

Discernment

Good morning everyone. Edwin was speaking the last few weeks about the 'toolbox' we carry around as Christians and some of the specific tools God equips us with. The truth is God abundantly blesses us with endless provisions; the right tools, the right equipment we need for any given situation are always available to enable us to stand strong in our faith and overcome all that besets or troubles us.

Read Ephesians 6 and put on the '*full armour of God*' for all the 'tools' we need.

And this subject set me thinking! What is it that we need so desperately today? In our spiritual lives, in our churches, in the life we live out in the world. I believe it is the gift of discernment and when I say discernment what I mean is: the ability to judge between right and wrong between truth & error.

Jesus said this in John 10: 3-5 *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."*

We live in days where we need to know the voice of Jesus, the good shepherd, to be led by his voice only and to be able to distinguish his voice from those 'other voices', the 'strangers' the 'thief and robbers' those false voices Jesus warns us about that are all around us and it is so easy to come off the track and to be led astray.

Do you think that's impossible for you? To be deceived that is? Scripture says: *"So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"*

Jesus warns us (Matt 24:24) *"That in the last days even the elect could be deceived. "For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect"*

And we know from the history of the Church throughout the ages that she is continually slipping into error. Look also for evidence of this in the amount of cults we have, look at the amount of denominations we have, but thankfully God's truth always prevails, God always rescues his truth from error.

So distinguishing between truth and error is essential in the Christian life. Unless we are able to do this we will be like the person described in Ephesians 4 *"tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming"*.

When we talk about discernment what do we mean? The English definition for the word discernment states, *"the ability to judge people and things well"* I like that, being able to judge well, to give an accurate assessment on things. But discernment, spiritual discernment is far deeper than that.

The Greek word for discern is 'deakreno' (dē-ä-krē'-nō) which literally means, "to separate throughout or wholly".

It has the idea of being able to 'separate out' It is related to the noun *bayin*, which means "space between." So the word then, has the idea of being able to put space between things. You can't mix these things together in one batch. This is over here, and that is over there. They don't mix. That means you're separating two incompatible realities.

And this 'separation process' is what discernment is all about: Separating something from another, because there is a difference and there must be a distinction made. Discernment, then, we can say is: "the skill in reaching understanding and knowledge of God's truth by a process of separation".

In addition to this, this word discern in the Greek means distinguishing between "look-alikes," i.e. things that *appear* to be the same! And that is often the problem with error, with deception, we have half truths. We must be able to discern what is true from what is false. We must be able to discern truth from half truth, as well as truth from error.

This ability to separate out is crucial in discernment, the truth is though, we live in a society, we live in a culture that doesn't want us to separate out anymore, to be able to make a distinction between one thing or another, there is no black and white anymore, it's all grey areas and 'political correctness' means if you try to separate out or distinguish between ethnic groups or determine someone's sexuality male or female for example your seen as being cruel and judgemental.

This was the problem with communism it was a system that rather than celebrating people's ideas, their unique identity, their individual talents, gifting, intelligence - it through it all into one big 'mixing pot', people were all supposed to come out the same, all equal, all believing the same thing, but it failed miserably it became corrupt and this is where we are going in the world at the moment with Globalism, one big melting pot, no individual nations, one world system, one world government .

This is also the error of universalism so prevalent in our Churches today where they say 'everyone will get to heaven eventually' they 'dumb down' all absolutes, they deny the clarity, the distinction of scripture, it doesn't matter what you believe – what you do, we will all be OK together in the end.

But it's not Gods way - God separates out! Let's just follow this through in the Bible, God's word, it's God's way, this separation, this putting the space between things as we defined earlier, it starts in the very beginning, in the book of Genesis, we have two trees in the Garden of Eden, one tree OK to eat from - one forbidden. Other separations / distinctions in scripture are:-

- The two ways, the broad way that leads to destruction the narrow way that leads to life.
- *The Sheep & the Goats,*
- *We are In Adam or we are in Christ,*
- *The Wheat from the Chaff*
- *Light & Darkness*
- *Believer & Unbelievers*
- *2 destinies, heaven & hell*

Always throughout scripture is this 'separation out' - this discernment, this distinction by God. We get it with people: he chose Jacob not Esau, with nations: he chose Israel & rejected the Canaanites, the other nations as well, there are also 'blesses and curses' for how we live. Listen to this, Psalm 1. *"How blessed is the man who doesn't walk in the council of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord and in his law he meditates day and night."* There's a clear line drawn again - a distinction throughout scripture.

