

Spiritual Discernment: **The Practice of Discernment**

** These notes are based on the following book, which I recommend you read: *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment* by Tim Challies

Introduction

As we've learned about discernment, we've likened to the skill of identifying counterfeit currency. Just like separating genuine from counterfeit currency, the practice of discernment is simple. It involves a test that will bring about one of two reactions. We know that we are to "test everything" and understand what that entails. We are to test everything that is in any way relevant to the Christian life. This means that when we encounter a new teaching or come across an important decision in life, we must test. And once we have tested, we will need to react. The two possible reactions are either hold fast or abstain. These are the subjects of our last lesson discernment.

The Bible provides us the framework for the method of discernment, but we won't find a verse or passage that explicitly instructs us point-by-point. Studying the complete testimony of Scripture, though, provides good instructions on how to go about it. What we will seek to do deliberately here is something that in time and practice will not be so regimented. As you grow in discernment you will find that you move easily from one step to the next probably because you've been practicing the steps all along without realizing it.

There are many opportunities to practice discernment. All you need to do is read a Christian book or listen to a sermon or tune in a Christian radio station. You could listen to any teacher of the Bible, and it wouldn't take long for you to find something that requires you to exercise discernment.

Identification

Action 1: Verify

Write down a statement from this song that we can verify by the Bible

Consider what it was that disturbed you, gave you pause, or somehow made you uncomfortable. Consider why you feel this is a teaching or decision that requires discernment. It may be useful to write down your thoughts so that you can recall them later.

Case Study: "Forgive Yourself"

*Can you tell me how you spend every day
Looking in the mirror of your shame
And staring like a judge, you are ruling for yourself
You tied a stone around your neck*

You're drowning in a past regret

*Don't believe it's okay to be like this
Don't believe you deserve to live like this
'Cause every part of you wants to know
Just one reason why you should let go*

*Forgive yourself, forgive yourself
Nothing ever frees you more than just believing
Come out of the prison
You've been delivered*

Example: The Bible teaches that we must forgive ourselves for past sins.

Preparation

The first step in discernment is ensuring adequate preparation. When you encounter a teaching or doctrine that requires discernment, there are two questions you will want to answer immediately: What is being said? And What is at stake? These are important questions, one you will want to grapple with before proceeding further. Though this may seem obvious, be sure you understand the issues at the very foundation.

Action 2: Clarify

Write down your understanding of the issue at hand. Include both your understanding of the issue and the opposing understanding you have gleaned from another teacher.

You want to fully understand what is being said to guard against reacting immediately or violently without ensuring first that you understand what the other person has been saying. You don't want to get distracted by the details but instead see what is truly at the heart of the issue.

Example: The song teaches the idea of self-forgiveness. The song's lyrics indicate a person who is suffering from guilt or depression because of past sin and suggest that the solution to overcoming this is to forgive oneself on the basis of God's forgiveness. In other words, since we have been delivered from our sin by God, we should now forgive ourselves to free ourselves from the prison of guilt.

Action 3: Assess the Issues

Write down what issue may be at stake.

Look beyond the surface and look to the ultimate. Determine what possible truths from Scripture could be violated by the idea you are considering. Seek to understand what is assumed rather than made explicit. Is it violating a primary doctrine, one that is absolutely fundamental to Christianity? Is it of secondary importance, one that could potentially disrupt unity in a local church? Is it a disputable matter that would have little bearing on church unity and the foundations of the faith? This will give perspective on the importance of this issue and its possible ramifications.

Example: No fundamentals of the faith are denied here, but at stake is a sound understanding of the origin and importance of forgiveness.

Examination

When we are teaching, we distinguish between what is good and evil, separating truth from error and seeking points of departure. Just like we look for a counterfeit bill by holding up to the light to see the watermarks, we need to test all things by holding them up to the light of God's Word. This can be a long and laborious process. Discernment does not come easily and without effort.

Action 4: Pray

Acknowledge your dependency upon God in prayer in all matters of discernment and in understanding the truth of Scripture.

He is the very author of truth, the one who must guide you, empower you and must be the one whom you seek to please. He is the source and power of discernment, and you must affirm your reliance upon Him.

Action 5: Assess your Instinct

Write down your first instinct on this topic and why you feel this way.

Note whether your mind or heart immediately reacted with acceptance or with hesitation. While they are not foolproof, many times our first instincts are often correct. This is especially true the more we understand of the Scriptures and grow in Christ. This is not the only basis for a decision, but it still can play an important role overall.

Example: My first instinct is that self-forgiveness is not a biblical concept.

Action 6: Assess your Conscience

Write down what your conscience is telling you. Does it feel right and good to proceed or does it nag your conscience and make you uncomfortable.

