

People of Discernment

Revelation 13:1-18

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



They had walked by this tree time and time again. At first, his words and guidance would echo in their ears and resonate in their hearts, “Anything else, you can eat. Just don’t eat from this tree.” Then over time, they would linger as they passed the tree, and his words became more and more distant and quiet. Then finally, one day, they lingered longer than they ever had before, and they met a creature they had never known or seen. This creature seemed harmless and offered new words and ideas that started to burn in their chests and dance in their minds. He told them that they were meant for so much more and that they had the power inside of themselves to achieve it, to take it, and to experience it. Intrigued, they leaned in and listened closely. He told them that the one who had told them not to eat from the tree was actually holding back the very best from them. That they didn’t have to be under his control or authority because they were equal to him. It was their right to take what they wanted, and when they did, they would truly experience life as it was meant to be lived. So they did as this new creature had told them, and to their great pain, his words were lies, and they had been deceived. Now, there was no going back. Instead, they were filled with shame and sought to hide themselves from the one who had told them not to eat from this tree.

This is, of course, the story of Adam and Eve and their fall. But it isn’t just their story; it is all of ours. Because as Paul said, through one man (Adam), the certainty of death was brought to all men, and through one man (Jesus), eternal life was made possible (Rom. 5). Adam and Eve’s story is our story because all of us have been deceived and exchanged God’s glory for a substitute. We struggle to be faithful even with resolute intentions to not be deceived again. John’s vision in Revelation 13 reminds us of the importance of not being deceived. In this chapter of Revelation, John reminds us of an important truth. **Faithful people resist deception through wisdom and discernment.**

1. Deception – The oldest game.

- a. Chapter 13 continues the vision that John has in chapter 12. Here in chapter 13, we see the rising of the two beasts and the deception of humanity into false worship.
 - i. **By continuing the story of the dragon, they continue warning readers across the generations about the power of evil, calling them to renewed faithfulness and endurance (12:10).**¹
 - 1. This is a key reminder for us. → Revelation as a whole is aimed to inspire hope in believers and prompt them towards faithfulness.
 - 2. Don't forget Revelation had a very specific original audience → The seven churches of Asia Minor. **I.e., This letter was written to real believers facing real problems and in need of lasting hope.**
 - b. Let's unpack the characters and events of chapter 13 → 2 beasts... the dragon... a number?
 - i. **The dragon:** The chapter says little about the dragon. He remains very much in the background. He does his work not openly, but through people. John is talking about a more than human evil, but it is **an evil that reveals itself in human deeds.**²
 - 1. Don't forget - Last week Pastor Jeff encouraged us to remember that our struggle is not just a physical one, but is also spiritual.
 - ii. **The number 666** - Verse 18 is one of the most debated verses in the entire book because of widespread disagreement over the identification and meaning of the number 666.³
 - 1. Most simply, this number represents anything less than completion. The number seven refers to completeness and is repeated throughout the book. But 666 appears only here. This suggests that the triple sixes are intended as a contrast with the divine sevens throughout the book and signify incompleteness and imperfection.
 - iii. **Everything in this chapter is about deception.... Especially the beasts.**
 - 1. Scholars connect two primary OT passages to the beasts - Job 40-41 and Daniel 7.
 - a. **This tradition may come into use here in the Apocalypse because people in Asia Minor thought of whatever came "from the sea" as foreign and whatever came from the land as native.** That is, one of the initial expressions of the first beast was Rome, whose governors repeatedly came by sea to Ephesus. Roman ships literally seemed to be rising out of the sea as they appeared on the horizon off the coast of Asia Minor. The second beast represented native political and economic authorities.⁴

¹ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 125.

² Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 161.

³ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 718.

⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 682.

