

The Responsibilities of the Church: Discernment, Part 2

Selected Scriptures

90-148

As we think tonight about our continuing study of discernment kind of marching through our thoughts from this morning, just a word of brief reminder that we identified our passage I Thessalonians Chapter 5 as the most instructive passage by way of exhortation to the church in the New Testament on the subject of discernment. I simply remind you of what it says: I Thessalonians 5:20, "Do not despise prophetic utterances but examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil. Now that is a very simple and very straightforward text and it calls the church to discernment.

For those visiting with us who may not have been with us this morning, we are in a series on the anatomy of the church, looking at the church as a body extending that metaphor a little bit and we're looking now at the muscles of the church, what the church does such as preaching and teaching and fellowshiping and we're talking today about this matter of discernment. How important the church is as the pillar and ground of the truth. Function of the church is to present truth in such a way that it preserves people from the kind of deception with which Satan deceived Eve. And you remember in II Corinthians 11, the apostle Paul said he was jealous with a godly jealousy over his people lest they be deceived in the way that Satan deceived Eve.

We live in a world of deception. We made that clear this morning and Satan has concocted every imaginable and unimaginable scheme to cause people to stray away from the truth and become perverted in their thinking and consequently in their behavior and bring dishonor upon the word of God and God himself, and so there's a great battle that is always raging in the world between the truth and lies. Satan concocts his lying scheme on every front and, of course, his greatest endeavor is to make it infiltrate the church so that it can confuse those who are coming close to the Lord, or those who even belong to the Lord. And so the church is called then to discern and to sort this out.

Now then this morning we also began to ask some questions and we asked the first question, why is there a lack of discernment? We never got past that question. Let me just review it. Number one, because of a disinterest of doctrine and we talked about the climate that has basically sort of precluded that disinterest, this climate of thinking whatever you want to think, being an independent interpreter of Scripture, coming to truth through your own experience. In fact, there's a book out right now that sort of emphasizes that. The title of it is Experiencing God and you sort of come to God through your feelings, your intuition, and your experience. That being the new way as it were to determine truth, doctrine has fallen on hard times. And since those who come up with doctrine and hold to it seem to be divisive there is great disdain for that.

I was handed a little note before the service began that says, "So many translations disagree. They come from scholars and experts. If the experts can't agree and know for sure what the Bible says, the conclusion must be that no one can for sure; therefore, people like John MacArthur who say

different must therefore be pontificating." That probably is a rather common viewpoint, that if you say you know what the Bible means you're simply pontificating because there's so many opinions of everything. The fact of the matter is there's a right interpretation and it's up to those who study the Bible to come to that right interpretation. There are a number of ways to approach the Bible, but there's only one way to approach it to get to the right interpretation.

Now having said that, I will concede that there are some matters in the Scripture in which the right interpretation is very elusive, but they tend to be tangential matters. That does not mean line matters, fringe matters, matters that are not matters of life and death, eternal life or eternal death, not matters of salient cardinal doctrine, not even matters of important doctrine, but those matters which are on the periphery. Certainly they are important to some degree, but the Lord if he desired us to know with crystal clarity some issues would had to have given us more information, more revelation than we currently have, so we understand that there are some things about the Bible that are beyond us. We may never understand and that leaves some room for discussion.

But the great cardinal mainstream themes of Scripture are discernable to us. They are discernable by appropriate means of approaching the truth. We don't need to bail out and say well we're sort of antidoctrine because scholars can't agree. There are reasons why scholars don't agree and the reason they don't agree is they don't all have the same approach to Scripture, 'cause if you take the same approach to it, it yields the same truth. And we'll talk about what that approach is in a few moments when we talk about how to be a discerning person. Now that's a very important starting point so there is a disinterest in doctrine and that contributes to a lack of discernment.

Secondly we noted this morning, at least in the first service, there's a failure to be antithetical. That is to come to the honest conclusion that there are things that are right and things that are wrong. There is a right way to understand God's truth and everything else is wrong. There aren't two right views. There's one right interpretation of Scripture. There's not any tolerance in the Bible for a relativistic continuum of, and you can sort of land anywhere you want and it's true. That's not so. The Bible is black and white; it is right and wrong; it is not a blend of relative shades of gray, but when you have an environment that wants to tolerate that kind of relativism then discernment suffers greatly.

