

# Developing Biblical Discernment

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We are continuing on this morning in our exposition of the book of 1 John and I am so delighted to be able to do that. I have had the opportunity to go through 1 John a number of times over the years and it's a book that is wedded into my DNA, and we've come to chapter 4, the opening six verses of chapter 4 in 1 John, chapter 4, verses 1 through 6 and you can be turning there. It doesn't take much observational skill to realize that we live in an age of competing claims to spiritual authority. There are new philosophies of ministry that seem to come and go with every passing year. There are ongoing claims to charismatic phenomenon and prophecies and miracles supposedly taking place right and left. I saw a video recently of some kind of glory cloud of some outfit in California and the preacher is preaching and they've got all of this sparkle dust falling down from the ceiling, claiming to be the presence of God in their midst. We have the ongoing issues of dealing with institutions like Mormonism and the Catholic church all claiming to be able to speak the truth, all being able, all claiming, I should say, to speak for God and to point people directly to the path to God.

Now, truth is absolute. There is no such thing as relative truth. It is an utter fallacy to believe that you can have your truth and I can have mine and we can just kind of coexist as the bumper sticker says, all the while saying completely contradictory things. That's nonsense. That's an utter falsehood. The truth of the matter is that truth belongs to God, he has revealed it in Scripture and he has called his people to discern truth from error. He has called us to test the prophets, to test the spirits so that we would know what was true and that we would reject that which was false and not try to accommodate those who would lie in the name of God. What a great travesty that is, that the God of truth would have in his creation people who lyingly claim to speak in his name when actually they are giving voice to demons. This is a travesty of great consequence.

Well, the Bible prepares us for this completely. The Bible tells us to expect this state of affairs. The Bible tells us how to discern truth from error and the Bible gives us very clear tests by which we can know who truly speaks for God. We can know the truth. Beloved, if you're here and you've been in the midst of confusion over the years and you've had a lot of different spiritual influences in your life and you feel like it's just a big mess of stew and it's impossible to sort it all out, I've got good news for you this morning: the Bible makes it clear so that you can know. You don't have to defer to scholars. You can know the truth for yourself. In fact, God calls you to know the truth for yourself and

to reject that which is false. That which we have in front of us here in chapter 4 of the book of 1 John shows us the way.

Look at chapter 4, verse 1 as I read the passage for this morning to set it in our minds before we begin our exposition. Chapter 4, verse 1, the Apostle John says,

1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; 3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. 4 You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. 5 They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Now, I like to always make these preliminary observations to just kind of help you see the context, help you see for yourself in the text of Scripture where the passage is going. Notice at the start in the opening there of verse 1, he says, "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." This is a command from God. This is not an optional accessory to the Christian life. This is not something that we defer to men in ivory academic towers. This is something that belongs to the people of God within the church to exercise the spirit of discernment. God calls us to this. He not only calls us, he commands it. We are meant to be a discerning people in the church of God.

He calls us to this and then notice how the passage ends up at the end of verse 6, after he's gone through everything that he has to say, he concludes by saying, "By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." In between there he has given us the means to fulfill the command. In between verse 1 and that ending statement in verse 6, he has shown us what is necessary, what we need so that we can know with certainty, beloved, so that we can know with clarity what is true and what is false. God in his goodness to his people, has given to us what we need to know what's true and what's false. You do not have to fall victim to the spirit of our age. You do not have to fall victim to the confusion and the lack of clarity and the foolishness of saying, "Let's all just coexist with our competing truth claims." You can rise above that, indeed as a Christian, you are called to rise above it and in this passage John has given us what we need for that kind of discernment so that, so that we can live with certainty in the midst of a hostile age; so that we can live with clarity in the midst of confusion.

Now, let me point this out right from the start. This is a major problem, this issue of confusion and the reality of conflicting voices but I want you to think about something this morning, maybe you haven't thought about this before: our situation today is nothing new. Even when Christ was on earth, there was confusion; there was a lack of clarity

about who he was and about what his mission meant. We saw some of it even in what we read in Mark 6, you remember there was confusion about who John the Baptist was and Herod thought that John had risen from the dead because he saw the works of Jesus going on.