- b. **Without exception the imagery of the sea monster is used throughout the OT to represent evil kingdoms who persecute God's people** (see on 12:3 for references). This is clearly the case in Daniel 7.⁵
 - 2. The physical description of the beasts → A false sovereignty and power.
 - a. Horns are typically metaphorical of power (e.g., 1 En. 90:6–18, 37–39; Rev. 5:6). As with the dragon's horns and heads, so here the number of *seven* heads and *ten* horns emphasizes the completeness of oppressive power and its worldwide effect.⁶
 - b. We cannot miss that just as John has done before in Revelation, the beasts, and the dragon's power is given to them. They do not possess power on their own.
 - 3. **Deception at every turn - Many of the beast's features are hideous distortions of those of the Lamb.** Christians believed that the God enthroned in heaven sent Christ into the world as the Lamb who suffered and died for others. In a perverse counterpart to this story, the Devil who is kicked out of heaven sends a beast into the world to make others suffer and die.⁷
 - a. *Who is like the beast?* may be meant as a parody of a similar Old Testament expression (**Exod. 15:11; Ps. 35:10**). And in view of the activities of the angel Michael it is possible that we should also detect a reference to the meaning of his name, 'Who is like God?'⁸
- c. **The key verses to this chapter - 10 & 18 → Discernment & Wisdom.**
 - i. There is so much in this chapter that we can be distracted by. I want you to underline verses 10 & 18 → John is reminding the seven churches of Asia Minor to be on their guard and to take the active posture of discernment which results in wisdom.
 - 1. Discernment and wisdom are key ingredients for a faithful life.
 - 2. **If we want to be faithful, what are we to keep a discerning eye out for?**
 - d. **Soothsaying** – Telling us what we “want” to hear. (v.5)
 - i. The first beast deceives humanity by telling them what they want to hear.
 - ii. In the most literal understanding of the idea of a “soothsayer,” is literally a prophet. However, the cultural understanding is that of someone who tells you what you want to hear so as to manipulate you. → This is the first beast.
 - 1. The beast utters blasphemous words against God, yet humanity eats it up. → This is not an exaggeration of the human condition. This is the reality of temptation and deception from the very garden.
 - iii. **Question for us - What ideas do we listen to because we want them to be true even though they aren't?**
 - 1. This is a question that we need to sit with for a while and really allow God's Spirit to work on us. There are all sorts of ideas that we can be deceived by.
 - e. **Sings and wonders** – Showing us things that amaze us. (v.13)
 - i. The deception of the second beast is signs and wonders. → Things that amaze us.

⁵ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 683.

⁶ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 684.

⁷ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 126.

⁸ Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 163.

1. Magic was common among first-century priesthoods as a means of impressing the gullible. So this beast does (habitually, present tense) *great and miraculous signs*. This noun is sometimes used in Revelation of the visions John sees (12:1, 3; 15:1), but a number of times also for miracles. **In this sense it always denotes miracles worked by evil powers (here, v. 14; 16:14; 19:20), a sharp contrast with the Fourth Gospel where it is a characteristic word for the miracles of Jesus.**⁹
2. We might ask - How is this possible?
- ii. cf. **2 Thes. 2:9&10** – ⁹**The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, ¹⁰ and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.**
 1. Paul is warning the church in Thessalonica about this very reality.
 2. They are false because of the one performing them, not because they don't actually happen.
- iii. cf. **Rev. 16:13&14** – ¹³**And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. ¹⁴ For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty.**
- f. So, John is warning believers to not be deceived in this passage. But, how do we do that?
 - i. Let's talk about discernment.

2. Discernment – Sorting Godly from ungodly.

- a. **Knowing the real from a fake** - This is an often used example or illustration for finding a counterfeit. But, it is so often used, because it is absolutely true.
 - i. How do Treasury Agents train or prepare to spot counterfeits? → Training in identifying counterfeit currency begins with studying genuine money.¹⁰
 - ii. This applies to all sorts of areas where fakes abound - Art, fashion, cars, sports memorabilia, etc.
 1. **You can spot the fake because you know the real thing so well!**
 2. So, how do we do that with spiritual things?
- b. **God's Word**
 - i. Remember – The Word of God will never contradict the will of God.
 1. I.e., If the Bible says otherwise, you follow the Bible.
 - ii. We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, through the words of human authors. As the verbally inspired Word of God, the Bible is without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for salvation, and the ultimate authority by which every realm of human knowledge and endeavor should be judged. Therefore, it is to be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires, and trusted in all that it promises.¹¹
 1. **“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”** - Heb. 4:12

⁹ Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 166.

