

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

A Call for Discernment, Part 2

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22

Code: 52-33

As we come now to the joy of examining the truth of God's Word, I ask you to open your Bible to Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, the first letter, chapter 5 and look with me at verses 21 and 22. We began two weeks ago to consider the truth of 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22. We'll continue this morning and then again next Lord's day.

Let me remind you of its truth with a simple and straightforward reading. "But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil." This is a call to discernment. "Examine everything carefully."

Beloved, this is absolutely critical in the Christian life. Absolutely critical. The Christian life is the most precise life of all. It is the most disciplined pattern of thinking and conduct. It calls for exacting precision, in comprehension, in deed. Precision that conforms to an absolute standard revealed by God in Scripture. The Christian life is a life that pursues perfect and total conformity to fixed laws commanded and empowered by God himself.

There is no life so precise and demanding as the Christian's life, because it not only calls for precision on the outside in terms of behavior, but precision on the inside in terms of thought and belief. We do not live a happy-go-lucky, catch-as-catch-can, free-wheeling, do-as-you-will, do whatever feels good kind of existence. The Word of God sets fixed demands for every area of our lives. There are no changing doctrines in Christianity. There are no changing values. There are no changing morals. There are no changing ethics.

It is amazing to me - and I'm sure to you - to be watching over the last couple of weeks all of these major denominations meeting: the Methodists, the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians, to vote in new theology, to vote in new morals, to vote in new ethical standards, to change the tradition of what has been believed in the past. And as one Presbyterian leader I heard interviewed on the radio said, "If we don't change our morals to accommodate today, we're going to lose all our members."

In true Christianity, of course, there are no changing morals. There are no changing values. There are no changing ethics. And there are no changing doctrines. We are required to live in a disciplined pattern of thinking, and we are required to live in a disciplined pattern of conduct.

And at the very foundation of this disciplined, precise kind of living is the necessity for discernment. We must be able to discern what is true from what is false. We must be able to discern truth from half truth, as well as truth from error. And when the church loses its ability to so discern, it therefore forfeits its precise theology. It forfeits its precise morals, values, ethics and doctrines, and therefore abandons any hope of precise living, precise conduct.

And when you look at Christianity today and you see it filled with immorality and a low-level commitment to holy living, you must understand that that imprecise kind of conduct is the result of imprecise kind of thinking, which is the product of an inability to make discernment work.

Evangelical Christianity is in a severe state of confusion. It is not sure how it is supposed to act because it is not sure what it's supposed to think because it is not sure what it believes. Watered-down, diluted theology will fail to produce deep reverence, deep worship, deep repentance, deep humility, deep understanding of God, his nature, his work, his ministry, his laws, his standards, his principles. It fails to make people God-centered. The church today caught up in relativistic thinking about doctrine, relativistic thinking about morality cannot, then, come to precise living.

Discernment, then, is crucial. Paul knew it when he put it in this little list. Starting in verse 16, he is giving us what amounts to a composite summation of the very cardinal elements of Christian living: "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks." That deals with your attitude toward God. "Don't quench the Spirit; and don't despise revelation;" prophecies which God has given – namely, the revealed Word - and then "Examine everything carefully." Those are the components that are at the heart of Christian living.

Paul, then, is calling us to something very basic when he says, "But examine everything carefully." It isn't easy to do that. There are three reasons why. Reason number one. Human weakness. Our minds are fallen. Our thinking is skewed. We are biased to be subjective in our own favor. We are debilitated by the indwelling unredeemed human flesh which has a propensity toward sinfulness. So we have to fight human weakness. Our mind is depraved.

Secondly, we have Satanic deceit. There is an ongoing onslaught against the church by the king of darkness, the prince of this world, and he is doing everything he can to confound and confuse the church.

Thirdly, you have the overpowering, inundating influence of the ungodly world around us. Between the world, the flesh, and the devil, the process of spiritual discernment can be quite easily debilitated. And unfortunately, the church has fallen into chaos and confusion under this onslaught. It is unable today to discern true from false, and good from evil, and that is creating imprecise doctrine, imprecise conduct.

In fact, as essential as it is to precise Christian living, being discerning and discriminating is not popular today even in the church. If you take stands strongly on issues, you are looked down on.

Now, that means that a call to discernment is appropriate. In calling you to discernment and helping expand and elucidate the truth of these two verses, I want to ask three questions. The last two questions we'll look at next Sunday. Let's go back to question number one which we discussed in our last study.

