

A Call for Discernment, Part 3

1 Thessalonians 5:21-22

52-34

It is our great privilege this morning to return in the study of God's Word to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5. We are fast coming to the end of this great epistle. We find ourselves in verses 21 and 22 in a special three-part series entitled "A Call to Discernment." Let me read the text of 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22. "But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil."

This is a call to discernment. It is that call that has prompted our study, our analysis, and I trust our exhortation to discernment over the last several weeks. And we bring that brief series to a conclusion this morning.

One of the famous Greek stories that most of you have heard is the story about the conquering of the city of Troy. Greeks, you remember, laid siege to the city of Troy for over ten years. They were unable to capture it. In exasperation, a man by the name of Ulysses decided to have a large wooden horse built and left outside the city walls ostensibly as a gift to the unconquerable Trojans. And then the Greeks sailed away in apparent defeat, leaving this horse as a gift.

The curious and proud Trojans felt confident enough to drag the horse inside the walls, though a priest named Laucoon warned them not to. He said, "I fear the Greeks, even when they bring gifts." That night, Greek soldiers crept out of the horse, opened the city gates from within and let the rest of the Greek forces into Troy. The Greeks massacred the population of Troy, looted, and burned the city. Throughout history, since that time, the Trojan horse has been the symbol of infiltration and deception.

And throughout its 2,000 year history, the church has embraced many Trojan horses, enemies disguised as gifts. The Romans, you remember, were polytheists. They had a god for hunting. They had a god for buying. They had a god for selling. They had a god to protect them on a journey. They had all these gods. Well, once Christianity was affirmed as the religion of the Roman Empire, it was necessary to dispense with all of this in some way.

But rather than take a strong stand against idolatry and such superstition, the church simply assigned those responsibilities that once belonged to Roman deities to dead saints. For example, instead of a god to protect you on journeys, St. Christopher took over that responsibility. And you had the merging of Roman pagan superstitious idolatry with Christianity.

In violation of Scripture, people then began not to pray to a Roman god but to pray to a dead saint, depending on the kind of request that was being made. The Trojan horse of Roman religion was allowed to remain inside the walls, as it were, of Christianity. It infiltrated and destroyed the Christian

faith.

In the eighteenth century, rationalism came to Europe. During the time of rationalism, which is also known as the Enlightenment, coming out of the Dark Ages, man believed that he could solve all problems with his own mind. He began to worship his mind. He was in awe of his mind. He felt that he had the mental capacity to understand everything and solve all problems.

God, it was believed, didn't interfere in the affairs of men when men were so supremely intelligent they could handle their own affairs. At best, God created the world and just let it go. And now it was up to man. And so they decided that since the mind of man was ultimate, anything that the mind of man could not conceive or understand wasn't true. And so they went to the Bible and anything that didn't seem rational, reasonable, logical, intellectual was eliminated, and thus all the miracles in the Bible were denied.

And then they began to deny the great supernatural spiritual truths about God, and Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and theological liberalism was the product. What happened, the church opened the doors and pulled in the Trojan horse of rationalism, intellectualism, and the Enlightenment. And they came out, opened the gates, and the place was flooded until the church lost its faith totally and European Protestantism became liberal and dead.

Today the church is still opening the gates and pulling in more Trojan horses filled with deceitful and devastating enemies. And the world is seeping into the church in myriads of ways. We could mention the erosion of moral values, the acceptance of the breakup of the family and divorce as normal, the selfish pursuit of money and status even now has a gospel identified with it, the prosperity gospel.

We could mention the Trojan horse of pragmatism or psychology. We could mention the Trojan horse of mysticism, intuitive pursuits of truth. The church has pulled in a myriad of Trojan horses, and they are letting the armies of enemies in to run rampant in the church.

This is a Satanic ploy. Satan isn't going to come into the church, into the pulpit by invitation, because they're not going to invite him. He's not going to move into an evangelical church or onto a Christian television or radio station and sell his wretched lies and perverted doctrine openly as Satan. He's not going to sell it as contrary to truth. He's going to come like a gift, like a Trojan horse, and he's going to be something subtle.

He will market his lies and his deceptions subtly, deceptively luring people away from the truth of God in to destructive error. He will mix in a little truth. He will put it in the mouth of one who claims to speak for Jesus Christ. He will attach some Bible verses to it. He will appeal or make it appeal to men's selfishness, and pride, and flesh in the name of spiritual blessing, and multitudes will unwittingly - because they are indiscriminating - be like sheep led to the slaughter.

