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Discernment

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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Our concept of masculinity rarely gives attention to how a man ought to *think*, but that is not because it doesn't matter to God. In fact, in Ephesians 4 the Lord describes the mature man with one particular characteristic, and it is a quality of the mind: *discernment*.

Until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love. (Ephesians 4:13–15)

In this passage, Paul describes the spiritual growth of believers as attaining “to a mature man” so that we are “no longer . . . children.” But how is childishness distinguished from mature manliness? On the one hand, childishness means being “tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming” (v. 14); on the other hand, maturity is “speaking the truth in love” (v. 15). In a word, the difference between mature masculinity and puerile childishness is *discernment*.

The Skill of Discernment

Discernment is the skill of separating truth from error. It is distinguishing between trash and treasure, gold and fool's gold, real and counterfeit, artifact and cheap imitation. If we are going to be godly men, we must develop the skill of discernment.

The original languages of Scripture define discernment clearly for us. The Bible uses two key words related to discernment. The first is the Hebrew verb *bîn*, which is used 247 times in the Old Testament and is translated in various ways, such as “discern,” “distinguish,” or “understand.” It is related to the noun *bayin*, which means “interval” or “space,” and to the preposition *bên*, which means “between.” It has the basic idea of separation—putting space between things. Discernment is the ability to distinguish and separate two ideas which must not be confused. Therefore, applied to spiritual matters, discernment is the skill of gaining understanding of God's truth by a process of separation.

The second biblical term is the Greek verb *diakrinō*. It means “to make a distinction” or “to differentiate” (cf. Acts 15:9). It is also often translated as “judge” because judging involves giving a verdict on what is true and false. It involves separating truth from error.

Therefore, discernment requires us to make careful distinctions in our thinking. The discerning person is the one who draws a clear contrast between right and wrong. Discernment is black-and-white thinking—the conscious refusal to color every issue in shades of gray. No one can be truly discerning without developing skill in separating divine truth from error.

The Deadly Loss of Discernment

There is no question that discernment has become an unpopular virtue. The difficulty of discernment today is that it requires saying that certain people are wrong—and that makes people feel bad. In a society which believes that making people feel bad causes psychological problems, it isn't surprising that discernment is out of vogue. In the world's eyes, to discern is to be the bad guy.

As a result, we live in a very indiscriminating culture. In past times, being a person of discrimination was an indication of wisdom. Such a person was honored and respected because the ability to discriminate between good and evil or truth and falsehood was desirable.

Today, the word *discrimination* has drastically shifted in its meaning, haunted by the negative connotations of racism, which is, of course, intolerable to God. However, it is not just sinful prejudice that the culture has a problem with, but discrimination *of any kind* is outlawed because absolutes are not tolerated. There is no room for dogma—for unchanging truth to which anything else must conform if it is to be called true. All truth-claims are equally valid, even if they are contradictory. This necessarily sidelines discernment.

As a result, evangelical Christianity is fighting for its very life. The church has forfeited its responsibility to discriminate between truth and error, good and evil. It refuses to identify and call out false teachers, instead opting to relegate fact to the realm of preference and to deal in ambiguity. In doing so, it has obfuscated the life-giving doctrine of God's Word.

I have often said through the years that the greatest problem in the church is a lack of discernment. It's comparable to AIDS: A victim of AIDS doesn't actually die of that disease; AIDS compromises the immune system so that the person is susceptible to die of a thousand other diseases. A lack of discernment in the church is like a case of spiritual AIDS—it leaves Christians vulnerable to die of a thousand heresies.

This only heightens the responsibility that men have to be men of discernment. It is a non-negotiable component of their leadership. So much so that in Ephesians 4, Paul considers it a defining feature of mature manhood—it is the opposite of childishness.

Today, the church wants men who are able to hold multiple opinions in the balance without distinguishing one from the rest. Evangelicalism applauds those who point out the positives of all the various views, and perhaps a few inconsequential negatives, without concluding which is right and which is wrong. But the Bible calls for the opposite—it holds up one truth and denounces contradictory statements as lies.

Christian men need to stop offering compliments to those who are damaging the church, and instead identify false teaching as the deception it is. The alternative is spiritual death. Today's church may admire the man who has only positive things to say about everyone and nothing negative to say about anyone, but that is not the kind of man God has called us to be. We need to discern. Is it true or false? Right or wrong? Godly or ungodly? Biblical or unbiblical? Those who refuse to draw these lines will only confuse themselves—and those they lead.