Why is there such a lack of discernment? I've already showed you the influences, the weakness of the flesh, Satanic deception, and the influence of the world. But why is it that the church has been victimized by this? What are the factors that have led to this lack of discernment? First I'll review and then I'll add some new ones.

Last time, I told you the main contributor to this lack of discernment is a weakening of doctrinal clarity and conviction. A weakening of doctrinal clarity and conviction. There is today an assault on doctrine. And any assault on doctrine is ultimately an assault on God. It is an assault on knowing God truly and knowing his truth properly, therefore it is an assault on his character, is an assault on worshiping him accurately, it is an assault on morality as well.

Churches today are not primarily concerned with doctrine as such. They are, for the most part - and of course there are exceptions to this - they are mostly concerned with making sure that whatever we are, we are loving, we are unifying, we are non-divisive, we are relational, we are non-confrontive, we are non-offensive. We want to be experiential. We want to deal with feelings and emotions. And we want to make people feel better about their life. We want them to be fulfilled and satisfied in their life. We want them to be comfortable.

And so our dominant hermeneutic has to do with all of this. And I told you two weeks ago that the liberals couldn't sell us their theology, so they sold us their hermeneutics. What is hermeneutics? It's from a Greek word *hermeneu*, which means "to interpret." They couldn't sell us their theology, so they sold us their principles to interpret Scripture.

Their principles are you interpret the Bible in the light of what is loving, what is unifying, what is non-threatening, what is non-offensive, what is non-oppositional, what is non-divisive, what makes people feel good, and comfortable, and relational, what will bring them joy, and satisfaction, and happiness, and self fulfillment. And if you approach the Bible with all of those as the principles of interpretation, you're going to come up with a liberal theology. And so they sold us their hermeneutics instead of their theology, which they knew we wouldn't buy. But we're going to end up with the same thing.

In fact, today you hear that relevant Christianity is not doctrinal. I saw an ad for some church in a flier this week and it made the statement, "Are you tired of traditional church services? Are you tired of - I can't exactly remember the specific words - of boring preaching. which is irrelevant?" The assumption is that anything that is traditional, anything that is biblical, anything that is expositional, is somehow not relevant. This is a fairly pervasive viewpoint.

Some months ago a doctoral dissertation was sent to me by a young man who wrote it to complete his Ph.D. work, and he wrote it on comparing my preaching to another well-known preacher. And his final assessment of me at the end of the section on me was "MacArthur is accurate but irrelevant. He speaks the truth but is not relevant." Now I don't know how speaking the truth can possibly be irrelevant. The other side of it would be to speak lies but be relevant. I'm not sure what that means.

Irrelevance is associated with preaching the Word of God, with being dogmatic or speaking truth firmly today. So worship, and preaching, and conduct reflect this weak kind of doctrinal commitment. I can think of so many, many amazing trends in the last five to ten years.

Even radio stations that once were eager to put everything we preach on the air now write us and tell us, "If you deal with this issue, or that issue, or this issue, we're not going to play it, because it will offend some of our listeners and we want to be loving." We want to be loving, too, but you speak the truth in love. Obviously, discernment isn't going to flourish in an atmosphere of fuzzy thinking, obviously.

Look at 2 Timothy for a moment, chapter 4. In 2 Timothy 4:1, Timothy is solemnly charged with a pretty intimidating charge. He says - does Paul - "I charge you in the presence of God, and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom."

In other words, "I want you to feel a lot of intimidation. I want you to feel a lot of motivation. You are being watched by God, and you are being watched by Christ Jesus, who is going to judge everything. And I'm telling you, Timothy, - " verse 2, " - preach the Word. Don't abandon that. You be ready in season and out of season."

In other words, when it's tolerated and not tolerated, popular and unpopular, accepted and not accepted, you preach the Word. And how is it going to come out? It's going to reprove, it will rebuke, and it will exhort, and you just do it with great patience and instruction. That's the mandate. We are to preach the Word.

We assume that will reprove people or convict them. We assume it will rebuke them or make them face the waywardness of their conduct and their belief. We assume it will exhort them, which is a word that means "it will warn them about judgment and call on them to change their conduct." That's how we have to preach.

Then in verse 3 he says, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths."

The primary responsibility of any preacher and any pastor is to make sure he preaches the Word to his people and gives them sound doctrine. It isn't always going to be what they want, it is always going to be what they need.

And when they begin to accumulate to themselves teachers who tickle their ears and make them feel good, who feed them what they want out of their own desires, they will turn away from the truth and they'll buy myths. Discernment will not flourish in an atmosphere like we have today, which is characteristically described, I think, as one of doctrinal confusion rather than doctrinal conviction.