Paul said it when he wrote to Timothy. He said, "This is how it is going to be. Expect it. In the later times, some will fall away from the faith because they have paid attention to deceitful spirits, and doctrines of demons spoken by hypocritical liars." There will be deception. There will be hypocrisy.

Second Peter, Peter says the same thing. False prophets, false teachers will introduce secretly destructive heresies. People will follow their sensuality. In their greed they will exploit you. They are

greedy, they are sensual, they exploit through deception.

And there are millions of people inside the walls of the church today who are basically being devastated by the invading and alien armies of the Trojan horses that have been allowed inside the walls of the church. Now, our only defense is to be sound and strong in the knowledge of the truth. Our only defense is to be discerning and discriminating.

The problem is we live in a time when the climate in the church is intolerant of that, when to be discriminating and discerning is not popular. The climate in the church today is actually intolerant toward discernment. It wants everyone to be loving. It wants to elevate love, and unity, and non-divisive attitudes. Don't say anything against a brother. Don't say anything that is divisive. Everyone is entitled to what he wants to believe. Let's be loving. Let's be united.

And as I told you last time, Satan knew we wouldn't buy liberal theology, so he sold us liberal hermeneutics, which will eventually get us to their theology. Instead of interpreting the Bible on the basis of a historical, grammatical, contextual understanding of the text, we are developing a tolerance for every view in the name of love and unity and a non-divisive spirit. That is deadly poison to truth.

Now some people will even attack. If you endeavor to name names, or to draw lines or to say, "This is true and this is false," and you are discriminating and discerning, some will even attack you. And usually what they attack with is a passage of Scripture that says, "Touch not my anointed ones and do my prophets no harm." Have you heard that? First Chronicles 16 and Psalm 105, both those chapters include a verse to that effect. "Touch not my anointed ones and do my prophets no harm."

You need to know that a proper understanding of that does not yield the way it is being used today. "Touch" means physical injury in the Hebrew, "doing bodily damage." "Anointed" has to do with kings. What he is saying to them is "don't kill the king. Don't do bodily harm to the king." The second part of the verse "do my prophets no harm," the word "harm" means "physical harm" again, "physical injury."

My prophets are those who speak my Word, a true prophet who was right when he made a prediction 100 percent of the time. "Don't physically harm a true prophet, and don't physically harm a king." That is a far cry from evaluating the theology of a heretic who is not a true prophet, nor a king. Softness on false teachers has poisoned the spring of the church.

Now I want to be very frank with you and help you to understand this. There is a tolerance today for every kind of aberration in the church, and it is therefore full of Trojan horses, letting the invading armies in to confuse and destroy. I have always believed, and continue to this day to believe it, that no man has done more to harm the morality of America than Phil Donahue. That beyond and above anybody else, that man has really been the prime mover in the disintegration of American morality. You say, "Why?"

It isn't necessarily because of his views. It's very hard to find out what he really believes about anything. It isn't because he articulates his views. It is because he gives a platform to every aberration. He has on his television program since its inception, given a forum to every bizarre, deviant, perverted, aberration that this culture has ever concocted. And what he has done, instead of presenting them as an aberration or a perversion, he has reduced them all to nothing more than a

curiosity. It's just a novel curiosity.

And so it eliminates the shock, and the trauma of the perversion, reduces it to something to laugh about, something that is no more consequence than a bunch of erstwhile housewives wander into the studio and banter around their silly jokes in discussing this perversion. It is reduced to a trivia, so that morality is trivia, so that aberration is trivia. It is nothing but a curiosity, and it is to be accepted and understood that there are just people who are like this, and isn't it funny? Isn't it odd? And isn't it weird? And it isn't it strange? But never isn't it wrong? Never.

Well, if you move that over into the Christian world, I would be very frank with you in saying that someone like Paul Crouch and Jan and the network called TBN is to the church what Phil Donahue is to the world. They have created an environment on television which gives a forum to every theological aberration in existence. And you can watch and see everything from the good and the righteous to the worst of what is out there, but they never make a value judgment on anything, never. But what has happened is the forum that has been created for every theological aberration in a non-judgmental way has literally softened the church's ability to discern. Everything is tolerated. Everything is accepted. Every viewpoint is okay. Everybody's whim is fine, as long as we don't say anything negative about anybody else, we maintain the spirit of love and unity in Christ – which, as I said earlier - is the liberal's hermeneutic, and that's how they came up with rejection of the trinity, the deity of Christ, the deity of the Holy Spirit and all the rest of the things they deny.

