

Discernment

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Bible Verse: 1 John 4:1-6
Preached on: Tuesday, June 2, 2020

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Tonight's message is titled "Discernment." Discernment and we're going to study the first six verses here this evening, 1 John 4:1-6, and let me read that text to start. He 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 last time when we were looking at 1 John, we dealt with the whole matter in a message titled "Overcoming Doubt," and we dealt with the matter of spiritual confidence and assurance before God and assurance of our salvation. We saw in verse 19, he says, "We will know by this that we are of the truth," and he says in verse 24, "We know by this that He abides in us," and in verse 21 right there in the center he says, "we have confidence before God." He's been building on these theme of assurance which is stated plainly as one of the purposes of the book in chapter 5, verse 13. I emphasize that context to help you understand the significance of this matter of discernment that we're going to be talking about here in chapter 4.

So he's been building on this theme of assurance. The flow of thought, generally speaking, is like this, that the new birth produces belief in Christ, and belief in Christ, faith is recognized by the effects that it produces in a life: obedience to Christ; love for Christ and his people; a love for truth; a respect and an honoring of biblical authority; all of those things are the mark of a true Christian and it's what you would expect the Spirit of God to produce in someone that he makes a child of God, God is going to reproduce his own character and his own priorities in the hearts of everyone that he saves. So the new birth is recognized by belief and this other factors that I mentioned, and

understanding these things and seeing them in your life produces assurance, it gives you a sense of confidence that you really are a child of God. It's recognized by life effects that way.

Now he moves into the matter of discernment and testing the spirits and it might seem at first like it's a very abrupt change and a very sharp change of thought, especially since they put in a chapter break there, it might seem like it's a big change of thought but it's not. It's not. Why does he go there? Why does he go to discernment at this point in the letter after he's been saying these things? What is the connection between assurance and now the matter of discernment? Well, my friends, what I want you to understand is this, is that false teaching of every kind is a threat to all of those spiritual things that we hold dear. False teaching is a threat to assurance. False teaching is a threat to biblical authority. False teaching is a threat to the work of the Spirit. Because of that, because false teachers wreak such havoc in the lives of believers who are undiscerning, John here calls them to discernment in order to protect the ground that he has gained in showing them the whole matter of assurance in what he had said at the end of chapter 3. This is not the only place or the first time that you see this in biblical writing, this connection, even if it's not stated plainly at the start.

Go back to the book of Philippians for just a moment, Philippians 3, and I just want to kind of illustrate the point here for just a moment. In Philippians 3, you see this exact same thing. Paul has been writing in the first two chapters of Philippians about unity in the church and walking as children of the light, doing all things without grumbling or disputing so that you would prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation among who you appear as lights in the world. He's writing and he's promoting this sense of unity and this knowledge of Christ and this manifestation of Christian character and Christian testimony against the black backdrop of a dying world. That's the general context there, and in chapter 3, verse 1, he says this, we'll get to this soon enough in Philippians whenever we get back there, chapter 3, verse 1, he says, "Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you." Now, so he's cultivating joy, he's cultivating this sense of unity, this sense of the knowledge of Christ and how he wants to protect them in the midst of everything that he is saying and he writes to build them up in joy.

Now without transition, without connections, without explanation, in verse 2 he says this, "Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision," then he goes on to defend his apostolic ministry, "for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh." Here's what I want you to see, brothers and sisters, is this, is that immediately after writing to affirm them and to encourage them in joy and in the knowledge of Christ, he immediately says, "Beware of the false teachers. Beware of the dogs. Beware of the evil workers." And the point is this, is that although we're not necessarily used to making that connection in our minds, false teachers are a threat to everything that we hold dear. It is not simply a matter that they have a difference of opinion with us over abstract

theological matters, they bomb the foundation of our Christian life with mortar shells that would bring it all down if it could.

And so discernment is a matter of great significance and importance for us to find our way through; as I'll say later probably, is to understand that discernment is not something that's simply reserved for theologians, it's not reserved simply for pastors, each one of you have a duty to exercise discernment in your own spiritual life. You need to be growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ. You need to be growing in biblical truth and applying yourself to the word of God in a way that builds you up over time so that your assurance is protected, so that you are able to come alongside weak believers and encourage and strengthen them. This is a matter for everyone in the church, not simply for the pastor or the elders. Discernment applies to each one of you.

