

1 JOHN

“Spiritual Discernment”

1 John 4:1–6

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Scripture Reading

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: 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, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (1 John 4:1–6).

Introduction

Imagine for a moment that you are Pharaoh, the High King of ancient Egypt. You hold more political power than anyone you know. You have more wealth than anyone you know. The people of your nation not only follow you—they *worship* you as if you were a god on earth. And then, one day, as you sit on your throne, a shepherd named Moses and his brother come before you.

By their clothing, you recognize them as belonging to the race of slaves that serve you [show image [Moses Before Pharaoh by Chagall](#)]. They should fear you and cower before your might and majesty. But instead, the shepherd announces that he is sent by a God—and this God commands you to let all your slaves go. This would almost be funny and amusing if it were not so brazenly offensive! After all, you have grown accustomed to being treated like a living god.

So, you command Moses must prove that his God has the authority to make such a demand. You think there is no way this could happen. You think you are calling the man’s bluff. But then the shepherd does something unexpected. He asks his brother to throw his staff on the ground. And in a display of supernatural power, the staff turns into a snake writhing on the floor [show image [Aaron’s Rod Turned into a Serpent](#)].

But not to worry. After all, You're the Pharaoh of Egypt. You have magicians of your own. So you command your magicians to come forward and display their own power. They, too, throw down their staffs. And—*shockingly*—their staffs turned into snakes as well.

If you were the Pharaoh, you'd be tempted to celebrate until you saw Moses's snake eventually eat and consumes the snakes of the Egyptian magicians.

Nevertheless, the Egyptian magicians have already performed their trick. They tell you not to listen to this shepherd named Moses or the words of his God. Moses seems to possess supernatural, spiritual power. But the Egyptian magicians have spiritual power as well.

If you were the Pharaoh, how would you know who to listen to? How would you know who to trust? How would you know how to *discern* what is true?

This little contest of spiritual power was a very strange but very real event recorded in the Old Testament book of Exodus (see: Exodus 7:8–13). But it illustrates a key concept that we encounter throughout the Bible, including the passage we read earlier from 1 John 4 today.

That concept is this: *just because something seems spiritual doesn't mean that it is from the Holy Spirit; just because something is supernatural doesn't mean it is from God.*

From the days of Moses to the days of Jesus's apostles, all the way to our current moment in history, there have been many people who claim to be spiritual. There are leaders and gurus who seem to be connected to some sort of supernatural power. And many times, such individuals will claim to speak with divine authority.

The question is: *how do we know who to trust?*

How can you tell if the televangelist on cable television is truly teaching the word of God or if he is just a swindler who preys on the gullible to grow his own fortune and fame? How can you tell if the person on YouTube or TikTok actually knows what they are talking about or if they are simply confidently spouting nonsense to gain a following? A more direct question might be, *why should you believe anything that I have to say today?*

It is with these questions in mind that we will now explore the crucial topic of **"Spiritual Discernment."** The word "discernment" means the ability to tell the difference between what is true and what is false; "discernment" is the ability to tell what is real from what is fake; "discernment" is the ability to see beneath the surface and beyond illusions to what is genuine.

As we dig into this passage, we will examine four major ideas about Spiritual Discernment: 1.) *The Need for Spiritual Discernment*, 2.) *The Test of Spiritual Discernment*, 3.) *The Power Behind Spiritual Discernment*, and 4.) *The Standard of Spiritual Discernment*.

Exposition

1) *The Need for Spiritual Discernment*

The book of 1 John is written by the Apostle John. He is the last of the living apostles of Jesus. Now, in his elderly years, he is writing this letter as a pastoral word of encouragement and warning to the next generation of Christians. As John nears his own death, he knows it is now their job it is now to follow Jesus and bear witness to the way of Jesus in a world that is often confusing and hostile toward their faith.

It is evident that John dearly loves the people to whom he writes. That is why over and over again throughout this letter, he calls them his “children” and his “beloved.” He knows that there will be false teachers and leaders who will seek to lead those he loves astray. And so from that place of love, he issues a warning and a command: *“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world”* (1 John 4:1).