The church today is filled with error and confusion. And that is why it is so essential for us to be discerning, while at the same time it might not be popular. We will obey what it says in verse 21. We'll examine everything carefully. Whatever we find to be good, we're going to hold onto. And whatever we find to be evil in any form, we're going to reject it.

In spite of all of the deadliness of these Trojan horses, the church keeps pulling them inside the walls. So we're trying to help you to be able to think a little bit about this matter of discernment.

Now we're dealing with some questions. You remember question number one? Why is there a lack of discernment? That was our first question and I've already given you the answer to that. I'll just review it briefly. Why is there a lack of discernment? I gave you these reasons. Number one. A weakening of doctrinal clarity and conviction. A weakening of doctrinal clarity and conviction. We went over that in detail. Doctrine is not considered loving and doctrine is not considered relevant.

Secondly, a failure to be antithetical. A failure to be willing to be black and white, absolute. We're into relativity. A failure to say, "Well here's a thesis. I offer an antithesis that says that's wrong." Relevant Christianity now is relative. It is subjective. It is experiential. Any discerning Christian can see this.

Even years ago when C.S. Lewis wrote *Screwtape Letters*, which is an imaginary encounter with Screwtape, the chief demon, who is developing a strategy to destroy the church. And he's trying to train another demon by the name of Wormwood on how to destroy the church. And in one little scenario, Screwtape instructing Wormwood tells him, "Here's how to keep Christians totally confused." "Keep his mind off the plain antithesis between true and false."

C.S. Lewis was dead on. If you can get Christians to abandon critical antithetical teaching, and knowing the difference between true and false, you can have them so totally confused, you can

teach them absolutely anything.

Thirdly, another cause is a preoccupation with image and influence as the key to evangelization. We talked about the idea that there are those today who say we need to soften our message, remove all the offense out of the gospel, make services comfortable and enjoyable for unbelieving sinners, remove what might offend, confront, condemn, judge them, or convict them and seek popularity with the unconverted Christ-rejectors.

And if we're going to build the church, we've got to be popular with the world. Image and influence is the issue. We got to get out there and market our deals so that the baby boomers, the post baby boomers, and now the new group called the baby busters are going to like it. And if we can package it so they like it, then they'll like Jesus, too.

Fourthly, a failure to properly interpret Scripture. And we talked about this last time. You have untrained, uneducated, and ignorant preachers and teachers coming up with their own theology, even as they speak. They don't even know what it is until it comes out of their mouth. There are others who are trained, but fail to use the tools to interpret, and opt out for telling stories and preaching psychology, and so forth. You have others who are too lazy to work diligently to apply those skills to rightly divide the word of truth, and you have some that believe the truth just rises from within subjectively. And so, you have really lowered the premium on the interpretation process of Scripture, and the church is weak in its ability to interpret the Bible properly.

Fifthly, another cause of this disaster in the church, the lack of discernment, is a failure to discipline in the church. And we told you that where you discipline sin in a church, you put a wall up between the church and the world, and it's clear that the world is here. and the church is here. and you can distinguish the two. If you don't discipline in the church, the world comes into the church. They mish-mash together. You can't tell one from the other. And then you can't act church discipline out, because who you doing to discipline? You tear down the wall between the world and the church. That reluctance to deal firmly, strongly, and publicly with sin leads to a lack of discretion, discernment in the church.

And lastly, spiritual immaturity. We talked about the fact that immature Christians can't discern. They do not have their senses exercised to discern between good and evil. They're like children tossed and carried about by every wind of doctrine.

Now those are the causes for the lack of spiritual discernment. Let's take a second question and then a third this morning and wrap up our series. Second question, what is spiritual discernment? Okay, we've seen that we don't have it. Let's grab a definition. What are we talking about? What is this?