Could it be the God of the scriptures is much less ambiguous then we are? Much more 'clear cut' on these things that we 'tip toe' around on.

This ability to separate out is so important in the Christian life, let me give you a couple of examples, the kids that come here a Wednesday night, we had become passive with them, just letting them come in and 'do their thing'. God spoke to us about being active - doing something with them, giving them food then the gospel in some format. That was our part the truth is though we do not know how they will react to this! will they respond? Is seed being sown? Will they come to faith? But that's God's part not ours, you see there is this separation again, we play a part God plays his part.

There was a pastor I knew he worked tirelessly for the Lord, visiting people, praying for them, people with deep problems, but he was able to separate out, he did what he could but he couldn't make them accept what he was saying or heal them, that was God's part, the pastor could well of ended up in an early grave if he tried to play both parts!. He was able to 'separate out', he had discernment, he could walk away having doing his best.

We can say that from reading scripture, God is a God who 'separates out' - who discriminates who has a distinction, does that sound hard & unloving? no not at all "God's ways are above our ways" – God knows best & we know God will 'Judge the world' he will separate the 'sheep from the goats' make a distinction between good and evil on that great day.

Is it perhaps that God brings clarity to these things? But that man confuses things, man 'muddies the waters' creates multiple 'shades of grey'. But God doesn't want us to be muddled, uncertain. God wants us to know His will to follow His path to discern his truths.

And the Bible is refreshingly clear in its teaching, it tells you what not to do and what to do!

There is no 'vagueness' no 'blurred lines' and what people are looking for today is answers. There are enough questions around! Our discernment is made easier by the clarity of the scriptures Listen to just a few of these as an example.

Eph 4:28 : *"He who has been stealing must steal no longer"* - (So, what must you do?) – *"but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need"*.

Eph4:25: *"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood"* - (So, what must you do?) – *"and speak truthfully to his neighbour"*

Eph4:9: *"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths"* - (So, what must you do?) – *"but only what is helpful for building others up"* It's beautifully clear- concise practical.

One of the problems today is we don't know the scriptures and that makes it difficult to have discernment if we don't know about the fundamental truths of our faith, our doctrines.

A Christian leader said "Evangelical Christianity is in a severe state of confusion. It is not sure how it is supposed to act - because it is not sure what it's supposed to think - because it is not sure what it believes".

The Church has lost its confidence about the message of the Bible. It hesitates and stutters out half truths when it's as clear as day. And we have replaced knowing the word of God and understanding and grasping the great tenants & doctrines of the Christian faith - we have traded this biblical knowledge for 'experiences' for feelings' for 'signs and wonders'.

Now don't get me wrong! I believe in spiritual gifts, I believe that God moves us emotionally – the spontaneous movement of the Spirit. That is how I came to faith through a 'prophetic word', but this should not be at the expense of neglect of the word of scripture.

There has to be balance, the ability to be able discern between truth and falsehood, we have to know our key doctrines we have to know what the bible is teaching, we have to be able to separate truth from error.

We should be people of the word as well as open to the Spirit. As an example of this, I came across this teaching by this 'Charismatic leader' I won't mention his name. He advises people to ignore reason, logic, and the senses when attempting to discern the truth. He says this

"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." He goes on, "There is a deep, almost un- intelligible 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, then it could only be soulish reaction."

This is the extreme viewpoint which I believe goes into error – the truth is: everything comes into operation in our faith when the Spirit moves, we use our mind, soul body our emotions and we should not neglect one for the other. I experienced this sometime ago at a Church we

used to go to – Edwin knows what I mean. ‘Demon deliverance’. It seemed everything was a ‘demon’; it became fashionable so if you had anything wrong with you it was a ‘demon’ behind it! Always be suspicious if a particular teaching, a ministry becomes the ‘be all and end all’ and everything else becomes obsolete. We have to keep the balance in our Christian walk and the rise of the cults shows us the danger of extremes. We also need to know also the difference between correct discernment and judgement.

