

SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

1 JOHN 3:19-4:6

And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God.

And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.

Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because 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 of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the

world. They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them.

We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

There are only 360 people in the United States, and about 4400 individuals worldwide that have [Q-Grade Certification](#). In the world of coffee, these people are called “cuppers.” They are the coffee-tasting experts.

The [Q-Grade Certification](#) requires an exhaustive test. It's the Bar Exam of coffee. It takes six days and costs \$2000. Very few people pass it on their first try.

But those who do have amazing coffee discernment.

We've all had the experience of savoring a tasty cup of coffee, or spitting out coffee we thought was too bitter... We might even have met a Starbucks' barista who definitely knows their coffee... But a person with [Q-Grade Certification](#) has taken coffee-drinking to another level. These people taste nuances in coffee that amateur coffee connoisseurs fail to differentiate.

A professional coffee cupper will use words foreign to most coffee drinkers when describing a cup of joe.

It's a compliment if a cupper labels a coffee, “[clean,](#)” or “[acidic,](#)” or “[bright.](#)” Whereas, terms like “[earthy,](#)” or “[dirty,](#)” or “[flat,](#)” or “[musty](#)” is hurling a coffee insult.

At a recent convention in New York City one Q-Certified taster was brought into a room where 300 cups of coffee sat

on five tables. He was given a set of traits to look for, and asked to pick out the cup that most characterized those distinctives. Within seconds this particular expert had chosen the right cup.

These folks have olfactory skills and taste buds that perceive subtleties the rest of us would miss.

One professional coffee cupper made the comment, “I can tell from blindly tasting a cup of coffee not just that it is from Guatemala, but from what state it comes, at what altitude it was grown, and on what mountain.”

Now that’s some impressive coffee discernment.

And this is what the Apostle John addresses in today’s text - **not discernment in coffee-tasting, but spiritual discernment.** John speaks of understanding nuances **in our hearts, in prayer, in our relationship with God, in the spiritual realm, and in the world.**

Just being a coffee drinker doesn’t mean you know a lot about coffee, and just being a Christian doesn’t mean you live a confident and victorious Christian life.

I was stunned this week to read that 83% of adults in America drink coffee - that’s 587 million cups of coffee daily, or an average of three per person. We drink a lot of coffee, but we’re not necessarily *discerning drinkers*.

We even have **coffee snobs!** They grind their own beans, and create their own flavors - or they frequent an exclusive coffee shop. These folks think they know coffee, but compared to a *pro cupper* they’re a novice.

And likewise in America we talk a lot about God, and spiritual things - people even claim to be Christians.

Some people grind their own ideas and combine them to create their own special blend of religion - but that doesn't mean they have biblical discernment.

To be God-Certified in spiritual things you have to open the Bible. God's Word discerns true from false, and real from fake. ***John wants us all to have this discernment*** - able to recognize what's going on in our own hearts, in prayer, in our relationship with God, in the spiritual realm, and in the world around us...

We begin this morning in verse 19, "And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him." With the words "by this" John is referring to His previous thoughts about loving God.

Last time, we talked about **how to be a better lover**. This is accomplished by loving not just "in word and in tongue, but in deed and in truth." This is how Jesus has loved us, and it's how we should love one another.

And when we love like Jesus loves it breeds confidence: *that we've been touched by His truth - that God's love dwells in us - that we truly are children of God.* Do you have a confident heart? Do you know that you know God? It's love that spawns this assurance.

I know I'm a true child of God not because *I pray everyday, or attend church, or always give an offering, or teach a Sunday School class, or even speak with unknown tongues -*

I know that I know God because His love ***fills my heart*** and is ***revealed in my actions***.

Jesus said to his disciples in John 13:35, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” It’s true, **love is the believer’s birthmark.**

It’s sad and frustrating whenever I speak to someone about their soul, and they’re not sure where they stand with God. Lots of people have no confidence - no assurance - that if they died they would go to heaven.

These are people who made a commitment to Christ as some point in their past. They were involved in church. There’s even been some spiritual growth in the past, but now *time, failure, distance* has created doubt and uneasiness in their heart. **They’re no longer sure.**

Today video engineers speak of “**the magnetic media crisis.**” When video cameras first became popular - in the 80s and 90s - Americans captured their family times and their children’s upbringing on VHS tape. The problem though is that magnetic tape has a lifespan of 15-20 years before it loses its magnetic properties, and the images it captured begin to fade and disappear.

