

Podcast Episode 51: Discernment, Part 1

This is Part 1 of a special series on Discernment.

QUESTION: In a lengthy *Times and Seasons* article entitled “Try the Spirits,” published on April 1, 1842, Joseph Smith wrote:

A man must have the discerning of spirits before he can drag into daylight this hellish influence and unfold it unto the world in all its soul-destroying, diabolical, and horrid colors; for nothing is a greater injury to the children of men than to be under the influence of a false spirit when they think they have the Spirit of God. (T&C 147:9)

What is discernment? How can I develop the gift and ability? What can be done to correctly discern true and false spirits? And how can I discern my own thoughts from those from God?

DENVER: The authenticity of God's message is not proven by the means of delivery. Even if an angel comes, an angel can come and mislead you. The only way to distinguish between what is and what is not of God is through the medium of sacrifice, because when you do this, the vessel is clean. And when the vessel is clean before God, then even an angel of light cannot mislead you. Because what they offer is darkness, and you can tell it, because they have not the power to mislead.

Everyone can be misled, unless the course in life that they pursue is according to God's will. I want to go to vs 27 of Mormon 9:27: “*O then despise not, and wonder not, but hearken unto the words of the Lord, and ask the Father in the name of Jesus for what things soever ye shall stand in need. Doubt not, but be believing, and begin as in times of old, and come unto the Lord with all your heart, and work out your own salvation with fear and trembling before him. Be wise in the days of your probation; strip yourselves of all uncleanness; ask not, that ye may consume it on your lusts, but ask with a firmness unshaken, that ye will yield to no temptation, but that ye will serve the true and living God.*” You don't acquire favor with God in order to consume what He gives to you on your lusts, to satisfy your ambition, to become someone great in the eyes of everyone else. It doesn't happen that way. And if you try to turn it in that way, you'll meet the same kind of unfortunate end that we see happening time and time again by the ambitious and the unscrupulous, the knavish and the foolish.

Be wise in the days of your probation. Strip yourselves of all uncleanness. Check your thoughts. Focus them on something that is light and true and pure. Because in the end, none of us have anything to be proud of. In the end, the only thing that matters is if God will vouch for us in the day of judgment. If He will and if He does, then it is a gift. I honestly believe—and I'm not saying this for rhetorical purposes, I honestly believe—

I have lived my life; I know the mistakes I've made. In the book *The Second Comforter*, the little vignettes taken out of my life illustrate how to make a mistake, how to do something wrong, how to fail. And what follows in the chapter is a description of how to do it right. I have learned all that I have learned as a consequence of my own failings, as a consequence of my own errors.

I genuinely believe that almost every person in this room (I say “almost” because I know there is a Marine here), almost every person in this room has lived a life that has been better, more pure, more decent, more honorable, and more noble than my own. I am unworthy of anything other than your pity. But I can bear testimony of someone who is pure, who is true, and who can save you. My belief is that every one of you have lived lives so much more worthy of the Lord's recognition than my own. For the life of me, I can't understand why you don't have the faith and confidence to realize that He loves you. And you are more lovable than am I. He probably finds it a lot easier to love you than me. I feel like I'm the idiot that's writing graffiti on the walls of heaven, and they really wish the guy would leave and wonder what he's doing here. I mean, I get that you're into forgiving the sinners, but you've got to be kidding me. I think if you were to arrive there, there would be a lot more propriety to that. Have faith. Be believing. Trust in Him.

