

The Practices of the Christian Life – Discernment 1

I remember a conversation about someone, professing Christian, who had chosen to live in sin with his girlfriend. Some people confronted him about it, and his reply was, “Where in the Bible does it say that it is wrong for two people who love each other to live together?” And of course, the answer he was expecting was nowhere, because the Bible doesn't say that, in as many words. In fact, there is no explicit command in the Bible to say that sex before marriage is sin. Sure, there are accounts in the law of people to be stoned if they are found to have been promiscuous before marriage, and there are warnings against general immorality – but who says those things mean wait until marriage? In fact, some statistics show that a very large percentage of young people who call themselves evangelical don't think there is much wrong with it. That's what we have come to: Christians asking if marriage is really necessary, because they can't find a Bible verse that says it in as many words.

What has happened to Christianity where people are doubting whether it is wrong to look at pornography, gamble, forsake the local church? What has happened to the church where it thinks that trashy romance novels are acceptable fare, where a movie is acceptable if it doesn't have too much nudity, and where music which is pure chaos is fine as long as the lyrics are about Jesus?

What's happened to the church where adulterers continue to pastor churches, and where whole churches are built on coveting money and prestige?

What has happened to Christianity when people can no longer tell the difference between worship and entertainment, when churches seem like circuses, when preachers are performers or politicians, when children's ministry is pure amusement?

What has happened is a shrivelling up of discernment. Modern Christianity is clearly a Christianity that lacks good judgement. Much of Christianity lacks basic abilities to properly weigh and understand both Scripture and the world around them.

Critical to the Christian life is the practise of discernment. Discernment, put simply, is the ability to distinguish. It is the ability to judge, to weigh the importance of things, the rightness of things, the prudence of things. Judgement, discernment is the absolutely vital practice of being able to sort out true vs. what is false; what is noble vs. what is dishonourable; what is just vs. what is unfair or unrighteous; what is pure vs. what is defiling; what is lovely vs. what is grotesque; what is commendable vs. what is deplorable; what is excellent vs. what is inferior; what is praiseworthy vs. what is reprehensible.

As we have studied the Christian life, and considered its priorities, process, position, posture and practices, we have spent some time examining the practices of meditation on the Word, prayer, and the local church. We come to one more practice, the practice of discernment.

Discernment is certainly something commanded of Christians:

1 Thessalonians 5:21 ²¹ *Test all things; hold fast what is good.*

Philippians 1:9-10 ⁹ *And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ,*

Romans 12:2 ² *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*

How do we get discernment? We get it as Proverbs told us we would get it: by seeking for it, and

using or applying what we do have obediently.

Hebrews 5:14 ¹⁴ *But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*

This is something that grows by use and by deliberate, intentional growth. If we do not seek discernment in these areas, our religious affections will be warped, and we will fail to love God as we ought.

Too often, Christians think that discernment is restricted to doctrine. And certainly, we are commanded to be discerning regarding the truths of our faith.

We are commanded to test the spirits in I John 4:1. The books of Jude and 2 Peter give us several characteristics or qualities of a false teacher, helping us to discern true from false. Beyond that, we are to discern whether teaching is truly from Scripture. This requires that we believe there is meaning in the text of Scripture - meaning which is retrievable using a method described by Scripture. This method is one of:

1. Taking Scripture literally except where obviously impossible to do so.
2. Regarding the very words and grammar of Scripture.
3. Understanding the context in which a passage is found – its surrounding verses, chapters, themes, book, purpose for writing, audience, author, historical context.
4. Comparing Scripture with Scripture, since no Scripture will contradict itself.
5. Considering the teachings and opinions of the church through the ages.

Having done this, our discernment must further be able to distinguish between what is more important and what is less important.

We must understand which doctrines are more crucial to the faith than others:

Matthew 23:23-24 ²³ *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."* ²⁴ *"Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"*

Here Jesus indicted the Pharisees as lacking in discernment. To war over minor details, but leave crucial doctrines aside is to strain out gnats and swallow camels. We must understand if a doctrine is a fundamental of the faith, an important secondary doctrine, or a third level less important doctrine. All truth is important, but some truths are more important than others – some commandments are more important than others e.g. Matthew 22:38.

