

Discerning Spirits

Passages: As listed in the lesson.

Memory Verse

“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.” (1 John 4:1)

| Knowledge of God’s Will [God’s Word] | Knowledge of God [God’s Divine Nature] | Good Works [Behavior] |
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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Our fight is against rulers of darkness and the spiritual hosts of wickedness.2. With God’s power, we can discern and overcome evil spirits. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. God is the ultimate ruler of the spiritual realm.2. Only God can overpower Satan. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Pursue an understanding of the spiritual realm.2. Prepare to fight against false teachings and the works of Satan. |

Overview

Events and Spiritual Teachings

- A. The Spiritual Realm
- B. The Opposition of Evil Spirits
- C. Discerning Spirits
- D. The Importance of Discerning Spirits

Life Application

1. Growing in Spiritual Wisdom
2. Be Watchful

Memory Verse

Conclusion: When we grow in spiritual wisdom, we will be able to be good watchmen for the Lord, able to discern spirits and to guard ourselves and the true church.

Spiritual Teachings

Introduction¹

One of the challenges that is easily forgotten in our walk of faith is the challenge of discerning true spirits from false spirits. The Bible teaches us often of the dangers of false prophets and false teachers, which come from the deceptions of evil spirits. But when the Bible is often difficult to understand, our task of sticking to the truth is not easy, especially when we are faced with decisions we have no idea how to make.

Because of the depth and scope of the topic, today's lesson is only going to be a brief introduction. To fully understand these spiritual mysteries, we have to pursue a closer walk with God and a higher understanding of His truth, so that He can send a spirit of wisdom to guide us and help us to understand. For today, however, we'll start by taking a broader look at topic of discerning the spirits.

A. The Spiritual Realm

The spiritual world is not an easy thing to understand. It is a realm that surpasses all things and it cannot be measured with scientific knowledge, because science can only be applied to things of the material world. The Bible teaches us that the thoughts of God are above our own (Isa 55:8) and cannot be understood by mankind. The same can be said of anything that is of the spiritual realm, because we are limited by our physical bodies.

Spirits have no form, cannot be touched or searched, and are not limited to time and space (Lk 24:39). Paul wrote that "the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor 4:18). The only way we can experience the existence of spirits is when they are revealed to us through the physical. But the spirit that reveals itself may be a spirit of God or of evil. The Bible warns us that the devil can impersonate an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14), and that "in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Tim 4:1). This makes it all the more important for us to learn how to discern what kind of spirit is revealing itself.

B. The Opposition of Evil Spirits

Although thrown down and condemned by God, evil spirits still possess power, and only God can overthrow them (Job 1:12). And the power that they have can confuse, deceive, and hinder God's followers. But what kind of power do they have? And what obstacles do they place before us?

1. Characteristics of evil spirits

The Bible records: "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). We fight the rulers of darkness of this age, and their command over this world allows them to deceive men, causing them to worship false gods. The Bible describes Satan himself as the "prince of the power of the air" and the king of this world (Eph 2:2; Lk 4:5-6). It even says that the devil has the power of death (Heb 2:14), which is the result of sin (Jas 1:14-15).

2. Deceptions of evil spirits

It is easier to fight an enemy that we can see. But evil spirits fight us with deceptions that are not easy for us to discern, unless we are close with God and full of the Spirit's wisdom. As with any enemy, to counter their attacks, we must first learn how they attack us.

¹ Some of the lesson content has been translated from the following book:

靈界辨證 (*Discerning False Spirits from the True One, 3rd Edition*), Theological Seminary Textbook of True Jesus Church: Taiwan, July 1993.

The Bible teaches us that evil spirits engage in several activities, all a form of deception. First, they deceive by performing great signs, blinding our minds with the use of idols and sorcery (Rev 13:13–14; 1 Cor 12:2). Second, they cause men to do evil deeds according to their desires, giving them earthly knowledge, a love of money, and a love of the world. They trap unbelievers and make them enemies of God (Jas 4:4). Third, they confuse and resist the truth with false religions and hypocrisy and hinder those who preach the gospel.

But one of the most dangerous tactics that we face is when evil spirits seek to tempt and deceive members, to overcome God’s children when they are weak (Rev 12:4). They tempt members to sin and cause conflict between members using envy, heresies, and pride.

