



Discretion

vs. Simple-Mindedness

Discretion is using wisdom to avoid damaging attitudes, words, and actions and to give insightful counsel.

Discretion is knowing when it is best to say nothing at all.

When you figure out an answer, learn to wait for someone to request it. A simple man opens his mouth and confirms his foolishness, but a discreet man keeps silent and is considered wise.

“Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise: and he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding.” —Proverbs 17:28

“ ‘Tis better to be silent and be thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt.” —Abraham Lincoln

Discretion is knowing how to describe unpleasant things in a pleasant way.

“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.” —Proverbs 25:11

Definition

In Scripture, a close synonym to *discreet* is the word *prudent*. Just as discreet behavior avoids damaging situations, so a prudent person understands cause-and-effect sequences and acts accordingly. “A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished” (Proverbs 22:3).

There are several Hebrew words that are translated *prudent*. A primary word is *aruwm*, which means “cunning.” When combined with the proper motives and knowledge, a prudent person is able to avoid problems and envision insightful achievements. “Every prudent man dealeth with knowledge: but a fool layeth open his folly” (Proverbs 13:16). “The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way: but the folly of fools is deceit” (Proverbs 14:8).

Some further characteristics of prudent behavior are:

- **Creative skill**—“I wisdom dwell with prudence, and find out knowledge of witty inventions” (Proverbs 8:12).
- **Good judgment**—“A prudent man covereth shame” (Proverbs 12:16).
- **Caution in speaking**—“A prudent man concealeth knowledge: but the heart of fools proclaimeth foolishness” (Proverbs 12:23).

- **Initiative in learning**—“The heart of the prudent getteth knowledge; and the ear of the wise seeketh knowledge” (Proverbs 18:15).
- **Investigation of Facts**—“The simple believeth every word: but the prudent man looketh well to his going” (Proverbs 14:15).
- **Openness to reproof**—“He that regardeth reproof is prudent” (Proverbs 15:5).

The Importance of Discretion

Discretion, when properly used, will protect a man’s health, wealth, and wisdom. “Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee” (Proverbs 2:11). There are several different Hebrew words that are translated *discretion* or *discreet*. These words, together with the context in which they are used, describe the meaning and application of discretion.

1. Discretion develops and exercises an understanding heart.

An understanding heart is also a listening and obedient heart. “My son, attend unto my wisdom, and bow thine ear to my understanding: That thou mayest regard discretion [*mezimmah*], and that thy lips may keep knowledge. For the lips of a strange woman drop as

an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil: But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword” (Proverbs 5:1-4). The Hebrew word *mezimmah* can describe evil plans or plans that are innovative, witty, and insightful.

2. Discretion distinguishes right from wrong and chooses right.

Discretion knows what attitudes, words, and actions are right, honorable, and just and accordingly acts upon them. “A good man sheweth favour, and lendeth: he will guide his affairs with discretion. Surely he shall not be moved for ever: the righteous shall be in everlasting remembrance. He hath dispersed, he hath given to the poor; his righteousness endureth for ever; his horn shall be exalted with honour” (Psalm 112:5-6, 9). The Hebrew word for *discretion* in this verse is *mishpat*. It means “judgment, verdict, an act of deciding a case.”

3. Discretion treasures and uses wisdom.

To treasure something is to guard it, to cherish it, and to delight in it. “My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion: So shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble. When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet” (Proverbs 3:21-24).

The Hebrew word for *discretion* in this passage is *mezimmah* (depicting inventiveness). The use of such innovation and insight will produce treasures. One who treasures money rather than wisdom may get riches, but he will

not be able to sleep well at night because of his worry over business and fear of losing money.

4. Discretion recognizes and responds to the motives of people.

Those who have wicked and deceptive motives should be avoided. Solomon became successful and famous because he had wisdom, understanding, and discretion. However, near the end of his life, he lost his discretion, and his heart was drawn away by immoral women. “Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee . . . To deliver thee from the strange woman, even from the stranger which flattereth with her words” (Proverbs 2:11, 16).