This is what’s happening to my generation’s magnetized memories. We’re losing them. They need to be digitized and preserved... *Yet this is also what happens to the assurance of a person’s salvation...*

The confidence we once possessed - that was a part of our faith - starts to fade. **Assurance is degradable.**

And it's our ongoing experiences with God that renew our assurance. When I sense His love for me and when I love Him in return, this digitizes my faith in Him. This is what creates a permanent assurance. What a joy it is to have a comforted, confident heart.

“For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things.” The opposite of a **confident heart is a conflicted heart.** It's possible for even a Christian to have a heart that *feels* condemned.

God's Spirit isn't the one who brings condemnation. It's the devil who condemns. God *convicts* us of our sin and draws us to the Savior, but He doesn't condemn.

Conviction gives hope - Condemnation despair.

Conviction brings repentance - Condemnation regret.

Conviction prompts change - Condemnation keeps me in chains... Conviction leads me back to God - Condemnation buries me under a mound of guilt...

Peter, denied the Lord, yet he was convicted by the Holy Spirit, and it led to his forgiveness. Whereas Judas, who denied the Lord in much the same way as did Peter, felt condemned and went out hung himself. Conviction led to restoration and a brand new life. Condemnation led to suicide and the ending of a life.

Yet here, John says to believers, **“For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things.”** Realize, just because your heart condemns you, doesn't mean God is condemning you.

God is greater than a condemning heart! He desires *conviction*, and *comfort*, and *confidence* for you.

There are all kinds of reasons this morning you might feel condemned... *There could be a sin from your past that God forgave, but you won't give up... An over-worked conscience, not in sync with God's grace, can condemn you... The disapproval of others can hang a cloud of failure over your head... Impossible standards imposed on you as a child can still haunt you... The scorn of a spouse or parent can cause feelings of unworthiness... Overlooked traditions can spawn guilt, even though now in Christ you've been set free...*

Some of us are harder on ourselves and more demanding than God is... Psalm 103:13-14 states, *“As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.”* We forget what God remembers... *“that we are dust”* - we're frail, feeble, and prone to failure.

Why is it you expect more out of yourself than God does? What kind of perverse pride causes that?

If you're in Christ and are still carrying around a burden of condemnation there is a problem with your faith. Romans 8:1 tells us, *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”*

I think the first lesson every believer needs to learn is that our **faith** should be based on **fact - not feelings!**

I am a Christian NOT because I feel like one! I am a Christian because God sent His Son to bear my sin, and die

in my place - and He promised me in His Word that the day I asked Jesus to forgive me, He would!

And though my feelings are sometimes fickle and may change - **the fact of what Jesus did for me, and has promised to me never changes!** Here's a true statement, "The devil lives in the realm of feeling, but Christians should live in the realm of fact."

Listen to one of my favorite poems...

"Three men were walking on a wall - Feeling, Faith, and Fact. When Feeling took an awful fall, then Faith was taken back. So close was Faith to Feeling, that he stumbled and fell too. **But Fact remained and pulled Faith back, and Faith brought Feeling too.**"

Are you allowing your feelings to have an undue and unhealthy influence on your faith? *Many Christians are!* We need to stop, and align our faith with the facts.

This is the key to a confident heart. As John says in verse 21, "**Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God.**" We do ourselves a favor to train our hearts to rest *in the love of God and in the truth of the Gospel*, not in our own fickle feelings.

This is important, for discerning our own heart is a key step to an effective prayer life. John writes, "**And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.**" Love in word and in deed, and you'll be assured of salvation - then you'll be bold in *the prayers you pray and in the answers you expect.*

If you're confident you *belong to God*, you'll be confident you *belong before God*. You won't be timid or ashamed to come to Him when you have a request.

Realize, prayer is for God's friends - those who want to please Him and prove it by their lifestyles. **Keep His commandments** and you can **ask your petitions**.

And verse 23 tells us what is the commandment God wants us to keep, **“And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.”**

Don't you love the simplicity of God's commands?

