

Chapter 5 – Learning to Discern

Charles Stanley defines “Discernment” as “the ability to judge a situation accurately—to see the full reality of a situation, relationship, experience, or circumstance. It is the capacity to understand accurately and clearly what is, to see the truth of things as they are from God’s viewpoint. Discernment for the believer is seeing and understanding as God sees and understands. It is the ability to make godly judgments and right appraisals.”

If we are to judge behavior as believers we must know what is good behavior or bad behavior. In order to know the difference we must study God’s Word. Listening to one sermon a week is not enough.

1 Peter 4:17 (NASB) says, *“For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?”*

Believers are to have sound judgment based upon accurate discernment. Ezekiel 44:23–24 tells us that there we are to judge ourselves now. How can we live godly lives if we do not know what a godly life is. God’s Word helps us to discern the right path to travel. Nonbelievers will be judged in the end by God.

Ezekiel 44:23-24 – *“23 Moreover, they shall teach My people the difference between the holy and the profane, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean. 24 In a dispute they shall take their stand to judge; they shall judge it according to My ordinances. They shall also keep My laws and My statutes in all My appointed feasts and sanctify My sabbaths.*

Romans 1:28-32 (Paul) tells us and the Romans that we are not to engage in a long list of improper behaviors or what the NLT translates as “all kinds of wickedness” and most of all we are not *“encourage others to do them.”*

Romans 1:28-32 says, *“28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, 29 being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; 32 and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.*

We need recognize four aspects of discernment:

- a. Discernment between good and evil

We need the ability to discern between good and evil. Satan has the ability to make what is evil seem good. He becomes the wolf that put on sheep’s clothing.

(1 Cor. 15:33–34 says, “Do not be deceived: “Bad company corrupts good morals. Become sober-minded as you ought (NLT says “Think carefully about what is right”), and stop sinning; for some have no knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame.”

b. Discernment between what is real and what is illusion

We need to be able to tell if what we are seeing and hearing is fact or fiction.

Some people may come into our lives and give the appearance of good character—only to be shown later to have had very bad motives.

c. Discernment between what is good and what is best

What does John 10:10b tell us about what Jesus wants for us?

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

“God does not desire that any person live a so-so, average life. He desires for every person to live an excellent life—morally excellent, spiritually excellent, relationally excellent. It isn’t a matter of how much money or material goods a person has—but the degree of love, joy, and peace a person has. (Stanley)

d. Discernment between our desires and God’s plan

Ask God to reveal His plan to you. Ask Him to show you the talents He has built into your life. Trust Him to show you how to develop those talents and use them to make a difference for Christ Jesus in this world. Don’t settle for your own dead-end goals—get in line with God’s goals and be all that He created you to be!

Discernment is a three-way key—it is a key to understanding God’s will, having good judgment, and knowing God’s voice.

1. A KEY TO GOD’S WILL

Discernment is key in discovering and understanding God’s will for your life. There was an old adage that says, “If you don’t stand for something, you’ll fall for anything.”

We can’t trust our feelings because feelings can be very deceptive. They are temporary. What feels good in one minute doesn’t necessarily feel good two hours later. We have to have discernment.

2. A KEY TO GOOD JUDGMENT

Have you ever watched those info-mercials. “If you buy this product, it will make you ...” You wonder who buys those products. People without discernment do. Discernment is key to having good judgment.

3. A KEY TO KNOWING GOD’S VOICE

Discernment helps us determine if God is speaking to us, or if the voice we are hearing is not of God. Remember, deception is one of Satan’s tools.

The Lord said that He speaks in a still, small voice. (See 1 Kings 19:12.)

The Lord also said that He is our Shepherd, and His sheep, that’s us, we will know His voice. (See John 10:4.)

Here are a few things to help us know that it is God speaking:

1. The Lord will never impose on us something that hampers us from using the talents, skills, and resources that He has given to us.

Cults are notorious for this. They tend to force their will on their followers. God will never force His Will on us. When we were created He gave us free will. Just as a parent wants their children to show and do things because they love them, God desires that we openly voice our praise and thanksgiving to Him.

When we studied Galatians, Paul worked very hard to teach them that God desires that we live in grace, not legalism imposed by the personal preferences of other people.