Now, such a command might come across as absurd in our own cultural context. We live in a culture that has been conditioned to see the world as nothing more than matter in motion. We have lost the ability to sense the spiritual, the supernatural, and the transcendent. Why should we care about spirits?

But for the Apostle John, the issue is not whether or not spirituality is real. For John—and most people around the globe and throughout time—it is a given that there is a truly spiritual aspect to our reality.

Deep in our bones, we know that our universe is more than what we can observe and record. Reality is more than mere matter in motion. Spirituality is an undeniable part of the human experience.

But *just because something is spiritual does not mean that it is true, good, and from God*. Not everything that is spiritual comes from the Holy Spirit. That is why the Apostle warns, *“...many false prophets have gone out into the world”* (1 John 4:1).

This is not a hypothetical scenario that John is telling us to consider. This is a declarative sentence about what Christians should expect.

There will be false teachers. There will be false prophets. There will be those who, in the name of God, preach, teach, and intentionally (or unintentionally) lead others into spiritual deception.

This happened in the New Testament, and this happens today. But Christians must not be spiritually gullible. Rather, *Christians are called and commanded to be a people of spiritual discernment*. We must now be wise in our own eyes. We must humbly acknowledge the limitations of our autonomy and self-sufficiency and instead realize that we are at risk of being spiritually deceived.

But what would a false prophet look like now? Should we expect them to carry a nametag that says “Satanist Priest”? Should we expect them to wear a dark black wizard robe like Lord Voldemort?

Probably not.

If that were the case, we wouldn't have to discern false prophets as much as we would need to simply acknowledge them. No, actual false prophets are subtle, not sensational. They most often deal in the realm of covert deception, not overt demonic display.

Hauntingly, they are counterfeits that look very much like the real thing—and that is exactly why they are so effective.

The most dangerous lie is the one that looks most like the truth. A false prophet is anyone or anything that plausibly claims to speak with ultimate authority but, in reality, is speaking contrary to the authoritative truth of God. A false prophet is anyone or anything that is attempting to convince you that he, she, or it is your savior instead of Jesus.

This certainly includes the swindler televangelist, but I want you to also see that false prophecy goes beyond the realm of Christendom. Both the religious and the irreligious can be just as vulnerable to the deception of a false prophet. Yes, a false prophet might be a religious teacher who teaches a distorted doctrine. But it could also be something else. It could be anything or anyone that is trying to step into the place of Jesus.

A false prophet is anyone or anything that says to you, “I am the way, the truth, and the light to your self-worth, validation, and acceptance before God and man—follow me.”

A false prophet can be the diet that says, “If you follow me, I will restore you. I will give you the protection, the value, and the control you crave.”

A false prophet could be the five-year plan or the investment strategy that says, “Follow me, and I will make you safe and secure.”

False prophets can even be the political party or candidate that promises, “If you follow me and place your hope in me, I will defeat your enemies, I will right all that is wrong, and make all things new.”

With that definition, think about how many false prophets there really are in this world.

All people—Christians and non-Christians alike, whether they know it or not—are seeking some type of salvation. A false prophet appeals to that natural, innate hunger for salvation and proclaims a salvation other than Christ.

We must be discerning enough to recognize false prophets and tell them, “no!”

But *how* are we to discern?

2) **The Test of Spiritual Discernment**

In the world of chemistry, one of the most basic tests that you can perform on a substance is known as a litmus test. A litmus test is an easy, inexpensive way to determine what the pH value is of a given substance. A litmus test can tell you if the glass of clear liquid in front of you is neutral, like water, or if the clear liquid in front of you is highly acidic and deadly.