But look over at the book of Luke, Luke 9. I just want you to see this for just a moment. Luke 9 during the earthly ministry of Jesus himself, there was this incredible confusion amongst the people at large about who he was and the significance of his ministry. Luke 9:18 and this is paralleled in Matthew 16 and in Mark 8, but we're just going to look at Luke's account in verse 18. "It happened that while Jesus was praying alone," this is Luke 9:18 if you're still turning there, "the disciples were with Him, and He," meaning Jesus, "questioned them, saying, 'Who do the people say that I am?' They answered and said, 'John the Baptist, and others say Elijah; but others, that one of the prophets of old has risen again.'" Now look, here's Jesus on earth, people have been hearing him teach, they have been witnessing his ministry, and Jesus in the middle of his ministry looks at his disciples and asks them for a report about what people are saying about him; who he is; the very nature of his identity when he's on earth. He says, "What do people say about me?" And what I want you to see here is that there was utter confusion and utter wrong ideas amongst the people at large about who Jesus Christ was. People were saying he was John the Baptist. That's crazy. They were wrong. They were saying that he was Elijah. That was wrong. They were saying that maybe he's one of the other prophets and that was wrong. Even while Christ was on earth, there was confusion and completely mistaken ideas about who he was that weren't even in the ballpark.

Now, notice what Jesus does in verse 20, "He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' And Peter answered and said, 'You are the Christ of God.'" What do I want you to see from that? I want you to see this, this is so important, so important: in the midst of the confusion, Jesus calls his disciples to make their own statement and their own declaration of faith. The fact that there was confusion amongst the masses did not mean that it was impossible to come to the truth. It did not mean that it was impossible to know the truth of who Christ was. Peter hit the nail on the head. Elsewhere in Matthew it says Jesus tells Peter, "You are blessed because the Father in heaven has revealed this to you." What I want you to see is that you should not be discouraged by the fact that there are competing claims to know the truth; there are competing claims to spiritual authority. That is not – get this – that is not a hindrance to you knowing the truth. The fact that other people are mixed up and confused does not mean that the truth is inaccessible to you. What it means is that you have a responsibility to search these things out on your own and to come to your own conclusions guided by God's Holy Spirit as he speaks through his word. You can know the truth. You can know it with clarity. You can know it with certainty. That's why the Apostle John says, "Test the spirits so that you can know whether they are from God or not." Don't let the confusion of the age, don't think because there is confusion in our age that you are incapable of coming to the truth. You are. God intends it and that's why he has appointed his word and the proclamation of his word to help you in that regard. So we ask the question: who speaks for God? Who speaks for God? Where is the truth to be found?

Can we get something out of the way preliminarily before we get into the text and mark this down, write it on your forehead, figuratively speaking: miraculous signs, so-called miraculous signs, prove absolutely nothing. Miraculous signs are no sign at all that someone is speaking for God. Jesus said in Matthew 24, he said, "False Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect." 2 Corinthians says that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light and it's no surprise therefore that his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Jesus said in Matthew 7, he said, "Beware of the false prophets who come to you as wolves in sheep's clothing." Outwardly they look like harmless innocent sheep, they look like one of us but they are ravenous wolves. They are emissaries of Satan.

So, beloved, put out of your mind the thought that miraculous signs show anything; that claims to tongues and prophecies and wonders show anything. Jesus specifically warned us in the clearest possible language that those things are the mark of deception, not the mark of truth. So don't be persuaded by that. Don't be fooled by that. Don't be taken in by some fancy stage show that really has nothing to do with what truth is at all. What John has given us here in chapter 4, 1 John 4, you can turn back there now, John shows us how to discern the truth and I've got three points for you this morning, three points to build this passage around. First of all, I want you to see the command for discernment. That's our first point for this morning and it's laid out there, again, in verse 1. We'll just look at it again real quickly. John says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but," here it is, "test the spirits to see whether they are from God." This is a command to the church, it's a command therefore that applies to us individually as well. This is the duty and responsibility of individual Christians to be discerning and John had already shown earlier in his letter that deception was in the midst of the flock that he was writing to protect.

Look back at chapter 2, verse 26. He says, "These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you." They are trying to deceive you. There were teachers in their midst that had now gone out but they were actively trying to deceive the flock of God. John says, "This is part of the reason that I'm writing is to protect you from those who are trying to deceive you."

