

HOW TO KNOW RIGHT FROM WRONG

1 John 4:1-6

As we continue our study in the Book of **1 John**, in **chapter four** we are introduced to something, which is, very significant. It is *how to know right from wrong*.

In light of the “perilous times” (**2 Timothy 3:1**) we are living in, the exhortation offered here by the Apostle John is definitely worthy of our closest attention.

If I were to ask you what the definition of *discernment* is, what would you say? How would you define it? To give a simple and workable definition would be to say discernment means to have the ability to judge well. It is the having the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. If that is what you would say, I would agree with you. But, will you allow me to expand on the last part of that definition by saying, in this day we are living in, **we must** not just possess the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, but **we must** possess the ability to be able to distinguish between what is almost right and what is almost wrong. **We must** not forget just how subtle the enemy of man’s soul is.

We are living in days of **great deception**. Whether we are considering the physical world we live in or the spiritual world we live in. It is my opinion things are not quite as “black and white” as they used to be. It appears to me they have been mixed so all we see is a dirty gray. Oh yes, truth is still truth and a lie is still a lie. That is not the issue. The issue is how some truths and some lies are being presented. Truth as presented today is determined by a position one takes instead of the reality of facts. For many, facts do not matter. For some, it’s all a matter of subjective opinion, situational ethics instead of undeniable, empirical evidence. In this day, it seems truth is being decided from whatever position a person takes and nothing else matters.

I believe we are living in the last days of the last days. In **2 Thessalonians 2:3** Paul refers to a “great falling away” or the last, one of a kind apostasy which is to immediately precede the return of Christ. It is the day when Paul said men would “heap unto themselves teachers having itching ears...turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.” **2 Timothy 4:3-4**. It is a time, according to **2 Peter 2:1-3**, when there are “false teachers who...bring in damnable heresies” and who are intent on using “feigned words” in order to “make merchandise of

you.” It is a time when “ungodly men” are “turning the grace of God into lasciviousness” according to **Jude 4**.

How are we to know what to do in a day such as this? How are we to know what is almost right and what is almost wrong? First of all, John says to us in **verse 1** “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone into the world.” Here is the answer! Try the spirits! Don’t be foolish! Don’t be gullible! Check *everything you hear by the Word of God!*

If what we hear, regardless from whom we hear it, **does not line up with the Word of God rightly divided** then we had best leave it along. If, as Isaiah said in **Isaiah 28:10** it must be: “precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line,” then we are to reject it as being false and not coming from the Spirit of God as its source. We all can rest assured the Spirit of God and the Word of God *always* agrees. In fact, they always go hand in hand. They will *never* contradict each other.

In many ways, Christians are easy targets for deceivers. They are given to seeing the best in people and are, at times, easily deceived because of possessing this trait. Christians are prone to give others the benefit of the doubt whether they deserve it or not. This is complimentary on one hand and problematic on the other hand.

So, is it not imperative in these days when “evil men and seducers are waxing worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived” (**2 Timothy 3:13**) for us to “continue...in the things which thou hast (we have) learned”? (**2 Timothy 3:14**) The only way to do that is to “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” **2 Timothy 2:15**. (Just as side note, only the King James Bible teaches we are to “study” the Word of God. All other versions use other words like, “do your best” as an example.

Brother, sister, **we must know the Word of God! We must get into the Word of God until the Word of God gets in us!** When we do, we will no longer be as: “children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive (us);” according to **Ephesians 4:14**.

John says, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, **we must** test or try the spirits because of the many false men and women in this world that have as their only purpose of life to deceive those who will be deceived. Let's take note of the fact the author said: "many false prophets are gone out into the world."

As John continues he sets forth a divine imperative. He sets forth something which cannot be misconstrued. Although we may have forgotten, let's remember we were introduced to the fact John is combating the Gnostics and their Gnosticism in this epistle. The Gnostics were those who denied Jesus Christ was actually God manifest in the flesh. They failed to believe Jesus was both very God of very God and very man of very man. If you recall, they taught Christ came upon Jesus at His baptism and left at His crucifixion. So the Apostle, who had leaned on the bosom of Christ in the Upper Room the night before His crucifixion tells us: "Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God:" **verses 2-3**.

May I say something both simple and profound? If a man or a woman is wrong on Jesus Christ of Nazareth and who He is, then they will be wrong on everything else! It does not matter if they are right on the issue of eschatology (future events) or any other major doctrine in the Word of God: if they are wrong on Jesus, they are just wrong! No one can be wrong on Jesus and still be right!

In the last part of **verse 3** we are reminded of a term used two other times earlier in this letter and used only by the Apostle John. It is not to be found in the rest of God's Word. It is the word "antichrist." We find it here and in three other places in his writings: **2:18, 2:22, 2 John 7**. To refresh our memories, "antichrist" refers to someone who is "against Christ." We can define "antichrist" as anyone who is an opponent of or in opposition to the Messiah. As we learned, "antichrist" refers to anyone that is against Christ. The writer tells us plainly here, anyone who denies that Jesus has come in the flesh is not motivated by the Holy Spirit and is, therefore, not of God.

He continues in **verse 3** by saying "and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world." May I suggest in light of the fact the "spirit of antichrist" was then present and active in the days of John how much more so in our day? That day (**2 Thessalonians 2:3**)

which is to directly precede the second coming of Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ?

