**What Is Spiritual Discernment?**

**Selected Scriptures**

**June 6, 2021**

1. Introduction
   1. In 1 John 4:1, John gives us this exhortation…
      1. This verse speaks of a significant topic found throughout the Old and New Testaments, namely, the topic of spiritual discernment.
      2. One of the burdens of my heart in pastoral ministry is to help Christians become discerning.
      3. It is painfully obvious everywhere we look today that the church has largely abandoned using any sort of discernment.
      4. We could spend time going over example after example of times that believers have failed to exercise discernment and the catastrophes that have resulted, but I think we are all aware of the times in which we are living.
      5. All too often we see pastors who have been exposed as charlatans and frauds, men who have disqualified themselves from pastoral ministry through deception, arrogance, sexual infidelity, or other sins that prevent them from being above reproach, lay low for a while, pick up and move to a new city, and start a new church and instantly gain a massive following.
      6. We routinely see believers and churches adopting and embracing all kinds of views, perspectives, teachings, and practices that are contrary to the Word of God.
      7. We might ask ourselves, “Why would anyone follow a man who so clearly has disqualified himself from pastoral ministry?” or, “How could anyone embrace such views or practices that are contrary to the Word of God?”
      8. While some of this may be willful defiance of God’s Word, much of it is also due to a failure of believers to be discerning.
   2. The lack of discernment is tragic but not surprising because the truth is that many believers don’t know what discernment is.
      1. A search for books and resources on the topic of discernment quickly reveals that the concept itself is rarely understood.
         1. For example, one book published in 2019 on the topic of discernment is entitled *Discernment: The Essential Guide to Hearing the Voice of God.*
            1. There is, of course, within the title an explicit assumption that discernment is equated with hearing God’s voice.
            2. The book summary reads, “With extensive expertise and personal experience, prophetic leader Jane Hamon takes a deep dive, biblically and practically, into one of the least known and most unused gifts of the Holy Spirit, covering the following topics: discerning the presence of God, discerning the times, discerning angels and demons, discerning the hearts of people around you, acting wisely with what you discern, walking in wisdom and balance, and more.”
            3. With chapter titles like “The Issachar Anointing,” “Discernment and Intercession to Transform Territories,” and “Discerning and Identifying Strongholds,” a discerning reader should have all kinds of warning bells going off about this book!
            4. This isn’t a book published by some fringe publishing house, but it is published by a division of Baker Books, a large Christian publishing company.
         2. Another book, this one from 2008, is entitled *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making*.
            1. We all want to make good and wise decisions, so what does this book have to say on the subject?
            2. Here’s a sampling of the chapter titles from this book, published by Westminster John Knox Press, a significant publisher located in Louisville, KY and London, England: “Memory’s Guidance,” “Intuition’s Knowing,” “Body’s Awareness,” and “Imagination’s Insight.”
            3. The very first chapter of this book is entitled, “Discernment: What Is It?”
            4. And we don’t have to get past page 8 to find the answer to this question: “Because discernment deals with the mystery of God, it resists being confined to a single definition, escaping attempts to pin it down once and for all.”
            5. How does one write an entire chapter on the meaning of a word that escapes attempts to pin it down to a single meaning?
            6. By combining “a number of contemporary understandings.”
            7. Surely the path toward a greater understanding of discernment cannot be combining multiple misunderstandings of discernment, can it?
         3. What sets these two books apart from many others I looked at was that these two books at least made some attempt to quote the Bible at various points of the discussion.
         4. They illustrate the widespread confusion about the nature and the definition of discernment among professing Christians today.
      2. If we look at how Christians define discernment in the church today, we typically find something along the lines of “the ability to perceive something spiritual with the mind and the senses.”
         1. It is often defined in an obscure way.
         2. People treat discernment as if it is some mystical ability that arises from our intuition.
      3. Other Christians view discernment as the ability to make good choices in life.
         1. Christians who are discerning are those Christians whose life choices result in good circumstances.
         2. Christians who are not discerning are the ones who make choices that end in difficulty or disaster.
      4. One of the key reasons why there is so little discernment in the church today is because so many people don’t even know what discernment is!
