

1 John 4:1-6

INTRODUCTION: Do you know what the word "Eureka" means? It is a Greek word that means, "I have found it."

This became a slogan for thousands of California gold prospectors in the mid 1800s.

This term meant instant riches. When a gold prospector found gold they would cry out "Eureka!"

However, many gold prospectors soon discovered that everything that appeared to be gold really was not. Not everything that glittered was gold.

Riverbeds and rock quarries could be filled with golden specks that looked like gold but it was nevertheless worthless.

This "fools gold" was called iron pyrite and miners had to be careful to distinguish it from real gold.

Their very livelihood depended on it.

Experienced miners could tell by looking at it. But in many cases it was too difficult to know the difference.

So they developed tests to discern what was genuine and what was not.

What was real gold and what was fool's gold.

They used these tests to discern the difference. Not just with the gold they found, but with supposed gold coins given to them by someone.

One test involved biting the rock or coin in question. Real gold is softer than a human tooth, whereas fool's gold is harder.

A second test involved scrapping the rock or coin on a piece of white stone, such a ceramic.

True gold leaves a yellow streak, whereas the residue left by fools gold is greenish black.

In either case, a miner relied on tests to authenticate his finds. His whole fortune and future depended upon learning to discern the true from the false.

But when the miner tested the gold and found it to be real. He would cry out "Eureka!" - I have found it!

Spiritually speaking Christians often find themselves in a similar position as those California gold rush miners of the 1800s.

We are constantly being confronted with doctrines, religious teachings, religious teachers and charismatic personalities who all make the claim to be genuinely from God.

We must be able to discern what is really from God and what is not.

In our passage today John is going to teach us some methods on how to discern spiritual fool's gold from genuine gold.

This is so very necessary today. Because we live in a world where deception is on the rise.

I believe the church today is lacking in spiritual discernment.

ILLUSTRATION: Many Christians are allowing themselves to be influenced by teachers and preachers who say they are from God but they are not.

Not everyone who claims to speak for God is genuinely from God. Not everything that glitters is gold.

John is calling us to discern the spirits to see whether they are from God.

When John says "spirits" in verse 1 - he doesn't mean we are to be ghost hunters or investigators of the paranormal.

The word "spirit" can be interpreted one of three ways.

1. The spirit behind the prophet who is speaking (**many false prophets have gone out into the world**), in which case it would refer to the Holy Spirit or to demons, depending on whether the prophet was of God.

2. The prophet himself, "spirit" being a figure of speech, a metaphor, meaning "the prophet."

3. The message itself, "spirit" being a figure of speech, a metaphor, meaning "the message."

I believe the correct understanding of this is that it is a reference to the "spirit behind the prophet."

The emphasis of these verse seems to be on the spirit. John is contrasting the "Spirit of God" with the spirit of the antichrist."

Notice the contrast between the two in verses 2-3.

There is a contrast between "the spirit of truth and the spirit of error."

When a preacher or teacher speaks what spirit is empowering them?

Is it of God? That is what John is calling upon all of us to discern.

That is the whole theme of these next six verses here in 1 John.

John is calling us to discern the spirits to see if they are of God.

TRANSITIONAL SENTENCE: If we are going to learn how to discern we must follow four basic guidelines that we see here in our text.

I. Listen Discerningly - "Don't believe everything you hear . . ."
There are two commands here!

A. First Command - Don't believe everything you hear.

Believe not – is called a prohibition imperative, meaning simply that John is commanding a stop to an action which has already begun.

We could translate it “stop believing every spirit...”

Evidently the believers that John wrote to had the same problem that many in the church have today.

They had no discernment.

They were believing everything that was being said from a person who said they spoke for God.

ILLUSTRATION: “What’s the biggest problem?” A lack of discernment. The Evangelical church literally has spiritual “AIDS”.

AIDS, you know, the HIV virus, it’s a deficiency in the immune system. And, an AIDS person who has that, can die from a myriad of diseases.

They don’t all die from the same disease. Different diseases attack them and their immune system can’t fight them off.

