

“Why is Discernment missing, hard or even an issue?” Pt 1

Recovering the Art of Discernment

Various Scriptures - Genesis 3

Rev. Bob Cummings

September 29, 2023

Bob: So I’m assuming you can all hear me.

Brave Men: Yes.

Bob: Are we good? Awesome! I find it a great privilege to be with you this morning. When Ted and Jim asked me to do this I said, “You don’t know what you’re asking. You’ve never heard me speak. How do you know that I’ll be any good?” So I’m hoping that I’m not going to disappoint you too much this morning in what I’m going to share with you. So I’m glad that I have the opportunity.

A little bit more about me. I was born in Oakmont, so I’ve been a native Pittsburgher most of my life. I’ve spent most of my ministry career—37 years—in Western Pennsylvania. Then I made a career shift to do what most of you know as interim ministry. In the EPC they call it “transitional ministry.” And what we do in transitional ministry is that we go into a church after the senior pastor leaves for whatever reason, and kind of help the church to re-focus on its core values, so that when the next pastor is called by the church, the pastor is coming into a church that has reaffirmed its core values and ministries.

That sounds like a great thing to do, and it is a great thing to do. I’ve enjoyed my time doing that. I was able to do that in Philadelphia and Washington.

And by the way, the apples in Washington are really spectacular. I mean really, when you get fresh fruit off the trees, it’s just unbelievable. And the scale of the agriculture there boggled my mind.

To tell you a little bit about that, we had a member of the church who was a specialist in cherries. And so he said to me one day toward the end of the cherry season, “Pastor Bob, would you like to come and visit my farm?” And I said, “Sure, I’d love to do that.”

He said, “Well you know, we start early in the morning.”

And I said, “Well that’s okay. I’m still on East Coast time. I’m getting up very early in the morning; I could meet you.”

And so I’m figuring it would be an hour or two of kind of seeing the farm. So I met him at the office. My wife and I got into his truck with him. He takes us down to the Columbia River where things start. And they have these huge intake pipes for irrigation, and they pump water up into the cherry orchards.

And so we started there. And four hours later I had not seen the entire cherry orchard that he farms. And so the scale is just incredibly large. We were very blessed; it was great. I never knew there were that many types of cherries in my entire life; there were all kinds of varieties. We just bought his red cherries.

So we had a great time in Washington; we loved it. We came back here because of a call from Pastor John. He said, “Bob, we need a pastor here at Christ Church. Would you be interested?”

I said, “Maybe, John.” And then God did great things. And that’s part of the reason I wanted to share with you what our topic is. How do we know what God is doing?

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We might be involved in the great things of God. We read the Scriptures and we see these astounding stories of God doing these amazing things with God’s people. And we sometimes say to ourselves, “That doesn’t happen to me. I don’t understand. Why doesn’t that great thing happen to me? Or how would I know if that great thing would happen to me?” And so we’re going to talk a little bit about this word *discernment*.

Transcriber’s Note: Bob writes on the blackboard.

Bob: Because one of the difficulties I find in leading churches is that we as Christians often don’t know what discernment really is. We’re really good about something we call decision making. And for men decision making is easy. We’re asked to make decisions every day by the hundreds, if not thousands. And most men don’t have any trouble making decisions. In fact, what we have trouble with is not making decisions.

I mean, come on, guys. When you’re talking to your spouses and family members, especially the ladies of your house, you want them to ask you this: “Can you make a decision?” That’s the easiest thing for us to do.

We can make decisions. But our decisions are not always discerning actions. And so one of the questions that I always ask in the churches that I’ve gone to is: Well, what is God saying to us as a church? What is God saying to you as individuals about the faith He is going to do with you in your life? And almost everybody says, “I don’t know. How would I know?”

And so we get into this conversation about how we hear the voice of God. How do we know what discernment is? How do we know it’s God’s voice? How does that help us in the things that we are about to decide to do?

And so over and over again I just see this kind of lack of this ability to discern and to understand what it is that God is directing us to do. And because of that we struggle with some of the things that we do in life. We go, “Why should it be this hard?” It especially shouldn’t be this hard for Christians. Our lives should be easier. And they should be. But we struggle with that because what we really like is the question of free will and decisions.