Now you might say, "Well, that's kind of difficult and how am I supposed to be able to sort all these things out?" Well, let me just say this by way of encouragement to you and I'm going to build on this next Tuesday as well. I just decided that this afternoon to build on this a little bit more, and so tonight we'll just touch on some introductory themes here. Here's what I want you to see. I understand that we live in this post-modern era where everything is true and nothing is false except for biblical Christianity, I guess, but everybody's opinion is of equal weight. You have your truth, I have my truth and we all just need to get along and not make too big of an issue of it. But here's the thing, my friends, is that conflicting voices confuse the truth but here's what I want you to see, it's nothing new. This is nothing new whatsoever to be in a time of competing truth claims.

Look over at the Gospel of Luke 9. Luke 9. It's been this way throughout biblical history which I'll point this out, I'll point that out next week, but for now just to touch on it briefly. In Luke 9:18 it says this, "it happened that while [Jesus] was praying alone, the disciples were with Him, and He 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.'" Here was the Son of God physically in their midst teaching, performing miracles, doing everything that the Gospels record about his life and ministry, and while Jesus was there people couldn't figure it out. People had trouble understanding and there were all kinds of conflicting truth claims. He's John the Baptist. He's Elijah. No, he's another one of the prophets that has risen from the dead. Do you see the point? It's that they're all kinds, there were all kinds of opinions circulating around the ministry of Christ. But here's the point in verse 20 for you and I today and for all time, Jesus said to them, "'But who do you say that I am?' And Peter answered and said, 'You are the Christ of God.'" You are not off the hook for discernment, you are not excused from exercising discernment, you're not excused from coming to your own convictions about who Christ is, what truth is and what the Gospel is, you're not excused from that simply because there are people that are saying diametrically opposed things. Christ comes to you and says, "But who do you say that I am?" And it's an individual personal question that we are to resolve for ourselves, not simply to pass over and shrug our shoulders and say that it must not be possible to know because there's so many conflicting opinions. Christ cuts through it all and you and I are in a position where we have to make our own commitments, we have to make our own truth commitments and

say, "No, I can read the word of God for myself. I have the Spirit of God dwelling within me helping me to understand and I see the testimony of the word of God and Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God come in human flesh and He alone is able to deliver me from my sin." And that's the conviction that every one of you should be coming to and understanding and that you are able to make that definitive statement even in the face of opposition and disagreement from others. You see, and so it's personal. Discernment is personal.

So the question is, "Well, then, who speaks for God? Can you know God? Can you know who speaks for God? And how do you know?" Pretty important questions. This is a pretty fundamental passage for all of spiritual life and so what I want to do tonight is to take you through three points that we find in this passage and just kind of treat the passage in an overview fashion tonight knowing that we're going to come back and expand on the theme next Tuesday. Next Tuesday.

So point number 1 for tonight, then, is we see the command for discernment. There is a command for discernment. God commands you to be discerning. Discernment is part of an obedient Christian life without which you are not walking in the fullness of what God would have you to do. Now in the whole context of 1 John, we see that false teachers were trying to deceive the flock and John is writing to help them. We've pointed this out recently but we'll review it again here tonight. In 1 John 2:26 he says, "These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you." They're trying to deceive you and he commands them in light of that circulating deception in verse 7 he says, "Little children, make sure that no one deceives you." And then he gives them tests for discernment.

So my friends, if you're here tonight as a believer, understand that you are called to exercise discernment so that you would walk in the truth. And you know, I'm grateful to see a lot of young people here again tonight, what a blessing that is, but just to encourage you along this path is to understand that now is the time for you to be building and developing discernment in your life and to not just rely on what your parents tell you or what a pastor tells you, but to be reading the word of God for yourself and coming to grow in your own understanding of truth otherwise, my young person friends, this is, you leave home and you're vulnerable. If you haven't developed these convictions for yourself, then you're vulnerable. You go out into the world, you go out into a university, you go out and make new friends that aren't Christians and, oh, how easy it is to be swept away in the current of the spirit of the world if you haven't anchored yourself beforehand. And so there's an opportunity for you that I plead with you to take advantage of, to recognize that you have a period of time in life right now to be able to develop convictions about truth that you can build the rest of your life on, and that's why this is so important. You and I must exercise discernment so that we walk in the truth.