Look over at chapter 3, verse 7. He says, "Little children, make sure no one deceives you." So there was an element of active pursuit of deception that was at work in the midst of this flock and so John writes to protect them. John writes to promote their joy, their holiness and their assurance. John is writing to help them so that the deceivers could not undermine those spiritual qualities in their lives.

Now, if you were here last week, we talked about the grace and peace that marks the life of a true believer. We talked about what a joy it is to know that God intends for us to have spiritual confidence in our lives; that we are to walk through with a sense of clarity and certainty in our lives that we know the truth and that God abides in us and that we abide in him, and those truths that we saw last time are extremely, extremely precious. Well, here's what I want you to see and what I want you to understand and this goes right to the life and the heartbeat of Truth Community Fellowship, this goes right to the

heartbeat of the future of our lives together in the years to come is that false teaching is a threat to that confidence that we enjoyed and looked at last week. This is not simply a matter of a difference of opinion. Those spiritual things that we treasured from last week can be undermined by the influence of false teachers. So it is the commitment of the leadership of this fellowship and it should be your individual commitment to guard those things from external threats and we do that together. We do that together as we apply ourselves to God's word. As you walk in the word day by day in your own private life, you are building yourself up so that you are able to be increasingly discerning. As we teach the word week by week, we're building ourselves up so that we would know the truth and be able to distinguish it from error, not simply so that we can have it right intellectually, it's so much more than that, beloved, it's so much more than that. We are protecting the truth of God, we are proclaiming it, we are guarding it, we're guarding that which others have given to us, and we are guarding and protecting it for those who are going to come after us, and we are guarding our own hearts and we are guarding our own families and we are guarding one another from the destructive influences of men who are not committed to this truth but rather want to draw people after themselves so that they can have power and influence and money as a result of their false spiritual ministry. That's why we do this. There are big things at stake here and it's not simply a matter of us being able to say we're right and they are wrong. There is a whole spiritual context. We're trying to honor God by protecting the truth that he has deposited in his word and that's why this command for discernment is so crucial and important.

Now look, look back at verse 1 with me, chapter 4, verse 1, he says, "test the spirits to see whether they are from God," the command implies that it's capable of fulfillment, but why? Why this command? Well, the end of verse 1 is very sobering, he says, "test the spirits because many false prophets have gone out into the world." This isn't an isolated problem. There is a plethora of false prophets in the world. There were in John's day and they've only multiplied since then. And when he says "test the spirits," that word "testing" has the idea of "examine something for its genuineness; examine it for its genuineness; examine it to see whether it is true." And what I want you to see is that the early church understood this and practiced it even when the apostles were in their midst.

Look back at Acts 17:11, actually we'll start at verse 10 as it describes the ministry of the Apostle Paul. Acts 17:10-11, it says, "The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews." So Paul went into the synagogue and began teaching and these people who were there heard his teaching and look at what they did in verse 11. It says, "these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica," the ones in Thessalonica had risen up and ran Paul out of town, but it says that "they received the word with great eagerness," look at this, "examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." And so the Apostle Paul was in their midst, they were happy to receive his teaching but they said, "Paul, we're going to read and compare what you say with what Scripture says so that we can know whether it's true or not." They were testing his teaching to see whether it was genuine. They were testing his teaching to see whether it was true. Well, if it was true with the Apostle Paul, how much more it is with us.

So we are commanded to do this and we do this by examining the Scripture and comparing the Scripture with what we're hearing. It's really a pretty clear and evident process. And look, when you remember that the Gospel is the only hope of men being delivered from the eternal judgment which their sins deserve, when you remember that hell itself awaits every sinner who has ever walked the face of the earth unless Christ saves them, and when you remember that Christ reveals himself through the proclamation of the true Gospel, then you realize how urgent and how important this is that we would test what people teach in order to know whether it's true or not because there is just too much at stake to treat it carelessly. This is more important than finding the right doctor to take care of your cancer because cancer can only kill your body, error, lies, can kill your soul and that's why this command is there; that's why God calls us to that. So when John says "test the spirits," in verse 1, he's simply continuing a call to discernment that is found throughout all of the Scriptures. That's the command for discernment.