The Biblical Command for Discernment

Many scriptures address the issue of discernment. In Romans 12:2 spiritual discernment is the ability to know that perfect, good, and acceptable will of God. It is that ability of which the apostle Paul wrote in Colossians 1:9–10: “We . . . ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.”

In 1 Timothy 4:6 Paul calls Timothy, as “a good servant of Jesus Christ,” to be “constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following.” But Paul also follows it up with a negative command: “Have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women.” There is a strong distinction between those two that Timothy must be able to make: the words of the faith and sound doctrine, versus worldly fables. Therefore, being “a good servant of Christ Jesus” requires discernment.

In verse 16 of the same chapter, Paul commands Timothy to “pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching,” underscoring the necessity of carefully distinguishing right doctrine (1 Timothy 4:16). Without discernment, he would inevitably stray into false teaching.

When Paul gets to chapter 6 of the same letter, he charges Timothy to “teach and preach these principles” (v. 2) but then confronts the issue of those who are not in line with Timothy’s teaching: “If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing” (vv. 3–4). There is a standard of sound doctrine, and if someone departs from that standard they are arrogant and have no understanding of the truth. *You have to know that standard and identify departures from it.* That’s discernment.

Paul doesn’t stop there. In verse 20 of that chapter he writes, “O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called ‘knowledge.’” Paul’s passion is tangible. The truth must be guarded; error must be avoided. Notice also that error is not labeled “deception.” It isn’t named “false doctrine.” It’s held up by those who teach it as “knowledge.” So you must have discernment to identify it for what it is.

Paul makes similar statements in his second letter to Timothy. In 2 Timothy 1:13 he says, “Retain the standard of sound words.” In verse 14 he adds, “Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.” To retain and guard the truth, you have to know it and reject the lies that are constantly attempting to corrupt it.

These are strong words because the preservation of the truth of Scripture depends on it. There is a constant threat of Satan’s Trojan horses infiltrating the church. We have to keep the gates closed to those undercover attacks. This is why Jude said, “Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 3). It’s why John wrote, “Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). Mature men must be on the forefront of these efforts.

Don’t be gullible. Don’t buy into every impressive preacher’s ministry. Don’t believe everything you hear on Christian radio or television or online. Don’t believe every book you read. A measure of skepticism is required when examining the multitude of information that comes to us through the

many different media channels of our era. To deal with all of that we have to be like the noble Bereans and search the Scripture to see whether the claims being made are accurate (Acts 17:11; cf. Matthew 7:15).

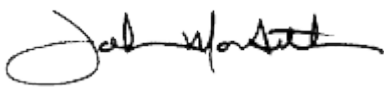
Back in Ephesians 4, Paul calls the church to unity of the faith and knowledge of Christ. When he says “unity of the faith” (v. 13), however, he is not referring to the act of belief but to the body of Christian doctrine. Oneness in fellowship is impossible unless it is built on the foundation of commonly believed truth. There can never be unity in the church apart from doctrinal integrity. Likewise, there must be the knowledge of Christ, otherwise the church will not attain to maturity.

Paul defines this maturity as “the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). Thus, he sets Christ up as the true measure of the full-grown, perfect, mature man. Paul then reveals what this maturity looks like: “As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming” (v. 14).

It is spiritual children who are in constant danger of getting “tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine.” Because they are not anchored in God’s truth, they are subject to every sort of counterfeit truth—whether it’s the prosperity gospel, psychology, woke ideology, feminism, or whatever. The New Testament is replete with warnings against this danger (see Acts 20:30–31; Galatians 1:6–9; 2 Peter 2:1–3).

The immature Christian is gullible, falling into all kinds of error. And despite our unprecedented education, sophistication, freedom, and access to sound, biblical teaching, it seems that a lot of men today fit that description. This lack of discernment reveals a dearth of maturity in the church—even in its leadership. It’s as if the church is being led by its children, just like many families today. But the church is supposed to be led by discerning men, not children who are easily taken captive by empty philosophies.

Mature men are men of discernment. And by their discernment, they protect the church from dangerous error and ensure its stability and growth. Without that function, the church will be blown off course. We have to make distinctions; we have to separate truth from error; we have to reject what is false. If we don’t, then we will not be able to speak the *truth* in love. And, as a result, the body of Christ will not be built up into His likeness.



(Adapted from *Reckless Faith* and [The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Ephesians](#))

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