

Choose What Is Right: A Study in Discernment

Lesson 9-How Can I Tell if Someone Is a False Teacher?



Discernment is being able to tell the difference – from rightly handled, in context Scripture – between sound, biblical doctrine and false doctrine.

Today's Scripture passages are embedded in the body of the study. Please click the links in each question.

Questions to Consider

How can you tell if someone is a false teacher? Is it someone who disagrees with you on any point of doctrine? What if your pastor makes an honest mistake while preaching – is he a false teacher? How about denominations that “do church” differently from yours?

We can't just go around willy nilly calling everyone a false teacher. **A false teacher is someone who unrepentantly, despite biblical correction, consistently teaches, either implicitly, explicitly, or via his or her behavior, doctrine that is in direct conflict with clear cut Scripture.** How do we identify someone like that? Let's take a look at what Scripture says about testing teachers to see if they're false or true to God's Word.

1. Carefully examine [1 John 4:1-6](#). Zero in on 1a (stop at “...from God”). Is this written as a command or a suggestion? Explain the “do not” and the “do” in this command. What does this tell you about the Christian's obligation and responsibility **not** to simply take teachers/teachings at face value, but to be a good Berean ([Acts 17:10-11](#)) and, with intentionality, put that teacher/teaching to the test? Is discernment an option or a matter of obedience to God's command?

Read [this background](#) (***) on 1 John. Which genre of biblical literature is 1 John? What was the primary false teaching John was writing to combat in passages like 4:1-6? In light of this information, look closely at 2-3a. What is the “litmus test” John gives his readers that will rule out the majority of false teachers they are likely to encounter in that time and culture? Is this still a **valid biblical test** (***) of a false teacher today? But have you ever encountered a teacher today who claims that Jesus was **not** fully human? Yet, are there still false teachers today? So, did God and John mean for Jesus' incarnation to be the *only* test of a false teacher?

Consider 2-3a in light of [1 Corinthians 12:2-3](#) and [2 John 7, 9](#). What is our standard for the nature and character of Jesus – for who He is (2 John 9)? If someone is teaching a “Jesus” (or a “God/Father” or a “Holy Spirit”) that does not match Scripture’s clear teaching about Him, is that person a doctrinally sound teacher (“Spirit of God”) or a false teacher (“spirit of the antichrist / not from God”)?

Based on your answers to the questions above, in your own words, what is the general biblical principle we can extract from 1 John 4:2-3a, 1 Corinthians 12:2-3, and 2 John 7,9 about the nature and character of Christ, as test number one of a false teacher?

Test 1:

Which two spirits does God say teaching comes from? (1 John 4:1a, 2a/3a, b) Notice the repetition of the phraseology “from the world” and “from God” in 1-6. List the characteristics of someone who is from the world versus someone who is from God.

Into which of these two categories does the “Spirit of God” (2a) fit? The “spirit of the antichrist / not from God” (3)? Who are the “you / we / us” and the “they/them” in 4-6?

Read the last sentence of verse 6. By *what* will you know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error? (Hint: What is “this”? Backtrack in verse 6.) This is test number two of a false teacher. State it in your own words.

Test 2:

2. Read [Deuteronomy 13:1-5](#) and [18:18-22](#). (Old Testament “false prophets” are analogous to New Testament “false teachers”.) In the 1 John 4 passage above, we surmised from the context of the passage and historical information that gnosticism/docetism was the prominent false teaching during that time in history. What can you surmise from these passages may have been some of the features of the false teaching Israel was encountering at this point in her history?

Read the first full *sentence* (v. 1-3a) of Deuteronomy 13, and explain its instructions in your own words. Try to put yourself in the place of the original audience of this instruction. As an Old Testament Israelite, what would you have understood God to be saying?

Have you heard of any “Christians” today who claim to be prophets, have the “gift of prophecy,” claim God spoke to them in a dream or vision, or perform “signs and wonders”? These are all typical of [New Apostolic Reformation](#) (NAR) (***) heresy (click the links in the paragraph above the video for examples and these passages in Deuteronomy are very helpful in identifying them. Or maybe you can think of other religions, cults, or movements that seem to fit this passage’s description?)

Having seen the videos of “prophecies” and “signs and wonders” at the link above, how does the Deuteronomy 13 instruction apply to you if you walk into a NAR “church” today?

What might it look like for a “sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass”?

What kinds of teachings did you see in the videos that would fall under the category of “‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them.’”? Did you hear any of these “prophets” or teachers encouraging you to worship Baal, follow Molech, or serve Chemosh? What about the “God,” the “Jesus,” and the “Holy Spirit” they teach?

Do their teachings line up with Scripture, or are they encouraging you to follow and serve a false god, created in their own imaginations, which they blasphemously call “God,” “Jesus,” or the “Holy Spirit”?

State, in your own words, the third test of a false teacher from Deuteronomy 13:1-3a. (Be sure to include the “if/and” from verse 1, the two main “and’s” in verse 2, and the implied “then” from verse 3a.)