Before I give you a simple definition, let me say that any pastor, or any Bible teacher, or any professor who teaches the Word of God must be held responsible for knowing the answer to this question. What is spiritual discernment? It certainly ought to be on every ordination examination. What is spiritual discernment and how important is it? Why? Because it is our trade. It is what we do. It is not unlike a medical doctor whose trade is discernment. The task of being an effective medical doctor is you are to be able to look at a person's situation physically, and you are through proper understanding to be able to judge what that condition is, what it means, and what its cure is.

It is all about understanding, reading symptoms, assessing certain factors in the life, and determining what is wrong, and determining what is right to do with what is wrong so that it can be made right. We are to diagnose and find a cure, if that is what we are as doctors, or people in the medical health field.

The same is true in terms of ministry. Our responsibility is to discern. It is to discern truth from God and its application in spiritual life. We are to be very, very trained and skilled in the matter of discernment. Now, we need to do that so that we can assess truth and error, and so that we can apply truth in a proper way. That is our stock and trade. Anybody in the ministry who is not discriminating and discerning has failed at the very thing they were called and trained to do. This is what we're all about.

Now let me give you a simple definition. Discernment is the skill in separating divine truth from error and half truth. It is the skill in separating divine truth from error and half truth. To this we have been called. In 1 Timothy, you remember Paul is writing to him and he gives us things that we need to know if we're in the ministry because they apply to us. He says, "You must be constantly - " 1 Timothy 4:6, " - constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you've been following, and you must have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women." Which was kind of an epithet describing contemporary philosophy.

You've got to know the difference between the stuff that's coming down the pipe from the world and the truth of God. You have to know that. You have to be able to distinguish that. If you want to be a good servant of Jesus Christ, you must be continually nourished on the words of the faith and the sound doctrine, and able to recognize the junk. You must be able to do that.

Later on in 4:13 he says, "Give your attention to reading the scripture, exhorting and teaching." And down in verse 16, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching." You must separate. You must know truth. You must distinguish it from error.

Go to 6:2 he says, "Let those who have believers as their masters not be disrespectful to them because they are brethren, but let them serve them all the more because those who partake of the benefit are believers and beloved." And after all of this teaching he says this - and this includes everything that we go back in to verse 5 to find - "Teach and preach these principles." And verse 3, "If anyone advocates a different doctrine and doesn't agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he's conceited and understands nothing."

Now you've got to be able to distinguish. If somebody comes along with something different, he's conceited. He doesn't understand anything. He's just disputing and controversial questions about words. It produces envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, constant friction, and on he goes. You must stick to sound doctrine. Teach and preach these principles and anybody with anything else who doesn't agree with this is conceited and knows nothing. That's a call to discernment.

Over in verse 13, he charges Timothy again, then in verse 14, to keep the commandment. I take it that the commandment embraces all of the revealed scripture. Keep it, guard it, protect it, so that it remains without stain or reproach until the appearing of the Lord Jesus. Then go down to verse 20, "O Timothy - " now he's getting passionate, " - guard what has been entrusted to you." What's that?

The truth. The truth. “Avoiding worldly, empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith.”

“Timothy, guard the truth. Guard it and know the difference between the truth, and worldly error, and empty chatter, and falsely called knowledge.” You’ve got to do that. That’s discernment.”

Those are strong words, beloved, to preserve the truth, unadulterated and pure, to guard the treasure against those who would corrupt it. So, anybody in the ministry is called and commended to the task of developing and fine tuning the skill in separating divine truth from error and half truth.

Now, it might be helpful to do a little bit of background study on the words that are used in the Bible just ever so briefly. Two key words arise out of scripture when we talk about discernment. One is the Hebrew word *bîn* and the other is the Greek word *diakrinō*. The Hebrew term *bîn* is used 247 times in the Old Testament, and has been translated in various ways, sometimes translated “discern,” sometimes “distinguished,” sometimes “understand,” but it has the idea of being able to separate. It is related to the noun *bayin*, which means “space between.” And it is even related to the term, preposition term which is *ben*. *Bayin, ben, bîn*. It means “to separate” or “between.”

So the word, then, has the idea of being able to put space between things. You can’t mix these. This is over here, and this is over here. They don’t mix. That means you’re separating two unmixable realities. And that is a separation process which is what discernment is all about: Separating something from another because there is a difference and there must be distinction made. Discernment, then, we say is the skill in reaching understanding and knowledge of God’s truth by a process of separation.