When you have a deficient immune system, you can get killed by all kinds of things.

And, you look at the church today and because it can't discern, it can't defend itself, it has a deficient immune system: it dies of a thousand errors.

John saw this as a danger in his day. So he tells them "stop believing everything you hear."

ARGUMENT: This is a mark of spiritual immaturity.

When my children were babies we had to watch them closely because they would crawl around on the floor and anything they found they would what?

Put it in their mouth.

They did not yet develop the ability to discern.

Hebrews 5:12-14 12 For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which *be* the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. 13 For every one that useth milk *is* unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. 14 But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, *even* those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

One of the reason God gave pastors to the church is so that believers mature spiritually.

KJV **Ephesians 4:14** That we *henceforth* be no more children, [nepios “infants, small babies”] tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, *and* cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;

B. Second Command - Test everything you hear

Notice v. 1b - “. . . Try the spirits whether they are from God.”

Test - The Greek word is “dokimos.”

The verb is in a present tense imperative, a command-- the believer is to continually test the spirits, like coins that are being tested for genuineness and proper weight—something that should be done on a continual basis.

Dokimos is the Greek word for approved. It means tested and found to be qualified, or proven and tested to be of high quality.

ILLUSTRATION: In the ancient world there was no banking system as we see it today. When they made coins they would melt precious metals to liquid and then pour them into molds.

After they were cool, the edges had to be smoothed. Some would dishonestly shave off the edges instead of smoothing them thereby not giving the full weighted money to the person. The coin was thus counterfeit.

In Athens more than 80 laws were passed to stop the practice of shaving coins in circulation.

Coins were "dokimos" tested to see if they were authentic.

This is the basis for discernment. John here commands the believers to continually exercise discernment to make sure something is authentic.

ILLUSTRATION: In its simplest definition, discernment is nothing more than the ability to decide between truth and error, right and wrong.

ARGUMENT: The problem is we are in a society and culture that exalts relativity. Truth is relative. It is only meaningful if it means something to me.

We fail to be antithetical in our thinking. The idea that there is white and black, truth and error, right and wrong. There is no grey.

But before you can think antithetical you must have an absolute standard of truth.

Since we live in an age where there are no absolutes and that spirit has invaded the church people fail to think this way.

Our standard is the Word of God and it is the basis of discernment.

ILLUSTRATION: Bereans - they searched the Scriptures to see if these things were so.

ILLUSTRATION: Heard a pastor of a mega church say, there are three kinds of people in this room.

1. Those who believe everything I say just because I say it.
2. Those who listen to what I say then decided if it is true then believe it.
3. Those who don't believe anything I say just because I say it.

Then he said, "My goal is to get everyone in group three to group one."

My thought was that is not what I would want. I would want everybody in group 2.

Paul would agree.

He told the Thessalonians the same thing.

1 Thessalonians 5:21 (KJV 1900) — 21 Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.

The word for "prove" in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 is the exact same Greek word used by John for test.

Test everything you hear, then hold to what is good.

I don't expect you to automatically believe everything I say. I expect you to look into the Scripture to see for yourself.

I. Listen Discerningly

But also

II. Listen Defensively

Why should we be like the Berean and test everything we hear?

John is going to tell us! He give a very clear reason.

v. 1c - ". . . because many false prophets are gone out into the world."

Very simply because there is a lot of deception out there. There are many that are out to deceive you.

You have to use caution.

ILLUSTRATION: Wednesday night August 16th I was driving home from church. You know I was in a car accident. Describe the accident.

Insurance said it was not my fault. But there was one thing I forgot.

I forgot a basic principle of driving that my driving instructor taught me.

Drive defensively.

You have to drive like everyone else on the road is crazy. You have to drive like everyone is out to get you.

You have to drive like everyone is trying to run you off the road or worse.

Because there are a lot of crazy people out there in the road and they are not careful.

If you want to stay safe drive defensively. Be suspicious of every driver around you.

John is saying the same exact thing here only he is applying it spiritually.

He is saying we have to listen to preachers and teachers defensively.

