

## 1 John 2:18-23: Recognizing the Antichrist

### 2:18-23: Recognizing the Antichrists in the last days

Exegetical Big Idea: John warns his churches about the reality of antichrists, and gives them ways to recognize them, and reminds them of the hope of the Christian to overcome them.

Homiletical Big Idea: **The only way to recognize and guard against false Christ's, is to know the real one.**

Fallen Condition Focus: Humanity is prone to being fooled. Our hearts are deceitful, our enemy is cunning, and we are dulled by sin. Authentic Christians need to, by God's power, recognize and guard against antichrists.

Intro: [I have a vivid memory of a certain occasion that happened when I was in grade 2. I was in the playground at school at recess with some of my class friends. The playground there had sand all around it, and one of my friends looked down and there in the sand was what appeared to be a million dollar bill. She picked it up and showed us and we as kids immediately thought that we were rich and could buy all the candy and toys we wanted. Well someone mentioned that we needed to make sure it was real, and of course we all thought it was, and suggested we take it to the adults in the office to make sure. So a few of us walked it to the office and told when what we found. They said they would look into it and thanks for finding it. Looking back I can clearly see that it was pretend money you can buy at the dollar store. But as kids, we had never even known a thousand dollar bill existed! We had no idea that there was such thing as counterfeit money. The only fake money we knew of was monopoly money but that is obviously not real. When we found something that looked and felt like the real thing, we had no idea it wasn't authentic.]

John here warns his readers about false Christs. He warns them of their danger, what they are trying to do, and also, how to guard against them. If they do not know the difference between the real Christ and an anti-christ, then they don't stand a chance against the false teachings of a false Christ and they will be deceived along with many others.

### **Verse 18: Antichrists are real and present**

John begins with a short and poignant statement. Dear Children, we are in the last hour. Now John already alluded to this in chapter 2 when he says that the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. The last thing to happen in redemptive history is the return of Christ.

But John uses the language of hours. Why? He could have said "days" or even "years". John wants his people to know the urgency with which he writes. John's not trying to give his reader's a false hope that Christ will be returning in a matter of days or weeks. The reality is that John does not know the day or hour, only the Father knows that. Obviously it's been more than a few hours, or years for that matter as we read this 1000 years later. But the fact that John writes with urgency back then should not make us any less urgent today. One commentator writing on this makes the comment that if we truly have eternity on our minds, then however long it takes Christ to return will really only seem to us a few hours.

Antichrists are the sign of the last hour, because Christ started the countdown, and they are just as their name suggests "anti-Christ". That's how John can say that how we know we are in the last hours. Now,

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“Antichrist” is both a person to come in the future, but also many who embody anti-Christ ideology throughout the Church age. John clearly says here that *the* antichrist is coming, but that even now *many* antichrists have come already.

We need to see that both are the case, there will be *an* antichrist who will appear before the coming of Christ, who will embody what it means to be an enemy of the gospel. Paul calls him the “man of lawlessness” in 2 Thessalonians. Paul explains that Christ will not return until the man of lawlessness sets himself up against God and opposes God and even calls himself God.

Also, John sees in the book of Revelation in chapters 12-13 a beast coming from the sea to deceive the nations and causes the nations the worship an idol.

But John clearly sees that many antichrists have already come. And they have one purpose: to attack Christ and his gospel directly.

These are those that also are enemies of the gospel in direct opposition to its message and person. Jesus himself says in Matthew 24 and Mark 13 that many false “Christs” will come. They will do sign and miracles and lead many astray and deceive many.

Antichrists have a singular purpose, to stand in opposition to Christ.

We need to understand that there are enemies of the gospel, and even though the victory has been one by Christ, the enemy knows that his time is short and is raging because he knows it. His hatred for Christ and his Church has driven him to deceive as many as possible to share the same fate that he will have when Christ returns.

Why is it important to see this? Because we need to recognize who and what is antichrist and what is not.

