

Principles for Discernment, Part 1

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This week does provide an opportunity for me to have a little continuity with you all and I really cherish that, just kind of dropping in to do a chapel isn't nearly as helpful either to me, perhaps, or to you, as getting into a little bit of a flow. So that means I have to kind of pick a theme. And as I was thinking about what I might address this week in our chapels together, I just kind of asked myself the question, "What's the most important thing that I could address? What's the most important issue that's going to face us as we live out our Christian lives in this world?" given that we know the Lord Jesus Christ, given that we understand the theology of justification and sanctification and all of that. What do we really need to know?

And I thought that this is an educational institution, this is all about learning, this is all about gaining knowledge, a body of knowledge so that you are truly an educated person. But more than that, knowledge is only valuable if it becomes the driving compelling force in the choices that you make. It really is the height of folly to have a lot of knowledge and then make bad choices. So in the end, knowledge should lead to wisdom, particularly if knowledge encompasses the truth of God's Word, that should make a major contribution to the wisdom that you exhibit in the choices you make in life. And your life will be the byproduct of your choices. I mean, you'll go through life, you'll make choices. Making the right choices is critical, it's crucial. Making the wrong choice is obviously as critical in a negative sense.

Some of you are sort of sitting on the fence of a choice about whether to come back next semester or not. Obviously we would like to tell you what the wise choice is and that is to finish what you started, to believe that if God brought you here would have to be a compelling direction from God to lead you away. But life will become a series of choices.

What are the criteria for you to make the choices you need to make to assure that in the end you can look back over your life and be grateful for all the blessing of God that you've enjoyed. I want to help you with that a little bit.

Another way to approach the subject would be to ask the question, "What is the greatest need? People ask me this all the time, "What is the greatest need in the church today? What is the most compelling need? What do you see as the biggest problem in Christianity? The biggest problem in the church?"

It's simple for me to answer that. The biggest problem in the church today is the absence of discernment. It's a lack of discernment. It's the biggest problem with Christian people, they make bad choices. They accept the wrong thing. They accept the wrong theology. They are prone to the wrong teaching. They're unwise in who they follow, what they listen to and what they read.

I'll tell you a funny story that will set us on our course here to talk about discernment. It was a number of years ago, my son, Mark, who graduated from the college was signed to play baseball with the St. Louis Cardinals. And he said, "I don't know where they're going to assign me but would you bring me my car? Wherever I'm going to be I'm going to need my car, would you bring it to me?" And I thought, you know, Palm Springs, Arizona will be great. They assigned him to Savannah, Georgia and he had this little Honda that I was going to have to drive from here to Savannah, Georgia. But what's a father going to do? I said, "Sure, I'll bring you your car and I'll have it there when the season begins and you get there from Spring Training."

So I jumped in this little Honda and off I went, shifting my way through the five speeds. I finally arrived in Arkansas...I like Arkansas, I really do. And there was a pastor, I think it was a Sunday and I visited a church and the pastor said, "You're John MacArthur, I'd like to take you Bass fishing." And I said, "You know, I'm not a good fisherman, I'm sort of fisherman's round up, taking me fishing and everything dies, you just spray me on the fish and I don't do well." So we... "No, no, we'll catch a lot of bass." So he took me out bass fishing, we caught absolutely nothing after about five hours.

I got back in my car, by then it was just raining like crazy and I was back on my way to Savannah and I was putting along the country road going up and down these hills. I saw a little sign, one of those handmade wooden signs with the word "quilts" on it. And I thought, well I'm gone for a week doing this, maybe I could pick up a quilt for Patricia, she'd appreciate that. And she likes quilts and probably they're handmade and it would be kind of neat. So I took off this dirt road where the little arrow pointed "quilts" and I drove through the rain and the mud and I came to this shack, really just a shack with one of those flapping screen doors. And I jumped up on the porch in the rain and it was really dark inside and smoke-filled. And I kind of looked, like, you know, is there anybody here? And then I said, "Hello." And this voice from the inside comes back and says, "What do you want?" I said, "I wanna a quilt."

Well she came to the door, this lady with a few teeth. Fortunately they met which helps when you're eating, but she led me in and I walked in the door and I knew I was in for a bad situation and I said, "Well I saw the sign about the quilts and I just wondered if I could see some quilts." And then I looked to my left and I saw this man sitting in this huge overstuffed cheap recliner, all worn. And I don't know, he had been in there for years, I mean, he just was in there. And to his left were stacked all kinds of magazines and newspapers and to his right were videos and he had two TVs and two video machines. I mean, he might as well have been a statue. And he said, "My name's Johnny." He said, I said, "Well Johnny, you've got a lot of literature here." And I looked over and he had books by James Dobson and he had books by the Unity Fellowship, Unitarianism, he had Mormon stuff, he had Christian Science magazines. He had the Worldwide Church of God literature. He had Moody Press stuff. He had all kinds of stuff in this assortment. And I said, "You know, you have quite a mix of things here."

And I'll never forget what he said. He said, "Theres good in all of it...theres good in all of it." That is a lack of discernment, isn't it?

Then, all of a sudden, his wife says to me. "I have just the quilt for you." And she ran in the back, she said, "I made it myself." She ran in the back, she came out with the ugliest quilt you have ever seen. It was absolutely non-descript. It was

no particular color or pattern. And I...you know, it's like when somebody shows you their homely baby, what are you going to say? That's...that is a baby.

So I didn't know what to say to this lady and so I said, "That is a quilt." She said, "I made it myself." And I had to think fast so I said, "Well, you know, it's just not the color I was looking for. And she said, "Well, it's got ever color in it." And I said, "No, I don't think I'd want that." And I thanked them and I left and I went out and I realized that she had quilted her husband's theology into that quilt, sort of metaphorically. That quilt was like a metaphor for her husband's eclectic theology. It was a whole bunch of nothing all sewn together that made no sense.

That's a little incident that sticks...by the way, I bought my wife a quilt somewhere else in Arkansas, it worked out fine, a blue one, you know, just blue. But I realized as I think back, it was like a sort of a symbolic experience, no discernment, no discrimination theologically and she had no discrimination in terms of beauty.

You know, so many people's lives are like that. They're just ugly quilts that make no sense, that have no rhyme or reason, just the bits and pieces of life all sewn together without any particular pattern. Indiscriminate.

I'm afraid that is pretty typical of the contemporary evangelical scene. There is a lack of precision in thinking, there's a lack of consistency, there's a lack of integrity. It's just a hodgepodge, listening to anybody and everybody, reading anything, making no particular judgments. In fact, to make a judgment may be seen as unchristian. Boundless, endless credulity, anything and everything except there's got to be good in all of it, how dare you question anybody's view on anything. And I really believe that because of this pervasive attitude, evangelical Christianity, biblical Christianity as we know it is fighting for its life. Amazing to think about.

But by the grace and intervention of God, the biblical Christianity that you and I know could go out of existence if left in the hands of the general evangelical consensus. So it seems to me that if any problem outstrips the other problems in the church. And if any problem outstrips the other problems in an individual

Christian's life, this growing lack of spiritual discrimination is, in my judgment, the main issue. This is...this is really what is the death knell to biblical Christianity, bad decisions, faulty reasoning, superficial understanding, shallow knowledge, ignorance are contributing and always have contributed more anguish to the church than any persecution. I would rather the church be persecuted. I would rather Christians shed their blood than abandon their theology. I would rather see Christians crucified upside down than to have them let go of the truth of God in a constant environment of compromise. In fact, there's no question historically that the lack of discernment, discrimination, precision regarding the truth has cost the church far more than all the persecutions of the church combined. You show me a persecuted church and I'll show you a church that clings to tenacity to the truth. You show me an affluent, flourishing, comfortable church and I'll show you a church that easily abandons the truth.

Persecution has taken its toll on lives but it strengthens the church because it strengthens our grip on the truth. So I want to talk about this issue of discernment. And I'm not just talking sort of historically, although we'll look at that a little bit, I want to get it down eventually as we go through the week to our own practical lives.

Now just in general, if you look at the literature of the Bible really from the beginning to the end, the Lord makes it very clear that there are two things sort of available to us in the world. One is the truth of God and the other is the lie of the enemy. So we live in a world where truth and lies are in constant conflict. And you get that all the way back in the book of Genesis where Satan comes to Eve and he says to Eve, "Did God really say this?" He's causing her to question what God said. And then he says, "You shall not surely die," which is to say God lied to you, God said you'd die, I'm telling you, you won't. And therein is the conflict framed up in its simplicity. God says one thing and Satan says another. So you have two systems working in the world, the truth and the lie.

Does it matter whether you sort that out? Does it matter whether you come to the truth or not? It does matter. It matters for your own life and it matters for the

honor and the glory of God's truth and it matters for all the people that you influence that you influence them with the truth.

So, Scripture is filled with warnings about liars. God hates liars. God hates those who tell lies. God cannot lie, the Bible says. He always speaks the truth. He is truth. Satan is a liar. He is the father of lies. They all sort of generate out of his spiritual mind set. We then have to be able to discern between the truth and the lie with regard to everything that God has revealed to us. We are warned in Scripture about ear-tickling teachers who just want to give the feel-good message to us no matter whether it's truth or not. We're warned about doctrines of demons, demonic lies, destructive heresies, myths, perverse teachings, commandments of men rather than God. We're warned about speculations that lofty ideas raised up against the knowledge of God. We're warned about deceitful spirits. We're warned about worldly fables. We're warned about false knowledge, empty philosophy, science falsely so-called, traditions of men, worldly wisdom, corrupters and adulterers of the Word of God. We're warned about all of that. We're warned about the wolves in sheep's clothing who come along to devour us. They come as if they are prophets, they turn out to be destructive agents of Satan. I mean, we have these warnings all over the place in the New Testament. They're also everywhere in the Old Testament.

And to put it simply, there is a world of chaos and confusion out there and Satan is very adept and very clever and very powerful and very systematic in the structure of evil that is wrapped up in the system in which we live. Against that is pitted the truth of God. We have to be able to discern the difference.

If you understand the warnings of the Bible and you understand how critical it is that you know the truth, that you have discernment. You cannot be gullible. You cannot be sucked off into error without dishonoring God. God is truth. He is revealed truth. He loves truth. He has given you the Holy Spirit to lead you into all truth. He's given you His Word which is truth. How terrible it is to think you might drift into lies. But people do it all the time, even people who sit in churches under very often weak teaching.

Let me give you an illustration of what we might be talking about. Turn to Matthew chapter 16. Matthew chapter 16, just a simple illustration comes in the first four verses here. The Pharisees and the Sadducees who never could get together on anything except their mutual hatred of Jesus, they hated each other and they wouldn't cooperate but they hated Jesus worse so they agreed to cooperate in assaulting Him. So they came up to Him and the reason they couldn't get along was the Pharisees were the hard-line fundamentalists and the Sadducees were the religious liberals and naturally the fundamentalists and the liberals don't get along well, but they did agree to assault Jesus. So, they came up as they often did, in testing Him, asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said to them, "When it is evening you say it will be fair weather, for the sky is red. And in the morning there will be a storm today for the sky is red and threatening. Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky but cannot discern the signs of the times?"

