

The Importance of Discernment
1 John 4:1-6
Notes for Sermon 11 in the Series - *Absolute Assurance*

1 Corinthians 2:14 “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned.”

“Discernment is the skill of understanding and applying God’s word with the purpose of separating truth from error and right from wrong.” (Tim Challies)

Romans 12:2 (ESV) “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

John 16:13 (NKJV) “However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own *authority*, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.”

Matthew 24:24 (NKJV) “For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.”

Acts 20:29 (NKJV) “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.”

2 Peter 2:1-2 (NKJV) “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, *and* bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed.”

Jude 1:4 (NKJV) “For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.”

I. The Command (v 1)

Matthew 7:15 (NKJV) “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.”

Ephesians 4:18 (NKJV) “having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.”

Ephesians 6:12 (NKJV) “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.”

The Fundamentals of the Faith

1. Scriptures □ The Scriptures are inspired by God (God-breathed) and totally sufficient.
2. The Trinity □ There is one God in three Persons.
3. The Person of Jesus Christ □ The Son of God is fully God and fully man.
4. Salvation □ Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.
5. The Second Coming □ Jesus is literally and bodily coming back to the earth.

Other lists have added the literal bodily resurrection.

Acts 17:11 (NKJV) “These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily *to find out* whether these things were so.”

II. The Confession (v 2-3)

Matthew 16:13b (NKJV) “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?”

Mark 1:24b (NKJV) “You are □ the Holy One of God!”

Mark 5:7 (NKJV) “...Jesus, Son of the Most High God...”

Christ is the eternal Son of God. In His incarnation as Jesus Christ, He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature with its demands and necessities and identifying Himself completely with mankind yet without sin. He honored the divine law by His personal obedience, and in His substitutionary death on the cross, He made provision for the redemption of men from sin. He was raised from the dead with a glorified body and appeared to His disciples as the person who was with them before His crucifixion. He ascended into heaven and is now exalted at the right hand of God where He is the One Mediator, fully God, fully man, in whose Person is effected the reconciliation between God and man. He will return in power and glory to judge the world and to consummate His redemptive mission. He now dwells in all believers as the living and ever-present Lord.”

[*The Baptist Faith and Message*]

III. The Contrast (v 4-6)

Matthew 24:24b (NIV) “...deceive even the elect □ if that were possible.”

2 Peter 2:2-3 (NIV) “Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.”

Jude 1:4b (ESV) “...who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality...”

Sermon 11: The Importance of Discernment

Series: Absolute Assurance

1 John 4:1-6

Nothing is more important in the Christian life than discernment. The most common Hebrew and Greek words translated “discern” mean “to perceive, to be able to distinguish between two things.” We see a clear use of the word in 1 Corinthians 2:14 (NKJV) “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned.” Only a person who has been made alive spiritually can perceive or discern the truth of the things of the Spirit of God.

I like Tim Challies’ definition of discernment. “Discernment is the skill of understanding and applying God’s word with the purpose of separating truth from error and right from wrong.” [Tim Challies, *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*, page 61]

The same Greek word translated “test” in 1 John 4:1 is translated “discern” in Romans 12:2 (ESV) “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” In verse 1 of our text, John is telling us, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but *discern* the spirits, whether they are of God.”

Follow the logic. Only a person who has been born of God (born again) has God, the Holy Spirit indwelling them (1 John 3:24). Because the Spirit of Christ indwells us we have the capacity to discern between truth and error and between right and wrong. This discernment is one of the things that Jesus promised us concerning the Holy Spirit. John 16:13 (NKJV) “However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth...” Let me repeat what I said earlier. Nothing is more important in the Christian life than discernment.

We are called to discern between true teachers (who speak the words of the Holy Spirit) and false teachers (who are led by demonic spirits). To put it another way, we are called to discern between true prophets or teachers that speak forth God’s Word and false prophets or teachers which speak forth lies. One of the most serious problems in the church today is that so many professing Christians lack discernment and they fall for the fool’s gold of false teachers like the *prosperity preachers* and even the false teaching of the cults. I recently read that one major cult gets the majority of their members in America from members of Baptist churches.

In the New Testament, Jesus, John, Paul, Peter, and Jude all give strong warnings against false teachers. Jesus said in Matthew 24:24 (NKJV) “For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.”

Paul said in Acts 20:29 (NKJV) “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.”

Peter said in 2 Peter 2:1-2 (NKJV) “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, *and* bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed.”

Jude said in Jude 1:4 (NKJV) “For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We must be discerning people. One of the evidences that we are truly saved, truly united with Christ is that a true Christian can never *ultimately* be deceived by false doctrine concerning salvation and the person of Christ. Those that make a final turning from the biblical truth of the person of Christ give evidence that they never savingly knew Him. True Christians, however, can be sidetracked and robbed of the abundant life that is theirs in Christ when they are gullible and fail to practice discernment on every teaching and so called, *revelation* that comes down the pike. Let’s examine the discernment that every believer needs.

