

Episode 53: Discernment, Part 3

This is the final part of a special series on Discernment.

QUESTION: 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 battle we are all called upon to fight is not external. Some people spend their time stirring people up to alarm them about carnal security. They are usually trying to sell something. There are fortunes being made by proponents of fear. But the audience for such things are only being distracted from a much greater, more immediate, and more personal battle. Until the internal condition of the individual has been conquered and brought into alignment with heaven, there is no amount of political, social, economic, or military security which will matter in the long run.

It's more advisable to seek for and listen to the Lord—and secondarily, those teachers who will convert you to the Lord—rather than any other advice or movement advocated by those promoting causes. Teachers ought always to point to Him. Never to themselves. No one but the Lord is coming to rescue you; and no group will be able to overcome error apart from Him. Ultimately, the battle we each face is the Lord's. We must cooperate with Him for Him to be able to win it, in us. When He does, however, the victory is ours, for we are the ones that He redeems.

The path back to the Lord's presence is an individual one. It is not likely to be accomplished while in an audience. There is no "support group" needed. It is you—what goes on inside you; what you love most. He will one day associate with a group in a city, but that group will be comprised of individuals who have previously met Him.

It surprises me how little discernment there is among those claiming to seek truth. Many of them will take in ideas from foolish, vain, and proud sources with as much enthusiasm as from a true one. How is it that people cannot tell the difference between them? Does not a true message sound much different from a false one? Is merely associating some lesser virtue with a cause enough to have it have persuasive power and distract you? What is more plain than the admonishment to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness? Whenever there is an increase in spiritual manifestations, there is always an increase in both true and false spiritual phenomena. You do not get one without the other.

In Kirtland, new converts (who were overzealous to participate in the new heavenly manifestations coming as a result of Joseph Smith's claims) opened themselves up to receiving influences they could not understand and did not test for truthfulness. They were so delighted to have any kind of experience, they trusted anything "spiritual" was from God. As a result, there were many undignified things, degrading conduct, foolish behavior, and evil influences which crept in among the saints. Joseph received a revelation in May 1831 concerning this troubling development. In it the Lord cautioned there were "*many false spirits deceiving the world*" (D&C 50:2); that Satan wanted to overthrow what the Lord was doing (D&C 50:3). The presence of hypocrites and of people harboring secret sins and abominations caused false claims to be accepted (D&C 50:4,6-7). It is required for all people to proceed in truth and in righteousness (D&C 50:9) if they are going to avoid deception, meaning that unrepentant and unforgiven men will not be able to distinguish between a true and a false spirit.

All spiritual gifts, including distinguishing between true and false spirits, requires the Holy Ghost, given through obedience to the truth, which allows a person to distinguish between truth and error—or truth being light, and error being darkness (D&C 50:17-23). The truth is like light, and when you follow the light of truth it grows inside you until you have a "perfect day" in which there is no more darkness, but everything is illuminated by the light of the spirit within you (D&C 50:24). In that light you are able to see clearly the difference between light and darkness, the shadows, and the pitch black.

The revelation clarifies that a preacher of truth will become only a servant. He will not claim greatness but will seek only to give truth, as a result of which false spirits will be subject to him (D&C 50:26-27). But this only comes as a result of repenting of all sin, because the light of a perfect day cannot arise when men harbor evil desires and inappropriate ambitions within their hearts (D&C 50:28-29). Truth will not leave you confused but will enlighten your understanding (D&C 50:31).

From this you can see how necessary it is for each one of us to continually repent, conduct our lives in conformity with such truth as you presently understand, and avoid deliberate wrongdoing in order to be able to distinguish between a true and a false spirit. You must attract light into yourself. It is attracted by obedience to such light as you already have. When you proceed forward using the light you already possess to attract more light, it will grow in one consistent and truthful manner from a lesser to a greater light, all of it conforming to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Ambition in spiritual gifts leads to acceptance of evil influences. As part of the same problem in Kirtland, in September of the previous year, Hiram Page wanted to be like Joseph and was able to attract a deceiving spirit to communicate with him through a seer

stone. But the commandments he received were designed to lead him into error (D&C 28:11).

Truth will always testify of Christ and lead to repentance. It will lead you to do good, not evil; to serve God and to not seek and obtain ambition to have men follow you, to have men praise you; to repent and forsake darkness which appeals to the carnal mind is the effect that truth has (see Moroni 7:12-19).

