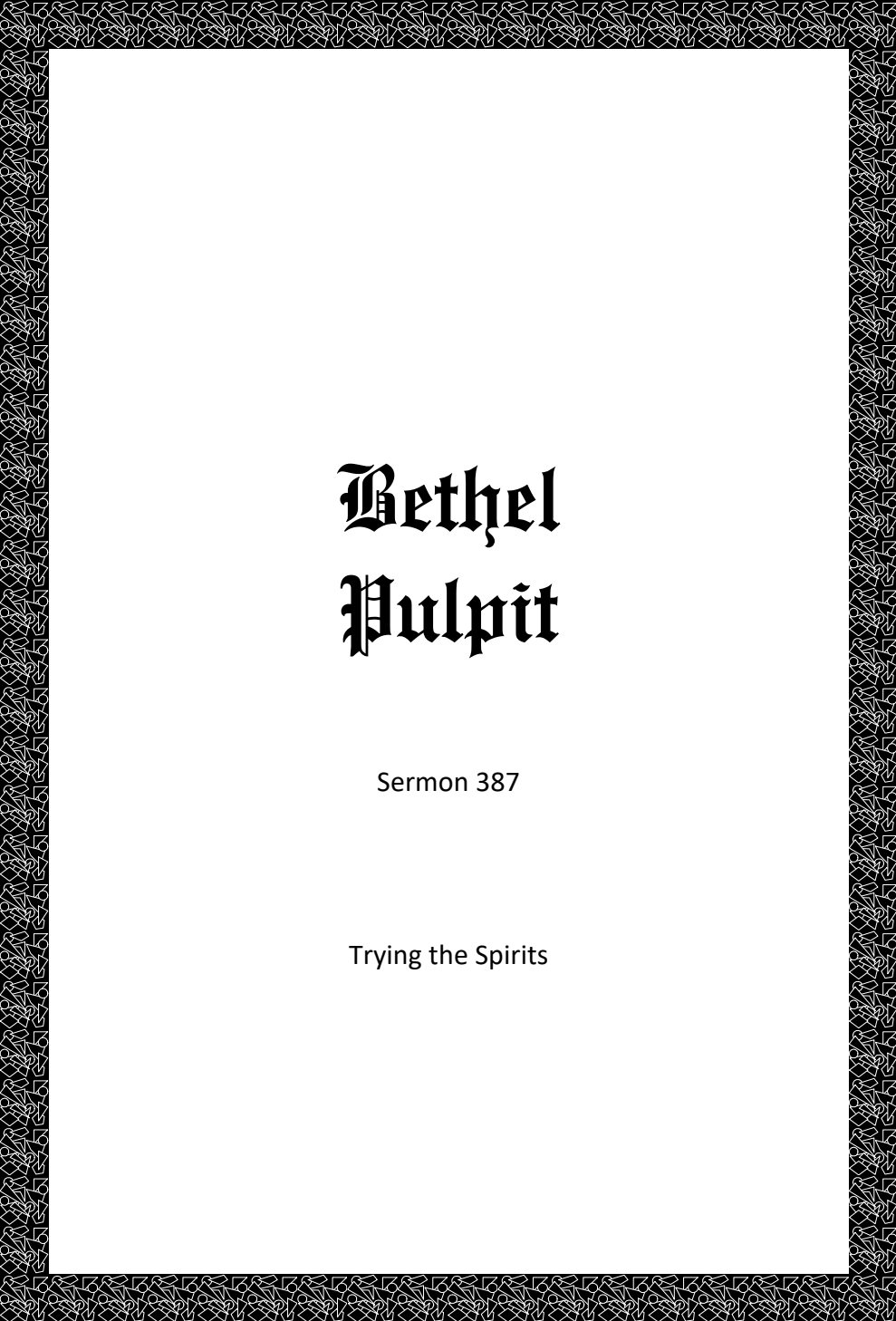




# Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 387

Trying the Spirits

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,  
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,  
on Lord's day morning, 10th September, 2017**

**Text:** *"Try the spirits" (1 John 4. 1).*

The one thing that stands out in John's Epistles is the way he insists on the love of Christ. You must notice that there is a great difference between John's Epistles and the Epistles of Paul and Peter. You do not get so much of the doctrine, the foundations being laid, but John insists so much on the love of Christ, the knowledge of that love, the walking in that love. But along with it, no-one speaks so much concerning the necessity for discernment, for watchfulness, for care, for not taking everything on face value, not taking everything for granted. So you have this wonderful background all through John's Epistles on the glorious love of Christ, but then all these warnings that keep coming in. If the apostle was so concerned in his day because of the false teaching and the false prophets that had gone into the world, how much more so in our day!