I. The Command (v 1)

In the previous verse (1 John 3:24), John tells us that the Holy Spirit dwells in every true believer. In chapter 4 he transitions to the work of unholy spirits who work in and through false teachers. John makes it clear that there are two spiritual spheres in this world working in and through the teaching that comes through men. One sphere is the work of Satan and demonic spirits and one is the work of the Holy Spirit. Every teacher purporting to proclaim truth from God is either speaking on behalf of the Holy Spirit or on behalf of the satanic spiritual realm.

Learn this – many, if not most, false teachers are very convincing. These ancient demonic spirits behind their teaching have been propagating false teaching for a long time. Jesus said of them Matthew 7:15 (NKJV) "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves." The *sheep's clothing* likely refers not to the sheep, but to the wool garments worn by the shepherds. They look like the shepherds that are there to help the sheep, but in reality they are ravenous wolves who destroy the sheep rather than protect them.

John reminds us that beyond the world we know with our physical senses, there is the very real, though non-material world described in Ephesians 6:12 (NKJV) "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*." Remember that false erroneous teaching is the main weapon of this demonic realm. That is why we must be discerning and diligent when it comes to what is taught in the church and what we listen to.

I do not believe that John is talking here about confronting demonic spirits and performing exorcisms. Instead, we are to constantly be comparing what we are hearing with the Word of God. Let me clarify that when I talk about demonically guided false teaching, I am not speaking about areas of secondary level truth. All the truth of Scripture is important. John, however, is most certainly referring to the fundamentals of the faith that every true Christian believes, not secondary issues that good and godly Bible teachers disagree on. For instance, this is not talking about one's stance on the details of the end times, or mode of baptism, or whether a church is Elder led or staff led. Those are not unimportant issues, but they also are not fundamentals of the faith.

What are the fundamentals of the faith? In the early 1900's biblical Christianity was being attacked by the philosophy of modernism, which glorified *modern science*, and rejected the miracles of the Bible and theological liberalism that accommodated modernism and sought to reinterpret the Scriptures. These enemies of the truth were making large strides in the church. In response God led two Christian laymen to set aside a large sum of money for issuing twelve volumes which would set forth the fundamentals of the Christian faith. These were called *The Fundamentals*, and consisted of messages written by well-known defenders of the faith from several different denominations. These twelve volumes of *The Fundamentals* were mailed free to over 300,000 ministers, missionaries and other Christian workers in different parts of the world. The fundamentals were:

1. Scriptures – The Scriptures are inspired by God (God breathed) and totally sufficient.
2. The Trinity – There is one God in three persons.
3. The Person of Jesus Christ – The Son of God is fully God and fully man.
4. Salvation – Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.
5. The Second Coming – Jesus is literally and bodily coming back to the earth.

Other lists have added the literal bodily resurrection which these writers of *The Fundamentals* all accepted.

These are the truths by which we test or discern the teachers that are of God and those that are of the enemy. As we will see in a moment, one of those fundamentals of the faith is the one the false teachers focus on. Oh may we be like the Christians of Berea of whom it was said in Acts 17:11 (NKJV) "These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily *to find out* whether these things were so."

Our enemy would rather have us believe a wrong thing that to do a wrong thing. If he captures a person's mind, he will have the whole person. What a man believes is more dangerous than what he does.

You don't need a seminary degree to test the spirits; you must have the Holy Spirit in you to give you the discernment to test the spirits whether they are of God. If they agree with the Word, they are of God.

II. The Confession (v 2-3)

In Matthew 16:13b (NKJV) Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" That is the most important question ever asked. It is the question that all mankind must answer. John is saying that you can basically divide all humanity into two categories – those who get this question right and those who get it wrong. This is the basic question that exposes most false teachers. Every true prophet makes the confession that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man.

In John's day, one of the main enemies of the truth was a false teacher named Cerinthus. Cerinthus said that Jesus was a great man and then at his baptism God's Spirit descended on Him and made Him deity. At His baptism, the man Jesus was anointed as the Christ. Cerinthus taught that when Jesus went to the cross, the Spirit left Him and only the human man died. Cerinthus was a false teacher. How do we make that assessment? He denied the deity of Christ. Not only was he a false teacher, he was still in his sins and spiritually dead and without eternal life.

A true teacher, one that is speaking the truth from God confesses that Jesus was and is fully God and fully man. The word "confess" means to agree with God. It is in the present tense which means that a teacher from God continues to agree with God about the person of Jesus.

Just because a teacher says that he believes in Jesus doesn't mean that He is from God. We must discern which Jesus he is talking about. Does he mean the Jesus who took on human flesh and was fully man without ceasing in any way to be deity? Allow me to name some names without being mean. The Jesus that I have described (the one who is fully God and yet fully man) is not the Jesus of the Jehovah's Witnesses. He is not the Jesus of the Mormons. He is not the Jesus mentioned in the Koran that the Muslims say that they believe in.

