



Good vs. Evil

The Discipline of Discernment

Paula J. Marolewski

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Lesson 1: Understanding Discernment

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An Introduction to Discernment

What do you think of when you hear the word “discernment”? How would you define it?

Many Christians assume that “discernment” is some mystical gift, only given to hermits living on mountaintops. Discernment, they think, is something that can’t be defined. It’s a feeling. An intuition. An inner sense. It has something to do with having a special “in” with God. To know things. Or know about things. Or whatever. Certainly, it’s not for the regular churchgoer. Elders and pastors and such should “have discernment,” but it’s not for the person in the pew.

That is a lie of the devil. Discernment is not some vague “inner sense,” nor is it a mystical gift. **Discernment is the ability to recognize good and evil, and it is a spiritual discipline.** A spiritual discipline is simply something I do in order to bring me closer to God.

What are some of the spiritual disciplines?

All spiritual disciplines involve a choice: you can choose to do them or not to do them. If you choose to do them, they will help you grow strong in your faith, and closer to God.

As a spiritual discipline, discernment is not “given” to hermits and pastors and elders. It is part of God’s call to every man, woman, and child who has accepted Jesus as Lord. And, since discernment is part of God’s call to a holy life, it’s not some ungraspable, undefinable reality. It’s a practical, everyday practice. It is reasonable and rational. It involves hard work, effort, and discipline.

The Definition of Discernment

It's important to get a good definition of discernment right at the start. Already, we have stated that discernment is the ability to recognize good and evil. That's what Hebrews 5:14 says when it reads, "Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to *discern good and evil*" (italics mine).

But you might say that actually recognizing good and evil is the end *product* of discernment. What we want to study in this series is the actual *process* of discernment: how do we get to the point of recognizing good from evil? How do we gain that ability? What is involved in discernment? If we know the *process*, we will get the *product*.

Let's begin with the dictionary definition of the word: "To detect or perceive with the eye or the mind; to perceive the distinctions of [which can be considered "to define"]; to discriminate" (*The American Heritage Dictionary*).

To detect. To define. To discriminate. Three "D's" that define "discernment."

To detect. The first aspect of discernment is detection. Put simply: open your eyes! Be observant. Pay attention. Scripture commands us to "be sober" (I Thess. 5:8), and to be "on the alert" (I Peter 5:8).

What do we need to be observant about in life? What aspects and areas of life?

Do you consider yourself to be an observant person? Why or why not?

Remember what the Bible says about Satan and sin and evil: that people fall prey to "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life" (I John 2:16). That "each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust" (James 1:13). That there are people who "hold fast to themselves for an evil purpose; they talk of laying snares secretly; they ... devise injustices ... for the inward thought and the heart of a man are deep" (Psalm 64:5-6). The implication is that evil is often disguised, camouflaged, or hidden. You have to be watching out for it. Satan doesn't walk around with a sign around his neck that says, "Satan: Watch Out!"

In fact, the Bible teaches that he often appears as an “angel of light” (II Cor. 11:14). He is a deceiver – “a liar, and the father of lies” (John 8:44). You have to keep your eyes open, or you will lose the battle before you ever knew there was a fight.

Can you think of a time when you were “blindsided” by evil? What happened?

What steps can you take to become more observant to what is going on around you and inside your mind and heart?

To define. The second aspect of discernment is to define what you see. First, you have to see what’s around you. Then, you have to think about what defines it. What are the characteristics of this thing, this thought, this situation? Why do I want this thing, this goal? How is this the same or different from other good or evil things I am familiar with?

Think about one of your key relationships. What characterizes the relationship?

Think about something you are striving for. Why do you want it?

To discriminate. First, you detect something. Then, you define it. Finally, you have to decide about it. “I’ve thought about this thing, this thought, this situation, this decision in my mind. These are its characteristics. Now, what does the Bible say about this? What does my reason tell me about this? What do trustworthy Christians think about this? What is God’s Spirit telling me about this?”

This is where you are deciding if something is good or evil. After that, it is up to you to obey God, or to disobey him. Remember, the spiritual discipline of discernment – like all spiritual disciplines – is meant to bring us closer to God. Discernment helps us to recognize good and evil, and therefore, if we choose the good, to live a holy life. In doing so, it strengthens and deepens our relationship to God.

Consider the relationship you wrote about above. Compare the characteristics you listed to the characteristics in I Corinthians 13. Is the relationship healthy and godly? Why or why not?

Consider the goal you wrote about above. Read James 4:1-10. Is your ambition good and godly? Why or why not?

Discernment, therefore is the spiritual discipline of recognizing good from evil. We discern by detecting, defining, and discriminating.

The Scriptures of Discernment

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of discernment, the rest of this lesson will focus on what the Bible says about the topic. We've already seen in Hebrews 5:14 that discernment is part of what makes up Christian maturity: "Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil."

