

Discerning the Spirits (Because of the Gospel)

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, June 4, 2023
PASSAGES	1 Corinthians 12:7-10; 1 John 4:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13; Matthew 7:15-20; Galatians 1:8; 1 Corinthians 12:2-3; 1 Corinthians 10:19-21
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:15:09 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

The ability to distinguish between spirits is not spooky, and it is not a personality inventory. It is the gift of answering one question about a message, a minister or a movement: *is this from God?* Paul answers it three ways — by the gospel it is built on, by the life of the person carrying it, and by the fruit it grows in the people who receive it.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Paul sets discerning of spirits right beside prophecy, and John does the same thing in different words. The two belong together: welcome the Spirit's speech, and test it.
- ◆ Discernment is not cataloguing people into types, and it is not naming the angels in the room. It asks one question, and the question is about the source.
- ◆ A false word does three kinds of damage: it is untrue, it plants a wolf inside a flock, and it divides a church, because anyone challenged can always answer that the truth has always been unpopular.
- ◆ Test one is the gospel. Galatians 1:8 sets the bar at an angel from heaven — it does not matter who is speaking or how good they are at it.
- ◆ Test two is conduct. Paul defends his ministry by pointing at how he behaved among the Thessalonians, which only sounds strange until you notice he does it every time.

- ◆ Test three is fruit. God's word bears its own fruit; you do not have to manufacture it, and opponents have never managed to stop it.
- ◆ The answer to fear of the wrong spirit is not avoiding spiritual things altogether. That is a victory for somebody, just not for you.

► 1:15:09

Hope Chapel has been working through 1 Corinthians, and Matt's last turn in the pulpit landed on prophecy in chapter 12. This week he took the phrase sitting one line below it on Paul's list — the ability to distinguish between spirits — and made the case that it is not a curiosity of the charismatic fringe but something a church cannot function without.

1. The gift below prophecy on the list

► 1:15:35

Matt does not read 1 Corinthians 12:7–10 as an exhaustive inventory: “I think the Holy Spirit can enable God's people with whatever he wants, whenever he wants.” What governs the whole chapter is the opening line — each gift is given for the common good. And he takes the ordering seriously. Just as tongues and their interpretation are paired, distinguishing between spirits sits directly after prophecy, and that is no accident.

What it is not: “I don't think it's like a librarian cataloging people into types,” he said — you are an extrovert teacher, you are an administration type, like the Oracle in *The Matrix*. Nor is it working out which angels are in the room and what their names are. John gives the cleanest definition of it anywhere.

► 1:18:10

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world... every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.”

1 JOHN 4:1–3 ↗

2. Why a false word does real damage

► 1:19:21

Paul pairs the same two instincts:

“Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.” Note the plural in John — *spirits*. Scott had already read it aloud earlier in the service: there is a spirit at work in the sons of disobedience. Spiritual activity is not all one thing.

Matt named three harms. The false thing is false, and falsehood has its own bad effects. It installs someone inside a community who will keep saying such things — a wolf in sheep's clothing. And it is divisive, because the moment anyone tries to correct it the answer comes back easily: the truth has always been unpopular, or, I knew you wouldn't recognize the Spirit of God. That is emotionally manipulative, and it works. Jesus warned about exactly this.

► 1:21:26

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits... every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.”

MATTHEW 7:15–20 ↗

He is not talking about the occasional apple that rots, Matt said — he is talking about what an apple tree *does*. Beautiful, and still short on specifics. So where do you get the detail? From watching Paul defend his own ministry and scrutinize other people's.

3. First test: the one gospel

► 1:23:09

It does not matter that a movement is the new thing in town, that the teaching is fresh, or that the parties are good. If it is not built on the one gospel, it is no good. Paul sets the bar absurdly high on purpose:

“Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. If anyone preaches a gospel other than the one you received, let him be accursed. Not even *them*, and not even an angel. “There's only one gospel,” Matt said. “The rest — trash it. Walk away. Or run, don't walk.”

4. Second test: how the messenger behaves

► 1:25:17

The template is the opening of 1 Thessalonians, where all three tests appear in a single breath:

“Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.”

1 THESSALONIANS 1:5-7 ↗

► 1:27:04

The contrast follows in the next chapter, and it reads like a list of what to look for:

no error, no impurity, no attempt to deceive, no words of flattery, no pretext for greed, no glory sought from people

Matt paused on the flattery line and wondered aloud whether there was an inside joke in it — Paul must have said something unflattering. Then the conduct itself:

working night and day so as not to be a burden, holy and righteous and blameless, gentle as a nursing mother, exhorting each one like a father with his children.

► 1:28:50

“The behavior of the minister actually does matter a great deal,” Matt said. It sounds like a strange thing to put in a defense of a ministry, until you notice Paul does it every time.