Why?

“Because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

A. Because of the Number of false prophets.

The emphasis here is on the many. There are many false prophets.

False prophets are all over the place, in fact, there are many more false prophets than there are true prophets.

For every true servant and minister of God there are many false prophets.

ILLUSTRATION: It was this fact that made Elijah depressed. He looked around and all he could see were prophets of Baal, people bowing the knee to Baal.

On Mt. Carmel, the supposed residence of Baal, Elijah was the only true prophet and he squared off against 450 prophets of Baal.

After that he retreated to Mt. Horeb, God said Elijah what are you doing here.

He had spent some time on Baal's mountain, now he wanted to spend time on God's mountain, he needed to be reaffirmed by God.

He needed to be encouraged by God, there he was on Mt. Sinai God's holy mountain.

Remember what he said, "I have been very zealous for your cause and I only, I am left."

There were so many false prophets Elijah felt like he was the only one left.

That is the way it is today!

We have to continually test the spirits because there are so many false prophets and false spirits pretending to speak for God.

B. Because of the Nature of false prophets.

They are false.

The word for "false" is from the Greek root word "psuedomai" - a word that means to tell lies.

They are committing to deception.

That's because Satan and his demons are busy corrupting God's truth, propagating worldwide error, and confusing people.

According to 2 Corinthians 11:14-15, Satan appears as an angel of light and his demons as ministers of righteousness.

They mask themselves as those who give God's truth when, in fact, they give the opposite.

C. Because of the Nearness of false prophets

"are gone out into the world . . ."

That is to say, they are everywhere in this world.

They are in churches.

They are in colleges. - Some colleges are now citadels of heresy when at one time they were orthodox. How did it happen?

Little by little. One person slipped in that was not of God. Next thing you know the place is infested.

They are in seminaries. -

They are in public office.

They are in government

They are in Sunday School classes.

They are in Bible Studies

They are in Men's meetings and Women's meetings.

They are everywhere.

Matthew 24:5 (KJV 1900) — 5 For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many.

Luke 21:8 (KJV 1900) — 8 And he said, Take heed that ye be not deceived: for many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and the time draweth near: go ye not therefore after them.

Acts 20:29 (KJV 1900) — 29 For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.

2 Timothy 3:13 (KJV 1900) — 13 But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.

2 Peter 2:1 (KJV 1900) — 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.

God was calling upon each individual to be discerning. You must determine for yourself if a thing is from God.

I. Listen Discerningly

II. Listen Defensively

III. Listen Doctrinally

Notice vv. 2-3

Notice John gives a simple test to help us discern if a person is speaking for God.

People use all kinds of criteria to judge or evaluate if a ministry is from God.

The problem is none of those guidelines are valid tests.

1. Experiences

Experiences and manifestations can be from many sources; physical, emotional, mental, paranormal/demonic, or from the Lord.

ALL experiences need to be tested against the testimony and teachings of the tried and true written word of God.

2. Feelings

Mormons made the "burning in the breast" standard fare for their followers, but now a large cross section of Christendom has been taught to judge everything by similar criteria.

Modern Christians are, for the most part, not being taught to submit to the Word of God -- but rather to the way they feel emotionally.

3. Numbers of Followers

Many leaders have large numbers of followers, including cultists and other religious "gurus".

In fact some of the most popular leaders, who have the most followers, are not Christian.

Numbers of followers is not a good test of the authenticity of a leader or his ministry.

3. Numbers Claiming Salvation

Ultimately, only God knows who is saved.

4. Church Size

Church size means nothing in the realm of discernment.

God looks for quality over quantity, regardless of what "apostles" like C. Peter Wagner claim:

"... we ought to see clearly that the end DOES justify the means. What else possible could justify the means? If the method I am using accomplishes the goal I am aiming at, it is for that reason a good method. If, on the other hand, my method is not accomplishing the goal, how can I be justified in continuing to use it?" (C. Peter Wagner, "Your Church Can Grow - Seven Vital Signs Of A Healthy Church", 1976, pg. 137. - emphasis in original)

Quantitative judgments are of men.

