Spiritual Discernment in the End Times

1 John 4:1-3 & 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22

9/19/10

Introduction: ***Ephesians 4:11-16***

In the last days Satan will attack 3 vital aspects of Christianity:

1. Satan will attack the **Bible**
2. Satan will attack the **Gospel**
3. Satan will attack the **Church**

See: I John 4:1-6

"Believe not every spirit" (v. 1a)

Those with spiritual discernment have **A MIND that TESTS everything they hear** (v. 1-3)

SEE: I THESSALONIANS 5:19-22

*** Every time you hear a message from the Word of God,**
YOU MUST LISTEN, WHILE THE HOLY SPIRIT IS SPEAKING!

2 Responsibilities that you must fulfill every time you hear a message:

I. You are Responsible to:
ALLOW THE HOLY SPIRIT TO SPEAK TO YOU (v. 19-20)
(Listen with spiritual desire)

II. You are Responsible to:
MAKE SURE IT IS THE HOLY SPIRIT SPEAKING TO YOU
(v. 21-22)
(Listen with spiritual discernment)

A. *Before You Swallow it:*
PUT IT TO THE TEST (v. 21a)

B. *If it Passes the Test:*
DON'T LET GO OF IT (v. 21b)

C. *If it Fails the Test:*

DON'T COME NEAR IT (v. 22)

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Introduction:

Ephesians 4:11-16

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: **That we *henceforth* be no more children, 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**; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, *even* Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

In the last days Satan will attack 3 vital aspects of Christianity:

1. Satan will attack the **Bible** (Because the Word of God is the foundation upon which our entire faith rests, it will become an object of attack)
2. Satan will attack the **Gospel** (The nature & work of Christ and God's plan of a Free Grace Salvation will come under attack; The Cross will be ridiculed) This is why Jude said that we must "earnestly contend for the faith"
3. Satan will attack the **Church** (By this I do not mean any particular denomination, but that Believers gathering in a unified, Bible centered ministry will come under attack) This is why the writer of Hebrews said that we must not be "forsaking the assembling of ourselves together… and so much the more as ye see the day approaching"

See: I John 4:1-6

Introduction: "Believe not every spirit" (v. 1a)

We must accurately discern what is of God and what is not. Reasons:

1) The prevalence of diverse religions, cults, "isms," and philosophies

2) The popular acceptance of ecstatic speech ("tongues"), new revelations, alleged signs, and wonders

3) The popular New Age inquiry into the spirit world, spirit guides, channeling, alleged extra-terrestrial contact

v. 1 - "believe not every spirit" - Don't trust every spiritual teaching, movement, or man. This is a warning against spiritual gullibility.

(So many undiscerning professing believers in our land will trust the teaching of most any TV or radio personality because of his appearance, charisma, or popularity.)

Many people "are only too readily gullible to every front-door exponent of false teaching." (Guy H. King, p. 88)

There are only two spiritual entities that teach:

1. The Spirit of God (the Holy Spirit)
2. The angelic spirits

--good angels often delivered messages from God during times when new revelation was being given - EX: Gabriel to Daniel or to Joseph & Mary.

--demonic (fallen) angels have throughout history been putting ideas into people's minds (EX: "Doctrines of Demons")
I Tim. 4:1 - Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;
Cp. Ja. 3:5 - Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

- Don't be naïve
- Beware of "misguided charity" (many are poor stewards, giving to wolves in sheep's clothing)
- Watch out for tolerance and compromise toward false doctrine

"The Bible places the responsibility for determining the reliability or veracity of a teacher squarely on the shoulders of each believer" (Hocking, p. 53).

It is not merely the preacher's or church's responsibility to tell you who to look out for, or what heresies to avoid. You need to be equipped to know how to have spiritual discernment.

"We need to preserve the Biblical balance, avoiding on the one hand the <u>extreme superstition</u> which believes <u>everything</u> and on the other hand the <u>extreme suspicion</u> which believes nothing" (Stott, p. 153).

How do you determine whether a teaching be . . .