But what else does the Bible say about discernment? When you remember that discernment is recognizing good from evil, we see that there are many passages that teach us what it means to be discerning. Let's look at three things that go into discernment: evil, good, and wisdom – since discernment is looking at and recognizing good and evil, and godly obedience is wisely deciding between them.

Evil

First, we look at evil. Sin. The bad stuff.

Sin has been defined as "missing the mark." It is anything outside the will and holiness of God. How else might you define sin or evil to someone who wanted a better understanding of it?

What are the characteristics of sin and evil?

There is an excellent summary of sin and evil in I John 2:16, which divides sin into "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life." In other words, bodily appetites (like gluttony, sexual depravity, and drunkenness), mental appetites (like envy, covetousness, and greed), and spiritual appetites (for instance, pride, arrogance, ambition, and self-centeredness).

It's important to have an in-depth understanding of everything the Bible names as sin. One of the ways to develop that understanding is to study the lists of sins the Bible provides.

Read the following passages and write out all the sins that are mentioned: Romans 1:28-32, I Corinthians 6:9-11, Galatians 5:19-21.

It is our natural preference to want to focus and meditate on Scriptures that make us feel good. Studying lists of sins rarely does that – but it is essential that we discipline ourselves to do so.

Imagine that you are a doctor – you obviously want to study the human body and how it works. But you also study all the illnesses, diseases, and injuries that are out there. Why? So that you will be able to recognize them immediately when you see them.

You will find that if you study carefully the sins that the Bible talks about, you will become more and more aware of examples in your everyday life – and therefore, you will be able to avoid those pitfalls, and live in greater obedience to God.

Which of the sins listed above are you guilty of?

Have you confessed and repented of any sins you are guilty of? If not, spend time in prayer and confession.

It's also important to study each individual sin to gain a greater understanding of it. For instance, consider sorcery. The dictionary defines sorcery as "The use of supernatural power; witchcraft."

We might think, "Well, I don't know any witches or sorcerers! That sin is no longer relevant today."

But expand on that definition a bit: "the use of supernatural power" means that people try to manipulate spiritual forces in order to accomplish what they want. That means that everything from "knocking on wood" (a "charm" against bad luck) to Ouija boards (manipulating spirits to tell the future) are all classified as "sorcery."

Where else do you see sorcery in everyday life? Consider trends, entertainment, movies, TV shows, work life, superstitions, kids' toys, books, etc.

You may have found that some items on your list – now that you have a better understanding of what sorcery is – are disturbing because you thought of them as "fun" or "innocent." And that is exactly the point: sin is devious. It's subtle. A witch is probably not going to walk right up to you and ask if you want to join a coven. It's possible, but not likely. But it is likely that your children will encounter seemingly "innocent" trends – games that play with spiritual power, charm or "power" jewelry, some kinds of fantasy books. That is how sorcery begins. Consider that Ouija boards are sold in toy stores along with other games!

Every sin works in this fashion. It starts small and subtle. It doesn't look too bad, if it looks bad at all. But it always grows. Consider lust. Lust leads to fantasy. Fantasy to pornography. Pornography to sexual immorality. Sexual immorality to rape. Rape to murder.

Rarely do we start out with grossly obviously, violent, and vile sins. We start out small. We are deceived into thinking that "it's not that serious." *But*, if we study what the Bible says about sins, we will learn to recognize sins in their infancy – and stop them before they take hold.

Good

Now, let's move on to the study of what is good. Goodness is defined as something within the will or character of God.

Consider the following passages and list out all the virtues – good characteristics, attitudes, and actions – that are mentioned: Galatians 5:22-23, Matthew 5:1-12, I Thessalonians 5:14-22, Romans 12:9-21.

It is important to study lists like these carefully – one word, and one phrase at a time. We study them for the same reasons we said earlier that we should study the lists of sins: because by studying the good, we can see and recognize it. We will learn to practice it. We will be convicted of sin in our own lives. We will be taught the right way to go. The Spirit will be able to bring what we have learned to our mind when we are in trouble or confused.

Bank tellers and policemen learn to recognize counterfeit money by spending considerable time handling *real* money. The more they handle the real thing, the faster they recognize counterfeits. Likewise, the more you live in obedience to God, seeking and doing the good, studying his Word and living by it, the more you will recognize evil and turn away from it.

Wisdom

Finally, let's look at wisdom. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines wisdom as: "Understanding of what is true, right, and lasting." Those three words sum it up so well:

- Understanding of what is true: that is, discernment on matters of the mind.
- Understanding of what is right: that is, discernment on matters of life and practice.
- Understanding of what is lasting: that is, discernment on matters of God and the spirit.

