontius Pilate, they are asking, "What is truth?" Because to so many, there's no such thing as absolute truth...it's purely subjective.

That same mindset is obviously spilling over into spiritual matters...what's right, what's wrong, what does God really say or mean? So, who can we believe? An article from Christianity Today in 2012 stated there are approximately 38,000 Christian denominations (and that's excluding cults or Christ-less religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, etc.) in the United States. There are 19 Lutheran conferences, not even synods. And each of those denominations are divided because they don't believe the same thing about God's Word. And I'm gonna tell you right now...they're not all right.

Satan's at work through so many avenues, through so many people today, even spiritual teachers, trying to peddle his lies. And it can be overwhelming to have to sift through the garbage to find the truth. So, again, who do we believe?

There's one voice...the voice that has been speaking since the world began...the voice that doesn't change with the winds...the voice that cares about you...the voice through whom we overcome!

Lately, there's been this new trend (or growing trend) in media ...called "fake news." Have you heard of it? I'm sure you have. Basically, it's where people are spreading deliberate misinformation or hoaxes via media outlets (and today, social media as well), with the purpose of misleading people for their gain (whether financial or personal). Like, for instance, did you the world is flat? A couple months ago, NBA star Kyrie Irving threw reporters for a loop when he claimed he believes the world is flat. And everyone, from his teammates to his friends to the media, was trying to figure out if he really believes this, is he yanking our chains, is he on to

something (we've been missing our entire lives)? Whatever his real intent, he got a lot of camera time. That's fake news. And I won't even get into how much that term is being thrown around the political scene today.

Fake news is nothing new...not even on the religious scene. We just call it something different...false teachings. In John's day, a man named Cerinthus was claiming to have the answers. A couple weeks ago, I introduced you to his movement (and false teaching), Gnosticism, which, again, basically denied the humanity of Christ and taught a person could achieve salvation on their own by attaining this special kind of knowledge. And we might hear that and say, "That's ridiculous. That flies right in the face of God's Word, which makes it so clear Jesus came in the flesh. Who in their right mind would ever believe that?" But that's the thing about fake news...people do believe it...and people were believing this false prophet, this false "spirit." And people were being led away from Jesus.

The dilemma for believers today is the same. We wish to simply tune in to God, but when we listen for him, we hear this babble of voices all claiming to speak for him. Every believer in all times has to confront the same terrible problem – who is telling me the truth? How can I tell? Whom do I listen to?

So, with so many different voices in the world today, who are you listening to? What's the "fake news" or false "spirits" Christians are hearing today? I can think of three groups.

First, there's the world or society. Their lies are obvious: "You're entitled to whatever you want; you deserve it." "It's ok to be disrespectful towards your teachers, law enforcement officials, you government leaders; you don't have to listen to them if you don't agree with what they're saying." "It's your body; it's your choice. Eat as much food as you want, drink as much wine as it takes to make your problems disappear. Put whatever you want into your body. If you're a woman and pregnant, you can decide if you want that life growing inside of you or not; it's up to you whether you consider what's growing inside of you to be life or not." And we ought to easily be able to shut our ears to those voices.

The next group consists of what I would call false teachers or "Christians," which, right there, might tip you off that this group is a little bit harder to differentiate with their fake news and false teachings...which makes them that much more dangerous. John writes about them here: "***They are from the world and therefore speak from the view point of the world, and the world listens to them.***"

Satan sees the Word of God for what it is – a deadly blow to his control of the people of the world. And so he recruits and trains a counterforce of spiritual liars who seek to infiltrate the church and, knowingly or unknowingly, unravel God's truth. So subtle and crafty is the evil one that many of his agents actually think they are working for God.

Do you know their lies? How about "it's ok to disregard God's teachings on the roles of men and women. It's obviously an outdated teaching that doesn't take into account how women are viewed today...strong, independent, they don't need to submit."

"Same sex relationships are fine; God's Word was just referring to dominating and abusive relationships. But if two men or two women are in a healthy, loving relationship, who are we to judge?"

And how about that one? "You can't tell that person what they're doing is wrong. God's Word says, 'Judge ye not, or you too shall be judged.' We need to be more tolerant."

"God's Word is outdated and antiquated. Plus the fact that it was written and translated over thousands of years by sinful people, you can't believe everything you read in it."

"All churches are basically the same. We talk about Jesus, so come here, because we have the best coffee or children's programs, and know you're going to hear the same message."

"Give your life to Jesus, make the decision to let him into your heart, and life is going to be great...problem-free. Try your hardest, and God's going to be happy with you."

All of that sounds pretty good...seems harmless enough...messages a lot of people in our world could get on board with. And these churches, these teachers, might think they're doing great work for God. Right, if you were to go up to the Joel Osteens and the Rick Warrens and the Billy Grahams of today and ask why they're stealing sheep away from Jesus, they would say, "We're merely speaking for God, proclaiming a divine *now* word (which supersedes the tired *then* word of the Bible). We're not leading people away." But they are.