5. Discretion turns knowledge into wise counsel.

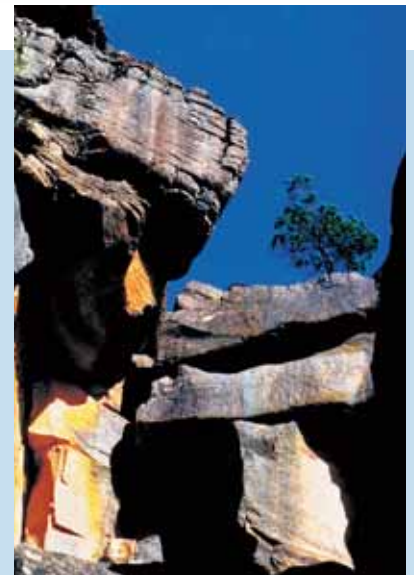
Proverbs was written “to know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding; To receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity; To give subtilty to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion [*mezimmah*]” (Proverbs 1:2-4). *Mezimmah* emphasizes the wisdom and insight of the counsel that is given.

6. Discretion has a spirit of wisdom and walks in it.

Joseph, one of Scripture’s most outstanding role models, exercised discretion. He had a listening and obedient ear to his father, he used discretion in responding to the wicked and lustful motives of Potiphar’s wife, and he demonstrated discretion when he gave the following wise counsel to Pharaoh.

“Now therefore let Pharaoh look out a man discreet and wise,

Realizing that its every step is vital in avoiding its enemies, the discreet **red fox** escapes its pursuers by making quick changes in direction and covering its tracks.



An indiscreet word or action takes a moment to do but results in a lifetime of regret.

“A prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself; but the simple pass on, and are punished.”

—Proverbs 27:12

“Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.” —James 1:19



Discretion is looking past problems and considering the potential of a person or project.

When we learn how to see and communicate to others the solution for a blemish or weakness, new life is given. When we learn how to describe potential because of a blemish or weakness, hope is given.

“The mouth of a righteous man is a well of life The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable.”
—Proverbs 10:11, 32

“He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction.”
—Proverbs 13:3

“Sometimes our best statements are made by saying nothing at all.”

—Oswald Chambers

and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh do this, and let him appoint officers over the land, and take up the fifth part of the land of Egypt in the seven plenteous years. And let them gather all the food of those good years that come, and lay up corn under the hand of Pharaoh, and let them keep food in the cities. And that food shall be for store to the land against the seven years of famine, which shall be in the land of Egypt; that the land perish not through the famine” (Genesis 41:33–36).

“Pharaoh said unto Joseph, Forasmuch as God hath shewed thee all this, there is none so discreet and wise as thou art: Thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled: only in the throne will I be greater than thou” (Genesis 41:39).

7. Discretion controls destructive emotions.

A person may have wisdom in giving counsel to others but lack the ability to control his own emotions of fear, frustration, and anger. However, “the discretion of a man deferreth his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression” (Proverbs 19:11). The Hebrew word for *discretion* in this verse is *sekel*. It means “intelligence, prudence, understanding.” The word *transgression* denotes a revolt morally, spiritually, or legally; rebellion or trespass.

In this case, one would use discretion to discern whose jurisdiction these “rebels” are under and to let their authorities deal with them. “He that passeth by, and meddleth with strife belonging not to him, is like one that taketh a dog by the ears” (Proverbs 26:17).

Such action will cause the meddler to be injured.

Similarly, we are not to fret because of evildoers or be envious of their evil deeds, because God will soon deal with them. “Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. . . . Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass. Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: fret not thyself in any wise to do evil” (Psalm 37:1, 7–8). (See also Amos 5:12–15.)

Personal Evaluation

How discreet are you?

- Do you know how to wisely evaluate an activity?
- Do you say what is on your mind without first evaluating its effect on others?
- Do you welcome reproof from those who see you do or say wrong things?
- Do you learn from others’ mistakes so that you do not repeat them?
- Do you stand alone for doing right and avoid all appearance of evil?
- Do you choose your friends on the basis of their wisdom rather than their popularity?
- Do you refrain from spreading gossip, slander, and damaging reports?