Thirdly we mention preoccupation with image. The church being very concerned about how it comes across to the world. The church wanted to be popular. It wanted to be liked. It doesn't want to be confrontive. We want to be user friendly. We don't want to fight anybody. We want to sort of smooze them in. We want to market them in with cleverness and make everybody feel comfortable, make everybody feel happy, entertain the unbeliever and if they like us maybe they'll like Jesus too. That's the underlying idea. That leads to pragmatism where you literally let the people out there dictate what the church is because you want to satisfy their desired.

And then we mentioned also a fourth reason why discernment is on its last legs in this particular evangelical culture and that is because of a failure to properly interpret the Scripture and that takes me back to the comment I made a moment ago. There is a great, great amount of difference in how you approach the Bible, but there really is only one right way, just one right way. Virtually every cult and every false teaching ever spawned was begun on one of two premises. One: somebody got a new revelation from God, or two: somebody has a new interpretation of the Bible. And usually cults are based upon a combination of those two things. Error comes because someone has a new revelation from God or a new approach to the interpretation of Scripture. Something different!

There is a sweeping movement in the church today to approach Scripture without regard for proper interpretation. One writer says if you want to get to the truth of the Bible ignore reason, logic and the senses when attempting to bear witness quote "with prophetic words accuracy in Spirit and content." I'm not sure how you ignore your reason, your logic and your senses and come to any kind of truth. This writer goes on to say, "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. So, if you really want to get to the truth of Scripture you've got to somehow come to some feeling in your upper abdominal area. What you're looking for, he goes on to say, is some kind of negative witness in your upper abdominal area with a message of no, or be careful, or something's not right and it's usually manifest with a nervous, jumpy, or uneasy feeling. 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. If our thinking is causing these sensations it can only be a soul less reaction. On the other hand, when God's Spirit," he says, "is bearing witness with our spirit that a prophetic word is right, is of God, and is according to his will and purpose, then our spirit reacts with the fruit of the Holy Spirit and we have a deep unexplainable peace and joy, a warm and lovely feeling or even a sense of our spirit jumping up and down with excitement. This sensation lets us know that the Holy Spirit is bearing witness with our spirit that everything is in order, though we may not understand what is being said."

In other words, he says, ignore your mind, forget your beliefs, disregard your theology and common sense and look for a sensation in your upper abdominal area, which will let you determine what truth is. Well, apart from being incomprehensible, that's utter nonsense. How your upper abdominal area feels has nothing to do with what is true. Anybody would know that. You may be suffering some indigestion or something. I'm not looking for a feeling. I'm not looking for some jumpy feeling inside of me, some uneasy feeling to determine if something is a wrong interpretation or am I looking for some sense of calm to determine what is accurate in the Scripture.

But this kind of thing is rampant. Maybe that's an extreme version of it, but it shows you to what lengths it goes. People approaching the Scripture with any other than an absolutely careful approach studying language in its normal sense can come up with absolutely anything. When I talk to pastors, or I talk to seminary students I remind them all the time that if you do not interpret the Bible in terms of the normal historical grammatical language, that is you take language to mean what it normally means, you understand the historical context and the context of the language that you're studying, that is to say a verse and a chapter or a paragraph or a book of the Bible, if you don't take language in its normal meaning then what meaning do you take it in? If it doesn't mean what it says it means then what does it mean? As soon as you say it doesn't mean what it says it means then whose going to tell us what it means? And you have catapulted yourself into hopeless ambivalence and opinion. That's why we stick with the word of God and we draw the truth out of the Scriptures.

People ask me, for example, if I believe in a future kingdom for Israel. And my response is well that's what the Bible says. And sometimes people will say well do you think that's what it means? Well if it doesn't mean that then I don't know what it could possibly mean and I wouldn't even venture an opinion. If this is some kind of mysterious secret to which the words of the text do not give the solution then there is no way to know. That is why, for example, you can take prophetic language in the Bible, or the book of Revelation and if you deny it means what it says it means then you have, and you have a lot of writers that do that, then you will never have any two of them agree on anything, because once you determine that you can't get the meaning from the normal language

where can you get it? Now you are looking for a jumpy feeling or something in your upper abdomen or whatever.

So we take the normal sense of Scripture and we determine every way we can to grasp the meaning of the normal sense of Scripture, the normal sense of language assuming that God wanted to make clear and not obscure, right? And that language is intended to make it clear, and if we reconstruct the history and if we understand the context in which something is said, and we recreate the scenario and understand the background and look at the normal syntax and lexicography, those are the issues of language, we can come to the regular meaning. It really isn't that difficult if we can get rid of our presuppositions, get rid of our bad hermeneutics it's amazing how we can all come to the same conclusion.