   3. This morning, as we begin our four-part series on discernment, I want to begin by laying out a definition of discernment.
      1. I’m going to do this by first of all giving you the definition, and then we will walk through the definition to see what Scripture says about discernment to make sure we are on the right track.
      2. So if you can’t get the whole thing written down right now, you’ll have it by the end as we break it down phrase by phrase.
      3. Discernment is the Spirit-empowered skill of using God’s Word to distinguish between truth and error and right and wrong.
      4. Each phrase in this definition is important to understand if you want to understand what discernment is biblically.
      5. So let’s unpack this definition and see what Scripture says to help us grasp this.
   4. First of all, then, discernment is…
2. A Spirit-empowered skill
   1. Discernment, like so much else in the Christian life, is mysterious in the sense that it has both a divine element to it and a human element to it.
      1. The fact that it is Spirit-empowered indicates that this is not something that the unbeliever can do.
      2. But the fact that it is a skill speaks to the fact that it is something that we not only can have but develop and use.
   2. First, let’s think about the idea that discernment is Spirit-empowered.
      1. 1 Cor 2:14.
         1. Note the word translated **appraised**.
            1. That word often means *to examine*, but here the nuance is slightly different; it means instead *to discern*.
            2. The unbeliever cannot comprehend the things of God because he has no mechanism by which to evaluate what is true from what is false, what is right from what is wrong.
            3. Of course, we might object and say that the unbeliever has a conscience, which is true, but the unbeliever’s conscience is defective.
            4. We know from Jeremiah 17:9 that the sinful heart of man is more deceitful than all else.
            5. That means that the unbeliever comes to the truth of situation or to a point of decision with no way to discern what is true from what is false, what is right from what is wrong in the sight of God.
            6. His heart is so corrupted by sin, that his moral compass has been destroyed.
            7. He cannot discern, he cannot make accurate judgments about spiritual things.
         2. In apologetics, this fact is something that is a powerful argument against the unbeliever’s worldview.
            1. The unbeliever will often claim a position of moral superiority to the believer.
            2. But an easy response to that is to challenge the unbeliever to give an account for why his sense of justice or truth is valid.
            3. Not just valid for him, but that it is valid for others, because the unbeliever is trying to impose his morals and his beliefs on the believer to argue against the gospel.
            4. And when you get to the bottom of that argument, the unbeliever will have to admit without fail that he has no basis for his moral system.
            5. He has no basis for his idea of what is true and what is false.
            6. He simply has to make it up or depend on pop culture or the media or whatever the world deems right and wrong.
            7. But there is no basis of discerning because without submitting to the Word of God, there is no absolute standard to which they can appeal.
         3. You might remember that in 2008, Barack Obama said that he was opposed to gay “marriage” when he was running for his first term as president.
            1. But then in 2012, he was suddenly supportive of gay “marriage.”
            2. How did he account for this sudden and radical shift in morality?
            3. He didn’t.
            4. He said that his views on marriage were evolving.
            5. What does that mean?
            6. It means he had no basis to be against it in 2008 and he had no basis to be for it in 2012.
            7. He stuck his finger in the sky to see which way the wind was blowing, and headed the same direction.
            8. And that’s about all the unbeliever can do because he doesn’t have the Spirit of God, he doesn’t understand the Word of God, and he has no basis for determining what is right and wrong or true and false.
      2. Romans 1:31.
         1. Here we find Paul describing humanity in its condition of having rejected God and His Word.
         2. In that condition, they have a depraved mind, he says in v. 28.
         3. Then he lists a number of examples of what the depraved mind looks like, with one of them being the depraved mind is **without understanding.**
            1. That term is the Greek equivalent of what we often find in the book of Proverbs when it talks about having discernment.
            2. The unbeliever who has rejected God to serve idols is without discernment.
            3. That is why, although they know that people who sin as they do are worthy of death, they not only do these evil things but approve of others who do the same.
            4. How do they know these things are worthy of death?
            5. They know it because they are made in God’s image and because when these types of things are done to them, they respond with outrage.
            6. But because they don’t have any discernment, they can’t put all the pieces together in a proper way that would lead them to upright and just behavior.