--from above or below?
--divine or diabolical?
--Biblical Christianity or a blasphemous counterfeit?

***In a day in which deceivers and deception abound, we need to have spiritual discernment!**

Those with spiritual discernment have . . .

A MIND that TESTS everything they hear (v. 1-3)

"But try the spirits" - Note: John is not saying: "Don't believe any spirit" (as if we should ignore all spiritual teachers), but rather he exhorts us to put them to the test.

"Try" - *dokimazete* - to examine something; then only if it passes do you approve it (I Thes. 5:21 - Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.)

"Test" - "In ancient times the word used here referred to objects – most frequently precious metals – that were tested to determine their value or genuineness. The word is used 23 times in the New Testament as a verb, and always in the sense of examining something or someone to determine whether they are genuine" (Hocking, p. 54).

ILLUS: Things you test:

--You test drive a car before you buy it

--You test the water temperature (bathtub, pool, lake, etc.) before plunging into it.

Why are many so unconscientious when it comes to testing what they hear?

*They don't care about truth (too preoccupied with the world)
*They are lazy (to preoccupied with pleasure)
--It takes work to be a Berean!
*They are untrained (didn't take advantages of opportunities to learn God's Word)
*They are comfortable with popular opinion (they assume that because so many others believe this way it must be okay)

v. 1

"Whether they are of God" - God is not the author of all religions (as some would say), nor do all roads lead to the same place. Not all "spiritual teachings" have their origin in God. As a matter of fact, most do not!

Satan's plan to confuse the world is to introduce so many ideas, philosophies, and religions so as to keep people unaware of which way to go. He has "muddied the waters" with so many cults and "isms" that people apart from God could never see the bottom of the truth.

"Many false prophets are gone out into the world" - Satan has opened the flood gates of hell and has unleashed his wolves on the unsuspecting world.

EX: Jer. 23:14, 16-17, 21, 25-26, 31-32 - I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem an horrible thing: they commit adultery, and walk in lies: they strengthen also the hands of evildoers, that none doth return from his wickedness: they are all of them unto me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah.
16 Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they make you vain: they speak a vision of their own heart, *and* not out of the mouth of the LORD.
17 They say still unto them that despise me, The LORD hath said, Ye shall have peace; and they say unto every one that walketh after the imagination of his own heart, No evil shall come upon you.
21 I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied.
25 I have heard what the prophets said, that prophesy lies in my name, saying, I have dreamed, I have dreamed.
26 How long shall *this* be in the heart of the prophets that prophesy lies? yea, *they are* prophets of the deceit of their own heart;
31 Behold, I *am* against the prophets, saith the LORD, that use their tongues, and say, He saith.
32 Behold, I *am* against them that prophesy false dreams, saith the LORD, and do tell them, and cause my people to err by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith the LORD.

Old Testament tests to determine a false prophet:

1. If his <u>prediction</u> does <u>not</u> come true (Dt. 18:22)

2. If his <u>message</u> <u>leads</u> you <u>astray</u> from God (Dt. 13:1-5)

3. If his <u>message</u> does not match the rest of Scripture

v. 2

How do I know when a man, movement or message is from the Spirit of God?

A. Listen to what they <u>say</u>

"Every spirit that <u>confesseth</u>"

--Don't be swayed by their charisma
-Don't be baffled by their signs and wonders
--Don't be buffooned by their popularity

The acid test is not what I see or "feel" about them, but what do they say; does what they say line up with Scripture? Ask. . .

--Is this teaching really coming from the test being quoted?
--Is he taking this out of context?
--Does this teaching line up with the rest of the Bible's teaching on this subject?
--Would this teaching lead me to disobey any other Bible teaching?
--Would this teaching (if obeyed) glorify Jesus Christ?

"Confesseth" - not a mere knowledge of a fact (as even the demons can render - Mk. 1:24, 3:11, 5:7-8; Acts 19:15)., but a personal confession (*homoogein*) of faith.

B. Listen to what they say about <u>Jesus Christ</u>

If they are teaching on the person and work of Jesus Christ, what do they say about <u>Him</u>?

