

Connection with Unit Theme: To complement the small group study of *The Dark Side*, these sermon outlines will use the same Scripture passages as the small group study, so the pastor can reinforce the study from the pulpit.

The Point: We don't need to fear evil forces when we're in Christ.

Introduction: P.T. Barnum is famous for saying, "There's a sucker born every minute." In fairness, it's never been proven that he actually said that, but it does seem to have been his life's philosophy. In fact, he took pride in his ability to "humbug". He defined this practice as "putting on glittering appearances – outside show – novel expedients, by which to suddenly arrest public attention, and attract the eye and ear." He had many examples of humbugging in his New York Museum of Human Oddities and Curiosities. For instance, he advertised a "six foot man eating chicken". It was actually an ordinary man – six feet tall – eating a plate of fried chicken. Another one of his exhibits was "the Egress". People had no idea what an "egress" was, so they would follow signs all over the museum directing them to it. Eventually they came to a door, and when they went through it, they found themselves on the outside of the museum. "Egress" means "exit".

Barnum's humbug was generally lighthearted and harmless, but some forms of humbug can be downright dangerous. That's especially true when it comes to spiritual matters. By the time the apostle John wrote his First Epistle, there were many false teachers in the world. John wrote this letter to counteract the false teachers, and he urged his readers to exercise some spiritual discernment.

I. The need for discernment.

- A. "Believe not every spirit" – A more literal translation is "stop believing every spirit", which suggests that some had fallen into heresy.
 1. John commanded them to "try the spirits" whether they are of God.
 - a. The word translated "try" is the Greek word *dokimazo*. It literally means "to put to the test, examine, scrutinize".
 - b. We should never take any preacher or teacher at face value, but we should test his teachings according to Scripture (Acts 17:11).
 2. Why was there a need for discernment?
 - a. False prophets had gone out into the world, and had evidently deceived some of the people.
 - b. There is no shortage of false prophets today.
 - Years ago I was visiting with a family in a hospital waiting room. A couple of men sitting near us were talking about a famous TV

preacher. One of them said, “He finds so much in just one verse of Scripture. I don’t know where he gets it!” I whispered to the young sitting next to me, “I don’t know where he gets it, either, but he doesn’t get it from God!”

- B. The supreme standard for discernment is Jesus.
 - 1. According to Irenaeus, John wrote this epistle in response to a Gnostic teacher named Cerinthus.
 - a. Cerinthus believed Jesus was divine, but did not believe He was human. He believed Jesus only “appeared” to be human.
 - b. Certainly there are plenty of false teachers who believe Jesus was human, but that was not John’s point. His point was, any false teaching about Jesus is not of God.
 - 2. We can “agree to disagree” about some doctrinal issues, but it is a very serious matter when one teaches falsely about Jesus.
 - When I was in seminary, I rented a room from an elderly lady. One evening we were watching TV together, and a commercial for the Mormons came on. She was curious as to why so many Christians are critical of Mormons. She said, “If they teach about Jesus Christ, what’s the difference?” The difference is simple: what they teach about Jesus is false.

II. The method of discernment.

- A. John contrasted his readers with the false teachers.
 - 1. John noted that his readers were of God.
 - a. The Holy Spirit lived in them, and would give them the power to resist the devil.
 - b. John was confident that they would not fall prey to false teaching.
 - 2. The false teachers, on the other hand, were “of the world”.
 - a. Gnostics believed that the body was evil, anyway, so “sins of the body” (adultery, fornication, etc.) were not a big concern.
 - b. False teachers will often try to justify various and sundry sins.
- B. John assured his readers that his teaching was from God.
 - 1. On the surface, John’s claim in verse six sounds rather arrogant.
 - a. False teachers often claim to represent God.
 - b. False teachers also tend to denounce their critics as worldly and ungodly.
 - 2. John could make this claim because he was an apostle.
 - a. By the time he wrote these words, he was probably the last of the original apostles.
 - b. Unlike the false teachers, John had actually walked and talked with Jesus (1 John 1:1-4).
 - My Dad was a veteran of World War II. Every now and then he would comment on some documentary he had seen about some battle in the Pacific, and would criticize it for its inaccuracies. He said, “That’s not the way it happened. I know. I was there.” He never claimed to be a scholar, but it was hard to argue with an eyewitness. Likewise, John never claimed to be a theologian or a philosopher, but he had walked and talked with the real Jesus. Thus, he knew the Cerinthians’ teachings were false.

Conclusion: Several years ago I took a trip to Gatlinburg, Tennessee. It's a great town, and I love the beauty of the Smoky Mountains. However, I always seemed to get lost when I visited there. I don't know why, but the streets in Gatlinburg twist and turn all over the place, and I lose my sense of direction rather easily. This time I didn't take chances. When I arrived in town, one of the first things I did was stop at the Visitors' Center and pick up a map (this was before the advent of GPS). I did get disoriented a few times, but all I had to do was consult my map, and I quickly got back on track.

God has given us a roadmap for life, and that is His written Word. We can't claim to have been with Jesus in the same way as John, but we do have the words and deeds of Jesus written down in the New Testament. We also have the writings of Paul and the other biblical writers who wrote under the direction of the Holy Spirit. When you're familiar with the Word of God, you'll have no reason to fear false teachers. God's Word will always guide you in the truth.

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