I go through this all the time. Everything I read, everything I hear, I have to put through the filter and separate what isn’t true from what is true. That process of separation is discernment. Again, it’s the concept of antithesis.

Now the Greek term is *diakrinō*. It means “to separate.” It’s often translated “to judge.” But what does a judge do? A judge is a judge, in theory, because he has the ability to hear a massive amount of information, to read a massive amount of information, and separate – what? - truth from error, and make a judgment. That’s what a judge does. He discerns. Again the word *diakrinō* has the idea of separating so that one can make a judgment, or a decision.

So, spiritual discernment is the ability to separate God’s person, God’s work, God’s will, God’s truth from everything else that wants to encroach upon it. It is the ability to know that perfect, good, and acceptable will of God that Paul talked about in Romans 12:2, which is by the renewing of your mind. It is that ability of which the Apostle Paul wrote in Colossians 1:9, when he said, “I want you to be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding so you can walk worthy.” I want you to know God’s will, to discern the truth of everything. That’s the key. To make a judgment. To make a separation. To make a distinction.

So, we are, as Christians, called to discernment. And when it says “examine everything” it is to separate error from truth. Why? Because God has given truth. He wants it guarded and passed on to the next generation, but Satan wants not just to blast the truth away, but to infiltrate the truth with – what? - with error, to send the Trojan horses in, so the gates can be open and all the enemy come

rushing inside the walls of the church, and you have absolute chaos.

Now, that leads us to the last question, and maybe the most important. And that is how can I become a discerning person? I hope you're motivated to be one. The question is how do you become one? I'm going to give you some simple steps.

Step one, desire. Desire. It starts there. It starts there. If you have no desire to be discerning, believe me, you won't be. If your only desire is to be happy, healthy, wealthy, prosperous, wise, if your only desire is to be satisfied, comfortable, if your only desire is to propagate what you believe and what you feel and what you think, if your only desire is to make sure that your view is heard on everything, you'll never be a discerning person.

Discernment comes out of desire born out of humility. A humility that says, "I don't know and I don't trust my own judgment. I must become discerning." A desire that comes from the fact that I believe so much in the Word of God and the truth of God, and I understand so clearly the attacks of Satan and his desire to bring in damnable heresy, I must be a discerning person. I know I have a deception capability. I can be deceived. I know I can't trust my own feelings, and longings, and emotions, and thoughts and concepts. I must be discerning. I know I can be lured in to false doctrine. I must be discerning. I know that I can control my theology by my selfish desire. I must be discerning.

And when out of the humility of your own ineptness and the recognition of your own weakness you say, "I long to be discerning," you're on the path. That's step one.

Proverbs 2. Let me read it to you. Proverbs 2:3, "If you cry for discernment, if you lift your voice for understanding, if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures, then you will discern." Then you'll get it and you'll be able to discern what is truly the fear of the Lord and the knowledge of God. When you want it, when you desire it, when you hunger for it. This drives the whole thing.

Somewhere along the line, I got that desire. I don't know all the components, but somewhere along the line I became compelled to know the truth of God. And I am, to this day, not satisfied with something just coming along. Everything I pick up and read, I go through this separation process in my mind. And you see any books if you were to rummage around in my library that I've read, and you would see little things in the margin. "That's true – Oops - Question mark - Where did this come from? This is not accurate. Red lines through this." I read that way, I think that way, because I desire too much to know the truth.

I have that knowledge directly implanting itself in my life and affecting how I live, and directly implanting itself in the lives everybody who hears me and affecting how they live. So it's an awesome responsibility. I have a high view of scripture. I have a duty to divide it rightly. And so I have a desire to discern.

And again, that's born out of the humility that says, "I can't know this on my own. I don't have all the answers in me, but I know God wants me to know his truth, and I know he wants me to rightly divide his Word, and I know he wants me to be discerning and I'm going to pursue that."

Second. Prayer. Prayer. Here's the balance of dependence on the Lord, of course, for the process.

You can have all the desire in the world, but you still have to depend on him. There's an illustration of this back in 1 Kings chapter 3, in 1 Kings 3:9, Solomon prayed to God. And he says, "So give thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people to discern between good and evil." Solomon says, "I want discernment. I want discernment." What a great request. "For otherwise," he says, "I couldn't handle this job. I have to have discernment." And verse 10 says, "It was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing." God was blessed that he asked for discernment. And God said to him, "Because you have asked this thing - " for discernment, the ability to separate between right and wrong, good and evil, " - and you haven't asked for yourself - " Oh, brother.