What I’m not going to get into today, or during our time most of all, is this question of free will. I’ve taught six classes on “Decision Making and the Will of God.” And every time I sit with the class somebody goes, “Well I want the ability to decide.”

Does that sound familiar? Does that sound like something you’ve actually encountered in your life? Well, that’s actually what we’re going to start with today. We’re going to begin with reading Genesis 3. So those of you who have Bibles, if you’ll open to Genesis 3, I’m just going to read it briefly to you.

“Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God really say that you must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

Now the background of this of course, as you know, is that God has created all great things. And He has created this man and this woman. He’s placed them in this garden which we call Eden, with all great things, everything they needed. In fact one of the great things that we see in chapter 2 of Genesis is that God says, “Hey, Adam and Eve”—that was a paraphrase!—“whatever you decide to name something, that’s what the name will be.”

Don Maurer: Eve wasn’t around yet, right?

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Bob: Right. So Adam calls things all kinds of names. He calls them Hickory Tree 1, Hickory Tree Jr., Hickory Tree 3. He calls them Oak 1, Oak 2, Oak 3; just different things along the way, and so that was the name.

So what do we see at the beginning? That God gave Adam some great free will and the ability to make decisions. But there is no need for discernment, because all of the decisions and the free will are done in association in a relationship with God.

But we come to chapter 3. And what happens is that the serpent appears, and he begins to challenge Adam and Eve about the things that God said. Did God really say these things?

And I'm going to keep reading through verses 7 and 8 here for a moment. *“The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat from the trees of the garden. But God did say that ‘You must not eat from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”* That's pretty clear; no decision necessary there.

“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. *“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”* *Keep that phrase in mind for a moment.*

“When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate of it. And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

“Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as He was walking in the garden in the cool of the day. And they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’”

“And he answered, ‘I heard You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.’”

Okay, I'm going to ask you some very important *questions from that passage. Was there any inability of the man or the woman to make a decision?*

Don Bishop: No.

Bob: How many decisions did they make in that short time?

Brave Man: One.

Bob: More than one. They decided to eat of the fruit. They decided that the fruit was full of wisdom. They decided that the fruit was pleasing. They decided that they were going to gain from it. They decided they were naked. They decided that they were afraid.

Mike Davis: They decided to disobey God.

Bob: They decided to disobey God.

Mike: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Bob: Did God prevent any of those decisions from happening?

Don Maurer: Mm-mm.

Bob: Free will. Okay, were any of those decisions discerning decisions?

Brave Men: No.

Bob: None of them were discerning decisions. Why do you think that is?

Don Maurer: That's the mystery of the ages. *(Laughter)*

Bob: It is the mystery of the ages.

John Gratner: When you say “discerning decisions,” how do you define that?

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Bob: Ah! That’s a very good question. One of the things that we say about discernment is actually coming from this orientation of the Greek perspective. We think of discernment as a mental exercise. But the Greeks have always thought of discernment as a heart decision, things that go to the depth of the heart of the matter. In fact the word *discernment* actually is derived from the Greek. It’s delving into the very inner nature of the decision.

And what’s important here is that discernment is about the inner nature—the heart, so to speak—of the relationship with God. So what was missing from the decisions that made them not discerning was that it did not involve the heart with God. It did not involve a relationship with God that was reflective of that relationship. So the problem of discernment is not a mental inability. It’s the lack of the heart.

We live in an era where we’re greatly emphasizing this ability that says, “I have this mental capacity to create decisions which are effective for my life.” But rarely do we ask the question: Is it a heartfelt decision or a rational decision? So we’ve been influenced not necessarily by the Greeks, but more by some of the philosophies of the more current period, which emphasizes separation from the rationality of life and the different components of life. There’s the emotional component, there’s the rational component. But we don’t necessarily integrate the two, which is why the issue of discernment is an issue for us, because we don’t integrate the heart into the things that we are doing or being asked to do. Don?

Don Maurer: I’m not sure I’m following you at this point, particularly with Adam and Eve, because when did they sin? Did they sin in eating—

Bob: Did I mention the word *sin* yet?

Don: Well,— (*Laughter*)

Bob: But your question is a good one. Keep going.