¹⁰ <https://www.challies.com/articles/counterfeit-detection-part-1/>

¹¹ EFCA Statement of Faith - Article 2, The Bible.

2. ¹⁶ **All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. - 2 Tim. 3:16-17**

iii. **The question for us - What is my relationship with the Scriptures like?**

1. Do I see them as authoritative or suggestions?
2. Do I see it as God's gift to me so that I can know him and know the abundant life of Christ?
3. Do I encounter God's Word and enjoy his presence through reading and study on a regular basis?

c. **The Holy Spirit**

- i. Remember – The Spirit of God will never contradict the Word of God.
 1. I.e., The phrase “I heard God tell me...” will never go against the Word of God. God will not “tell” you to do or don't do something that he has already given clarity on in his Word.
- ii. We believe that the Holy Spirit, in all that He does, glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ. He convicts the world of its guilt. He regenerates sinners, and in Him, they are baptized into union with Christ and adopted as heirs in the family of God. **He also indwells, illuminates, guides, equips and empowers believers for Christ-like living and service.**¹²
 1. The key to this statement is “for Christ-like living and service.”
 - a. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. - Jn. 16:14
 - b. J. I. Packer describes it as the Spirit's “floodlight ministry.” Like the floodlights that illuminate the Washington Monument at night, displaying its beauty in the best possible way, so **the Spirit throws his light on Jesus, allowing us to see his glory, to hear his word, to go to him and receive life, and to taste his gift of joy and peace.** He applies the redeeming work of Christ to our lives by uniting us to our Savior, and, by dwelling within us as the down payment of our future inheritance, he begins our transformation into conformity with the image of Christ.¹³

d. **Mature Believers**

- i. Remember – Mature believers will always submit to the Word of God.
 1. I.e., The wise brother and sister's advice will always be bathed in the Scriptures.
- ii. We believe that God's justifying grace must not be separated from His sanctifying power and purpose. **God commands us to love Him supremely and others sacrificially, and to live out our faith with care for one another,** compassion toward the poor and justice for the oppressed. **With God's Word, the Spirit's power, and fervent prayer in Christ's name, we are to combat the spiritual forces of evil.** In obedience to Christ's commission, we are to make disciples among all people, always bearing witness to the gospel in word and deed.¹⁴
- iii. **Here is a short list of the “one another's” in the NT.**
 1. **“be devoted to one another”** (Rom. 12:10)
 2. **“honor one another above ourselves”** (Rom. 12:10)
 3. **“live in harmony with one another”** (Rom. 12:16; 1 Pet. 3:8)

¹² EFCA Statement of Faith - Article 6, The Holy Spirit.

¹³ EFCA. Evangelical Convictions, 2nd Edition (pp. 191-192). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition.

¹⁴ EFCA Statement of Faith - Article 8, Christian Living

4. “stop passing judgment on one another” (Rom. 14:13)
5. “accept one another, just as Christ accepted you” (Rom. 15:7)
6. **“instruct one another”** (Rom. 15:14)
7. “greet one another with a holy kiss” (2 Cor. 13:12)
8. **“serve one another humbly in love”** (Gal. 5:13)
9. “be kind and compassionate to one another” (Eph. 4:32)
10. “speak to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit” (Eph. 5:19)
11. “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21)
12. “bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone” (Col. 3:13; Eph. 4:2)
13. **“teach and admonish one another with all wisdom”** (Col. 3:16)
14. “encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thess. 5:11)
15. **“spur one another on toward love and good deeds”** (Heb. 10:24)
16. “love one another deeply, from the heart” (1 Pet. 1:22)