Test 3:

Carefully examine the Deuteronomy 18 passage. Using your cross-references and the immediate context of [Deuteronomy 18:18-22](#), who are the “prophet” and “you” in verse 18?

How does this passage say the Israelites may determine whether or not someone is a true prophet, genuinely speaking for God (like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, etc.), or a false prophet? (21-22) As a 21st century Christian, how would you properly apply this test to a teacher or “prophet” today?

State, in your own words, the fourth test of a false teacher from Deuteronomy 18:22. (Be sure to include the “if” as well as the implied “then” in the final sentence.)

Test 4:

How do the Deuteronomy 13 and 18 passages contrast false teachings/teachers and false prophecies/prophets with the one true God, His true teachings, and His true followers? How does this apply to Christians today?

What are the characteristics of a true follower of Christ (13:3, 4, 18:18-19, 21c)? How can these characteristics help you determine whether or not someone is a false teacher and/or whether or not you, or someone you know, might be following a false teacher?

3. Read [Galatians 1:6-9](#). What is the false teaching being addressed in this passage? What are the two, nearly identical, phrases in verses 8 and 9 that begin with “a gospel contrary...”? What do these two phrases mean?

Compare them to [these passages](#). (1 John 4:6, 2 John 6, 2 John 9, 1 John 2:24) Where did Paul’s and John’s audiences hear the gospel and teachings they received “from the beginning”? Where do we get this same gospel and teachings today?

What is the term for “some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:7b)? Does Paul exempt himself or anyone else from false teacher status if that person is preaching a different gospel than the one taught in Scripture?

What is test 5 of a false teacher according to this passage?

Test 5:

4. Some Christians say that overtly teaching a false gospel – an unbiblical way of getting saved (see some examples [here](#)) (***)- is the **only** teaching that qualifies someone as a false teacher. Is that true according to Scripture? Can you think of a false teaching that’s not directly connected to the plan of salvation? [Here are some examples from Scripture](#). (1 Timothy 4:1-3, 2 Timothy 2:16-18)

What are the two false teachings mentioned in 1 Timothy 4:3? Are they directly connected to salvation?

How does verse 2 characterize those who teach these false doctrines? How does verse 1 characterize the teachings?

What is the false teaching mentioned in 2 Timothy 2:18? How does God characterize this false teaching in 17a, 18a, and 18c?

If God characterizes restrictions on marriage, food, and eschatology, which are not directly related to salvation, as “deceitful,” “doctrines of demons,” and “gangrene,” and those who teach them as conscience-seared, insincere liars, having swerved from the truth and upsetting the faith of some, is it true that someone is a false teacher **only** if he teaches a false way of salvation? What else qualifies as false teaching, and what is our standard for evaluating it? What is test six of a false teacher?

Test 6:

5. Examine these [passages from 1 John](#) (1 John 2:3-6, 1 John 3:4-10, 1 John 5:2-3). When the Bible instructs us not to do something and we do it anyway, what is that called? When the Bible instructs us to do something and we fail or refuse to do it, what is that called?

Explain the phrases “walk/walked” (2:6), “makes a practice of sinning” (3:4,8,9), and “keeps on sinning” (3:6,9). Is John talking about a Christian who’s striving for holiness, sins, repents, and keeps on striving for holiness? How can you tell?

How does God characterize a person who claims to be a Christian, yet unrepentantly walks in sin, or makes a practice of sinning? (2:4, 3:6, 8, 10) Explain the connection God makes in these passages between knowing/loving God and obedience to His commands. If a “Christian teacher” lives in willful, unrepentant sin, on an ongoing basis, is that someone you should receive teaching from? Why not (2:4b, 3:8a, 9a, 10)? State test of a false teacher number seven from these passages.

Test 7:

In questions 1 & 2, we gleaned from context and historical information the types and features of false doctrine that were prolific when 1 John 4 and Deuteronomy 13 & 18 were written. We also saw specific tests designed to combat these specific false teachings. We can do the same for the specific false teachings prolific in our culture today.

In my experience, currently, the *most* widespread false doctrines that are “spreading like gangrene” in the church today are the New Apostolic Reformation/Word of Faith (prosperity gospel), [progressivism](#) (***) (liberal, woke, social justice, feminist, perversion affirming, etc.), and a general air of [antinomianism](#) (***) (basically, the 21st century version of [Judges 21:25b](#) – “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”).

Aside from the fact that most of their specific beliefs demonstrably conflict with clear cut Scripture, there are two features that are common to all of these false doctrines. They are usually easy to spot and require minimal knowledge of theology, making our next two tests of false teachers practical and relatively quick. They are both “sub-tests” of test 7 because they both involve walking in *specific* unrepentant sins.

Read [1 Timothy 2:11-3:7](#). What two things does 2:12 [prohibit women](#) (***) from doing in the gathering of the church body?

Is this limited to the Sunday morning gathering of a local church?

What are some examples of other Christian events where the church (Christians) physically gather for worship and Bible teaching?