There's a second cause I noted for you in our last message and it contributes also to this lack of discernment. It is a failure to be antithetical and it follows exactly along the first one. It fails - this culture fails to want to be antithetical. It doesn't want to debate. It doesn't want to be polemical. It wants to be relativistic.

We are feeling the inroads years ago of existentialism, of subjectivism. People just want everything to sort of be in a wide spectrum of relativity. There are no black and white issues, absolute issues. But biblical preaching, teaching is absolute. It divides, it confronts, it separates, it judges, it convicts, it reproves, it rebukes, it exhorts. And that's not acceptable today. That's not desirable today. It's a day for fun and games. It's a day to sort of dance over lightly every issue and make sure you don't offend anybody. It's not a day for debate. It's not a day for polemics. It's not a day to draw the line and say, "Here's the truth, and everything on the other side is error."

And obviously, in a relativistic day when there is not the desire to be antithetical, to put a thesis and an antithesis against each other and see what is true, in a day like that, a day of doctrinal relativism, discernment is not going to survive.

Look at Titus 1:9. In Titus 1:9, we have instruction for an elder or a pastor, and he is to hold fast the faithful Word, which is in accordance with the teaching, and he is both to exhort in sound doctrine, and refute those who contradict. It is mandated by God that we be antithetical, that we take issue with error.

We must do that or we do not fulfill our divine calling. But where that is not tolerated, where you're not allowed to be divisive, you're not allowed to say you're wrong, that is error, that must be corrected, because the loving, unifying, relational, hermeneutic dominates, discernment cannot survive.

Thirdly last time, I told you that another contributor to the demise of discernment in the church is preoccupation with image and influence as a key to evangelization. The church has bought the idea - the lie - that to reach the world we must become popular with the world. We must be nice, and inoffensive, and accepting, and accommodating. We need to make sinful people feel at ease. We need to make the church warm and embracing. We need to make sinners feel comfortable, and happy, and entertained. And if they like us, they'll like Jesus.

Image and influence are believed to be more powerful tools of evangelism than the preaching of God's inspired and powerful Word. And obviously, discernment doesn't survive in an atmosphere of doctrinal confusion. It doesn't survive in an atmosphere of moral relativism. And it doesn't survive in an atmosphere of compromise with the world.

And yet that's what the church is into today. It is accommodating everything it does to the unregenerate world, trying to win their approval. To win their approval. Instead of being the light that turns on and reveals their sin, it wants to be so dark that they can be with us a long time and they never really have to confront that. They can just enjoy how nice we are.

Now, I want to be loving, and want to be gracious, and I want to see sinners repent. But I know the only way that's ever going to happen is when their sin is confronted, and they face the reality of their eternal doom.

In 1 Corinthians - I pointed out to you, and I just remind you of it - chapter 4, the apostle Paul had quite a different philosophy of ministry. He said about his own ministry, "We are hungry and thirsty, -" verse 11 " - poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless. We are reviled, we are persecuted, we are slandered, and we have become -" verse 13 " - as the scum of the world, and the dregs of all things, even until now."

Not popular with the world. The church has never sought to be popular, never sought to be influential in the sense that they accept us as we are, never thought that image was the key issue, that our academic erudition was what won them over, or the entertaining quality of our services, or our non-threatening sort of loving embracing tolerance. But that's the spirit today. Weak theology, an unwillingness to be absolute in terms of doctrine, and a preoccupation with our strategy to market the gospel to the world through image, and influence, and prestige has killed discernment.

Now let me take you to a fourth one. Failure to properly interpret Scripture. Failure to properly interpret Scripture. You know me well enough to know that this has got to be close to my heart, and indeed it is. When I was in college I had a great desire to want to learn how to interpret the Scripture. And I knew that there was a path to get to that. So my freshman year in college I signed up for five units of Greek first semester and five units of Greek second semester. I took ten units. My second

year I took three each semester. My third year I took three each semester, and my fourth year I took two each semester.

I graduated with all of that Greek background because I believed that if I was going to interpret - primarily my work would be in the New Testament - and I was going to interpret the New Testament, I needed to know how to interpret it from its original language. I went away to seminary and I took three more years of Greek, and I took some years of Hebrew, and I studied theology, and I endeavored to discipline myself in understanding doctrine, and church history, and background history, and culture, and philosophy, and all of the things that I could learn in order to enrich and enhance my comprehension of the context and understanding of Scripture.