(Remember: the Holy Spirit's job is to promote Christ. John 15:26 - ¶ But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, *even* the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me:

Cp. John 16:13.

Other than teaching about his Lordship or deity, the Holy Spirit will also teach these major truths about Jesus Christ:

1. He is <u>Savior</u> (Jesus = Jehovah is salvation)
2. He is <u>Messiah</u> (Christ = anointed One)
3. He is <u>pre-existent</u> ("came")

4. He became a man ("in the flesh" - incarnate

"For many years this passage troubled me, because I could not see why such tremendous issues should hand upon so simple a thing as the acknowledgement that Jesus Christ was an historical personage. Of course He was; even these false spirits will agree to that. Secular historians, quite independently of the Bible—Josephus, Pliny, for instance—record the fact." (King, p. 88).

The fact that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah) and that He came to earth and became "flesh" is a recurring major point of emphasis in John's first epistle.

I Jn. 1:1-2 - ¶ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life;
2 (For the life was manifested, and we have seen *it*, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;)

I Jn. 2:22 - Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son.

I Jn. 5:1a - Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God

I do not believe that John's point is merely to correct docetism (the teaching that Christ appeared human but was not), but rather Judaism, which denied that Jesus was the Christ who came to earth in a physical body.

"This is not talking merely of Jesus being a man who lived on earth; it is talking about the pre-existence of Christ, as well as the deity of Christ. . . Did God become flesh." (Hocking, p. 54).

"The best translation of verse 2b is: 'Every spirit who is confessing jesus as Christ come in the flesh is of God'." (Donald W. Burdick, p. 67).

v. 3

"This is that spirit of Antichrist whereof ye have heard that it should come" -

In the last days, Satan's teachers will increasingly attack the fact that the Messiah has come. And why will he so vigorously deny that Christ came in the flesh?

Answer: To pave the way for the other false Christs which shall appear (Mt. 24:23-24) and ultimately to prepare the Jewish nation and the world for the coming of the Antichrist - I Jn. 2:18).

“Anti” - means “instead of”

An Antichrist is a counterfeit Christ or an imitation Messiah who comes instead of the true Christ who came in the flesh.

“Even now already is it in the world” - “This does not imply that the Antichrist was already in existence in the first century. However, the spirit which will be characteristic of Antichrist when he comes was then active and still is.” (Burdick, p. 68).

Any teaching that attacks the Messianic incarnation of Jesus is of the devil!

SEE: I THESSALONIANS 5:19-22

Verses 16-22 appear at first to be a string of abrupt, unrelated commands with no theme or common point.

However, a closer look reveals that verses 16-18 have the theme of "consistency" being emphasized (in Gk., the emphasis is on the adjectives - "evermore" "without ceasing" "in everything").

Now verses 19-22 have a theme describing our attitude and responsibility to the message of the Holy Spirit.

Whereas v. 16-18 deal with our inner (private) spiritual life, verse 19-22 describe our outward (public) spiritual life (when we hear preachers proclaim God's Word).

If God has one command for His churches that He makes very clear, it is the command found 7 times to 7 churches in Revelation 2 & 3. At the end of each message to each church, jesus Christ says: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (cp. Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

*** Every time you hear a message from the Word of God,**
YOU MUST LISTEN, WHILE THE HOLY SPIRIT IS SPEAKING!

2 Responsibilities that you must fulfill every time you hear a message:

I. You are Responsible to:
ALLOW THE HOLY SPIRIT TO SPEAK TO YOU (v. 19-20)
(Listen with spiritual desire)

A. We Allow Him to Speak by not:
SMOTHERING HIS FIRE (v. 19)

"The Spirit" = the Holy Spirit of God.

"Quench" = to extinguish, or put out like you do a fire; to smother or stifle

The Spirit is likened unto a flame in Acts 2:3; and a purifying fire in Is. 4:4.

It is the Spirit who burns into our hard hearts with His convicting power (Luke 24:32). It is the Spirit who warms our cold hearts with His encouraging power.