Proverbs and James are undoubtedly two of the best places to go to look at wisdom. We'll turn there to look at the source of wisdom, the characteristics of wisdom, and the results of wisdom.

What is the source of wisdom according to Proverbs 9:10, Proverbs 2:6-7, and James 1:5-8?

As you study the above passages, what do you need to do personally to grow in wisdom?

What are the characteristics of wisdom, as found in James 3:17?

Which of these characteristics are you strong in? Which do you need to develop?

What are the results of wisdom according to Proverbs 2:10-12 and Proverbs 3:21-26?

Think of a current situation you are in where you need wisdom. Which results do you need the most?

Therefore, we have found that:

- Discernment is a spiritual discipline.
- Discernment is the ability to recognize good and evil.
- Discernment involves three D's: to detect, to define, and to discriminate.
- We should study what the Bible says about evil so that we can recognize and avoid it.
- We should study what the Bible says about good so that we can recognize and practice it.
- We should seek wisdom through pursuing a right relationship with God, ourselves, and others.

Close in prayer, asking the Lord to help you grow in the discipline of discernment.



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Lesson 2: The Prerequisites of Discernment

Paula J. Marolewski

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The Prerequisites of Discernment

In this lesson, we're going to look first at the prerequisites of discernment. A prerequisite is something that we must have before we can have something else. For instance, a prerequisite to getting a Masters degree is that you have to have a Bachelors degree. A prerequisite to eternity with God is forgiveness at the foot of the Cross.

There are six key prerequisites to growing in the spiritual discipline of discernment – all of which begin with the letter “S”.

Salvation

We begin with salvation. In the previous lesson, we specified that the source of wisdom is God alone (“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” Proverbs 9:10; “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God,” James 1:5), and that only those in a right relationship with him would receive his wisdom. Therefore, the first prerequisite for becoming a discerning person is that we must get ourselves into a right relationship with God through the salvation available in Jesus Christ.

What happens when people try to gain wisdom without being in a right relationship with God?

Who are some of the major philosophers, political leaders, and religious figures of this world who were not Christians? What did they write or teach? What were the results?

Sanctification

But salvation is only the beginning: it sets the stage; it makes it *possible* for us to receive wisdom and practice discernment. The second step is sanctification. Sanctification means setting ourselves apart as consecrated to God. Seeking to be like Christ. Desiring to live a holy life. Committing ourselves to God and living it out. We are to produce good fruit, as Jesus commands us.

Why do people sometimes avoid a life of sanctification?

How does sanctification change you so that you can receive God's wisdom?

Paul lists the kind of fruit we should be producing in Galatians 5:22-23: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”

For each of the fruits of the Spirit, write down your understanding of the word (I encourage you to check out the dictionary definitions), and how well you think you’re doing in producing that fruit in your life. Then, write down at least one additional thing you can do this week to practice each fruit. For instance, for self-control, you might say, “I will limit myself to one snack or dessert each day.”

Love

Definition: _____

How well am I doing? _____

How can I do better? _____

Joy

Definition:

How well am I doing?

How can I do better?

Peace

Definition:

How well am I doing?

How can I do better?

Patience

Definition:

How well am I doing?

How can I do better?

Kindness

Definition:

How well am I doing?

Gentleness

Definition:

How well am I doing?

How can I do better?

Faithfulness

Definition:

How well am I doing?

How can I do better?

Self-Control

Definition:

Spirit

But how do we produce the “fruit of the Spirit”? How do we live a sanctified life? By following one of the shortest, yet most profound commands in Scripture, found in Ephesians 5:18: “Be filled with the Spirit.”

“Be filled with the Spirit.” God has not left us alone to try to live a holy life. He has not abandoned us. We are saved by the death and resurrection of Christ. We live by the breath of the Spirit within us.

If we desire the Spirit and seek to obey him, he will fill us. Being filled with the Spirit isn’t about some mystical experience reserved for extra-holy saints. It is about loving God, desiring his will, and seeking to do it. When we have that attitude, when we are praying for God’s strength and grace to help us do his will, God’s Spirit will gladly fill us, sanctify us, and help us live a holy life.

We see this clearly by looking at the context of the command “Be filled with the Spirit,” and of it’s opposite warning “Do not quench the Spirit.” The first is found in Ephesians 5. The second is found in I Thessalonians 5. In each case, the verse is part of an entire chapter describing the characteristics of the Christian life: the life filled with the Spirit, where the power of the Spirit is not quenched.

Read through each chapter in full: Ephesians 5 and I Thessalonians 5. What do these chapters command us to do? Where are your strengths? Where do you need to improve?

Service

Next is service, or having a servant’s heart. It is vital to live a life characterized by humble obedience. You can see how all the prerequisites of discernment are intertwined: salvation is the beginning of the journey, continued on by sanctification through the power of the Spirit in a life characterized by humble service to the Lord.

