

Discernment and the Holy Spirit

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Bible Text: 1 John 4:1; Acts 11-16

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You know, that last line, it will never lose its power for me. You know, it's interesting, a lot of critics of the Bible think that it's outdated, it's some artifact of antiquity, but did you know that word for power, when the Bible says that Jesus Christ is the power of our salvation, where that line comes from, that that has translated through the millennia and we get our word dynamite from it today; that that same word that says that the power of God unto salvation in our common language is the dynamite, in other words when we talk about the blood of Jesus Christ and its power for me, that Jesus Christ is able to eliminate or remove any obstruction in our life that keeps us from being where we should be or where we need to be. When we talk about his blood and its power, whatever the obstruction, whatever the issue, whatever the concern, whatever is in the place of where you should be today, hear me clearly, only the blood of Jesus can remove it. Not your background, your education, your skill set, only the blood of Jesus has the power to remove whatever the obstruction is.

Let's pray.

Lord, as we come to this time, Lord, as we have prepared our hearts, declaring not only the power of the blood but the mightiness of the cross of Jesus Christ, Lord, as we open your word, challenge us with it. Lord, may we not be the same people who leave this campus who walked on. God, we come, I pray, just as Jeremiah the prophet said, that our hearts and our lives would be as the clay in the potter's hand. Mold us, shape us, put us in your image. Lord, may we not try to conform you to ours. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to two specific places in the New Testament, the book of 1 John 4 and the book of Acts 11 through 16. Now I know that's a pretty open ended area there. We'll get there in a moment. We're going to spend the first half of the message today at 1 John 4, then we're going to go back to the book of Acts 11 through 16 for some illustrative materials based on the subject matter at hand.

If you're a guest or visitor with us today, we've been walking through kind of a journey together primarily through the book of Acts but all throughout the New Testament looking at this subject matter or idea: the person and the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We've looked at what does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit. What does it

mean to be bestowed spiritual gifts. On the other side, we looked at what does it mean to grieve the Holy Spirit. So we've looked at both sides of the equation but last week we addressed probably the most practical of all the messages, listening to the Holy Spirit of God. We talked about sometimes we have these lightning moments in life, it completely changes everything. Sometimes we have what we call thunder moments where we hear the voice of God more clearly or more distinctly than probably other times in life. But what we focused on last week, that the most prominent way that the Lord speaks in our lives through the Holy Spirit is that quiet whisper in our ear as he guides us, as he directs us day by day in decision by decision. If we're going to speak about listening to the Holy Spirit, then it is only of necessity that we deal with the subject matter today of discerning the Holy Spirit.

Now when I use the word "discernment," by strict definition it means "to distinguish or to discriminate against another." In other words, when we speak about hearing the Holy Spirit, one thing we must recognize today, that when you desire to hear from God, there are competitors out there. There are voices, ideas, philosophies and constructs that oftentimes – hear me clearly – they sound like God, they come in the appearance of God, but they have nothing to do with the truth of God.

Let me encourage you in 1 John 4, one very simple yet powerful verse. We're going to take this verse and kind of peel away the layers, then we're going to go back into the book of Acts and see how this is lived out on a day by day basis. It says,

1 Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.

Now when we talk about discernment today, I want to break it down to three basic questions: what is discernment; how do we discern; and why is it important. And I want to use the definition for discernment as kind of our subpoints today. How do we distinguish and how do we differentiate between the two?

So let's begin with what, what is discernment? Now I've shared with you what the dictionary definition is but let's go a little bit further. What we need to do is distinguish the biblical definition of discernment versus how the world tells us discernment is lived out in our lives. Here's how the world will tell you if you're discerning, the world will tell you if you have that sixth sense, in other words if you can walk into a room and you just kind of know who needs to be the lead on that project, or if you walk into a situation and say, "You know, I think this is what's really happening." The world calls it a sixth sense. In fact, the world also talks about intuition. Now let me describe intuition. Intuition is that inclination that you just kind of gravitate toward what should be versus what should not be.