Go to Moses 1:8: *“And it came to pass that Moses looked, and beheld the world upon which he was created...”* Moses beheld the world. To me, this is very interesting. He's describing a view that is very often in scripture referred to as “being caught up into an exceedingly high mountain.” This is a view up and looking down. In any event, let's move to verse 18: *“And again Moses said...”* now he's talking because Satan has come during this interlude period as an angel of light, tempting him—vs 18: *“And again Moses said: I will not cease to call upon God, I have other things to inquire of him: for his glory has been upon me, wherefore I can judge between him and thee. Depart hence, Satan.”*

The defect that Moses perceived in what Lucifer was saying, tempting him, did not consist merely in the presence. This is an angel. Go to Section 76, and read the description: an angel, in a position of authority in the presence of God, was cast down. That is not a being who, to look upon, would appear to be a vile creature. That would be someone who, to look upon, would appear to be a being of light, a being of glory, an angel of light. The reason

Moses could discern between them had nothing to do with the appearance. It had to do with the content. It had to do with the Spirit. It had to do with what he radiated. And what Moses was able to discern was that this was not the source of something which he, Moses, chose to take in, as a consequence of which, he could judge between him and say, You—you I disprefer.

When you look at the Joseph Smith History, the thick darkness (I talked about this last time)—the Orson Hyde account of that talks about the thick darkness that gathered around him. It consisted of the adversary benighting his mind with doubts and brought to his soul all sorts of improper pictures. The reason why it is possible to do that, and more easily so with many of us, is because we have ingested into ourselves all kinds of improper images, which then can be summoned back up.

Look at 2 Nephi 9:9. This is one of the early sermons given by Jacob, *“And our spirits must have become like unto him, and we become devils, angels to a devil, to be shut out from the presence of our God, and to remain with the father of lies, in misery, like unto himself; yea, to that being who beguiled our first parents, who transformeth himself nigh unto an angel of light, and stirreth up the children of men unto secret combinations of murder and all manner of secret works of darkness.”* It is not the physical appearance, nor the transformation that takes place—it is the content—which is why you need to know that the course that you are pursuing is in accordance with the will of God, because once you have made the required sacrifice, you acquire the required knowledge.

Look at Alma 30. This is an explanation given at the bad end of Korihor. As the judgments were upon him, and he was writing his final confession before his death, Alma 30:53, *“But behold, the devil hath deceived me; for he appeared unto me in the form of an angel, and said unto me: Go and reclaim this people, for they have all gone astray after an unknown God. And he said unto me: There is no God; yea, and he taught me that which I should say. And I have taught his words; and I taught them because they were pleasing unto the carnal mind; and I taught them, even until I had much success, insomuch that I verily believed that they were true; and for this cause I withstood the truth, even until I have brought this great curse upon me.”*

You see, he was convinced by the devil who appeared to him in the form of an angel. It's not always that the adversary comes to you with murderous intent. Sometimes he comes to appeal to your vanity, to your pride. Pride is such a sinkhole that he can get most people there. “Oh, you could have acclaim, you could have wealth.” No, you acquire what you need to acquire as a consequence of sacrificing for God. And in that process you will endure

criticism, rejection, opposition, the world's hatred. You may even be cast out—but you obtain what you obtain from God by sacrifice.

MAN: What keys of knowledge, what tools do you use to help discern between truth and error?

DENVER: The most correct measuring stick, in my view, is the Book of Mormon. As long as you have the Book of Mormon, you have the ability to make a comparison, and if something reaffirms something I find there, then I regard that as having passed the test. If it contradicts that [the Book of Mormon], then I regard that as having failed the test. And if it harmonizes with it, but it extends it beyond anything known to me, then I've got something to pray about, because the ultimate arbiter of truth is God.

Within your family, within your marriage, are you and your wife learning to use persuasion? Within your marriage, are you and your husband learning to use gentleness in dealing with one another? Are the two of you, together, facing one another in all the difficulties that come as a result of being married, are you facing that together in meekness? Do you find that, in all the relationship troubles, turmoil, and challenges, what predominates is kindness? Is there a search for understanding that results in pure knowledge, when it comes to a dilemma?

