

# Discernment

*1 Cor 2:15 (KJV)* But he that is spiritual judgeth all things...

*Mat 7:1 (KJV)* Judge not, that ye be not judged...

F.F. Bruce: "Judgment is an ambiguous word, in Greek as in English: it may mean sitting in judgment on people (or even condemning them), or it may mean exercising a proper discrimination. In the former sense judgment is depreciated; in the latter sense it is recommended."

NIV Study Notes: The Christian is not to judge hypocritically or self-righteously, as can be seen from the context. [But] Scripture repeatedly exhorts believers to evaluate carefully and choose between good and bad people and things. The Christian is to "test everything":

*1 Thes 5:21 (Phi)* "By all means use your judgment, and hold on to whatever is good."

A.W. Tozer: "Among the gifts of the Spirit scarcely one is of greater practical usefulness than the gift of discernment. This gift should be highly valued and frankly sought as being almost indispensable in these critical times. This gift will enable us to distinguish the chaff from the wheat and to divide the manifestations of the flesh from the operations of the Spirit."

For clarity, let's use the word discern for the judgment that God encourages, and criticize for inappropriate judgments. By context, try to identify whether the word judgment, when used in Scripture, means discernment or criticism.

## Spiritual Malpractice

*Luke 12:57 (NIV)* "Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right?"

*Hosea 4:6 (NIV)* My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.

It is important that we judge things properly, or *discern*. If a person with appendicitis is diagnosed as having an ulcer, it may seem a mere matter of

terminology, but if judged improperly, treatment could lead to death! If a baby has a fever, you wouldn't put it in the freezer to cool it down. Treating the symptom may make the problem worse! Discernment by outward appearances, out of ignorance, confusing cause and effect, symptom with problem, can be devastating--even with the best of intents.

*2 Cor 10:7 (NIV)* You are looking only at the surface of things.

## Why Are Our Prayers And Ministry So Ineffective?

Consider our lack of discernment: Of the causes mentioned in Scripture of God, the world, the flesh, the devil; each Christian sect seems to focus on one and ignore the others. Diseases are assumed to be demons and "rebuked" without discernment or effect. Demons are assumed to be sickness, and "treatment" is attempted. God's discipline is attributed to Satan, and made light of. The obvious promptings of the flesh are assumed to be the spirit, or even of the soul. The soul is confused with the flesh and spirit. A mere matter of terminology, right? With such faulty diagnosis, we attempt "ministry", to no effect, and often to great harm. Is this ministry? Is this us?

*John 7:24 (Phi)* "You must not judge by the appearance of things but by the reality!"

*John 7:24 (NIV)* "Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a *right judgment*."

## Counterproductive Ministry

If a medical doctor were to make such outlandish mistakes, we would put a stop to his "practice". But the modern church carries on in this "anti-ministry", leaving behind a wake of damaged souls. It is a very bad symptom when we don't care if our prayers and ministry are effective; it shows that the object of our "spirituality" is self-glory and not love. We don't dare look to see for fear of realizing how badly we are doing. Ignorance is bliss. Clearly, we need to learn to judge properly before we act. We need discernment.

*Prov 19:2 (NIV)* It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way.

*1 Cor 4:5 (Phi)* "The moral of this is that we should make no hasty or premature judgments."

If we were willing to ask, willing to wait, willing to listen, we might gain discernment, so that we could "know", and not have to waver. We might achieve real faith. We would see past the surface, into reality. Our prayers and ministry would be effective. We could know God's will and see it done.

*James 1:5 (NIV)* If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given unto him.

## Jesus On Discernment

*Luke 11:9 (NIV)* "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

*Mat 16:3 (KJV)* "...'It will be foul weather today: for the sky is red and lowering.' O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?"

*Isa 11:2-3 (NIV)* The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him--the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord--and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears.

*John 8:15-16,26 (NIV)* "You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. But if I do **judge**, my decisions are right, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father who sent me... ***I have much to say in judgment*** of you. But he who sent me is reliable, and what I have heard from him I tell the world."

*John 12:48 (NEB)* "There is a judge for the man who rejects me and does not accept my words; ***the word that I spoke*** will be his judge on the last day."