And I have endeavored through the years to try to apply the things that I learned, to rightly divide the word of truth. Being able to interpret Scripture is crucial, especially for one in my position, because James 3:1 says, "Stop being so many teachers, for theirs is a greater condemnation." The one who rushes into teaching better realize that when you take the profile of teacher you bring upon yourself potentially a greater condemnation because now you are responsible not only for what you believe and affirm, but for what you have caused everybody else to believe and affirm who listened and believed you.

There is a very very exacting science in Bible interpretation. A very exacting science. Some of our men were telling me recently they were talking to a famous preacher in America, and one of them asked him, "What are you going to preach on this Sunday?" It was probably middle of the week. And he said, "Oh, I don't know yet. I'm a Saturday night special guy."

You cannot interpret the Word of God like that. It is not something whimsical. But you have today in the churches many preachers who do not pursue the discipline in the science of interpretation of Scripture. And as a result of that, what they do is go lightly across the top of things, preach relationally, sort of a quasi-Christian psychology, or tell a lot of stories, or whatever it might be, and as a result they're not ever really interpreting the Word of God.

And then you can add to that the reality that there is a sort of a new elevation of everyone to the level of an expert in Scripture. Everybody coming down the line seems to feel they can interpret the Bible when, in fact, unless they have sat under good teaching or unless they are well read and have learned how to interpret the Scripture from someone who knows, it is highly unlikely that no matter how spiritually-minded they are and how much they love Christ they will be able to accurately divide the Word of truth.

People who have inadequate training in the Bible but who have advance training in some other field, somehow feel that they can just move over and interpret the Scripture. And then many folks just feel that because they're Christians they can interpret it for themselves with little or no training and not

having sat under careful explanation of Scripture so that they learn how to interpret by listening to those who do it.

So we've somehow pulled everybody to the same level and everybody has an equal right to write books about the Bible and interpret the Scripture no matter who they are or how inadequately prepared they might be.

And you can add another problem that leads to this lack of proper interpretation and that is that the Charismatic Movement, which is sweeping the world, basically says that you just read the Bible and somehow Jesus will tell you what it means. Somehow it just, it rises up from within you mystically, which eliminates the need for interpretation at all.

By the way, virtually every cult and false teaching ever spawned was begun on the premise that Jesus gave them some new revelation. This is a very frightening thing because it's so pervasive. And you hear people all the time if you listen to radio or watch the Christian programs on television who come along and do these kinds of interpretations and talk about how Jesus told them this, and God told them that, there's no need to interpret the Bible with that because it just comes from within you.

Bill Hayman, for example, heads a network of Charismatic prophetic ministries. He advises people to ignore reason, logic, and the senses when attempting to discern the truth. Ignore reason, logic, and the senses when attempting to discern the truth. He writes - I'm quoting him - "Our traditions, beliefs, and strong opinions are not true witnesses to prophetic truth. The spirit reaction originates deep within our being. Many Christians describe the physical location of its corresponding sensation as the upper abdominal area."

Do you hear what he just said? If you want to know truth it comes by a reaction in your upper abdominal area. "A negative witness with a message of, 'No, be careful,' or 'Something's not right,' usually manifests itself with a nervous jumpy or uneasy feeling." So you read the Scripture and then you wait for something to happen to your upper abdominal area.

He goes on, "There is a deep, almost unintelligible sensation that something is wrong. This sense can only be trusted when we are more in tune with our spirit than with our thoughts." What is that? Double talk. Nonsense. He further says, "If our thinking is causing these sensations, then it could only be soulish reaction." So mindless, irrational, senseless, nothingness while you sit there and wait for an upper abdominal jumpy, nervous feeling. And if it happens, then that's not true. You've got to come up with another interpretation.

"On the other hand, when God's Spirit is bearing witness with our spirit that a prophetic word is right, you found the truth, then our spirit will react with the fruit of the Holy Spirit. We have a deep unexplainable peace and joy, a warm loving feeling, or even a sense of our spirit jumping up and

down with excitement. This sensation lets us know the Holy Spirit is bearing witness with our spirit that everything is in order even though we may not understand it.”

In other words, ignore your mind, forget your beliefs, disregard your theology, reject your common sense, and don't ever take Tums, that will mess up the Holy Spirit's process. Don't fool with your upper abdominal area, because then he can't lead you.

I - it begs language to even look for adjectives to describe such idiocy. Utter nonsense. You're not going to find that in the Scripture. We don't read the Bible and sit around and wait for some feeling in the upper abdomen to determine what truth is. Indigestion, heart problems - that's ludicrous - could give you the same or even greater feelings.

