

Developing Discernment

Proverbs 1:1 The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel: 2 To know wisdom and instruction, To perceive the words of understanding, 3 To receive the instruction of wisdom, Justice, judgment, and equity; 4 To give prudence to the simple, To the young man knowledge and discretion-- 5 A wise *man* will hear and increase learning, And a man of understanding will attain wise counsel, 6 To understand a proverb and an enigma, The words of the wise and their riddles. 7 The fear of the LORD *is* the beginning of knowledge, *But* fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov. 1:1-7)

I once read an article about the legendary basketball player Michael Jordan. Jordan was asked how long he practiced shooting hoops every day. Jordan responded with an important insight. “You can practice shooting eight hours a day, but if your technique is wrong, then all you become is very good at shooting the wrong way”.

Practising the wrong technique just makes you proficient at doing the wrong thing. Very similar to that notion was what my wife's violin teacher told her. She used to practice over four hours a day. Her violin teacher once said, “Practice doesn't make perfect. Practice makes permanent.” Practice just cements what you are doing into a habit; it doesn't mean you've acquired the right habit.

That's true of basketball, it's true of playing the violin, and it's true of discernment. Spiritual discernment is a skill developed by practice. Last week we saw from Hebrews 5:14 that discernment is the skill of understanding God's Word and God's world so as to love what God loves. Being a skill, it grows with repeated exercise. However, you need to be practising the correct technique of biblical discernment to get better at it. Otherwise, you're just getting better at doing the wrong thing.

In the years since I've been saved, I've seen a lot of people practising something they think is discernment, but it really isn't. For example, discernment is not simply polemics. Polemics means strong attacks on a position you believe is false. Some think that if they point out error, identify false doctrine, and warn of every false teaching, that they're practising discernment. Now certainly discernment involves identifying error or evil. But if that's all you do, you've missed the very point of avoiding evil: so as to choose the good. Pure polemics ends up creating Christians who are good at avoiding error, but not much good at anything else. And as someone said, if you steer your car by avoiding the ditches on one side, you usually end up in another one. That ditch is all too often a narrow sectarian spirit, cynicism, and more than just a bit of spiritual pride.

Nor is discernment simply naming and shaming false teachers. Certainly the Bible named false teachers, and there is a time to do that. But simply doing that is not practising discernment. But a lot of so-called discernment, especially online, is nothing more than a Christian version of tabloid journalism, printing the scandal sheets of who is false this week, and who went to whose conference, and who endorsed whom. It's just gossip masquerading as warning the sheep. Practice this all day, and you are not developing discernment. You're probably developing a sense of self-satisfaction that you've identified all the false teachers, and “are not as other men are.” Very little conviction and confession in this kind of discernment, and quite a lot of pointing and sneering, and possibly even perverse curiosity in scandal, contention and evil. Paul tells us in Romans 16 to be “wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil. (Rom. 16:19), so I don't know why we would want to swim in the sewers of false teaching, or act like spectators at a cage fight, eager to see conflict and contention between Christians. I've seen people practising this kind of thing becoming rather cruel, twisted people, whose sense of judgement is now mangled beyond recognition, because they became experts in evil, unwittingly became immersed in slander and gossip, and remained naïve regarding what is good.

No, discernment is the skill of understanding God's Word and God's world so as to love what God loves. It is not simply polemics, and it is not simply identifying and naming false teachers. So how do we grow in the skill of understanding so as to love rightly? What should the exercise be, so that we are not learning very well to shoot the basketball badly?

For that we turn to the ultimate book on learning discernment, the book of Proverbs. In the first six verses we read what the goal of the book is, and in the seventh verse we read the foundation of all of it.

Proverbs 1:1 The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel: 2 To know wisdom and instruction, To perceive the words of understanding, 3 To receive the instruction of wisdom, Justice, judgment, and equity; 4 To give prudence to the simple, To the young man knowledge and discretion-- 5 A wise *man* will hear and increase learning, And a man of understanding will attain wise counsel, 6 To understand a proverb and an enigma, The words of the wise and their riddles. 7 The fear of the LORD *is* the beginning of knowledge, *But* fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov. 1:1-7)

What does verse 7 tell us is the true foundation of knowledge? The fear of the Lord. This is repeated in 9:10: “The fear of the LORD *is* the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One *is* understanding. (Prov. 9:10)”

Now this is completely counter how most people think about learning and understanding. Most people have been taught that we are really like computers. If you input good information, then you will get good outputs. They think we are these neutral blank slates, and you just need to get correct biblical facts, and write them in, and you will have discernment.

But we see in Proverbs that the beginning of understanding is not a mental act, it is not an act of the intellect, an act of cognition. It is an act of affection, an act of devotion.

What is the fear of the Lord? It is the attitude, or the posture of our hearts before the goodness and greatness of God. In some ways, it is an Old Testament way of speaking about being in a relationship of faith in the Lord. But in other ways, it also speaks about your attitude towards God and towards life. When God occupies first place, so that you hold Him in reverence and awe, you are in the fear of the LORD.