Mankind's tendency is to complicate, but God loves to keep it simple. I've heard it said, **“The United States has thirty-five million laws trying to enforce ten commandments.”** God keeps His commandments brief and simple... **“believe in Jesus and love one another.”**

The Jewish Law included 613 commandments that covered every aspect of life. Religion is complexed and complicated, but Jesus condensed God's commands down to two - *believe on Him and love one another*.

And if you keep these commands - trust Jesus and love each other - God will answer your prayers! As *John writes in verse 22*, **“Whatever we ask we receive from Him because we keep His commandments.”**

For the last three years, our family has gotten tickets to the hallowed grounds of Augusta National and *The Masters*. If you're a golf fan you know the toughest ticket to get to any sporting event is to *The Masters*.

Some fans never get the opportunity to attend.

Currently, a Thursday ticket from Stub Hub will cost you a whopping \$2200. I don't have that kind of money for golf tickets. But we get our tickets NOT because of *what we have* or *what we've done*, but because of *who we know*. My son, Mack, works for the National and he gets us two free tickets for each day of the tournament.

And this is how it works with God, whatever you ask and get, comes NOT because of *what you have* or *what you've done*, but because of *who you know*. You receive because you believe in *His Son, Jesus Christ*.

Yet here's what happened this year, one of Mack's siblings (*who'll remain anonymous*) copped a bit of an attitude. He got upset he didn't get tickets for the day he wanted - so *he almost missed out*. Rather than be grateful, and love one another (*as we're told in verse 23*), he nearly missed out on what was freely given.

You think, how can this happen? How can anybody take for granted a privilege other people would relish?

Yet it occurs in our relationship with God! He wants to answer our prayers, *but if we think we're entitled to His blessings, or get upset that God doesn't allocate those blessings the way we like, or ask the Father to bless us while at the same time are being unloving to the rest of the family* - we too can miss out!

If your prayers aren't getting answered it could be you've copped an attitude! In prayer we also need to check our hearts and ask for spiritual discernment.

Chapter 3 ends, “Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.” Here’s the ultimate source of our spiritual discernment - *the Holy Spirit who abides in us.*

On the evening of His resurrection Jesus appeared to His disciples in the upper room. He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

At that moment Jesus created a heart connection with His men that lasted even after His ascension to heaven. Jesus lives in His followers through His Spirit.

This is God’s greatest gift to you and me. No one becomes *a child of God* without *the Spirit of God*. Jesus is with us - He abides in us - by His Holy Spirit.

And this is strategic. We need *the Holy Spirit*, because Chapter 4 begins with a warning about *other spirits*... “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

Understand, the human spirit is like a satellite dish. It picks up *all kinds of signals* from *all kinds of sources*.

God’s Spirit speaks to me... the devil can plant thoughts in my mind... the world is bombarding me with deceptive messaging... my emotions influence me daily... my own conscience and sub-conscience are actively influencing my behavior... even a late night slice of pizza causes disturbing impressions (pepperoni speaks to me, just not in a constructive way!)

This is why John cautions us, *“test the spirits, whether they are of God.”* Again, we need spiritual discernment! And in the next several verses John tells us how to run a spiritual background check...

I hope all of our parents realize before anyone goes to work in CCSM’s children’s ministry we ask them to submit to a criminal background check. We do our due diligence to make sure we’re not endangering our kids.

And the same is true with God’s children. We need to check out anyone who comes speaking in His name.

Are they really of God, or are they of another spirit?

And here’s the criteria we’re instructed to look for, in verse 2, *“By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God.”*

To peel back the appealing façade of a person or an impression, discover *what they’re saying about Jesus*.

John tells us that any *“spirit”* - that is, **any inward influence**... which could point to an actual spiritual being (*an angel or a demon*), or it could refer a prevailing attitude (*as in “the spirit of Christmas,” or the spirit of the age*) - but any *“spirit”* that isn’t **correct about** and **exalting of** our Lord Jesus is an evil spirit.

If it does not affirm and honor Jesus - if it does not bow to and glorify Jesus; then you know it’s not of God!

So let's say a single young lady walks in to the church, and says, "Well, I felt God wanted me to sleep with my boyfriend last night. We're soul mates. We're in love. And it just seemed like the right thing to do."

Okay, it is now our job to test the spirits? And we do this in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ!