Let me describe this in our home. Many of you are familiar with what we call women's intuition. Let me share with you how that's lived out in our house. If you're not familiar, our house possesses four men and one beautiful young lady, my wife. My wife can tell us to go into the living room and go and pick something up or find something and all four of

us combined including the dogs, can't find it. My wife walks in the back door, she knows exactly where it is. I don't know if it's a radar on the naval. I don't know what it is but, women, you can find things guys can't find.

When the world talks about discernment, the world is talking about intuition or a sixth sense. That's not what the Bible is saying. When the Bible is talking about discernment it says that we need to realize that we live in a world where we have communication with the spiritual world and we need to distinguish what is the voice of God and what is the voice of an opponent. We're not dealing with lost socks here or who should be the lead on a project, we're talking about did I hear from God or did I hear from a competitor thereof? That's what we need to distinguish.

Now we need to differentiate. When we talk about discernment, there is the difference between all believers in Jesus Christ discerning the voice of God in our life versus those who according to 1 Corinthians 10:12 have the spiritual gift of discernment. The Bible does say that as he bestows gifts, and hopefully you have participated in our spiritual gifts survey and you've kind of gone out and answered some questions to kind of see, "Well, how has God wired me and how has he constructed me?" There is a spiritual gift called the discernment of spirits. That being said, the Bible says here, "Beloved." It doesn't say just to those who have this gift or just those who have the special indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The word "beloved" here means all believers. So I think oftentimes we are guilty of saying, "Well, I don't have that spiritual gift." Isn't it convenient that anytime the Lord is addressing in our lives, we often have the excuse, that's not my gift, that's somebody else's? When it comes to discernment, we cannot take a step back and go that's not what God has called me to be. No, he says, "Beloved," he says, "do not believe every spirit." So when we talk about discernment, this is not intuition, this is not sixth sense, what this is is did I hear from God or was it indigestion. Did I hear from God or was it a competing voice.

The next phrase in 1 John 4:1 tells us how we discern. What does it say? Test the spirits. Try the spirits. In other words, the Bible commands us, it commissions us not to just take everything at face value but to allow it to go through a sieve of testing or a sieve of trying. Now let me also use the same definitions for discernment on this. How do we distinguish this? Notice what it says, do not believe every spirit. What that means is in addition to the Holy Spirit of God, there are competing spirits in our life that desire to communicate into our lives and steer us off the course of our life.

Allow me to illustrate from the Eastern world and from the Western world. If you have the privilege to go over to the Eastern world, you will understand very quickly they are much more spiritual than we are. In fact, over in the Eastern world, everything has a spiritual nature to it. Everything. Every aspect, every aspect of nature, everything has a spiritualness to it. In fact, there are many faiths and religions over in the Eastern world where they will subscribe to hundreds and thousands of gods. There are those that worship their ancestors. There are those that worship inanimate objects. There are those that worship reincarnated constructs and such, whatever it may be. The struggle in the Eastern world is they so do not want to miss out on the spiritual world that they just

throw everything in the grocery cart and say it's all true. What does it say here? Do not believe every spirit. It can't all be true, according to the Bible some of it, or shall we say most of it, is not.

Now we live in the Western world. Most of us have been raised and reared in this part of the world and we are very much non-spiritual, in fact, we're materialistic, we're carnal. Our culture struggle is if we can't touch it, we can't see it, we can't feel it, it must not be real. So when we began to investigate, when we began to be open to the voice of God and discerning the Spirit of God, we often fall into a trap that a friend of mine did some years ago. He went to a large convention center and it had been touted for a while there was going to be a very well-known public figure there that was going to have an event, was going to have, for lack of better terms, a service, and there was all kinds of hoopla and there are all kinds of events going on, and as a part of the presentation that night, the key most critical figure or character as a part of it, at one point put his hand out and according to my friend, over 500 people immediately fell on their back. He came back and he shared that event. He said, "Jeff, I've never seen the power of God. I've never seen God move like that." I said, "How did you know it was God?" He said, "Because only God can do that." I beg to differ. 2 Corinthians 11 says the devil himself disguises himself as an angel of light.