Look at verse 1 now, chapter 4, verse 1. He says, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." That's the command for discernment and the idea of testing the spirits has the idea of examining something to determine whether it is genuine or not. And so, look, you are not meant to simply believe

everything that you hear. The mere fact that someone stands up and professes to be a teacher of the word of God does not mean that he should be automatically believed. That's not the case at all. We're not meant to be gullible. I've said it before, I don't think I ever titled a message like this, I've never been quite that bold to title a message like this, to put it in very colloquial language, don't be a sucker. Don't be a sucker and just believing everything that's said to you. As you're listening to something, how does that compare with the word of God? What does God's word say? What have I understood about truth in the past rather than blindly believing everything that is said to you. Jesus himself made this point in Matthew 7:15, he said, "Beware of the false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

So John says, "Test the spirits." Jesus said, "Beware of the false prophets." If you'll turn in your Bible to Acts 17 for a moment, you see the noble Bereans giving us an illustration of what a discerning spirit looks like. In Acts 17:10 it says that, "The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica," they raised a riot against the teaching, riots are nothing new, there's nothing new under the sun and so we shouldn't get too worked up about what we see happening around us. Verse 11, "Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." Notice they were teachable. They were not skeptics that simply rejected everything that was told to them. They were a teachable group of people and yet at the same time, as they received the teaching they compared the teaching they were receiving with the Scriptures, comparing it daily, you might notice there, they examined the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. And as you compare Scripture with Scripture, as you compare a teacher's teaching with Scripture repeatedly over time, it starts to become obvious whether this is somebody who's telling you the truth or not, whether it's somebody whose word you can rely upon for the interpretation of Scripture or not. But the point here for now is that this is a command for discernment and we are called to test the spirits and not simply believe every wind that comes along.

Let's look at another passage in Ephesians 4 that comes to my mind. I love it when this happens. Ephesians 4 in verse 11 we see this. On the negative side we've seen, "Test the spirits. Beware of the false prophets." Now we see the positive aspect of discernment here in verse 11, "He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ." And so, beloved, here's the thing that I want you to see from that passage as we kind of round-out this first point about the command for discernment, the intention of God in your Christian life is that you would grow and develop convictions about what is true. There is no virtue in

having an open mind about every question, every issue in faith that just never, that you always learn but never come to the truth. There is no virtue in that. You are to study and to come to convictions that say, "This is true and this is not. This is right and this is wrong."

So we are to grow up. You grow up like an ever-maturing oak tree, having started maybe as a little sprout and things are, you know, it's very vulnerable in those early months that you plant a new tree, but as time goes on, it grows and it becomes stable and strong and it provides shade for those who come under it. That's the kind of Christian that you are supposed to be. You're supposed to grow and become strong so that you become a point where your family, where your children, where your friends can come and sit under the shade of what you have learned and be protected from the heat of false teachers and abide in truth and to be people who are not so easily misled. That's why we do what we do here. I don't need to explain that to you. You understand that. That's why we teach God's word. That's why we don't care too much about stories and all the other stuff because stories don't build you up, doctrine does, truth does, and in doing so corporately we're trying to obey this command for discernment that Scripture speaks so clearly about.

Well, point 2 for this evening. There's not only the command for discernment but point 2, the need for discernment. The need for discernment and we've kind of been explaining this as we've going along but we'll just follow the text and let it speak to us. Why is discernment so important? Well, John states it plainly. He says, "Test the spirits to see whether they are from God," and here's the explanatory clause, "because." Here's why you must be discerning, it's because of this. This is the reason that undergirds the command for discernment, he says, "many false prophets have gone out into the world." And false teachers thrive on gullible people. Scripture says elsewhere they particularly target weak women who are bogged down in many different difficulties of life. But false teachers thrive on gullible people who love a glib speaker, someone who will flatter them, who will entertain them, sometimes going to the other end of the spectrum, and I know some of you have experienced this, false teachers who will intimidate you to follow them and threaten you, and false teachers who have all manner of hidden agendas that they are carrying out and you find those out later on. There's just a whole mess of them. To give an analogy, it's like there are just all kinds of nests of vipers that you are walking through just looking for an opportunity to strike you and inject you with their venom.