We need litmus tests in the world of chemistry, and we need litmus tests when it comes to spirituality. And John will give a very helpful litmus test in this passage. He writes, *“By this you know the Spirit of God: 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.” (John 4:2-3a).*

True Christian spirituality, faith, and practice are all about Jesus. Christianity is founded on Jesus, centered on Jesus, and dependent upon Jesus. And according to John, *the defining trait of a false spirituality is that it denies, diminishes, or distorts Jesus.* It is essentially any worldview or storyline of life without Jesus as the center.

Now, at the time John is writing, there was a particular heresy that was seeking to infiltrate the early Christian churches. The core of this false doctrine was the denial that Jesus was fully human.

This teaching was called *Docetism*. Docetism taught that all matter was evil, and because all matter was evil, Jesus could never have become a real human. Instead, the Docetists taught that Jesus was a pure spirit and that his humanity was a mirage.

This was a dangerous heresy because without both the full divinity and humanity of Christ, the gospel is compromised. If Christ wasn't truly man, then he could not have died the death that we deserved or resurrected to life so that we might live.

Now, it's important to know that the early church tells with lots of heresies other than Docetism. But it is fascinating that almost every major heresy in the early church centered on some distortion of Jesus.

Here is a big idea: *spiritual deception always attacks the doctrine of Jesus because if we lose Jesus, we lose everything. This is why, even now, false doctrine usually denies Jesus, distorts Jesus, or distracts from Jesus.*

From popular books and films like *The Da Vinci Code* to the crackpot shows on the History Channel that says Jesus was actually an alien in disguise, the doctrine of Christ is just as constantly challenged today just as it was when the book of 1 John was written.

For example, in modern-day America, there are many spiritual teachers who take our cultural idolatry of prosperity and call it the Christian gospel. They say, “If you follow Jesus and give lots of money to the church, you will become prosperous. You’ll live a blessed life. You’ll have your best life now!” This form of teaching is often called the “Prosperity Gospel.

But the prosperity gospel is no gospel. It is a demonic distortion of Christ. It reduces Jesus to nothing more than a utility—a stepping stone—that allows us to get to our national idols of money, success, and power.

And there are many more destructive ideas out there than just the prosperity gospel. There are many spiritual powers at work that would cause us to be distracted from Jesus.

It is for this reason that our church sign has for twelve years displayed the words, “*It’s all about Jesus.*” Unfortunately, it is really easy for a church to not be all about Jesus. A church can easily slowly drift into being all about a celebrity personality, corporate growth, or culture war.

But even beyond that, think of how many voices there are in our world that seek to distract individual lives from Christ. Think of how many seemingly neutral things compete for your spiritual allegiance: things like your career, your kid’s sports league, your social media habits, and your hobbies.

About these things that can cause us to deny, distort, or be distracted from Jesus, John says something shocking. He says, “*This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already*” (1 John 4:3b).

The antichrist is not just an incarnated version of the Devil who will come to wage war against God at the very end of time; the antichrist is a spiritual force that is at work in the world right now.

The antichrist spirit is anything that would cause you to intentionally or unintentionally deny Christ, believe something distorted about Christ, or be distracted from Christ.

What does this look like for you? What are the antichrists of our culture? What are the antichrists in your life? What are the forces that distract you from church, from Christian community, from reading the word of God, or praying to Jesus? Conversely, what is leading you toward isolation, autonomy, and trusting what culture says instead of God?

There are evil spiritual forces that will seek to pull our hearts away from God. This again shows us why we need the power of the Holy Spirit to constantly recalibrate us to focus on the life, death, resurrection, and final return of Jesus.

3) **The Power Behind Spiritual Discernment**

When we see how vital the need for discernment is, when we see how deceived we can become, it would be really easy to become either discouraged or cynical. But John won't let us do that. Instead, he will give us a profound reason to rejoice with confidence.

Look at verse four: *"Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."* (1 John 4:4).

John is reminding us of a critical truth. He is saying, "If you are Christian, you already have the power to win the war of discernment." Why is that? Because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world!

But who is this who is in us? It is the Holy Spirit who God has given us, and through whom God abides in us (1 John 3:24).