3. Persecution from evil spirits

Evil spirits tempt and trap members in order to attack and destroy the church. When there is no unity in the church, it cannot grow. The apostolic church fell apart because of the many false teachers that rose in the church and the heresies that they taught. Such persecution from the world occurs because we are children of God (Jn 15:19). Jesus Christ once warned His disciples that “you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Mt 10:22).

Satan and his servants will always seek to overcome God’s followers. But “God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Cor 10:13). We may be pursued and persecuted by Satan, but God has promised blessings for those who overcome, and for those who are persecuted for His righteousness’ sake, He will give the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:10).

C. Discerning Spirits

Now that we understand just what they can do, how do we discern between good and evil spirits? One of the most obvious signs of God’s Spirit is the speaking of tongues, like when the disciples first received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Aside from these external signs, the Holy Spirit will transform our conduct as well, replacing our heart of stone with a heart of flesh (Ezek 36:26–27). The Spirit will release believers from the bondage of sin, fill them with spiritual joy, and enable them to bear the fruit of the Spirit (Rom 8:2; Gal 5:22–23). This is because the Holy Spirit grants us power from on high (Lk 24:49).

On the other hand, evil spirits have their own power and seek only to harm. The physical signs of one possessed by an evil spirit have been witnessed, both in the Bible and today within our church. They may produce unnatural sounds or have other abnormal manifestations, such as convulsions or throwing themselves to the ground. God’s Spirit offers peace and self-control (1 Cor 14:32–33), but one who is possessed cannot control their bodies (Lk 9:39–42; Mk 5:5–6).

It is important to note that evil spirits do not only exist in those that have been possessed. A person who intends to do harm, cause conflict, and hinder the church out of hatred or pride can also be considered an evil spirit that we have to defend ourselves against. This is especially true of false teachers, who can sow great harm and discord within the church. Let’s read 1 John 4:1–6. This passage notes the differences between spirits of truth and of error. Let’s briefly take a closer look at how John teaches us to discern the spirits.

1. “Does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” (v. 3)

The first and clearest sign is when someone claims that Jesus Christ did not descend on this earth as

human. John describes these spirits as “the spirit of the Antichrist,” a spirit that directly opposes God’s truth. Peter also warns us of such destructive doctrine. He wrote, “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction” (2 Pet 2:1). He greatly condemns false teachers, calling them “accursed children,” and declares that, “while they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption” (2 Pet 2:14, 19).

2. “They are of the world.” (v. 5)

Jesus said, “I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world” (Jn 17:14). With the help of the Holy Spirit, God’s word transforms us so that we act according to His will. But a false spirit is of the world, and therefore encourages people to act according to their worldly desires. Rather than seeking out the kingdom and righteousness of God, they instead seek to fulfill their own desires and pleasures. As a result, someone with a false spirit does not have peace in their hearts. John warned us, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world” (1 Jn 2:15–16).

3. “The world hears them”; “does not hear us.” (vv. 5–6)

The Bible teaches us that the world loves its own (Jn 15:19). The revelations of a spirit of error do not come from God, but are deceptions, aimed at like-minded people who seek out their own interests. John also notes that “he who is not of God does not hear us” (1 Jn 4:6). A person with a spirit of error refuses to submit to the truth or to change their ways. They are often proud and lack the humility to learn God’s word and, therefore, oppose the truth.

D. The Importance of Discerning Spirits

The Acts of the Apostles describes a great number of situations where Paul, Peter, and the rest of the apostles were opposed by various spirits and different types of persecution. However, one of the biggest things that broke apart the apostolic church was the rise of incorrect doctrine through false prophets and teachers. Peter and John addressed these issues in their letters, but the church ultimately fell apart because the members turned away from the truth.

It is vital that we learn to discern the spirits so that we avoid falling into the same pitfalls that many members—both from the apostolic church and in our church today—have fallen into. Whether we face temptations, conflict, or heresies, it is often difficult to see the attack for what it is unless we have the wisdom of God within us. By understanding what kind of tactics evil spirits use, we can begin to defend ourselves and learn how to avoid falling into sin and disharmony with God and our brethren.

Today’s lesson, however, is just the beginning. There is still so much to learn. To grow in our experience and faith, we need to pursue a higher level of spirituality, so that we can be better equipped to fight against false doctrines, temptations, and persecution of the end times.