Here's the basic problem. People who seek discernment are willing to step outside themselves. You have been cultivated in Christianity today, it's such an immense selfishness that people really aren't interested in discerning, they're only interested in getting for themselves what they need.

He says, "You haven't done that. You had an opportunity to ask for anything. You could have asked for long life. You could have gotten into the name it and claim it group, and the faith group, and the prosperity group, and the long life group. You could have asked for riches for yourself, - " and that's certainly out there today. You've got that group. "And you could have asked for the life of your enemies. You could have been among the vengeance seeking ones. But you didn't. You didn't ask anything for yourself. But you asked discernment, to understand the justice. And behold, I've done according to your words. I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so there's been no one like you before, nor shall one like you arise after you."

Wow. That's really an illustration of James 1:5, "If any man lacks wisdom, let him - " what? " - ask of God, who gives to all men liberally and holds back nothing." The balance, of course, in terms of desire is prayer. I can desire discernment, but I must depend upon the Lord for the process of becoming discerning - like Solomon, prayer. I plead with God to make me discerning. I plead with God to teach me discernment, to grant me that.

Thirdly, in this little series of steps to becoming a discerning person. One, a desire. Two is continual prayer, setting this before the Lord. And that, too, reflects your humility because it acknowledges you don't have what you need but he does. Thirdly, learn from the gifted. Learn from the gifted. You're going to find in your life and in the church that there are people who have capability to discern.

In fact, it is quite interesting to look at 1 Corinthians chapter 12 and in the list of spiritual gifts that is given in that chapter in 1 Corinthians 12:10, it mentions the gift or the ability of the distinguishing of spirits. The distinguishing of spirits, or the discernment of spirits.

Now, this is quite interesting because the scripture really doesn't say anything about this. It does say in 1 John 4:1, "Beloved, believe not every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they're of God." So, we know that in the early church demons and Satan were coming along and trying to infiltrate the church with their lies. And it was important for the church to discern between the true spokesman of God and some demon. Now remember, they didn't have the text of scripture in their hands yet. It was still being written. So they didn't have a full-blown revelation that they could refer to and test everything against.

So how did they know whom to believe? How did they know who really spoke for God? Well, there would be some in the church who had the ability to discern that. It may have even functioned in a

very spiritual way, not just an earthly way, but a very supernatural way, that God actually gave them insight to know that this was a demon spirit. They may have had that ability.

Because we know, for example, you remember in Acts 16 that a woman came down to where Paul and Silas were, and this woman said of Paul and Silas those very familiar words, "These men are the servants of the Most High God who show unto us the way of salvation."

Now was that true? Absolutely true. Paul and Silas were the servants of the Most High God and they were showing us the way of salvation. That was absolutely true. But Paul knew it was coming from a demon spirit that was living in that girl. And remember, after listening to it for a while, he cast the demon out because he knew the subtlety of it was a demon spirit was speaking the truth, so that people would embrace this girl.

And once they embraced her as one who spoke the truth, believing that she was speaking the truth of God, then would she speak lies to them, and they would unwittingly receive them. So it was necessary for Paul, by God's grace, to have discernment to know what was really going on.

In the early church, then, both to discern truth from error and a true spirit from a false spirit, apparently God gave some the ability to discern. They were the watchdogs, the patrol, the guard, the sentinel for the church.

Now the question comes, does this gift still exist? Or was it only for that time? Well there's nothing in the Scripture to indicate that it has ceased its existence. There is nothing at all said about it. We have no reason to assume, then, that it has ceased. I feel comfortable in saying I have no problem letting the gift continue to exist in the church and take on a different kind of operational mode, to function in a different way.

Today, it can still be used in some people's lives to protect the church from error. There are some people in the church that God just gives the ability to discern. They are gifted to be leading the church in distinguishing truth from error. We might even call them "theologians." We might call them "Bible scholars," in general.

Those people who come along who can think critically, and analytically, and carefully, and thoughtfully, and even historically, and know where error has come and gone before and who can say, "here's a proper understanding of it," they become the watchmen of the church. We put them in seminaries and we send young men to learn from them. Why? So that they can learn to discern by learning how these men discern.