And then the final group, characterized by one quote from one famous cricket, "Let your conscience be your guide." Might the deadliest false voice out there be your own...your sinful nature?

"If it feels right to you, do it." "Your happiness is what's most important; only do what's going to make you happy." "Yeah, you've done some bad stuff; you've sinned. But you also know other people who have screwed up way worse than you, so, not a big deal." You slack at work...not a big deal. You cuss every once in a while...not a big deal. You share some gossip about that one person (but it's the truth)...not a big deal.

All of that...it's a big deal...because all of those voices are working for one network, Satan...hell. Do you understand the danger with any of those false voices? Friends, it's a slippery slope, to start listening to any of this fake spiritual news that's out there, no matter what voice is speaking. Make no mistake, they are out to deceive us. There is great risk if we let these people teach us about God because one lie is enough to lead a person away from Jesus permanently. I've seen in the lives of people how believing one lie can so easily snowball into being overcome and won over by so many other lies to the point where that snowball rolls right out of God's family firmly into Satan's control.

And we're guilty. We've listened...we listen to those voices...far too often, and that means we are in danger as well.

How do we overcome? Well, there's still one more voice...an unassuming and unlikely voice...definitely not the most popular voice today, either. John records that voice in our gospel for today, "***I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me...They too will listen to my voice.***" It's the voice of the Good Shepherd, our Savior, Jesus. You have overcome all these false spirits because you have the truth...you have a Good Shepherd who speaks the truth.

And here's what's different about this Good Shepherd and his voice. Every other voice speaking in your life (the world, false teachers, your own sinful conscience) does not care about you. They have one purpose, and one purpose only...to lead you away from the truth and get you into hell. Not Jesus. He cares about you. Right, "***God so loved the world...***" Your Good Shepherd doesn't have his own, selfish, career-advancing agenda when he speaks. He cares about you.

And here's how we know. He showed it. We are the sheep who are often led astray by all the fake news, and Jesus went one step further than simply trying to call us back to the fold. He laid down his life for you. For your sins and for you listening to these other voices and for giving in to temptations, Jesus laid down his perfect life when he took up his cross and died on it to pay for your sinful life.

And we are certain Easter means we overcome the world, false teachers, our sinful natures, all of our sin because Jesus has come in the flesh (that's John's direct counter to Cerinthus' false claims, he's died, and he's risen from death). This is the truth we cling to and by doing so overcome falsehood, and, ultimately the world (unbelief).

Our Good Shepherd promised those very things and he fulfilled every promise...meaning, now he's a credible source...the only one. And caring for us, he's given us the Spirit of truth who is at work in us, enabling us to overcome. And, as John writes, the one voice in them (God) is greater than the one who is in the world (the devil).

And how can we keep listening to that voice, and how can we overcome all the fake news and false spirits out there today? In other words, how can we know who to listen to?

You know, it's easy today to be too easily impressed by alleged signs and wonders performed by this or that "prophet." Or one might fall for the charisma, the personal magnetism, of a preacher. Some might be attracted by outward show or success or power. Others might be induced by the appearance of great scholarship or intellect. There are indeed many pseudo-prophets in the world, and people who want to listen to God's message (that's you and me) must be on guard, must carefully test, must critically examine all such teachers to see "whether they are from God"—or not, just as Paul warned the spiritual leaders in our 1st Lesson for today, ***"savage wolves [can] come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them."***

Evaluating claims of religious teachers is a job not only for religious professionals. Every Christian has the responsibility to be careful what he or she "eats."

How can we test what we're eating or what we're hearing to know if it's the truth? Well, since you can't read minds or look into hearts to see if there's faith or not, listen to what they say. And that applies to choosing places to worship as well. Evaluate their confession, that is, their position, their teachings. And here's the only evaluation tool you need...God's Word. These churches, their appearance, style, buildings, personalities, and numbers of adherents are all irrelevant. What are they teaching people? They may have charm, pizzazz, connections, and charisma, but what matters is their confession. Don't be afraid to be like the Bereans of Scripture and fact-check what you're hearing with what Scriptures says. And that applies to this voice as well. A commentary I read has this memorable quip, ***"Popularity is not the same things as truth; it might mean simply that a lot of fools are standing in the same place."***

So, test before you trust. Know what God's Word says (which means being in your Bibles and thus growing in your faith), and then be willing to hold what you hear up to the light of God's Word to see if it's pure...if it's the truth. If it is, listen...trust.

It's a hard position to be in. Fake news is all around us. You may feel very isolated to be the only ***biblical*** Christian, even in your extended family. John gives words of hope: ***"You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them."*** The Word of God is mightier than the mightiest Ph.D. dissertation and ultimately more influential than the most popular talk show host. What can give fearful Christians such confidence? ***"Because the one who is in you [the Holy Spirit] is greater than the one who is in the world [Satan]."***

Satan's power is broken; his evil head was crushed on Calvary once and for all, and we are safe in our Good Shepherd's care...in our loving Savior's arms. Through him we overcome. To his voice will we only listen...and trust...and live. And that's a voice we will never tire of hearing. Amen.