Discernment vs. Judgment

Discernment is the ability to distinguish between good and evil, in order to make wise decisions.

Definition

The concept of discernment is defined by several Hebrew words. *Shama* means “to hear, understand, perceive”; *yada*, “to know, to recognize, to consider”; and *biyn*, “to separate mentally, to distinguish.” A fourth word, *mishpat*, means “judgment in law; decision” and refers to “a verdict pronounced judicially, especially a sentence or formal decree.”

The Greek word translated discern is *diakrino* and means “to separate thoroughly, to withdraw from, to discriminate, to make a distinction, to decide.”

What Are We to Discern?

When God told Solomon to ask for anything he wanted, Solomon asked for discernment. “Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart . . . that I may discern between good and bad” (I Kings 3:9).

God commanded the priests of Israel to “teach my people the difference between the holy and profane, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean” (Ezekiel 44:23). Mature believers are defined as those “who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Hebrews 5:14). The word *senses* refers to our organs of perception: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, hands, mind, and heart. By constant exercise, we are to increase their ability to make fine distinctions between good and evil.

The Importance of Discerning Between Good and Evil

In Scripture, the opposite of holiness is uncleanness, as indicated by the following passages:

- “God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness” (I Thessalonians 4:7).
- “As ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness” (Romans 6:19).

The Apostle Peter links New Testament holiness with the Old Testament instruction on holiness: “As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy” (I Peter 1:14–16).

In this passage, Peter quotes directly from Leviticus, which describes approximately ten different categories of physical and moral discernment is spiritual sight that is not dimmed by lack of faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, or love.

“He that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins.” —II Peter 1:9

“Discernment is the power to interpret what we see and hear.” —Oswald Chambers

Discernment is the ability to see the hand of God in every circumstance and to trust His intentions through each one.

“All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” —Romans 8:28
uncleanness. This one book contains over seventy references to the word holy.

“I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy: neither shall ye defile yourselves” (Leviticus 11:44). “Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). “Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be ye holy: for I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 20:7).

What Are the Consequences of Uncleanness?

Regulations against uncleanness govern the proper care of the body of a believer, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Defiling the temple brings the judgment of God. “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are” (I Corinthians 3:16–17).

An even greater consequence comes when a believer defiles his body with moral uncleanness. He causes every other member of the Body of Christ to be affected. Every believer is a member of the spiritual Body of Christ. “So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” (Romans 12:5). God has “set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him” (I Corinthians 12:18).

The interrelationship between the members of the Body of Christ is compared to the oneness of marriage. “So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. . . . They two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:28, 31–32).

The awesome result of this corporate union is that when one member commits a sin, the entire body of believers is damaged. “Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it” (I Corinthians 12:26).

This truth explains the warning in I Corinthians 6:15–19: “Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid. What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh. But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit.”

The same truth is given to the Israelites. “The children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan . . . took of the accursed thing: and the anger of the LORD was kindled against the children of Israel” (Joshua 7:1).

A discerning believer will understand that every thought, word, and action must be authorized by the Word of God and guarded by the Holy Spirit. Any violation must be repented of and confessed.

The Lord ordained the communion table as a time for thorough self-examination, with the awareness that confession of sin and asking forgiveness of the local Body of Christ must be made before communion is taken. Failure to discern the true purpose of Christ’s death and our responsibility to the body of believers can be the cause of weakness, sickness, or premature death.
“Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep” (I Corinthians 11:27–30).

How Do We Gain Discernment?

The answer is contained in Solomon’s request of the Lord. “Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart . . . that I may discern between good and bad” (I Kings 3:9). An understanding heart is a “hearing heart.” It listens to the voice of conscience, the words of Scripture, and the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

In James 1:5, we are urged to ask for wisdom and are assured that God will give it to all who ask for it in faith. We can, therefore, expect that as Solomon was granted his request, so we will be granted a similar one. As we exercise our senses in making each decision, our discernment will increase.

The tragic experience of those who reject the truth is that they are deceived. “They received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie” (II Thessalonians 2:10–11).

What Are the Indicators of a Judgmental Spirit?

If the failures of others decrease our concern for the faults we know we have and instead improve our opinions of ourselves, then we are being judgmental.

We reveal a judgmental spirit when we share the failures of another with those who are not part of the solution. Bitterness, the mention of past failures, and a desire for vengeance are also signs of a judgmental spirit.

How much discernment do you have?

- Do you ask God for an understanding heart to discern between good and bad?
- Do you pursue holiness by rejecting all forms of uncleanness?
- Do you dedicate your body to God as a temple of the Holy Spirit?
- Do you ask God to remove anything in your life that would hinder you from hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit?
- Do you listen to both sides of a story before making conclusions?
- Do you evaluate the benefits of God’s letting something happen?
- Do you consider a person’s life and background before making a judgment?
- When you see someone making a wrong decision, do you desire to help?

Personal Evaluation

Observation becomes judgment when there is no desire to provide a loving solution.

“Discernment is God’s call to intercession, never to fault-finding.” — Oswald Chambers

Truth and love must always be combined with discernment.

- Truth without love is harshness.
- Love without truth is compromise.

“Beware of allowing the discernment of wrong in another blind you to the fact that you are what you are by the grace of God.” — Oswald Chambers