While conscience is by no means an infallible guide, it can be valuable especially in mature Christians whose consciences have been made particularly tender through the work of the Holy Spirit. We're told not to violate our conscience because actions taken against conscience cannot be done in faith.

Example: My conscience tells me that self-forgiveness is not found in the Bible. I would be in violation of my conscience if I were to forgive myself in an attempt to be free from guilt for sins I've committed in the past.

Action 7: Search the Scriptures

Search your Bible for relevant passages and make a list of them.

We don't need to experience something first to know whether it is true or false, good or evil. God has given us His word as the standard by which we are to gauge whether something meets His approval. We test a doctrine or teaching not by immediately embracing it, but by comparing it to the unchanging standard of Scripture. While instinct and conscience are important, they are not nearly as important as Scripture. Scripture is the perfect and holy standard, and it is here that we will be able to gauge whether our instinct and conscience are right.

This is the first step of observing what the Scripture teaches about the subject at hand. Begin by searching the Bible to find passages relevant to your question. You can do this simply by reading the Bible, by calling to mind passages you already know, or by using tools such as dictionaries, concordances, or the cross-references in your bible. As your knowledge of Scripture increases, you will find yourself increasingly able to remember passages relevant to your study, and you will have an easier time doing this research.

Example: Ps 32:1-2; Mk 11:25; Col 3:13; 1 Jn 1:9; 1 Jn 2:1

Action 8: Observe the Scriptures

Observe each passage prayerfully asking God to reveal His truth to you.

Remember, at this time we are still looking only at individual passages and not at the wider topic. Write down a few words summarizing what you have learned from each of the passages.

- *Observe singularly.* Look first to the Bible and do not move to other resources until you have read the passage repeatedly and meditated upon it. It is easy to short-change this step by moving immediately to others' interpretations, but do not give in to this temptation.
- *Observe carefully.* Do not rush, but look long and look carefully at the passage in question.
- *Observe thoroughly.* Look not only to the verse or verses that concern you, but also to the wider context of the passage and the book. Much can be learned by looking to the context.
- *Observe systematically.* Begin with verses that discuss the subject in the broadest terms and from there move to verses that discuss it in greater detail.
- *Observe intimately.* Read with the mindset that you are receiving a message from your heavenly Father to you, His child. Read with the knowledge that God desires to teach you from His Word.

Example:

- Ps 32:1-2 – There are blessings in store for a person whose sins have been forgiven by God.
- Mk 11:25 – We are to forgive each other so that God will continue to forgive us.

- Col 3:13 – We are to forgive each other as a way of modeling the forgiveness God extends to us.
- 1 Jn 1:9 – When we confess our sins to God, He is faithful to forgive and cleanse us.
- 1 Jn 2:1 – When we sin, Jesus Christ stands as our Advocate before the Judge.

Action 9: Compare and Contrast

If certain passages seem unclear, compare them with another passage of Scripture from a good Bible translation. Write down any clarifying comments.

Comparing between different Bible versions (e.g. NIV, NASB, ESV, KJV, etc.) can be helpful as the translators may have selected different words that may bring to light different nuances of the original word.

Example: Mk. 11:25 was further clarified by a few of the alternate translations. For example, the Holman Christian Standard Bible makes explicit that we are to forgive others. “And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven will also forgive you for wrongdoing.”

Investigation

Once you have observed all you can from the passage, it is time to investigate what others have discovered. Turn now to your resources – Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and sermons. You may also wish to use a study Bible or to turn to a friend, pastor, or elder for assistance.

Action 10: Research

Turn to your bible reference tools to see what others say about the passages you have found. Write down a few lines for each.

Example: There’s too much info to write here.

Interpretation

Having done your observations and investigation, you now have what you need to properly interpret the passage. You will answer the question, “What does this mean?” Assume that the Bible should be interpreted as you would interpret any other book. Take into account figures of speech and symbolism, but know that God has not made the Bible deliberately difficult or impossible for us to understand. Look to the whole of Scripture to ensure that the interpretation you draw from one passage is consistent with the rest of the Bible.

Action 11: Summarize

For each passage write a sentence or two summarizing what it means. Having done all this, you should have a clear sense of what Scripture says about the topic at hand.

Action 12: Expand your Research

Search for books, articles, sermons, and other resources by discerning Christians. Note their conclusions and the Scriptural basis for them.

Include both present and past resources in your research. Rarely does controversy arise that has not arisen in the past. Many of the doctrines we wrestle with today are the same ones Christians have wrestled with for 2000 years. This is why the study of church history is so critical to our lives today. We search for teaching from discerning Christian leaders to learn what conclusions they have reached on a particular topic and, as importantly, the Scripture passages upon which they based their conclusions.