Church size is no way to test a ministry.

5. Signs and Wonders

Satan can produce lying signs and wonders.

6. Success of a Teacher

Anyone can be successful given the tools, the gifts, the right connections and the right circumstances.

Some of the most godly men and women in the church have been dirt poor.

Don't be swayed by rich televangelists.

They have often raised their money off the backs of the less fortunate, the naïve, the hopeless, the poor, the fatherless, the widows.

True success is not measured by money, power, number of followers, or any of the criteria of the "American Dream".

Man looks on the outside, but God looks on the heart.

7. Apparent Authority

Many men and women are capable of speaking with authority. It can be a natural gift, a demonic gift or a gift from God.

But it is no way to test whether a person is a true or false teacher.

Authority can be put on, learned, acted.

John does not mention any of these things.

John gives us here one monumental, profound test to use to determine if a person is of God.

Listen to their Doctrine!

More specifically the doctrine of Christ. Listen to their Christology.

What do they teach about Jesus Christ?

Listen to their doctrine. Listen to what they teach.

ARGUMENT: This can be challenging at times because false prophets like to use orthodox words with heretical definitions.

They use our words with their own definitions to those words.

When I say "I believe in the deity of Jesus, a false prophet will say, "So do I."

But what I mean by deity and what he means by deity are two different things.

They will say Jesus was created as a "god" but they don't think He is the God!

When I say I believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ a false teacher will say "So do I." But what I mean by resurrection and what they mean is not the same thing.

I mean physical bodily resurrection, they will mean a spiritual resurrection and by saying that they are denying the bodily resurrection.

ILLUSTRATION: That is why throughout the history of the church when creeds and confessional statements have been written, the wording has been very specific.

Many confession will affirm a truth and then at the same time deny some things that someone might try to add to that statement that are not true.

For example:

We affirm that Jesus is the incarnation in history of the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity. He is Christ, God's promised Messiah.

We deny that Jesus Christ is a mere man or was a fictional creation of the early Christian church.

We affirm that in the unity of the Godhead the eternally begotten Son is consubstantial (homoousios), coequal, and coeternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

We deny that the Son is merely like God (homoiousios) or that He was simply adopted by the Father as His Son. We deny the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father in the ontological Trinity.

We affirm, with the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds, that Jesus Christ is both truly God and truly man, two natures united in one person forever.

We deny that the Son was created. We deny that there was ever a time when the Son was not divine. We deny that the human body and soul of Jesus Christ existed prior to the incarnation of the Son in history.

We affirm the hypostatic union, that the two natures of Jesus Christ are united in His one person without mixture, confusion, division, or separation.

We deny that to distinguish between the two natures is to separate them.

We affirm that in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, His divine and human natures retain their own attributes. We affirm that the attributes of both natures belong to the one person Jesus Christ.

We deny that the human nature of Jesus Christ has divine attributes or can contain the divine nature. We deny that the divine nature communicates divine attributes to the human nature. We deny that the Son laid aside or gave up any of His divine attributes in the incarnation.

And so on.

Even so John is very specific here.

He gave one important monumental test to use to discern between the Spirit of God and the spirit of antichrist.

NOTICE: 4:2-3

The one who confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God.

When John says Jesus is come in the flesh he means that Jesus is all that He claimed to be.

This is a summary statement about the whole person and work of Jesus Christ.

QUOTE: Joel Beeke wrote, "To confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is to own him as God and man, the pre-existent yet incarnate Saviour, the all-sufficient Saviour."

QUOTE: R. C. Lenski says that "'Jesus is come in the flesh' summarizes the whole gospel--the entire person and ministry of Jesus. It summarizes all that John had to say in his epistles about Jesus, and all that the Scriptures have to say about Christ. It summarizes the work of all of Christ's offices. To confess Christ is to sit at his feet for prophetic instruction, to stand at his cross for bloody expiation, and to bow before his throne for royal guidance."

So, the question is what do they teach about Jesus Christ?