3. Wisdom – The right application of knowledge.

- a. Once we have discerned real from fake and have the knowledge of what is right and godly, we must then apply it to our lives. → **This is the task of wisdom.**
 - i. Wisdom is not merely knowing the right thing to do. It is also, actually following through on it.
 1. I.e., Wisdom is not exclusively a “do as I say” discipline. Instead, it is more completely a “do as you have seen me do” discipline.
 - ii. This is how the Proverbs talks about the topic of wisdom:
 1. **⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. ⁸Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching, ⁹for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck.** - Prov. 1:7-9
 2. Do you hear it in there? → Wisdom is to have an effect on our lives. I.e., Wisdom is not passive or a collection of random facts.
- b. **Who is the person in your life that is the epitome of wisdom?**
 - i. There have been several people in my life that come to mind when I consider this question.
 1. In my high school years, an older lady from our church.
 2. In college, two of my professors come to mind.
 3. In my adult life, there are many that I have gone to, and go to with questions and need for direction.
 - ii. The thing that they all had in common is not that they somehow always knew what to do, but it was that their knowledge was affirmed by experience. I knew they had lived the truth they offered to me.
 - iii. Sometimes the wisdom they passed along had been handed to them by someone wise. Other times, their wisdom had been acquired through “life lessons.” Either way, I knew that their wisdom was genuine.
- c. **Jesus is seen at the epitome of wisdom. → In that, we see both the fullness of God’s truth in Jesus, but we also see it applied rightly in the action of living.**
 - i. **wisdom Christology.** The identification of Jesus with God’s divine Wisdom as personified in certain OT and Jewish texts (e.g., Job 28; Prov 1:20–23; 8:1–36; Wis 7:7–9:18; Sir 24).

Matthew appears to be the first Gospel writer to identify Jesus this way (11:16–19, 25–27; 12:42; 23:34–39). John presents Jesus as the unique Word, or Wisdom of God (Jn 1:1–18). Paul even earlier identifies Christ as God’s wisdom for the believer (1 Cor 1:30; Col 1:15–20; cf. Heb 1:1–3).¹⁵

- ii. In simple terms, the NT reminds us that believers are called to come into conformity with Christ.
 - 1. **By this we may know that we are in him: ⁶ whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.** - 1 Jn . 2:6
- iii. This is what we mean as a church when we say that we, as believers, are to follow Jesus in a life-defining way.
 - 1. I.e., Knowing what is godly and faithfully following through with it.
- d. Here we come back to the often-debated number, 666.
 - i. John has already told us that this vision is a call for endurance. Now, we hear that it is a call for wisdom to understand what impersonates and is a substitution for God, and what is truly of God.
- ii. **Wise people who yearn to live in a faithful and godly way will ask these questions:**
 - 1. Mature Christians don’t ask: “Is this sinful?”
 - 2. Mature Christians ask:
 - a. Is this wise?
 - b. Does this please God?
 - c. Does this lead to human flourishing?
 - d. Does this jeopardize my ability to witness and share the gospel?

¹⁵ Arthur G. Patzia and Anthony J. Petrotta, *Pocket Dictionary of Biblical Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 123.

Additional Notes:

On the beast's deception: The masses are enthralled by this grotesque creature, following it as if bewitched (13:3). The crowds ask two questions that prompt readers to contemplate what they are seeing. First, they ask, "Who is like the beast?" (13:4). The crowds would presumably respond to their own question by saying, "No one is like the beast. The beast is incomparable." **John, however, has prepared his readers to answer the question differently. Readers can discern** that in some ways the beast is like Satan, but in a perverse way the beast tries to disguise itself as Christ, as we will see. Second, they ask as they behold the beast, "Who can fight against it?" Again, the crowds would presumably respond by saying, "No one can fight against the beast. The beast is invincible." **And again John has prepared readers to answer differently**, for readers learned in the previous chapter that the armies of heaven have already defeated the dragon in heaven, and that Satan is conquered by the blood of the Lamb and by the testimony of the saints. Readers know that if the allies of God and the Lamb can fight against the dragon, they can surely fight against the beast.¹⁶

On the beast's wound: Those who see in the beast the Roman Empire think of the heads as Roman emperors and usually refer the healing of the deadly wound to the Nero *redivivus* myth. Nero was so evil that many could not believe that death was the end of him. The expectation arose that he would reappear in a resurrected form. Others think that Caligula is meant, for he had a dangerous illness and recovered. What is not often noticed by those who see the Empire as the meaning of the beast is that it is not said that the head died and was restored. Rather it was the beast that suffered a deadly wound, located in one of its heads, and was healed. There is no suggestion that the head was restored. We are justified in reflecting that there is an evil which comes ultimately from the dragon and which is found both in the human heart and in the communities of men. And it apparently cannot be slain. Though wounded it rises again and will do so to the end of time, to people's amazement (*the whole world was astonished*).¹⁷