We may need to head back to the Scriptures ourselves in order to check that our resources are correct. The more you do this process, you will learn which leaders are discerning, which tend to teach what is consistent with Scripture. This does not excuse us from testing to make sure what they teach is biblical. Even the best of Christians will still be wrong at times.

Example: Quotes from John MacArthur & Jay Adams

Conclusion

We now have the evidence we need to make a decision.

Action 13: Conclude

Write your conclusion about the issue at hand.

Example: Based on my verses and other resources, it is clear that “forgive yourself” is not biblical language. There does not seem to be any place in Scripture where we are told to forgive ourselves, either in those words or even in concept. We are told to seek forgiveness from God and from others. We are told to extend forgiveness to those who have wronged us and release any bitterness we feel towards them. But it does not seem that we are ever told to forgive ourselves.

Action 14: Make a List

Write down a list of points on which the true and the false teaching agree.

We know what we believe about the issue, but we still must think about how we will react. Return to the issue and look first for areas in which the Bible agrees with what has been said or done. These points of agreement can be useful in discussion. They are useful for beginning discussion on common ground.

Example: Forgiveness overcomes guilt. We need to be forgiven. We need not only God to forgive us, but we also need to forgive each other.

Action 15: Judge

Jot down the point at which the false teaching departs from the truth. Assemble all the evidence and make a judgment. Write down your conclusion.

Discernment is critical because the points of departure are often surrounded by places of agreement. Or, as Hank Hannegraff has so well put it, false teaching is often “the skin of the truth stuffed with a lie.” We need to seek out the point of departure, that portion of the teaching that begins the path that inevitably leads further and further from what is good and true. Once a doctrine has veered away from the true, it will not return but will carry on its trajectory until it does not look like truth at all. Look for any ways in which a teaching departs from God’s Word. While most doctrine will typically follow the Scripture for a while, any false doctrine will depart at one point or another. And this is the point we need to identify. This is the point we seek to find. Search for this point.

Example: The point of difference seems to be in whom we sin against. The bible is clear that when we sin, no matter what fallout there is associated with it, we have sinned first and foremost against God. Those preaching self-forgiveness have a low view of the holiness of God. Our sin is not primarily against ourselves; we do not need God in order to receive self-forgiveness. This view leans more toward, “Against myself, myself only have I sinned.” Self-forgiveness is rooted in self-esteem and sinful, man-centered psychology, not Scripture.

Scripture is silent on self-forgiveness, leading to the thought that we do not need to forgive ourselves, nor should we make this our practice. It may bring a temporary peace, but true, lasting peace is found by accepting God’s forgiveness and allowing him to remove the guilt of our transgression. Only God can do this because true forgiveness will be found only in the very source of forgiveness.

Application

The most difficult task is now complete. We have done the hard work of separating truth from error and right from wrong and we now have no choice but to take one of two options. There is no ambivalence. There is never a case where we can shrug our shoulders and walk away without taking any action. The Bible makes clear not only the fact that we must act but also how we must act. We can abstain or we can hold fast. We must abstain from false doctrine and hold fast to that which is true.

Action 16: Hold Fast

If you have found a doctrine to be unbiblical, write down what it is that you will abstain from it. If it is good and pleasing to God, write down how you are to hold fast to it.

Abstain: If the teaching you’ve examined is unbiblical, you must abstain from it. Note what you found wrong with a teaching and what the Bible says about it. This is not all you must do with false doctrine, though. You must also substitute what is false for what is true.

When our test has shown a doctrine to be false, we must abstain from it. We must now identify what we need to abstain from. We must abstain from every form of evil, every kind of evil. We must avoid those things that have the appearance of evil not because they give the appearance of evil (but actually are not) but because they actually are evil. Remember, Jesus appeared to be evil in the eyes of the Pharisees when He mingled with sinners. If based on God's Word something is displeasing to God, that is what must be shunned. We don't want to flirt with it or attempt to mold it to our image. Rather, we are to cast it off and distance ourselves from it.

How we abstain from evil will vary from person to person and situation to situation. Abstaining may involve putting down a book or even throwing it away. It may involve ceasing to listen to a particular band, turning off the television, or not watching a movie. Become an active observer by writing in the margins of your books, talking to your television, and discussing movies and music with one another to help sharpen your discernment and increase your ability to critique unbiblical values.

Hold Fast: If you have determined an action or doctrine to be unbiblical, write down what it is you will abstain from. You do not just abstain, but you must dig deeper to understand what the truth is and substitute what is true for what is false. Don't end with rejection for that only leaves a void. Rather, end with affirming, reaffirming, or embracing the flipside of the error. For every error there is an opposite truth.