What Jesus said to them was interesting. He said, "You're religious authorities, you're the religious elite and frankly, your primitive way of telling the weather is better than your spiritual discernment." That's what He's saying. Shocking. You have a very limited knowledge of weather. But as simple and primitive as that is and not necessarily accurate, it's better than your theology. You cannot discern the signs of the times. What He means by that is you can't discern spiritual issues. You don't even know you're addressing the Messiah of God. You don't even understand that the Kingdom of heaven has come to you, you're unsophisticated weathermen but you're better at that than you are at your theology.

And so, this is the issue that I want to talk about a little bit, the ability to distinguish between the false and the true which is essential and possible for you as a Christian in order that you might make the right decision. Two passages that sort of set the frame for us. Go to the end of 2 Corinthians, for a moment, chapter 11...chapter 11. I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness, verse 1 of 2 Corinthians 11, and Paul obviously had a lot of problems with the Corinthian church. Repeatedly they failed to fulfill his hopes and desires for them, falling into all kinds of sinful patterns as well as believing false teachers. And here was his

concern. Verse 2, "I'm jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I am betrothed to you like a husband." In other words, I have a relationship with you that's like a marriage and it's really a marriage not between myself and you but between you and Christ and I want to present you to Christ some day, you know, when you enter into His presence as a pure virgin. So I have this godly jealousy. I have linked you to Christ and I want to keep you pure until the time you meet Him. But I'm afraid, verse 3 says, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray.

That's what he was afraid of. He was afraid that their minds would be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. Verse 4, "If someone comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, different than the Holy Spirit, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully." You tolerate it...another Christ, another gospel, another spirit and you don't have a problem with it. You lack discernment.

"My great fear, my great fear is this, that you will be led astray." I can tell you as a pastor, I can tell you as a president, that's a great fear that I have for you. It's happened with people who have gone through the college and graduated and been led astray into some false teaching that dishonors God, some lies. And then it boils down too to the decisions you make day in and day out that effect the course of your life, manifesting discernment at that level is critical as well.

Now, I want to take you to the main passage that we're going to be dealing with 1 Thessalonians chapter 5. 1 Thessalonians 5. Now this is a very important passage of Scripture. It's one of those really great summary passages in which the Apostle Paul pulls together like what you would call bullet points, basics of Christian living. Verse 16, "Rejoice always," verse 17, "Pray without ceasing," verse 18, "In everything give thanks," verse 19, "Don't quench the Spirit."

And then comes verse 20, 21 and 22, and that's where we want to focus. "Do not despise prophetic utterances." That would be revelation from God. Do not despise God's revelation through spokesmen who speak for Him. But examine

everything carefully, hold fast to that which is good, abstain from every form of evil.”

Now this is virtually a call to discernment...a call to discernment. Let's go back and just kind of take the text apart. Verse 20, “Do not despise, do not downgrade,” that's what that Greek word means. Do not make light of. Do not belittle. Do not treat as trivial or insignificant prophetic utterances, propheteos. What is propheteos? It is the gift of interpreting the divine will. It is the gift of interpreting divine purpose. It is the skill for the public proclaiming of God's Word.

What he's saying is, do not despise preaching, do not despise the presentation of the divine will.

Don't belittle preaching. We could say a few things about that in a day when preaching is often belittled. But he says don't belittle preaching, don't treat it lightly or trivially, don't downgrade it, though many people do that today. But while you're hearing preaching and while you're elevating propheteos, the gift of interpreting and proclaiming the divine will, do this, examine everything carefully. That's what that word means. Examine is dokimazo, very important Greek word. Very familiar word, by the way, to the students of the New Testament with language, used very often to refer to something that is tested, something that is tested very carefully so as to reveal its genuineness. Something that is subjected to scrutiny, analysis, sometimes it's used of testing metals to determine the degree of their purity. Test everything you hear. Be like the noble Bereans, he is saying, search the Scripture to determine whether these things in fact are so.

If you have had the opportunity to come to the Master's College and to be trained here, taught here, and go out of here, you ought to be a front-line person in terms of assaying what you hear, what other hear. You ought to be on the front line of discernment. You ought to be useful in the dokimazo process. Test everything to determine what's true. And, he says, what you find is good, cling to it, hold on to it.

On the other hand, verse 22, “Whatever comes across as evil, whatever its schema, whatever its form, the word abstain means to push it away from you.

You have to be able to make that distinction. Precision is everything. Discernment is everything. I mean, if you were to go to the medical doctor and you are having severe headaches, debilitating headaches, you went to the doctor and the doctor said, "Well, it could be a lot of things. It could be a fatal brain tumor growing or it could be too much sugar, drinking too much soda pop. Or it could be just being out in the sun. But you're welcome to believe anything you want." That's not helpful. That's not helpful.

You can say, "Well I choose to believe that it's just being out in the sun, so I'll wear a hat, drink as much Coke as I want." That's not helpful. But the one thing you want to know is the truth about your condition. Why if we demand such precision to that regard do we not demand precision in the spiritual realm and in the interpretation of divine truth? Test everything.

It was said of King David, [2 Samuel 14:17](#), that he was able to discern good and evil. Paul said, "Learn what is pleasing to the Lord." It's the same thing. Hold on to what you determine is kalos, good is the word kalos. It doesn't mean good in the sense of beautiful, that's agathos, that's where the old name Agatha came from, it means beautiful. Agathos is something that has the appearance of goodness or the appearance which is desirable or lovely. Kalos is what is inherently noble, what is inherently true, what is inherently right and righteous and genuine.

So when you're listening to the preaching or when you're reading what's written, or when you're hearing somebody espouse something, examine it carefully, put it to the test. And the test is always the Scripture, like the Bereans who searched the Scriptures to see if these things were so. And when you determine that something is good, cling to it, grip it, clutch it. And, on the other hand, as I said, in verse 22, if it is not good, if it is evil in any firm, the word literally means shun it,, apa is the prefix, hold it far away from you, separate yourself completely from it, don't sit under it, don't expose your mind to it. It has a corrupting influence. And evil, by the way, is always understood in an active sense. It's never something static. You can't ever play with evil as if it were something completely objective, something fixed, something static. Evil is always presented in Scripture as

something malignant, something harmful, something working disaster, something growing, corrupting, defiling and influencing and injuring everything it touches. Evil is like poison. It is like an infectious disease, stay away from it like you would stay away from a plague. This is a call for discernment.

And Lenski, the New Testament commentator writes, "The worst forms of wickedness consist of perversions of the truth, spiritual lies." You know, I think that's really an important statement. "The worst forms of wickedness are the perversions of the truth, spiritual lies."

There are a lot of wickedness...elements of wickedness in the world. You can talk about sexual sin, you can talk about covetousness, you can talk about all the elements of materialism. You could talk about the horrors of war. You could talk about all of the terrible crimes. You could talk about abortion, whatever. Pick whatever category. I think he's right, THE worst form of wickedness that exists in the world is a perversion of truth, that's the worst.

So don't be guilty of that. And don't be sucked in by those who are guilty of it. And by the way, the word here, just for your filling out your knowledge on this, the word "form" is eidos, eidos. It simply means shape. Evil in any form, any shape, any appearance of any kind, any sort, any species, shun it. This is critical. Or you will be susceptible to being led astray, as we read in 2 Corinthians...yeah, 2 Corinthians chapter 11.

So this then is a call for discernment. And this is such a critical thing and I can't emphasize it too strongly, young people, your value to the Kingdom of God, your value as a Christian as one who serves Christ is going to be directly related to your discernment regarding the truth. Also, the blessedness, the productivity, the fruitfulness, the joy of your Christian life is going to be directly related to your ability to discern because that's going to aid you to make good choices.

So I say, when the church loses its ability to discern, it puts itself in a disastrous situation, absolutely disastrous. And I'll go back to what I said at the very beginning. I think evangelical, biblical Christianity is fighting for its life. And the reason it's fighting for its life is because it has lost its discernment. I can't even

keep up with all the aberrations. I can't keep up with all the theological aberrations that are coming out of the Evangelical Movement, staggering to me.

Now with that sort of as a foundation, we're going to ask some questions this week and then we're going to get to the practical application regarding discernment. But let me start with an initial question that sort of fills out our thinking for this morning.

Why is there such a lack of discernment? It's obvious it's there, the question is why is it there? What has contributed to this? And simply, I'll give you the main contributor, is a weakening of doctrinal clarity and conviction...it's a weakening of doctrinal clarity and conviction. There were much better times in the history of the church when Christians were encouraged to think, to think biblically, to think theologically, to think precisely, to search the Scriptures thoroughly, to distinguish carefully its truths. Churches weren't in the hands of pastors and leaders who didn't think deeply or clearly or precisely or carefully about the Word of God.

Theology will disappear in the hands of novices, that's very, very obvious. Especially in an environment where there's no real persecution. Today if you take a strong stand on a theological issue, you're criticized because I know I'm criticized quite frequently, pretty much routinely. In fact, one guy...I was introduced one time at the Booksellers Convention as John MacArthur, the guy who is much nicer in person than he is in his books. And the reason they say that is because when you take a position in a book that's definitive and says, "Here's the truth of God," that's not acceptable in the pluralistic, syncretistic tolerant environment that we live in now. You're criticized as a heresy hunter and all of those kinds of things.

One night Benny Hinn was on TBN and they got talking about me. And the question came up, "Well what would you do...what do you do about John MacArthur?" or something. And Benny Hinn's response was, "I would like to take my Holy Ghost machine gun and blow his brains out." That's a strange attitude, isn't it? I don't know what a Holy Ghost machine gun is but...that shows you how strongly affected error is by the truth.

I remember going to lunch when I wrote the book, *The Gospel According To Jesus*, a very well-known pastor took me to lunch and he said, "Your book is a problem, big problem." And I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah, it's divisive...it's dividing the body of Christ. It's a severe problem causing a huge division in the church."

And I said, "Well I think I'm aware of that. But...I said...can I ask you a question? Is it true? Is what I wrote true?" Because that's all I'm responsible for. I'm only responsible to teach the truth of God. Just because it creates chaos doesn't change my responsibility. Jesus came and he preached the truth and it killed Him, but it didn't change the fact that He preached the truth. Paul preached the truth and they killed him. All the Apostles preached the truth and they killed all but one of them and they exiled him to Patmos. It's just about the truth, that's all it's about.

And he said, "Well, I don't agree with you."