[Suppose for a minute that you needed to do some grocery shopping for making a meal, and so you get in your car and drive to the store and you head down the aisle of canned goods. And unknown to you, some hooligan was in that aisle before you and thought it would be funny to peel off all the labels from the cans. Now what are you going to do? Are you going to just say “oh well, they’re all cans, it’s all the same I’ll just pick a bunch and go home and throw them all together in a pot”? Of course not, you’re going to leave that store and head over to another store and hope the hooligan didn’t beat you there]

The term antichrist matters. Some things are antichrist and some things are not, and we as God’s people need to recognize the difference.

We need to be careful with that term. There are many things and people we may not like and agree with, but if they are not directly an assault on the worship of Christ and setting themselves up as God, then it may just be something else, like human selfishness in general or incompetence.

And here’s why it’s important. Because we must extend the grace of the gospel to those who may hate us and with whom we disagree, and if we’re too quick to label people as antichrist, then I fear it will cause us to start to think that they are beyond the reach of the gospel. If everything is antichrist, then what who is left to redeem?

Instead, it may just be that they are lost and gratifying the desires of their flesh, wandering around in the darkness that has blinded them.

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On the other hand, to ignore the reality that antichrists have come and will continue to come, will cause the church to be soft on stances that we should be bold on! Many Christians in past generations have called out people as antichrists. John here sees the false teachers as antichrists. Think of the reformation and Martin Luther, he was very adamant that the pope was antichrist. We can look to more recent history and see Hitler and Nazi Germany as antichrist. Or even more recent history we can see the extremist Islamic movement as antichrist for sure. We need to call these out for what they are to show the seriousness of sin and hell and the wrath of God.

All of these have in common a very specific mission. They are bent on deceiving humanity away from the true doctrine of the Church in order to drag souls to hell, and they do this by setting themselves up as God. They are directly opposed to Christ and his teachings and there is no mistaking it.

Assaults on Christ and his gospel will come, but is there any other saving power under heaven? Is there any other name by which we must be saved?

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

**The only way to recognize and guard against false Christ's, is to know the real one.**

**Verse 19: Antichrists have a false connection to religion.**

John, after talking about antichrists in general, then wastes no time in identifying the false teachers as antichrists. John writes that they "went out" and broke fellowship over "new" ideology. John has already written that love for people is a sign of being in Christ. The false teachers were breaking fellowship with John and those who obeyed the teachings of the gospel that John had brought. The false teachers were treating them with contempt because the authentic Christians in Ephesus were not being swayed by the new teachings of the false teachers. So the false teachers caused division in the churches, and broke apart from orthodox Christianity.

The painful reality for John is that these people started off in the church! As John pointed out, they didn't truly believe and belong to the church, but they would have been part of it.

Antichrists, whether they have their start within the church or not nonetheless have a connection to some kind of religiosity. They have to because at the heart of an antichrist is worship. Specifically, the worship of something or someone else other than Christ.

And there is an appealing nature to this for those who do not know the truth.

[Halfway between Leamington and Kingsville is a sushi restaurant. I've been there a couple of times. We make that drive often as a family and many times on those drive as we pass by that restaurant, I make some kind of comment about how yummy sushi is and how we should stop in one day for some sushi. And you know what Alana's response usually is? "Yuck, how about we don't". See sushi to me is very appealing, I love sushi! But it holds zero appeal for Alana because she doesn't. That place has a wooing effect on me every time I pass it because I have an affection for sushi, but it has no such effect on Alana because she has no desire for sushi at all.]

The false teachers wouldn't have people following them if their teaching was not attractive in some way. But this attractiveness to their teaching does not work on the authentic Christian because he or she can recognize that their teaching is anti-Christ. The people that are attracted to their teaching are those to

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whom it appeals to their sinful nature. Remember that the basis of sin is the desire to throw off the Lordship of God and to place yourself on the throne. Anti-Christ teaching does just that, directly opposes the Lordship of Jesus.