The main thing you want to do is answer the question, "What do I need to hold fast to?" Here's God's instruction to you:

- ***Philippians 4:8*** Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.
- ***Romans 12:2*** And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

When you seek what is good, you seek the will of God. And when you seek the will of God, you seek what is good. That which is good is that which honors God as the author of good.

See this for what it is – God has graciously revealed His truth to you. Therefore, hold fast to it! Do not walk away from what you now know without knowing how it must be incorporated into your life.

Example: We must always remember and believe that we sin primarily against God. What we need to avoid is a man-centered approach to sin where we first ask, "How have I harmed myself with this sin?" Instead, we must turn to God and ask Him to

forgive us. We would be falling short if we were to substitute self-forgiveness for true repentance before God and acceptance of His forgiveness. We must, therefore, abstain from forgiving ourselves and relying on our acts, deeds, and words of penitence to make ourselves feel better about our sin. We abstain from downplaying the seriousness of our sin and the gravity of defying God and His laws.

Action: 17: Apply

Having determined what you need to hold fast to, write down what you will do and what truths of Scripture you will hold fast to. If you found a doctrine to be unbiblical, write down what you will substitute for it.

Example: God does not require me to forgive myself for my sin. Rather, I need to ask God's forgiveness and, having confessed and repented of my sin, I need to hold fast to God's promises that He has forgiven me. My primary responsibility is not to myself but to God. When I sin against another person or against myself, I primarily sin against God, and thus it is His forgiveness that I require most. I can live without the forgiveness of men; I can live without self-forgiveness. But I cannot live without God's forgiveness. My responsibility and my privilege is to receive God's forgiveness, trusting that when I confess, "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9).

I will substitute a God-centered approach to sin for a man-centered approach. I will hold fast to the truth that it is God who is most offended when I sin. It is God who must forgive me.

Applying these truths may be deeply personal. I may need to change my view of seeking God's forgiveness. I may need to put more effort into seeking the forgiveness of others. I may need to repent before God of taking His holiness so lightly. Whatever it might be, I will turn more fully to Him and trust in the sufficiency and efficacy of His forgiveness.

Spiritual Discernment Worksheet

** These notes are based on the following book, which I recommend you read: *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment* by Tim Challies

Step	Action	Explanation
Identification	<i>Action 1: Verify</i>	Write down a statement you would like to verify by the Bible
Preparation	<i>Action 2: Clarify</i>	Write down your understanding of the issue at hand. Include both your understanding of the issue and the opposing understanding you have gleaned from another teacher.
	<i>Action 3: Assess the Issues</i>	Write down what issue may be at stake.
	<i>Action 4: Pray</i>	Acknowledge your dependency upon God in prayer in all matters of discernment and in understanding the truth of Scripture.
Examination	<i>Action 5: Assess your Instinct</i>	Write down your first instinct on this topic and why you feel this way.
	<i>Action 6: Assess your Conscience</i>	Write down what your conscience is telling you. Does it feel right and good to proceed or does it nag your conscience and make you uncomfortable.
	<i>Action 7: Search the Scriptures</i>	Search your Bible for relevant passages and make a list of them.
	<i>Action 8: Observe the Scriptures</i>	Observe each passage prayerfully asking God to reveal His truth to you.
	<i>Action 9: Compare and Contrast</i>	If certain passages seem unclear, compare them with another passage of Scripture from a good Bible translation. Write down any clarifying comments.
	<i>Action 10: Research</i>	Turn to your bible reference tools to see what others say about the passages you have found. Write down a few lines for each.
	<i>Action 11: Summarize</i>	For each passage write a sentence or two summarizing what it means. Having done all this, you should have a clear sense of what Scripture says about the topic at hand.
Conclusion	<i>Action 12: Expand your Research</i>	Search for books, articles, sermons, and other resources by discerning Christians. Note their conclusions and the Scriptural basis for them.
	<i>Action 13: Conclude</i>	Write your conclusion about the issue at hand.
	<i>Action 14: Make a List</i>	Write down a list of points on which the true and the false teaching agree.
Application	<i>Action 15: Judge</i>	Jot down the point at which the false teaching departs from the truth. Assemble all the evidence and make a judgment. Write down your conclusion.
	<i>Action 16: Hold Fast</i>	If you have found a doctrine to be unbiblical, write down what it is that you will abstain from it. If it is good and pleasing to God, write down how you are to hold fast to it.
	<i>Action 17: Apply</i>	Having determined what you need to hold fast to, write down what you will do and what truths of Scripture you will hold fast to. If you found a doctrine to be unbiblical, write down what you will substitute for it.