Secondly, discernment in this area requires that we are able to 'choose our battles'.

2 Timothy 2:14 ¹⁴ *Remind them of these things, charging them before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers.*

1 Timothy 1:4 ⁴ *nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith.*

We must know that some disputes are not worth having while others are worth fighting for, for example, in Jude 1:3.

However, many Christians are very discerning in the area of doctrine, and almost blind to areas of practical discernment. It's in this area where we find perhaps an even greater lack of discernment.

Like children who need every command spelt out, many Christians think that God's will is only

seen in explicit commands. You will tell a child not to eat the cake on the table. A moment later he goes for the cookies. You ask him why he went for the cookies when you just told him not to eat the cake, and his response is, you didn't say anything about the cookies. That's how a child thinks – everything, positive and negative must be spelt out. As children grow, we expect them to not only go on what has been commanded or forbidden, we expect them to judge what is meant overall.

The same is true with God's will in the Bible. God wants us to take principles from Scripture and learn to wisely apply them to all of life. He wants us to grow in discernment. Without this, we will remain spiritual children.

Christians who do not learn how to judge properly will not be able to apply the Bible to most of their lives. So their decisions about worship, about church, about personal purity, about leisure activities, about money, about dress, about health, about entertainment, about relationships end up lacking discernment. Without discernment, most of the Bible ends up ignored when it comes to their lives. As a result, their lives bear little fruit, they look just like the world, and they are a cause of stumbling for others.

If we are to make biblical decisions, we need to learn how to correctly interpret and understand God's will in the Bible. Well, let's back up a bit and look at the biblical landscape. When we come to Scripture, we find three ways that God gives us instruction.

The first way is when God gives explicit commands or prohibitions. God simply mandates certain behaviours and forbids others. God tells us not to lie, steal or covet. He tells us to love Him and our neighbour, to be hospitable. How much discernment do you need to apply these to your life? When God gives us these unambiguous 'do this' and 'don't do this' statements, there is no discernment required. We must simply obey.

The second way is when God reveals principles. A Scriptural principle is a truth given to us in God's Word in generalised form. It is given to us without a specific application. Principles give truths, usually in timeless, axiomatic, or generalised form, which must then be properly connected to the specific circumstances that a believer is in. Principles are general truths, and general commands. "Do not be conformed to the world" "be clothed with humility". The biblical stories do not give us any commands, but they teach us principles. Most of the Proverbs are principles. "Do not be conformed to the world" is a principle. Generally speaking, Christians must not be pressed into the mould of thinking and acting which a world system seeks to instil in us. But what does that look like? What does that mean for my TV watching? My approach to credit? My view on clothing? My view on appearance? Dating? Divorce? In other words, the principle has many applications.

Probably most of what we have to apply is going to come from principles. Principles will guide us for most areas of life. You can see how important discernment is.

The third way God reveals His will is when certain areas could go either way. God neither requires nor forbids explicitly in His Word. You have applied the principle, but still could go either way. Should you eat this or not? Should you observe this day or not? Even though these areas are not mentioned at all, careful judgement is still needed. There are non-moral things in the world; there are no non-moral decisions. Every decision made by a moral agent is a moral choice.

So I want to take you through a crash-course in interpreting and applying Scriptural principles. I want to show you that in many ways, you already know how to do this. We simply have to get better at doing it, and be more consistent in doing it.

The difference between a clear command and principles is that a principle never stands alone. A Scriptural principle does not supply its own application. To get a principle into your life, you have to include some outside information.

Think of it like two hands. In the one hand you must have the Word rightly interpreted. In the other hand, you must have some information from the world around you that is correct. When you bring them together, you can wisely apply principle to your life.

Let's take a few examples of this:

Let's begin with an example that I think most Christians will agree with. Is it right or wrong for someone to take crack cocaine? If you would ask where the Bible tells you it is wrong, they will say it violates the principle that believers are to obey the law of the country (Rom 13:1) It violates the principle that believers are not to harm their bodies, the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). It violates the principle that believers are not to be enslaved by anything. (1 Cor 6:12).