There is a Bible teacher I know (no names) who I have a lot of respect for – an excellent teacher of God’s word. But he has recently written a book dismissing the Charismatic movement completely as false and deceptive. He had seen some videos of some strange occurrences and then dismissed the movement as a whole now that involves millions of people worldwide; it includes the complete Pentecostal church! In fact anyone who ever used any spiritual gift.

I believe that’s ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’ I believe that moves from discernment to a dogmatic Judgement, sure, there are false teacher’s in the Charismatic movement - things that are not of God, but it goes to the extreme, it goes too far, dismissing them completely. We need to be careful in our discernment not to move into a wrong judgemental attitude. As I said earlier we need to know ‘Jesus voice’ we need to know how to distinguish between the competing voices in our heads. I came across this guideline the other day and found it helpful regarding recognising the ‘voices’ - I hope you do too.

Voice of God	Voice of the Devil or ‘other sources’
God convicts of specific sins CONVICTS?	Satan often accuses in broad generalities that leave a lingering sense of failure and unfocused guilt
God speaks with 100% truth that can be tested by the Word of God	Satan often traffics in lies, deceit and half-truths (John 14:6). Often unscriptural
God tends to speak with gentle leadings	compulsive, clamoring, loud demands
God’s voice produces freedom – you reap what you sow!	Satan’s voice often produces bondage
When God speaks there is a definite sense that everything is under control	Satan speaks there is an inner sense that something is out of control
God tends to speak when we are consciously seeking Him.	Self or Satan tend to speak with sudden intrusions of thoughts into the mind (Jeremiah 29:12-13).
God’s voice is always clear and distinctive, giving us clear direction in which to act / believe	Satan perplexes, causes confusion, loss of direction...“For God is not the author of confusion...” (1 Cor. 14:33)
God says, this is what you ought to do.	Satan screams, this is what you HAVE to do!
God’s voice produces peace and a sense that everything is OK (even though they seem not)	Satan’s voice speaks of despair, you have missed it, all is lost...your no good etc
When God speaks problems have a resolution, sin is forgiven, peace calms the storms around us, and our focus is on how big God is—not how big our issues are.	When the enemy speaks, problems are magnified, fear grips us, we act impulsively, situations around us seem urgent, we are burdened, overwhelmed, guilt-ridden, and feel responsible for solving our own problems.
But the voice of God brings great encouragement to the Christian Even convicting of sin – there is a way out – renewal - redemption	The voice of Satan brings depression and discouragement no way out

But what are some of Characteristics needed for discernment: **Firstly Humility -**

As I said earlier “Gods ways are above our ways” but we are human – fallible. There are certain fundamentals of our faith that we should have no doubts about. But in some other areas we shouldn’t be too dogmatic, we don’t know it all , we should have a spirit that is open to correction to recognise we may be wrong, if so convicted or challenged, that’s humility, we are called to be ‘disciples’ and disciples are learners, teachable.

And recognise that discernment is a process; there are things I have modified in my views, my theology, from earlier in my Christian journey. As I look back from I see things clearer now, perhaps with increasing maturity. I may have been more naive then, more accepting, but I am hopefully older and wiser now.

And that’s ok because discernment is a dynamic thing an ongoing thing, as we grow in knowledge and depth of insight. They say that age brings wisdom it also brings a greater level of discernment.

As I said earlier we need to know the scriptures, I cannot stress this enough, we need to be ‘people of the word’. We need to have a desire to study the scriptures. Many of us read the scriptures like taking a daily vitamin pill, we think we can just read a short passage, a few verses, swallow it and look for the benefits to automatically manifest itself.

But it doesn’t work like that, we need to diligently study the word, we need to have a plan and be active in doing so, to understand the key Christian doctrines that have been handed down to us from the time of the apostles.

We need to know them if we are going to be able to discern, to be able to stand and defend our faith in the days ahead.

Let us all pray for wisdom for spiritual discernment.

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