And yet, how many people follow that kind of advice? Millions. And then move their church membership over to that church, and donate their life savings to that ministry. The price of Charismatic mysticism and subjectivism is much too high. Everybody is free to do, and say, and teach whatever his upper abdomen tells him. And the uniqueness, and centrality, and necessity to interpret the Scripture has been eliminated.

So on the one hand, you have people who perhaps could interpret it but they've opted out for Christian psychology and story telling. On the other hand, you've got people who really don't have the tools to interpret it, but they're making a whack at it. And then you've got a third group of Charismatics who are sitting around waiting for some feeling to tell them what's right. Is it any wonder why we can't discern the truth? Because we go at the Scriptures all wrong.

The following letter was written to an acquaintance of mine from a young man in the Charismatic Movement. It illustrates this typical attitude toward Scripture. This is the letter. “The greatest experience in love I have ever had was at the foot of the cross as the blood of Jesus Christ poured out over me. He filled me with his Spirit. He brought me across the vale into the city of Jerusalem, into the holy of holies. There I beheld myself in him and he in me. I received the baptism as by fire, and from this his love dwells in me. From this I have communion daily.”

Well, that whole paragraph is pretty mystical to me. I don't know what he's talking about. And I don't think he really wants the baptism of fire. That's judgment. But we can excuse him that mistake for a moment and follow the rest of the letter.

“I do not feel the need for the study of the Scriptures, for I know Jesus as he has revealed himself to me within. And as he dwells in me, there is the Word. Scriptures are a secondary source.” Do you understand why people can't be discerning? Because they don't have a standard for discernment.

Do you understand why people can sit down on those television talk shows and just continue to advocate bizarre things, and wild things, and no one ever says, “Hold it. Stop. That’s wrong. Not true. Not in the Bible. Can’t be defended.” No one ever says that because experience is the validator.

The Reformers fought error with the proper interpretation of Scripture. Now, in the twentieth century, the church is going to have to fight the same battle, only this time we’re not fighting the Roman Catholics, we’re fighting the Protestants, who have fallen in to the same kind of patterns of ineptitude in dealing with Scripture.

And the Word must be properly interpreted, and it will yield all necessary truth precisely for holy living, if rightly understood. Look at 2 Timothy chapter 2 for a moment, and I want to reacquaint you with familiar ground and enhance your understanding, I trust.

In Timothy 2 2:15, Paul says, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed handling accurately the word of truth.” That’s very straightforward. “Be diligent,” has been translated “study to show yourself approved to God, a workman who doesn’t need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.”

The implication of the verse is if you don’t handle the Word accurately you ought to be ashamed. You ought to be ashamed. And if you don’t want to be ashamed, and you want to handle it accurately, you don’t wait for some motion in your upper abdomen, you diligently study for God’s approval as a workman, a skilled craftsman, cutting straight the Scripture. This gives us, by the way, rich insight into the precision required in biblical interpretation.

Remember this, now. People do not move into false doctrine by design. I mean, they’re not all saying “I want to find a false doctrine. I want to find a lie. I’m looking for a deception here.” No. It isn’t by design, or by motivation that they err so terribly. It is by laziness, ineptness, carelessness, foolishness in handling the Scripture.

Follow down into verse 17 and meet two people, who here would be an illustration of this: Hymenaeus and Philetus. It says they are men - verse 18 - who have gone astray from the truth. Now stop at that point for a moment. That little verb “have gone astray” means they missed what they aimed at. And the idea here is they were aiming at the truth, they just missed it.

People don’t come up with error because they’re seeking error. People come up with error because in the process of seeking truth, they don’t know how to find it, or they don’t make the effort, or they don’t appropriate the necessary elements. They missed what they aimed at. They may have had the right target: Truth. They missed it. And they missed it, and they came up with a ridiculous thing. They came up with “the resurrection has already taken place.”

Now how do you sell that? You're going to tell people they've already died and been raised? You'd say, "Well now, wait a minute. I know whether I've been dead and alive again. You can't fool me with that one." Sure I can. They must have come up with the fact that it was some kind of a spiritual resurrection, that the only resurrection there's going to be is a spiritual one, and it already was.

Maybe they were the original annihilationists, coming up with the idea that when you're dead you go out of existence, soul sleep or whatever. Maybe they were saying that Christians have already had all the resurrection they're going to have and there isn't any future one, and that resurrection was a spiritual one.