But at this point, you could ask, how do you know that crack cocaine is against the law? How do you know that crack cocaine harms the body? How do you know that crack cocaine is addictive? What chapter and verse tells you that? The answer is none. You didn't get that information from Scripture; you got it outside of Scripture. But as long as that information is true, it helps you to correctly apply the principles. In the left hand you had Romans 13:1, 1 Cor 6:19 & 12, but in the right hand you had information on what cocaine does to your body and mind, and whether our country has laws against it. Discernment is seeing both the principles, and the information in the world, and seeing the relationship between them.

Recently, we've had preachers who've been using coarse language and even swear words from the pulpit. And when challenged, some are saying, what Bible verse forbids me from using such and such a word in the pulpit? Well, once again, this is where discernment comes in.

Most Christians would agree that a preacher should not use certain four-letter words in the pulpit. What principles would that violate? They will say it violates the principle found in Ephesians 4:29 that no filthy communication should proceed out of our mouths. It violates the principle of Colossians 4:6 that our words should be with grace, seasoned with salt. Some would say it violates the principle of what a preacher ought to be: "2 Timothy 2:24 And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient," You have that in the left hand.

But at that point, you could ask, how do you know that such-and-such a word is a swear-word? What Bible verse tells you that such-and-such an Anglo-Saxon monosyllable is indeed vulgar and coarse? What Scripture told you that those words are filthy or corrupting? What Scripture told you that so-called 'strong language' is not language seasoned with grace? What Scripture told you that those words are not examples of gentleness and meekness in a preacher? The answer is none. You didn't get that information from Scripture; you got it outside of Scripture. But as long as that information is true, it helps you to correctly apply the principles. We know from a right understanding of our culture, of the world around us, what those words mean – we know when they are used, who uses them, what they are identified with. And since we understand that, we can wisely see how to bring together left hand and right hand.

Many Christians would say it is unfitting and inappropriate for Christian women to wear provocative dresses like miniskirts or bikinis. They would point to:

1 Timothy 2:9 "in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation"

But which Scripture actually tells you that a miniskirt is not modest? Which Bible verse tells that a skimpy bikini is not an example of propriety and moderation. The answer is: none. You don't get that information from the Bible. You get it from outside the Bible. IN our culture, what are those pieces of clothing used for? What are they associated with? What reactions to they produce? What is the meaning of those items in our culture? As long as that information is true and trustworthy, it becomes a valid way of applying the principle.

People who deny that we can make applications by using information from outside the Scriptures actually become reverse-legalistic, and instead of protecting the authority of Scripture, they imprison it. Unless we supply truth about our world, we can almost never apply the truth of the Word. You see, most of the time, we have to supply a bridge between the principle and its application and the bridge is non-Scriptural information. The same is true for matters related to worship, like music, language in the pulpit, technology, architecture, and the appearance of the preacher.

You see the problem we have today is Christians who think that meaning is found only in the Bible. For some reason, they are scared to use the right hand to discover what things mean in the world.

Meaning is everywhere. Wedding ceremonies have meaning. Eating at a table versus eating a TV dinner in front of the box has meaning. Churches with high arches have meaning, and churches with flat ceilings, lit with fluorescent-lights have meaning. The colours worn to funerals have meaning. The music played at a funeral has meaning. A mini-skirt has meaning, as do ties, earrings, sunglasses, tatoos, and lip-stick. Having a cell-phone has meaning, as do the paintings on your wall. Language has meaning, as does art. Economics has meaning. Politics has meaning. Science has meaning. Jurisprudence has meaning. Everywhere we turn, human beings invest the raw materials of creation with meaning. We are intelligent beings created in the image of God, and it is our reflex action to organise our environment, and whether or not we are conscious of it, invest the results of our hands with significance.

We don't always need to know how it got the meaning it does, or even why it communicates what it does. We need to be concerned with what it does mean. We need to know what it does signify and communicate.

If you are going to be a faithful Christian, you need to become wise at discerning the meaning of the world around you. God is not going to spoon-feed you all the commands. Instead He wants you to learn about the world you live in, properly understand it, so as to wisely apply the Word to it.