Is this what Jesus taught? Is this what was taught in the Scriptures that Jesus affirmed? Would Jesus agree with this young lady's sentiment? **WWJD: what would Jesus do?** This is how you and I need to test the spirit.

It's not about what seems right to me, or my opinion, but is this belief compatible with the nature of Jesus?

Throughout his writings, and particularly here, John was dealing with a deception that was threatening the early church. Already, Christian truth was under attack by a heresy that would later be named *Gnosticism*.

The word "**Gnostic**" or "**gnosis**" means knowledge and these false teachers claimed to have special insights that were hidden from the rank-in-file believer.

The Gnostics denied that God had come to earth in human form. They believed that matter was intrinsically evil, thus God would never have taken a physical body.

To the Gnostics, God was like a rock thrown into the lake. He was the point of impact, but the ripples that emanated from God were less and less pure reflections of His deity. And rather than the actual rock, Jesus was just one of the ripples. He was one of many emanations of God, but not "**God Incarnate**" or "**God in the flesh.**" These heretics denied Jesus' humanity.

And they did it in an interesting way. Of course, they couldn't deny Jesus actually walked the earth. Jesus of Nazareth was a fact of history. There were too many eyewitnesses living at the time who saw Him firsthand.

Thus, the Gnostics tried to skirt the obvious. They made wild claims that Jesus had appeared, just not in flesh and bone. He'd been a phantom, a spirit, an apparition. They concocted fanciful tales of Jesus walking on the beach and leaving behind no footprints.

In 85 AD a false teacher named “**Cerinthus**” taught that the Spirit of Messiah had rested on the man Jesus from the time of His baptism until just before He was crucified. At which point *the divine spirit* departed from *the human Jesus*. This denied the incarnation of Jesus, as well as the atonement. These Gnostics rejected the biblical truth that **Jesus was fully man and fully God.**

This is why in verse 2 the Apostle John says very specifically, “**Every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God.**”

This was a direct rebuke of these Gnostics. As was 1:1, “**That which was from the beginning, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life...**” Jesus was no ghost. John had touched Him.

It's interesting, in the first century the heretics denied Jesus' **humanity** - whereas, today they've changed tactics. Most modern false prophets deny Jesus' **deity**.

Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, other cults affirm Jesus' manhood, but deny His Godhood. They say He was an angel, or "a god" (*with a little "g" - one of many, similar, lesser gods*) - not the "one and only God."

Yet John's teaching applies to both denials. John is saying, **If you're not right on about Jesus you're all wrong about God!** I agree with John wholeheartedly.

Verse 3, "And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world." Antichrist is the future one-world leader spoken of in Revelation 13. He'll deny the true Christ, and lead a global revolt against God. He comes in the *last days*.

But *the spirit of Antichrist* - an anti-God and anti-Christ mood - has been around since *John's day*.

In fact, *the spirit of Antichrist* is alive and well today.

On Friday I flew non-stop from Tokyo to Atlanta - a 12 hour flight. And it was torture. I drew a cramped seat assignment. Naturally, I flew coach, *but guess who I sat next to on the flight?* A sumo wrestling team.

I'm just kidding, but it wasn't much better. I actually sat next to a big, burly, wide-body fellow for twelve of the longest hours of my life. (*That's a joke too, but I'm just saying that's how it felt... And I'm under no illusion, I'm sure he complained just as much about being stuck next to me. It was an unpleasant situation for us both.*)

I had hope to work on my Bible Study during the flight, but under the oppressive conditions arranged for me by Delta Airlines, I couldn't concentrate - and since I can't sleep on

airplanes - I ended up doing a little mind-numbing. I binge-watched movies for ten hours.

And by the time we'd landed I drew one very obvious conclusion. *Why does every movie maker hate Jesus?*

What is it about the name **“Jesus”** that causes Hollywood to take His name in vain at every turn?

Not once did I hear anybody angrily shout, **“Oh Buddha”** or **“Muhammed”** - *not once*. The screenwriters only cursed the name of Jesus. And that's just the overt blasphemies - the attacks against His name. That's not counting the ways they mocked His values.

It's true, the Antichrist has yet to appear, but his spirit is already at work in the world. Lines are being drawn.

This world is getting more and more hostile toward the One who died to save it. Expect overt attacks against Jesus to become increasingly commonplace.

