

Learn to Discern (1) - The Meaning of Discernment

Because of the Internet, we are now able to keep track of people who would otherwise have disappeared from our lives. Every now and then, I will hear about someone I went to school with. In some cases, the news is average. But then I will hear some disturbing story. One person I know so dabbled in drugs the first years after school that his body just gave in and he died a year or so ago. Another got involved in drug dealing in Thailand and ended up impoverished. Some had multiple children out of wedlock, multiple marriages. Some have faces and bodies that look about thirty years older than their age.

When you hear this and reflect on it, two words come to mind: bad judgements. Bad decisions, poor or foolish choices led otherwise intelligent people to ruin their lives. We look at decisions without discernment, and we shake our heads. We make remarks like, "What was he thinking?"

A life lived without discernment ends up being a shipwrecked life. Often in the counselling room, we are essentially trying to deal with the consequences of decisions made that lacked discernment, trying to set a new path, where the decision are rooted in sound judgement.

In some ways, discernment lies at the very heart of a life that flourishes. It is the connector between you and every decision you make. It is the GPS or Google Maps that tells you where to go and what to do next. If it is good discernment, it will get you there. If it is bad discernment, it is that GPS that somehow always puts you back in the middle of Alex or Town.

No wonder that Proverbs has entire chapter simply urging us to pursue discernment. Whole chapters where a father begs his son to put aside other pursuits, and pursue wisdom, sound judgement, discernment. He never stops speaking of wisdom's benefits, what it protects you from, what it will bring. One example: 5 Get wisdom! Get understanding! Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. 6 Do not forsake her, and she will preserve you; Love her, and she will keep you.

7 Wisdom is the principal thing; *Therefore* get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding. (Prov. 4:5-7)

From a pastor's perspective, nothing is more satisfying than seeing church members develop discernment. John wrote I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth (3 Jn. 1:4). When Christians grow to be able to detect error, make wise judgements in personal life, understand the meaning of the culture around them, it feels similar to a parent seeing a child becoming more discerning. Parenting is really a process of initially doing all the discernment for a child, teaching the child to do more and more discernment as he grows, and finally sending him out to do it all himself, and teach his children the same.

But discernment is in short supply today. In fact, being discerning is actually disparaged today. When people say, "Don't judge!" or "Don't be judgemental", they are sometimes saying "Stop doing the work of discernment", "Stop making the distinctions between true and false." But a church without discernment will soon experience the following nasty consequences.

It cannot worship meaningfully. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman:

22 "You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. (Jn. 4:22)

Without the discernment to tell what God is like and what He is not, people may end up worshipping a god of their own imaginations. They may end up worshipping the true God but in a profane and irreverent way. A lack of discernment can lead to idolatry or false worship.

It cannot find its way to stable truth.

14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by

the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, (Eph. 4:14)

It is at the mercy of multiple voices, conflicting opinions. This week it is this teacher, this week it is this one. It cannot handle deeper doctrine but must remain on beginning doctrine all the time. **1Co 3:1** And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able;

It can't live a holy life or understand God's will.

2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Rom. 12:2)

9 For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; 10 that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing *Him*, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; (Col. 1:9-10)

Without discernment, Christians cannot understand what God wants and how to please Him in the details of their lives.

Discernment is indispensable. It is worth taking the time to really understand. For that reason, I wanted to step away from our series in Hebrews and take a few weeks to study this matter of discernment. Most of the series will be a study in how to grow in discernment. Today I want us to spend time biblically defining discernment, knowing what it is. I want us to understand what it is we are in pursuit of, and what it looks like when we have it.

That's because a lot of people think they have discernment when they don't, and a lot of people mistake something else for discernment.

Most people have a fairly high view of their own level of discernment. Very few people admit that their judgement may be immature or flawed. In fact, there is an inverse proportionate relationship between maturity and confidence in one's discernment. The more immature someone is, the more confident he is in his powers of discernment. The more mature someone is, the more humble and cautious he is, and the more teachable. Proverbs 26:12 reports this reality: Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? *There is* more hope for a fool than for him.

Mark Twain once quipped, "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years."

The older you get, the more you realise you don't know, and if you are growing spiritually, that should be happening to you as well. The mature are growing in discernment, and growing in their awareness of how much more of it they need. Wherever you think you are on the discernment spectrum, let me encourage you to clothe yourself with humility and confess, I need much more than I have.

Some people mistake some other things for discernment. Let me tell you two things which are incomplete ideas of discernment.