"Oh," I said, "the issue is you don't agree with me theologically, so we need to talk about that, you need to read the book." It's just about the truth. But when the superficial unity overpowers the role of the truth, you have obvious problems.

So the fact that there is this tolerance and this disdain for precision and doctrine and clarity in understanding the Word of God is not because people disagree when they've done the hard work in the text, it's because people who haven't done the hard work in the text want to be accepted in the mainstream of evangelicalism without anybody questioning what they believe. This is not an accident, believe me, because what Satan would want to do more than anything else is to become powerful in the church by getting the church not to make an issue out of a right interpretation of Scripture. Just tolerate everything and lack precision and conviction.

There is very little doctrinal clarity today...very little conviction about doctrine. I remember when I was on Larry King, I couldn't believe my ears. I was on Larry King with Hathout, the Muslim and Deepak Chopra, the con-man, quasi-Hindu snake oil salesman who is taking money out of people's pockets. And then with

an evangelical, the guy who wrote the Prayer of Jabez. And I'll never forget Larry King said to him, "Is God a Christian?" And he said, "No." I almost fell off my chair. No? What is God, a Buddhist? What is God, a Hindu? God is a Christian, God is Christ. How can you say that God is not a Christian?

And then he said, "God is the God of everybody." No He's not. Why did he say that? Cause he doesn't have any conviction. He probably wouldn't have said that if he was speaking here, but if your theology is that adaptable, then it's not a conviction. There's just really the death of clarity in doctrine and with the death of clarity comes the death of conviction.

And so, what we want to do as we go through our education here, certainly in your behalf, is to make sure you get your theology right and it comes right out of the Scripture.

There is a movement that slowed down now is the Vineyard Movement. The real architects of the Vineyard Movement, John Wimber and another guy in England, David Watson, they led the charge of relativism into the church, they really did. Certainly David Watson led the charge of relativism into the Church of England and partnered up with the Vineyard here. They were really some prime movers in the early years of sapping the church of its doctrinal confession and conviction. And this is what David Watson said. Now David Watson was an Anglican and this is what he said. "The reason I travel with a team...he has kind of a music praise team...the reason I travel with a team gifted as they are in the performing arts is that they are able to communicate the gospel much more effectively than I could with mere words."

What in the world does that mean? You can...you can communicate the gospel more effectively through performing arts than through words? God didn't give us a music video, He gave us a book. These are words and words demand precision. The reason God gave us a book is because printed material is frozen and that leads to evaluation, assessment, comparison, contrast, exegesis. It's there, it's unchanging. Not one jot or tittle will ever pass away of this eternal

Word. There isn't any performing arts that are going to communicate the gospel more effectively than the words which God has given us.

And then he, David Watson, went on to criticize the Christian church. He said, quote; "Most churches rely heavily on the written Word and then they wonder why so few people find the Christian faith to be relevant."

So go back 30 years to the Vineyard Movement and you're going to find that they began to bring relativism into the church to replace the written Word with entertainment, performing arts because the Word couldn't convey the truth of God in a relative way...they say. They were really saying that relevant Christianity is not mental, it's not rational, not doctrinal, it's psychological, it's emotional, it's experiential, it's mystical.

So that's what we've got...experience, and emotion, and sort of Christian mysticism in the church without real doctrinal conviction. That's the first reason why discernment has disappeared cause if you don't have sound doctrine and you don't hold with all your passion to the conviction that those doctrines should bring to you, then you have no standard by which to discern anything cause you have no fixed point by which to measure anything.

I have a doctrine that I believe with all my heart, it's the doctrine of the Trinity. So when somebody comes along and says God is not three in one, I say that's a lie, right? I have a doctrine of the deity of Jesus Christ that says He is the God/Man so when the Gnostics come along and say Jesus is a created emanation that descended from God down the long chain of emanations and is an elevated angel, I say that's a lie because I understand the Bible teaches that He is God.

The Bible teaches the doctrine of justification. If somebody comes along and writes a book and say you can be saved without ever hearing the gospel, or you can be saved by believing in Jesus Christ, not necessarily believing in the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, I say that's not true, that's a lie. I don't care who said that, I don't care who wrote that. That's contrary to the truth which is established in Scripture.

So the point is, you can't even have discernment unless you have the fixed standard. That's why it's absolutely critical that you know theology. Look, theology...the theology that has come down to us from the Word of God has been protected and preserved and fought for, for millennia. Here we are fighting for it today, no different than any other time. They've been fighting for it, the Christians who believe the truth, for two thousand years fighting to hold on to this, earnestly contending for the faith, preserving, protecting, guarding the faith. And it comes down to us intact. Then we've got this willy-nilly superficial kind of quasi-Christianity floating around that doesn't want to say anything for sure. And that's how you lose the faith all together.

So, you have to stand where the Bible is crystal-clear on these issues. That's the fixed points. They don't change, they don't move. And by that, you begin to measure. And then you go from there to matters of sanctification and matters even of discerning the will of God and matters of sin and righteousness and you know exactly what the Bible teaches. You know exactly what the Bible teaches about divorce. You know what the Bible teaches about issues like abortion, homo-sexuality, fornication, pre-marital sex. You know what the Bible teaches about cheating, about covetousness, about materialism. You know all of those things, those are fixed in the Word of God with unmistakable clarity. They have to then become convictions and against the plumb line of those great truths you make choices. Then you have discernment. If you don't affirm those doctrines, then you can't be discerning whatsoever.

So if we're going to be discerning, we have to start with a conviction about sound doctrine. That's why in this institution, the entire faculty agreed on a doctrinal statement, the most lengthy one of any Christian college that I know of in America because that's the standard by which everything is then discerned. I thank God for the faculty from all the various places they've come, they agree completely on these great truths, not because I told them to or our administration told them to, but because they're reading the same Bible. That's where discernment starts.

Well, more on Wednesday. We'll leave it at that point for today.

Father, we are again aware of the fact that we wouldn't know anything unless You told it to us. And how human wisdom leads us nowhere, the world by wisdom knows not You. Where is the wise man? Where's the scribe? He can't on his own come to any true knowledge so therefore he's comfortable with just opinions. But we have come to know the truth, the truth revealed in Your Word. And may we take that truth and may we learn and even master that truth to the degree that You've revealed it in Scripture so that it becomes the fixed framework, the plumb line against which all issues are discerned and measured. May we be people of the truth which truth then provides our doctrine, our conviction and guides the choices we make as we live our lives to Your eternal glory. We ask these things in Your Son's name. Amen.

Principles for Discernment, Part 2

Selected Scriptures November 6, 2002 TMC210

Well, certainly on behalf of all of us, we want to say thanks to you guys. Every time I hear you, you're better than the last time and you're always great. So that was just really wonderful. Thank you so much. And we're greatly encouraged that the exaltation of the Lord and our Savior in their music and certainly I'll commit to praying for you as you travel around to represent Christ. Thank you so much. Great to have you with us this morning.

Glad to be back in chapel again with you all this morning. Talking about the issue of discernment. Just in case you wondered a little more detail about this, I wrote a book a few years ago called Reckless Faith and the sub-title is "When the church loses its will to discern." It deals with a lot of the issues regarding discernment. And in the back of the book is an appendage, Jonathan Edwards Theology of Discernment that's probably worth the price of the book. Anyway, it's the book on Reckless Faith on the subject of discernment if you want more information on that.

We're talking about the issue of discernment, basing it on a text from 1 Thessalonians, if you want to turn back to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 for a minute, I want to look at just the foundation of our thoughts in verse 20 of 1

Thessalonians 5, “Do not despise propheteos, do not despise messages, really, preaching. Do not look down on it. Do not treat it with triviality. Do not diminish it. Do not belittle it. Take it seriously. But when you hear preaching...verse 21...examine everything. Put it to the test.” Obviously the test of Scripture. “Hold fast to that which is good, that which is inherently good and true and shun what is evil in every form.”

That's essentially what discernment is. It is hearing and examining like the noble Bereans who searched the Scriptures to see if these things were so. Absolutely critical that we deal with the Scripture precisely. There's a premium on precision because there's a premium on accuracy. I hate to say it, but in the contemporary evangelical world today there is no premium on precision whatsoever. Everybody is sort of entitled to their own spin on Scripture and on theology and amateurs have sort of commandeered evangelicalism today, people who don't have the training or don't have the diligence that it takes to interpret Scripture precisely.

I'm reminded of a book I read a number of years ago, I mentioned when I was back at Southern Seminary a week ago. It was a book on mathematics written by a professor named Alexander Calandra(?) who teaches mathematics, advanced mathematics for Washington State University. And in this book, I don't normally read mathematic books, in fact I don't ever read them but I just happened to stumble across this and found this very interesting story. Anyway, he was giving an exam to one of his students in one of his advanced mathematics class and the exam only had one question. The question was, “Determine the height of a building with a use of a barometer.” How do you do that, was the question. And the student had to only answer that one question. One student turned in his answer and it said this, “Go to the top of the building, tie the barometer to a long rope, lower the barometer to the ground, measure the length of the rope and you have the height of the building with the use of a barometer.”

Well the professor agreed that you could get the height of the building with the use of a barometer that way, but that did not demonstrate appropriate knowledge in the subject to command a good grade. And so he said, “I'm sorry, I'm going to have to give you an F unless you'd like another chance, I'll give you one more

opportunity to answer the question.” He said, “Certainly, I'd be glad for another opportunity. There are many answers to that question.”

So the professor said, “You have ten minutes.” Nine minutes went by, he hadn't written anything. He finally scratched off his answer. “Take the barometer out on a sunny day. Measure the length of its shadow, then measure the length of the shadow of the building and by the use of simple proportion you can calculate the height of the building because you know the height of the barometer.”

Wrong again. Then he said, “I'm sorry, I can't allow that answer either.”

He said, “Well here's one you might like. Start at the bottom of the building and go up the stairs. As you go, put the barometer on the wall and mark off a pencil mark as you go. When you get to the top of the building, go back down, count all the pencil marks and you have the height of the building in barometer units.”

“Another thing you might like, he said, just as long as you're asking is lean over the edge of the top of the building and drop the barometer and time its speed with a stop watch and then using, there's a formula something S^2 you can determine the height of the building. But,” he said, “here's my final answer. The best way to determine the height of a building by the use of a barometer is to go to the basement and knock on the door of the building superintendent and say to him, ‘Sir, if you tell me how tall this building is, I will give you this fine barometer.’”

Well the student had a problem with precision. The answer, of course, is there's a difference in the air pressure because of the altitude, but that's no fun. As far as the student was concerned, any ole answer would do. And I think that's sort of what it is in evangelicalism today. As far as most people are concerned, any ole answer about anything will do. But that isn't the way it is in terms of the Scriptures and that isn't what pleases God.