*Heb 4:12 (NIV)* The word of God is living and active... ***it judges*** the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

## Our Destiny

*Mat 19:28 (NIV)* Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his throne in heavenly glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

*Luke 22:30 (NIV)* "so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

## Discernment in the Church

Are we to "judge" teachings, situations, and even people in the church? Many Christians are fearful of making judgments, and unclear if this is the mission and duty of the church. After all: "Judge not!..." (We will consider hypocritical judgment, or criticism, in a moment.) This fear of using proper judgment may come from a simple lack of understanding of God's will, or from superstition (Col 2:18-19), or even from a lack of the Holy Spirit (Jude 17-19). Scripture is useful for correcting such conditions (2 Tim 3:16-17).

*1 Cor 5:12-6:6 (Phi)* Those outside the church it is not my business to judge. But surely ***it is your business to judge those who are inside the church***--God alone can judge those who are outside... When any of you has a grievance against another, aren't you ashamed to bring the matter to be settled before a pagan court instead of before the church? Don't you know that Christians ***will some day judge the world?*** And if you are to judge the world do you consider yourselves incapable of settling such infinitely smaller matters? Don't you know that we shall judge the very angels themselves--how much more then matters of this world only! In any case, if you find you have to judge matters of this world, why choose as judges those who count for nothing in the church? ***I say this deliberately to rouse your sense of shame.*** Are you really unable to find among your number one man with enough sense to decide a dispute between one and

another among you, or must one brother resort to the law against another; and that before those who have no faith in Christ!

*1 Cor 5:3,12 (NIV)* Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have ***already passed judgment*** on the one who did this, just as if I were present... What business of mine is it to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

*1 Cor 6:2-3 (NIV)* Do you not know that God's people will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!

## The Difference Between Old Testament Prophets and New

*1 Cor 14:24-25 (NIV)* But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be ***convinced by all that he is a sinner*** and he will be ***judged by all***, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. He will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

In Israel, prophets were rare and held to a high standard. You were 100% correct or "stoned". For the church, the Holy Spirit distributes the gifts to many, and we must learn and grow into the proper use of the gifts, prophecy included. We have quantity, but not necessarily quality. Thus, the burden is on the listener to discern, or judge the prophets. Simon Peter makes a good example of the inconsistency of the church prophets. (For an after Pentecost situation, see Paul "judging" Simon Peter in Gal 2:11.)

## The Case of Simon Peter

Mat 16:16-17 (NIV) 22-23 (Phi) Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my father in heaven..." Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never

happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Amazing how the same mouth that spoke a "word of revelation" was "in the flesh" just a few moments later. The gift is great, but the "in the flesh" part can be a real problem for others. Jesus, who had discernment, openly "judged" Simon Peter, moments after praising him. For most of us, we will not have to openly judge, but simply decide for ourselves whether or not the "prophetic" message is from above or from below.

## The Case of Simon the Sorcerer

Acts 8:9-10 (NIV) Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power." They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic.

Acts 8:19-23 (Phi) "Give me [Simon the Sorcerer] this power too, so that if I were to put my hands on anyone he would receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "To hell with you and your money! How dare you think you could buy the gift of God for money!.. your heart is not honest before God... repent of this wickedness of yours and pray earnestly to the Lord that if possible the evil intention of your heart will be forgiven. For I can see inside you, and I see a man bitter with jealousy and bound with his own sin!"

## How to Discern Real Prophecy from What "Simon Says"

*Mat 7:15-16,22-23 (NIV)* "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. **By their fruit** you will **recognize them**... Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many

miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

A.W. Tozer: "The healthy soul, like the healthy blood system, has its proper proportion of white and red blood cells. The red corpuscles are like faith: they carry the life giving oxygen to every part of the body. The white cells are like discernment: they pounce upon dead and toxic matter and carry it out to the drain. In the healthy heart there must be provision for keeping dead and poisonous matter out of the life stream."

*1 Jn 4:1 (TEB)* My dear friends: do not believe all who claim to have the Spirit, but **test them** to find out if the spirit they have comes from God. For many false prophets have gone out everywhere.

*1 Cor 14:29 (NEB)* Of the prophets, two or three may speak, while the rest exercise their **judgment** upon what is said.

*1 Cor 14:29 (TEB)* Two or three who are given God's message should speak, while the others **judge** what they say.

*Acts 17:11 (NIV)* Now the Bereans were more noble than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day **to see if what Paul said was true.**

## Criticism in the Church

*Mat 7:1-2 (Phi)* "Don't criticize people, and you will not be criticized. For you will be judged by the way you criticize others, and the measure you give will be the measure you receive."