I tell people all the time who sort of fall into amillennialism and the reason they do that is because they develop a different hermeneutic and when the Old Testament says there will be a kingdom in Israel and the Messiah will come back and his feet will land on the Mount of Olives and he will establish his kingdom there and he will reign over that kingdom and the tribes of Israel will be saved and they will look on him whom they pierced and they will receive their kingdom and in that kingdom they will reign with Christ and in that kingdom they will bring Gentiles to see Christ who will reign in Jerusalem over the whole world. When the Old Testament says that, if you apply the same hermeneutics to that, that you apply to the resurrection of Jesus Christ you will come up with a literal kingdom. Just like you came up with a literal resurrection. It's a question of being consistent in your hermeneutics. That's from hermeneua, which means to interpret. The science of hermeneutics is simply the way you interpret the Bible.

Where you don't have a consistent hermeneutic you have a very difficult time getting continuity and getting agreement. It's why in seminary one of the first things you teach students is the science of hermeneutics. How do you interpret the Scripture? How do you recreate the language? You have to learn Hebrew and Greek so you have the root language. You have to understand historical background so you can understand the context in which things were said and the meaning, which they have in that context. And you have to do your work in the text itself to understand the context around a given statement so you understand what is going on in the language and what is going on in the narrative or the conversation or the reasoning that's being presenting so that you can tie it into its intended frame of reference. All of that is just the normal way in which you understand language. Any ancient document demands that.

We do that all the time in this country with the Constitution. We have a whole court called the Supreme Court whose primary task is to interpret the Constitution and apply it. Sometimes we think they do a pretty good job of that; sometimes we think they do a terrible job at it. But unfortunately, there were a lot of presuppositions that were not written into the Constitution because they were so dominate in the fact that they were in the culture as such a deep and foundational level that the people who wrote the Constitution assumed they would always be there and when they're not there we have a very difficult time. In fact, the Constitution was never written to ever be applied to a society that didn't believe in biblical morality. That was the given. We have then a Bible, which is an ancient document, like any ancient document needs to be interpreted in the normal sense of language. But where you do not have a normal and consistent pattern of interpretation, where people are not committed to interpreting language in its normal sense you're going to come to different conclusions.

So a failure to rightly divide the word of truth is of immense proportions in contributing to the lack of

discernment. And using the idea that people disagree as an excuse for not doing it right is merely a cop out of sorts. It is not as if John MacArthur or Grace Community Church or people who agree with us have all of a sudden hopped out of nowhere with a strange and new doctrines. In fact we stand in the great tradition of the history of the church and those who have all along endeavored to rightly divide the word of truth.

I don't want to be different. In fact if I ever come up with anything that's new help me to get rid of it will you? I want to come up with what is old and approved by many before me. There's on other thing that I want to mention to you about what contributes to the lack of discernment. It's not just the disinterest in doctrine and the interest in image and all of those things that we've talked about, a failure to rightly divide the word of truth.

There's another thing that contributes, I think, to this lack of discernment in the church and that is a failure to discipline, a failure to discipline in the church. And this is a much more important thing than you might at first think. And maybe you don't even think it's obvious. You say why would you mention that as a component in the demise of discernment? I'll tell you why. Church discipline, which is the priority of holding people to a holy living. Church discipline, the priority of holding people to a standard of godly living, which really puts a wall between the church and the world. Unless that is done, if there is no disciplining of sinning Christians, it then becomes impossible to distinguish between the two, that is believers and unbelievers. Today when churches tolerate sinning Christians and they lower the standard of righteousness they want to do that so they make the unbelievers feel comfortable, as a result they dull the edge of discernment. Because if you're in a place where Christians and non-Christians, sinning Christians and non-Christians are all comfortable, if you've created a place that makes people who are sinning feel comfortable then you're making compromise feel comfortable to the point where discernment and discrimination are not going to be tolerated. You can't step into that environment and be discriminating and discerning and precise and clear because you're going to alienate everybody. This is one of the unintended consequences that occur. In fact, when people work real hard to make sinning people comfortable in the church today, when they work very hard to make them feel welcome in a church, they create an environment where the unintended consequence that they can't ever really strongly confront iniquity without having people accuse them kind of a bait and switch. They're not going to tolerate that. If you get them there on that premise that what you want to do is make them feel good then you'd better keep making them feel good or they're going to get angry at you. In fact, it would be interesting, I don't know that I'll ever have the opportunity, but it would be interesting to go into a church where they work very very hard at making unbelievers feel comfortable and just preach directly at the issue of sin and iniquity and see what happen.