I was recently in Italy and was...another wonderful experience for me to be in Italy. We had a pastors' conference for Italian pastors, only the second one that brings everybody together, all the pastors from all the associations,

denominations, church groups. And there aren't very many pastors, evangelical pastors, in Italy. Italy is profoundly engulfed in the cult of Mary, Roman Catholicism, worshipping Mary the Queen of Heaven. And Catholic...basically Catholic power dominates in every aspect of life in Italy. So the churches are small and it's very difficult, it's called a graveyard for missionaries it's so hard to serve there.

Anyway, we had a pastors' conference and it was different because through the years, the evangelical unity in Italy is important because there's so few of them, the churches are so small, there's such a fragile Christian testimony there that everybody wanted to make sure...they circled the wagons, and let's all get along. So let's never make doctrine an issue because doctrine might divide us and we're already so weak, if our testimony gets divided any further, we're going to be just utterly disappearing from the radar. So the idea was, let's not ever bring anything up that's going to divide us. You know, this little group has their little view on this and this on that and so forth so let's never deal with those issues.

So as a result of that, the church in Italy tends to be very, very weak. It doesn't have strong doctrinal foundation. There was a foundation in there, a financial foundation, that had some vision and said, "Let's see if we can't strengthen the Italian church by making doctrine an issue." They invited me to come two years ago. Many of the people thought it wouldn't work. We had about 350 pastors and missionaries come and I just unloaded on them the foundations of Reformed Doctrine. And it was pretty shocking for the first couple of days. And then they began to see the power of the Word of God because we're taking it out of the Word of Scripture. As a result of that conference, they said, "We want more...we want more." We were just there for two weeks. We went back, this time there were 500 pastors and missionaries there and they were just sucking it up like sponges. And in the intervening time and now even in the time looking ahead, they want more and more and more training and right now they're in the process of building a training center down in Sicily where we can send some of our seminary graduates to go and train them even more in the knowledge of what the Word of God has to say. They've gotten a taste of what it is to be precise, a taste

of what it is to know sound doctrine. They find that it's much better than the fragile unity that exists when everything is maintained on a shallow level.

Discernment is critical in the life of the church. Knowing sound doctrine is essential in the life of the church. Sound doctrine, Paul said to Timothy, is to be preached, it is to be guarded. It is to be kept as a treasure and passed on to the next generation. Now we said last time there is a lack of discernment in the evangelical world. I gave you the first reason, you remember what it was? Lack of doctrinal clarity and conviction...lack of doctrinal clarity and conviction. That's pretty obvious. We just don't have that.

I remember being on a talk show with a woman, it was a Christian talk show in a major city, big station. And we were talking and it was obvious that she was the host of this Christian talk show. People called up with their questions about their spiritual life and it was more like Christian counseling than Bible questions. But anyway, she was the answer lady. And she said to me in the middle of this discussion, off the air she said, "You know, there's a word that a lot of people use, it's the word 'sanctification.' What does that mean?"

What does that mean? And so I explained to her a little bit about that and after another half an hour or so, we went off the air for a commercial and I said to her, "How did you become a Christian?" Trying to figure out if she was, but I said, "How did you become a Christian?"

She said, "Oh, it was really cool. One day I got Jesus' phone number and we've been connected ever since." That's what she said.

And I guess I had a startled look on my face. I was so stunned by that and I...she looked a little surprised and I said, "What does that mean...what do you mean you got Jesus' phone number and you've been connected ever since?"

She said, "Well what do you mean what do I mean?" That's about as far as she could go. She said, "If somebody asked you why you were a Christian, what would you say?"

I said, "I'm glad you asked. So I explained to her the gospel.

And at the end of that, and I put this in the book, at the end of that she said to me, "O come on, you don't have to go through all of that, do you, to become a Christian?" This is the...this is the Christian answer lady on the radio.

We have a serious problem when we don't know sound doctrine, when sound doctrine is offensive. Let me give you a second reason and we'll kind of work through these things and we'll wrap all this up on Friday. This is just kind of an assessment of why we have the problem we have, the lack of doctrinal clarity and conviction is followed by a failure to be antithetical, get a little bit philosophical there for a minute....a failure to be antithetical.

To put it another way, an unwillingness to disagree...to disagree. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "When you remove polemics from the church, the church dies. There has to be constant and healthy and serious debate about truth in the church." When you decide that a debate is divisive, disagreement is intolerable because everybody's got a right to his own opinion, the church will die.

It's true. It's essential to be antithetical. It's essential to be willing to say that's wrong and that's right. This is antitheses. We have now this sort of political correct kind of a smarmy sentimental relativism that prevails in the church that doesn't want to disagree. Nobody's really right and nobody's really wrong. Nothing is really true and nothing is really false. Whatever you feel is to be accepted because you by your own intuition have a right to come to whatever spiritual conclusions you want to come to. That's just deadly to the life of the church. Everything is subjective. Biblical preaching is not relevant today because it's too definitive, it's too offensive, it's too sharp, it's too black and white, it's too absolute.

But if you look at Scripture and just to give you a kind of sweep over Scripture, you would be amazed if you sort of rehearsed this a little bit, and I hope you do this, how black and white and absolute the Scripture is. Jay Adams wrote a paragraph that puts it in to perspective. "From the Garden of Eden with its two trees, one allowed, one forbidden, to the eternal destiny of the human being in

heaven or in hell, the Bible sets forth two and only two ways...God's way and all others. Accordingly, people are either saved or lost. They belong to God's people or the world. There is Gerizim, the mount of blessing and Ebal, the mount of cursing. There is the narrow way and the wide way. One leads to eternal life. The other to eternal destruction. There are those who are against and those who are with us. There are those within the Kingdom and those outside the Kingdom. There is life and death, truth and falsehood, good and bad, light and darkness, the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, love and hatred, spiritual wisdom and the wisdom of the world. And Christ is said to be the way, the truth and the life and no one may come to the Father but by Him. He is the only name under the sky by which one may be saved," end the paragraph.

And that is exactly the way the Bible presents itself. It presents truth and error, God's way and everybody else's way. There's a right way, there's a wrong way. There's a right interpretation of a passage and every other interpretation is the wrong one. There's a right theology and anything that disagrees with it is a wrong theology. There is a right way to understand God, Christ, the Holy Spirit and salvation and a wrong way. This is on every page of the Bible, from the beginning to the end of Scripture. This antithetical kind of thinking is everywhere...everywhere.

In the Old Testament, give you an illustration of it, in the Old Testament you look at how God put the ceremonial law in place within the ceremonial law, there were distinctions being made that weren't moral. For example, there were clean animals and unclean animals. Remember that? There were certain kind of animals that you could eat and certain kind that you couldn't eat. There were certain kind of birds that fit into the clean and certain kinds that fit into the unclean. And there was this whole structure about clean and unclean. There were certain ways to prepare food, certain ways to treat utensils. You couldn't steal eggs out of a bird's nest and there were all these sort of little rules that didn't have any real moral or spiritual implications to them. And if you ask the question why...why did God put all this stuff in to Judaism? Why all of this distinction in the Old Testament?

And I would like to suggest to you that there wasn't arbitrary at all. It was a means of teaching the Jews down to the smallest little detail of the day how you ate, how you cooked, how you farmed, what kind of clothes you wore. You couldn't even mix two kinds of fabrics. You had to think about every single thing you did and know there was God's way and there was the other way. And you had to think about that at every single point. You woke up in the morning and you were aware when you put your clothes on that God had prescribed a certain kind of clothes and forbidden a certain kind. And then you went to your meal and there was a certain way to eat and that was the way God had ordained to eat and then there was every other way, the way the Gentiles ate. Farming techniques, justice, health care, holidays, all these things that don't have particularly moral or spiritual components were nonetheless used as what the Bible calls the ABCs, the primer teaching so that you would learn that there was God's way and there is every other way.

Teaching people to go through life with an understanding of thesis and antithesis. Today, all of a sudden, this is just gone. Anybody's sort of able to do whatever they want. No longer are we trying to distinguish God's way from every other way. I remember one time when I was asked if I would become the head of a Christian school, and another Christian college, or university. And the people who were talking to me said, "You know, here's our objective, we want to integrate the Scripture with the wisdom of the world. We're committed to Syncretism and integration."

I said, "Well I think we have a profound difference then. What I want to do is distinguish the truth of God from the wisdom of the world. I'm in to separation. You're in to integration. That is a profound and substantial philosophical difference. I want to make sure in whatever education I'm involved in that people understand God's truth separate from any pollution by the thinking of man. And then that truth of God sits in judgment on all human wisdom. Great difference in those two mentalities. If as [James 1:27](#) says you're going to keep yourself unspotted from the world, if you're going to distinguish the wisdom that is from above from the wisdom that is from beneath, you have to maintain clear understanding of biblical truth.

In Psalm 1, another very distinct separation is made. "How blessed is the man who doesn't walk in the counsel of the wicked." That's the first thing that I think of when I think about integration, don't walk in the counsel of the wicked. Don't stand in the path of sinners. And don't, for goodness sake, sit down in the seat of scoffers." Don't go to some school and sit down in a seat where the Bible is going to be mocked. Don't do that. That's pretty straight forward. Don't set your course under the counsel of the wicked. Don't stand, is to say, take your position in a pathway designed by sinners and don't sit down in the class that mocks the scoffers.

On the other hand, his delight, the one who is blessed, is in the law of the Lord and in His law He meditates day and night and he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water yields its fruit in its season, its leaf doesn't wither whatsoever he does prospers. The wicked on the other hand are not so, they're like the chaff which the wind drives away and so forth. Again it's about discernment.

I remember when I was...I had the idea that I wanted to pursue a degree at Claremont Graduate School, a degree in theology at one point in my life, a doctoral degree. And I went out there and they said, "Well what you have to do is you have to read 200 books, 200-220 books that are French and German." So very dutifully I marched off to the local junior college over in Glendale and I took German, figuring once I got German down I'd take French and then I'd go over and read all these two hundred books.

Well I just got enough German under my belt to get into one of those books and I decided that all it did was mock the Word of God, all that German higher critical theory stuff just mocked and dishonored and blasphemed the Word of God and God Himself. And I said, "I don't really see any benefit in wading through another two hundred of these. And I, at the time, really found that Psalm 1 was what forced me completely out of that program. I decided I'm not going to benefit by going in the path of sinners and standing there and sitting in the seat of a scoffer in a classroom and exposing my mind to assaults on the truth of God, not if I'm going to keep my mind pure and unspotted from the world.

In Titus chapter 1 verse 9, Paul talks about holding fast the faithful Word which is in accordance with the doctrine...holding fast, having a strong grip on the faithful Word, that's the Word of God, understanding what it teaches so that you may be able...and here's a very important idea...that you may be able to exhort in sound doctrine, listen to this, and refute those who contradict. It is essential to ministry that you exhort, that's the positive side. You exhort people in sound doctrine. It is also critical that you refute those who contradict sound doctrine.