*Mat 7:3-5 (Jer)* "Why do you observe the splinter in your brother's eye and never notice the plank in your own? How dare you say to your brother, 'Let me take the splinter out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own? Hypocrite! Take the plank out of your own eye *first*, and then you will see clearly enough to take the splinter out of your brother's eye."

This is not inconsistent with other Scriptures that instruct us to "judge" and help others be delivered from sin. The message here is to make sure you have been delivered first! Then, and only then, will you be effective at ministering to others. "Splinter removal", after all, is an important work of the church.

*Mat 7:5 (NIV)* "...**first** take the plank out of your own eye, and **then** you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

Sin can be debilitating and painful, like a splinter in the eye. But removing a splinter from your own eye may be impossible. Often, we need each other for this type of healing. For removal, the "healer's" hands must be clean, the environment must be full of light, the approach must be sensitive and reassuring. This should never be attempted by the self-righteous, in an environment of darkness, or with dirty hands.

## "Judges" With Dirty Hands

*James 4:8,11-12 (Phi)* ...You are sinners: get your hands clean again. Your loyalty is divided: get your hearts made true once more... Never pull each other to pieces, my brothers. If you criticize your brother and judge your brother you have become a critic and judge of the Law. Yet if you start to criticize the Law **instead of obeying it** you are **setting yourself up as a judge**. There is only one Judge, the One who gave the Law, to whom belongs absolute power of life and death. How can you then be your neighbor's judge?

*Rom 2:1-3 (Phi)* Now if you feel inclined to **set yourself up as a judge** of those who sin, let me assure you, whoever you are, that you are in no position to do so. For at whatever point you condemn others you automatically condemn yourself, since you, the judge, commit the same sins. God's judgment, we know, is utterly impartial in its action **against such evil-doers**. What makes you think that you, who so readily judge the sins of others, can consider yourselves beyond the judgment of God?



## Don't Judge Anyone but Yourself in Disputable Matters

*1 Cor 11:31 (NIV)* But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment.

*Rom 14:1,4-5,10,12-13 (NIV)* Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters... Who are you to judge someone else's servant?.. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind... You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat... So then, everyone will give an account of himself to God. Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another...

*Col 2:16-17 (NIV)* Therefore **do not let anyone judge you** by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a new moon celebration, or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

*1 Cor 4:5 (Jer)* There must be no passing of premature judgment. Leave that until the Lord comes: He will light up everything that is hidden in the dark and reveal the secret intentions of men's hearts...

*1 Cor 4:6 (NIV)* ..."Do not go beyond what is written."...

## Personal Judgment: Discernment or Criticism?

*1 Sam 16:7 (NIV)* "...Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

Suppose you think that you have "discerned" something. A good test of whether this "realization" is from above or from below is: *what you feel*. Does your discernment lead you to help, heal, love, share? Does it lead towards purity of the body, towards Christ? Then the Holy Spirit may have given you a taste of His perspective: the truth, with love. Your actions will prove the validity of what you think, and deeper fellowship and/or humility will be the result.

But if *what you feel* in your heart as a result of the discernment is superiority, scandal, bitterness, or a desire to detach yourself from the body of Christ, then it is not of God. Whether it is correct, or not, is not the issue: The "knowledge" comes from below, not above--as judged by its fruit. God looks at the heart. If what you "know" about others isn't useful to them or you, forget what you "know". It's poison.

## The Gift of Discernment

*Phil 1:9-10 (NIV)* And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able *to discern* what is best and be pure and blameless until the day of Christ.

*Phil 1:9 (TEB)* This is my prayer for you: I pray that your love will keep on growing more and more, together with true knowledge and perfect judgment...

*1 Ki 3:9 (NIV)* So give your servant a *discerning heart* to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong...

*1 Cor 12:10 (KJV)* ...to another prophecy, to another *discerning* of spirits...

*1 Cor 12:10 (Phi)* ...to another the ability to *discriminate in spiritual matters*...

*Heb 5:14 (NIV)* But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to *distinguish good from evil*.

*Prov 15:14 (NIV)* The discerning heart seeks knowledge...

*1 Cor 4:6 (Jer)* ...(remember the maxim: "Keep to what is written")...

*John 7:24 (NEB)* "Do not judge superficially, but be just in your judgments."

## God's Thoughts

*1 Cor 2:10 (NIV)* ...but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.

*1 Cor 2:14-16 (NIV)* The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man ***makes judgments about all things***, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment... we have the mind of Christ.

*1 Cor 10:15 (NIV)* I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.