Don: As far as the heart is concerned, they were not affected by any kind of error or any kind of inclination not to have a heart to discern presumably before they ate of the fruit. I’m trying to process all of this.

Bob: It’s a great question. And this is why the issue is so significant. Notice when I read the text that Eve perceived that the fruit would provide her or them with wisdom. What was the wisdom that she thought she would gain?

Brave Man: The wisdom of the knowledge of good and evil.

Bob: The wisdom of good and evil.

Ron Baling: But if they did not know what good and evil was, how did they know they were going to get that?

Bob: Very good question. (*Laughter*) A very good question for which there is no good answer. I mean, there’s a lot of great theology and discussions about that kind of question. It’s more of a post-reflection from our perspective. We say, okay; we understand that there is good and evil. But why was there good and evil when there was only good before?

Ron: Or no concept of right or wrong at all.

Bob: That’s correct. So we think—

Ron: That was too big a decision for them to handle because it was simply an intellectual decision. He came up with the word *giraffe* because it had a long neck, or

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whatever. So that did not involve the heart. It’s like balancing a checkbook, you don’t use the heart to balance a checkbook.

Bob: That’s right. But what you do with your money may involve the heart.

(Laughter)

Ron: But again, there were things that needed to be from the heart, like his decision to eat the fruit.

Bob: Yes, Tom?

Tom Benedict: The difference that runs here is that what God told them was now being called into question.

Michael Rush: That’s right.

Tom: When they made decisions about the animals, there was no decision to believe God or to believe the serpent. But at this point she’s weighing what God told her. Is that true, or is the serpent true? So the big difference here with the serpent was the truthfulness of God.

Gary Craig: It was the truthfulness of Adam, because Adam was the one who told Eve not to eat of the tree. She wasn’t there when God told Adam not to eat of the tree.

Bob Cummings: Yes?

Bob Busted: Another point. When we’re talking about discernment, don’t we make discerning decisions or get involved in discernment based on what we think are the facts? And so when they went to hide, they thought they used discernment when they decided to hide, because they acted on what they thought was proper, what they thought was right.

Bob Cummings: They made a decision, but they didn’t make a discerning decision.

Bob Busted: Yes. But I guess I’m wondering how many decisions that we make in bed really come from the heart, as opposed to from the brain, as we gather facts and have experiences?

Bob Cummings: You’re exactly on target for where we begin today, because most of the decisions we make are based not on the discernment principle at all, but on the accumulation of facts that we put together that we think provide wisdom.

Bob Busted: Which comes from our experience.

Bob Cummings: Which come from our experience, which lends itself to a very important question. What is the experience that we’re drawing from?

Jim Hamilton: So they knew they were going against God’s will. They made a decision that was not consistent with what God had told them to do.

Bob Cummings: Correct. And was that a discerning decision?

Don Bishop: No.

Bob: No. It’s a decision, but it’s not a discerning decision. We’re able to make lots of decisions that have nothing to do with discernment.

John: And again, how are you defining discernment?

Bob: Discernment is an extension of life’s decisions that are reflective of a heart relationship.

John: Okay.

Jim: That are what?

Bob: That are connected to, or are a reflection of, a heart relationship.

John: So was there a deficiency in Adam’s heart relationship prior to the serpent having this discussion about eating the fruit?

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Bob: The easy answer is yes.

Don Maurer: Whoa!

Bob: But now we’re into the hard theology of all of this, because when does sin play a role in the question of free will. Do I ever have free will when sin is in play? And the answer is that we never have free will when sin is in play. Once sin makes an entrance into our lives, in whatever form,—and in this case it was the voice of Satan that was turned to,—sin entered in at that point. And so Adam and Eve were no longer able to have free will, because they heard the voice of Satan instead of the voice of God.

Michael: By the way, Bob, thank you. Of all the questions that are asked, what we do with Genesis 3 a lot of times is that we read the story. I would challenge everyone here to read the first verse, and you’ll get answers. *“Now the serpent was more crafty”* than the other creatures in the garden. You don’t want to bypass that, because that’s where the question of separation comes in—which is what discernment is—it’s the ability to separate. And now that’s been challenged.