Check for Understanding

- 1. Why is the spiritual world so difficult to understand?** It surpasses all things; it cannot be measured with scientific knowledge because science can only be applied to things of the material world.

2. **What kind of power do evil spirits possess?** The power to confuse, deceive, and hinder God's followers.
3. **What kind of deceptions do evil spirits use?** They perform great signs, blinding our minds with the use of idols and sorcery. Second, they cause men to do evil deeds according to their desires. They trap unbelievers and make them enemies of God. Third, they confuse and resist the truth with false religions, hypocrisy, and by hindering those who preach the gospel.
4. **What is the most dangerous tactic that we face from evil spirits?** When they tempt and deceive members, and when they overcome God's children when they are weak.
5. **According to John, how can we discern false spirits from true spirits?** Spirits of error do not confess that Christ has come in the flesh; are of the world; and are heard by the world but do not hear us.

Life Application

1. Growing in Spiritual Wisdom

The most basic, yet most important, foundation for discerning spirits is spiritual wisdom. At the beginning of the lesson, we learned that we cannot apply any human understanding or logic to the spiritual realm. The Bible teaches us that "the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God" (1 Cor 3:19). So how do we grow in spiritual wisdom?

a. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom

Solomon famously wrote that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov 9:10). This is because "no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:11). Therefore, the first step to growing in spiritual wisdom is to first fear God. We need to revere and respect Him before He will grant us wisdom. To do so, we need to ask ourselves daily, "Do my actions show respect towards God? Do I remember His omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence? Or do I try to pretend that He cannot see what I am doing, or that He does not know the thoughts in my heart?"

b. Equip ourselves with the word of God

When we revere God, we will naturally spend more time learning His word and will understand how to apply Scripture to our daily spiritual growth (2 Tim 3:16). This includes being able to discern spirits. One reason false teachers are able to lead so many astray is because those who listen lack knowledge of the truth. Just as Jesus rejected Satan's temptations with Scripture (Mt 4:1–11), when we have a better understanding of God's word, it is less likely that we will be led astray. Instead, we will be able to grow in the wisdom given to us by the Spirit and learn how to wield God's word as our defense against false doctrine and temptation (Eph 6:17).

c. Leave no room in our hearts for spirits of error

Jesus taught us to pursue the treasures of heaven because "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt 6:21). We tend to set God aside for the sake of our daily pursuits, whether they are sports, academics, music, or games. It is always easier to prioritize what we can see over what we cannot see. This is one of the reasons it is so difficult for us to pursue spiritual wisdom. But worldly pursuits are all opportunities for Satan to drag us away from God.

When we prioritize our interests in this world, we open a door for the spirit of error to enter our hearts and cause us to stray. So, instead of filling our hearts with material desires, we need to learn to fill our hearts with God's will and leave no room for false teachings or temptations. To do so, we need to constantly pray for the fullness of the Spirit. By doing so, we can remind ourselves that the things of this world will pass away, but those who pursue God will be given

spiritual wisdom, which leads to everlasting life. Ask yourself, “What do I truly treasure in my heart? Do I prioritize God in my everyday decisions? Do I strive to fill my heart with God’s Spirit?”

The devil is a powerful, intelligent, and cunning being, but if we ask God for His wisdom, He will give us the understanding and power to combat any deceptions.

2. Be Watchful

Aside from having the spiritual wisdom to discern the spirits, we must always remain watchful. Peter told us that Satan “walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet 5:8). Any one of us may be his target, especially when we are spiritually weak. While the Israelites traveled through the wilderness, the Amalekites, one of their enemies, attacked the stragglers at their rear, when they were tired and weary (Deut 25:17–18). In the same way, Satan will attack the weakest among us. We need to be watchful, both for ourselves and those around us.

When Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, desperate for God’s help, His disciples fell asleep. Seeing this, Jesus warned them, “Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt 26:41). So how do we remain watchful?

a. Remain alert²

In ancient times, a “watchman” would be the lookout for the town or city, normally from a high point, such as a tower or atop a wall. Their job was to keep an eye on the surrounding fields and warn the city of approaching danger. However, if a watchman were to fall asleep, enemies could creep up unnoticed, bringing danger to the city and all of those within. A watchman’s job is to remain alert at all times. When you see sexual images, do you quickly switch channels or close the tab on your browser? Do you refuse to follow along with your friends if they engage in activities that you know God would dislike? If an evil thought comes to mind, do you pursue the thought or shake it away? Are you a watchman who stays alert?

b. Sharpen our spiritual sight

In the Old Testament, the Lord called Ezekiel His watchman (Ezek 3:17). But His first message to the Israelites was not to warn of dangers from the outside, but from within. At the top of a tower, a watchman not only has a good view of the surrounding land, but also of the very city that he guards. We learned today that one of the greatest dangers we face from evil spirits is the rise of incorrect doctrine and false teachers. So, like a watchman atop a tower, we must be alert to false teachings and incorrect behavior, both in ourselves and in our church. To do so, we must sharpen our spiritual sight, so that we are able to discern the true from false.

Sharp spiritual eyesight requires a strong faith, deep knowledge of the Bible, and insight into God’s will—all things which cannot be achieved without the fullness of the Spirit. Are you able to see the true will of God? Are you able to see sin when it appears, either in yourself or in those around you? Or are you spiritually blind like the Pharisees, unable to perceive God’s true will?

c. Rely on the power of God’s name

In the event that we actually face danger, we must rely on God. Remember that evil spirits have power, and we cannot face them without God’s help. We must learn to call upon God’s name

² Wayne Chen, “The Spiritual Watchman”, *Manna Magazine Issue #35*, April 2001, <http://ia.tjc.org/elibrary/ContentDetail.aspx?ItemID=608&langid=1>.

when in need. Using the name of Jesus, Peter made a lame man walk (Acts 3:6), and Paul cast out an evil spirit from a girl with the simple words, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her" (Acts 16:18). The strength of the apostles was not in their own abilities, but in their faith and reliance on God's name. Psalm 127:1 says, "Unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain." Without God's power, we can do nothing. But on the other hand, with Him at our side, we can do anything. Our faith can move mountains (Mt 17:20). Do we have faith in the name of Jesus Christ? Do we truly believe that there is power in His name, and that if we call upon Him with faith, He will answer?

Memory Verse

"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." (1 John 4:1)

Context

In this passage, John was warning the members to be on guard not against demon possession, but against teachers who promote incorrect behavior within the church. At the time, the church fought misguided teachings such as Docetism, a set of beliefs that branched from Gnosticism.

Meaning

1. To "test the spirits" means to ascertain whether a spirit is truly from God. If a person's teachings are from God, then they align with God's will and will never be in conflict with the Bible. This means that to recognize a false teacher, we must first have a thorough and complete understanding of God's word.
2. False prophets are a tool of Satan, set forth to deceive God's children and drag us from the true faith. Many may have already strayed from the truth, but we must be firm in our beliefs. We must remain convinced of God's calling, of the true church, and of His will, no matter what temptations or false teachings we face.

Conclusion

By understanding what kind of tactics evil spirits use, we can begin to defend ourselves and learn how to avoid falling into sin and disharmony with God and our brethren. To do this, we must grow in our experience and faith. We need to pursue a higher level of spirituality, so that we can be better equipped to fight against false doctrines, temptations, and persecution at the end time. Then, when we grow in spiritual wisdom, we will be able to be good watchmen for the Lord, able to discern spirits and to guard ourselves and the true church.

Lesson 11 Homework Assignment Answer Key

1. How do we “test” a spirit, to see if a person’s teachings are from God?
If a person’s teachings are from God, then they align with God’s will and will never be in conflict with the Bible.
2. How do evil spirits tempt and deceive members?
They tempt members to sin and cause conflict between members using envy, heresies, and pride.
3. According to 1 John 4:1–6, what are three characteristics of a spirit of error?
 - a. *Does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*
 - b. *Is of the world*
 - c. *The world hears them; they do not hear us*
4. Why is it so important to equip ourselves with God’s word?
False teachers are able to lead so many astray because those who listen lack knowledge of the truth. Just as Jesus rejected Satan’s temptations with Scripture, when we have a better understanding of God’s word, it is less likely that we will be led astray.
5. Are you a good watchman who stays alert? Explain why or why not. How can you become a better watchman?
Personal answers.