And you know what? They upset the faith of some, for every screwball idea there is a following. Right? Especially in Southern California. Grow a beard, put on a bathrobe, go to the beach, say you're Moses, you'll have 50 followers in a half hour. There's always a group to follow you. And it wasn't that they were aiming at error, it was they were aiming at truth ineptly, carelessly, lazily, foolishly. And they came up with error.

And now you go back to verse 15 and he says, "Don't be like Hymenaeus and Philetus, but you study and be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who doesn't need to be ashamed because you have handled accurately the Word." You need to have conscious integrity before God whose judgment is always accurate.

The handler of the Word should never be ashamed because he didn't use all the resources and all the energy to do quality work and master the true interpretation. There are plenty of preachers, dear friends, who are popular with men, but ashamed to God. Popular with men but ashamed to God. And any time that I would ever misrepresent the truth, I would be ashamed to God. Poor work in the Word is intolerable. It must be accurately handled, rightly divided.

People say today, "Well, I - boy, if you say this and you say this guy's wrong, and that guy's wrong, and that interpretation is wrong, 1 Chronicles 16:22, touch not the Lord's anointed. Touch not the Lord's anointed. Touch not the Lord's anointed." Well if somebody is teaching error, they're not the Lord's anointed.

We have to be faithful to the Word of God. It isn't the personal attack, it's the preservation of truth. Whether failing to interpret Scripture accurately, being preoccupied with worldly image, failing to be antithetical, whether a lack of clarity and conviction of doctrine, any and all of these things will literally kill discernment.

How can we be discerning if doctrine isn't an issue? How can we be discerning if we're not willing to say this is right and this is wrong, and get rid of relativity? How can we be discerning if we're trying to

compromise and make the world comfortable? How can we be discerning if we don't even know how to rightly interpret Scripture?

Two more in closing - very brief ones. Failure to discipline in the church. Failure to discipline in the church. Beloved, here is a really serious issue, and I want to just mention it briefly, but listen carefully to what I say. One exact point to mention: Church discipline. What is it? Confronting sin in individual lives.

If your brother's in a sin, go to him. Go to him. Confront him. Try to lift him up. Try to build him up, strengthen him, try to get him to repent. Jesus said, "If someone's in a sin, go to him. If they don't repent, take a couple with you. If they don't repent, tell the whole church. And if he still doesn't repent, put him out." Paul said, "Don't have a meal with him. Don't treat him like a friend in terms of accepting everything, but love him like a brother, and pray him to repentance."

Paul told the Corinthian church to turn him over to Satan and his body would be destroyed, his flesh would be destroyed in chastening. The church must hold up a holy standard, a high standard. There are times when we have to confront sin. Two weeks ago a member of our church took me with him to confront a sinning man who had left his wife and was living with a girl, not his wife. And we were there waiting when he showed up at a certain place and said, "We're here to call you back to holiness. And we want to pray for you and with you." If he does not respond, you'll hear about it, because we have to follow that process.

Now listen very carefully. When you discipline in the church, that means that you deal with sin confrontively, you put a wall up between the world and the church. No question. You put a wall up between the world and the church. Because if you confront someone about sin and they don't stop sinning, you put them out. Maybe they're not even a Christian. But it keeps the wall very very clear.

Here are the people walking in obedience to the Lord and here are the ones that aren't. And that wall of separation between the church and the world is crucial. But as soon as you stop disciplining sin, the wall comes down, the world mingles with the church and you can't tell the difference. Can't tell the difference.

The world feels comfortable. And you don't know whether you're dealing with believers or unbelievers. Why do you think the Lord killed Ananias and Sapphira in front of the whole church? Now today any church marketing, church growth strategist would say that was a foolish act for God to do, because it gave the church a bad reputation. You know what the reputation of the church was? Don't join that organization, because people die in there.

The word went through the city like wild fire. Two people came to the offering and didn't give what they told God they would and they're dead. Wow. Stay out of that organization. How's that for

marketing? It's like running a restaurant where the last two people that ate there died. How's that for publicity? You don't want to join that organization. People die in there. They're serious about sin in there. They're real serious about sin. You know, if they find you sinning, they come to you, and they confront you, and if you don't deal with, it they publicly speak about you.

I heard about a church this week, has a two-year rule and one of their people said that someone coming in to their church living in a sinful situation - they were talking about a homosexual - they don't want to say anything for at least two years, until the person feels very comfortable and accepted, and then they want to deal with the sin. You know what that tells me? If a homosexual can sit in a church comfortable and accepted for two years, that church hasn't said what it's supposed to be saying. I don't think a homosexual can come to Grace Community Church for two years period - comfortable or uncomfortable. He's going to say to himself, "I'm getting out of this place. I don't need to listen to this guy. Who needs this?" Or he's going to repent.