Well, point 2 this morning is for us to understand the need for discernment. The need for discernment and we see that at the end of verse 1. Why this command to test the spirits? Verse 1 says, "because many false prophets have gone out into the world." Look, real simple point here: you cannot assume that everyone who claims to speak for God actually does. No one who teaches error, no one who is simply trying to accumulate a little earthly kingdom for their own wealth and prosperity would tell you, "Hey, I'm here to speak for Satan. I'm here to deceive you so that you will give me money and I can live a prosperous life and not actually go out and do real work with my hands." No one would say that and so you have to realize that false teachers come and pretend to be someone they're not. They claim to be a mouthpiece for God when they're not and that's the initial point. You see, false prophets, false teachers, they depend upon the gullibility of their audience. They depend upon their audience not exercising biblical discernment as they hear things taught and one of the endearing traits about true Christians that makes them vulnerable to this is that true Christians often tend to be very trusting. They assume that people mean well when they're teaching. They assume that people aren't going to lie to them and that is what false teachers depend upon is that gullibility that will give them room to purvey their error. You simply can't assume that everyone who claims to speak for God actually does. False teachers thrive on gullible people through flattery, through intimidation, through humor, through hidden agendas that they don't disclose to you.

Turn back just one book of the Bible to 2 Peter 2. It's the book immediately prior to 1 John in your Bibles. Scripture says so much about this and why is it necessary for us to be discerning? It's because of the deceptive nature of false teachers. 2 Peter 2:1 says, "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you." That's a promise of Scripture. There are going to be false teachers among us. And notice this, they "will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves." They will be in front of you claiming to speak for God while at the same time they are denying the very deity of Christ and mangling the purpose for which he came. It's secret. It's not evident right on the surface and that's why we have to be discerning. That's why we have to take this carefully.

So the question is with this need for discernment, with false prophets claiming to speak for God when they don't, the question is how can you tell the true from the false and that brings us to our third point here this morning and our third point is going to give you three tests for discernment. These are very clear. They are right on the surface of Scripture and the challenge is not so much to understand them but to apply them and the challenge is not so much to be able to grasp what Scripture says about this, but to be able to make value judgments and decisions that, "Do you know what? This person that I thought I could trust is actually somebody who is a false teacher. This person who led me spiritually is actually someone who doesn't pass the test of Scripture." That's the hard part, is to realize and we have to understand the reality of this, is that false teachers will be in the midst of true Christians. They will be operating and pretending to be just like you and me. They'll look just like the real thing but if you sniff around, if you poke below the surface, if you think about what you're being taught, you're going to say, "Wait. Wait. Wait. Wait. I know from Scripture that this doesn't add up." And you start to check one or two other things and you say, "Oh, there's other things here too as well." When you start to see that, beloved, the key, oh, the absolute key for discernment is to overcome your human impulse to make excuses for them and to say, "No. No. I am called to test the spirits and this doesn't pass the test. This isn't from God. Not only am I not going to follow this anymore, I'm not going to support it anymore and when I have opportunity in my circle of relationships and it comes up, I'm going to warn people against what I see to be true." It's a very serious and sober topic that we are coming upon but the Bible makes it clear.

This is our third point for this morning and I'm going to give you in this third point three tests for discernment. Three tests for discernment and this is something that we'll teach on in months to come as well from other passages of Scripture and so we'll expand on this in days to come but this morning we're going to give three tests for you to evaluate a teacher by, evaluate those who claim to speak for God. Scripture makes it clear.

First of all, first test for discernment: examine their manner of life. Examine their manner of life. John had earlier written that you could identify false teachers through their ungodly lifestyles and their unloving dispositions. Look at chapter 3, verse 10. It is right on the surface of Scripture. I want you to see that. I'm not giving you any hidden things out of the Greek text. I'm not telling you things that you can't see for yourself right on the pages of Scripture. That's so important for you to understand. And also, let me say this, that whoever speaks from this pulpit, including myself, whoever teaches in the future in the realm of Truth Community Church, everyone is subject to this same kind of examination. You are entitled to apply this test to me, to anyone that would ever be in leadership at Truth Community. We are all subject to the Scriptures and subject and required and obligated as much as we can as fallen men to approximate the truth side of these things. So by showing you these things, I'm holding myself accountable and everyone who would ever teach in the future of this ministry, that everyone is applied, everyone is subject to this same standard.