That's why the safest place to be as a Christian is in the Church!

In the church we learn and study the Word of God together, in order to grow in our understanding and faith in Christ. We correct each other in the church, so that we can hold each other accountable to faithfulness to what the Scriptures actually teach.

Most of all, because John says clearly that the false teachers' going out from the fellowship of the church showed that they did not truly belong, so it is the case for those who break fellowship with the church today. Please don't misunderstand, it is not that staying in the church is a guarantee of your salvation in Christ. Some people will sit in these pews their entire lives and still not truly believe. So I'm not saying that just because someone is part of the church their entire lives it guarantees their salvation, but leaving and forsaking the church *does* guarantee that a person is not authentically saved. For if they had belonged to us, John says, they would have remained with us.

There's a reason why Christ calls the Church his body. We belong to him and him to us. We are connected in such a way that we cannot be separated. Leaving the Church is like somebody separating off a limb, it only leads to death. But as we remain in Christ and in the community of the Church, it shows that we are connected to Christ authentically, but anyone who goes out in defiance of orthodox Christianity and the true gospel believing church is just shown to be what they truly are, counterfeit.

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### **Verse 20-21: The Holy Spirit keeps God's people in the Truth**

But Christians have a defense against the antichrists, namely, an "anointing from the Holy One". John here is talking about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who indwells every believer as they believe the true gospel. The anointing that John is confident that his readers has is in contrast to the false teachers. They don't have it, and the difference is, is that the Holy Spirit reveals the truth of Christ.

The Holy Spirit reveals the Christ of the Scriptures, and if someone denies the Christ of the Scriptures, then they clearly do not have the anointing because the Holy Spirit would not lead someone to deny the Christ of the Scriptures.

"All of you know the truth" could also be translated "you know all things". Either way, what John is saying is that it was the person of the Holy Spirit who opened your eyes to the truth of the gospel. John elaborates on this in verse 22, but he is saying that the Holy Spirit is the one who was responsible for showing them the glory of the gospel of Christ, opening their hearts to believing it, and he also gives each authentic believer the ability to know when something is blatantly anti-Christ.

[I'm 35 years old and married and have kids of my own and haven't lived in my parents' house for decades now, but if you're anything like me, you can still hear your mother's voice on occasion. Not in a weird audible way, but in little ways. For example, whenever I do laundry in my house and I'm sorting the clothes to throw them in the machine, I hear a little voice in my head that sounds an awful lot like my mother's. The voice says "don't forget to check the pockets". Or when I'm doing the dishes I hear that same voice say "don't forget to rinse off the bubbles". See in a way those stay with us.

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In an infinitely more real sense, every authentic believer has not just the *feeling* of the Holy Spirit inside him or her, but the actual person of the Holy Spirit dwelling inside of them.

Think of it, Christ promised to be with his people always, even unto the end of the age. And the way in which his presence is with his people is by the Person of the Holy Spirit that lives in each authentic believer. If you are an authentic believer then, you have the Spirit of Christ in you, and when someone comes walking up to you with a claim that goes directly against the truth of Christ, the Spirit inside of you says to you “that’s not my gospel”. Our God is a jealous God. Not in the sense that he’s scared someone will show him up with something better, but that God will not let his name be dragged through the mud or his rightful glory be offended, and Christ himself as he dwells in each authentic believer affirms the truth of the gospel and reveals the lies of false gospel taught by false Christs.

Aren’t you thankful that you have the Spirit of God in you that reveals the Word of God to you so that you know it and walk in it and are able to recognize error? I am, because apart from the Spirit of God I would be totally lost.

John says that he’s not writing to those who do not know the truth. He is not writing to give them something new, to give them a new defense against the teachings of the antichrist. He’s writing them to remind them that they already have all they need to stand against them!

He further writes that no lie comes from the truth. This points to the unchanging solid nature of the truth of God. If you are firmly planted in the gospel, then the second a doctrine reaches your ears that is antichrist the alarm bells will ring and you will recognize it for what it is, a lie from hell.

