



Learn to Discern: How to Recognize and Respond to Error in the Culture

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The enemy of truth is subtle and cunning. We should not be surprised by the increase in lies and spiritual error as we near the return of Christ. The Bible says this will happen (Matt. 24:11), and God wants us to be aware of false teachings and teachers so we can stand firm in His Word. We must be discerning and not simply accept what people say is true.

Be Discerning

Learn to discern between truth and error.

Wisdom is the application of the truth of Scripture to our lives (James 1:5), and God wants us to ask for wisdom. But discernment takes that one step further. Discernment is the ability to judge or distinguish between two things using the wisdom of God's Word. This kind of judging is not wrong. Indeed, it is crucial if we are to make wise choices.

We learn to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, sound and unsound, and truth and error through the work of the Holy Spirit within us. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God to reveal and teach the truth that is from Him (John 14:26; 16:12–15; 1 Cor. 2:13–14).

God praises discernment in His children. In the Old Testament, the sons of Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel should do—they were discerning (1 Chron. 12:32). In the New Testament, Jesus told the Pharisees that they should be able to understand the signs of the times, but because they were more concerned about adding to the law, they were unable to discern God's truth (see Matt. 16:1–3).

Adding to God's Word is always a sign of false teaching. Proverbs 30:6 and Revelation 22:18–19 tell us clearly that we are neither to add to nor take away from God's Word or

else we will be found to be “a liar.” Whenever we incorrectly handle the Scriptures, we will end up in deception and destructive teaching.

It is the responsibility of every Christian to be discerning, but our attitude in discerning and confronting error is also important. We must not be hateful, argumentative, or angry, but we must instead expose false teachings with love, kindness, and hope for change (Eph. 4:15; 2 Tim. 2:24-26). We must listen carefully to what is said (Prov. 18:13) and then confront with the faithful Word (Tit. 1:9), not our own opinions. God hates evil, but He also despises pride and arrogance, so our attitude in discernment matters to Him (Prov. 8:13).

Be Alert

Notice the corrupting pull of the culture.

The Bible instructs us to “walk circumspectly” (looking around), “not as fools but as wise ... because the days are evil,” and to “understand what the will of the Lord is” (Eph. 5:15–17). In other words, we need to be alert. We must be aware of the error we encounter in literature, the news, and other media. We need to increase in the knowledge of God and His truth so we will have His “wisdom and spiritual understanding” (Col. 1:9–10).

God’s people need knowledge of His will, Word, and ways so they will not be destroyed (Hos. 4:6). It is dangerous to add opinions and human philosophies to God’s wisdom, just as it is foolish to substitute man-made rules and teachings for true, biblical holiness. Second Timothy 3:1–5 describes the kind of people who will live in the latter days—people who will have “a form of godliness” while denying the power of God. People are hungry for spirituality today, but they refuse the holy standards in the Scriptures.

False prophets bring in “destructive heresies,” deny the Lord, and blaspheme the truth, exploiting people with deceptive words (2 Pet. 2:1–3). These false prophets, like the secular world system, want us to adopt unbiblical values, gain approval based on those values, and pursue ungodly goals.

One of the key words in the culture that confuses people today is the word tolerance. We must remember that tolerance is how we treat people, but rationality is how we are supposed to treat ideas—and for the Christian, that is biblically based rationality. We are not to tolerate false ideas. Rather, we are to sort truth from error and then expose error.

Two worldviews are in conflict. One worldview is biblical; the other is antibiblical. Christians are often called narrow-minded, but having distinctions requires a narrowing of thought. Jesus spoke of a narrow gate (Matt. 7:13–14), and we see throughout the Scriptures that there is no gray area when it comes to receiving Christ’s salvation and obeying His commands.

We are to expose and cast down anything that rises up against the knowledge of God in the Word, because someday every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord (2 Cor. 10:3, 5; Phil. 2:10–11). Jesus must be the Lord of our minds. He exercises His authority through the Word, so we must be sure we are thinking biblically.

Be Biblical

Know and teach the truth, and show it in your life.

Bank workers study genuine money, not counterfeit bills, so they will recognize bogus money. Similarly, if we want to recognize wolves in sheep's clothing, we must know what a true sheep looks like! Because evil disguises itself as truth—and remember, Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14)—we must study God's Word so we can quickly recognize error. Even in some evangelical churches, people are not being taught the whole counsel of God. It's important to anchor our lives in God's character (2 Pet. 1:3), and know His standards for unchanging truth, so we will not be cast adrift by the empty, always-changing philosophies of the world (2 Tim. 2:15).

God does not want us to be spiritual babies. He wants us to mature in Christ so we will not be “tossed to and fro” by foolish, crafty schemes and teachings (Eph. 4:13-15). He wants us to grow in understanding and discernment, because he hates “every false way” (Psalm 119:104).

Likewise, God does not want His children to fall into the traps of the Enemy. If we will meditate in the Scriptures, we will be less likely to fall for the counsel of the wicked (Psalm 1:1–2). It is important to come to the Word of God in humility—as a little child—without any ulterior motives and biases, asking our heavenly Father to teach us (Matt. 11:25; 1 Cor. 1:19–20). It is also important to sit under solid, biblical church teaching and to fellowship with strong Christian believers. God wants us to “exercise” our senses and faithfully seek how to live for Him (Heb. 5:14). We need daily exposure to the Word of God so we will be able to “discern what is best” and live holy, blameless lives (Phil. 1:10).