Here let me say this, tangent 1 here this morning. For those of you that are new, sometimes I play tangent cards when something occurs to me that I hadn't planned in my

notes. I'll give you one of the first things that is going to mark a false teacher, is that they are going to claim to be the Lord's anointed and they're going to tell you, "Don't touch the Lord's anointed." As soon as someone says that to you, get away from them because they are trying to exempt themselves from the tests of discernment. No one has a right to tell you, "Don't examine my teaching. Don't examine my life," because Christ himself tells us to do that. So as soon as someone starts to say, "Don't touch the Lord's anointed," warning bells should go off in your mind. "Hey, something's not right here," because true teachers, if the Apostle Paul was happy to have the Bereans examine what he taught by the Scriptures, how much more those of us who don't hold the apostolic office should invite and welcome the scrutiny of sincere believing Christians who simply want to open their Bibles and say, "Does this man truly speak for God or not?" When a man says, "Don't touch the Lord's anointed," listen, figuratively speaking, that's when you should most smack him. "No, I won't touch you, I'll smack you with the tests of biblical discernment." Okay, that's the end of that tangent.

Three tests for discernment. Examine their manner of life. Look at 1 John 3:10 where John says, "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious." Alright, it's obvious. It's manifest. It's plain as day. This is how the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious and then he lays it out for us, he says, "anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother." Examine his manner of life. Are there marks of holiness in this man's life? Are there marks of true holiness in this institution? Biblical righteousness, not simply external conformity to self-made standards. Listen, it is right and proper in light of what Scripture says to call us to discernment, it is right and proper to look at the rampant child abuse in the Roman Catholic priesthood and say, "This is not the mark of biblical righteousness." Despite all of their aggressive and arrogant assertions of authority, they do not pass the test of biblical righteousness. This is endemic to their system. You're entitled as a Christian to look at that and say, "This is not the practice of righteousness." You talk to many Catholics who grew up in the Catholic system and they'll tell you stories of how the priest would be drunk on Friday night, share the communion wine with the altar boys. Listen, this isn't credible. Look past the externals of the rituals and see it for what it is. This is how you practice discernment on these things and we can't back away from applying that and calling a spade a spade. A false teacher who lives unrighteously is not someone to be followed. This is how you tell a child of the devil from a child of God. When it comes out that a man has been living a secret double life, living a life of adultery while he presumes to speak from the pulpit of God and you say, "Wow. Couldn't see it at the time but this is obvious. This is a child of the devil even as he was teaching the Scriptures. Wow." Don't back away from those hard conclusions because this is where discernment is found and God calls us, "Test the spirits." He says, "This is how you can tell. This is how it's obvious. The children of God, the children of the devil, if he doesn't practice righteousness, he's not of God." If they live that way, if they're arrogant, abusive men, they are false teachers to be avoided. You can walk away from ministries like that without fear of losing the influence of God in your life. So there is this moral test, there is this manner of life that you look at and examine. We're not saying that these men are going to be perfect but there is going to be an element of their life, Scripture says in 1 Timothy 3 and in Titus 1, that the elders of the church are going to be men who are above



reproach; that there is going to be an element of blamelessness in the lives. You're entitled to look for that from the men who would presume to teach you. This is part of discernment. This is part of what God calls us to. This is part, beloved, of how the Lord Jesus Christ protects his flock.