I John 2:4-6 states this very clearly, “The one who says, ‘I have come to know him,’ and does not keep his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps his word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in him: the one who says he abides in him ought himself to walk in the same manner as he walked.” And in John 14:15 Jesus says simply, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

In what situations do you find it easy to serve others? Why?

In what situations do you find it hard? Why?

Is God calling you to an act of service that you have been avoiding? What is it? Why have you been avoiding it? What are you going to do now?

Supplication

The next prerequisite is supplication. Prayer. If we are saved, sanctified, filled with the Spirit, and living a life of service, then supplication is a natural outgrowth of our lives.

As with most things in our lives, God wants us to talk to him. He wants us to ask him. He knows what we need, but he wants the communication and the communion to flow freely between us: therefore, he usually waits until we *ask* before he will move to *act*.

This is definitely true of wisdom. James 1:5 says, “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” And Proverbs 2:4-6 states, “If you seek her [wisdom] as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures, then you will discern the fear of the Lord, and discover the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity.”

Don’t be satisfied with just muddling along: ask God for wisdom, and he is ready and willing to give it to you.

How much time do you spend in prayer each day? Each week?

How often do you ask God for help? What kinds of things do you ask his help for? Are there any areas of your life that you don’t ask for his help in? If so, why?

What current situations in your life do you need wisdom on? Spend time praying for these situations.

Scripture

The last prerequisite of discernment is Scripture. Psalms is an excellent place to find affirmations of the Bible’s place in our lives:

- Psalm 19:7 “The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.”
- Psalm 119:105 “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”
- Psalm 119:11 “Thy Word I have treasured in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee.”

In the last lesson, we reviewed what the Bible says about good and evil, and discussed how it is important for us to study what the Bible says so that we will recognize evil to be able to avoid it, and good, so that we will be able to do it. The Scriptures are the absolute authority on good and evil.

What other authorities does the world say we should listen to, that may often (or always) contract the Bible?

How would you rate your knowledge of the Bible?

How can you incorporate the memorization of Scripture into your life? Pick a verse to start memorizing this week.

So the six prerequisites of discernment are:

- Salvation
- Sanctification
- Spirit
- Service
- Supplication
- Scripture

With these prerequisites in place, you will grow strong in the discipline of discernment: guaranteed!



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Lesson 3: The Tools of Discernment

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Scripture

In this lesson, we're going to look at the tools of discernment. God has called us to recognize good from evil. He has given us four major tools to help us to do so, the first of which is Scripture.

Read II Timothy 3:16 and Psalm 19:7-13. What does Scripture say about what it can do for us?

As you can see from the above, the Scriptures can do many things for us, including helping us to avoid evil, and avoid sin. That is part of what discernment is about.

Turn to the gospels. When in Jesus' life did he use Scripture to avoid sinning? What did he do?

Since we see that God's own Son used God's Word to avoid evil, we cannot stress the importance of the Bible enough for us. Therefore, we want to consider two ways we can immerse ourselves in the Bible.

Memorization

First, memorization. Memorization puts the Word of God directly into our minds. It hammers it in, allowing us to call it forth at need.

Are you actively working on memorizing Scripture now? Why or why not?

If you are not actively working on a memorization program now, when did you last engage in a memorization program or effort?

Many times, we leave memorization to the children. We claim that as adults we can't memorize anymore ... that our minds aren't limber enough.

Sometimes that may be true, but not all the time. The point really is that children are *required* to memorize things – whether at church or at school – and therefore they put *time and effort* into it. As adults, we don't put forth that consistent time and effort.

Why don't we put forth the time and effort? Ultimately, it's because we don't really think that it's important enough to do so. We typically find or make the time for the things that really matter to us.

What are the benefits of committing Scripture to memory?

Think of two or three instances when you wished you could have quoted a Scripture verse, but were unable to think of one, or to quote it well.

Now, it is important to take something into consideration: some people have better memories than others. While I would contend that most people can memorize more than they do, that does not mean that everyone can memorize the same amount, or with equal facility. People tend to fall into the following categories:

1. You have the capacity for serious memorization, and can put numerous long passages into your mind for easy retrieval.
2. You have the capacity for reasonable memorization – usually single verses and short passages rather than long ones – and you can paraphrase a lot more than you can actually quote.
3. You have a hard time memorizing Scripture, but you can paraphrase it well.
4. You don't have a great facility with memorization or paraphrase, but you know the principles of God's Word and can explain them to others.

The crucial thing to understand about these four categories is that none is “better” than the other. *God designed you just as you are, and is not going to expect from you more than he created you to give.* Therefore, if you have a hard time memorizing Scripture, don't compare yourself to someone who finds it easy and think you are somehow “less” of a Christian than they are. We are all equal in Christ, and God has given you precisely the abilities you need to accomplish the work he has for you to do.