Each of us in this room might have a certain mindset based on what we know or what we’ve known up to that point. Once something else comes in and makes us have to separate what we know by what we just heard, that’s where discernment comes in. So I just wanted to say that, because we have that in the first line, and it’s not there for no reason.

Bob: Okay, I’m going to detour a little bit on your comments, Michael, and say that where this comes into play later, in a similar kind of reflection, is in Mark 4, for example, when Satan speaks to Jesus and says, “Did God really say?” And Jesus responds with discernment, because what does Jesus respond to? He turns to “Thus says the LORD.” He doesn’t listen to the voice of Satan. Jesus listens to the voice of the Lord.

So part of the discernment issue is going to be tied to this question: What is the voice of the Lord. In fact that’s really the heart of every question of discernment. What is the Lord saying to us? And why that’s important is because when we ask that question, we’re taking the heart matter back to our relationship with God. We’re not thinking about ourselves or our decisions or our wills; we are taking it back to the voice of and our relationship with God.

So right off the bat, I’m saying this morning that the difficulty of that discernment is that we have separated ourselves out from the voice of the Lord. And we’ve separated ourselves out from our relationship with the Lord because the heart of the matter is about ourselves and not about God. So the difficulty we have in discernment is that we say, “I need to have enough wisdom. I need to accumulate enough experience to make this decision,” rather than asking the question: What does the Lord say?

And then the question becomes for us over the long haul, how do I know it’s the voice of the Lord? We’re going to talk about that in a couple of weeks in the near future, because that’s really important. It comes into play in places that you can’t imagine. I mean, you’ve probably read a thousand times and you go, oh; that’s what this is going to be like. It’s a question of discernment over and over and over again.

Why do things happen in the Old Testament over and over again? Why do God’s people get strung out and lost and overcome over and over again? Because they lack discernment. They lack the ability to seek the Lord and say, what does the Lord say?

Jim: Does discernment always have something to do with God?

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Bob: Discernment always has something to do with God.

Jim: I think you can discern a lot of things that have nothing to do with God in my mind. I guess we're not discerning. But I don't know what we're doing.

Bob: And that's the point. Is there any part of our lives that doesn't require discernment? And the answer is no.

Ron: Let me use an example. I understand what you're saying. The reason is that all of our experiences we put into groups. That's why, whenever I go down a side street in Pittsburgh, halfway to the South Side I go and drive through. But when I come down a side street and I sense that I'm coming to a major street, I automatically slow down and try to stop. To me that is a discernment. I don't know if that matches your definition. But that's a discernment based not on right or wrong; it's a discernment based on the logic of how driving works.

Bob: Okay. So I'm going to ask the question of you then.

Ron: Go ahead.

Bob: Is God not involved in the process?

Ron: If you look at it that way, He's involved in all processes.

Bob: Well, if God is involved in all processes, then why is He not involved in that process?

Ron: What I'm saying is that it's not a sense of right or wrong.

Bob: No, I understand what you're saying. *(Laughter)*

Ron: All I'm saying is—

Bob: So let me extend that conversation a little bit just for the intellectual exercise. Sorry, but it will make our brains work. I don't know about you all, but I love mysteries. I love reading Sherlock Holmes. And one of the things about Sherlock Holmes is that he likes to deduce things, using the power of reason to deduce and take things down to the smallest little detail. And I love the little line: *“I'm going to exercise the little gray cells.”* So we're going to exercise the little gray cells a little bit this morning. Does God not want your safety?

Ron: Well, yes.

Bob: Isn't the heart of God for your life and salvation?

Ron: You're right. We operate everything under Him.

Bob: So God is involved in all of our lives. And if God has intentions for our safety, isn't discernment part of the recognition that there might be a stop somewhere?

Ron: Yes.

Bob: But we don't think that way. We separate out our ability to decide based on our rationality, based on what Eve described as “I want to gain wisdom.” What's wisdom? The accumulation of knowledge, the accumulation of experience.

Some of you are older than I am; some of you are my age. What do we say? I grew up with a very great opportunity that some of my parents and their peers didn't have. They didn't get to go through high school and college. We have a lot of people who have gone through a lot of great educational opportunities. And what would you say? Are they smarter?