I always think of Ananias and Sapphira who were executed by God for lying to the Holy Spirit in the middle of church and that was certainly a warning about how holy God wants the church to be and the warning got out to everybody. People in the town said don't go there, people die in that place, unless you're serious about your life. But when a church does not discipline, when it doesn't raise a holy standard and hold people to a holy standard it dulls the edge of discernment because then you can't be precise, then you have to interpret the Bible selectively, then there's some issues you don't bring up, then there's some things you don't say, and then at that particular point you have eliminated discernment.

That's why I Peter says judgment must begin where? The house of God. We have to evaluate, test, purge, and discipline. We have to sift and purify. The one final contributor to this lack of discernment

is spiritual immaturity, spiritual immaturity. As we said this morning, children are tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine, Ephesians 4 says, "Spiritual children, people who don't know sound doctrine, who aren't built up in the faith are very very vulnerable. Having little deep knowledge of God's truth they follow popular viewpoints, they follow their feelings, their experiences, they seek miracles, healings, the solution to the routine trials of life. That's all they want. They just want answers to the little pains. Mature people really aren't interested in that. The little pains they embrace because those are means of perfection. "After you've suffered a while the Lord will make you perfect," Peter said. The mature Christian embraces his suffering, embraces his pain because he understands what it produces. The immature Christian just wants relief immediately. They're concerned about personal comfort and personal success, preoccupied with themselves rather than God. There's another thing that happens in sort of a seeker-friendly church environment where people come in on the basis of you're going to meet all their felt needs, they come on that basis and you have to spend the rest of your time making sure you meet those needs all the way down the line or it's another bait and switch. You can't all of a sudden make God the preoccupation when the premise on which you got them there was them. If anything characterizes that kind of a church it can be that it's very self-centered and when you try and switch those people over to being lost in wonder, love, and praise to God it doesn't fly very well. Another one of those unintended consequences.

So Ephesians 4 says, "Stop being children tossed to and fro, carried about by every wind of doctrine." Hebrews 5 describes the Jews to whom the writer was penning his letter as those who should have for the time been mature, but they were not mature. For the time that they had been exposed to the gospel, for the opportunities they had had to hear the truth they ought to be teachers he says in verse 12. Instead you have someone, you need to have someone teach you again the elementary principles and you can only take milk and not solid food. This is because you are not mature.

Now all of these causes, are just kind of overlapped and intertwined and they become the driving force that pushes people away from discernment. Then again I say what I said initially this morning it's sad enough that the church doesn't have discernment, but what's really debilitating is the church sees it as a threat to its comfort and unity.

I've tried to break down some of the causes for you so that you can help to see the roots of this fruitless tree. A few reminders of what the Bible says on the other hand. Proverbs 14:33 says, "Wisdom reposes in the heart of the discerning." You want real knowledge and real wisdom it belongs to people who discern. Proverbs 16:21, "The wise in heart are called discerning." Proverbs 17:24, "A discerning man keeps wisdom in view, but fools eyes wander to the ends of the earth." There is the undiscerning person who wanders off into all kinds of folly."

In Philippians Chapter 1 continuing this same train of thought, Philippians 1:9 is a prayer, one of many, by Paul, one to be noted in this context of discussing discernment because it actually uses the word. Philippians 1:9, "And this I pray that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, and all discernment." Now what is that? What does that produce? What does that do? How does that function? Verse 10, "So that," here's what discernment produces: "So that you may approve the things that are excellent." In other words, initially so that you can sort out what is excellent, what is good, what is right, what is true, from what is not, and the result of that in order that you may be, verse 10, genuine and blameless. In other words, it is right doctrine that produces right living. So he says, "I pray that you would have discernment to be able to approve the things that are truly excellent so that you might be genuine and blameless until the day of Christ,

having been filled with the fruit of righteousness." You want a life of righteousness, you want a life of genuine spirituality, you want a life of blamelessness then you must be discerning. That is a call for discernment. Absolutely a crucial part of Christian experience.

And you know when we think about it in terms of life we work real hard at that in the secular realm. Some of you are discerning about what food is good for you, what investment will give you the best return. Some of you are very discerning about who makes the best products that you want to buy for your home. You get the Consumers Guide and you sort through all of that. You're very thoughtful when you choose a doctor or go for some medical treatment. You're very careful about that. You may be highly analytical even politically about the issues of the day, and you may make sure that you're the best armchair quarterback that ever came along. And all of us over the last few years since the O. J. case have become armchair lawyers and judges haven't we? But some of us forget to use our analytical faculties in the realm in the word of God to discern what is good and what is evil, to examine absolutely everything.