On the mark: He now caused a *mark* to be set on all people on the *right hand or forehead*. The listing of various classes, *small and great* (for which see note on 11:18) etc., is a way of stressing totality. No-one was exempt. The choice of right hand or forehead is presumably for conspicuousness. It could not be hidden. It may also be meant as a travesty of the Jewish custom of wearing phylacteries (little boxes containing extracts from the Bible) on the left hand (or forearm) and on the head. It is probably also a parody of God's seal (7:3; 14:1). **The precise significance of the mark is uncertain.**¹⁸

On the number - 666: There are many theories about the significance of the number 666 in verse 18. One is that 666 is the sum of Nero's name in a Hebrew system in which letters were assigned numeric values (see Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, pages 384-452). If so, John is saying that the wise person realizes Nero and his successors are the latest manifestation of satanic power. Alternatively, 666 may represent one less than the perfection represented by 777—three lots of seven: a combination of the two numbers

¹⁶ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 125–126.

¹⁷ Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 162.

¹⁸ Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 167.

symbolizing perfection or completeness. If so, John is saying that the wise person recognizes imperial power is not good nor the final word in history.¹⁹

The number seven refers to completeness and is repeated throughout the book. But 666 appears only here. This suggests that the triple sixes are intended as a contrast with the divine sevens throughout the book and signify incompleteness and imperfection. Furthermore, if the number of 144,000 saints in the next verse has the figurative function of signifying the complete number of God's people (see on 14:1), then the intentional contrast with 666 in the preceding verse would refer to the beast and his people as inherently incomplete.

That "six" has the idea of incompleteness is also evident from writings that interpreted the seven days of Genesis 1, by way of Ps. 90:4, as representing seven thousand years of world history (*Barnabas* 15; Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 5.28.3; cf. *b. Sanhedrin* 97a). The sixth thousand was to be the time of Antichrist, immediately preceding the Messiah's victorious millennial reign (cf. *Barnabas* 15). Against the background of this chronological reckoning of world history, Irenaeus (*Adversus Haereses* 5.28.2) understood 666 "as a summing up of the whole of that apostasy that has taken place during six thousand years." This idea of "six" is also present in the sixth seal, the sixth trumpet, and the sixth bowl, which all depict judgment of the beast's followers. The seventh in each series depicts the consummated kingdom of Christ. Each series is incomplete without the seventh.

Charles contends that the symbolic view cannot explain why only one or even two sixes were not used instead of three, since one six would have achieved the sufficient symbolic idea of incompleteness. But the triple repetition of sixes connotes the intensification of incompleteness and failure that is summed up in the beast more than anywhere else among fallen humanity. In the Bible the number three signifies completeness, as, for example, in the completeness of the Godhead in Rev. 1:4–5, which is parodied by the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet here in ch. 13 (and in 16:13). Therefore, six repeated three times indicates the completeness of sinful incompleteness found in the beast. The beast epitomizes imperfection, while appearing to achieve divine perfection. Three sixes are a parody of the divine trinity of three sevens. That is, though the beast attempts to mimic God, Christ, and the prophetic Spirit of truth (cf. 19:10), he falls short of succeeding. He cannot complete his attempts to image God and exalt himself above God. Sometimes "seven" is appropriately applied to the devil or the beast to emphasize their thoroughgoing evil nature, severe persecution, and universal reign of oppression (e.g., 12:3; 13:1; 17:3, 9–11). Sixes are used instead of sevens in 13:18 because of the repeated emphasis in vv 3–14 on the beast as a counterfeit Christ or prophet. Though the Satanic beasts appear to imitate successfully the truth in their attempts to deceive, they remain thoroughly evil on the inside and fall far short of the divine character that they are mimicking.²⁰

¹⁹ Chester, Tim. *Revelation For You: Seeing history from heaven's perspective* (p. 99). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

²⁰ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 721–722.