However, that being said, he does expect you to live up to the abilities he has given you. Let me use myself (the author of this Bible study lesson) as an example. I personally fall into the first category above. I have a natural facility with memorization. Over time, I have committed hundreds of verses to memory. This practice is *essential* to my gifts in the area of teaching: I call on what I know from Scripture in order to create lessons, teach in the church, proclaim the gospel, and defend the faith against those who would tear it down. Without memorization, I would not be able to fulfill my role in the church to the capacity that God intends.

Too often, unfortunately, we settle for something less. Don't! We are commanded to “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (II Timothy 2:15).

Which of the four categories above do you think you belong in? What is your capacity for memorization and paraphrase?

Are you living up to your capacity and ability in this area? Why or why not?

Over the next few weeks and months, test your abilities – push yourself to see how much Scripture you can commit to memory. Choose your favorite passages to start with. You may be surprised to find that you can do more than you thought you could!

Here are a few tips that will help you learn the Scriptures to your highest capacity:

- Pick a translation you understand. NIV, RSV, NAS: whatever works for you.
- Select a passage you can handle. Single verses, short groups of verses, long sections: whatever you are able to readily memorize.
- Find your real capacity by pushing yourself occasionally to see if you can memorize longer passages. If you find yourself getting frustrated or disappointed, you are probably pushing yourself beyond your limits – let it go, and don't worry about it.
- Find a way to keep the verse or verses constantly in front of you. Index cards tucked into your mirror, on your bulletin board at work, or as bookmarks in your daily calendar can all be helpful aids.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat. Don't worry about memorizing things in a day or in a week. The longer you keep at it, the longer you will keep it in your memory.

Again, allow me to use myself (the author) as an example of the last point, which I believe is the ultimate key to memorization. When I work on long passages (sometimes entire chapters), I print them out and read them over once a day. That's it. I don't consciously "try" to memorize them. I don't expect to memorize them in a week, or even a month. I simply read them over once a day, several times a week.

Eventually – and usually so subtly that I don’t even notice it – the passages become ingrained in my mind. It may take four months or more of regularly reading the passage over. But because I spend so long with the passage over such an extended period of time, the memorization is solid. Years after ceasing to actively work on memorizing a passage, it is typically possible for me to quote it almost word for word. And what I cannot quote, I can usually paraphrase or locate readily.

So don’t rush memorization. It is too important a discipline for that, with too many benefits you don’t want to miss. Take the time to repeat, repeat, repeat – and the words will become yours for life.

Study

Next, let’s talk about Bible study. Whereas memorization focuses on the words, study focuses on the content – the two should be inseparable, since it does no good to memorize words you don’t understand!

There are many ways to get down into the meat of the Bible. Some methods you’ll like more than others. Some you’ll find easier than others. All have something different to offer.

Here are a few to explore:

- Use published study guides and commentaries. Study guides will often provide solid definitions, explanations, word studies from the original languages, historical context, and cross-references so you can look up other similar passages that will add further insights.
- Take a topical approach, either using a study guide, or simply using the concordance in your Bible. For instance, you can look up all the verses with the word “grace” in them, and write down all you find out about grace by seeing what all the various references say.
- Use a meditative approach. Choose a passage of Scripture, read it carefully, and think on it prayerfully. Think about how this passage applies to you, or what it teaches you, or how it expresses something you may have felt or may be feeling.
- Explore a linguistic approach. If you love languages, dive into the original Greek or Hebrew and look at what picture images, historical insights, or connotations the original language had that may not come across in English. If that’s not your cup of tea, you can still use this approach simply by getting two or three different translations and comparing the same verse or verses in each of the translations to see different “views” or “takes” on how the original language was translated. I would suggest using a contemporary version such as the NIV for one translation, the NAS to study a translation that follows the original languages as closely as possible, and perhaps The Message for a looser paraphrase.

Let's touch now on the dangers we can fall into when using Scripture. The top three dangers are Scripture twisting, taking verses out of context, and plain misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

We see an example of both Scripture twisting and taking verses out of context in the temptation of Christ in Matthew 4. Satan tempts Christ in verse 6 by saying, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge concerning you,' and 'on their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"

What's wrong with what Satan said? (Be sure to look up the actual passage he was quoting from before you answer – found in Psalm 91:11-12.)

What does the passage Satan was quoting really mean?

We can fall into this trap as well. We can take verses out of context because they are "convenient" to us. We can drop or change a single word and claim that as a truth.

People sometimes say "Money is the root of all evil." This is not an accurate quote from the Bible. The actual verse is I Timothy 6:10: "For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil."

What effect could the above misquote have on people?

What principles does the verse actually teach?