Examine the pronouns and other gender markers in 3:1-7. The office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to which sex, male or female?

What are the three ways a woman might disobey these biblical instructions in 2:12 and 3:1-7? What are the three ways a man/pastor might disobey these biblical instructions by what he allows, encourages, or invites women to do? If he or she is biblically corrected about his or her sin, but unrepentantly persists, how does this connect to what you just learned from 1 John about walking in sin, keeping on sinning, or making a practice of sinning?

In addition to the fact that the woman (or man) violating any of these prohibitions is sinning *herself*, what is her behavior – pastoring, preaching, teaching Scripture to men, or exercising authority over men – teaching her audience about *their* obligation and responsibility to obey God's commands?

Is it false doctrine to teach, even implicitly, via one's behavior, that Christians are free to ignore or disobey any Scripture they dislike or disagree with?

From 1 Timothy 2:11-3:7, what is test 7a of a false teacher?

Test 7a:

Read [these passages](#) (2 John 9-11, 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, Romans 16:17-18, Titus 3:10-11). Answer the following questions for each passage:

- In what way does the passage characterize false teachers?
- How are Christians supposed to respond to false teachers?
- What is the result of either avoiding, or failing to/refusing to avoid false teachers?

Why does God instruct Christians – including Christian teachers – to avoid, and not to partner with false teachers? Read [these passages](#) (1 Corinthians 15:33, 2 Corinthians 11:12-15, Luke 16:13, Matthew 10:24-25, Luke 6:40) .

- What is the danger of partnering with false teachers in 1 Corinthians 15:33?
- Who is the false teacher's (servant's) master in 2 Corinthians 11? What does Luke 16:13 say about serving two masters? Can a teacher serve both Christ and Satan?

- How do Matthew 10 and Luke 6 apply to a Christian teacher learning from, and being influenced by false teachers?

Since it is direct disobedience to God's Word (sin) for any Christian – but especially a teacher, whom God holds to a **higher standard** (James 3:1)– to unrepentantly and persistently fraternize or partner with false teachers (again be reminded of what the 1 John passages said about walking in unrepentant sin), and since false teachers will always influence their disciples *away* from Christ and the truth of His Word, what is test 7b when you're vetting a teacher?

Test 7b:

6. What are all of the tests we have listed?

Test 1:

Test 2:

Test 3:

Test 4:

Test 5:

Test 6:

Test 7:

Test 7a:

Test 7b:

What is the common theme running through all of these tests? What is our measuring stick for determining whether a teacher passes or fails each of these tests? What is one broad, general test that could encompass all of these tests?

If you're testing a teacher to discover whether or not he or she lives, believes, and teaches in obedience to God's Word, you need to know the Word as thoroughly as possible. You can't know something contradicts Scripture if you don't know what Scripture says and how to handle it correctly and in context. How can you become a good student of the Word? What are three ways God has provided you to learn and understand the Bible better?

• **Hint #1**—(***)—

• **Hint #2**—(***)— [If you're looking for a specific tree, back up and look at the general forest. :0) —Michelle]

• **Hint #3**—(***)—

Homework

- Create a checklist listing each of the tests of false teachers you've learned in today's lesson. Be sure to include Scripture references for each. Keep it in your Bible or another handy place so it's easily accessible when you need to test a teacher.
- Imagine you're a [Berean](#) (Acts 17:10-11) vetting Paul. Use the tests and Scriptures from today's lesson. Start with [this passage](#) (Galatians 1:11-24), its cross-references, and everything else you know about Paul and his teachings. Does Paul pass or fail each of the tests of a false teacher?
- Check out these resources:
 - [Basic Training: Being Berean- 8 Steps for Comparing Teaching to Scripture](#) (***)
 - [Is She a False Teacher? 7 Steps to Figuring it Out on Your Own](#) (***)
 - [John MacArthur Sermon "Testing the Spirits"](#) (***)

Suggested Memory Verse



<https://www.gty.org/library/bible-introductions/MSB62/first-john>

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Docetism.html>

<https://michellelesley.com/2017/01/23/the-mailbag-what-is-the-new-apostolic-reformation/>

<https://michellelesley.com/what-must-i-do-to-be-saved/>

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Progressive-Christianity.html>

<https://www.gotquestions.org/antinomianism.html>

<https://michellelesley.com/2015/09/11/rock-your-role-jill-in-the-pulpit-1-timothy-211-12/>

<https://michellelesley.com/2017/04/21/basic-training-7-reasons-church-is-not-optional-and-non-negotiable-for-christians/>

<https://michellelesley.com/bible-studies/>

<https://michellelesley.com/tag/prayer/>

<https://michellelesley.com/2018/09/14/basic-training-being-berean-8-steps-for-comparing-teaching-to-scripture/>

<https://michellelesley.com/2022/03/10/is-she-a-false-teacher-7-steps-to-figuring-it-out-on-your-own-2/>

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=BKiGrPsbtA8&t=11s>