I get letters, lots of interesting letters. Some even from homosexuals who just come one time and write me amazing letters about their anger and hostility - and other sinners of assorted kinds, as well. You tolerate sin in the church at all and you've got to tolerate sin overall, and now you've destroyed the holiness of the church, and now the church can't be discerning. Where are you going to draw the line? You've already said you're not going to draw lines. You want everybody to feel all right. You want to tolerate compromise to the point where discernment and discrimination aren't tolerated.

Look at 1 Peter 4:17. This is as simple as it could be in terms of an understanding, "It is time for judgment to begin with the household of God." That's Peter's way of saying, "Look, start to divide. Start to separate. Start to confront. Start to evaluate. Start to make judgments on people's lives in the church. You can't accommodate sinning Christians."

And certainly if we're dealing with sin strongly in our church because God tells us to. We're reflecting God's desire for holiness and he says if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? What Peter is saying is, "Look, if God wants us to be judging sin among ourselves, imagine how he's going to judge sin among those who reject him."

We can't lower the standard. We can't accumulate sinning Christians or sinning non-Christians. We've got to purge, and discipline, and sift, and purify. And if God does that at his own church as a first priority, then what in the world is he going to do to the unbelievers? So if we preached judgment, and chastening, and purity to the church, we have to preach judgment, and chastening, and salvation to the lost.

We have to confront their sin. "Start that judgment in the church," he says. And remember, if God wants his church pure and he's going to judge the church if it isn't, what do you think he's going to do to the unbelievers?

And then, verse 18, amazing statement taken out of Proverbs, "If it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?" What does he mean by that? If we barely get in - if we barely get in - what do you mean by that? Well, we sin and the Lord chastens us and it's tough enough being a Christian, feeling the chastening hand of the Lord.

If it's tough for us to make it because we keep stumbling into sin and God has to judge us, what is he going to do to the godless? We should be sending a message to the world. And you know what the message should be? The message shouldn't be "We're a nice place. You'll like us." The message should be "This is a holy place where we deal with sin." That's the message.

Not "This is a happy place. This is a holy place. This is a holy place." Not, "This is a place you'll like." "This is a place you won't like if you don't deal with sin, if you don't come to the Savior, if you're not willing to live a holy life." No, the absence of church discipline and the absence of a high degree of holiness will kill discernment.

Last point. One final contributor to the abysmal lack of discernment in today's church is spiritual immaturity. Spiritual immaturity. I'm convinced that many in the church have shallow knowledge of God's truth - very shallow - and they follow popular views, and feelings, and experiences, and they seek miracles, and healings, and a solution to the routine trials of life. And they chase personal comfort, and they want personal success, and it's a very shallow kind of Christianity. And basically we could call it "baby Christianity." And I think it would be safe to say that that characteristic which is most descriptive of an infant would be the characteristic I call selfishness. Wouldn't you agree? They never say "thanks" for anything, and they scream if they don't get what they want when they want it. They're selfish.

If anything characterizes the immature, it is self-centeredness, selfishness. Just look at the church today. It is utterly preoccupied with itself. It wants its own problems solved, and its own comfort elevated, and it's not lost - as the hymn writer said - in "wonder, love, and praise and focusing on the Lord." The church is selfish and selfishness is an evidence of immaturity. The church is like a self-centered baby, seeing the whole world needing to stop while their needs are met and their desires are fulfilled. There's no discernment in immaturity.

Go back to Ephesians 4. I want to show you a familiar verse that you already know, but it makes the point. Ephesians 4:14 says this, "We are no longer to be children. We are no longer to be children." Here's why. Children are "tossed here and there by waves and they're carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, and craftiness, and deceitful scheming." There you are.

Spiritual immaturity makes victims out of people. Makes victims out of them. They don't know what's right. They don't know what's wrong. They're yanked all over the place, blown all around. They're

deceived easily. How do you change that? Verse 15, "Speak the truth in love so we can grow up." Verse 15. Speaking the truth in love, we're to grow up.

How does the church grow? It grows under the truth, clear truth, spoken in love. That's how it grows up, and is built up. It talks about at the end of verse 16 the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. Immaturity just does not discern. Just like a little baby crawls along the floor, puts anything it finds in its mouth, no discernment, it doesn't know what's good, what isn't good.