Now by the way, that's a portion of Scripture that describes the responsibilities of elders and pastors. As a pastor, I have a two-fold responsibility to teach and to rebuke, to help teach those who receive the truth and rebuke those who are in error. We have this new evangelical climate that's been contrived where discernment is unacceptable and unwelcome and calling someone out as being in error is absolutely intolerable and therefore error wins the day...error wins the day.

Discernment will only thrive in an environment of confrontation. Discernment will only thrive when you understand that there is antithesis and thesis, there is black and white, there is true and false, there is right and wrong, and you not only have a responsibility to proclaim the right, but to expose the wrong. That's part of our responsibility as guardians of the truth.

There's a third cause of the lack of discernment that I'll just bring before you. And I don't know exactly how to frame it but the third cause is a preoccupation with image and influence as a key to evangelization. This is a big issue and I don't want to get too...I don't want to get too involved in this. I could, but I'll try to resist it.

The idea is that the church somehow is more effective in evangelism if it can create an environment that somehow embraces unbelievers. This is what all the user-friendly, seeker-friendly church movement comes from which really the originator of that, as I pointed out on Sunday, is Robert Schuller and it was picked up by Bill Hybels Willow Creek and it's been spread from there all over the place.

But the idea is, that effective evangelism is a product of influence, making people sort of feel good about the church, making people feel good about Christianity and Christians. And so obviously then, you can't confront them with truth. You can't confront them boldly with truth. You can't confront their sin. You can't confront their error. You can't call them to repentance because that doesn't make them feel good, that offends them.

So the idea is, let's get all the offenses out, anything that we think is a negative influence. We redefine the church, reinvent the church, stripped of anything that anybody might feel is somehow offensive or, listen to this, or even different. Hymns are different. The world doesn't identify with those. Sermons, the world doesn't identify with those. That's why George Barnas(?) says, "The only hope for the church in the future is to get rid of preachers." Because people don't identify with preaching. People don't identify with old hymns. They don't identify with church music. They don't identify with pastoral prayers. They don't identify with the Lord's table and communion. They don't identify with baptism. That isn't something they're familiar with, that's not sort of user-friendly.

So we just wipe it all out even though that's what the New Testament defines as the life of the church. And the illusion is that somehow we're going to be able to influence them into Christianity by cutting out everything that's offensive to them, reinventing the church so that the church is just another form of entertainment with psychology sort of stuck in there to boost their self-esteem. And then we sort of subtly sneak in a minimalist's kind of gospel.

I said this, I think, a week ago at the church, this is a myth, the myth of influence. If you've seen the latest Ligonier ministry Tabletalk, it's on the myth of influence. It's extremely well written, the great articles. You ought to get a copy of it and read it. The idea that anybody gets saved because of somebody else's influence is really false. The only reason people get saved is because they hear and believe the gospel. I'm not saying you shouldn't live a life that demonstrates the power of Christ, you should. I'm not saying that people don't see your life and glorify your Father who is in heaven, because the Bible says they do.

But the real influence is the influence of a godly life, but that's not enough until they hear the truth. It's not the style of our music that gets people converted. It's not because of the entertainment level that they enjoy that gets them converted. Sooner or later you've got to get down to confronting them with the message and my judgment is sooner is better than later. So what are we waiting for? Let's just get them to hear the message, that's how they're going to be saved. Take out the preaching of sin, take out the preaching of hell, take out repentance, take out the cross, and then people will feel comfortable. That's the new trend. Build an image of love, care, being nice and if everybody is nice, they like us, they might like Jesus. That is tragically not the case.

When Jesus came preaching, He came preaching repentance. They hated Him for it. They sought to kill Him and eventually they executed Him. They did the same to all the Apostles. They've been doing it to the faithful preachers throughout all of the history of the church. There's only two possible...well three possible reactions to the gospel. One would be indifference, the other would be faith and the other would be hostility. You have to live with the reality of that.

So the church has had this illusion somehow that we can wipe out everything that offends. And somehow influence people to be saved in an inoffensive way. Eventually you've got to get to the offense, you might as well start there because until they're offended about their own sins, and their violation of the holiness of God, they aren't going to come penitently to the Savior.

Well there are a lot of other things we could say about that. Let me just give you a fourth thing to think about if you're making a little list. Another reason we have a lack of discernment is because of the failure to properly interpret Scripture. This kind of follows along...a failure to properly interpret Scripture. This is like running fingernails down the blackboard for me, when I hear somebody speak who misinterprets Scripture. It is a grievous thing to me and I'll just give you a simple statement that I gave you some months ago.

The meaning of the Scripture is the Scripture...the meaning of the Scripture is the Scripture. If you don't have the meaning, you don't have the Scripture. So if you

misinterpret the Scripture, that's not the Scripture. Don't say God said...and then misinterpret Scripture. If you're going to say "God said," then you have to interpret it correctly. And yet today, there's very little interest in careful, biblical interpretation.

I was reading about a guy named Bill Hamon, H-a-m-o-n. And he is a minister, preacher, evangelist, Bible teacher, and he says this. He advises people to ignore reason, ignore logic, ignore common sense when attempting to bear witness with accuracy to the Scripture.

How are you going to accurately interpret the Bible without your mind? Without your reason? In fact, he says, "The Spirit will help you interpret Scripture by giving you strong sensations in your upper abdominal area. When you get a message of no in your upper abdominal area, or be careful., or something's not right, it will manifest itself in a nervous, jumpy, uneasy feeling. And there is that Holy Spirit witness that there's a deep unintelligible message that something's wrong."

"On the other hand," he says, "when God is bearing witness with our spirit, that the interpretation is correct, then our upper abdominal area reacts with an unexplainable peace and joy and a warm feeling." Gee. This guy needs to go to a nutritionist and do something about his diet. Too much chile.

Well here's a quote. "In other words, ignore your mind, forget your beliefs, disregard your theology and common sense and wait for the sensation in your upper abdominal area." You say, "That's wacky." Of course that's wacky. But that's the kind of guy that's featured on TBN and nobody will question the legitimacy of that. This kind of subjectivism is frightening...frightening.

And then, you know, this is something I was talking to our staff about last week. Paul says in 2 Timothy, "Preach the Word." And then he says, "Continue in the things you've learned from me. Things you've learned from me give to faithful men who shall be able to teach others also." You know those passages. As a person who teaches the Word of God, my passion is to make sure that I'm consistent with the men of the past. In other words, I want to...when I want to

know whether I'm right, I don't wait for some upper abdominal feeling. If I want to know whether I'm right, I'll go back and read somebody in the past who had illumination, who had a God-blessed great ministry. I may go all the way back to the Reformers. I may go back and read John Calvin. I may go back and read the Puritans, mention Jonathan Edwards, or John Owen. If I have any question about whether I'm right in the interpretation of Scripture, inevitably I go backwards. I don't look for a contemporary writer. I don't go to the bookstore and say, "You know, do you have any new books, you know, on contemporary Christian psychology, or some popular Christian book." I certainly don't look for fiction.

If I want to test my interpretation of Scripture, invariably I go backwards to those in the past who have the noble, proven, interpreters of Scripture whose books are still in print because they have stood the test of time and the scrutiny of scholarship. And I go back to make sure that I'm not inventing something. I just want to take the baton from somebody. I want to interpret the Word of God the way it's always been interpreted and I want to be faithful to those in the past who were led by the Spirit of God to understand the Word of God.

In fact, I'm far more drawn to past literature than I am to present literature. You can put all of the books from the last five years in my office on one shelf and all the rest of the say four or five thousand books there are from the past because there is a continuity of the work of the Spirit of God in the preservation of the truth and I want to remain in that continuity. And one of the things that frightens me greatly about contemporary preaching, it frightens me greatly is this idea that you cut off from the past completely. Preachers today want to invent their own style. They want to give their own message. Do their own insights. They have very little, if any, interest in the past. They don't read the great theologians and the great commentators of the past. They don't expose themselves to that. It is a level of egotism that frankly is frightening to me, to all of a sudden pop on the scene and say, "Forget the past, forget the theology of the past, forget the great writers of the past. This is my cool insight." That is frightening egotism, scary.

You go into a...hear these people preach who just give you all their own little insights, that's scary. I want to be in the great tradition of those who passed the

truth on down from generation to generation to generation so pardon me if I include in my little book Jonathan Edwards. But I'm very glad to stand exactly where Jonathan Edwards stood and proclaim the same truth that concerned him in his day.

You have in contemporary evangelicalism today a stylizing of preaching, a stylizing that has literally cut off the church from its heritage. And they wipe out the hymns. We don't want any hymns in here. Nobody likes hymns. Listen, there's a reason that hymns last, and I'll tell you what it is. They were written by men who knew theology. And the bad hymns disappear over the centuries. The hymns that convey the profound realities of theology hammered out through the centuries, those hymns last and those hymns are a phenomenal legacy to the church because they convey that theology. But the contemporary idea is whack off the past...whack it off. We're an island and we'll reinvent the church. We'll reinvent teaching. We'll reinvent Bible interpretation. We don't need the past. We don't need its hymnology. We don't need its theology. We don't need its commentaries, interpretation. That's frightening.

And what you have is inept and inadequate and non-historic interpretation of Scripture, if in fact you have any interpretation of Scripture at all. We have one job as preachers, and that is to tell people what God meant by what He said, that's it. My whole life is about one book and only one book and that's it. What does God mean in this book? That's it...that's ministry, nothing more and nothing less. To declare the whole counsel of God, that's my responsibility.

So, when you think about the whole issue of discernment, you have to realize that discernment cannot survive in an environment where doctrine doesn't matter. Discernment cannot survive in an environment where people refuse to be polemical, where they refuse to debate or argue or test things or disagree or say something's wrong. Discernment cannot survive in an environment where everybody's concerned about somehow wiping out all that offends. And discernment cannot survive in an environment where there's virtually no interest in maintaining the great truth that has been passed down from generation to

generation through a careful, thoughtful, scholarly, faithful interpretation of Scripture.

The future of the church is going to depend upon discerning leadership. I tell you, it's sad. You can look at some of the biggest Christian organizations in the world and they are led by people who have influence and power but have no real ability to rightly divide Scripture. And they are the power brokers in evangelicalism that define evangelicalism in its broadest definitions. So we have to get back to preaching the Word, to rightly dividing.

Turn to 2 Timothy for just a minute, one other verse and then I'll quit and let you go today. But in 2 Timothy chapter 2. "Be diligent...verse 15...present yourselves approved to God as a workman, a craftsman who doesn't need to be ashamed." I don't know about you, but I don't want to be ashamed of my ministry. I don't want to be ashamed of my life. So if I'm going to present my ministry to God so that I can be approved so that I'm not ashamed of it, I have to handle accurately the Word of Truth. I mean, how clear is that? It's got to be handled accurately. That's where it starts. You interpret it accurately. You proclaim it boldly. You proclaim it on a positive level, exhorting. You proclaim it on a negative level, confronting and refuting error.