All of our other major doctrine flows from this doctrine. If you don't get this question right, **YOU ARE WRONG ON EVERYTHING ELSE.**

You get the question of Jesus wrong all of your theology will tumble like dominoes.

All of your other doctrines will be wrong!

ILLUSTRATION: The Gnostics of John's day taught that Jesus was not a real man he merely appeared as a man or some taught that the divinity part of him came upon Him at His baptism and left before the crucifixion.

If there was no incarnation that that has a chain reaction in the rest of the doctrine of Scripture.

Did you know that the Incarnation of Jesus Christ is the major pillar upon which all of Christianity rests.

If Jesus is not God in the flesh, then God the Father lied to us and He is not God.

The Bible is untrustworthy because the Bible says he was God in the flesh.

If Jesus is not God in the flesh than the Holy Spirit is a false witness cause the Spirit bore witness of Him.

If Jesus is not God in the flesh we have no salvation, it is not be grace through faith cause Jesus doesn't qualify as the Savior.

No Incarnation, - no virgin birth, means Scripture is not inerrant, no atonement, no bodily resurrection, no salvation.

That is why John says, Anyone who does not confess that Jesus is come in the flesh is antichrist!

LISTEN DOCTRINALLY!

- I. Listen Discerningly
- II. Listen Defensively
- III. Listen Doctrinally

But also:

IV. Listen Dependently

Notice vv. 4-6

A. Dependent on the Spirit v. 4

Here John gives us a word of confidence and encouragement when it comes to learning to discern.

You CAN learn to discern. You have all the spiritual resources you need to overcome deceptive false teaching and teachers.

Some Christians might be tempted to think that they can't know how to discern error.

"With all of that error out there, it is so subtle and so insidious, it is hard because it sounds like truth, it sounds so good and appealing!

How can I learn to discern?

JOHN IS ASSURING YOU, YOU CAN DO IT!

WHY?

You have the Holy Spirit to help you.

John already made that point earlier.

Notice 1 John 2:24-27

Also notice 1 John 4:4

You are able to have victory of deception because "greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world."

Who is the He that is in you? The Holy Spirit of God.

Who is the he that is in the world. The spirit of antichrist.

The Spirit of God that is in you teaching you the truth is greater than the spirit of the antichrist that is in the world trying to deceive you.

We are guaranteed ultimate victory over the deceptive forces of the world because of the Spirit of God in us.

EXPLANATION: overcome - This is one of John's favorite words. He will use it several times in Chapter 5.

It is the word "nike" - to have victory over.

Thank God the Holy Spirit can give victory over the "spirit of the world."

QUOTE: Stephen Cole wrote, "By 'overcome them,' John means that his hearers have resisted the false teaching. The reason that they have overcome is not only that they are from God, but also that with the new birth, they also received the Holy Spirit ("the anointing," 2:27), who indwells them. He is greater than he who is in the world (Satan, who inspires the false teachers). Even though the Gnostic teachers may have been intellectually superior to John's "little children," the presence of the indwelling Spirit gave his readers the ability to discern and thus avoid the errors of the false teachers.

However, that doesn't mean that a Christian can't be deceived and fall into error and lose his reward.

It can happen. This is why John is warning us.

What this means is that ultimately God will give victory. God will bring them back.

WE HAVE TO BE DEPENDENT UPON THE HOLY SPIRIT TO HELP US!

He is the Spirit of Truth and He will helps us to conquer the spirit of error.

B. Dependent on the Word

vv. 5-6

EXPLANATION: Notice there is a contrast between the "they" of verse 5 and the "we" of verse 6.

John is making a purposeful contrast here between "they" and "we."

v. 5 - "They are of the world . . ."

v. 6 - "We are of God . . ."

The question is who is John talking about when he says, "they" and "we."

1. "They" are the false teachers!

Notice "they" are from the world and the world listens to them.

As we have seen, the world is that evil system under Satan's dominion that is opposed to God and His kingdom.

Verse 5 may imply that these false teachers were drawing a big crowd.