And when you do have that, it is the foundation, and therefore the environment, in which discernment grows.

But we need to flesh that out. We want to understand the skill of discernment, how to exercise and train discernment. Does Proverbs teach us the actions of this fear of the Lord that will grow our understanding?

I. A God-Fearer Relies on God for Understanding

5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; 6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths. 7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and depart from evil. (Prov. 3:5-7)

Here Solomon tells us not to do something, and then to do something. What should we not do? Lean on your own understanding, be wise in your own eyes. In other words, stop trusting your private interpretation of the Word and the world. Stop believing in your own hyper-competent discernment. Instead, humbly trust in Yahweh with all your heart, and acknowledge Him in every area of your life. Acknowledge Him: know Him, know His ways, His will, in every part of life.

You see, God is the key to understand anything, and God is the key to understand everything. God is the first principle of knowledge. He is not an idea to be proved, He is the reality to be assumed to make sense of the rest of reality. This is why Hebrews 11:6 says that faith believes that God is, and that God is a rewarder.

The world is an immensely complicated place. The human being is an immensely complicated being. In fact, Proverbs comments on the hopelessness of trying to understand life apart from God:

A man's steps *are* of the LORD; How then can a man understand his own way? (Prov. 20:24)

Jeremiah said the same thing: O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps. (Jer 10:23)

I remember a magazine my family subscribed to. At the back there was always a quiz. They had photos in squares of some object in an extreme close-up, and you had to guess what it was. They gave the answers on the next page, and there you saw that that large silver oval was the eye of a needle, or the green grassy fibres were the surface of a tennis ball. But it was hard to see when in such close up. You need to zoom out.

The only way to understand a part of reality is to understand it in light of the whole of reality. We exist with the worm's eye view, but there is only one person with the bird's eye view of all of reality. Every bit of knowledge is connected to some others, making up a massive web of knowledge. We might be able to see portions of that web, but only one Person sees it as a whole, a *universe* of facts.

Now a God-fearer submits to that. He holds God in such high esteem as the Creator and Author, that he knows he can only understand life, if he understands it from God's perspective. He holds himself in enough of a humble esteem that he accepts he cannot understand life without God.

Now the opposite of that is the foolish attitude of the man trusting in self.

The way of a fool *is* right in his own eyes, But he who heeds counsel *is* wise. (Prov. 12:15)

There is a way *that seems* right to a man, But its end *is* the way of death. (Prov. 14:12)

He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, But whoever walks wisely will be delivered. (Prov. 28:26)

So the beginning of discernment is not trawling the Internet. It is not Googling the name of Bible teachers to see what comes up. The beginning of discernment is to make God the lens through which you understand everything. You ask, What does God say about this ? Does this please God? What is God's view on this?

The moment you ask those things, what will be your first stop? You prioritise God's Word.

He who despises the word will be destroyed, But he who fears the commandment will be rewarded. (Prov. 13:13)

You want to know what God says, so you will want to know what the Word says. You also know you can't understand God's Word without God's assistance. For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth *come* knowledge and understanding; (Prov. 2:6)

Because God gives illumination, the God-fearer asks God for help in understanding God's Word and God's world.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. (Jas. 1:5)

Whether you are dealing with the Word or the world, you begin with God. What does God say?

You ask for illumination in the Word. You ask for insight about the world. Train yourself to be always trusting in Him with all your heart, and acknowledging Him in all your ways.

That's the first habit of the one who fears the Lord. The second might surprise you.

II. A God-Fearer Obeys God for Understanding

The fear of the LORD *is* to hate evil; Pride and arrogance and the evil way And the perverse mouth I hate. (Prov. 8:13)

The one who has the fear of the Lord obeys, hating sin and loving obedience. Why will this grow discernment?

A wise *man* will hear and increase learning, And a man of understanding will attain wise counsel, (Prov. 1:5) Give *instruction* to a wise *man*, and he will be still wiser; Teach a just *man*, and he will increase in learning. (Prov. 9:9)

Rebuke is more effective for a wise *man* Than a hundred blows on a fool. (Prov. 17:10)

Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold *is* a wise rebuker to an obedient ear. (Prov. 25:12)

What do these Scriptures have in common? They all say that the person who already has wisdom, will grow wiser. The person who is already obedient receives knowledge and deepens in understanding. And the more he obeys, the more he understands.

Why is that? When it comes to spiritual understanding, obedience provides explanations. The righteous learn and grow through the experience of submitting to God. Have you ever learned something during a trial or during suffering? Were those things you learned brand new facts, or were they truths you had already heard in some form? You had already heard them, but as you tried to obey God in the trial, you came to an understanding of those truths which you would not have found had you responded in complete rebellion and rejection. Obedience provides explanations.

The Lord Jesus taught this in John 7. "If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or *whether* I speak on My own *authority*. (Jn. 7:17)

Notice the order. He doesn't say, if anyone knows the doctrine, he shall do God's will. He says, if anyone wants to do God's will, that is, obey, he shall know concerning the doctrine. The commitment to obey God and submit to Him is fundamental to the kind of understanding God gives.