And you stay away...verse 16...you stay away from this worldly, empty talk that leads to further ungodliness. This kind of talk that spreads like gangrene. Gangrene is not a good thing. It destroys. Just like Hymenaeus and Philetus with their gangrenous chatter about nothing, men who went astray from the truth, upset the faith of people. Failing to interpret Scripture accurately and carefully and precisely, being preoccupied with worldly influence and image, failing to be antithetical, black and white about issues of truth, disdaining clarity and conviction in doctrine leads to a serious onslaught on discernment.

Just one other thing to mention, the final point in the little points I want to give you is a failure to discipline in the church...a failure to discipline in the church. I'm not going to talk about it, I know you know about church discipline. This is deadly to the church. This is deadly to discernment because what it says, if I know

there's sin in the church and I don't do what Matthew 18 says and I don't do discipline in the church, then what I'm saying is...well I know what the Bible says, I interpret it rightly, but it just doesn't matter in your life. That is, if somebody rises up in the church and teaches falsely and I don't deal with them, or somebody lives in sin and iniquity and I don't deal with them and the church doesn't deal with them, what we're saying is the truth doesn't matter. It's the truth but it doesn't matter. And that is typical of churches today. There's no church discipline so even if they do tell the truth, they will not apply the truth. Churches tolerate sinning Christians, they therefore lower the value of the truth because if the truth doesn't have to be lived, then what's the point of it. As a result they dull the edge of the sword of the Spirit. You don't ever want to seek a place where non-believers and sinners feel comfortable, where Christians are never confronted with their sin, where error is never dealt with. Because what that does is diminish the truth. God's truth is for application. It's for application for those in error and those in sin.

It's just not happening in churches today. They will not apply the truth. I talked to a guy who was a staff member at a large seeker-friendly church and I said, "If you had a homosexual guy in your church, you knew he was living in homosexuality, how long would it be before you would personally go to that person and confront him about his sin?"

I'll never forget his answer. He said, "Ah, probably be a year and a half or maybe two, until he felt really comfortable in the church." What is that? You don't think the Lord's church is to be holy? You don't think the Lord cares about purity? You don't think that guy is a worthy-enough soul that you would confront his sin so that he could repent and be saved? This is the issue of discipline, confrontation. And it's another reason why there's no discernment in the church because nobody even if they come to the truth is willing, it seems, to apply the truth.

Well enough about that. Next time, on Friday, I want to talk to you about how to become a discerning Christian.

Father, we thank You this morning for this great time of worship and music with the guys singing for us. We thank You for their leading us to honor You and to praise You and to glorify Your name. We just pray that You will bless them and their families to the places they travel and we thank You, Lord, for the call to discernment. We thank You that You have raised us up in a sense sort of counter-culture in the evangelical world as well as the world outside. And we pray, O God, that we would be faithful to the truth, to live it and proclaim it and apply it in our own lives and in the lives of those around us as we serve You in Christ's name. Amen.

Principles for Discernment, Part 3

Selected Scriptures November 8, 2002 TMC211

I suppose those of you who know me well know that I am consumed with the truth. If you ask what's most important to me, the answer is the truth of God. That's what drives me. That's what compels me. That's really what I live for is the truth, to know the truth and to proclaim the truth and to apply the truth and to defend the truth and guard the truth and raise up others who would have that same commitment to the truth of God.

And we've been talking about how important it is if we're going to represent the truth, which is so precious to God, that we understand discernment, that we be able to discern the truth. Absolutely critical.

Just by way of introduction, this morning, take you back to 2 Timothy chapter 2 for a moment and just give you a little bit of historical perspective. In 2 Timothy chapter 2 Paul says in verse 15, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman, a craftsman who doesn't need to be ashamed, handling accurately the Word of Truth."

There you have a title for Scripture, The Word of Truth. That's what Scripture is, it is the truth, it is God's truth. It is the most important thing in the universe, the truth of God. It is the truth of God that saves. It is the truth of God that justifies, that sanctifies and that gives the hope of glory. It is on the basis of the truth of God

that we know what is reality about man, God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, redemption and everything else that matters. And so it is critical that we handle accurately the Word of Truth, that we not be ashamed of ourselves for an inaccurate handling of God's truth. We need to present ourselves to God as craftsmen who have handled accurately His Truth.

This is particularly compelling if you go to chapter 3 verse 1 because the Apostle Paul says, "Realize this, that in the last days difficult times...the NAS says, some translations say dangerous seasons...will come." It is essential to handle the truth accurately because we will live in dangerous seasons. The word "times" here is not chronos, not clock time, it's kairos, it is epochs, movements. The word "dangerous" is just that, difficult, dangerous, deadly, threatening. It is critical for us to handle the Word accurately because we are living in dangerous times. And the greatest spiritual danger that exists in the world is the danger of deception. If the truth of God is the most important thing, then anything that assaults the truth of God is the most severe danger. Paul then is warning Timothy about his calling to know the truth, and over in chapter 4 verse 2, to preach the truth because of the danger of the seasons, dangerous epochs.

Down in verse 13 of chapter 3 it says, "Evil men and imposters," and again here's the idea of deception, imposters, false teachers, false prophets who misrepresent the truth, they will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. In other words, as the last days progress, deception will increase. Now the last days of verse 1 refers to the messianic time that began when Jesus arrived. I'm going to address that some on Sunday night. But the last days began when Jesus came, the messianic era. Been going on for two thousand years and we're closer to the end of the last days than we've ever been. But Paul says, "In these last days that were initiated by the arrival of Messiah, there is going to be an increase in deception because the truth has landed fully in Jesus Christ." The Old Testament didn't give us the full truth. The Old Testament revelation was progressive. It didn't go from error to truth, it went from incompleteness to completeness and if all you had was Genesis to Malachi, you have an incomplete revelation. That's why the writer of Hebrews says that the Old Testament saints

could not be perfected without us who are living in this era of the revelation of the mysteries of the New Testament.

And so, with the final arrival of the full truth in Jesus Christ, there is an escalation of deception to assault that truth. Those dangerous epochs come in these last days. And according to verse 13, they get worse and worse and worse as deception increases. Safe to say then that we live today in the most dangerous time in the history of the world, the most dangerous season in the history of the human race. The truth is under greater assault, more sophisticated assault, more diverse assault than it has ever been.

Just one illustration of that. When I was in my college days and my seminary days, I was exposed to theological liberalism. The big attack of theological liberalism was on the deity of Jesus Christ. They came along and said Jesus is not God and they said that He was either a man or an angel or even a figment of historical imagination, etc., but not God. And the liberals made the all-out assault on Jesus Christ.

Then came the mystical sort of Charismatic Movement that began to attack the Holy Spirit and redefine the Holy Spirit as if He was a little genie and you rubbed your bottle and He jumped out and did all kinds of miracles all over the place and gave you anything you wanted. There was an assault on the Holy Spirit. I don't now that I ever anticipated that finally the assault would get to God, but here we are really for the first time within the framework of what is called Christianity and evangelicalism with a massive attack on the nature of God framed up under the openness of God. It basically says God does not control what happens in the future, God doesn't...does not only control it, He doesn't even know what's going to happen until it happens. He's just trying to figure out how to react just the way we are. This is an assault on the nature of God, a blasphemous one at that.

So here is a new epoch that we didn't deal with a few years ago. The point being, we just keep accumulating these massive, dangerous epochs that threaten the truth. And the sad part is at the time when they are most formidable, most highly developed and most of them have been accumulated, the church is weaker than

its ever been, preaching is weaker than its ever been. Evangelical Christianity is more compromising than its ever been. And we're moving fast to eliminate theology and Bible exposition from the pulpits as rapidly as possible. Christian colleges are weaker than they've been. Christian seminaries are weaker than they've been. And it's not the time for weakness.

If you go back in history and talk about those dangerous epochs, you would have to start with the dangerous epoch of Sacramentalism starting with the Holy Roman Empire in the fourth century and developing right up to the Reformation, over a thousand years of Sacramentalism, the Roman Catholic system and the Eastern Orthodox system where the church replaces Christ. The Church becomes a surrogate Christ. You attach to the system but never to Christ. You're fed by the system. Salvation is by automatic ritual and routine. And you have a mass of people who call themselves Christians but don't know Christ at all. The power of Sacramentalism for a moment was assaulted and attacked in the Reformation, but it survived and now it's more powerful than ever. And you have leading evangelicals coming along and saying that the Pope is a wonderful Christian brother. They have literally bought the lies and deceptions of Sacramentalism. Dangerous stuff and the evangelical world today is unwilling to call Sacramentalism what it is, a false system.

Out of the Reformation, by the time you're moving into the seventeenth and eighteenth century, a second dangerous season comes called Rationalism. Out of the enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Renaissance, man finds his own mind after having literally been held captive to Sacramentalism, held in abysmal ignorance under the Roman Catholic Church in which people were spoken to in a language, Latin, that they couldn't even understand. Their sort of mental release came in the great times of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution...Revolution. Gave birth to Humanism and Rationalism and man began to be enamored with his mind and Thomas Paine writes *The Age of Reason*, half of it debunks the Bible, and the other half postulates the human brain as the ultimate authority in the universe. And so Rationalism is born. It goes back to the Bible and it just massacres the Bible, removing anything that's not rational which is everything that's divine and supernatural. And out of Rationalism

comes the worship of the human mind, Liberalism, Theological Liberalism, Neo-Orthodoxy, Critical Theory that emasculates the Bible, and so forth. That dangerous season is still with us today as Liberalism pervades and theology as Humanism dominates education, as Atheism is still a factor in our world.

Out of that period comes another kind of ism, Orthodoxy, dead, cold, Orthodoxy, churches that are historic, they have connections to Luther, they have connections to Calvin, but they are as dead as a proverbial doornail. And then you have the dangerous season of Politicism in Europe where the church is politicized, where it marries the government and even in a most bizarre fashion Hitler realizes that if he's going to bring about his great Nazi Empire and conquer the world, he's going to have to embrace Christianity and become united with Christianity. And so Hitler develops what was called The German Christian Faith Movement. Hitler embraces a strip of denuded kind of Christianity, equates Nazism with true Christianity, takes everything out of the Bible that's positive about Jewish people and then sets out to use Christianity as a way to massacre the Jews. In the midst of that, people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer raise a protest and they too are martyred.

Politicism is any effort to politicize Christianity for any political means. Clear it's social gospel, reconstructionism, liberation theology and even contemporary quote/unquote evangelical moralism.