            7. Their view of right and wrong is relative: it’s right if I do it to you, but it’s wrong if you do it to me.
            8. Within that, there is enough to convict them because they know it is wrong, but their undiscerning hearts make them into fools who practice folly.
      3. We see, then, that the natural man cannot exercise discernment because it is a Spirit-empowered skill.
   3. The fact that it is a skill, however, indicates that it is also something that we can develop, cultivate, and exercise.
      1. Romans 12:2.
         1. Here, the Apostle is calling us to develop and use discernment in our lives to know what God’s will is, to know what is good and acceptable and perfect.
         2. Having the Holy Spirit does not eliminate the need for us as believers to expend effort in developing discernment and using it in our lives.
         3. We have a responsibility to do this, and God has given us the tools to do it.
         4. We’ll talk more about developing and exercising discernment in later messages, but for now, I want you to note that discernment is something we are expected to put into practice and develop.
         5. The word **prove** means *to test*, and it relates to discernment because through this testing process we find what is pure and good and true and we sift out what is impure and evil and false.
      2. Hebrews 5:14.
         1. Here we have one of the clearest statements in the Bible that discernment is something we are to train ourselves to exercise.
         2. When you think about something that is a skill, you think about something like hitting a golf ball or painting a picture or fixing a car.
         3. And all of these kinds of skills are improved with practice.
         4. You develop them, you hone them, you work at them, they require effort from you if you want to do them with excellence.
         5. And discernment is the same way; it is a skill, something we need to hone, something we work at and give effort to developing and putting into practice.
   4. These, then, are the two sides to discernment that we must keep in proper balance.
      1. Discernment requires the presence and the power of the Spirit in our lives.
      2. We will never be discerning on our own; we are completely dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit.
      3. At the same time, discernment is a skill, something we are called to grow in and practice in our lives as we walk with Christ.
   5. Now, second part of the definition: Discernment is a Spirit-empowered skill of…
3. Using God’s Word
   1. Here, we begin to deal with some significant errors when it comes to understanding the meaning of discernment.
      1. Apologist Greg Koukl tells the story of being a young Christian, not even saved a year yet, and spending time with a friend who was further along in her walk with Christ.
         1. They went to a church coffeehouse together to hear some music, and his friend Joyce stopped as they entered the room and said, “I sense that something is wrong. I feel this check in my spirit.”
         2. As a young Christian, Greg was impressed!
         3. He said that in that moment he thought to himself, “I can’t wait till I get to the point in my spiritual growth where I can know things directly in the spiritual realm!”
         4. The only problem is that after walking with Christ for decades, he confesses that moment has never arrived.
      2. He also relates that he is sometimes criticized for being too intellectual about discernment and not “in the Spirit” enough.
         1. People tend to divide up discernment into two areas.
         2. We have the discernment we exercise with our minds as we think about situations and people and events and filter them through God’s Word.
         3. And then we have spiritual discernment, something that happens subjectively within us, some intuitive skill where we can sense that something is right or wrong or true or false.
         4. And many, many Christians look at the second kind of discernment as being more spiritual and therefore more desirable.
         5. I’m sure you’ve all heard someone say, or maybe you’ve even said, “I just don’t have a peace about it,” when you give a reason why you didn’t do something.
         6. Or the converse, “I just really felt a peace about it.”
         7. Is that spiritual discernment?
      3. Now, as Koukl points out, the biggest problem with the second kind of discernment that is based on subjective feelings is that discernment in the Bible is never defined that way.
         1. When we look at passages on discernment, we never are encouraged to look for a subjective feeling, to see if we have a peace about it, or anything like that.
         2. If you think of Jesus the night He was arrested, He was in agony as He prayed, and how many Christians would have skipped the cross because they just didn’t feel a peace about dying in such a horrific way?
         3. We have to be very careful in how we think about discernment because people can justify all kinds of unbiblical things based on a subjective emotion or feeling.
   2. Let’s look at some passages that talk about discernment and the standard we should use in exercising it, which is the Word of God.
      1. Hebrews 5:11-14.
         1. Notice the critique of these believers in vv. 11-12: they should be teachers of the Word of God, but because they have become dull of hearing they are like people who need to go back to kindergarten and re-learn the alphabet.
