

The Need for Spiritual Discernment # 12

1 John 4: 1-6

I am sure we've all been warned about believing everything we hear. The same caution should be applied for what we see as well. It is foolish to believe everything we are told and much of what we see. Lies and deception were used to tempt Adam and Eve and the enemy and his associates have not changed their tactics. Our world is filled with false doctrine and deception.

Such deception has existed for centuries, since the fall of man. [Acts 5:36-37 – For before these days rose up Theudas, boasting himself to be somebody; to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves: who was slain; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to nought.](#) ^[37] [After this man rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the taxing, and drew away much people after him: he also perished; and all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed.](#) We remember Jim Jones leading more than 900 people to commit suicide in Guyana in 1978, David Koresh and the Branch Davidians of Waco Texas, and the group that sought a ride on the comet Hale-Bopp. These were false teachers who led people astray under the cover of spirituality. We must know what the Bible teaches, what we believe, and why we believe it. There is no shortage of false prophets in our day, and it will continue until the Lord returns.

John urges us to develop spiritual discernment and guard against deception and the spirit of antichrist. Let's examine the [insights](#) of the text as we consider: [The Need for Spiritual Discernment](#).

I. The Believer's Diligence (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.](#) Our discernment requires due diligence if we are to overcome the spiritual attacks we face. Consider:

A. The Appeal (1a) – [Beloved, believe not every spirit.](#) John offers a simple yet profound appeal. We cannot believe everything we hear or experience in this life. He simply challenges the believer against being gullible in everyday life.

- This appeal needs to be heeded today as well. Have you ever known a time when we were bombarded with more doctrine and philosophy than today? Society and culture have adopted their own set of rules. We are challenged by many against a literal interpretation of Scripture. Many argue the Bible doesn't hold the same weight today as when it was written. They claim it was given for others, but no longer applies today. Many false prophets appear sincere and maybe believable, but we must examine every aspect of our lives with Scripture.

B. The Approach (1b) – Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God:

When we are offered a philosophy or view from others, always approach it from a biblical perspective. Is it consistent with the teaching of Scripture? What does the Bible have to say about this particular doctrine or behavior? Try the spirits and teachings of others. We are expected to examine the motives and teaching of others, seeking to determine their merit based on the Word.

- Have you ever heard someone say, “I know what the Bible says, but...?” We can rest assured God will never lead us contrary to His Word. If the motives, teaching, or behavior of others contradicts Scripture, we can know for sure it isn’t of God. If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, there is a pretty good indication that it is a duck!

C. The Aggression (1c) – because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Bear in mind, they were only a few decades removed from Christ’s ascension and yet John proclaims there were already many false prophets among the world. With the first of humanity, Satan sought to defile men and lead them astray. I am convinced he plants counterfeits among the world in an attempt to hinder the Gospel message.

- Man is a spiritual creature with an inward desire to worship something, even if it is himself. All of humanity will either worship the true and living God or gods of their imagination. The doctrines and religions of our day continue to diversify and grow. Man wants some sort of worship that is consistent with his personal desires. Satan will provide a teacher and doctrine to accommodate man’s wishes. We are surrounded by false prophets, many of whom seek to spew their poison under the banner of Christ. [2 Peter 2:1 – But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.](#)

II. The Believer’s Discretion (2-3) – We do not have to live in darkness. We can know the truth and abide in the light. John reveals the litmus test for truth. Consider:

A. The Criteria (2) – [Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God:](#) There is a lot we could say about this statement, but in reality Jesus Christ is the defining factor regarding truth. What one does with Jesus reveals their spiritual condition and standing with the Lord. If we affirm that Christ came in the flesh, born of a virgin, died for the sin of humanity, and rose again victorious, our doctrine is consistent with God and His inspired Word.

- We may have differences of opinion, but at the end of the day this is the deciding factor and criteria for genuine faith. Much of what we disagree on among the church will not have eternal significance, but what we do with Christ certainly will. If our hearts and doctrine are right concerning Christ, it is evident we are pleasing to the Lord.

B. The Contradiction (3a) – [And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God:](#) John reveals the attitude many possess contrary to God. If one cannot confess Christ and His finished work, they are not of God. Again, Christ is the essential element in faith and the determining factor in our standing with God.

- This is where caution is needed in our day. There are many religious groups that claim affiliation with Christ, but deny the Christ of the Bible. They seek to detract from His deity and the work He accomplished. They may mention Christ, but what do they actually believe concerning Him. Simply, if one cannot embrace Christ as revealed in the Bible and the truth of the Gospel, they are not of God. [2 John 1:7 – For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.](#)

C. The Confusion (3b) – [and this is that *spirit* of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.](#) The spirit of rebellion and deception was already prevalent in John's day through the spirit of antichrist. Many in his day sought to discredit the Lord, denying His deity and finished work. They were spreading lies and confusion.

- This great evil continues in our day. Take a moment to consider the doctrines being promoted and encouraged in America. We live in an "anything goes" society. People are taught to be their own person. Live as you please. They are brought up to believe their accountability rests primarily in personal happiness. Many believe Christians are weak, unable to think for themselves, and unrealistic. Man continues to deny the existence of God and the means of salvation through Christ the Lord. That is exactly what Satan desires. If he can create doubt and confusion, resulting in unbelief, he has achieved his goal.

III. The Believer's Distinction (4-6) – John knew what it was to enjoy a personal relationship with Christ and the benefits associated with that. He experienced something many in his day did not. This relationship set him apart from the world as it does us. Consider:

A. Our Association (4) – [Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.](#) Many were the struggles of John's day and those

struggles continue today, but we do not have to live in defeat. We can overcome in Christ the Lord. He dwells within us through His Spirit, and He is greater than our adversary. The world says we are weak and ignorant, but we have strength and wisdom this world cannot give. Life will continue to bring struggles, but we can overcome in Christ!

B. Their Agenda (5) – *They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them.* The world doesn't share our desires or possess the hope we enjoy. They have an agenda that stands in sharp contrast to the lives we live. They speak of the world, promoting its desires and philosophies. They seek their own and are heard of those who share their beliefs.

- We are in the world, but not of the world. I don't enjoy conflict or opposition, but we cannot expect the world to embrace our faith or promote Christianity. They seek the things of the world, the things that please the flesh. *2 Tim.4:3 – For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;*

C. Our Assurance (6) – *We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.* The world doesn't share our faith or support our cause, but the Lord stands with us. He equips us to serve Him and accomplish His will. We may feel alone, but we are not alone. He is always there and He also has provided others of like faith to share the journey with us. Aren't you glad for fellow believers to walk this road of life with? Aren't you thankful for those you can lean on and draw strength from?

- We close with a comforting thought. *Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.* Life is difficult and we are surrounded with adversity, but we are not without truth and guidance. The Spirit will lead us as long as we seek the Lord. It is possible to possess spiritual discernment in these difficult times. We do not have to accept the world's view regarding our faith. We can rise above and experience victory in Christ our Lord. *John 16:13 – Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.*

Conclusion: There are many voices vying for our attention these days. Everyone believes something and many seek to influence us with their modern theology. Likely more than ever, we need spiritual discernment. We need to be settled in the truth of God's Word. We must know what we believe and why. When we know truth we will not be lead astray with error.

Jesus is the source of truth. He is the way of salvation and eternal life. If there are needs in your life, seek Him. He is able and willing to provide!