Now all the things that are going on in the name of religion, and more than that, going on in the name of our Lord Jesus – who can really estimate them all? So there is that call that was so needful then and is so needful now: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world." You young people, and you older ones, people will talk to you and they will have some doctrine or some belief. Perhaps it is something you have not heard of before. Is it right, or is it wrong? You have to try it; you have to test it. Sometimes someone will come knocking at your door and they will speak to you, and so many things seem good, but you wonder if altogether it is good. Well, we are told not to take everything, but to "try the spirits." Or someone will lend you a book. They will say, Have you seen this book? It is a wonderful book. You begin to read it, but there are things in it you have never seen before. They seem true, but are they true? And you are commanded to "try the spirits." Perhaps you are away from home, or even in our chapels, or even with me – if you hear the preaching and you hear some new thing, you are commanded to "try the spirits whether they are of God" or not, because if it is false, it is not for the

honour and glory of God; if it is false, it is not for your soul's good; if it is false, it can do a lot of harm.

The sad thing is that with any new things, there are always people, and even in our congregations, who just seem thrilled with them. J. C. Philpot once said that if he could preach a sermon standing on his head, he would have the biggest congregation in England! Now we are commanded to “try the spirits.”

Now there is a very interesting word – I wonder if you are familiar with it – in the Book of Job, and it is this: “For the ear trieth words, as the mouth tasteth meat.” Now that is a very interesting word, that our listening or our reading is just like someone being given something to eat: the ears trying the words, the mouth tasting the meat. (I do not need to tell you, surely, that *meat* in the Word of God means any kind of food.) And the point is simple. If you are out for dinner, or even in your own house, you are eating what is set before you, and you suddenly realise there is something wrong; it does not taste right; there is something amiss. It may be bitter. You spit it out. You will not eat any more. You could not explain what is wrong with it. You could not explain there is something with the bacteria, or something like that. You do not know what is the matter, but you know there is something wrong. It is an immediate response of nature, and the Word of God tells us it should be something like that in grace. If you come across something, and if it is wrong, then if your spirit is right, you cannot explain what is wrong, but you know there is something not just right.

Many of those dear, old, godly, simple souls who could not even read or write were blessed with grace, and they had a wonderful spirit of discernment. They could not explain it; they could not open up the doctrine; but it was this: “As the mouth tasteth meat.” There was something wrong, something amiss. Well, we are told to weigh things in the balances of the sanctuary, and I think just one simple thing on this point. If you have new preaching, new doctrine, a new book, or whatever it is, or whether it is new or old, I think you will find if it is not right, if it is wrong, there will always be this one thing: it will not really debase the sinner; it will let him have a bit he can do himself. And it will not really exalt the Saviour; it will not really put the crown on His head. So John Newton spoke many good words, but never a better than when he said,

“What think you of Christ? is the test,  
To try both your state and your scheme;  
You cannot be right in the rest,  
Unless you think rightly of Him.”

“Try the spirits.” Even godly Samuel was wrong, when he was summoned to go to the house of Jesse to seek a king for Israel. He was not trying the spirits. There are one or two words in the New Testament. “Lay hands suddenly on no man.” That is one. “Let these also first be proved.” That is another. But godly Samuel was not trying the spirits. He was looking at things at face value, taking things for granted. This one man of such majestic appearance, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is before him.” We need to beware of a spirit like that. In the church of God, it is often this poor, humble man who is passed by. Samuel, “Man looketh on the outward appearance.” The Lord does not. “The Lord looketh on the heart.” Now there is a vital point on this here. “Try the spirits.” So it is not just outward things, but it is the trying the *spirit*. Is there the spirit of God in it? Is there the Holy Spirit’s work in it?

“Try the spirits whether they are of God.” There was a well-known minister told me a little story I have never forgotten. He said they had a case when he was the pastor. They had a woman come there, and she had a wonderful testimony, but he felt there was something, somehow, somewhere not just right. So he spoke to his deacons, and one by one they met this lady, and they could not help but admire so much with her, but every one of them came back and said, “Well, we can’t really be sure; there is something that doesn’t seem altogether right, but we don’t know what it is.” The minister said, “Well, I don’t know what it is.”

So he told me what he did. He prayed to the Lord, and the Lord laid this on him: “Try the spirits.” He said, “Her words are true, but we don’t know what her spirit is.” So he went to visit her. He listened to the wonderful things she had to say, and then he said, “I don’t think really I will receive you,” and immediately she began to oppose him. Her temper was vile. She said evil things. He said, “I have got my answer,” and he told me what it was: “We had been trying her words, trying her appearance, we had been trying everything, but we had not tried her spirit,

and the Lord showed me the way to try her spirit, and we found her spirit was completely wrong.” I have never forgotten what he told me.

