**Grace Group Guide**

**1 John 4:1**

**“Testing, testing, 1…2…3”**

**Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world**. – 1 John 4:1

Back in the days before social media, we had (drum roll please!) AIM – which stands for “AOL Instant Messenger.” Before I was checking statuses on Facebook, I was scrolling through the away messages of all the friends on my friends list. There was one friend in particular on my list who found it quite hilarious to put “fake news” on his away message so that everyone who saw it would see it and believe it to be true. After all, someone had taken the time to put it out there for everyone to see it…so it must be true, right? More often than not, his status looked like this: “RIP Sean Connery.” On occasion he would insert the name of another beloved actor or actress, but Sean Connery was the main target.

Now, when you read something like that, what’s the first thing that you do? Go to the source and find out if it’s true or not. We call that “fact checking.”

My buddy did that just to get a rise out of people, but I have to wonder how many times people saw that message and then immediately went to someone else and said, “did you hear that Sean Connery died?” Then that person goes and tells another person, etc. Before long, the world laments the passing of Sean Connery, all the while, he’s alive and well. My point is, it’s easier than ever for “fake news” or false teaching to spread like wildfire. Therefore, John’s warning to us is as applicable as it has ever been to any believer in the history of the church. We MUST be diligent in discerning what is from God and is beneficial to the believer and what is from the enemy and is geared for tearing down.

To put it another way, consider these words from Ray Steadman – “Every Christian is also called to be an unbeliever. There is a time when unbelief is the right thing and the only right thing. The very same Scriptures which encourage us to believe likewise urge us not to believe. In fact, they not only urge us, they command us not to believe. This is no contradiction, any more than to say that in order to live it is necessary both to inhale and to exhale. These are contradictory things: You cannot inhale and exhale at the same time, but both are absolutely necessary to maintaining life. You cannot inhale unless you exhale, and you cannot exhale unless you have inhaled. It is the same with this matter of belief and unbelief. You cannot believe truth without rejecting error. You cannot love righteousness unless you are ready to hate sin. You cannot accept Christ without rejecting self. "If any man come after me," Jesus says, "let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me," [Matthew 16:24](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Matt%2016.24), [Mark 8:34](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Mark%208.34)). You cannot follow good unless you are ready to flee from evil. So, it is not surprising, therefore, that the Scriptures tell us we are **not** to believe, as well as to believe. This is what John declares in the first three verses of Chapter 4. (In Stedman's closing words he says) “God help us to be *unbelievers in error* as well as *believers in truth*.”

It's worth repeating that one of the reasons we tend to study the Word in a verse by verse manor is because even the Word of God, taken out of context, can be used in a very destructive manor. For example, look at this ad placed in a newspaper in Flagstaff, AZ, for a new church launch – *“Have you ever wanted more out of life? We can help! Discover powerful and easy secrets that have been proven and are guaranteed to give you the results you want. Whether you desire love, health, money or simply more fulfillment and satisfaction in your life, now is the time to take advantage of this new and exclusive series being introduced for the first time in the Flagstaff area—absolutely free. Learn how you, too, can start seeing an immediate difference! No matter who you are, you, too, can profit from knowing these safe, trusted and easy-to-understand principles for personal growth and achievement. Stop missing out on the life you could be living. You have nothing to lose … everything to gain!”*

I read that advertisement and I wonder to myself…. what bible are you reading? And what secrets do you have that the rest of the churches in Flagstaff don’t have? But the typical person doesn’t read that and say “hmmm….how can this be?” Instead they read that and say, “that sounds like everything I’ve been missing.” People flock to messages like that and there’s no regard for whether or not it’s true. I can tell you one thing right off the bat, that church has already taken people in a direction that leaves no room for a message like “take up your cross and follow me, or repent, or deny yourself, etc.”

**What is our best method for discerning between truth and error? What scriptures come to mind to back up your answer?**

“Behind all spiritually false teaching is “the spirit of error” ([1John 4:6](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/1%20John%204.6)), led by Satan, but including all of his demonic forces. Whether they know it or not, behind every false prophet or false teacher is an evil spirit promoting the errors that they teach. From the day that Satan deceived Eve in the garden, until the last days, when the final antichrist will deceive the world ([2Th. 2:3-12](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/2%20Thess.%202.3-12)), **evil spirits have promoted false teaching to lead people away from the living and true God**. When John says, “many false prophets have gone out into the world,” we should realize that these were not sinister, evil looking characters. They didn’t blatantly encourage Satan-worship or child-sacrifice. They used Christian lingo and professed to believe in Jesus. No doubt, they had attractive personalities and convincing arguments. Jesus called them wolves in sheep’s clothing ([Mt. 7:15](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Matt.%207.15)). Paul warned that these men disguise themselves as apostles of Christ and servants of righteousness. Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, not darkness ([2Cor 11:13-14](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/2%20Cor%2011.13-14)).” – Steven Cole

As I go back and re-read that advertisement, I can’t help but hurt for that church and for the people in it. Do they realize the damage that they are doing? People are going to go in those doors and they will be fed not the life-giving truth of the Gospel, but rather a watered down, feel-good message that really only belongs on the paper inside a fortune cookie. In fact, if I didn’t know that it was advertising for a church, I would imagine it could be an ad for anything….

**What is the difference between biblical discernment and the sin of being judgmental? Can discernment be taken too far?**

In an era when information is so easily accessible, please be diligent in knowing the truth behind the things that you claim and share with others. Satan would love nothing more than for people to flock to a message that makes them feel good about themselves and keeps the focus on self, rather than on the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world. You know, now that I type that, it sounds like pretty good news that people will probably want to hear. And I didn’t have to alter it a single bit…..