So when we begin to distinguish how do we discern, we in the Western world, we fall into the trap of saying, "Well, if it was supernatural and if it was not normal, if it wasn't what I'm used to, then it had to be of God." Let me remind you it might have been the lasagna you ate last night, okay? Just because it felt different, just because it looked different, just because it seemed different, did not mean it was the voice of God speaking in your life. We have to distinguish between the voice of God and the competing voices.

So how do we differentiate? How do we decide what is of God and what is not? Notice what it says, try them, test them. You say, "Well, how do I do that?" This is where Acts 11 through 16 comes into play. If you'll turn to the book of Acts, and we're going to be jumping through a variety of these passages here. When you get to the book of Acts, one of the things you will discover in chapter 11 is that the Gentiles, that's predominantly you and I, by the way, the Gentiles had been reached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's gone to the Jews in Acts 2, the Samaritans in Acts 8, the Gentiles in Acts 10. Beginning in chapter 11 of the book of Acts, you have this dialogue, you have this discourse going back and forth between how the Gentiles are to respond to the Gospel, how the Jews are to respond to the Gospel because that wall or partition has been broken down and that which used to have separate courts is now worshipping together. The reason I say through chapter 16, because by the time you get to chapter 17, you see the Apostle Paul out on the missionary journeys, you see him stirring up the people, you see him in the academic world among the Stoics, the philosophers. Between chapters 11 and chapter 16, for lack of better terms, we're just figuring this thing out, okay? How do we hear from God? How do we know it was God that led us? And do you know what the underlying seam and thread is throughout all these chapters? That if it does not line up with and is not supported by Scripture, it wasn't God. In other words, you do not have the right to say, "I know the Bible doesn't address it, but I just think it is." That's not the Spirit of God. The

Holy Spirit of God will not give you information that he doesn't give all of us, at least supportively. In other words, you cannot verify what you want life to be based on, "Well, this is what I heard from God even though the Bible does not support it." You didn't hear from God, but on the other hand, sometimes we say, "Well, I can't believe that is of God but yet the Bible says it is." So we have this problem where we go back and forth either saying, "I experienced or heard something that is not supported by Scripture or I don't want to believe that which is."

How do we differentiate the voice of God? The Holy Spirit of God will never ever communicate anything to us that cannot be verified by his word. He has given us this security, he has given us this check and balance so that as we are in our prayer closet, as we are walking through life and we are conversing with the Lord, we say, "God, I don't know if I'm listening to you are not," it will always have verification in his word. That's how we differentiate.

So what is discernment? Hearing the voice of God versus competing voices. How do we discern? We have to distinguish not only between the false voices but confirmation with the word of God. Which leads to the last and the most important question: why is this so important? The last statement in 1 John 4:1 says because there are many false prophets that have gone out into the world. Now 2 Peter 2:1 defines for us what a false prophet is. A false prophet is somebody who enters what is called damnable heresies, denying even our Lord Jesus Christ. We're not just talking about people who maybe have an error here or an error there, but they are completely way off and claiming – hear me clearly – claiming to speak on behalf of God.

So how do we distinguish the false prophets? Turn to Acts 12 for a brief moment. I want to distinguish those who claim to be God versus those who claim to speak on behalf of God. In Acts 12, we run into a guy by the name of Herod. By the way, any time you run into somebody named Herod in the Bible, it's usually not a good thing. But Acts 12:21,

21 And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. 22 And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man. 23 And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him [or killed him], because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost. 24 But the word of God grew and multiplied.

Here is a man who was willing to claim he was God, and if you think that is far-fetched, the Bible makes it very clear that there is a character who will one day show up, we know him commonly as the antichrist. By the way, that word is only used in the book of 1 John. The book of Revelation which we typically associate him with, it uses the term "the beast." That antichrist, that beast character, one day according to the book of Revelation, he shows up and 2 Thessalonians 2 verifies this, he walks into the temple of God and he declares he is God.