Ron: No.

Bob: Are we wiser? Do we look at the world and say that we've gained so much wisdom by getting all this educational experience? We don't say that at all. In fact we're

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pretty critical right now of the educational system when the educational system is doing a great job of providing knowledge, a great accumulation of knowledge.

But what is that accumulation of knowledge all about? Personal power. And as Lord Acton said, *“Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”* So our accumulation of knowledge, our accumulation of experiences, empowers us to be corrupt in our decisions. Yes?

Bob Busted: When I think of discernment, for some reason I automatically think through the subject of truth and lies. And today it’s very difficult to discern the truth from a lie because there is no penalty for a lie. And most people don’t think about the heart, or what one ought to do, or anything of that nature. They just go ahead and do it because it just feels good and that’s what they want. And so they have free will and they go ahead with it. But the discernment issue and truth and lies is a very big issue for me.

Bob Cummings: It is a big issue; it’s a very big issue. It should be a big issue for all of us, because if we were to do our day-to-day activities, and we as Christians are saying, “I want to do what God wants me to do so that I can continue in my relationship with God,” one of the key moments is to ask the question, “What does God say to me? How do I know it’s God who is saying it to me, and not the voice of Satan, or someone else, or something else?” Don?

Don Maurer: I’m just going to throw another monkey wrench in here. You just said that the people of Israel got lost and entangled because they didn’t have the ability to discern?

Bob: Or the willingness.

Don: The willingness, yes.

Bob: The willingness.

Don: That’s what I would say. They were disobedient.

Bob: Yes, just like Eve was, just like Adam was, over and over again, and probably just like we are. There are a lot of passages. Paul is going to talk about it in Romans especially. I’m not forgetting those; we’re going to get to those eventually. But what I’m saying here is that our discernment is partly connected to our primary identity. When we fall under the aspects of sin, we lose the ability to discern, because what we decide is that we are most important. The great definition of sin—I don’t know if you’ve ever seen this; I love this definition,—you see the word *sin* printed up: s-i-n. And the “I” is always in the middle. As long as we put ourselves in the middle of every decision of importance, we are dwelling in the nature of sin.

And so in all of our decisions for all of our lives, what is our job? What is our family life? What am I going to do today? As long as we place ourselves in the middle of that decision, we’re not using discernment at all.

And so the issue of discernment begins to be more and more complex for us because it becomes more and more distant from us, because more and more we involve sin in the process. So the problem for us mostly is this: how do I know that what I’m doing today is important?

So I’ll give you a personal example. I’m serving a church in Ligonier. People ask me this all the time. I’m serving a church in Ligonier; I’ve been there 23 years. I’m enjoying myself. I’m thinking that I’m going to retire from this position because I’m now in my

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60s. And I don't see any reason not to think in that direction because that's what you all think about.

And I go back to an experience I had here in Sewickley. I was here probably a month. I was a pastor in youth ministry, doing youth and young adult ministry. And one of the significant things that happened as I moved back to Pittsburgh was that it's the start of the real change of the steel industry here in Pittsburgh, when things really start to become significantly changed. It wasn't just the steel industry.

So one of my first experiences is that this individual who was a member of the church where I was serving is the senior Vice-President of a large corporation in Pittsburgh, a Fortune 500 company. He'd been with the company for 22 years. He's the senior CEO and now he's retiring. And after all that service and after all that training he expects that he's going to be the next CEO of this large corporation.

He gets called into the office. I arrive in June. He gets called into the office in the middle of June. And they said, “While you're here at this board meeting, we're packing up your office; we no longer need your services.” And so all of his life training, all of his decisions, suddenly evaporate.

And it's like “What happened? I didn't see this coming. I've been involved in the company for all this time. I've helped to make all these decisions. Suddenly the board says that we're heading in an entirely different direction. Where does that come from?”

I'm at the church for 23 years. And I hear this voice of God saying to me one day, “You're finished here. I need you to do something else.”

Of course, what do I do? “Oh, no!” (*Laughter*) “That's not it, God. I'm going to retire.”

God says, “Oh, no! You're going to do these three things. And when you do these three things,--“

“God, I'm not going to do these three things.” (*Laughter*)

“God says, “Oh yes, you are, because I need you to do something else.”