         2. Dull of hearing has the idea of being lazy or complacent in hearing the Word of God.
            1. Their problem is not that they are missing some feeling or emotion.
            2. Their problem is that they are not taking the word of God seriously enough.
            3. They are lazy listeners.
            4. They are complacent about engaging with the truths of God’s Word.
            5. And because of this, they need milk like newborn babies.
         3. He says in v. 13 that they are not accustomed to the word of righteousness.
            1. That means they have lost their ability to use the word of God.
            2. They are like someone who used to be physically fit but has spent the last five years eating pizza and krispy kreme donuts and then decides to go back to the gym.
            3. They are out of shape spiritually.
            4. They aren’t able to handle the word of righteousness.
         4. Solid food is for the mature, he says in v. 14, and the mature are those who are accustomed to the word of righteousness, those who have put in the effort to hear and understand and obey the Word of righteousness.
         5. These people are able to be discerning because the way you exercise discernment is through the word of righteousness.
         6. Please note there is nothing in this passage about having a feeling or being intuitive when exercising discernment; it is completely something that is based on your skill with God’s Word.
      2. 1 John 4:6
         1. Here, John has told these Christians not to believe every spirit but to test the spirits to discern who is from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.
         2. How do we know if someone is a false prophet?
         3. Do we get an icky feeling in our tummy?
         4. Do we get a check in our spirit, to use Koukl’s friend’s term?
         5. We might get a bad feeling around a false prophet, but that’s not how we know they’re a false prophet.
         6. Look at v. 6.
         7. Here’s the test: who aligns what they teach and how they live with what the Bible says?
         8. There is no subjective test involved in discerning truth from error or right from wrong.
         9. There is only an objective test, and it is their agreement with what the Apostles have written in the NT.
         10. That’s how we know the Spirit of truth from the spirit of error, from the clear teaching of God’s Word.
      3. The psalmist deals with this as well.
         1. Ps 119:66…
            1. He asks God to teach him discernment.
            2. And he grounds that request in his faith in God’s Word.
            3. Because, O God, I have put my trust in Your commandments, teach me discernment.
            4. He does not ask for some subjective feeling or intuition, but he grounds his discernment in his faith in Scripture.
         2. Ps 119:104
            1. Where does he get understanding, or discernment?
            2. From the Word of God.
            3. His discernment is derived entirely from what God has revealed in the Scriptures.
   3. Discernment, then, is a Spirit-empowered skill of using God’s Word.
      1. Now, you say, “What about feelings and intuition? Doesn’t God use our emotions? Or doesn’t the Spirit impress things on our hearts?
      2. I would encourage you to think about that question and seek an answer from God’s Word.
      3. Can you find the work of the Spirit in the life of believers to give us discernment in those terms, and if you can, is that the main emphasis in the NT?
      4. I think there is a proper place for examining our feelings and subjective responses to people or events, and we’ll talk about that more when we get to the message on exercising discernment.
      5. But as a preview, everything, including our feelings, must be subject to the Word of God, and discernment is something we exercise based on God’s Word, not based on subjective experiences.
   4. Now, third, discernment means we have…
4. To distinguish
   1. Here is another place where people get a little weak-kneed about discernment.
      1. We don’t like to draw clear lines in our culture.
      2. We don’t like to think in terms of right and wrong or true or false.
      3. Jay Adams points out in his book on discernment that our culture is much more comfortable thinking in terms of shades of gray than black and white.
      4. We like to think of truth as if it exists along a continuum, some things are more true, other things are less true.
      5. Or some things are more holy, other things are less holy, but there is this continuum of truth and righteousness, everything is sort of a shade of gray.
      6. Adams wrote of our cultural mindset, “Nothing, then, is wholly right or wrong. All is relative; most of it is subjective. That is one reason why biblical preaching, with its sharp antithesis, rubs many people the wrong way; It is hard for modern minds to accept.”
