



Good vs. Evil

The Discipline of Discernment

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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