Well, what John is saying here and what Christ has provided for us is that discernment protects us from those attacks and, again, this is part of what I'm going to be saying next week so I won't dwell on it so much, but the thing that I want you to understand and to appreciate is the fact that it's not always obvious. Sometimes it's difficult to discern these things and it takes time and it takes study. The Apostle Peter in 2 Peter 2:1 said this and listen carefully, he says, "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you." 2 Peter 2:1, "false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves." So beloved, we're not talking about an incidental matter in spiritual life here, we are talking about something that is a real prevalent threat

throughout all ages of Christianity, throughout all the ages of church history, and it's certainly true here in the 21st century. We must – ah – we must understand that this threat is real and that it is serious. The willingness of someone to follow a false teacher may very well be a sign that they're not even saved to begin with despite the fact that they're professing Christ along the way. This is just such a serious serious threat.

Let's go back to Matthew 7. Again you just see the warnings alongside the assurance that the biblical writers and Jesus himself gave to those who were truly his. Matthew 7, beginning in verse 13. Just really burdened by the importance of this here tonight. Matthew 7:13, Jesus said this, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." He's calling people to exercise discernment to find the true way and true reconciliation with God. Then he immediately says, verse 15, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." I won't read the whole passage, his basic point is summed up in verse 20, "you will know them by their fruits." You'll know false teachers by what comes out of their lives and what comes out of their mouths. Then he immediately says having warned about false teachers, he goes and expresses the eternal consequences that are at stake. He says in verse 21, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will say, 'Depart from Me, I never knew you, you who practice lawlessness.'" Do you see the point? Do you see what I'm emphasizing here is the fact that this is no incidental matter, there are great eternal consequences that are attached to this matter of discernment and this reality of false prophets. This is not something to trifle with. This is not something to mess around with.

Again, I'm going to say this next week. I should have just preached next week's message tonight because that's what I keep referring to, right? But understand that false teachers are energized and animated by the spirit of antichrist. They are animated by Satan himself and Satan prowls about like a roaring lion, 1 Peter 5:8, seeking someone to devour. And so this is a real spiritual threat that carries out in the heavenly places. You and I are foolish if we treat this lightly. And if I can just say as a word of pastoral encouragement or admonishment, whatever you want to call it, those of you that so easily ignore your Bible week after week after week, you're just a sitting duck waiting to be struck down. You must be a student of God's word. You must be reading God's word in order to protect yourself in these matters.

So we see the command for discernment, we see the need for discernment. Well, let's start to answer this next question: how can you tell the true from the false? How can you tell true teachers from false teachers? Well, Jesus said in that passage in Matthew 7, he said, "You will know them by their fruits. You will know them by their fruits." Now not everyone is going to have equal skill in matters of doctrine and biblical theology, okay, so let me put your mind at ease about that. We realize that not everybody is going to have equal ability in these matters of truth and error and biblical doctrine but, my friends, what

I want you to understand is, is that that is not the only matter that grants discernment to you about what's true and what's false. Jesus says, "You'll know them by their fruits." Well, let's go to point 3 tonight and see three tests for discernment, three tests for discernment. These all reinforce one another but they give us different aspects of a false teacher to recognize them by and I'm going to give you three subpoints under this. Three tests for discernment, first of all, is we can recognize them by their false conduct. Their false conduct. False teachers have ungodly lifestyles and unloving hearts. That's the moral and social test combined into one.