All right, so much for the question why is there a lack of discernment. How about a short second question: what is discernment? What is discernment? Very simple, even the word discernment means to divide, to divide. It is the ability to divide truth from error. That's what it means. People say well doctrine is divisive. That's right, it is. It divides truth from error. That's exactly what it does. We should be nourished on sound doctrine, I Timothy 4 says. We should be committed to that sound doctrine, teaching and preaching that sound doctrine, in I Timothy 6 and in verse 3, "If anyone advocates a different doctrine and doesn't agree with sound words and with the doctrine conforming to godliness he's conceited and understand nothing.

So here's what you've got. Sound doctrine and on the other hand the conceit of the one who knows nothing. There's no gray continuum there. Discernment is the ability to distinguish between sound doctrine and everything else. "The person who advocates different than sound doctrine," I Timothy 6:3, "who does not agree with sound words," proper interpretation of Scripture, "those words that conform to godliness is conceited understands nothing, has a morbid interest in controversial questions, disputes about words, which arise out of envy and strife and abusive language and suspicions constant friction between men of depraved mind, deprived of the truth, supposed that godliness is a means of gain." So if you want to blame somebody for the friction and the chaos don't blame the person holding sound doctrine. That's his point. There will be friction, there will be discord, there will be disagreement, there may even be envy, strife, and evil suspicion and abusive language but don't blame the person whose holding to sound doctrine. Blame the person whose not, 'cause that's where the apostle Paul lays the responsibility, right at the feet of the person who teaches different than sound doctrine. That's where the premium is.

Down at the end of Chapter 6 in I Timothy verses 20 and 21, "O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you," that's sound doctrine, the treasure entrusted to you, "avoid worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and thus gone astray from the truth." So he says guard the truth, hang on to it and avoid all the error that is rampant. If there is division, and there is, truth always divides, please let's put the responsibility where it belongs. The divisiveness is coming from the error, not coming from the truth.

Now that sort of puts it in perspective. To understand discernment is to understand this for example the Hebrew term bin, b-i-n, used 247 times in the Old Testament, has been translated to understand, to discern, to distinguish. It basically means from the noun bin it means to put space between, the

Hebrew word to put space between or to divide. It's to separate two things. The New Testament word deacrinal also means to separate, to distinguish. That's what it means to be discerning, to sort those things out, to pull them apart.

Now one last question and this is what we'll just kind of wrap up on tonight. It's very practical. How can I become a discerning person? What is the path that I have go along to be discerning? Well it's a very simple one, but a very very important place to start. Number one: discerning people have a strong desire for discernment. It starts there. Turn in your Bible to Proverbs Chapter 2, Proverbs Chapter 2.

And that is what frightens me about our current situation because you have people who aren't discerning but don't have any desire to be because they see discernment as a threat, as something wrong because they've been told that so long and so incessantly. So you have people who have no interest in being discerning because they think it's divisive. But I want you to know this if you don't have a desire to be discerning you never are going to be discerning. It starts with a spirit of humility and a passion. Look at Proverbs 2. Proverbs is wisdom. It is wisdom for life. It is wisdom for spiritual life, wisdom for living a godly life. It is wisdom passed on from a father to a son from generation to generation. Nothing is more important in that than discernment. Wisdom to the Hebrew was godly living, but you couldn't live godly unless you thought godly and you can't think godly unless you can sort out truth from error. So he says in Chapter 2, "My son, if you will receive my sayings, and treasure my commandments within you, make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding. For if you cry for discernment lift your voice for understanding. If you seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasure then you will discern the fear of God, or the fear of the Lord and discover the knowledge of God." Look right there in verses 3 and 4, then you have the heart of it. You want understanding? Do you want discernment? Do you want wisdom? Seek her as silver. Search for her as for hidden treasures then you will discern the fear of the Lord.