The confession in verses 2-3 enables us to test or discern every teacher who claims to be from God. On the truth of Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God becoming flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, Christianity stands or falls. This truth is not optional; it is essential.

We see in verse 3 that those who deny that Jesus is God become flesh are of the same spirit and the same family as the antichrist. "Antichrist" literally means "against Christ." As we have seen before in 1 John, there is coming a literal person who will be possessed by Satan himself who will be a virtual world ruler, but until then, every false teacher is of the same spirit and same spiritual family as the coming antichrist. Here is the doctrinal statement of our denomination that is signed by every IMB missionary, every seminary professor and other denominational workers. It is from *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*.

Christ is the eternal Son of God. In His incarnation as Jesus Christ He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. Jesus, perfectly revealed, did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature, with its demands and necessities, and identifying Himself completely with mankind yet without sin. He honored the divine law by His personal obedience, and in His substitutionary death on the cross He made provision for the redemption of men from sin. He was raised from the dead with a glorified body and appeared to His disciples as the person who was with them before His crucifixion. He ascended into heaven and is now exalted at the right hand of God where He is the One Mediator, fully God, fully man, in whose Person is effected the

reconciliation between God and man. He will return in power and glory to judge the world and to consummate His redemptive mission. He now dwells in all believers as the living and ever present Lord.

[*The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*]

III. The Contrast (v 4-6)

This is a passage that should bring great confidence and courage to every born again person who has the Spirit of Christ living within us. This verse is often used to prove that with the Spirit of Christ in us, we have power over every temptation, every tactic, every scheme, and every weapon that the enemy brings against us. That is true! However, it is not the primary application of this verse. We are being cautioned against trying to discern and answer a false teacher with our own intellect. False teachers have the supernatural power of demonic spirits guiding and giving them what to say. Remember that they are of the spirit of the antichrist and Jesus said in Matthew 24:24 (NIV) that the antichrist would “deceive even the elect--if that were possible.” It is not possible for the elect to be ultimately deceived, but we must remember that we are up against a foe who is vastly superior to us in intellect. We come against false teachers remembering that we have the very Spirit of Christ living in us and no demon spirit is a match for Him. It is the Holy Spirit in us that conquers the error that Satan propagates in the world system where we live. The Spirit in us gives us insight when error is being taught and guides us in how to answer it. We must not depend on our own intellect. Listen carefully. A born again person who has Christ living in them in the person of the Holy Spirit, who has become a partaker of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), and is yielded to the Spirit (filled with the Spirit) will know false teaching. They may not be skilled enough to confront the false the false teaching, but they will know that it is false and not be ultimately taken in by it. Why? Because “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”

I remember several years ago when I pastored in Columbus, Ohio a young woman in her 20's who lived in Cleveland had become a member of a prominent cult. Some of the details of the encounter I had with her are sketchy, but I remember the gist of our conversation. If I remember correctly, she had heard the Gospel in our church and seemed to have a genuine salvation experience. I met with her and shared the error of the cult she was in. A while later, she returned to our church and made an appointment with me. She told me that she was in turmoil. She had found a gospel preaching church in Cleveland and was attending, but the cult members wouldn't leave her alone and she was going back to their meetings while attending a Bible teaching church. I knew that I didn't time to train her in apologetics or give her a course in confronting cults. I simply told her the truth of this passage in 1 John. I believed that she had genuinely been saved and so I told her to go before the Lord in total surrender and ask Him to show her the truth and then tell Him that she would do whatever He said. I prayed with her for discernment and she left.

Sometime later I talked to her and she told me that she was plugged in to the Bible believing church. I think she told me that she had been baptized and she had completely left the cult. She said that when she went back to the cult, she couldn't explain it, but she just knew something wasn't right. What happened? The One who was in her is greater than he who is in the world!

Notice the first words of verse 5 and the first words of v6. Verse 5 says “They are of the world.” Verse 6 says “We are of God.” Because false teachers are of this world system, you will find that typically their character is flawed and it will usually show up sooner or later. Their “of the world” character will usually manifest itself in one of two areas. The first area is greed. 2 Peter 2:2-3 (NIV) “Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.” They love money and will pervert Scripture to justify their greed while they fleece their flock.

The second area in which their “of the world” character will manifest itself is in sensuality. Jude 1:4b (ESV) says that they are people “...who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality...” That is speaking

of more than sexual promiscuity but it includes that. If we had time we could see these “of the world” values in a significant percentage of false teachers throughout church history. Some years back, I remember a leader in one of the cults who was kicked out of leadership by his father because of his adultery. His response was, “My private life is my own business. My public life is dedicated to the Lord.” [Jerry Vines, *Exploring 1, 2, 3 John*, page 153]

In contrast to the false teachers who are of the world, a teacher or preacher who is *of God* will be solidly based on Scripture with a message that confronts greed and sensuality instead of condoning it. Those who know God will be able to tell the difference. Those who know God recognize the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

God has made discernment available to you. Don't walk in this world without it.