Look at chapter 3, verse 10 of 1 John. I'm not sure where I left you off. I'm back in 1 John and now you will be too. 1 John 3:10. Chapter 3, verse 10, he says, "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother." There is a moral aspect. It is just astonishing to me how many prominent men in so-called Evangelical Christianity, how many of these men fall into blatant immorality, they're restored to ministry, they fall again, and you know, there's just this pattern, there's always, there's a sucker born every minute that's ready to restore them after a few months and to put them back into ministry after they've already fallen. Now look, Scripture gives a man no bites at the apple. You know, an elder, a teaching pastor, the qualification is that he must be a one-woman man, Titus 1, 1 Timothy 3, and these men who are serial adulterers, it does not matter what's coming out of their mouth, beloved, you need to turn away from them and reject them as false teachers because they are exposed by their inability to practice righteousness and John says this is obvious. The children of God and the children of the devil, they're obvious by this. The one who does not practice righteousness is not of God. What Jesus was saying in different words, "You'll know them by their fruits."

And it is just astonishing to me the number of men who can continue on doing what they're doing. That's astonishing enough, you'd think they'd slink away in shame that they've been so publicly exposed, but what's even more astonishing is that there are still thousands of people ready to follow after them. What does that say about the state of their souls, that they can follow so easily after a man who's obviously a false teacher? How can you explain this except by the fact that this isn't as difficult as it seems. This isn't as difficult as it seems, you just need to read the Bible and see that this is obvious to God and it should be obvious to us. Children of God, children of the devil. It's obvious. Anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God. You can know them by their fruits. It's not that hard. It's just that maybe in part there's this misplaced sense of compassion or grace that says, "Well, let's give him another chance." Well, no, let's not. Let's obey Scripture and say that a man's disqualified and therefore he should not be in ministry. Let's do that. More important to obey God in this matter than to generate false compassion to those who have disqualified themselves.

So ungodly lifestyles, unloving hearts. Look at verse 10 just to emphasize this, "the one who does not love his brother." You might have a man who is unblemished in the moral realm but be marked by a practice, a pattern of intimidation in his spiritual ministry in a way that disqualifies him from a different perspective. Look, Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. Christ is the good shepherd who laid down his life for us. Christ is the

one who cares for us and who won't extinguish a burning wick, so gentle is his hand with those who know him. Well, those of you that come out of some of these fundamentalist backgrounds, you've known pastors who were not like that at all. They were harsh and they were severe in their dealings with people. What you need to see is that that's equally disqualifying. The fruit of a harsh, unbending, unloving, uncaring man is equally signs that he's someone not to be followed because his conduct is a disqualifying aspect to the nature of his ministry. So by their fruit you'll know them, it says.

Look at verse 10 again. This is obvious. Chapter 3, verse 10, "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious." It's obvious. This is plain. "Anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother." And so in the context of John refuting false teachers in this letter, he gives an obvious statement to help people recognize the true from the false. Now as we go along in chapter 4, he adds two doctrinal tests that will also help us in our discernment and now we get back into the flow of the text here in chapter 4. You can recognize a false teacher by their false conduct, secondly, you can recognize them by their false Christ. Their false Christ. True teachers confess the true Jesus and thereby prove that they have the Spirit of truth.

Look at chapter 4, verse 2. Chapter 4, verses 2 and 3, that's what I meant to say. Verse 2, "By this you know," there are these words of clarity and discernment, "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, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world." The Spirit of God leads people to an understanding of who Christ really is. Who is Jesus Christ really? He's fully God and he is fully man. Two natures in one person. Co-equal with God the Father, co-equal with God the Spirit, and yet full humanity as well. And this is the sense in which Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and that confession is a mark of a true teacher of God. True teachers affirm that. True teachers affirm the purpose for which Christ came. He became man to die in the place of sinners, to offer his life as an atonement for sin. And so we see the person and work of Christ being expressed in doctrinal ways by true teachers.

Now in John's day, as we've alluded to in the past, the false teachers that he was combating were an early form of what's called Gnosticism, I'll just allude to that without going into detail. But these false teachers said that Jesus was an ordinary man upon whom the Spirit of God came at his baptism, and then the Spirit left him just before his crucifixion. So it's kind of a V-shaped ministry of the Spirit of God on Christ but he was not God before he was born, and the Spirit of God left him so that he died merely as a man, not as the God-man and that was the false teaching that John in particular was combating. Here's the point: they were denying the Incarnation. They taught a false Christ. They taught wrongly about the atonement.