Here is your defense against the deceiving lies of the antichrist: knowing the truth of the gospel, and believing it.

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### **Verse 22-23: Antichrists ultimately point to the glory of Jesus**

We’ve talked already a bit about the false teachers’ claims that Jesus was fully human. There’s just one small problem with this: Nobody who denies that Jesus is who he says he is truly knows God. The end half of verse 22 explains this. If you deny Jesus as the Christ, you are an antichrist, and you not only deny Jesus, but the Father as well.

What John means here specifically here is that the false teachers, as we have noted a few weeks ago, were denying the humanity of Jesus. I think it’s appropriate to expand that here and realize that any denying of the fundamental understanding of who Jesus is and what he came to do is anti-Christ.

That’s John’s point here as he says it makes no sense for someone to deny that Jesus is Christ and still have the Father. It makes zero sense. Whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ, by definition denies also the Father. Jesus seems to be at the center of this doesn’t he?

[Now, I’m not a car thief. I’ve never been one and have no desire to be one. But were I a car thief, and I had the equal opportunity to steal either a 1988 Ford Aerostar minivan (the kind my family had growing up), or a brand new 2021 Lamborghini, which one would you think I’d pick. Of course I’d chose to steal the sports car! Why? Because it is worth more than an old minivan. The fact that a car thief would rather

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steal the sports car attests to the value of the car. The desire to steal it is directly related to the value of the car.]

The very fact that the antichrists have the singular purpose of trying to steal the glory of Jesus attest to the fact that the Jesus is the cornerstone of authentic Christian faith.

I keep going back to that verse in John's gospel as he records Jesus saying "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" because it is so fundamental to John's thinking. After Jesus says this he makes the boldest religious statement ever when he says "no one comes to the Father except through me".

Do you see why it is fundamental for the antichrist and antichrists to attack directly the person of Jesus? Because if they can convince people of just one thing, they want to convince people that Jesus is not who he says he is. Because if they can do that, they've robbed you of everything.

Because Jesus himself is the cornerstone of authentic Christianity.

People who were seemingly in the church, but denying that Jesus was the holy Son of God, truly God and truly human, who died a sinless man on the cross for the payment of the sins of the world and who was raised to life 3 days later, are denying this but still hold the claim to have the Father.

Except if you deny that Jesus is the unique Son of God, you are by definition also denying the Father.

But John does what he does best and gives us the other side of the same coin, and this is a wonderful place to end today.

If it is true, and it is, that denying Jesus means you don't have the Father, then that means that by acknowledging Jesus, you have the Father. I cannot overstate the glory of that phrase. If you have Jesus, by believing in your heart and confessing with your mouth that he is Lord and Saviour, then you have the Father.

Look at the end of verse 23: "whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father Also.

You belong to God, and he belongs to you.

Why is confession so important? Because the confession of our lips, that expresses what we believe in our hearts, is the way in which the complete work of Jesus is applied to us. Now at the most basic level simple faith is all that is necessary for salvation, so I'm not saying something crazy like anyone who may not be physically able to speak is not an authentic Christian because they are unable to confess with their mouth. But I am saying that the normal working of things is that a person believes in their heart that Jesus Christ is Lord, and out of the overflow of his heart he or she confesses with great joy and conviction that truth. And it is through this

Paul acknowledges the same thing in 1 Corinthians 12:2-3 when he says that it takes the Holy Spirit's work in someone's heart for them to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. We get the same idea in Romans 10:9-10 when Paul writes that if we believe in our heart that Jesus is Lord and *confess with our mouths* we are justified and saved. It is clear that it is not the confession that saves you but it is the confession that reveals the reality that is in the heart of the person since it is the Holy Spirit alone who can cause a person to truly make that confession out of a changed heart.

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Even the antichrists cannot help but attest to the glory of Jesus. And that's the point, our greatest good, and our greatest joy, is knowing the authentic Jesus.

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