Then, of course, there is basic misunderstanding and misinterpretation of verses. For instance, take I Corinthians 9:27: “I buffet my body and make it my slave.” That has been used over the course of Christianity as an excuse for self-flagellation (physically abusing yourself to somehow achieve holiness) of varying kinds.

The verse in context, however, is not talking about self-abuse. It is talking about self-discipline. The passage talks about “running a race,” “competing in the games,” and “boxing effectively.” All these are images of physical exercise and self-control to achieve a prize. Likewise, Paul is writing that self-control (both of the body and of the spirit), is important in living the Christian life.

Care for our physical bodies is emphasized in passages such as when Christ bid his disciples come away and rest awhile, when God cared for Elijah when he was fleeing from Jezebel, and in every passage where God calls us to regular Sabbath rests. God himself set the pattern back in the first chapter of Genesis, affirming that it was important to rest from our labors and take care of ourselves. But we see how lifting one verse out of context and misinterpreting it can lead to all sorts of evil.

Therefore, in summary, strive to clearly understand Scripture, always keep verses in context, and be careful not to change wording in such a manner that you change meaning.

Reason

Now, let us turn to the other tools of discernment, looking next at reason.

One of my favorite sayings is that “God gave us a mind and he expects us to use it.” Followed closely by “You don’t check your brain at the door when you become a Christian.” A key aspect of being created in the image of God is that we are created as rational, reasoning beings.

It is of vital importance to exercise our minds. We should read books that make us think. Confront doubts and fears and anxieties. Apply our minds to Scripture through study.

Reason complements the Scripture. The Bible gives us eternal and overarching principles, but doesn’t necessarily give specific direction for specific circumstances. *It is up to our reason to apply biblical principles to specific situations.*

Consider the following Scriptures that talk about our mind and reasoning abilities:

- “Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good, abstain from every form of evil.” I Thessalonians 5:21-22
- “Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” Hebrews 5:14
- “Do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be babes, but in your thinking be mature.” I Corinthians 14:20

Why do you think that those outside the church sometimes accuse Christians of “checking their brain at the door”?

Do you think the church teaches people to reason well about their faith? How could the church improve in this area?

When it comes to discernment, there is one area that deserves particular attention. We find it in I John 4:1-3:

“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. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.”

One of Satan’s consistent attacks on Christianity – where he most often seeks to undermine our faith – is regarding the person and nature of Jesus Christ. Every heresy, every cult, and every form of evil is characterized by denying who Jesus really is. Every thing, thought, relationship, situation, person, philosophy, action, or teaching that denies Jesus is evil.

When all these attacks are boiled down, we find that evil typically involves denying one or more of the following five aspects of the person and nature of Christ:

1. Denying his God-head.
2. Denying his manhood.
3. Denying his death and work of salvation on the cross.
4. Denying his resurrection.
5. Denying his continuing ministry to the Church and in the world.

What happens when we deny Christ’s:	
Deity?	_____
Humanity?	_____
Salvation?	_____
Resurrection?	_____
Ministry?	_____

Therefore, when we apply our minds to situations, actions, relationships, and thoughts to discern whether they are good or evil, one of the key questions we should ask is: Does this deny Christ in some way? If so, then avoid it at all costs.

Consider the following and determine whether they deny Christ in any of the five ways mentioned above:

God created the world and everything in it, but then he stepped back and no longer intervenes.

Jesus was a great teacher.

The body is fallen and therefore evil.

I'll get to heaven; I'm sure my good deeds outweigh my bad ones.

You don't need to believe in miracles to be a good Christian.

Just as there were dangers to be careful of when using Scripture for discernment (Scripture-twisting, taking verses out of context, and misinterpretation), there are also dangers associated with using our reason as a tool for discernment. The biggest are:

- Becoming arrogant in our reasoning ability.
- Failing to use Scripture as a checkpoint to our reason.
- Committing a logical fallacy (a mistake in reasoning).
- Deceiving ourselves (cf. II Timothy 3:13).

How do we guard ourselves against each of the above dangers?

Becoming arrogant in our reasoning ability.

Failing to use Scripture as a checkpoint to our reason.

Committing a logical fallacy (a mistake in reasoning).

Deceiving ourselves (cf. II Timothy 3:13).

Counsel

Next, let's turn to counsel. Proverbs 19:20 says, "Listen to counsel and accept discipline, that you may be wise the rest of your days." And Proverbs 12:15 says, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel."

You may come across situations where you aren't sure how to apply biblical principles, and are having trouble reasoning through what to do. In that case, someone else's experience and counsel can be of infinite value. That's why we emphasize discipleship when people become Christians: can you learn everything you need from the Bible alone? Of course, theoretically. Practically speaking, however, it's easier, faster, and safer if we have someone walking alongside us on the way.