2. The Lord will never speak something to us that is contrary to Scripture.

This is another reason that we need to study God’s Word. If we know what the Bible says then we can check the message against it—and not just against one isolated verse that may seem to verify or confirm what you want the message to be.

Trust the Holy Spirit on a daily basis to guide you in EVERY aspect of your daily lives. John 14:16 tells us that the Father will send a “*another Helper*”, that He may be with you “*forever*”.

A number of times while walking with friends, one of the children walking with the group has reached up and grabbed my hand thinking that I was their dad. They quickly pull away when they realize it is not Dad. We can do the same thing if we do not discern God’s voice or God’s will and use good judgment daily, we can end up following Satan.

THE IMPORTANCE OF OBEDIENCE

I read two books written by John MacArthur, "The Gospel According to Jesus" and "The Gospel According to Paul". One of the key differences that MacArthur points out between the two messages about the Gospel is that Jesus demands obedience. Charles Stanley says, "Spiritual discernment works fully only when we desire to obey and actually do obey God's directives."

In order to better develop your spiritual discernment we must first recognize that it is something to be desired and sought. Just like knowledge we don't necessarily get it when accept Jesus Christ as our Savior.

The Holy Spirit fills us with His presence, and He is the Author of spiritual discernment, but the ability to discern comes as part of the process of our minds and hearts being renewed. Ephesians 4:21-24 says *"21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, 22 that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, 23 and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth."*

Psalm 119:66 tells us to pray for spiritual discernment. It says we should pray *"Teach me good judgment and knowledge"*. This verse says, *"Teach me good discernment and knowledge, For I believe in Your commandments."* (NASB) The word 'discernment' and 'judgment' are much the same.

Additionally, Charles Stanley says, "we must learn to rely upon the Holy Spirit to be the Source of truth in us. Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit would be in us, with us, and upon us. The Holy Spirit determines our spiritual gifts, instructs us in the Word of God, empowers and energizes us, and is our Helper in all situations. The Holy Spirit reveals what Jesus would do and say in any given situation, and enables us to discern the truth in all situations." (See John 14–16.)

1 Corinthians 2:9–12 says, *"but just as it is written,*

*"THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD,
AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN,
ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM."*

10 For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. 11 For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God,

Paul is telling us that the Holy Spirit reveals to us the truly important things of life—the things that are of God and that have eternal benefit. As believers, we have God inside us, not a portion of God. With the Holy Spirit living in us we have the ability to understand God's Will and God's Word and we have a perfect connection with God.

Unfortunately, along with the good we get the less desired. Since the Holy Spirit lives in us, He knows our sinful motivations, attitudes, and beliefs. He will reveal to you when you sin or are about to sin.

Stanley says, "We must rely on the Holy Spirit if we truly are going to have a renewed heart and mind and be able to develop spiritual maturity so we aren't led around by the devil as if we were on his leash."

Finally, we must be willing to study the Word of God. Studying the Bible is the only way to know and understand God. You must allow the Holy Spirit to guide you in what verses to study and how to interpret them.

Psalm 119:97-105 says, *"97 O how I love Your law!
It is my meditation all the day.
98 Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies,
For they are ever mine.
99 I have more insight than all my teachers,
For Your testimonies are my meditation.
100 I understand more than the aged,
Because I have observed Your precepts.
101 I have restrained my feet from every evil way,
That I may keep Your word.
102 I have not turned aside from Your ordinances,
For You Yourself have taught me.
103 How sweet are Your words to my taste!
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!
104 From Your precepts I get understanding;
Therefore I hate every false way.
105 Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path.*

At that time the Law was the Word of God. The psalmist knew the great value of God's Word in developing discernment. We are to study God's word to get understanding (v 104) and guidance (v 98) which are discernment.

Verse 105 says *"Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path."*

John 14:16 tells us that Jesus said *"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever;".* It told us that the Holy Spirit would be with us forever. The Holy Spirit's help in our lives is ongoing. We never fully know everything we need to know.

"Discernment is God's gift made available to every believer, but as is true for all gifts from God, we must actively receive this gift and do so by faith. We must ask God to impart His discernment and then believe that He will give it." (Stanley)

Just as the Hebrews nation had God as a pillar of fire at night to guide them through the wilderness, we have the Holy Spirit to guide us throughout our lives. We must ask God to shine His truth on any situation that seems questionable to you.