Just because you have a “spiritual experience,” you cannot trust it will invariably be from God. True spirits will:

- Testify of Christ.
- Lead to repentance.
- Be consistent with existing scripture.
- Lead you to be submissive to authority that comes from God—and God alone.
- Edify and enlighten your mind.
- Be understandable and not cause confusion.
- Cause light to grow within you.
- Turn you toward Christ, not toward men.
- It will never cause pride.
- It will make you a better servant. You will be able to bless the lives of others.
- It will increase your love of your fellow man.
- It will clothe you with charity for the failings of others, instead of making you judgmental and proud.
- It will conform to the true whisperings of the Holy Ghost you previously have received.
- It will leave you humble and grateful for God’s condescension.
- It will make you want to bring others to that same light.
- It will be grounded in love toward God and all mankind.
- It will lead you to rejoice.

Contrariwise, false spirits will lead you to:

- Deny Christ or to diminish his importance; or to relegate him to a status other than the Redeemer, the Savior.
- False spirits will give you messages that bring about your pride.
- They will make you believe you are better because of the experience.
- They will contradict the scriptures.
- They will appeal to carnality and self-indulgence, tending to have you violate the ten commandments and to make your violation of the ten commandments something

that is viewed as excusable or justified, reasonable, or that God approves it, when He does not.

- It will lead you to rebel against those who preach the truth.
- It will cause you confusion.
- It will lead to ambition to try to control others.
- It will make you intolerant of other people's failings, and you'll judge and dismiss them.
- False spirits cause people to seek self fulfillment rather than service to their fellow man.
- False spirits appeal to your vanity and assure you that you are a great person. In fact, part of the message that succeeds comes about from false spirits precisely because it reassures people that they are great, that they are better than others. This brings about darkness in your mind; it repulses the Holy Ghost; it prevents you from understanding your sins repenting and forsaking them. It interferes with your ability to serve others. It makes you focus on yourself rather than the needs of others.

You should never think that all spiritual experiences can be trusted. There is no difference between the activities of deceiving spirits today and those in Kirtland (as well as those in the New Testament times). If you follow the Lord, you must still test the spirits and only follow those which point to Christ (see 1 John 4:1). Even Joseph Smith had to ask God about some of the phenomena going on in Kirtland before he knew which were of God and which were deceiving.

There are those today who are enjoying some success, and they target, specifically, people that have accepted the new covenant. They tell you that you are great, you are chosen; and they can assure you and confer upon you even greater blessings. What follows in the wake of their ministry though is pride, self indulgence, disobedience, and in turn, their minds become darkened, and they wind up committing serious sins. I've had a number of them come and talk to me, confessing serious sins. But they were misled at the beginning because they thought that these phenomenal spiritual experiences that people boast of could be trusted.

I hardly mention the spiritual experiences that I have had. That's for a purpose. I do not want people pointing to me and saying, "There is a great man." I want people looking at the message, evaluating the content of the message; testing it against scripture, seeing whether it brings them closer to Christ; seeing whether their faith in Christ is increased, whether their trust in our Lord grows.

It doesn't matter that a weak and flawed instrument gets used. And I consider myself only that. What matters is the truth to be found through Christ. The people who are most vocal about their great spiritual enlightenment almost invariably quickly begin to teach things that are anti-Christ, that are opposed to Him and opposed to His teachings, opposed to the commandments that He has given.

There is no higher order of things that justifies disobedience to the ten commandments. There is no higher order of things that allows you to disregard the teachings to be found by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, in which He elaborates on and extends what it requires in the heart to obey the ten commandments. If you find yourself following someone whose preaching and teaching and visionary experiences suggest to you that there is no need to obey the Lord, that there is no need to follow Christ, that you needn't look to the commandments given in the ten commandments (which Christ elaborated upon and made personal, as our individual challenges within our own hearts, in the Sermon on the Mount), then rest assured that message—if they are preaching against that—they are misled by a false spirit. I don't care how elaborate and how wonderful their message may be cloaked.

I've tried to preach from the scriptures and rarely mention anything of a personal experience. I only do so when I am constrained or commanded to do so. If people knew all that I had experienced— Well, they never will. At least not while I'm living. It just doesn't edify; it distracts. God has made His will known. God does appear to men today. The heavens are open for business. But hell is eager to jump into that same track. When you've opened up a conduit for spiritual communication, that conduit can be just as compromised by the evil as it can be used by the good, the pure, and the true. Therefore, try the spirits. Test them. Examine them and their message against the criteria I've just discussed.

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