Now, secondly, as we go in and continue on in 1 John 4, you also examine their view of Christ. Their view of Christ because a person's teaching about Christ is an acid test of whether they speak for God or not. Look at verses 2 and 3 with me, 1 John 4:2-3, "By this you know the Spirit of God." Okay, we're talking about discernment, how can we know the truth, the spirit of truth and the spirit of error, this is how you know, "every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world." The Apostle John is saying that true teachers affirm that God came to earth in flesh in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. They affirm what the Scripture says about him. John 1:1, the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Pre-existent deity. And then chapter 1, verse 14 of the same Gospel, "And the Word became flesh." Listen for what a man says about Christ. Listen for what a so-called religion teaches about Christ. Anyone that does not affirm those doctrinal truths about Christ, uncreated God come in human flesh, is not from God. It's from the devil. Jesus was fully God and he was fully man to die in our place. Contrary to what Mormons say, Christ was uncreated and is of the exact same substance as God the Father. And that had to be true, beloved, so that his sacrifice could have an infinite value to redeem sinners from their sins. As soon as you knock Christ off the throne of deity and make him a created being, you have taken away any power of that Christ to save because there must be an infinite value to the person of Christ in order to be able to redeem millions of sinners from their sins and anyone who doesn't teach that is from the devil. He is a false teacher and it's not simply a matter of a difference of opinion.

Oh, look at it with me again, look at verse 3 with me again, "every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God." Okay, that's the negative. Where are they from? What can we say about teachers who manifest this kind of teaching? This should put chills down your spine. Look at verse 3, "this is the spirit of the antichrist." This is the spirit of the devil himself. This is the same spirit that is going to rise up at the end of time and oppose Christ in the coming of his kingdom. This is the whole thing that Christ has come to overthrow. Understand this, beloved – oh, I want you to see the urgency of this, not so that you would be afraid but so that you would be committed to a life of discernment. False teachers are not innocent people who are mistaken. It's so much more than that. Look at verse 3, it says, "this is the spirit of antichrist." What I want you to see is – oh, pay attention, please – false teachers give voice to demonic teaching. False teachers are a mouthpiece for Satan. This is not to be trifled with. This is not to be underestimated. This is not to be taken lightly. This is the spirit of antichrist. This is in full opposition to Christ and his kingdom and so we take these things seriously. The false teachers in John's day, they had a view that said Jesus was simply an ordinary man. The Spirit came upon him at his baptism but left at the time of his crucifixion. False view of Christ. And they rendered Christ, they turned him into an ordinary man that died on the cross and, beloved,

understand that no ordinary man can save you from your sins. We're called upon, we are commanded to believe in the true Christ, in God come in human flesh. Any other Christ is a false Christ, a false Christ that you follow right into the pit of hell. These things are of profound significance. So the false teachers in John's day denied the incarnation. They taught a false Christ. True teachers, on the other hand, openly, gladly, continually teach you about Christ and call you to Christ and speak of his glory as an explained aspect of his person and work overtime.

Now listen, you are entitled to ask this question as you observe ministries in different places, as you think back on and try to interpret your past personal experience, you are entitled and you should ask questions like this: when does this teacher tell me about Christ? When does he open up the Scriptures and say, "This is what the Scriptures say about Christ and this is what it means"? When does this teacher explain Christ instead of telling me yet another funny story? When does this teacher tell me about Christ? When does he warn about the dangers of eternal judgment? When does he call me to repentance from sin and to put my faith in Christ? When does he do that? Is that the mark of his ministry or is it simply something that he tacks on at the end in order to maintain a superficial veneer of credibility? What is it that marks his ministry? Those are the questions that you should ask. Those are the standards that God's voices are held to, when I say God's voices, those who teach the Scripture. When a teacher pushes Christ aside, puts himself on display with his stories and his humor and telling one more story about what he did last week, it's time to call timeout and say, "Wait a second, this doesn't match. This isn't consistent with what Scripture says." When you're listening to a teacher, you shouldn't have to strain and poke around and say, "Where can I find Christ in this? Where can I find Christ in this ministry? Where can I find Christ, sirs," it says in the Gospel of John? The Greeks came and told Andrew and Philip, "Sirs, we want to see Jesus." The presence of Christ in a ministry should be obvious. That's part of confessing him and if you're having trouble finding Christ in a ministry, you're probably looking at a ministry that does not deserve your following or support.

One final thing here in this passage. What's left here may surprise you a little bit in terms of what it signifies and where it's going. We've said three tests for discernment: examine their manner of life. Is there an element of righteousness that you can discern in the life of this leader, this teacher? Do they manifest the love of Christ in their relationships or are they abusive? What about their teaching? Where do we find Christ in their teaching and what do they say about Christ in their teaching? The final thing here, the third test for discernment is: examine their view of Scripture. Examine their view of Scripture because you can also recognize true teachers by – get this – by their submission to apostolic teaching. It's more than simply a verbal affirmation, "Oh, I believe the Bible." It's more than that, it's teaching and a lifestyle and an attitude that's actually submitted to it, not that simply affirms it with their lips but denies it with their life.