Now what John is saying is what you want to know is you want to know what a teacher says about Christ, and that this aids in our discernment. True teachers openly proclaim the true Christ and they teach him. Paul said, "We proclaim not ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord." 2 Corinthians 4, I want you to turn there with me as well. 2 Corinthians 4 for

just a moment. 2 Corinthians 4. Oh, this is so important I had to stamp my foot to emphasize it whether you heard it or not. 2 Corinthians 4:5, Paul says, "we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake." You see, Paul is emphasizing the content of his preaching. Back in 1 Corinthians 2, turn back there with me. 1 Corinthians 2:2. We're kind of doing this in reverse order tonight. 1 Corinthians 2:2, Paul said, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." And in verse 22 of chapter 1, see how we're going backwards? Before long we'll be back to Leviticus at this rate. Chapter 1, verse 22, he says, "Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." We preach Christ crucified. We preach Christ crucified. Not ourselves but Jesus is Lord. Do you see the theme? This is Paul saying in different language the emphasis that John is making here. Everyone who has the Spirit of God and his teaching confesses Jesus Christ in that way. He has come in the flesh. The spirits that deny that, the teachers that deny that, that distort the doctrine of Christ, they are manifesting that they are of the antichrist, they are of the devil, they are leading people into damnation.

So when a Jehovah's Witness comes to your door and says Jesus was a god, not God himself, you are hearing the voice of antichrist speaking. When Mormons come and present a different God and a different Christ and a different heaven and a different route of salvation, beloved, these are not Christians that are talking to you. These are people who are lost and they are speaking demonic doctrines seeking those who they could lead as blind guides leading others into the pit. This is serious. This is the spirit of antichrist and while there is coming a great final antichrist, the spirit that undergirds that great final antichrist is already at work in the false teachers that are abounding. That's the point that John makes here. So those who teach falsely about Christ are giving voice to demons. They are forerunners of the coming antichrist, their false Christ exposes them as false teachers.

So as you are growing in grace, as you want to know what exactly is a teacher telling you about Christ, and let me just say something else here as well, something that's very important to emphasize and realizing that sometimes these messages go outside the walls of our church and sometimes we want to say things to help people benefit from that as well. This is really important what I'm about to say. It is quite entirely possible, it happens all the time for a church to have a reasonably orthodox statement of faith that they follow and maybe you can find it on the website, maybe you can't but, beloved, you can't just go by that. You have to know what they actually say from the pulpit. You have to know what the course and the theme of their teaching is. Perhaps some of you if you ever relocate to another area, you're looking for another church, what you need to do is you need to listen to a cross section of a man's messages. Churches that are looking for a pastor, you can't go by one simple message that a man preaches, you need to listen to a cross section of his message, asking yourself the question, "Is he consistently pointing me to Christ or not? And is he pointing me to the true Christ or not?" You can affirm a particular orthodox confession of faith but you deny it in practice by not preaching Christ when you have the opportunity.

I feel the burden of the moment, that's why I pause here. Is the man who truly has the Spirit of God, he's not going to be able to stop talking about Christ to you. He's going to be filled with the Spirit wanting to point you to Christ and not to himself again and again and again. And if a man can week after week after week be content to speak vapid sermons that are devoid of Christ, that are filled with stories about his latest vacation or his family or his children or all of that, and that's the main emphasis that you get from him – listen – judge him by what he actually says in the pulpit, not by the convenient pointing that he makes to a particular statement of faith that reads orthodox but he denies it in practice by his inability to speak of Christ when he has the opportunity to do so.

So all of these things help us to see that there are many ways to discern the true from the false. A third and final point that John gives us here this evening, this third test of discernment is you can know a false teacher by their false canon, c-a-n-o-n. Their false canon and here's the point and each one of these is present in true teachers and the absence of one is a grounds of discernment of rejecting the man, rejecting the teaching that is brought to you. Their false canon and here's a very important point: true teachers submit to apostolic teaching as the word of God.

Look at verses 4 through 6 here. Verses 4 through 6, "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." Just pause there for a moment. This is a word of encouragement from John to his readers. While these matters of discernment might seem to be high and lofty and difficult, he assures them that they are able to exercise this kind of discernment. He says the Spirit of God dwells within you, the Spirit of God illuminates your mind, the Spirit of God helps you. You are able to do this and in Christ you have already overcome them. And so you are in a triumphant position even though we are speaking to you in these ways. He encourages them in this way.