Verse 3: "Cry for discernment. Lift your voice for understanding. That's where it starts. It starts with a strong desire. Somewhere along the line the Lord planted that desire in my heart, for which I am grateful. I don't think he planted it there apart from my own will and my own longings. I started many years ago to have a driving passion to understand the word of God. It starts with an exalted view of Scripture. May I remind you of that? If you don't have an exalted view of Scripture you're not going to have any desire to understand it, right? I think sometimes the reason people don't have a passion for discernment is because they really don't understand the singularity of Scripture. They don't understand that it is the absolute and only word of the Living God. Or they don't understand its treasures, or they don't understand its yields, what it bring to the one who gives himself to it. They have for some strange reason a low view of Scripture. They might not even know it. They might say, "Oh yeah, I believe the Bible is the word of God. I believe it was inspired by God, but nonetheless they have a low view of Scripture. They might also believe that God is speaking in visions and prophecies and consequently the singularity of Scripture is undermined for them. But it starts with a high view of Scripture. I thank God for the people in my life who poured that into me, who gave me that high view of Scripture. Once that high view of Scripture was established in my mind that this is the word of the Living God, and every single word in it is purified like silver in a furnace seven times fired over to be made pure. Every word of God is pure. Every word of God is true. All Scripture is inspired by God and all of that, once I came to grips with that and understood the treasure that I held in my hand then the desire could begin to well up within me to understand this great truth. Once I understood that it was to be more desired than gold, yes than fine gold as Psalm 19 says it was more to be taken in than honey, honey from the honeycomb. It was a greater treasure than gold and a

greater pleasure than honey. When you understand that you understand what it yields, what it brings. Once I understood what Jeremiah meant when he said, "Thy words are found that I could eat them and the word was in me they joy and rejoicing in my heart." Once that was triggered in my heart and I think the first time it was triggered was when some preacher preached on I John 1:4. "These thing I write unto you that your joy may be full." As a young man maybe up to that point I had the idea that the Scripture was a lot of duties and all of a sudden I was told that the Scripture was full of joy and I began to discover that for myself and once I got started the desire has been insatiable.

But that's where you start being a discerning person with a high view of Scripture understanding it is the authoritative word of God, it's exalted equal to its own name, Psalm 138:2, and then you give yourself to this immense treasure and this great pleasure of the study of Scripture.

Job said that I have desired his word more than my necessary food. I understand that. I understand perfectly what it means to be so absorbed into the word of God that you have no interest in eating, you have no interest in doing anything. That's where it all starts. You start with a high view of Scripture and a strong passionate desire of the heart equal to the passion with which people pursue silver. When you start to cry for discernment the way people search for hidden treasure, understanding what it yields, understanding the wealth of it, then you will be a discerning person.

Secondly it is not just a desire because you don't have the human capability to fulfill that desire. Secondly it's prayer. You may be saying I don't have that kind of desire. I don't have that kind of passion. I don't have that kind of discernment. Well let me suggest to you that it demands prayer and I'll show you the great classic illustration of that if you'll turn in your Bible to I Kings Chapter 3. I Kings Chapter 3. Here we come to the story of Solomon, so familiar to us. Solomon, son of David, who became king in Israel and when Solomon is confronted by the Lord and he's about to become king and is given the opportunity to ask for what is on his heart, he does the right thing.

Let me tell you how it all started. In verse 3 of I Kings 3, "Now Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David." I wish that was all there was in this verse, but he was like a lot of other people, "except he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places." That would be the way all of our biographies would read wouldn't it? He loved the Lord and he walked in the statutes of the Scripture except fill in the blank. But Solomon loved the Lord and walked in the statutes of his father David. Sort of like Peter, Peter kept telling the Lord he loved him even though he denied him. But Solomon's heart was toward the Lord and in this particular situation go down to verse well verse 6, "Solomon said Thou has shown great lovingkindness to Thy servant David my father, according as he walked before Thee in truth and righteousness and uprightness of heart toward Thee; and Thou hast reserved for him this great lovingkindness, that Thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. And now, O Lord my God, Thou hast made Thy servant king in place of my father David; yet I am but a little child: I do not know how to go out or come in." Here's a man who humbles himself before God and says I can't handle the responsibility. I don't know what to do. I'm like a little kid. "I don't even know when to go out and when to come in and Thy servant is in the midst of Thy people, which Thou hast chosen, a great people who cannot be numbered or counter for multitude." I have a tremendous responsibility. First of all it's a very large group of people, secondly you have chosen them, which sets them apart from all other people and I am accountable to you for the care of these people.

So, verse 9, here's what he asks for. "Give Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Thine? And it was

pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing. And God said to him, 'Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself long life, nor asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself discernment to understand justice, behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you.'

