

DISCERNMENT

SERPENTS & DOVES

Mt. 10:16 says “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.” In Gen. 3:1, we find “Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made...” Its subtility was a characteristic that gave the serpent an important advantage over other creatures. The word “subtil” comes from the Hebrew word arum, which means shrewd, sly and crafty, but it also means sensible and prudent. Jesus coupled the “wisdom of serpents” with the “harmlessness of doves.” In pairing these two qualities, it seems clear that Jesus did not intend for His followers to use their wisdom to exploit or mistreat others. Rather, the tone of His instruction suggests a stance that was more defensive than offensive. He wanted them to have their wits about them - to be smart, prudent, discreet and cautious.

DEFINITION & KINDS

Discernment is actually defined as the ability to separate and distinguish between things, and it necessarily involves the use of “sound wisdom and discretion,” as mentioned in Prov. 3:21. We need to understand that discernment can be of the earthly, physical sort, or it can be spiritual in nature. We find this illustrated in Mt. 16:1-3, where Jesus told the Pharisees and Sadducees, “When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather today: for the sky is red and lowring. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?” Sadly, their understanding was limited to the physical realm - but when it comes to living life as a Christian and doing the work of the Lord, there is a serious need for God’s people to exercise spiritual discernment.

Right up front, we need to acknowledge that accurate discernment is not always easy, because man’s understanding of things is naturally incomplete and one-sided. When trying to understand situations, it is good to recall how “one-sided” the wisdom was of Job’s friends. According to their assessment of Job’s situation, the reason for his plight seemed obvious (he had to have done something to deserve all he was going through), but they were only seeing the earthly side of the picture. Job 11:6 says in the KJV, “But oh that God would speak, and open his lips against thee; and that he would shew thee the secrets of wisdom, that they are double to that which is!” The NASB puts it this way: “For sound wisdom has two sides.” There is that obvious side of a situation that men can easily observe and perceive, but then there is often a second, “hidden” side, which only God sees and reveals to men. As the scriptures record, Job’s friends had missed “the God side” entirely. In reality, there was much more going on in the heavenly realm than met the eye. This example illustrates how crucial spiritual discernment is to seeing and understanding the complete picture.

NECESSITY

As we look around today, it’s clear that both the ability and the willingness of people to exercise discernment are seriously inadequate. It’s a very troubling state of affairs because the devil is a master of deceit and “identity theft.” You can read about that in II Cor. 11:14-15. He deals in deception, confusion and chaos, using just enough truth to disguise the lies. Satan and the secular powers of this world are trying their best to blur God’s distinct lines of demarcation in every area of life. One clear example of this is the area of gender. Many of you can probably remember when the first uni-sex bathrooms were installed. Then came uni-sex clothing and hairstyles, intended to hide God’s design and make one’s gender harder to distinguish. This trend now seems to have reached its zenith in the outrageous and full-blown confusion that is sweeping our world. The devil would have us believe that there is no meaningful difference between male and female, and no need for us to make a distinction between the two. Of course, this is just the latest iteration of his continual assault on what is true and right, but it is succeeding because of a lack of discernment. Naturally, the world has no discernment because it is spiritually blind, but we, as God’s people, should be able to see and discern what is going on, and what the proper response should be.

DISCERNMENT

BIBLICAL & MODERN DAY EXAMPLES

Acts 8:5-25 records an instance when Peter, after observing and listening to a sorcerer named Simon, “perceived” or discerned that the man’s heart was not right and that he was yet “in the gall of bitterness.” Read Acts 16:6-7. How did Paul & Silas know not to go to Asia and Bithynia? Spiritual Discernment! Other scriptures speak in specific terms about discernment being needed, for example: “between the clean and the unclean, between good and evil, between the upright and the perverse, between the left and the right, between the wicked and the righteous, between those who serve God and those who serve Him not.” These are all worthy of our study, but let us also consider some additional areas where effective discernment is desperately needed, and woefully absent. These areas should be of great concern to us all.

Between what is truly important and what is not. We see this in the personal, family & church priorities that folks are setting. Families with saved Moms & Dads are giving things that are worldly and of no eternal value priority over the things of God. In so doing, they are depriving their children, many of whom are lost, the advantages of a Gospel environment during a critical part of their lives: their formative years. Why does this happen? Because there is a lack of discernment/understanding on their part as to what is really important!

Between truth and error or doctrinal soundness. More and more frequently we are seeing saved people, church members, departing from the principles of the faith to embrace doctrines that are foreign to God’s Word. These doctrines sound right and satisfy the mind and flesh, but we are warned against them repeatedly in the scriptures. So then why are people falling for them? Because there is a lack of biblical knowledge and a lack of discernment on their part as to what is true and what is not. Paraphrasing Gal. 1:8-9, Paul says, “I don’t care if some other preacher, or even an angel from heaven, shows up preaching a different gospel from what you have received, let him be accursed!” The problem is, people have to be able to distinguish that it is a different gospel, and sadly, many cannot.