When have you benefited from the wise counsel of others?

Have you ever ignored the counsel of others, or failed to ask for it, and regretted it later? What was the situation? Why did you not ask for or take the counsel of others? What happened as a result?

Of course, there are dangers to accepting the counsel of others. II Peter 2 talks about false teachers in the church – we can fall into the danger of accepting counsel from people who are teaching us incorrectly. We can also err by accepting counsel from people who are immature in their faith – so that even though they are well-meaning, they are wrong or at least not quite right. We might also experience the danger of conflicting counsel, where we get differing answers to our questions, even from mature, committed believers. Life is complex. All these things happen.

In order to guard ourselves against these dangers, we need to hold up the counsel we receive to the light of Scripture, test it by our own reason, and pray for wisdom to discern whether the counsel we have received is itself wise.

The Spirit

Last, but not at all least, we have the Holy Spirit to help us in discerning good from evil. Isaiah 30:21 says, “And your ears will hear a word behind you, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ whenever you turn to the right or to the left.”

Do we hear a literal voice? Almost never. The Spirit helps us to understand Scripture, helps us to reason properly, and helps us to recognize and give godly counsel to others.

Very often, the Holy Spirit speaks to us by bringing to our minds Scriptures that we have learned, or by revealing how to apply a Scripture to our current circumstances. In John 14:26, Jesus promises us, “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.” And in John 16:13, Jesus states that the Holy Spirit will “guide you into all the truth.” We can see, therefore, why it is so important to memorize and study Scripture constantly – the Holy Spirit cannot bring to our mind what we have not made an effort to put into it.

As with all the other tools, there are dangers associated with the Spirit. We can make a mistake and think we are hearing God’s Spirit, whereas it might be the pizza we ate last night. We might be deceived by the strength of our own emotions or desires.

What’s the solution? To remember that *God will never contradict himself. His written Word in the Bible is final*: anything he says to you today will agree perfectly with the Bible.

If you think you’ve heard from the Holy Spirit but what you heard contradicts something the Bible has said, then what you heard is wrong, not the Bible. Remember I John 4:1-3 again: we are commanded and warned to “test the spirits.” There are many spiritual forces out there, but only one Holy Spirit of God. You may indeed hear something spiritually, but it may not be God’s Spirit. But if what you hear agrees with biblical principles, makes sense according to your reason, and meets with the approval of the counsel of mature Christians, you can be certain that it is God’s voice you have heard.

In order to hear God’s Spirit accurately, keep a humble, obedient attitude, seek God’s will, immerse yourself in the Scriptures, and pay attention and think things through.

Conclusion

In conclusion, God has given us four tools of discernment: the Bible, our reason, the counsel of others, and his Holy Spirit. Usually one or more of these tools will work together in any given circumstance. Each has its dangers when taken alone and improperly, or if we are immature or arrogant. However, if we seek God with a humble heart, study Scripture, think carefully, accept the counsel of mature Christians, and listen for the voice of his Spirit, we can be sure that he will give us all we need every hour of every day to live a life pleasing to him.



Good vs. Evil

The Discipline of Discernment

Lesson 4: The Questions of Discernment

Paula J. Marolewski

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The Questions of Discernment

In this lesson, we're going to look at the questions of discernment.

There are five questions that we can use to help us reason out whether something is good or evil. These apply to anything in life: thoughts, actions, ideas, relationships, decisions, emotional reactions, what we say, etc.

The questions are very "big." They are designed to be fairly all-encompassing, so that we can use them in any situation. Of course, from these, other questions may suggest themselves to you to probe further into specific situations. These are meant to be a starting point. A short checklist we can use to get a rapid "feel" for what is going on.

These five questions are:

1. What is the underlying principle?
2. What is the ultimate goal?
3. What are the ultimate consequences?
4. Who is ultimately being promoted?
5. What does this say about Jesus?

What is the underlying principle?

When we look at the underlying principle, we are asking ourselves “What’s the general idea here? Is there a philosophy being presented? A certain world view or outlook? When you strip this thing of all the extra words, when you remove all the confusion, when you reduce this thing down to its absolute rock-bottom essentials, what do you have?”

Let’s take an example and examine it in light of each of the five questions through this lesson.

People have, over the millennia, assigned special powers to certain forms of jewelry – crystals, stones, charms, etc. One of the more recent examples is the “power bracelets” – trendy and popular with both children and adults.

Different stones are assumed to convey different forms of power – giving the wearer the ability to achieve wholeness, happiness, ambition, money, passion, self-control, confidence, etc.

What is the underlying principle of the power bracelets?

Read the following Scriptures. How do they contradict or condemn the underlying principle of the power bracelets? Deuteronomy 18:9-13, Psalm 62:11-12

What is the ultimate goal?