He convicts and encourages by the Word (the Scriptures).

Many things can quench the Spirit's working in a church. Such as:

1. Sinful actions (on the part of members) (immorality, idleness, etc.) (Sin in the camp keeps God from working; EX: Achan's sin, Josh. 7)

2. Sinful attitudes (pride, self-righteousness; bitterness; anger)

3. Coldness
--Mechanical singing, praying, and worshipping (The Spirit is not free to work; He is put in a box, confined)

--Unfriendliness

**But the way He is quenched according to this context is by your having an apathetic attitude toward the preaching of the Sword of the Spirit (v. 20).

B. We Allow Him to Speak by not:
BELITTLING HIS MESSAGE (v. 20)

V. 20

"Despise" = to treat something lightly; to consider something to be nothing; to down-grade, or treat with contempt.

While N.T. prophets did foretell the future and proclaimed new revelation from God (Acts 11:27-28; 21:10-11), their primary function was like that of a Pastor: they exhorted (Acts 15:32) and proclaimed God's Word in simple language that everyone could understand (I Cor. 14).

Apparently, the Thessalonians -- who had welcomed Paul's message "not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God" -- were rejecting their own prophets' (or pastors) messages.

Today, many will travel many miles to hear a noted Bible teacher or radio or TV preacher, but when their own pastor presents the same truths, they will turn him off (Walton, R.B.P., I Th., p. 63).

Disrespect for the preacher
Distrust in the preacher

--Some treat lightly what is said because they treat lightly the one who said it (disrespect). (They belittle the preacher because of his lack of degrees, his young age, etc.)

--Others treat lightly what is said, because of others who have spoken the Word in the past, but proved to be false prophets (distrust) (They close themselves off to all preaching because of others who failed).

Your attitude toward a meal affects how you will like the meal. EX: If you were told that _____ was a tremendous cook (her recipes were great, etc.), because you come with positive anticipations, the meal, though not perfect, will seem great to you!

If you come to church and expect nothing, you will get nothing.

If you come to church full of what the world gave you, you won't be hungry for what the Spirit can give you.

Your attitude toward a meal affects how <u>others</u> will like a meal. EX: Suppose you came to a banquet and a plate of spaghetti and meatballs sat right in the middle of a table.

1. How much would you eat if everyone else only ate 1 meatball?
2. How much would you eat if the others had a disgusting look on their faces as they took a bite?
3. Or what would you think of this so-called banquet if only a few guests showed up?

APPLICATION - Your hunger for the Word is catching; so is your indifferent, cold, uninterested attitude toward it.

1. When you come to church, others will know if you are hungry or not.

2. When you listen to a message and yawn or sleep through it, others will be turned off.

3. If you don't come, your absence will also affect others.

II. You are Responsible to:
<u>MAKE SURE</u> IT IS THE HOLY SPIRIT SPEAKING TO YOU
(v. 21-22)
(Listen with spiritual <u>discernment</u>)

While God wants us to be <u>hungry</u> to learn His truth, He does not want us to swallow it unless we are sure it is edible.

(ILLUS: baby's tend to eat anything and everything -- Warning to new Christian: Beware of what you eat!

A. Before You Swallow it:
<u>PUT IT TO THE TEST</u> (v. 21a)

V. 21

The Thessalonian believers seemed to be easily swayed or prone to accept anyone's doctrine without checking it out first with other Scripture.

Therefore, Paul showed concern about the stability of their faith, and had to warn them about deceivers and false doctrine that was floating around (II Th. 2:2-3).

NOTE: The early Church did not have a completed N.T., so they had to compare what they learned with the O.T. and the oral teaching of Christ and the Apostles. (Satan could more easily slip in false prophecies; therefore, people had to measure what was heard with the God-breathed standard!)

"Prove" = to test or examine what is spoken, to see if it is genuine truth.

You are to abound more and more "in knowledge and in all judgment (insight), that ye may approve things that are excellent" (Phil. 1:9-10).

We need spiritual discernment - especially in our day!