Look at verse 37: *“That they may be conferred upon us, it is true; but when we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man (D&C 121:37).”*

It has been my observation that as soon as the Spirit of the Lord withdraws, that quickly will another spirit step in to assure you that you're right, that you should be vindicated, that you ought to proceed on in the arrogance of your heart to feel yourself justified and vindicated. There are false spirits that go about, but there is no better an audience to receive the whisperings of those false spirits than the abusers who, having grieved the spirit and caused it to withdraw, then accept counsel from another spirit that says: “You are right; press on! Well done! You are good; you're right. You'll be vindicated. This is all God's work, and you're a great man because you're engaged in God's work! Do not back down; do not relent. Forget about persuasion—you should never be long-suffering; you should make those under your rule suffer. They should yield to your rule. There is no place for meekness. We believe in a God of strength, a God of power, a God whose work can be done despite the frailties of man! There is no need for men to be meek. And it's kind, in the end,

after all, to punish and to force and coerce, because we have a good objective in mind.” All of the lies and all the deceit that led, in turn, to Catholicism falling into the abyss that it fell into are presently in play with Spirits that worked this out long ago, taking the Restoration of the Gospel as yet another opportunity in which to whisper in once the Spirit is withdrawn.

And so does your marriage help you avoid covering your sins? Does your marriage— Because you are never going to solve this problem in a community of Zion, until you first begin to solve it in the walls within your own home. You are never going to have Zion that exists somewhere in a community, until first that community has been composed of those who have a marriage that is in the image of God.

Does your marriage help you to avoid “gratifying your pride?” Does it help hold down your “vain ambition?” Is your ambition to exalt the two of you, rather than the one of you? Does it bring you, time and time again, to not exercise control but to respect the freedom to choose? Your kids are going to make mistakes. It is not your job to force them to not make the mistake. It is your job to counsel them and to let them have the experience by which your counsel makes sense and is vindicated. You hope the mistakes they make are not too serious, but even if they are serious and they involve lifelong struggles, it is their right to choose. It is your obligation to teach and to persuade and then to rejoice when they return after they are tired of filling their bellies with the husks that the pigs are fed. It is your job to go and greet them and put a robe on their shoulder and put a ring on their hand and to kill the fatted calf. It's not your job to beat them and chain them to the farm, so that they can't go away and behave foolishly. They need to know that your bonds of love towards them are stronger than death itself. They need to know that they will endure in your heart into eternity—not only your children, but one another. Because we all make mistakes.

Do not exercise dominion; do not exercise compulsion; but exercise long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, and kindness. Some of the biggest disasters come when you do not give people the right to choose freely, and you attempt to coerce them. Be wise, be prudent, be someone that they would respect and who they would listen to. (Your children will correctly measure you in the end, even if they do not do so at the beginning.)

When you submit to the rule of God and you place yourself in a position in which you must be dependent upon Him, every one of you realizes your own weaknesses. Every one of you has to grapple with the uncertainty of, “Is this right, or is this wrong?” Every one of you has to grapple with the fact that, in answer to some questions, there is silence, and you are forced to choose—if you choose right, you do not know you chose right, because He refused

to answer you. Then you act in reliance on that, going forward—only later to be told, “If you’d made the mistake, I would have corrected you, but you needed that experience.”

God answers prayers. And sometimes He forces you to make choices. And very often (I can't tell you how often, but very often), I make the wrong choice. It is almost like I've got a compass pointing south. I don't know what the deal is there. I choose wrong, and then I get an answer. But I got an answer, because I made a mistake. I have no clue why, other than the fact I was so converted and faithful to the LDS Church, why the Lord would have chosen me to accomplish what He's accomplished. Because I sincerely believe most of you here are just genuinely better people than I am. I have nothing but weakness to offer. Weak things are used by God because that requires faith. And faith requires that we have a correct belief and then that we take action. That's from the *Lectures on Faith*: A correct belief, and then we take action. But if you do take action, then you will receive the reward from your faith. Do not rely on man.

There is nothing special about us...YET. But there can be. We do not need numerous temples, but we will need one to which Christ can come. We do not need to perform endless work for the dead until after there has been a covenant made for us. We must be first connected. Only then can we do something to liberate them. I've written so much on that, I won't repeat it.