You see, we've got to distinguish, there's a big difference between somebody who claims to be God and somebody who speaks on behalf of God. Though it does occur in very rare instances, most likely you're not going to run into anybody, hear anybody or read a book by anybody who claims to be God. If they say they are God, just get rid of it, plain and simple, okay? What you and I need to do today is we need to differentiate between those who claim to speak on behalf of God but are not verified or validated by the word of God. 1 John 4:1, we need to test the spirits because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

Now as we begin in chapter 13 of the book of Acts, I promise for the sake of time we're not going to go through every chapter, every verse, but I want you to see three ways in which you and I oftentimes can become subject to the wrong voices in our life. Chapter 13, we have Paul's first missionary journey. I'm going to pick it up in verse 6,

6 And when they had gone through the isle unto Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Barjesus: 7 Which was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man; who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God. 8 But Elymas the sorcerer (for so is his name by interpretation) withstood them [listen to this passage], seeking to turn away the deputy from the faith. 9 Then Saul, (who also is called Paul,) filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him, 10 And said, O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?

How did the Apostle Paul, how did those gathered, how did they know that this individual was a false prophet? Not just by his reputation, not just by his name, notice what happens here in verse 8 and 9, he turns people away from the faith. When you are around or you hear from or you are reading books that may have religious motifs, religious concepts, they may even sound churchy when they talk about everything but Jesus, you've got a problem. You know, the Bible talks about finances. The Bible talks about marriage. The Bible talks about raising children. The Bible talks how to handle employees and employers. The Bible talks about all kinds of different subject matters but if you don't talk about Jesus, you've missed the boat. In fact, allow me to summarize and contemporize the words of Jesus from Mark 8, "What good is it to have a healthy marriage, great kids and a lot of money, if you spend forever in hell?" What we discover is there are individuals today, books that are written, conferences that are held, messages that are spoken, that they talk all about the subjects of the Bible but they never talk about the subject of the Bible which is Jesus Christ. If you don't have Jesus, then what does it matter if you have all of the peripherals around?

Now I know what you may be thinking, "Well, that does occur and that does happen but it's rare," and you're absolutely right. It is, but the next one is going to be a little more frequent. Go to chapter 14. Chapter 14, Paul and the apostles and Barnabas, they continue their way and they run into a situation where the Gospel is preached with validity from

them but when it is heard, the response of the crowd, the audience, is fascinating. Verse 11,

11 And when the people saw what Paul had done [by the way, there was a man that was healed], they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men. 12 And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercurius, because he was the chief speaker. 13 Then the priest of Jupiter, which was before their city, brought oxen and garlands unto the gates, and would have done sacrifice with the people. 14 Which when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of, they rent [or tore] their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out,

What happened here is what I want to talk about when it comes to position. Now thankfully Paul and Barnabas recognized what was taking place. They wanted to call them Jupiter, they wanted to call them Mercury or Zeus and Hermes and the other philosophies of the world, and they said, "No, no, no, we're not going to have anything to do with that. Do not elevate us to a status that we are not worthy of or have the identity of." Allow me to break this down into everyday life. A false prophet according to 1 John 4:1 which we should not hear from, according to 2 Peter 2, has a damnable heresy, is anybody – listen to me – who says that you've got to go through them to get to God. The Bible says there is only one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. There are people in our culture who elevate – I'm going to say this – they elevate their pastor to godlike status and it's wrong. Do you know how you go to God? You go to him through Jesus, you don't go to him through me. There are other groups, there are other people, who say you cannot understand the Bible unless you read our literature to guide you. Jesus Christ said the only guide we need was the Holy Spirit that would guide us into all truth. So sometimes we run into a situation where the communication, the books, the conferences, talk everything about the Bible but nothing about Jesus, sometimes they elevate personalities to such a status that they become the go-between and not Jesus.