This question relates to motive. Purpose. You can often rephrase this question as “What do I want?” or “Why do I want this thing?”

Look again at the power bracelets. Consider again the things you can theoretically “get” by wearing certain kinds of stones: intuition, balance, grounding, inner strength, health, money, good fortune, and optimism. What strikes you about that list?

Compare the above list with the list found in Galatians 5:22-23. How do the two lists differ – both in nature and in their ultimate goal?

Also consider the next verse – Galatians 5:24. What additional insight does this verse provide?

What are the ultimate consequences?

Next, we have “What are the ultimate consequences?” This is where we often try to fool or deceive ourselves. The drug addict convinces himself that “nothing will happen to me – I can stop anytime.” But what we need to do to answer this question is let go of any emotional attachment we have to the thing or idea or temptation. Coldly and logically, we need to ask: if I follow this thought to its extreme logical conclusions, what do I find?

What are the ultimate consequences of believing in and using power bracelets?

For comparison, what are the ultimate consequences of asking God to provide all your needs – materially, emotionally, and spiritually? Consider the following verses before you answer: Galatians 5:22-25, Philippians 4:11-13, Ephesians 3:14-21.

Who is ultimately being promoted?

Next in our list of questions is, “Who is ultimately being promoted?” You might rephrase that as, “Who is this glorifying?” or “Who gains from this?”

What answer do you get when you consider power bracelets?

What does Scripture say about who should be ultimately promoted – in every aspect of life?
Consider Matthew 5:16, Isaiah 42:8

What does this say about Jesus?

Lastly, we ask ourselves, “What does this say about Jesus?” We discussed this in the last lesson when we talked about the five aspects of Jesus’ person and nature that evil usually attacked:

1. Denying his God-head.
2. Denying his manhood.
3. Denying his death and work of salvation on the cross.
4. Denying his resurrection.
5. Denying his continuing ministry to the Church and in the world.

This final question draws from those five aspects: “What does this thing or idea say about Jesus? Does it jive with what Scripture teaches? Does it affirm or deny Jesus, and what does it say specifically about him?”

What do the power bracelets say about Jesus?

Few Things are “Trivial”

Very often, people assume trends such as the power bracelets are “trivial.” They appear to them as harmless, but they in fact have much deeper consequences. That is why it is important to carefully consider everything in life in light of these five questions.

When we look at the power bracelets, we found the following answers to these five questions (take a moment to compare what you wrote down to the summary below):

1. The underlying principle is that there are impersonal, unnamed, undefined spiritual forces in the world that you can manipulate.
2. The ultimate goal is self: I want the things these bracelets can get me.
3. The ultimate consequence is a lack of reliance either on God or on self; we forfeit our own responsibility in life.
4. The person ultimately being promoted is self and this unnamed spiritual force: I am glorified if I get these things I want, and I get them through this spiritual force.
5. Jesus is utterly denied as needed, important, or powerful.

Not exactly trivial. Not in the slightest.

Practice Makes Perfect

It's important to practice answering these five questions so that it becomes second nature to you to apply them to what you experience in life. Sometimes you will find that things are completely in accordance with Scripture. Other times, that they are not. Sometimes, you may be surprised.

Take the time now to apply the five questions:

1. What is the underlying principle?
2. What is the ultimate goal?
3. What are the ultimate consequences?
4. Who is ultimately being promoted?
5. What does this say about Jesus?

to the following examples:

- Capitalism as practiced in the United States
- Sex as promoted in popular magazines such as Cosmopolitan
- A popular movie now in the theaters
- A popular Christian speaker or writer
- Reports of visitations of Mary, the mother of Jesus
- Sports in America today
- A current military conflict taking place in the world
- Your church's preaching and ministries
- Your goals in life

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Please Remember

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Understanding Discernment

Introduction to Discernment

Discernment is _____

Discernment is _____

Discernment is _____

The Definition of Discernment

The Three D's

The Scriptures of Discernment

“Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” Hebrews 5:14

Evil _____

References: I John 2:16, Romans 1:28-32, I Corinthians 6:9-11, Titus 3:3, Galatians 5:19-21

Good _____

References: Galatians 5:22-23, I Thessalonians 5:14-22, Romans 12:9-21

Wisdom _____

References: Proverbs 9:10, James 3:17, Proverbs 2:10-12, Proverbs 3:21-26

The Prerequisites of Discernment

The Six Prerequisites of Discernment

S _____

S _____

S _____

S _____

S _____

S _____

The Tools of Discernment

The Four Tools of Discernment

I. _____

Notes:

II. _____

Notes:

III. _____

Notes:

IV. _____

Notes:

The Questions of Discernment

What is the underlying _____?

What is the ultimate _____?

What are the ultimate _____?

Who is ultimately being _____?

What does this say about _____?