So much could be said here about the spirit of antichrist being present and presently manifesting itself in our day, but time will not allow for such a consideration. Suffice it for me to say that we see this spirit manifesting itself in many places, like the legislative and judicial branches of our government. It was seen in the executive branch as well under the Obama administration. Although it manifests itself in many ways, we can see it plainly in the calls for sectarian prayers to be prayed in public rather than a call for prayer to be prayed in “the name of Jesus Christ which is more than a tradition in America—this Christian nation. It can be seen in City councils meetings where invocations are being welcomed by anyone who claims to be “spiritual” regardless of who they claim their god to be, as long as they do not mention the One True God who was manifest in a man known as Jesus Christ of Nazareth, born of virgin, God incarnate. Or it can be seen simply by trying to eliminate public prayer altogether.

WE MUST TRY THE SPIRITS TO SEE WHETHER THEY BE OF GOD!!!

Verse 4 makes a bold statement worthy of both rejoicing over and hiding in our hearts. It reads: “Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.” Now, if that doesn’t make a Baptist want to shout I don’t know what will!

Listen to this declarative statement: “Ye are of God, little children.” What a position that is! What a relation we have! Do you think there are times in our lives as believers we might be guilty of forgetting that truth? As strange as it may sound, I am afraid we are, at times, guilty of forgetting our birth rights as children of Almighty God. I am afraid we are prone to see ourselves as victims and not as victors. I am afraid we act, at times, like we have been overcome instead of remembering we are overcomers because of Who’s we are and because of Who is a constant and abiding presence in our lives. Let us never forget the truth given to us in **verse 4!**

It is undeniably true that in this life there are things we are not sufficient for. **BUT**, Who constantly dwells in us is! Isn’t that what Paul meant when he wrote **2 Corinthians 3:5** where he said: “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God.”? I think so. Isn’t it

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awesome to know that resident within us is the means to constant, complete victory as a believer? Isn't it awesome to know all we need is dwelling within us to make us victorious over the world which is against us? I think so, and in this I rejoice! May I draw our attention to something I hadn't seen before doing this study in **verse 4, 5, 6**? Please note the begging of all three verses: **verse 4** "Ye are of God...", **verse 5**; "They are of the world...", and **verse 6** "We are of God..." Although I know this is significant I readily confess my inability to provide commentary as to why it is significant. The division between the two groups referenced is, actually, an eternal difference. And the thing, it seems to me, that marks that difference between the two groups (in an undeniable way), is the fact that within those who "are of God" lies the ability to hear. It is one thing to listen and not hear and a completely different thing to listen and to "hear." Isn't that what Jesus was saying in **John 10:27**: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me;"

In closing this study, we will do so as we consider that in **verses 5 and 6** we find a contrast worth noting. It is a contrast centered on the Word of God. Although it is simple to understand it is a profound in its meaning and its reality. God's children will hear God's Word and those who are not God's children will not. The sad part is not that they *cannot hear*, but that they *will not* hear. They are like the people Jesus addressed in **John 5:40** where He said the reason people would not be saved was not because they could not come to Him, but rather because they would not come to Him.

Notice the word "Hereby" (which means as a result of this) in **verse 6**. This means, by the simple but profound fact *the people who will not hear* the message of John (and those others commissioned by God with a similar message) are "not of God." Wow! This is both amazingly simple and profoundly plain.

Those who are of this world care not for the things of that world of which we are citizens of. (See **Philippians 3:20** where the word "conversation" actually means citizenship) Let us never forget what Jesus said in His High Priestly prayer found in **John 17:11, 14** where He says, His children, although "in this world," are "not of this world." Hearing that always puts me on shoutin' ground!

"The spirit of truth and the spirit of error" mentioned by John in **verse 6** are as contradistinctive as day is from night. The distinguishing mark between them is whether or not God's Word is heard. Those who hear (and heed) God's Word are

God's "little children." Those who neither hear nor heed God's Word are not God's children. This truth can be seen throughout the pages of the Word of God from the day when Cain slew Abel to the present.

Choosing to hear or refusing to hear the Word of God will determine whether or not a person is prepared for eternity. Remember what Jesus taught in the last part of His Sermon on the Mt. in **Matthew 7:24-27**? He said: "Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of min and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that hours; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mind, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it."

There was a day in which a clear line of distinction existed between the world and the Church for which Jesus died. Sad as it is to say, it is not so in this...our day. Still, this sad truth does not negate the need to have a clear line drawn between the two nor does it negate the fact the Word of God says there is in this world: "the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error." In fact, in **1 Timothy 4:1** Paul tells us: "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils:" I believe the day we are living in is the day Paul was referring to.

Remember the question I posed at the beginning of this study? How can a believer discern between what is true and what is not true? The answer is simple. They can know by knowing what the Word of God says. If they know what is true they will know what is not true. What is true is what is found in the Word of God. Once that is known, discerning what is not true becomes easy. No believer needs to read all the many foolish things being published today in order to identify error. All they have to do is to read their Bible and hold to those great eternal truths found therein.

As the children of God, we find ourselves in a world not friendly to us and actually in opposition to us. Yet, God has made us to be overcomers by the Spirit that dwells in us and by the Book we know as the Bible He has given to us. But neither will benefit us unless we obey both the Holy Spirit and obey the truths we find in God's Word.

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In every past day and generation, a follower of Christ was tasked with the responsibility to learn how to discern between what is right and what is wrong. But in our day, a follower of Christ *must be* able to discern between what is almost right and what is almost wrong. We can be successful in doing this only when we have the Spirit of God and the Word of God constantly abiding in us.

We prove who we are not just by hearing, but by doing what we hear. May I close by saying once again, the proof is in the pudding.

Tom Price, 2020