Then you have coming into the 1950's, ecumenism which says let's all get together. Can't we all just get along? And let's not make doctrine an issue. Let's just love each other and you have a new hermeneutic for interpreting the Bible, the Jesus ethic. And if something in the Bible doesn't seem to square with what we think Jesus would think, then we throw it out. We all believe that Jesus was this gentle, meek, loving kind of syrupy guy who floated around patting babies on the head and being nice to old ladies. And therefore, we've got to get rid of all the wrath, and all the judgment, and all the threats, and etc., that are in the Bible. Anything that divides or is unkind and so ecumenism eliminates doctrine for the sake of some kind of congeniality. Dangerous seasons.

And by the way, they didn't go away. We still have Sacramentalism, it's with us. We still have Rationalism, it's with us. We still have dead Orthodoxy, it's still with us. We still have the politicizing of Scripture and the politicizing of Christianity. We still have ecumenism. In fact, it's more alive than evangelicalism than it's ever been in my lifetime.

And then in the 1960's came another dangerous epoch, Experientialism. It started in Van Nuys, California in an Episcopalian church. The Charismatic Movement as it is now known was really Experientialism. It said truth is discerned by intuition. Truth is discerned by experience, not accurate interpretation of the Scripture. Signs and wonders, visions, prophecies, voices from God will tell you the truth. Forget the Bible, set the Bible aside, trust your intuition, trust your feelings, trust your experiences. A dangerous epoch that stripped the Bible of its authority. I remember one leader I was dialoguing with said, "I really don't care what the Bible says, I know what Jesus told me."

It was the 1980's when another dangerous epoch came into the church, the dangerous epoch of Subjectivism...Subjectivism. This is when the church bought psychology and the church turned in on itself in to sort of Narcissistic navel watching, looking for its own self-esteem and trying to solve all its own anxieties and pains. Theology was redefined as meeting people's felt needs. Psychology was a dangerous epoch in the church. It had a terribly devastating effect on biblical preaching where once the Bible was preached in pulpits, then psychology took over. It affected, as we all know, counseling and people were psychologized rather than theologized in dealing with the issues of life. Subjectivism is still there, still has a reigning place in the church.

In the nineties came mysticism, belief in everything. The loss of the centrality of Scriptures...then in the 1990's, also...by the way, they're coming faster now because as media capability increases, movements come. It used to take a thousand years and then a few hundred years, and now they come in about two or three years because of the media opportunity to bring everybody under the banner of new thinking. But in the nineties came Pragmatism is the view that the church ought to do whatever people want it to do. And Robert Schuller said, "You

want to start a church? Survey your neighborhood, find out what they want, and give it to them.”

I remember I was at a Christian National Religious Broadcasters Convention and Robert Schuller gave a message to the whole convention, that's what he said. “If you want to know how to run the church, survey the neighborhood, find out what everybody wants and then give that to them and they'll come.” And everybody stood up and clapped at the end of his thing, except myself and a couple of other guys who were standing there. And I think we were pretty obviously not standing up, at least to those around us. And that was followed by a panel discussion. And I happened to be on the panel with the same people. And the first question...the first question that the moderator of the panel asked was, because it came from the audience, “John, what did you think of what Dr. Schuller said and be to the point?”

So I said, “Well, I disagree...I disagree completely. If you want to know how to run a church, read the New Testament and do what God said.” Chuck Swindoll was sitting next to me, just kind of shaking his head and, “Why don't you tell them what you really feel, John?” He said. I said, “I'm trying, Chuck, do you agree?” “Yeah, I agree.”

If you want to know how to run a church, read the New Testament. It's not about Pragmatism, it's not about what people want or what works. Pragmatism says that preaching is a pony-express method of delivery in a high-tech age, but it's still the preaching of the cross that God calls for.

That was in the 1990's, also Syncretism came or Inclusivism, if you want, that's the latest dangerous system, where everybody's going to go to heaven even if they never heard the gospel, never believed the gospel. You have books being written to advocate that coming out at a rapid-fire rate. Places that shock me like Moody Press publishing a book that says, “People who have never heard of Jesus, never heard of a Bible are going to go to heaven because they believe in a Creator.” Amazing. These are dangerous seasons bottom line.

And in dangerous seasons, more dangerous than they've ever been, the truth is hanging perilously threatened. "This is the time for people...back to chapter 2 verse 15...to be diligent to present themselves approved to God as craftsmen needing not to be ashamed because they handle accurately the Word of Truth." That's a matter of interpretation. And then over in chapter 4 verse 2, "Preach that truth." It's not only how you handle it, it's how you proclaim it. And he says in verse 2 of chapter 4, "Be ready in season and out of season."

The bottom line is, it may not always be popular. There will be a season when it's popular, there will be a season when it's not. I've lived long enough to be through...have gone through that. When I came to Grace Church many years ago, thirty-some years ago, preaching of the Bible was really popular and I was popular because I was a Bible teacher and people flooded to the church and people wanted me to speak here and speak there. And publishers would call me and say, "You know we want one of your books, we don't care what it's about, just write us a book and give it to us. And we just want Bible teaching. There's a tremendous appetite for Bible teaching." And I was invited here and there and everywhere to speak. And I haven't changed. I'm doing the same thing I've always done.

And I'm a problem now...I'm a real problem. I'm a dinosaur. I'm a problem. People don't want me anymore at their conferences because I cause problems. I'm not saying anything different. I could send to some conferences I used to speak at an old tape that I gave when I was there and it would now be a problem. These are really dangerous seasons.

The question is, what are we going to do? We going to do what the Scripture tells us to do? This is not a time for weak people and weak churches preaching weak messages. Too dangerous a time.

Well all of that to say this is a time for discernment. Now let's go back to our text. That was just an introduction. But I think it tells you where I'm going here. Back to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, just a couple of looks at the verses we've been using in these days. Verse 20, "Do not despise propheteos, do not despise preaching.

Don't look down on preaching. I could preach a message on "don't look down on preaching," because today preaching is looked down on. Don't look down on preaching but don't just accept everything, examine everything carefully, do that dokimazo, that assessment, and whatever is good, hold on to it and whatever is evil, shun it. You have to be discerning. You have to be discerning

Now we talked Monday and Wednesday about why the church is undiscerning and I gave you some reasons just kind of assessing things. Now I want to talk about the positive side of this. What is discernment? What is it?

Simply this, discernment is the skill in distinguishing truth from error...and here's the more important part maybe...and from half truth. Discernment is the skill in distinguishing truth from error and from half truth. It is a facility to distinguish and therefore I told you Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "When the church loses its willingness to engage itself in such a distinction and to engage in the polemics of argument to save the truth, the church will go out of existence." You must guard the truth, Paul says to Timothy. You must guard the truth, that is your responsibility, to be a guardian of it. [Second Timothy 1:14](#), "Guard through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us the treasure which has been entrusted to you." The treasure, of course, is the truth which had been committed to him. That guardianship is also noted a couple of other times as Paul writes to Timothy in chapter 6 of 1 Timothy, "Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you and don't fall prey to knowledge falsely so-called."

So discernment again is the skill in distinguishing truth from error and from half-truth. Two principle terms are used in the Bible for discernment. The Hebrew word bin and the Greek word diakrino. Both in etymology and usage are similar. The Hebrew word bin is used about 250 times in the Old Testament. It has been translated in various ways, understand, discern, distinguish. And it is related...this is a good thought to keep in mind...it is related to a Hebrew noun bayin which means space between something. It means literally an interval. The preposition ben another form of that same root means between. It is the ability to put space between two things. That is, to not let them blur together, to be distinctive. The process by which you come to separate things that differ. Discernment is then

reaching understanding and knowledge of the truth by a process of separation. Thinking Christians know how to separate.

To make a space between the thoughts and ways of God and the world, between a true interpretation of Scripture and a false one. The Greek term, diakrino is the same thing, it means to separate used, for example, in [Matthew 16:23...16:2](#) and 3 that I read you when we first started, being able to discriminate between different situations. The Pharisees looked up in the sky and they made a discrimination or a distinction between the weather based upon what they saw. Spiritual discernment then is the ability to distinguish God's truth from everything else. The ability to distinguish God's truth from everything else.

Let me tell you something, there's no greater way to honor God than to make that distinction because God is honored when His Word is believed. When you don't get it right, God is dishonored. To discern the truth of God is critical, absolutely critical. That's why there's so much instruction in the New Testament about the mind because this is a mental process, this is a cognitive process. This doesn't happen in your upper abdominal area. How are you going to be conformed to this world by not being, [Romans 12:2](#), to transform by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what the will of God is.

If you want to know what God approves and what God wills and what God has said, you have to have your mind renewed, otherwise you're just going to fall victim to the thinking of that which dominates the society around you. Listen to [Philippians 1:9](#). "I pray that your love may abound still more and more." That's good, we want you to love. "But in real knowledge," not false knowledge, "real knowledge," and I love this, "and in all discernment." Love and truth in perfect balance. Love and truth in perfect balance. [Colossians 1:9](#) and [10](#), essentially the same thing, "I pray for you that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And the result is, you'll walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.

Truth is critical to the preservation of that truth for the next generation. It's also critical for your testimony and your witness. It's also critical for your own spiritual life.

Well that brings us to the last point and just want to give you some things to think about. How can I become a discerning person? How can I become a discerning person?

Number one, desire...desire. How badly do you want it? How important is it to you? Cause this is what separates, if you will, the men from the boys. Proverbs 2...look at Proverbs 2. Proverbs is all about wisdom, it's all about understanding, it's all about discernment, it's all about knowing the mind of God, the truth of God. It's all about loving knowledge, the knowledge of God. And so in chapter 2 verse 1, "My son, if you will receive My sayings and treasure My commandments within you, if you really want to know what I'm saying, then make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding." In other words, something's got to happen in you that says I want to know God's truth. I want to know it that I can honor Him by the belief in it. I want to know it so that I can proclaim it accurately. I want to know it so it will have an impact on my life.

I know you probably often think that God is pleased when you do what is right. And He is. God is pleased when you obey Him. God is equally pleased when you understand His truth. And the more of it you understand, the more pleased He is.

Now how are you going to...how are you going to get to the point of real discernment? Verse 3, you start by listening to the truth, that is exposing yourself to the Word of God, read, preached, taught. But look at verse 3, you want discernment? "Then cry for discernment. Lift your voice for understanding. If you seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures, then you will discern the fear of the Lord and discover the knowledge of God."

How badly do you have to want it? You have to want it more than you want anything else. Now it's pretty typical for kids to go to college with a view to getting silver, right? You want a job, we understand that. You'll even make a great investment to prepare yourself so that you can have a career and prosper. You

might even commit yourself to searching for hidden treasure, trying to figure out ways to get well. Amazing what people will do.