      7. We simply find discernment offensive!
      8. But biblical discernment requires us to make distinctions, to draw lines, to see the world in black and white terms.
   2. Look at 1 Kings 3:9
      1. Solomon had a dream, and in the dream God asked Solomon what he wanted God to give to him.
      2. And this verse is his answer to that question…
         1. He prayed for discernment!
         2. And what is discernment according to this verse?
         3. It is the ability to distinguish between good and evil.
         4. That’s the heart of discernment!
         5. We look at a situation or a teaching or an event or a person and we can distinguish whether what we are evaluating is good or evil.
      3. Solomon does not pray to discern what is good, better, or best.
      4. He does not pray to discern what is the good, the bad, and the ugly.
      5. No, there are only two categories, good and evil.
      6. And discernment is the ability to tell the difference between what is good and what is evil.
   3. Look at 1 Thess 5:21-22…
      1. Paul says they need to exercise discernment!
      2. Examine everything carefully.
      3. Be discerning, Christians!
      4. And after you have examined everything, hold fast to the good, and abstain from the evil.
      5. When you examine something, you will come to a conclusion that it is either good or evil, it either aligns with God’s Word, or it doesn’t.
      6. If it doesn’t, abstain from it!
      7. If it does, cling to it!
      8. But note that discernment requires us to make this distinction.
   4. The Hebrew word often translated as discernment or understanding is comes from a root term that means *between*.
      1. That’s crucial to grasp if you want to have a biblical worldview and be discerning.
      2. We are called to distinguish between two things, good things and evil things.
      3. In fact, the entire Hebrew lifestyle was set up to teach them discernment.
      4. If you look at the OT laws, things were either clean or unclean.
      5. From behaviors to dietary choices to their clothing to the way they sewed their crops in the field, everything was a binary choice of either good or evil, right or wrong, true or false, clean or unclean.
      6. The entire OT system was set up and designed to make Israel a discerning people who would realize that there are only two ways: God’s way, and all other ways.
      7. And a big problem we have today is not only that we don’t understand what discernment is, we don’t want to understand what it is because it forces us out of our comfort zone where we live in shades of gray and plants us in a world that is black and white.
   5. Discernment, though, demands this type of distinction between good and evil.
   6. Now, we can break this down into two aspects of good and evil; first of all, we might think of good and evil doctrine, which can be described as…
5. Truth and error
   1. This is what John was talking about in 1 John 4:1-6.
      1. When we are testing the spirits, we are essentially seeking to discern truth from error.
      2. We are seeking out sound doctrine.
   2. As believers, we are called to examine and discern what people say and see if those ideas and if those beliefs align with the Word of God.
      1. Discernment demands this.
      2. We must use this Spirit-empowered skill of using the Word of God to distinguish sound doctrine from false doctrine.
   3. In addition, we can say that good and evil also encompasses behavior and actions, so that we must distinguish between…
6. Right and wrong
   1. Eph 5:8-10.
      1. We are called to walk as children of light.
      2. What does that look like?
      3. Verse 10 – we are learning what is pleasing to the Lord.
      4. We are to develop discernment about how we live our lives, so that we can tell the difference between what pleases God and what does not please God, what is right and what is wrong.
   2. It’s really a tragedy to see how many professing Christians over the years have capitulated to the cultural standards of sexuality and morality and justice and any other number of behaviors.
      1. It betrays a complete and total lack of discernment.
      2. You see how the way so many professing Christians think is rooted in the media, the culture, the worldly mindset, and the standards of this present, evil age, rather than in the Word of God.
      3. And it bears itself out when they can’t tell the difference between things that are right and wrong.
7. Conclusion
   1. Discernment, then, is the Spirit-empowered skill of using God’s Word to distinguish between truth and error and right and wrong.
   2. It is based on an objective standard, the Word of God, not a subjective feeling or experience.
   3. It encompasses everything that can be classified as good or evil, including our beliefs regarding truth and error and our actions as being either righteous or unrighteous.
   4. The discerning person is trained to use the Word of God in the power of the Spirit to make these distinctions, and he or she has the willingness to do so, despite how unpopular it is in our culture to be discerning.
   5. Now that question that all of this raises is this: If discernment is so unpopular and so out of step with our culture, why should we practice it? Why should we want to be discerning? Why does discernment matter? And that’s for next time.