Between what is real and what is fake (what is of God and what is not) Emotionalism and sentimentality are poor substitutes for spirituality. You know, Satan would love for us to reach a point where we settle for shallow emotionalism and shows of the flesh, instead of seeking after a genuine move of the Holy Spirit. It seems we have more than a few who have trouble discerning the difference in the two - and the funny thing is, they apparently think that other people can’t tell the difference either. But when God is really in something, saints who are prayed up can feel the Spirit bearing witness, and saying “That right there is the real deal!”

Between people you can trust and those you should not (motivation) It is not good to be cynical, but it is even worse to be naive. The truth is that the world is made up of all kinds. Sometimes people have a hidden agenda, and they will pretend to be something they are not, using flattery and other tactics to win our confidence and trust. We need to be able to discern when this is happening and detect shady motives when they cross our paths.

Between what we should tolerate and what we should not We are living in a society whose mantras are “No judgment” and “Love is love.” The world is not satisfied with just being accepted - they want us to compromise our principles to the point of embracing and celebrating their sinfulness. Because we are constantly exposed to this, we must be on guard lest our minds be influenced and our moral compass distorted. We need caution and discernment to see where God’s lines have been drawn!

Between what is the appropriate time and manner in which to handle things and what is not. Doing the right thing in the wrong way or at the wrong time can be seriously counterproductive. We need discernment to know the right approach, the right words, and the right timing. A good example of this is found in Acts 18:26. Priscilla & Aquilla had heard Apollos preaching, and they detected a deficiency in his knowledge. They did not immediately interrupt his preaching and confront him in front of everyone there in the synagogue, but rather the scripture says “they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.” If we would exercise a little more discernment and discretion in our handling of matters, we would likely see more successful outcomes!

DISCERNMENT

)Between things that undermine our Christian witness and those that do not It is amazing how oblivious people can be sometimes. Setting aside spiritual discernment, some do not even display a modicum of common sense. When it comes to social media especially, it seems there is a serious lack of self-control in what people “Post” and “Like.” It is as if they think they have entered an alternate universe where their pastor and fellow members can’t see what they’re posting online. Why is this? I think in many cases, people only have a “one-day-a-week religion.” Sadly, they fail to discern & truly appreciate the damage that can be done to their own influence and to their Church’s reputation as a result of language and photos that are unbecoming a Christian.

Between sound and unsound sources of advice/counsel (Christian versus secular) As Christians, we need to be very careful as to which voices we listen to and follow. The story of Rehoboam should be sufficient proof of this. Bad advice can be worse than no advice at all. We’re living in an age when people will dismiss outrightly the counsel of their pastor - a man who loves and watches for their souls (Heb.13:17) - but they will hang on every word spoken by Dr. Phil or Oprah or whatever secular psychologist happens to be popular. We need to realize that not everyone who calls himself a “Christian counselor” necessarily has a sound understanding of God’s Word. So, we need to be selective and discriminating when it comes to our sources of guidance.

Between the times (the lateness of the hour and the urgency of the Gospel. As time passes, and the Lord’s return has not occurred, we seem to be slipping into the mindset of those mentioned in II Peter chapter 3, who say “Eh, all things continue as they were.” But as Christians, we need to be discerning the signs of the times and be conscious of how close the Lord’s return is getting. We need to disentangle ourselves from the things of this world and recognize how important and urgent the work of the Gospel is. We need to live and work like we’re expecting the arrival of someone important! I’m afraid a lot of our people are going to be laid back in their LazyBoy when “the doorbell rings,” so-to-speak, because they have not discerned the times.

ACQUIRING & DEVELOPING DISCERNMENT

First, it’s necessary for us to recognize and appreciate the spiritual nature of this work in which we are engaged. I Cor. 2:12-14 addresses this and says, “*Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*” Through His Holy Spirit, God is able to lead us and guide us into all truth, and to authenticate things to us by His inward witness. But it is critically important that we stay close to the Lord, tuned into Him, so that we can detect the communications of His Spirit. We no longer have the Urim & Thummim to consult for answers, but we DO have His indwelling Spirit, which serves as an onboard detection system. The Spirit will either bear witness and sanction things, or He will send up a red flag that says “Something here is not right.”

I Corinthians, chapter 12, addresses spiritual gifts. In verses 4-11, the Apostle Paul deals specifically with those gifts, administrations and operations, and in verse 10, we find this: “...to another [is given] the discerning (distinguishing) of spirits.” We realize these gifts were needed in the early days of the Church, because they did not have the Bible in its full and final state, and the Church had not yet been fully accredited. Those apostolic gifts have long since ceased, but I’m convinced God is still able to give us the discernment (spiritual insight) that we need to carry out His work, if we desire it and seek after it.

DISCERNMENT

Discernment seems to be a first cousin to wisdom. (Perhaps it is even one of her seven pillars, mentioned in Prov. 9:1.) James 1:5 says, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." The same is true for discernment. We should pray fervently and ask God to give us the clarity and spiritual insight needed to operate effectively and respond appropriately in every situation.