You want the proof of that? Read the Proverbs. Read the Proverbs. And that's only a sampling of the thousands of Proverbs that the Bible says Solomon wrote. Incredible wisdom was given to this man. There is even wisdom, isn't there, wisdom in the ironies of the book of Ecclesiastes, which Solomon also penned and showed the futility of life from a human viewpoint. He asked for wisdom, he became the wisest man that ever lived.

You say, how does that relate to me? Well just this way: James 1:5, James 1:5, do you remember it? "If any of you lacks wisdom let him what, ask of God who gives to all men generously and without reproach and it will be given to him." Solomon asked for wisdom, God gave it to him. You need it, you want it, you ask for it. Solomon had the desire and he went to the source. That's what we ought to be asking for, not this thing, or that thing, or riches, or long life, or success, which is a modern version of triumphing over your enemies, but discernment. And you go to God to get it because he's the source of it.

Now there's a third component and I want you to turn to I Corinthians 12:10. If we're going to be discerning people it starts with a passion of the heart so that you will not settle for anything less than the truth. It demands that we are dependent on God. It's a balance of dependence and passion. We depend on the Lord for the process of discernment for developing it in our hearts. The third thing in I Corinthians 12:10 we have some listing of gifts here and in the middle of verse 10 it says among these gifts that are given here is the distinguishing of spirits. Literally in the Greek it just says the distinguishings or discernment, discernment. In the early church this gift was the watch dog. It was the patrol. It was the guard, the sentinel for the church. Now remember in the early church the New Testament had not been written and people would come along and say God said this and God said that and the Holy Spirit said this and I speak for God and I speak for the Holy Spirit and I speak for the ascended Christ and it was very difficult to know who really did. There was no written New Testament by which to measure them, so the Spirit of God gave supernatural ability to certain people who could determine the true from the false and they would be able to say by supernatural insight that is not the Spirit of God speaking. That is a demon spirit from Satan.

I suppose that we would say sadly the Corinthian church had people with that gift because in the first chapter Paul says, you come behind and no gift but either we're not using it or when they did use it they were ignored by the rest of the congregation. As a result they had people standing up according to I Corinthians 12 and cursing Jesus and claiming it was by the Holy Spirit they were doing that. Someone with the gift of discernment should have stood up and said that is not the Spirit of God speaking and they all should have listened.

Paul illustrates how this gift worked in Acts 16:16-18. There was a young maiden following Paul and Silas. And this young girl was coming along behind Paul and Silas and according to Acts 16:17, this is what she said, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who show us the way of salvation." Now was that true? Yes. Absolutely accurate. Paul and Silas were the servants of the Most High God and they were showing the way of salvation. That sounds like real good PR to have somebody coming along just announcing that as you go. Verse 18 says, "she did this for many days.

Paul grieved, turned and said to the spirit, 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ come out of her!' And he came out the same hour." How did Paul know that this was a spirit in her? Well obviously God has granted him the ability to discern that. He knew it wasn't the Holy Spirit but a demon spirit, not by what the spirit said, that's part of the deception of Satan see, go along and agree and agree and agree and once you've gotten people to trust you then lead them astray.

The gift of discernment in those days was given to recognize the Satanic counterfeit. As that gift ceased, well I suppose in that unique sense, yes, because we don't need someone to tell us whether someone is speaking for God or not by knowing the spirit that is in them today. We can measure what they say by the Scripture, right? So once we have the word of God we measure them by the word of God.

False prophets are everywhere today and I believe there are some people who are gifted to unmask those false prophets. Some of them write books, which unmask them, some people have done tremendous work on the cults and the occult, but it seems as the church has moved out of the apostolic era this is exercised by people who are skilled at applying the truth of Scripture to those errors.

A gift can be exercised in the church in many ways today, but it is those who have that unique ability to identify demonism in all its forms, to identify carnality, to identify truth as over against doctrinal error, they too are the watchmen of the church. And I guess there's a little of that in me. When the Lord sort of dipped his brush in the pallet and put all the colors to make me he gave me a little of that. The danger of the gift of discernment it can deteriorate into critical and proud condemnation degenerating into a judgmental spirit if one is not careful, but the third point I want to mention to you and it's a very important point if you're going to be a discerning person. It is this: learn from those gifted at discernment. God has given them to the church. I'm so thankful for books through the years of the church that have been written to expose error. Through all the history of the church there have been those watchdogs, those battlers, those men on the front line that were sorting out the truth from error. You need to be exposed to those people, those people who can mentor you and help you to develop skill in discernment. Those great soldiers who go out and they can identify the enemy and they know how to hit the target.