We have such immaturity today and going with it lack of discernment. And that is a direct result of shallow teaching, preaching, of the strange, bizarre, mystical kind of stuff that much of the church is exposed to in the Charismatic end, of the sort of homespun stuff that comes out of people who perhaps are not properly trained, and of the story telling, relational kind of preaching that lacks real deep substance and foundational doctrine, which is essential for us to grow.

One last text, Hebrews 5 - and it cements this final point of immaturity. Hebrews 5. In another context, this principle here is certainly illustrated. The writer of Hebrews says to his readers in Hebrews 5:12, "It's time you should be teachers." In other words, you've been around long enough, you've heard enough that you should be able to teach. But the problem is, "Instead of being able to teach, you have need for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, he's a babe." You're babies.

I can't - you've been around long enough to be teachers but instead I have to feed you milk. I have to keep giving you elementary things. You can't take solid food. You're not accustomed to the word of righteousness. The Word, the Word, the Word. You've got all this experiential stuff, and you accumulate a lot of stories, and you've had a lot of emotional feelings, but you don't know the Word.

And then in verse 14, "Solid food is for the mature who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil." Discernment and maturity go hand in hand. Discernment and maturity go hand in hand. Sitting under the Word, understanding the word of righteousness, taking in solid food, engaging in spiritual practice, conduct, trains your senses to discern good and evil.

So whether you're talking about the lack of doctrinal conviction, whether you're talking about image, and influence as the key to evangelization, the unwillingness to be absolute and this desire to be relative, whether you're talking about inadequate interpretation of Scripture, or whether you're talking about the absence of church discipline, or immaturity, and they're all overlapping and intertwined, these things are the contributors to the loss of discernment.

Soft on doctrine, we're not real sure what we believe, don't want to be black and white, don't want to make issues, want to be sure we compromise enough of the world to make them feel comfortable so

we can win them over, haphazardly interpreting Scripture, spiritually immature, we have no hope of discerning.

And yet the Scripture says, Proverbs 14, "Knowledge comes easily to the discerning." Proverbs 14:33, "Wisdom reposes in the heart of the discerning." Proverbs 16:21, "The wise in heart are called discerning." Proverbs 17:24, "A discerning man keeps wisdom in view, but a fool's eyes wander to the ends of the earth." All of those out of the NIV. The undiscerning just wander all over everywhere. But the discerning is focused.

Now some of you are very discerning. You really are. About the food you eat, you get the box and you look at it, and you read all that little stuff about how many grams of fat, and how much of the daily required amount of whatever it's got. And you're very careful that you want to avoid any kind of pesticides, and you want to eat healthy. You're very discerning about that.

Some of you are very discerning about what investment you're going to make, and you read all that stuff in fine print in the newspaper, on the stock market, and in the investments and all of that. You're good at discerning that. Some of you are very careful when you're going to have surgery. You want to find a doctor who knows the way in and the way out. And you're very, very careful. You pick somebody who's been analyzed carefully, and has recommendations, and maybe you get another opinion.

And some of you are highly analytical politically, and you can assess the issues of the day, and you can quote editorials from all kinds of national magazines, and you've got it all figured out in terms of the government and foreign policy. Some of you are absolutely unequalled as armchair quarterbacks. You can assess any offense, any defense, you can discern the whole problem of winning and losing. Some of you know the batting average of everybody, and why they hit the way they do, and how they do it.

Some of you analyze things to the Nth degree, but never get around to using your analytical faculties in the Spirit and in the Word to discern what is good and evil. How sad. And because the church is not discerning, it is being poisoned with a deadly chemical that looks like living water.

Now, so much for question number one. How do you become a discerning person? That's for next time. Let's pray.

Father, we pray that through this message this morning we might be able better to diagnose the issues around us and begin to set our course to correct that. We don't want to be ashamed. We want to be like the noble Bereans who search the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. We want to be as discerning as they were.

And we know that you've given us your Word, and you've given us your Spirit, and you've given us teachers who teach us, preachers who preach to us, skilled writers who write to us, so that we can learn how to be discerning. And, Lord, help us to be willing to come to convictions that are true and strong, to fight for those things, not to become a part of the drift.

Help us to be willing to discipline, to pursue holiness. Lord, may we grow to spiritual maturity with our senses trained to discern good and evil so that we might honor you. You've given us all we need to be discerning. You've given us the truth, the Word, the standard. You've given us the Spirit to teach us. And you've given us all our teachers to enrich us. And may we use all that is given us to be able to properly discern what is most important in life, and that is your truth. And we'll thank you, Lord, for what that will accomplish in our lives and for Your glory in Christ's name. Amen.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2015 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).