Now you're saying to me, “How do you know that's God's voice?” That's a good question. That was my all-night wrestling. “God, is that really you? How do I know it's you? How do I know this is real? How do I know that decision is for my best interests, or the best interests of my family?”

I can tell you that those three things happened almost immediately that second. And I wasn't even trying to make them happen; they just came through the door. I said, “God, I'm not ready to do this, because I'm ready to retire here in another four years, maybe five years. My life at 67 will be great, you know?”

God says, “No; I have a plan for you.” And so I wake up the next night and I say, “God, what does that mean?”

He said, “I'm going to move you into something called transitional ministry.” I had no idea what that was. I had been reading about this and hearing about this. I'm not trained in this.

He said, “Listen. Start the training.” So I did. I went into training. I said, “This is the best thing that has ever happened to the church.” God said, “I know.” (*Laughter*) “I know, You don't know, but I know.”

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I had 37 years of ministry experience. And none of this would have led me to that discernment. But this is what I needed to hear. I felt it was the voice of God saying, “Thus says the Lord.” Yes, Don?

Don Maurer: I’m going to step on your toes.

Bob: You can. *(Laughter)*

Don: Are you saying that there is another source other than Scripture that is an infallible source of “*Thus saith the LORD?*”

Bob: No. I’m saying that the voice of God is inherent in Scripture as well as being very present. The eternal God speaks. He speaks through the Holy Spirit. He speaks to us. The problem is that we say that God only spoke; He does not speak. And God speaks. One of the issues we have with discernment is saying that God does not speak anymore, but that He only speaks through the Scriptures. He does speak through the Scriptures. He does use the Scriptures actively in our lives. I’m not disputing that; I’m affirming that 100 per cent. But what I’m saying to you is that God will also speak to you in an audible voice that you’ll know—

Don: Audible?

Bob: In some occasions audible. Not regularly. Well, I’m going to qualify that. If we have the heart of God in our lives actively present, then why can’t God’s voice be audible?

David Miller: Also, I’ve heard the Lord outside of Scripture. However, I always got confirmation from Scripture.

Bob: Always. And I’m going to tell you that we’re going to do the same thing. And I’m going to tell you how to do the same thing before this class and our time together is over. Not today; we’re going to get there. In fact the Scriptures will help us to know exactly that it is the voice of God. Without the Scriptures we can’t know that.

Michael: You know, Bob, you bring up an interesting point. This sometimes gets dicey because of the abuses of the Holy Spirit.

Bob: Yes.

Michael: There are extremes on both sides. And we know that spirit without truth isn’t truth, and truth without spirit isn’t spirit. And because of the abuses of the Holy Spirit, what happens is that sometimes the Holy Spirit is just thrown out. So what you just said is key. I hear people saying that God doesn’t speak, or that He doesn’t have a voice, or whatever, whatever, whatever. But through their day-to-day lives they follow the voice of God. But to his point, it always agrees with Scripture; it always lines up with Scripture. And we discern based on our relationship with and our knowledge of God. And throughout our lives we pray. “Use me, Lord; lead me, Lord; guide me, Lord,” this and that.

I don’t want to go too far. But I’ve been in situations where people act like there is no Trinity; it’s just the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is here; He dwells in us.

Bob: What does Jesus say about the Spirit? He’s the Counselor. How does He counsel?

Michael: But I just wanted to say that. It gets kind of weird sometimes.

Bob: Before we get away this morning I’m going to show you the four books that are behind what we’re going to share today: this book by Henry Nouwen on discernment, and this book by Dallas Willard on hearing God. There’s this book called *The Discerning*

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Heart. This is an Inter-Varsity Press book. A book that I’ve shared with many young people is called *All That is Good*; it’s about discernment. The author is a pastor’s wife. And she asks the question: I find discernment easy. How come other people don’t find discernment easy? And so we’re going to get to the heart of that with this one. The only other book I’ll introduce to you later is called *The Next Right Thing*, and that’s really a good book. So all of those are worth it if you want to get into a study. If you want to look at materials, those are the materials behind what we’re sharing today through this series.