There are so many opportunities to go off the rails that I want to remind you of some of the early problems in Kirtland. In Doctrine and Covenants 50:2,

Behold, verily I say unto you, that there are many spirits which are false spirits, which have gone forth in the earth, deceiving the world. And also Satan hath sought to deceive you, that he might overthrow you. Behold, I, the Lord, have looked upon you, and have seen abominations in the church that profess my name. But blessed are they who are faithful and endure, whether in life or in death, for they shall inherit eternal life. But wo unto them that are deceivers and hypocrites, for, thus saith the Lord, I will bring them to judgment. Behold, verily I say unto you, there are hypocrites among you, who have deceived some, which has given the adversary power; but behold such shall be reclaimed [not the hypocrites; He's going to reclaim those that are deceived]. But the hypocrites shall be detected and shall be cut off, either in life or in death, even as I will; and wo unto them who are cut off from my church, for the same are overcome of the world. Wherefore, let every man beware lest he do that which is not in truth and righteousness before me. And now come, saith the Lord, by the Spirit, unto the elders of his church, and let us reason together, that ye may understand; Let us reason even as a man reasoneth one with another face to face. Now, when a man reasoneth he is

understood of man, because he reasoneth as a man; even so will I, the Lord, reason with you that you may understand. Wherefore, I the Lord ask you this question—unto what were ye ordained? To preach my gospel by the Spirit, even the Comforter which was sent forth to teach the truth. And then received ye spirits which ye could not understand, and received them to be of God; and in this are ye justified? Behold ye shall answer this question yourselves; nevertheless, I will be merciful unto you; he that is weak among you hereafter shall be made strong. Verily I say unto you, he that is ordained of me and sent forth to preach the word of truth by the Comforter, in the Spirit of truth, doth he preach it by the Spirit of truth or some other way? And if it be by some other way it is not of God. And again, he that receiveth the word of truth, doth he receive it by the Spirit of truth or some other way? If it be some other way it is not of God. Therefore, why is it that ye cannot understand and know, that he that receiveth the word by the Spirit of truth receiveth it as it is preached by the Spirit of truth? Wherefore, he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together. And that which doth not edify is not of God, and is darkness. That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day. And again, verily I say unto you, and I say it that you may know the truth, that you may chase darkness from among you; He that is ordained of God and sent forth, the same is appointed to be the greatest, notwithstanding he is the least and the servant of all.

This is what we should be. This is how we should teach. This is how we should edify one another. This is how we should be preparing our children. This is what we should be laying hold upon: truth, light, understanding, edifying, growing in knowledge of the principles of truth. You should not waste another 3-hour block of time fiddling around with nonsense, because you don't have permission from God to do that. Preach the principles. And if you don't think you know enough to do anything else—get together, and read the scriptures out loud.

(Transcribers Note: This next paragraph (in italics) was intended to be included in the audio at this point in the podcast, but due to difficulties in the transcript that was used to identify the start and stop times of the audio segments, the paragraph didn't make it in—but it's highly relevant and has therefore been included here):

False spirits will be among you. Prideful and pretentious people will want to impress you to give them honor. Honor God instead. Do not let a new revelation displace your attention away from the scriptures. They are sufficient for our day, as these ten sessions have demonstrated, I hope. I have expounded the scriptures as Moroni did to Joseph and as Christ did on the road to

Emmaus the day of His resurrection. We must first remember and observe. Preserving the Restoration requires us to be very familiar with the scriptures of the Restoration. At present, we should fear most our ignorance of the scriptures.

In the tenth talk, given in Phoenix two years ago, you were warned about false spirits, as happened in Kirtland, which you were warned would come among us. That warning has proven true. False spirits have misled some into foolish errors. I am astonished at vain, foolish, and prideful ideas that are anti-Christ, degrading, and dark but have been welcomed by some. Remember Pharaoh's magicians also enchanted their rods to become snakes (Exo. 7:11-12) and conjured frogs to mimic the sign given by God through Moses and Aaron (Exo. 8:7). Pharaoh's heart was hardened by these imitations. Do not let yours become so likewise.