What are some of the questions we need to ask about the world if we are to apply the Word to it? In other words, when we think about our clothes, our bodies and the things we put into them; the places we go; the things we watch and view and listen to; the recreation we partake of; the careers we pursue; the way we use money; the way we drive; the way we worship, and serve, and speak – we need to ask some of these questions:

How is it used? What effects does it create? Where is it used? What situations does it work in? What is it used for? What is its purpose? What is it associated with? What is identified with it?

In other words, you're asking questions like, What is meant by trusting that a lottery will provide you money? What does a tattooed drummer usually mean? What emotional effect does substituting a violin for a guitar have? What happens when pictures of another person's nakedness is shown to us on a screen – what does that do to the other person, and what does it do to us? What does having your preacher on a TV screen do to the understanding of the event of preaching? How are various narcotics, legal and illegal understood? What are they used for and why? How does having a stage

presence influence how the event of worship is viewed?

Sometimes, you can get this information by simply being thoughtful, Other times, like Proverbs tells us, you are going to have to search to find out. You are going to have to ask, and read, and research. That means you will even ask unbelievers. When I need right information on how to keep the temple of the Holy Ghost healthy, I ask a doctor, and I do not insist that he use the Bible when he does so. When you need information on the laws of South Africa, you ask a lawyer, and he doesn't have to be a Christian to be right. If you want to know what music means, ask a composer, a music critic. They don't have to be Christians to tell you what music does and how.

Much of the problem in all the debate about music in worship is a failure to bring the two hands together. What does the Bible say about music? It tells us to use it in worship. It tells us that music is a kind of communication. It tells us our communication must be true, and edifying and pure. What we ought to do is then go to the right hand and ask, how does music communicate, in our culture, and in any culture. How is this music used? Where is it used, and what is it used for? What is this music associated with? According to experts in music, how does music achieve certain emotions? The world can't tell us what our music should sound like, but right information from the world will tell us what current music does communicate.

We have to become a people who are thoughtful and reflective about the world we live in. That's why Paul gave all those commands:

Ephesians 5:10 ¹⁰ *finding out what is acceptable to the Lord.*

1 Thessalonians 5:21 ²¹ *Test all things; hold fast what is good.*

Test all things – that doesn't mean test the Bible. It means test the world you live in, the places, the activities, the media, the gadgets and technologies, the fashions, the priorities, the public opinions and trends. Now perhaps we will sometimes get the information in the right hand wrong. If Scripture hasn't spoken on it, then we need to keep checking, reading, evaluating.

So what do we have to do to become these kinds of Christians?
Let me give you three applications.

First, seek out God's wisdom in the Word. Proverbs 2 tells us to search, seek, cry out for, incline our ears to and desire wisdom. As you have heard before, be saturated with the Bible. Read it cover to cover. Learn it. Memorise it. Do so in the fear of the Lord, loving God, and desiring to please Him – the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Do so with others. God has given you the local church in which there are other Christians who have the mind of Christ. Wise and mature Christians can help you know if you are getting the principles right out of Scripture.

NKJ Proverbs 11:14 *Where there is no counsel, the people fall; But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.*

We make sure that in the left hand we rightly understand the principles and which ones apply.

Second, seek out understanding of the world. The same attitude of seeking wisdom in the Word needs to be applied to the world. Test all things, says Paul. Finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. We need to be vigorously curious about the world, careful and thoughtful. This is our Father's world, and we need to be interested in understanding it. We need to be willing to check, do research, read, ask experts, get advice. Here is where we make sure that we have the truth from the world in

our right hand.

To do this, you are going to have to resist an attitude in our world. That attitude encourages distraction over reflection. Instead of thinking about the world you live in and trying to understand its meaning, it wants you to just sleepily march through it, and go from job to entertainment and back to job and back to entertainment. As you remain distracted, you can never become reflective long enough to think about the world and all its objects, activities, technologies, media. So the third application is: develop an attitude of reflectiveness, thoughtfulness about the world. This is not an optional extra. Unless you take enough time to understand the Word, and enough time to understand the world, you will never connect the two, except in those small number of cases where the Bible spells it out in black-and-white, and that will not cover most of your life. Discernment means seeking out the meaning of all things. Next week, we will consider discernment in the area of matters which could go either way.