Look at how Paul teaches the same thing:

8 For you were once darkness, but now *you are* light in the Lord. Walk as children of light 9 (for the fruit of the Spirit *is* in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), 10 finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. 11 And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose *them* (Eph. 5:8-11)

Psa 25:8 Good and upright is the LORD; Therefore He teaches sinners in the way. The humble He guides in justice, And the humble He teaches His way. **Psa 25:12** Who is the man that fears the LORD? Him shall He teach in the way He chooses.

“He who seeks to understand commandments without fulfilling commandments, and to acquire such understanding through learning and reading, is like a man who takes a shadow for truth. For the understanding of truth is given to those who have become participants in truth (who have tasted it through living)” - St. Gregory of Sinai (1300s).

The kind of spiritual understanding God gives cannot be plundered from God by raiding His Word, or scouring libraries, as if you can take the knowledge by force, or through sheer intellectual muscle. No, to those who trust God, and show they have been faithful with the little truth they've

been given, God will grant them to be stewards over more truth.

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

This is why it is actually dangerous to be someone practising that kind of discernment which is nothing more than cataloguing who you think is a false teacher. It is dangerous to be only interested in Christian facts and ideas that you can keep at arm's length from your own life. It gives you the illusion you are on the right side, while you are not being conformed to the image of Christ in any real way.

The sort of discernment God gives shapes you to love what God loves, not merely be correct.

So what sort of exercise does the God-fearer do? He is always asking, how can I please God more? How can I put into practice what I already know? He is as interested in the biblical counselling topics of dealing with anger, depression, worry, forgiveness, conflict resolution as he is in studying who the king of the South in Daniel 11 is. He is as interested in God's view on his parenting, use of the tongue, use of money, as he is in learning the errors of the Word-faith cult or the false doctrine of Mormonism. He is as interested is having a biblical position on education and social media and what music he listens to as he is on whether Calvinism or Arminianism is correct.

“If any man will know the will of Christ, let him do that will. When a young man is put to learn a trade, he does so by working at it; and we learn the truth which our Lord teaches by obeying His commands. To reach the shores of heavenly wisdom every man must work his passage. Holiness is the royal road to Scriptural knowledge. We know as much as we do.” C. H. Spurgeon.

The biblical order is: rely on God for understanding, obey God for understanding, followed by a third God-fearing action.

III. The God Fearer Pursues God for Understanding

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)

33 The fear of the LORD *is* the instruction of wisdom, And before honor *is* humility. (Prov. 15:33)

Here now we come to the action which most people think comes first: study. Yes, we need to at some point study and pursue understanding. But what comes first is wholehearted trust, followed by obedience, followed by study.

But notice the kind of study. It involves receiving, treasuring, inclining the ear, applying the heart, crying out for it, lifting up the voice for it, seeking it and searching for it. There is nothing detached or cold or clinical in this study. There is zeal here, there is eagerness, there is diligence, because there is desire. And the desire is a personal love for God.

Pro 8:17 I love those who love me, And those who seek me diligently will find me.

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

We should have a holy curiosity, a sanctified inquisitiveness, a consecrated thirst to know. Knowledge on its own puffs up, but when we are reliant on God, and when we are desirous to obey God, what results is a kind of study that God rewards with understanding.

If you want an example of what this looks like, look at the godly scribe Ezra.

For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do *it*, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. (Ezr. 7:10)

Notice the way Ezra did it. He sought the Law of Yahweh, because he wanted to obey it, and then teach it. He didn't learn so as to teach and maybe obey. He pursued God, and obeyed, and then taught. He wanted to please God, wanted to know how, did so, and eventually wanted to help others.

We said a few weeks ago that every Christian should be a teacher. Our attitude should be to study so as to do so as to teach other Christians. Study the Word not for the ego of being knowledgeable. Study the Word not because you want to be known as a teacher. Study the Word because God is at the centre of your life, you want to please Him, and you want to help others.

We take the same approach when it comes to the world. Become zealous to understand the meaning of devices, practices, technologies, customs, media in the world, because God is at the centre of your life, you want to please Him, and you want to help others.

Indifference when it comes to knowing the Word or knowing God's world is sin. It is a laziness that the writer of Hebrews called dullness of hearing. To be apathetic about knowing truth is to quench the Spirit. It is to say, I am not interested in what God says in His Word, and I am not particularly interested in the meaning of His world. I am not a student of revelation, and I am not a student of creation.

And I think there is a very bad habit that will feed that kind of apathy and indifference: become addicted to amusement. If you need the constant hit and high of social media, a pop song in the background, a TV show or Youtube clip to veg out to at night or on weekends, trivial magazines to pass the time, non-stop computer games or apps, you are weakening your ability to learn and discern. You cannot serve God and mammon, and you cannot be a seeker after God and a seeker after worldly amusement. You will love the one and hate the other, serve the one and despise the other.

Christians are to be lifelong learners: students of the Word, and students of God's world. How? Rely on God for understanding. Obey God for understanding. And then pursue God for understanding.