What level of passion do you have toward discernment? Where does that fit into the scheme of things? Some of you are trying to achieve things scholastically, achieve things musically and achieve things economically, achieve things athletically. I mean, how much do you cry for discernment? How important is it for you? How much does it drive you? Because if it doesn't, you're not going to get there.

I mean, it's the same old thing. If you don't run that race, you can't win it. If you don't pursue that goal, you can't get it. If you're content with a minimal knowledge of truth, if you're content with a kind of sloppy theology, if you're content not to pursue the deep things of God and the glories of His truth, then I promise you, you're not going to get them because they're not sitting on the surface.

There's a great chapter in Job chapter 28 which...we can't read the whole chapter, but just a couple of comments about it. You can read it on your own. It points out, Job 28, "There's a mine for silver, a place where they refine gold, iron is taken from the dust, from rock copper is smelted." It's kind of interesting to think about the fact that Job is probably written in the patriarchal age, maybe the first book in the Bible, so you're way, way back in early human history and they already had silver mines, they already had gold mines, they already had iron ore, they were already smelting copper out of the rock. I mean, you're talking about...do you think man is smarter today than he was then? Wrong. We're on the decline. "And in order to mine the treasures that God had placed in the earth, man put an end to darkness. That is, he dug down into the earth to reach these things and literally brought the light down to the farthest limit. He sank a shaft, amazing, what kind of drill did they use to sink shafts into the rock? Forgotten by the foot and they hang and swing to and fro far from men." They put a shaft in the ground in Job's day and they sent people down there in some kind of an elevator contraption and they were swinging around down there trying to find whatever was there. They brought up...this is amazing..."They brought up sapphires" in verse 6, "and gold. They went to places where the bird of prey doesn't even

know. The falcon's eye has never caught sight of it." And they used the falcon as an illustration because they have such incredible sight. The falcon never saw this. No proud beast ever trod in that area. Verse 9, "Overturn the mountains..." how do you overturn the mountain at its base? You have to do dynamite to do that. Are we saying that in Job's day they had that kind of sophisticated ability to overturn mountains? That's what it says. "They cut channels through the rocks. They damned up the streams."

What are they doing? Mining for gold, all this in the primitive time of Job but they can do all of that but verse 12 says, "Where can wisdom be found?" Where can wisdom be found? Where's the place of understanding? Man doesn't know its value. It's not in the land of the living. The deep says, the ocean says you're not going to find it in me. The sea says, not with me. Pure gold can't buy it. Silver can't get it. The gold of Ophir can't get it. Precious onyx, sapphires, gold, glass can't equal it. Coral, crystal, topaz, it goes on. You can find...man has incredible, incredible genius to find all of this stuff but he can't find wisdom. The reason he can't find wisdom is because he doesn't look where it is, in the Word of God.

Verse 23, "God understands its way; He knows its place." Verse 28, "Behold the fear of the Lord." That's wisdom. Now if you want wisdom the way people want gold and silver and sapphires, if you want to give your life to the pursuit of wisdom, then you'll be discerning...then you'll be discerning. And your discernment will lead to greater worship because you won't be worshiping out of a shallow understanding of God, but a full and rich one. It will give greater impact to your life and testimony because you'll bring the Word of God, the truth of God to bear upon every circumstance in the lives of people you influence. It will make you a more effective, obviously, teacher and preacher if that's what God calls you to do. And it will profoundly enrich your own life because living in the truth, living out the truth brings the flood of the blessing of God upon your life.

That's why I've said this through the years, it's so important to protect the doctrine of Scripture because if you ever equivocate on the veracity and authenticity and authority and inerrancy of Scripture, you've just cut yourself off from an absolute source of wisdom.

So, you start at that point. Let me give you a second point. First you want to desire it. You have to have that desire in your heart, ask God to grant you that desire. And that takes me to the second point, prayer...prayer. [James 1:5](#), "Any of you lacks wisdom, let him...what?...what does it say?...ask God who gives to all men generously without reproach and it will be given to him. But don't ask in faith doubting or you'll be like the sea, driven and tossed, with full confidence that God is the source of wisdom." It starts with a passion in your heart. And I don't know, I grew up, you know, as an athlete. In high school, I didn't take my education seriously at all, it was just a way to stay eligible to play. I came into my college days and I was involved in athletics and...but there was in my heart in my days in college even though I was consumed with so many activities and being involved in leadership and a lot of other things, there was this growing passion to know the truth. In fact, I had a hard time having daily devotion because people would say to me, "You know, read the Bible fifteen minutes a day, read the Bible a half an hour a day and say a little prayer, it's really important." That was the most frustrating thing I did because I'd read it and I'd say, "I don't understand that." And then when I shut the Bible and went away, I was frustrated because I didn't understand what I just read.

So if you mean by daily devotional reading the Bible and not understanding it, that's not helpful. I found out, however, as I read it more and more and more, it began to be clear to me. But the Lord started developing in me a passion for the truth and I started trying to feed that development by my own prayer. "Lord, I want to understand Your Word." I never went to seminary, in all honesty, I never went to seminary to be made into a preacher. I never went to seminary to be made into a pastor. I went to seminary because I was frustrated because I didn't have the tools to interpret the Word of God and I had such a desire to know His truth. And that's never changed. It's a matter of prayer. It's a matter of passion.

Thirdly, it's a matter of pattern. You need an example. So hang around people who have discernment. That's one of the great realities of being here. Hang around people who have discernment. Just like a leech, you know, suck everything you can get out of them. Now, today, as always, according to [1 Corinthians 12:10](#), there's a gift of discernment. [First Corinthians 12:10](#) talks

about the gift of discernment. The gift of discernment is related, I believe, to an understanding of Scripture which is how you become discerning. This gift becomes a watchdog gift for the church, though it may have in the early church had some element of being able to discern false spirits. False spirits could easily be discerned by anybody because they spoke false and not the truth. Hang around people who have discernment, people who know how to answer heresies and hypocrisies, who know how to identify error, who understand the subtleties. This is one of the great experiences of your life is to be in an environment here with those kinds of people all around you. These people are the watchmen for the church. They are your teachers.

Another thing to do, and this fits right into it, is follow the example of mature Christians. Follow the example of mature Christians. The writer of Hebrews, and this without going into a lot of detail, in chapter 5 of Hebrews and the last little verse there, "Solid food is for the mature who because of practice have their senses trained to discern." Find mature people who have been around a while and who have their senses trained to be discerning. Pastors, youth pastors, faculty members, sit under discerning people. Really important when you choose a church, not just now but throughout your life, find those people who demonstrate maturity in discernment. Make them your pattern.

So you start with asking God to give you the passion, asking God to give you the desire, the hunger for the truth. You support that constantly in prayer, asking God to show you the truth, to reveal the wisdom to you as you study His Word. Find those who are gifted in that area who are mature, follow them.

And then I think just one other thing has to be said and that is this, depend upon the Holy Spirit. Depend upon the Holy Spirit. First John 2, this verse I know you know, verse 20, "You have an anointing from the Holy One and you all know. I have not written to you because you don't know the truth but because you do know it and because no lie is of the truth."

The reason you know the truth, he says, is because you have an anointing from the Holy One. The anointing is the Holy Spirit. Verse 27, "You received from Him

the anointing who abides in you so you don't have any need for human teachers, but as His anointing teaches you about all things and is true and is not a lie, you abide in Him.”

So here again, the truth contrasted to the lie, the truth teacher, the anointing, the Holy Spirit given to you at the time of your salvation. You have a resident truth teacher. How wonderful is that? You have a permanent faculty member, more astute than all of us combined, infinitely so. And that truth teacher dwells in you and promises to disclose to you the truth of God as you expose yourself to the written Word.

And that takes me to the last point. Diligently study Scripture. You have to end up here, folks. Diligently study Scripture. Like in Acts 17 the Bereans who search the Scripture to see if these things were so, read Psalm 19 and you're going to find there a man, David, who loved the Scripture. All through Psalm 19, all hundred and seventy-six verses he pours out this love for the truth which compelled his heart, just compelled his heart.

As you study the Word of God, as you expose yourself to the Word of God, prayerfully, passionately, dependent on the Holy Spirit to be your teacher, discernment will develop. And then you find those who demonstrate maturity and have experienced through the years of practice who are the models of that discernment and make those people your spiritual heroes. Don't make the stylized people your heroes, make the discerning people. Those who have the deep and wide and broad and high grasp of divine truth, they're your heroes. I'm afraid it's like our world around us, many young Christians heroes are in the music field or sort of the Christian pop culture field. Make the heroes the ones who have the most discernment. And God will be blessed and honored by your faithfulness to His truth, you will be able to worship Him in the highest and purest form because the more you know about Him, the more glorious He is. The more of His truth you know, the greater will be your worship, the greater will be your ministry, your witness and the greater joy and blessing will come to your life as you live out that truth.

So maybe to end, look at Philippians 1. I mentioned it a minute ago. But let me just make this my prayer for you. [Philippians 1:9](#), “This I pray that your love may abound still more.” I don't want to make this love for truth become hard-hearted, or hard headed. Paul didn't either. He says, “No, I want your love to abound still more and more. But I want that love to be the product of real knowledge and all discernment. And I'll tell you this. The more you know of God's truth, the more legitimately you love. The less you know of God's truth, the more superficially you love. So I want your love to abound still more and more but in real knowledge with all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, you can make the distinctions. And when you make the distinctions, here's the wonderful reality, you will be sincere, that is without hypocrisy, and blameless in your life until the day of Christ, the day the Lord comes for His own. I want your life to be without hypocrisy, sincere, without wax, no hypocrisy. I want it to be blameless until the day of Christ. And then in verse 11, “I want your life to be filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ and gives glory and praise to God.”

I want you to live a life that praises God, a life that glorifies God, a life that honors Christ, the life that's fruitful, a life that's blameless, a life that's without hypocrisy because you can choose what is excellent because you have all discernment because you have real knowledge. You can go forward and backward through those verses. You're blessed, people are impacted, God is glorified when you are discerning.

Father, I pray that You will grant to us even as we said earlier from James that You would grant to us the wisdom that we need. May we not wait as if somehow that's going to occur in a vacuum, but may we know that the wisdom awaits us in the pages of Scripture as we faithfully pursue it, reading it repeatedly, studying it, listening to it being taught, reading books that explain its meaning, following the example of those who are mature and have their senses heightened through practice to discern what is right and what is true. Give us the deep passion, give us an unending prayer for discernment that causes us to come before Your throne and plead and cry for discernment, wanting it more than silver, more than gold, more than anything, for then we will have the knowledge of God and we'll

have an appropriate fear in the worship of You. I pray, Lord, that You will make us guardians of the truth as well as proclaimers of it, as well as living out that truth and enjoying all the fruits of righteousness which shall be to our own blessing in time and eternity and to your eternal praise. These things we ask in Your Son's name. Amen.