The world was listening to them. When you tell the world what it wants to hear, you will not lack an audience.

When a false teacher sets aside the unpopular notion that all have sinned, and he tells people that they are wonderful and that God exists to help them fulfill their desires, he will gain a following.

But the problem is, that message is not from God. It is from the world and the god of this world.

The practical application for us is, don't judge the success of a ministry by its size!

Judge it by its faithfulness to the truth of the gospel as revealed in the Bible.

2. "We" are John and the Apostles that gave us the inspired Word of God.

Some understand the "we" of verse 6 to refer to all believers.

But it stands in antithesis to the "they" of verse 5, and so it is better to interpret it as referring to the apostles.

The apostles gave us the inspired Word.

Notice v. 6 - ". . .he that knoweth God heareth us. He that is not of God heareth us not."

This is really another simple test of salvation and genuine faith.

The ones who listen to the Word of God is of God.

False teachers don't listen to the Word of God. They make up their own message.

False Believers don't want the Word of God. They want to be entertained or have their ears tickled.

Those who are from God want to hear the Word of God!

EXPLANATION: The "ye" of verse 4 and the "we" of verse 6 are both of God.

v. 4 - Ye are of God little children. They are true believers. They are of God and they want to hear the Word of God.

God's people want God's Word and they are dependent on it.

It is the Word of God that will teach you how to discern truth from error.

Notice the end of verse 6.

This is how you know the "spirit of truth and the spirit of error. "

The bottom line is God's people learn the Word of God and they learn to discern error by knowing the truth.

APPLICATION: Here is a test for you? Who do you listen to?

Who is the one speaking into your life? Is it a preacher or teacher of the Word of God?

Do you hunger to know God's Word?

A true believer will hear a true preacher of the Word. They will not listen to the teacher who the world loves!

Are you learning to discern error by knowing and learning the truth?

ILLUSTRATION: When Martin Luther was summoned to the Diet of Worms in 1521 and asked to recant his teaching, he replied, “Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason, my conscience is captive to the Word of God.

I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience would be neither right nor safe. God help me. Here I stand, I can do no other.”

Luther’s well-known formulation, “Scripture and plain reason,” is the only basis on which we can properly ground true spiritual discernment.

CONCLUSION: How do we learn to discern?

I. Listen Discerningly v. 1a

- A. Don't believe everything you hear
- B. Test everything you hear

II. Listen Defensively v. 1b

- A. Because of the Number of False Prophets
- B. Because of the Nature of False Prophets

C. Because of the Nearness of False Prophets

III. Listen Doctrinally vv. 2-3

IV. Listen Dependently vv. 4-6

A. Dependent on the Spirit

B. Dependent on the Word

The late A. W. Tozer had some wise counsel on “How to Try the Spirits” (adapted from, *Moody Monthly* [12/79], pp. 51-55). He posed seven tests to apply to any teaching:

1. How does the teaching affect my relationship with God? Is He magnified and glorified, or diminished?
2. How does the teaching affect my attitude toward the Lord Jesus Christ? Does it magnify Him and give Him first place? Or, does it subtly shift my focus onto myself or some experience?
3. How does the teaching affect my attitude toward Scripture? Did the teaching come from and agree with the Word? Does it increase my love for the Word?
4. How does the teaching affect my self-life? Does it feed self or crucify it? Does it feed pride or humility?
5. How does the teaching affect my relationships to other Christians? Does it cause me to withdraw, find fault, and exalt myself in superiority? Or, does it lead me to genuine love for all that truly know Christ?
6. How does the teaching affect my relationship to the world system? Does it lead me to pursue the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life? Does it lead

me to pursue worldly riches, reputation, and pleasures? Or, does it crucify the world to me?

7. How does the teaching affect my attitude toward sin? Does it cause me to tolerate sin in my life or to turn from it and grow in holiness? Any teaching that makes holiness more acceptable and sin more intolerable is genuine.

Ray Stedman titles his sermon on our text, “When Unbelief is Right.” His final statement is (p. 304), “God help us to be unbelievers in error as well as believers in truth.”