And this is why John gives us some encouragement. He knows we're in a battle - a struggle is going on - so he says in verse 4, **“You are of God, little children, and have overcome them...”** Notice first, who's the **“them?”**

Well, the Christian faces a trifecta of evil: **the world tries to beat us up - the devil wants to rip us off - our own flesh drags us down.** The Christian life is **not a sheltered life.** Every believer takes some hits - but we *fight through*, we *rise above*, we *climb over* whatever is thrown against us. Our Lord enables us to overcome.

And here's how, verse 4, "Because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." At times it may appear as if the world has stacked the deck against us.

Your opponent's hand is loaded with Aces and Kings. Just never forget that you hold **a trump card! Greater is He that is in you, than all that is in this wicked world!**

In 1963 the USS Thresher sunk in 8,400 feet of seawater. The nuclear submarine ended up on the ocean floor a-mile-and-half under its surface.

At that depth the pressure was so intense its steel bulkheads buckled. The sub crushed like an eggshell.

Sadly, the Thresher's 129 member crew was lost.

But what's surprising, is that when the Navy went to recover the sub, they spotted all kinds of fish swimming around the wreckage. These fish had skin a fraction of an inch thick; yet they could withstand the same intense pressure that crushed the sub's steel plates.

How is that? The secret was the fish's equilibrium. These deep-sea divers have an *internal pressure pushing out* equal to the *external pressure pushing on*.

And this is the secret of an overcoming life. Evil may be *pressing in on us*, but Jesus is in us *pressing out*.

The next time a heavy trial comes your way, here's the discernment you desperately need - **greater is Jesus that is in you, than the pressure that is on you.**

When you **need strength...** Remember that the power of God that hung the heavens, and flung the myriad of stars into their orbits, dwells within you.

Need wisdom... Keep in mind, that the mind of God which knows and grasps all mysteries abides in you.

If you **need calm and composure...** Don't forget the One who fell asleep in the boat knowing He had mastery over the storm is also now riding in your boat.

And when you **need love...** Remember the love that sacrificed itself upon the cross, now lives inside of your heart. Let me suggest we put verse 4 to memory, *“He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”*

And then we need to discern between *the worldly voices* and *the godly voices*. Verse 5, *“They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”*

Our ears hear only what they've been tuned to hear.

If God trains and tunes your ear, you'll listen to God. But if your ear has only been tuned to this world you'll have no interest in listening to the people of God. A man of God could slap you in the face with God's truth and you wouldn't receive it - *the world is deaf to God.*

The story is told of **Charlie Chaplin** and **“the tramp”** character he made famous - *bowl hat, floppy shoes, cane, mustache*. Due to his distinctive traits, *“Chaplin look alike contests”* sprang up all across the country.

Once in San Francisco, Chaplin himself entered *the Charlie Chaplin look alike contest* - and he failed to make the final round! The judges couldn't identify the real Chaplin though he was staring them in the face.

And this happens to the worldly-minded person. He or she doesn't appreciate God spokesman and God's truths. John says of this person, *"he does not hear us."*

Remember John was the last of Jesus' apostles.

And it was to the original twelve disciples that Jesus gave the authority to bind and loose. Through their writings in the NT they bound the Church to certain commands, and loosed them from other commands.

In essence, Jesus gave to the first twelve apostles and their proxies - **and to only them** - the authority to determine for the Church her doctrine and practice.

Thus, Paul could write in Ephesians 2:20 that the Church was built on the foundation of the apostles!

Now in verse 6, when the Apostle John says, *"we are of God..."* the *"we"* he's referring to is himself and any of the other apostles that were still alive at the time.

When he says, *"He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us"* he isn't on an ego trip. He's actually affirming the special position the twelve apostles occupied in God's plan for the Church.

John is saying that the people who are of God, and who want to hear God, will pay attention to the spokespeople God authorizes to speak on His behalf.

This is how the Church has always judged truth from error - **was it spoken by an apostle, or under His authority** - if so, then it's of God and inspired by God. If not, then it's of the world and should be rejected.

And this is John's point, believers need discernment.

We need to be able to differentiate the truth from error in our own **hearts... in prayer... in our relationship with God... in the spiritual realm... and in this world.**