“Try the spirits.” Now then, beloved friends, to come to the vital point: if you are going to try the spirits with other people, or books, or visitors, or whatever it is, you have to begin by trying your own spirit, because people are very good at trying other people’s spirits, but never trying their own. We need the spirit of the children of Issachar, who knew what Israel ought to do. One minister said our chapels are filled with the tribe of Issachar, who know what other people ought to do. Now the only way to try the spirits is to begin by trying your own.

So beloved friends, the way this word has laid on my spirit this morning is especially this: you and me; your spirit, my spirit. Yes, it is vital, this trying the spirits in the church of God, and people you meet with, and books you read, and ministers you hear, and all these things. But leaving all that, trying the spirit, and it is your spirit, and it is my spirit.

Of course, the first and most important thing of all is this: we need to try our spirit whether our religion is right, or whether our religion is wrong, whether we have ever been born again of the Spirit of God, whether we know anything of the Holy Spirit’s work in our heart. Now that is where we have to begin trying the spirit – our own spirit. It is personal, and it is vital – sin, and our soul, and eternity. I realise we can be too introspective. Some people are always trying their own spirit. The hymn says,

“Pore not on thyself too long,  
Lest it sink thee lower.”

But Mr. Gosden said, “Make sure you pore on yourself long enough.” Now is that the great point – not taking things for granted? Eternity *is* a solemn sound. It *is* a solemn thing to die. It *is* a solemn thing to meet our Maker. Now try your spirit.

“How stands the case, my soul, with thee?  
For heaven are thy credentials clear?  
Is Jesus’ blood thy only plea?  
Is He thy great Forerunner there?”

Do not be satisfied with anything short of a vital, personal, saving knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God – no other resting place, no other hope, no other foundation.

“Try the spirits.” But then as we seek to live our little lives before the Lord, before the world, before God’s people, we need to try our spirit. John and his brother James were godly men. It was this John who is writing here, this very same John, but he was once in a wrong spirit. He was not trying his own spirit. You know the circumstances. The Lord Jesus and the disciples were being treated badly, and you know how they came. They said, “Lord, wilt Thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?” Now weren’t they proud of their own spirit! Hadn’t they got a zealous spirit! Weren’t they zealous for the truth! Weren’t they zealous for the honour and glory of their Lord and Master! And they had a solemn shock when the Lord Jesus said, “Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of” (Luke 9. 52-56). You and I need to fall under that so often. “Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of.” “Try the spirits,” but begin with your own spirit.

Most of the Epistles end with, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you,” or, “be with you all.” Two of the epistles end like this: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be *with your spirit*.” If our religion is real,

“Grace once received can ne’er be lost,  
Nor hell from Christ thy soul divide,”

but grace is not always with our spirit. “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.” O look at the spirit of Christ. What about that word, how do you and I stand before it: “If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His”? Have you got the spirit of Christ?

“Try the spirits.” “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.” Now so often it is our own spirit, or a wrong spirit, or a sinful spirit, or a proud spirit, but not the spirit of Christ. In this we do need to be divinely kept, and in this we do need grace. Nothing but grace will ever put us in a right spirit, keep us in a right spirit.

“Try the spirits, whether they are of God.” Sometimes it is not of God; it is of self, even if it is not of sin. Now there are special times when we need to try the spirits. What about when Sunday morning comes,

chapel time, coming along to chapel, coming through the doors, sitting down in your place? What kind of spirit do you come in? And what kind of influence do you bring to the congregation? because each person brings an influence, and it is an influence for good, or it is an influence not for good.

But try your spirit this morning. How have you come? Did you come prayerfully? Did you pray for the poor preacher that the Lord might show him what to say and then bless it? Did you pray that there might be something for yourself? Or did you come in a careless spirit? Did you come just because it was the right time to come, and you have always come? We do need to watch our spirit on the Lord's day. How many of you could say, "How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts!"? How many of you could say, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord"? How many of you could say, and David said it to God, "Lord, I have loved the habitation of Thy house, and the place where Thine honour dwelleth"? Now try your spirit concerning the Lord's day.

Now John, this same John, many years after this on the Isle of Patmos was in exile for the truth's sake, and he was separated from the people of God. He was all alone. He missed the fellowship of the gospel, the fellowship of the saints. He missed the brethren. I wonder how much religion you and I would have left if we were isolated. He says, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day." When the Lord's day comes, do you pray that you might be found in the Spirit? And the only way we can be found in the Spirit is if the Lord in love and mercy puts us in the Spirit.

"Try the spirits." Then in our behaviour one with another. Children, what is your behaviour like in your families? Parents, what is your behaviour like with your children? So we might go on: when you are out in the world, or what about if you have a little time when you are free. Is it in the Book of Ezra, they had "a little space" in the midst of their bondage? Can you ever sit down and meditate and think on the things of God? Is there ever a time when you do? "Try the spirits" – your behaviour in the world, as the world sees you; your behaviour before your family; your behaviour before the people of God. We do need to watch our spirit, because we are not the best judges of our own spirit, any more than John and James were. They thought they were so zealous for the honour and

glory of God, and they had a little rebuke from our Lord and Saviour Himself.