--New religious teachings are springing up
--More books are published than every before
--The world-wide media (TV & radio) is being used to promote much false doctrine.

All of the varieties of cults, religious, viewpoints, etc., don't surprise me because God has told us it would be this way in the last days.

I Tim. 4:1-2 - "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils: Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron"

II Tim. 4:3-4 - "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; And they shall turn away their own ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables."

God does not place a premium on ignorance!

"There is a way that seemeth right unto a man . . ." (Prov. 16:25)

The Bereans searched the Scriptures! (Acts 17:11)

We are to test the Spirits (SEE: I Jn. 4:1-3, 6)

(How: By comparing what we hear with the Word of God).

We don't trust a spirit by how it "looks" or how it "feels," but by what it says!

You test a spirit by putting it to the objective doctrinal test and a subjective emotional test!

Put everything you hear (messages, advice, counsel) to the acid test of Scripture!

NOT to the test of your likes and dislikes (don't accept it just because someone's doctrine may suit your lifestyle)

NOT to the test of what you heard in the past (what you learned previously may have been incorrect).

NOT to the test of your own theological presuppositions.

The Roman Catholic church deliberately kept men blind from the truth; ignorant of their mishandling of Scripture by telling the people: "You are not qualified to discern on your own; you cannot interpret without us, etc."

However, "in Christ" we all have the Holy Spirit who teaches us.

I Jn. 2:26-27 - "These things have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you. But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him."

(NOTE: This verse does not relieve us from being taught, going to church, etc. What God is saying is that God's Spirit will teach you how to distinguish between truth and error. **The Holy Spirit also uses men to do this teaching with Him - Eph. 4:11-14).

How do you examine what you hear?
Follow these simple hermeneutical principles:
As you listen to a message, ask yourself:

1) Is this person interpreting this passage in a normal (literal) way, or is he making it say something it really does not say?

2) Is this interpretation supported by the context? (does his view follow the line of thought here?)

3) How does this teaching compare with other Scripture that I know? (does it contradict?)

B. If it Passes the Test:
DON'T LET GO OF IT (v. 21b)

God does not merely want us to approve what is good, but to hold firmly on to it and retain it (make it a part of your life).

Hold on to it like you would a precious gem that was examined and found genuine.

C. If it Fails the Test:
DON'T COME NEAR IT (v. 22)

In the Greek, we see that God deliberately sets up a contrast:

1)"Hold fast" ( ) the Good
2)"Hold off" ( ) the Evil

V. 22

"Abstain" = keep yourself away from; separate yourself.

God is not saying here: Don't do what "looks" like evil (EX: Don't drink soda out of a can because someone might think you are drinking beer).

While the principle is true that we should avoid appearing to do wrong even though we actually are not (Rom. 14:16), this is not the point being made in this context.

God is saying: After you have proven (tested) someone's teaching, if it has any shade, form, or visible evidence of evil in it, "spit it out" and throw it away! Stay away from it.

We are to avoid doctrinal error no matter what form or appearance in which it may present itself.

False teaching may dress itself up in many various sizes, shapes, and colors (don't be deceived!).

The Holy Spirit only works with Truth!

--A book may veil itself in an attractive cover and title, but the Spirit can only use it if it has pure doctrine inside.

--A preacher may be eloquent and say many good things...

--A church may be large and have many attractive features . . . but all that matters is: Is the truth being taught?!

"The worse forms of wickedness consist of perversions of the truth, of spiritual lies." (Lenski, p. 370-71).

The most destructive sin is false doctrine, because it deals with your soul; your relationship to God; your present life, and your eternal destiny!

CONCLUSION:

Listening to God's Word is serious business.

You cannot be passive about it.

Every time you hear a message from the Word of God, you must listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying!

2 Responsibilities we must fulfill every time we hear a message:

1.You are responsible to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you

--Don't smother His fire

--Don't belittle His message

2.You are responsible to make sure it is the Holy Spirit speaking to you

--Before you swallow it, put it to the test

--If it passes the test, don't let go of it

--If it fails the test, don't come near it