Fourthly and just a couple more and we'll finish up but fourthly follow the pattern of the mature, follow the pattern of the mature. I John 2:12-14, "I write unto to you young men because you are strong and the word of God abides in you and you have overcome the wicked one." Follow mature believers. Get in behind them. They can discern better because of their maturity, because the word is strong in them, because they have fought the battle, because they have thought things through, because of their spiritual experience. They're not children tossed to and fro, they're not just on the milk, they've graduated to the meat because of their maturity. That's why when the Lord puts the church together he talks about elders, elders being the mature men experienced in the truth and its application, who know the battle and are strong in doctrine.

Number five: depend on the Holy Spirit, depend on the Holy Spirit. This is obvious, but it needs to be said. Here is the recognition that the true discerner is the Holy Spirit and he must fill us and his word must dwell in us richly if we are to be discerning. So we certainly don't want to have sin in our lives, that quenches the Spirit; we don't want to have sin in our lives that grieves the Holy Spirit; we don't want to walk in the flesh and not walk in the Spirit or we can't be discerning.

In John 14:17, Jesus said, he was going to send the Spirit of truth and, "He will abide in you and because he abides in you, you will know the truth." "You have an anointing from God," I John 2 says, being the Holy Spirit dwelling in you. In John 16:13, "When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all the truth." What a tremendous promise that is. And in I Corinthians 2:16, Paul says, "We have the mind of Christ." What is that? Backing up a little bit, he says, "No one knows the thoughts of God," verse 11, "except the Spirit of God." Verse 12, "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God that we might know the things freely given to us by God." Then the next verse he talks about being taught by the Spirit combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words and the natural man doesn't have that.

So you want to be discerning it starts with the desire, moves to a petition, involves following the mentoring and the leading of discerning people, following the pattern of mature believers who have been experienced in the battle and then sorting out truth from error, and in the end depending on the Holy Spirit, which means if there's sin in your life and you're walking in the flesh you cannot be discerning. When you walk in the Spirit, and you're faithful to the Spirit, you're filled with the Spirit, yielded to the Spirit, you will experience the discernment that he alone can grant.

And then one last point and I supposed you knew that we'd end up here. Diligently study the Scripture. There's no magic here. Discernment develops and flourishes in an environment of intense Bible study. There is no shortcut, or back to where we were this morning, in II Timothy 2:15, being diligent to be approved of God as one who rightly divides the word of truth. Diligent, intense, faithful study of the Scripture. And that's how one becomes a discerning person. Desire, prayer, example, maturity, the Holy Spirit and the knowledge of the Scripture.

That kind of approach will cause us to be strong, firm, discerning, and will in effect answer Paul's prayer that we might abound in all discernment in the consequent righteousness, genuineness, and blamelessness that he desired for his people. Take some time this week and read Psalm 119. Read it all the way through and catch the heart of a man totally devoted to understanding the word of God. There are 176 verses in that Psalm. The first 175 of them show the heart of David and his love for God's word and we must approach it the same way with the love and a passion that leads us to diligent and faithful study.

Now let me encourage you by saying you don't have to do all of that all by yourself. That's why we're here to help you in your study by opening the Scripture to you. That's why other teacher's and preacher's are around and God has always had them all around the world and throughout the history of the church. That's why there are great books to read and tapes to listen to and seminars to go to. We're here to help so that you'll be able to understand what the Scripture means. We're just here to stimulate your own intense commitment to the great treasures of God's word. This is a mandate in the life of the church, to be discerning. It'll strengthen our doctrinal conviction. It'll develop us into antithetical people who understand the absolutes of right and wrong. It'll keep us from foolish compromises with the world. It'll pour upon our lives profound and uncountable blessing as the word does its work in us. That's the promise of God.

Sum it up this way: as David's desire the pure milk of the word that you may what, grow. Spiritual growth is what it's all about as we get more and more like the person of Jesus Christ through the intake and application of his truth. Well let's pray.

Father, we thank you tonight. What a wonderful day and evening we've had sharing in these truths.

And Lord how important it is for us to hear the word of discernment, the command, the mandate, the exhortation so that we can be protected from error and that we can enjoy the full blessing that comes from the richness of understanding your truth. We thank you that we are not faced with an impossible task, but that the word yields its truth to the spirit controlled and diligent study who approaches it honestly and with a hungry heart. Give us, Lord, give us discernment. And yield to us the significance of your word at every point that we might enjoy its riches and in the enjoyment give you're the glory and the praise. In your Son's name, Amen.

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