For two years I have watched, attended some of your meetings, gathered reports, and tried to let you stand and display your strength and understanding. Even God left Adam and Eve in the Garden and allowed Lucifer, the common enemy, to tempt and try them, promising to return again to visit them. They transgressed His commandment, and He provided the means to cover their shame, repent, and return. He also promised to later send messengers. But God did not "babysit" Adam and Eve, informing them that it was given unto them to choose, even when He forbids something. God is the same now as in the beginning. We are all required to display our strength, obedience, and prove our understanding.

People have come among you preaching falsehoods and inviting others to follow false spirits—adulterers and adulteresses who justify sins and mock the commandment, "*thou shalt not commit adultery*" (Exo. 20:14). False claimants are pretending to seal others up to eternal life, changing the ordinances, and introducing foolish and vain ideas borrowed from pagans and heathen who do not know Christ nor His righteousness. I do not oppose them directly by debate or counter-argument. I declare the truth and leave it for everyone to decide between clearly opposing teachings. If people cannot discern, then they will need to learn from sad experience to choose between good and evil, perhaps only coming to understand after their destruction in this world.

There are those who use well-reasoned arguments to expound their understanding of scripture who have declared with certainty it is impossible for what I say to be true. These voices come from both the fearful anonymous and proud academics. I do not respond to either.

In a letter on August 24, 1834, Joseph Smith described the only way falsehoods could be avoided. He wrote, "If the Saints are very humble, very watchful and very prayerful, that

few will be deceived by those who have not authority to teach, or who have not the Spirit to teach according to the power of the Holy Ghost, in the scriptures” (JS Papers, Documents Vol. 4, p. 117).

Only the truth is at issue. Individuals other than Christ do not matter. The message I have and do preach is from the Lord. His sheep hear His voice. If they accept it as His, then deceivers, false spirits, and men’s learning are powerless to destroy faith in Him. He promised He “will take care of our flocks” (D&C 88:72), and therefore, it will be Him, and not me, who will keep His flock shepherded.

Of course, a false spirit can project love. Of course. False spirits imitate. The great imitator, who is a liar from the beginning, begins by assuming the role that is designed to be a counterfeit. The only way that a counterfeit works is if it has the look and feel, sentiment, and everything that the real thing has. If the adversary is going to imitate, of course love can be one of those things that are imitated. The question—if you want to try and dial in yea/nay, good/bad, true/false—is whether or not the love that is being shown leads, in turn, to pride, to haughtiness, to thinking I’m great, I’m wonderful. If it has, as its objective, creating pride and haughtiness in the individual, then you have to question the content of the message, not the means by which it gets delivered. Because if the means by which it is delivered is a counterfeit, it will seem like the ‘coin of the realm’—the real thing. Therefore, you have to question if the objective is prideful or if the objective is ultimately destructive.

In addition to the foregoing, Denver has addressed this topic extensively in several blog posts that may be worthwhile for you to review, including:

[“False Spirits” posted January 19, 2012](#)

[“Gifts Come from God” posted June 2, 2010](#)

[“The Battle” posted January 13, 2011](#); and

[“Faith Requires Correct Acts” posted August 7, 2016](#).

The foregoing excerpts were taken from:

- Denver’s *40 Years in Mormonism Series*, Talk #2 entitled “Faith,” given in Idaho Falls, ID on September 28, 2013;
- His talk entitled “Other Sheep Indeed,” given at the Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City, UT on July 29, 2017;

- Denver's *40 Years in Mormonism Series*, Talk #9 entitled "Marriage and Family," given in St. George, UT on July 26, 2014;
- Denver's *40 Years in Mormonism Series*, Talk #10 entitled "Preserving the Restoration," given in Mesa, AZ on September 9, 2014; and
- His conference talk entitled "The Doctrine of Christ," given in Boise, ID on September 11th, 2016.