Truth is the most powerful corrective to error. Once we know the truth, we will want to share it with others who have fallen into error, those who are deceived by false teaching. We must teach and live out the truth of God. We can help other believers stand in the liberty of Christ and “not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1).

Be Courageous

Identify and expose the works of darkness.

God wants us to defend the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1) by exposing lies. We must identify the sources of error that may be influencing our lives or the lives of those we love. Perhaps it is a cult or New Age thinking or theological errors. First John 4:1 instructs us to test the spirits, attempting to determine whether they are from God. Whatever their words—whether they are spoken by preachers, teachers, psychologists, authors, talk show hosts, or radio speakers—all teachings are to be judged by the eternal Word of God (John 17:17b).

The character and methods of false teachers are exposed in the Scriptures.

- They preach another gospel and a different Jesus from the one revealed in Scripture (1 Cor. 16:22; 2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:6–9).
- They speak “a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the LORD” (Jer. 23:16) and prophesy lies in God’s name, trying to make His people forget about Him and His Word (Deut. 18:20–22; Jer. 23:25–27).
- They dismiss guilt and justify sin, calling evil good and good evil (Isa. 5:20).
- They “make captives of gullible women” who are loaded down with sinful lusts—women who are “always learning” some new “truth” but never embrace the truth (2 Tim. 3:6–7).
- They “secretly bring in destructive heresies” (2 Pet. 2:1).
- They speak great “swelling words of emptiness” and entice people through the flesh, promising them liberty but enslaving them (2 Pet. 2:18–21).
- They cause dissension in the church (Rom. 16:17) as “untaught and unstable” people follow their example and twist Scripture for their own purposes (2 Pet. 3:16). False apostles often appear to be apostles of Christ (2 Cor. 11:13).

In the end times, false prophets will be joined by false christs, who will “show great signs and wonders” to deceive many (Matt. 24:24). Christians are warned to have no fellowship with these teachers and their “unfruitful works of darkness” but rather to “reprove” them (Eph. 5:11) and be careful not to be “spoiled” (taken captive or cheated) by their false doctrines (Col. 2:8). False teachers are empowered by Satan, and we must be courageous and vigilant against this cunning enemy who seeks to “devour” us (1 Pet. 5:8–9a).

Be Prayerful

Intercede for those caught in Satan’s snare.

Prayer is often the forgotten element in the battle against false teaching. Beyond gently and firmly sharing the truth, we can pray—from a heart of compassion and concern—that God will correct those “who are in opposition” and “grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:24–26).

We can also pray for those who have fallen prey to these teachers, that they will recognize the error of false teachings and embrace the truth of the Word of God. We must be alert and keep on praying for believers everywhere, that they will stand for truth and righteousness (Eph. 6:18).

We must be “serious and watchful” and develop keen discernment in our prayers (1 Pet. 4:7). Just as King Solomon asked for wisdom so that he could discern wisely and govern his people well (1 Kings 3:5–14), so we need to pray for understanding as we seek wisdom and truth in the Word (Psalm 119:125, 130).

Be Proactive

Protect yourself against the poison of error.

There is no such thing as a safe dose of poison, so we must be careful about what we allow to enter our lives. It is wise to surround ourselves and those we love with a clear understanding of what God teaches in His Word. After we pray for protection, we can stand firm with the “belt of truth” (Eph. 6:14a). In fact, we should put on the whole armor of God, for our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the “powers of this dark world” (Eph. 6:12–17).

To be proactive, we can learn to correctly handle the Scriptures, knowing these truths about the Word of God:

- It is eternal and unchanging (Psalm 119:89).
- It is trustworthy (Psalm 119:137–138).
- It is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).
- It originates in God Himself by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20–21).
- It will be fulfilled—unlike the prophecies of false teachers (Deut. 18:22; Matt. 5:18; Luke 24:44).

- It is understandable through the Holy Spirit's teaching (John 14:26; 16:13; 2 Cor. 1:13).
- It means what it says and is not to be altered (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:5–6; Eccles. 12:11-12; 1 Cor. 4:5–6; Rev. 22:18–19).
- It is unified, neither contradictory nor inconsistent (Num. 23:19; Psalm 119:160; Matt. 4:4; Acts 20:27).
- It is the standard for testing all spiritual teaching (Acts 17:11; 2 Cor. 11:4; 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 John 4:1).

We test teachings by asking questions. Does the teaching present Jesus biblically (John 8:24; 10:33)? Does the teaching represent truth from the Spirit of God—as portrayed in the Word of God—or from another spirit? Is the message consistent with the Scriptures that teach the physical death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and salvation by grace alone (1 Cor. 15:1–4; Eph. 2:8–9)?

With the increase of spiritual error in these perilous days, we must be courageous to confront false teachings in confidence, with compassion and wisdom. We must know, share, and live the truth, prayerfully asking God to use us to change the hearts and minds of those ensnared by Satan's lies.