First, it is not merely testing the spirits and becoming more sceptical of what claims to be Christian. Certainly it is a good start, to recognise that not all spiritual food that goes under the banner of Christian ought to be swallowed. But simply adopting a cautious posture doesn't make you discerning. Some people think they are very discerning because they don't listen to certain teachers, and only listen to some others. But on closer inspection, we discover that they didn't really become more discerning; they just changed tribes, and found out that this group should not be listened to,

and this group should be. They became sceptical and cynical about some, and began to almost unquestioningly trust some others. They exchanged one list of approved speakers and authors for another list. Discernment goes beyond testing the spirits, and beyond the tribalism of one group over another.

Second, it is not merely becoming reliant on the Bible alone for doctrine and practice. Again, it is a sign of growth when people move away from supposed words, prophecies, miracles, whims, dreams, impressions, still small voices, fleeces, open doors, closed doors, revolving doors and begin to root themselves in what the Bible says, and the Bible alone. Given the chaos out there that goes under the banner of Christianity, for most people it is quite a transition to go from experience-based Christianity to Bible-based Christianity. But again, that is just the start. For you will soon find that even among those who regard the Bible as the final authority, there can be wide differences in how they interpret the Bible and in how they relate Scripture to Scripture. Discernment goes beyond becoming biblical.

What is discernment? We turn back to Hebrews 5:14 for a definition.

But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (Heb. 5:14)

The mature are those who train by regular use their powers of perception so as to judge between good and evil. They train their *aestheiteiria* (their understanding and experience of the world) so as to have this *diakrisis*, this through-judgement.

So here is a definition: *Discernment is the skill of understanding the meaning of God's Word and God's World so as to love what God loves.*

Now from that definition, let me break it apart.

First, discernment is a skill. Hebrews 5:14 tells us discernment comes from practice, and a lack of discernment comes from neglect. No one is born with discernment, nor are some people just gifted. You may have high intellectual gifts, you may have unusual powers of perception, you may even have unusual insight, and still be a fool. Because as Proverbs abundantly shows, discernment must be sought, and developed and trained. One of the only ways you get better at this skill is by being bad at it, and having it corrected. You have to try, and fail, and learn.

Proverbs shows us that discernment comes from deliberate effort.

Proverbs 2:1 My son, if you receive my words, And treasure my commands within you, 2 So that you incline your ear to wisdom, *And* apply your heart to understanding; 3 Yes, if you cry out for discernment, *And* lift up your voice for understanding, 4 If you seek her as silver, And search for her as *for* hidden treasures; 5 Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, And find the knowledge of God. (Prov. 2:1-5)

There has to be a holy curiosity, a zeal to know and obey, a hunger to understand for this skill to develop. Only the child intent on walking keeps getting up and exercising those muscles.

Second, discernment is a skill of understanding. In Hebrews 5:14, both the words *aestheiteiria* and *diakrisis* speak of the understanding. In the book of Proverbs, the word *discernment* is also translated *understanding*. In fact, Proverbs has a triad it keeps using: knowledge, wisdom and understanding. Knowledge (*da-ath*) is the basic component of knowing, wisdom (*chogmah*) is the skill to relate and compare those truths, and understanding (*biynah*) is what results.

44 Then He said to them, "These *are* the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and *the* Prophets and *the* Psalms concerning Me." 45 And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. 46 Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, 47 "and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 "And you are witnesses of these things. (Lk. 24:44-48)

What was happening here? The disciples already had some knowledge of the Scriptures. They had read and heard the Bible and the prophecies many times. They had even tried to compare and relate those Scriptures. But now, in this moment, it all came together for them. The parts related to the whole: they could see how it had all been pointing to Jesus all along. We say, the dots connected, the light bulb went on. What was taking place? Comprehension, which is a word that means, to grasp together. To bring together knowledge, rightly relate it, so as to see big picture. So often, the disciples were lost in the details, or stuck on one truth, so that they couldn't, as the saying goes, see the forest for the trees.

Discernment is a process of taking different ideas, facts, truths, and comparing, contrasting, connecting until what emerges is understanding. Understanding what is true, what is good, what is beautiful from God's point of view.

Let me give you a negative example of a lack of discernment:

23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier *matters* of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. 24 "Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! (Matt. 23:23-24)

Here were people who were experts in one area, and had missed the big picture. They could apply the doctrine of tithing down to the smallest seeds, but could not apply the bigger and more important doctrines of justice and mercy and faith. They had a narrow expertise that could seemingly never zoom out and see the big picture. They couldn't see anything except their favourite pet doctrines.

Discernment is when you are gaining the skill to take knowledge, wisely relate those pieces of knowledge, and emerge with a big-picture understanding.