“Try the spirits.” But then there are the things you do, the things that come in your life. Perhaps it is something new, something at work. Perhaps it is some hobby. Perhaps it is some interest. We need to try our spirit, because it is so easy for anything to become a snare. You know what a snare was. Well, they set a trap, but the trap was hidden out of sight. Close to the trap was some very attractive bait, and the poor bird came. It came for the food. It did not know about the trap, but it was caught in it. Now “try the spirits.” It is very easy to be swallowed up with things. It is very easy to be taken in with things. We need the Lord Jesus to keep us. “Kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation” – to keep us outwardly, but we need that keeping inwardly.

“Try the spirits.” What about your prayer life? Surely you pray. Surely there are times when you pour out your heart to the Lord. But try your spirit. Are you kept as tender in the fear of God as you once were? Are you kept as prayerful as you once were? You remember the little story I have told you about the “prayer path.” In one of those African countries out in the jungle there were a lot of these little huts, little homes, and quite a number of these people had been blessed. As they had no secrecy in their own little hut, their own little kraal, they used to walk out in the jungle to pray, and from these huts over the months there was a path worn down. There was a path leading down from each hut into the jungle. But they said everyone could see if a prayer path became overgrown. What did it mean? That someone was beginning to falter. They were not as exercised, as burdened as before. So there was that saying among them: Watch your prayer path. Well, do you and I watch our prayer path?

Also watch your spirit concerning the Word of God. In our early days we loved it. When the Lord blessed us, we had a right spirit then. We had what the Word of God speaks of as “an excellent spirit.” But search your spirit concerning the Word of God.

“Try the spirits.” Then there are times when there is a decision to be taken, a choice to be made. In this, you have to seek the Lord’s will. Perhaps some of you are there at present. You are seeking the Lord’s will, and I trust you are praying about it, but you cannot discern the Lord’s will.



It is so important to make a right decision for the future. That choice is vital. It is a sad thing if you go wrong. We need to be led aright.

“Try the spirits.” In one of John Newton’s greatest works, he has a wonderful letter he wrote on divine leading, and he warns that if you are determined to do something, it is very easy to get a scripture that will fit in with it, and also, if there is something you badly want, you will certainly get a very lively spirit of prayer that you might have it. Now Newton’s great point on divine leading was really on the ground of this: trying the spirits. Seek before the Lord that your spirit is tender, that it is right in His sight, and that if you begin to move in a right way, you will feel the Lord’s approbation; that once you begin to move in a wrong way, you will know the Lord’s frown. He put it, not in the analogy, “as the mouth tasteth meat.” He put it as someone who was musical and they are listening to someone playing a tune on the piano. You all know it – if they hit a wrong note, it jars you. You could not understand it musically, that that note was a discord, but you know there is something wrong. Now in all these things, seek that your spirit is right before the Lord.

“Try the spirits.” Well, beloved friends, there are many things we might speak of, but we must come to this which is important: how do we try the spirits? How concerning ourselves? Well, it must be seeking the help and leading of the Holy Spirit. That is vital. It must be exercising a great distrust of ourselves. It must be realising that we are easily deceived, that we are not always right. Wasn’t it Cromwell who wrote to the Scottish Commissioners: “Beloved brethren, believe it possible in the sight of God that you may be mistaken”? Often we are.

But there must be these two things: *much prayer*. “Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass.” Much prayer. I spoke to you on Thursday evening of how godly Joshua made a mistake (Joshua 7). It all seemed so clear, so simple, so he did not pray about it and it was a disaster. And then secondly, *keep close to the Word of God*. What does the Word of God say? What does the Word of God teach? If the Word of God forbids it, it is wrong. If the Word of God commands it, it is right. But if your heart is made tender, at times there will be a scripture which will lay itself, or rather, the Lord will lay it, on your spirit: “This is the way, walk ye in it.”

O but finally, the vital point: the honour and glory of God, the Person of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. “That in all things He might have the preeminence” – His Person, His glorious work, His love, His mercy, His compassion, His wisdom. It must be that, your only foundation, your only resting place, as you try the spirits. It is “looking unto Jesus.” It is depending on Him. It is Him, your only hope.

“Try the spirits.” But before we sit down, you will find in all these things so often you fail, you realise you have failed, you know you have failed, you are condemned, you are unworthy, and you come back on the same old foundation where you first began:

“Mercy, through blood, I make my plea;  
O God, be merciful to me!”

“Try the spirits.”