Look at verses 4 through 6 with me. "You are from God, little children." Don't you love that little word of affirmation in the midst of that statement? In the midst of all of this challenging teaching about discernment and it could almost be a little bit unsettling to say, "Wow, we're in the midst of a battle here." Well, yeah, we are but notice the attitude

of God toward his flock as John expresses it in his writing to this flock back in the first century. He says, "You are from God, little children." Take heart, take comfort, take confidence. Let me reassure you that you are from God as you read this letter of mine, he says. "You have overcome them." You stand in a position of having overcome these false teachers, "because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world." For all of the sobering things that we've talked about here this morning, understand that the Christian is someone who God has delivered him from these threats. God has graciously delivered us from that and we have overcome these false teachers and as a result of that, we can move forward in a life of discernment with a sense of confidence and assurance rather than a sense of fear and dread. "You've overcome them," he says, "greater is He who is in you." It's not about you, it's about the Spirit that dwells within you that is greater than the spirit that animates these false teachers. In the Holy Spirit of God, the indwelling Spirit of God, we have a magnificent omnipotent advocate dwelling within us and helping us and guiding us into the truth. You have overcome them. The Spirit of God will sustain you but you still have to practice discernment, you still have to exercise and test the spirits but you do so from a position of strength, not a position of weakness.

Now, here in verse 4, he says, "You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world." Verse 5, "They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them." Verse 6, "We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." Now, notice this in this section here, there are three groups that he is addressing: one in verse 4, verse 5, and one in verse 6. He says, "You are from God, little children." Here in verse 4 he's referring to true Christians. They did not fall for the lies of the false teachers because the Holy Spirit had guided them into the truth. He's addressing true Christians there and gives them a word of assurance. Now in verse 5, he addresses a different group. Notice the difference between "you" and "they." Verse 4, "You are from God," verse 5, "They are from the world." Who is he talking about in verse 5? Well, here in verse 5, he's referring to the false teachers that he is exposing and notice what he says about them, he says, "They speak as from the world, and the world listens to them." Here's another aspect of discernment: if you see a teacher that is popular, a so-called Bible teacher who is popular in the unsaved world, that's a warning sign. That's not a sign of the blessing of God on his ministry. The fact that the world listens and receives that kind of ministry, a Joel Osteen, look, that's a warning sign because the world should be resisting that which confronts it. The world should be attacking the truth and when a man is received by the world and the world feels comfortable with his teaching, something's horribly amiss. What's amiss is the fact that the man is a false teacher. It's a false teacher. That's why the world listens to them, it's because they're from the world. They have the same spiritual source that their audience does and that's why the audience listens to them.

So in verse 4, you see the true Christians. In verse 5, you see the false teachers. Now in verse 6, John says, "We are from God; he who knows God listens to us." Who is he talking about there? I want to tell you something: I am not in the purview of verse 6. When John says "we" he's talking very specifically about a very narrow circle of people, he's talking about the 12 apostles. John was the last living apostle at this time and he's

speaking as the final representative of the apostolic circle and he says, "We are from God." You see, there's the "you" who are the true Christians, there is the "they" who are the false teachers, now in verse 6 he says, "We are from God," meaning, "We the apostles are from God and those who know God listen to us." This is not a verse that a teacher today can take and claim and say, "We are from God and he who knows God listens to us," because John is talking about the spirit of the apostles. He's talking about the apostolic office here.