Along with prayer, one of the most fundamental tools we have to aid in our discernment is the Word of God. God is the essence of truth and righteousness, and His Word is the written expression of that truth. Often, by simply consulting the Holy Scriptures, we can easily rule something in or out-of-bounds! Discerning between truth and error is a lot like the work of the FBI's Fraud & Counterfeit Division. Those agents become experts by studying the details and the basic distinguishing features of legal currency, so that when they see a counterfeit bill, any differences will jump out at them. In a similar way, if we study and develop a good understanding of God's Word, when we're exposed to false teaching/preaching, the differences will jump out at us too, allowing us to dismiss it for the heresy that it is.

Another way to develop our ability to discern things is by conferring with wise and experienced elders. Generally speaking, the longer a person does something, the more effective he becomes at it. And the longer a person has been in the Lord's work, the broader his span of experiences and the sharper his level of discernment is likely to be. Heb. 5:14 says, "But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." We should value and appreciate the elders among us, who have seen and experienced much more than we, and we should readily seek their wise counsel as the need arises. (Prov. 15:22 & 19:20)

PRACTICING & PROMOTING DISCERNMENT

We are not advocating that we all become crazed inspectors who go around trying to analyze everybody and everything. But, when we find ourselves in unusual circumstances, we need to be able to gauge the situation properly. I mentioned earlier that we sometimes need to discern whether something is of God or not. That which needs to be examined might be a thought or feeling of our own, or it might be that of someone else, but being able to discern its origin is very important. We're all familiar with I Jn. 4:1, which says, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God...." I wish it were not necessary to try the spirits, but it is. Sometimes well-intentioned people think they are following an impression from God, when really it's just the product of their own thoughts and emotions. We all know that the Lord gets blamed for a lot of things unjustly and this is not a new phenomenon! From Paul's writing to the Corinthians, it seems that their services were sometimes a carnal free-for-all, due in part to a similar lack of spiritual discernment.

One reliable test is to ask the question, "Where is the attention and the glory being directed in this?" If someone gets up in church and is drawing attention to himself, or heaping glory upon himself, it is a good indication that it is not of God. I say this because scripture teaches us that God does not give His glory to another, nor does He approve of flesh that tries to glory in His presence (Is. 42:8; I Cor. 1:26-31). Even the Son of God did not seek His own glory, and we should discourage this as well. Eph. 3:24 makes it clear where the glory should be directed: "Unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen."

II Cor. 3:17 says, "...where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" but I'm afraid sometimes people take liberties with that liberty! When they do, the effect is very apparent. We have probably all been in church services where the Lord's presence was moving, only to have it interrupted by a talk, an action, or a song. Suddenly, it's as if someone threw a bucket of cold water on everyone. It kills the service, and that sweet spirit promptly disappears!

DISCERNMENT

Such instances may well indicate that these well-intentioned folks need some teaching on discernment and trying the spirits - so that our services will be governed by the Holy Spirit, and not by the whims of the flesh. We may be tempted to think, "Well, that's just Sister So-and-so," and dismiss such things as harmless. But they are not harmless! When ego and personal will result in the Holy Spirit's departure from a service, it is a serious thing! God inspired John to write "Without me, you can do nothing!" - so we need to avoid offending the Spirit at all costs, and do all we can to maintain an obedient, worshipful environment where HE will be pleased to dwell!

Other instances that call for prudence and discernment are situations where religious strangers approach us, eager to gain our confidence, fellowship and support. The intentions of some may be legitimate, but often we discover their true goal is simply to separate people from their money.

Leadership and discernment are also important when delving into a new initiative, such as starting a mission; selecting pastors, evangelists & other officers; or even in the handling of day-to-day issues of church work, for example, in the reception of members. On the one hand, we need to understand that everyone's salvation experience is unique and that people express themselves in different ways; yet, we must be wise enough, and strong enough, to ask probing questions when a profession is missing key elements like conviction and repentance. In those instances, we need to be able to discern how the matter would be best handled.

Lastly, as the Spirit allows, we really need to preach and teach the importance of discernment to our congregations. I say this fully realizing how careful we need to be in what we say and how we say it. We don't need to use harsh ridicule, that will intimidate and squelch people's obedience to the Spirit. But we CAN teach discernment with a loving and well-balanced approach, that warns of quenching the Spirit on the one hand, and "self-willed adventures" on the other. And ministers of God need to be sure they are practicing this too.

CONCLUSION

II Tim. 3:17 speaks of the man of God being thoroughly furnished. This statement is made with reference to the inspired Word of God. But another important element in being completely equipped is possessing discernment and spiritual insight. In an age of increasing social alikeness, the people of God need to stand approved of God, and realize that there are definite distinctions that need to be made between the carnal and the spiritual. May God strengthen us and help us all to keep growing, and learning, and contending for the faith. And in so doing, may God always help us to exercise the spiritual acumen needed to be ...wise as serpents, yet harmless as doves.