5. Third test: what it grows in the people

► 1:30:47

The third mark is not fruit in the messenger but fruit in those who receive the message:

“you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”

When it is genuinely his, it bears its own fruit, because it is living and active. Which is also why rejection is never merely personal — whoever disregards this disregards not man but God. Paul is not the brains behind it. He is, in Matt's phrase, Jesus' lackey.

And there is a second party with an interest in the outcome.

Paul wanted to come again and again, “but Satan hindered us.” He sent Timothy

“for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.” The point of a temptation, Matt noted, is that it looks good: “It'd be a dumb temptation if all of it looked real bad. It's not appealing, it smells bad — a big bucket of sludge, no thanks.” Plenty of things that are not good sound good, which is the whole reason the gift exists.

► 1:33:06

You also cannot manufacture that fruit, or suppress it. People have tried to squash the church and it grew anyway, which is more or less Gamaliel's argument in Acts — Matt reached for it, admitted on the

spot that he had mangled the reference, and moved on. He kept one more passage he had nearly cut: the day of the Lord comes like a thief, but not to those who are not in darkness. The early church left us a legacy of longing for that day, and the way a bride prepares for the bridegroom is by walking in the light.

6. There is a spirit behind every message

► 1:36:59

Back in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul has already said this in the chapter's opening lines.

“You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says ‘Jesus is accursed,’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.”

1 CORINTHIANS 12:2–3 ↗

They did not wander into idolatry by accident — they were *led*. And Paul is explicit about what does the leading:

pagan sacrifice is offered to demons and not to God; you cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. So the world is not neutral about Jesus. Matt asked the room to notice how the mockery aimed at Christ runs hotter than the mockery aimed at other faiths, and to wonder what animates it. Each message has a spirit behind it that promotes it and looks for people to partner with it. John says the same thing in his own vocabulary — “By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”

7. Do not quench, and do not swallow

► 1:42:10

There is an obvious escape route here, and Matt closed it: “I don't want to be caught up in something demonic, so let's just do nothing spiritual at all. Is that really our path to victory? It's a path to *someone's* victory.” Do not quench the Spirit. Do not squash prophecy. And do not accept a word because you like the man — test everything, even from someone older than you, someone who knows the Bible better than you, someone who can read Greek.

► 1:45:04

He also refused to make it frightening. He mentioned an email that had slipped past his spam filter with the subject line *The Antichrist is coming*, and let it stand as a small case study: the spirit of antichrist is not a forecast, it is already in the world, and engaging that particular correspondent was

not the remedy. “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” The conflict does not need to spook you. It also does not mean you drop your filter.

8. Three ways it actually goes wrong

► 1:46:54

Matt ran the rubric backwards through three portraits. First, the prophetic word sought outside the gospel — no one at church was available, so go get a hand reading, the horoscopes are surprisingly useful for your prophetic career. No. Second, the minister with genuinely sharp insight whose encouragements are built on *almost* the gospel, with a strange legalism running underneath and a pressure to buy into the Spirit in ways that do not sound free because of the cross: “I don’t care how fancy or specific this guy’s ministry is.” Third, the polished operation where you cannot see the gospel problem and cannot see behind closed doors — but look at the community it grows. “Perhaps the disciples of this movement are the extremists who feel like they’re a cut above you. They have extra Spirit, you have less. They’re the Marines, you were sitting at home. You have a junior Holy Spirit.”

► 1:50:29

The gospel is scandalous in the opposite direction, he said — so much grace, so much acceptance, the Holy Spirit given entirely because of Christ, which is precisely why no one should ever be able to sell you forgiveness or sell you the Spirit. Discernment is not a side issue and it is not a hobby for the spiritually advanced. It is central, and it should be asked for: “Lord, that you would give us discernment... that your voice and the message about you would be our focus.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- 1 Corinthians 12:7–10
- 1 John 4:1–3
- 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22
- Ephesians 2:1–3
- Matthew 7:15–20
- Galatians 1:8
- 1 Thessalonians 1:5–7
- 1 Thessalonians 2:3–6
- 1 Thessalonians 2:9–10
- 1 Thessalonians 2:13
- 1 Thessalonians 4:7–8
- 1 Thessalonians 2:17–18
- 1 Thessalonians 3:5
- Acts 5:38–39
- 1 Thessalonians 5:1–5
- 1 Corinthians 12:2–3
- 1 Corinthians 10:19–21
- 1 John 4:6
- 1 John 4:4

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Before this message, what did you assume “discerning of spirits” meant? What did Matt's definition — one question, is this from God — change for you?
2. Paul's second test is the messenger's conduct. Why do you think we find it so much easier to evaluate a teaching than the life of the person teaching it?
3. Matt said the escape route of avoiding spiritual things altogether is “a path to someone's victory.” Where have you taken that route, and what did it cost you?
4. Think of a message or movement that shaped you. Run the three tests on it out loud — the gospel, the conduct, the fruit in the people who received it. What do you find?
5. What influence on you or your household this week deserves testing rather than swallowing, and what will you actually do about it?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDQchYMp5Lc&t=4509s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.