I want to just kind of do two things quickly; we’re losing time. I want to do a couple quick things. I’m reading a book by Tim Keller about pain and suffering. Keller introduces the perspective of why we have difficulty with pain and suffering, and why that difficulty exists. He quotes a philosopher, Charles Taylor, who talks about contemporary secularism. He uses the words “*the imminent frame*”—that the world is completely a natural order, without any kind of supernatural imposition.

If we think about that for a moment, that description is exactly the way we function here. We function as if all decisions are in the natural order, without any supernatural imposition, when discernment requires supernatural imposition, because discernment requires the relationship of the heart with God. And by that definition it requires supernatural imposition.

Taylor describes our lives as being “*open and porous in nature. We use feelings, intuitions and attitudes which are under the influences of forces outside of us, forces that we could not control.*” “And so we need to look for that force to counter that. That force is God.”

Keller gives this big, long description. I haven’t finished the book yet, so I can’t give you all the answers and where he goes with that. But I think he has the right attitude and the right perspective. The reason we’re struggling is that we don’t think that God can supernaturally be imposed on our everyday lives.

I read the Scriptures pre-supposing that. But our actions and our attitudes are in a different place.

Let me give you an example of how easy it is to have discernment when we think in a different direction: John 1. By the way, it’s one of my favorite books. People say, “What is your favorite book?” I have to come back to John 1 over and over and over again.

John 1: “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made. And without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not understood it.*”

The Greek is so powerful there. The description in the Greek is that everything that happens happens through Him—continuously, not just in the past—so that, if our lives are filled with decisions, they need to be involved with God because God is in that moment, all the time. Everything that happens happens through Him.

Further down in John 1: “*The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip He said to him, ‘Follow Me.’ And Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida.*”

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“Philip found Nathanael and told him, ‘We have found the One Moses wrote about in the Law and about whom the Prophets also wrote: Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph.’”

“‘Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Nathanael asked.

“‘Come and see,’ said Philip. And when Jesus saw Nathanael approaching Him, He said to him: ‘Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.’”

“‘How do you know me?’ Nathanael asked. And Jesus answered, ‘I saw you while you were under the fig tree before Philip called you.’”

That, brothers, is discernment. He looked into the life of Philip and said, “I know you.”

“How do You know me?”

“Because in My relationship with God, God is speaking to Me even about meeting people, even calling people.” So the value of discernment is that we are able to walk in the way of God, to see things from God’s perspective that we are not able to see in our own wisdom.

And with that life starts to come into alignment with God to make our lives exactly what we want—easier, fuller, richer, more abundant. But the only way that’s going to happen is if we start to get our hearts and lives in alignment with God.

Now I will tell you as an introduction to the study as a whole that we’re going to talk about some of the difficulties and some of the other voices that speak into our lives, and there are many. And we start struggling with how you identify that voice of God in the first place. How do we get to the place where we’re using discernment? And what does that then look like in a practical sense? So each of those weeks we’re going to examine some aspect of those hard questions along the way, so that at the end of five weeks you’re going to be able to say, “This is what discernment looks like. This is how I practice discernment,” so that when the new guy comes and says, “What is God saying to us about how He is going to move in ministry in this place, at this time?”, you’re going to be able to say, *(Unclear)*

Because time after time I go to churches in Washington or Philadelphia or even my own or other churches in Pittsburgh. And I would say, “What is God asking you to do?”

“We want to get young people. We want to evangelize. We want to build the church.”

“Really? Okay, that’s great. That’s a lofty goal. But how are you going to do that?”

“I don’t know. We’ll have a program. We’ll gain some experience from someone else.”

“No, how is God going to use you to do that?” Jim?

Jim: Isn’t there a difference in discernment for Christians and discernment for non-Christians?

Bob: I’m going to say that discernment for non-Christians is impossible.

Don Maurer: Amen.

Bob: They’re going to use wisdom and experience and knowledge, but they’re not going to have discernment.

Michael: They’re going to call it discernment.

Bob: They’re going to call it discernment.

Jim: Non-Christians are trying to perceive and understand and judge things clearly.

Bob: But for their own benefit.

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Jim: Just as Christians do.