I don't know what you want to call it. Maybe you feel uncomfortable calling it still the gift of distinguishing of spirits or discerning of spirits, but it is obvious to me that God has set some in the church who are uniquely gifted to be models of discernment that we can follow. I read books. Whenever there are issues that I want to face, there are certain authors that I know about who have written in that area, and I want to know what they say, because they help to give me insight because of the clarity with which they are able to discern certain areas of truth.

False prophets are everywhere today, every place. Trojan horses are being pulled into the church every day. And there are some people who are gifted by God to unmask these false prophets, some

people gifted by God to discern these things.

I remember when I was growing up and the church was really doing the formidable work in attacking the cults like the Mormons, and the J.W.s, and various other cults, there was a proliferation of writing being done on the cults by people that were obviously set in the body of Christ to assist the body in thinking critically and clearly about the error of those particular groups.

So there are some who are around to unmask false prophets. You need to learn from them, whether you sit under their teaching, sit under their preaching, read their books, or whether you know them personally. They're in the church today perhaps to identify demonism, perhaps to identify carnality, certainly to identify error in doctrine. They're watchmen for the church. Learn from them.

Fourthly, the next step. You start with the desire, you move to prayer, you learn from those who have discernment and are gifted in that area. Fourthly, follow the pattern of the mature. Stay on the pattern of the mature. Stay on that path. Mature Christians can discern. They have their senses exercised to discern good and evil, it says in Hebrews 5.

Mature people have discernment. That's what Hebrews 5 is saying. Ephesians 4, "Don't be children tossed to and fro, carried about by every wind of doctrine, undiscerning." Children are utterly undiscerning. In fact, it's a great challenge, isn't it, to raise a discerning child? It takes years. And you continually do it, even when your kids get to be teenagers, you're still trying to teach them. Wait a minute. You're telling me about that? Let's think that through. Do you understand what that's all about? No. Well let me help you. Let me help you to discern that. That's all a part of child raising, isn't it? To raise a wise child. It's a process.

The same is true spiritually. You don't go to sleep one night, say, "Lord, make me discerning," wake up in the morning. "Ah, I'm discerning." No. It's a process. It means you follow the path of maturity. How do you become mature? As babes desire the pure milk of the Word that you may grow by it. 1 Peter 2:2. You grow into maturity through the Word. And you grow into maturity through trials and tests. After you've suffered awhile, the Lord will make you perfect. So there's a process. Follow the path of maturity. Be discontent with where you are. Pursue growth.

Fifthly, depend on the Holy Spirit. Depend on the Holy Spirit. You must walk in the Spirit. You must be filled with the Spirit, because the Spirit is the true discerner. The Spirit is the true discerner. He is the one Jesus said in John 16:13 who will lead you in to all truth. He will lead you in to all truth. That's his role. That's his task. He's the true discerner.

First Corinthians 2:16 says, "the only one who knows the mind of God is the Spirit of God. The only one who knows perfectly the mind of God is the Spirit of God." You have the Spirit of God, therefore you have the mind of Christ. What a statement. First John 2:20 and 27. "You have an anointing from God, so you don't need any man to teach you, that anointing is the Holy Spirit."

Depend on the Spirit of God. As you're filled with the Spirit, as you walk in the Spirit, obedient to God, dealing with sin in your life, confessing it, living a pure and holy life, yielding to the control of the Spirit of God through the Word of God, the Spirit of God will make you a discerning person.

Then lastly and most importantly, diligently study the scripture. Diligently study the scripture. You will

not become discerning no matter how much you desire it, no matter how much you pray about it, no matter how dutifully you follow the lead of a discerning person. You will not become discerning no matter how mature you desire to be, and no matter how much you depend upon the Holy Spirit unless you diligently study the Word of God.

Because it is there you will learn the principles for discernment. Because it is there you learn the truth. Remember the noble Berean church, just new in faith, but in Acts 17:11 it says, “they searched the Scriptures diligently to see these things, whether they were so.” Here they were really coming out of a knowing nothing kind of background, but they knew what they had to look at, and so they went in to the Old Testament to see if these things were so.