Now in verse 5 he draws a contrast with the false teachers. He says, "They are from the world." Verse 4, "You're from God." Verse 5, "They are from the world therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them." False teachers are popular with the world because the world listens to its own kind. False teachers affirm ungodly people in their rebellion against God. This is moralistic therapeutic deism all over again. But if you see a teacher who's popular with the unsaved world, you need to turn away from him. His audience exposes him as someone who is false.

But now look at verse 6 and this is where we'll close and conclude here this evening. John says this, he says, "We are from God." Verse 4, "You are from God." Verse 5, "They are from the world." Verse 6, "We are from God." Understand what John is saying here. There is no modern teacher today who can make the statement, this statement in the way that John is making it. When John says "we are from God," he's speaking as an apostle. He's speaking as a representative of that apostolic circle. The apostles and their teaching, he says, the one who knows God listen to us. We listen to the apostles by which we mean the Scripture is our authority. In today's language now that the canon is

completed, the written word of God is our final authority and it is our only authority. Oh, that word "only" is so very important.

So John here says, "We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us." What is he saying here? Well, let me summarize it this way and we've said all of these things before. I say them gently but I must say them clearly. A teacher who does not accept the authority of the Bible is a false teacher. It could be no other way. Someone who denies the word of God, who accuses it of being full of errors, who denies it in that way, he's not from God no matter what else he says because the one who is from God listens to the apostles. He heeds them. He obeys them. He respects the authority of the apostles. Someone who adds to the authority of the apostles is not from God and, beloved, I'm sorry but I have to say these things, those teachers who appeal to their own prophecies are false teachers without exception. Teachers who appeal to their experiential, their experiences and appeal to those as saying, "I've got a message from God. Listen to what happened. Listen to what God told me." They are overriding the authority of the apostles when they say things like that and they are exposing themselves as false. The true teachers heed the apostles and when you add to the apostles or when you take away from the apostles, you are denying the very truth of what John is saying.

Mormons claim new revelation. Catholics add their tradition. Charismatics add their prophecies and teach on what they say God has told them. Beloved, what I want you to see is that all of that bears a common thread of going beyond the apostles instead of listening to them and staying within the four corners of what Christ appointed for his church as he gave the apostles to his people. And this is not popular to say, but they are all exposed as false by the fact that they appeal to a different authority than the authority of the apostles.

In Revelation 22 it says this, "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."

You say, "This is pretty sober, then?" Yeah, it's pretty sober. It's a pretty serious matter. You see, beloved, when we talk about who God is, we're dealing with matters of utmost sobriety and Scripture warns us and calls us to exercise discernment so that you would be in the truth and know that you're in the truth and not mislead others by an unwitting misunderstanding of the things that are taught. Discernment is serious and that's why we teach the Bible here. We can only ask that the Spirit would keep us in the faith to the glory of Christ, and I'm glad that you're along for the journey as we do.

Let's pray together.

Father, we commit these things to You. Such sober matters, Father, and yet it's where the text brought us tonight. We pray and I pray, Father, that You would grant to each one of

us discernment, grant to each one of us the ability to tell the true from the false. I pray, Father, that You would give us the sense of clarity that we need from Your word, that Your Spirit would illumine us that we might know what is true and that we are in Him who is true in Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Father, for the young people here today making life decisions in relationship to truth and sorting out what they believe, Father, be abundantly gracious to them and, Father, instill in each one of our young people that are here tonight and watching over the live stream, instill in each one of them a deep profound desire to know truth, Father, in a way that would be unquenchable throughout all of their days, and would You lead them into the truth, would You sanctify them in the truth for Your word is truth.

And Father, I thank You for these brothers and sisters gathered together tonight. How sweet it is to be back together. Thank You for Your great faithfulness to us through this time of separation and we pray that You would build us up individually, build us up as a church that we might be all that You have called us to be and may Your Spirit work deeply in the hearts of those who do not know Christ, Father, to lead them to new birth, to lead them to Christ that they might be born again, that they might be saved and delivered from the clutches of the devil who blinds men to the truth. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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