Last but not least, chapter 16, probably the most frequently, most common aspect in our culture when it comes to this idea of hearing or listening to the wrong voices. Chapter 16, verse 16, it says,

16 And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel [or young lady] possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying: 17 The same followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation. 18 And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour. 19 And when her masters saw that the hope of their gains was gone, they caught Paul and Silas, and drew them into the marketplace unto the rulers,

Even though she said, "Oh, they are telling the truth," do you see that the only motivation, the only factor that allowed it to propagate was the fact that their pockets

were being padded with money. You see, sometimes the false communication comes through those who talk about everything but Jesus, even though it may be a biblical topic. Sometimes it comes through those that elevate themselves to such a standing they become godlike in our lives. But this one is profit. In other words, as long as it puts money in their pockets, they are your best friends and they'll tell you everything you need to know about the Lord, but as soon as the money dries up, they go by the wayside.

Let me sum it up, here it is. Let me give you a warning signal. By the way, if you've ever heard this from anybody else, they got it from me. Are you ready? Stay away from gold chairs, big hair and Learjets. Let me say that again, stay away from gold chairs. If everything is of a gaudiness, if everything is just flashy, I've got news for you: they want your money. If they've got hair that looks like my high school in the eighties in Texas, stay away, particularly if it has a lot of different colors. And last but not least, if they dare tell you Jesus wouldn't be caught riding a donkey, he needed a Learjet, turn the TV off, please. In other words, what was happening here is everybody was talking about Jesus as long as they could profit off of Jesus.

Folks, be discerning. Listen, would the voice of God, would the Holy Spirit's primary concern be that somebody gets rich and wealthy? Would the Holy Spirit's main concern be to put a barrier between me and God that I have to go through them? Would the Holy Spirit's main concern though it may be a great thing, is my marriage and family and finances but not my soul? You and I have got to listen to the voice of God very particularly and very carefully because there are so many competing voices and sometimes they come clothed in religion and in church, and sometimes they even have a Bible in their hands, but the voice of God will never contradict and is always supported by his word. It says to not believe every spirit but try the spirits to see which ones are of God or which one is of God because there are many false prophets in the world.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. You know, maybe you're here this morning whether here in person or on the other side of the cameras and maybe you'd be willing to admit, "You know, I've gotten caught up. I'm guilty. I've listened to some of the wrong voices. They told me what I wanted to hear. They told me what made me feel good. It just sounded too good to be true," which means that it was. The voice of God, the Holy Spirit of God, communicates very clearly these two important things: that you and I are by nature sinners in need of a Savior and only Jesus Christ can save us and forgive us. Maybe you're here this morning and saying, "Do you know what? I need to get on the right track. I need to get on the right path. I've been listening to the wrong voices." I've got great news for you, the Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. You don't have to sign up for a 13 week course, you don't have to mail money into a certain PO Box, you don't have to receive a package in the mail. No, all you have to do is talk with the Lord. You don't have to have this conversation about, in fact you don't even have to say the same words I might say, but maybe your conversation with the Lord would go a little something like this. "God, today I just want to admit what you already know. I've been listening to the wrong voices. But today I want to listen to your voice and your voice alone. And God, I believe that you have spoken it clearly in your word that you loved me so much that you sent Jesus to be born for me. I believe you loved me so

much that Jesus lived a sinless life on behalf of me. I believe you loved me so much that Jesus Christ was willing to pay the price for my sins on the cross as the payment for my sin and three days later I believe he rose from the dead so I could be forgiven and I could be saved. And God, today I don't have all the answers to the world's problems, I don't even have the answers to my own problems, but I do know that Jesus Christ is the only answer to my sin problem. In the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me. I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, isn't it good to know that you don't have to be subject to the wrong voices? Isn't it good to know that you can hear from, you can communicate with the Creator and the Sustainer of your life, temporal and your life eternal. You don't need another human being. You don't need a pamphlet. You don't need to even send in a check or cash but the book of Romans says that the gift of salvation is free through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Lord, as we come to this time, thank you, thank you, God, that even though we may have lived decades listening to the wrong voices, that your voice is louder, your voice is stronger, and your voice is more powerful than all the competitors. Help us, O God, today no matter where we've been, what we've done or who we've done it with, that we would listen to your voice alone. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask you to stand with me as our team leads us, whatever decision, I'll be right down here at the front.