Look at it again with me in verse 6, he says, "We are from God; he who knows God listens to us." He is distinguishing the group in verse 6 from the group in verse 4. All of us true Christians are found in verse 4. We are from God and we have overcome them but there's a narrow group, an isolated, non-repeatable group that he's referring to in verse 6. "We are from God. We are the apostles." Do you want to know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error? "The one who knows God listens to us," that is, the one who knows God listens to the apostles. They pay attention, they give heed, they submit to the teaching of the apostles as found in the word of God. The apostles had the spirit of truth. The apostles were Christ's appointed agents to reveal and complete the New Testament. And here's what this means, beloved, for you when it says, "he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us," teaching must be consistent with apostolic doctrine in the New Testament or it is to be rejected. Someone who does not submit to the teaching of the apostles in the New Testament is not from God. They are demonic. Teachers, oh, watch this, look at what he says, "he who is not from God does not listen to us." They don't submit to the authority and the teaching of the apostles. Teachers who appeal to tongues and modern-day prophecies are not from God. Teachers who appeal to Mormon doctrines, "Pearl of Great Price, Book of Doctrines and Covenants," and all of the other tripe that Joseph Smith foisted on the world, they're not from God. Catholic tradition, not from God. Not part of the apostolic teaching. The truth is, they are under God's curse.

Look back at the end of Revelation, the last book in the Bible, the closing verses of the Bible, really, verses 18 and 19, "I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book," this is the final book of the Bible. It has to be. This is disclosing the end of time. There is nothing to be added beyond the book of Revelation. Verse 18, "I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book." If people deny portions of Scripture, they're not from God. If they try to add to Scripture and say, "God spoke to me and now I deliver it to you," let the discernment bell go off in your mind and say, "That can't be right. This is not how God speaks." God has made himself known through the New Testament, through the teaching of the apostles. 1 John 4:6, "he who knows God listens to us." This is how we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. The teaching of the apostles, the apostolic doctrine laid down in the New Testament is the exclusive standard by which you know whether something is true or false or not and that's why we have the example of the Bereans in Acts 17, they examined the Scriptures daily to see what they were being taught, whether it was so or not.

So how can you tell if a man is teaching you the truth? You test it by the Scriptures and when I stand in this pulpit, beloved, I am subject to the authority of Scripture. I'm not independent of it. I can't add to it. I can't take away from it. Everything that I say is to be tested by that same standard of Scripture that the Apostle Paul was and any teacher who tries to turn off your discernment switch is somebody to get away from in a hurry because they're trying to place themselves outside the divinely revealed pattern of discernment that God has given to the church.

Now, these are weighty things, I get that, but we're only dealing with things that God has revealed in the Scripture, right? We're just following the command of God to consider these things and to think about them. Understand, beloved, that when God has laid down these things, these tests of discernment for us in the Scripture, I want you to understand that this is something to treasure and to love God for. God has given these tests of discernment like a shepherd built fences around his flock in order to protect them from the wolves that would try to get in and attack them. This is how we guard ourselves as believers, is by being discerning. We're not out to take a witchhunt against everybody. You know, we're willing to give people room to prove themselves but there is always this undergirding mindset that we have, is that we have a deposit, we have a treasure that has been given to us in the Scriptures and we have a responsibility to protect it, to preserve it for those who are going to come after us.

And yet let us end on this note: God gave us this because he loves us. God gave us this so that we could enjoy it. God gave us these tests of discernment so that we could know that we are of the truth, that we are walking in the truth, that we could have the joy and assurance that that brings, and that we could know by these tests of discernment and by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that we are true believers, that our sins really are forgiven and that we really are going to go to heaven when we die. You only know that because it's revealed in apostolic doctrine, in the apostolic pages of Scripture. God gives us this for our benefit. He gives it to us for our joy. He gives it to us so that you could know that of all the people in the world, that you yourself have eternal life; that you yourself were the objects of the saving work of Christ on the cross that when he gave his life up on the cross, he was thinking of you, he was dying for you, he was dying to save you. He was dying to save your sinful soul. And so we exercise discernment to keep out the wolves and also to enjoy the great liberty of what it means to be a child of God walking through this earth with our final destination of heaven.

Let's bow in prayer.

*Our Father, we simply ask that the Holy Spirit would guide us and keep us in the true faith for the glory of Christ. Do give us discernment, our God. Make us worthy. Help us to be worthy of what you have entrusted to the church. Help us to be worthy of the opportunity that you've given us here in this fellowship. Father, give us discernment, not so that we could just be critical people that are difficult to live with, but that we could know the truth, protect it, and proclaim it to a world that needs to know Christ. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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