Discernment flourishes only in an environment of intense faithful Bible study. Say it again. Discernment flourishes only – only - in an environment of intense faithful Bible study. That’s why in Acts 20 when Paul was so worried about the Ephesian elders, he says, “I know that after I leave, wolves are going to come in here,” perverse wolves are going to rip you up, the Trojan horses are going to come, the enemy is going to infiltrate, you’re going to buy in to some error, of your own men perverse ones will rise, they’ll lead you astray, you’re going to have doctrinal chaos, doctrinal confusion here. “And so I commend you to the Word of his grace, which is able to build you up.” The Word, the Word.

Look with me at 2 Timothy 2:15, just to touch this verse as to its significance. Now you must be able to distinguish - the end of verse 15 - between the word of truth and empty chatter, worldly chatter that leads to ungodliness. You must be. You must be able to distinguish between the word of truth, as we said last time, and the silly, foolish stuff that comes along and says, “the resurrection has already taken place,” and upset the faith of some.

You’ve got to be able to distinguish between the truth and error. You have to. Here’s how. “Be diligent - ” that pictures a worker giving maximum effort and excellence in his work “ - to present yourself approved to God.” That means literally to stand alongside God as worthy of his company. Boy, if I’m going to stand alongside God and say, “I’m worthy of your company, Lord, because you and I believe the same thing.” It’s going to take a lot of effort if I’m going to be that approved of God.

Then he says, “As a workman who doesn’t need to be ashamed.” The word “ashamed” is the key word. You should be ashamed of the low quality of work done in the Word if it’s a dishonorable effort. You want to be able to stand beside the Lord in his presence and say, “Lord, I preached exactly what you wrote in the Word. I was faithful to it. I diligently pursued it. I diligently studied it so I could faithfully represent it.”

Or do you want to get there some time and him say to you, “I’m ashamed of you. I’m ashamed of the shabby, shoddy way in which you dealt with my truth. I’m ashamed of your inability to distinguish the truth from worldly and empty chatter that leads to ungodliness and spreads like gangrene. I’m ashamed of your inability to identify false leaders who have gone astray from the truth and upset the faith of other people. I’m ashamed of the way you handled my truth.”

Listen, if we are to rightly dispense the word of truth, then we have to be very diligent in the study of the Word of God. There is no shortcut for that. No shortcut. It is that which makes the man of God perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works, Paul says later.

So if you are to be discerning, it requires desire, prayer, example, maturity, the Holy Spirit, diligent study, knowledge of the Word. And what will happen? That kind of approach, if we set our path to follow in those steps, it's going to strengthen the doctrinal conviction of the church. It's going to make us antithetical, absolute not relative. It's going to call us to church discipline. It's going to keep us from foolish compromises with the world. It's going to make us good interpreters of Scripture. It's going to mature us. It's going to honor God. And then we'll be a discerning church.

Let me close with Philippians 1, very important text. Turn to it. Philippians 1:9. "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more - " stop right there. We're not against love. We don't want to be unloving. I don't want to be unloving. I want your love to abound more and more. I want more love, and more love, and more love toward others. And he's talking about love toward others, other people.

He says, "I want your love to abound." I don't want you to be thought of as unloving. "But it must abound more and more in real knowledge and all discernment." You see that? You can't have love as a hermeneutic. You can't have love as the principle of interpretation. You want to have a greater, and greater, and greater love, but that love is contained in real knowledge, or knowledge of reality and discernment. "Then you will approve what is excellent," verse 10. "Then you will be filled with the fruit of righteousness," verse 11.

Now, we want to be loving, but a love that abounds in real knowledge and all discernment, approving what is excellent, being filled with the fruit of righteousness and both of those verses - 10 and 11 - he says, "and that will show up in the future in your glory." That's God's call to discernment. Let's bow together in prayer.

Lord, we have been blessed in these days to have considered this important subject, and we ask that you would give us understanding even of this, to know why there is such a lack of discernment, to understand what discernment is, and now to know and pursue being a discerning person.

Father, help us to guard the truth, guard the treasure, pass it on pure and unadulterated to our children and another generation. Help us, Lord, not to be victimized by the Trojan horses that have come into the church as gifts and have turned out to release enemy armies to tear us to shreds. Help us to examine everything in the light of the scripture, use it as the plumb line, as Amos said, by which we measure truth.

Help us to be unashamed someday to stand beside you and say, "I preached it just the way you intended it as best I could. I was faithful to discern." Grant us that ability that we may protect the holiness and the righteousness, the excellence of your name and your church for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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