Evil men do not understand justice, But those who seek the LORD understand all. (Prov. 28:5)

Third, discernment is a skill of understanding God's Word and God's World.

Hebrews 5:14 tells us that we discern between good and evil. Good and evil are judgements of value, whether it is true and false or right or wrong, or wise or foolish. But what standard are we using to make that evaluation? Answer: God's Word. When we have the skill to understand God's Word, we get God's standard, God's view on life.

15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Tim. 2:15)

That skill to compare, contrast, connect is to be done with God's Word until what emerges is understanding.

When we do the exercise of seeking Biblical understanding, we emerge with God's standard of what

is good and evil, true or false.

What do we do with that standard? We apply it to the world we live in.

In fact, you can't properly understand the world without God's Word.

But on the other hand God's Word is meant to be applied to God's world. If you only understand God's Word, but do not understand God's world, you can't apply it properly. Your knowledge of the Bible becomes academic.

21 Test all things; hold fast what is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thess. 5:21-22)

To please God, I need to know what His will is in Scripture, and I need to see all the ways that His will must be done on Earth. I need to know what Scripture says about honesty and truth, and I need to know what that means in the areas of the world such as business ethics, taxes, gambling, plagiarism in writing, copying software or music, exaggeration in speech. I need to know what Scripture says about purity, and I need to know what that means in the areas of the world such as dating, what you watch online or on TV, what music you listen to, how you dress, what places you frequent.

When you look at a life with poor judgement, you are looking at a life that did not understand God's will in His Word, and did not understand reality as God made it. They were banging their heads into closed doors, driving their cars into ditches, because they didn't understand what God said about money, family, the body, and they didn't understand the meaning of living on credit cards, or Internet pornography, or addiction to alcohol.

Both the Bible and the world are full of meaning and must be studied to be understood.

The fourth part of our definition is what you do with this understanding of the Word and the world. Hebrews 5:14 has something unstated but assumed. It tells us that maturity brings the ability to discern between good and evil. What is assumed is that you will choose the good and refuse the evil.

Fourth, discernment is the skill to understand the meaning of God's Word and God's World so as to love what God loves.

Discernment is not only a skill of understanding, but a skill of valuing. Discernment understands meaning, and then responds to that meaning by loving what God loves and hating what God hates.

Notice what Paul says you do with discernment:

9 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, 10 that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, 11 being filled with the fruits of righteousness which *are* by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9-11)

8 Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things *are* noble, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy-- meditate on these things. (Phil. 4:8)

A discerning person has the skill of understanding what God's Word says and means, what something in the world means, and can connect the two and choose what pleases God. He knows what God says in the Bible about the body, he knows what a certain substance does to the body, he connects the two and knows how God sees this: whether God loves it or hates it, whether it should

be embraced and shunned.

In the end, God does not merely want you to be informed or enlightened. He wants you to value things as He does. It's knowing what God knows and then loving what God loves. Love what He loves. Treasure what He treasures. Disdain what He disdains. Reject what He rejects. Pursue what He pursues. If you are becoming like Him, then you should be reacting and responding as Christ would on Earth.

The most discerning people are not those who have become experts in some area of doctrine, and yet fail to love and hate what God does. I've known people who could enlarge at length on Daniel's seventieth week, but couldn't seem to see the problem of using religious entertainments and amusements to attract and keep people in church. I've met believers who can go into extraordinary detail over Ezekiel's temple and the nature of Millennial sacrifices, but had no idea about a biblical approach to food or dress or finances or politics. I've met believers with some pet hobby-horse doctrine they've become experts in: The King James Version Controversy, Calvinism, Pre-Trib, Mid-Trib, Post-Trib Rapture, Lordship Salvation, celebrating Christmas, the Sabbath day, but absolutely clueless about whether a hymn by Isaac Watts or a hymn by Jack Hayford is superior, no idea about what New Testament worship is supposed to be, no concept of what the corporate body life of a church is supposed to be. That's a truncated discernment, a stillborn discernment.

Good judgement is not simply being on the right side of systematic theology, choosing the correct doctrines. Good judgement is loving what God loves, in the way that God loves it.

We begin to see that this is very important, because if I don't learn the answers to these questions, I might well end up loving what God hates. I could end up hating what God loves. I could be involved in idolatry, and call it worship. I could have my loves all out of order. It is always a sin to love what God hates. It is always a sin to hate what God loves.

The Bible is a thick, complicated book. The world is a vast, complicated place. But God calls on you and me to understand both so as to be pleasing to Him.

20 Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature. (1 Cor. 14:20)