If you are a Christian, the Holy Spirit dwells within you. He is able to commune with you and lead you into his perfect truth. He can be the one who says to your heart, "Yes, this is true," or "No, that is false." He is the one who will bring you back over and over again to the centrality of Jesus. He is the one who can recognize and discern the truth, for he is the Spirit of Truth.

Now it is true that many people in our world reject the truth. There are many who will find the truth of God not only to be false but even abhorrent. To this, our texts remind us, *"They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them"* (1 John 4:5).

In 1 Corinthians, Paul conveys this idea in a similar way: *"And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned"* (1 Cor 2:13-14).

Simply said, when the good Shepherd speaks, his sheep hear his voice (John 10:14-16). However, others will only hear nonsense. Without the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, we are by nature dead to spiritual truth. Because of this, there will be many people in our world that will despise the truth of God and the truth of Scripture. We need to expect this to be the case. Spiritual truth often seems absurd and offensive to the world.

So you need to know: the Spirit of God and the Spirit of the Age will collide. If you are a Christian, you are called to discern the truth, and you are called live in the and for the truth even when it isn't culturally convenient or popular.

There will be times when faithfulness to Jesus will put us at odds with the world around us. But the world changes like the shifting sands of time. But the truth of the gospel will endure unto eternity.

4) The Standard of Spiritual Discernment

One final thing I want to say about this idea is suggested in the last verse of this passage. John writes, "*We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error*" (1 John 4:6).

John tells his readers that they will recognize his spiritual authority because it is from God. Now what is he talking about?

If we look at the greater context of the book of 1 John, he is talking about his ministry as an apostle. John is one who has personally seen, heard, and touched the resurrected Christ (1 John 1:1-4). When he is writing this letter, it is not just personal correspondence. This letter is written by an Apostle of Jesus Christ under the very inspiration of the Holy Spirit. These are the very words of God!

Why is this important? Because it shows that Scripture is the final standard for spiritual discernment. You can discern the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit will always point you to Jesus. The Holy Spirit will always bear witness within your heart because he abides in you. And the Holy Spirit will always agree with the Word of God because he is the ultimate author of Scripture.

Do you want to know what the voice of the Holy Spirit sounds like? His voice is still and small. It is the gentlest, kindest, and most powerful voice you have ever heard. And it sounds exactly like the very Scriptures he inspired.

The Conclusion

False prophets have come and gone throughout the whole of history. In fact, in Jesus's day, there were many other men who claimed to be the Messiah. There were those who claimed that they were able to defeat God's enemies, build God's temple, and establish God's Kingdom on earth.

However, none but Jesus was the real Messiah. Why?

Because Rome put all would-be Messiah to death—but only Jesus rose from the grave.

No other Messiah but Jesus conquered the power of death by the power of resurrection. No other Messiah but Jesus ascended to the throne of heaven. No other Messiah but Jesus sent disciples into the nations and sparked a movement that would change history. No other Messiah but Jesus has promised to come back and make all things new.

So, yes, there are false prophets and antichrists in this world today. They will compete for your affection. They will try to form your vision for life. They will call to you and tell you that they can save you.

But only Jesus loved you so much that he died for you. Only Jesus defeated death for you. Only Jesus offers you true life. Only Jesus offers you the gift of his Spirit.

Jesus is better than all of the fakes. Know him today. Worship him today. Receive him today

So Redeemer Christian Church, may we be a people of discernment who understand the need for discernment. In our spiritual journeys, we may learn to forsake anything or anyone that would deceive us or distract us. Rather, may we be a people who are dependent on the Holy Spirit and centered on Christ.

Amen.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. *Read 1 John 4:1–6 out loud. Have someone from your group rephrase what this passage is saying in their own words.*
2. *What does this passage reveal about God?*
3. *What does this passage reveal about humanity?*
4. *As you look back on this passage, what are the truths that we should apply to our own lives? In other words, what are you doing well, and what do you need to change?*
5. *When you think about what you have learned from this portion of Scripture, can you think of someone that you should pray for or share this with?*