Bob: So non-Christians are going to do those kinds of things. They’re going to try and judge things fairly. But the fairness is only from their perspective, from the same perspective. Where am I in this decision process that brings value to me?, not value to the whole, not even value to life, unless it involves me.

Bob Busted: You sound like you have a lot of wisdom on the subject of discernment, having read all these books. I have a very interesting question for you.

Bob Cummings: Okay.

Bob Busted: If you had to make a wild guess, how many of the decisions of the men in this room involve discernment?

Bob Cummings: I would probably venture to guess that maybe one a day of your decisions involves discernment—one of all the decisions you make in a day.

Bob Busted: Thank you.

Bob Cummings: Go ahead.

Brave Man: It sounds to me that if you’re making a choice, it can be a decision or it can be discernment.

Bob: Yes.

Brave Man: Depending on your walk and on your relationship with God at that point, and whether you are willing moment to moment making a decision at an intersection, or with the fact that there isn’t one molecule in the universe that isn’t under God’s control, that your walk is constantly vigilant in relationship with God, those decisions now become discernment because of your relationship with God at that moment, and the closeness of your walk. So when you walk through life, if your thoughts and your decisions are about what God wants you to do, that becomes a discernment versus a decision.

Bob: Correct.

Brave Man: That makes sense; that makes perfect sense.

Bob: Here’s a decision. I’m going to cut the grass today whenever the grass dries.

Brave Man: Yes.

Bob: There is nothing discerning about that, except that I’ve convinced myself that discernment is waiting till the grass dries. But that’s based on experience, not necessarily wisdom, but desire on my part. So I make those decisions all the time. But there is nothing discerning about that. But discernment comes when I say, “God, is this the right day to do the grass cutting?”

Brave Man: Right.

Bob: Or what would You have me do instead of that today? And that’s a wholly different motion that I’m putting into play.

Brave Man: And if you’re praying without ceasing, and you’re constantly in conversation with God, things become discernment.

Bob: Correct. Then in the end it will become discernment. Don’t

Don Bishop: I’m thinking about the example of Paul. If I go into that city I might be stoned. So the decision would be that I need to protect myself because I could be stoned in that city. But discernment says that I was called to be an evangelist to the Gentiles.

Michael: Amen.

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Don: So I’m going to go into that city regardless, and God will take care of the rest. The alternative would be that if I’m stoned, I can’t finish God’s calling.

Bob: But in the process I could be bearing witness as does Stephen, if that’s what God is calling me to do. Proverbs 3:5; you’ve heard this over and over again. *“Trust in the LORD with all of your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight.”* Isn’t that discernment?

How many of us will do any one or all of those things? Will we trust God today? Will we lean on Him today? Or will we lean on our own understanding?

Michael: Amen. You know, this is interesting. I knew a guy who would say, “I’m not just a Christian; I’m a born-again Christian.” And I would say to him, “There’s only one kind.” *(Laughter)* But it’s interesting that he would say that, because I know a lot of believers, or people in churches, who think that they just want a little of Jesus in their lives. So they made a decision that they want to come. They want to be a part of an organization. And when we’re in conversation, the supernatural imposition that you mentioned earlier is never a consideration, never ever. For the one who is born again, it can’t be anything but that. Do you understand what I’m saying?

Bob: I do.

Michael: Yes, it can’t be anything but. You’re involved with the way that God leads and guides. And just like Jesus in the wilderness or Eve in the garden, when you say we need to talk about these other voices, we’re continually as believers to discern whether it’s the voice of God or the voice of the evil one. And of course we know that we have Scripture as our guide in that. So I just wanted to say that. There are a whole lot of people without the supernatural part. They make decisions. They say, “I’m going to do this,” and “I’m set to do x, y or z.” But there is never a thought of *“Thus saith the LORD.”* Anything you have to know He says through His word.

Bob: And listen, guys. I’m going to confess to you and I’m going to close with this. I’m going to confess to you that even as church leaders we struggle with the issue of discernment and decision making, because we’ve had enough education to gain enough wisdom and enough knowledge to be able to make good decisions. But our decisions aren’t always good decisions even as leaders, because we make decisions and not discernment. And I’m going to say that to you because I confess that I’ve done that many, many times.

And later I wonder why things don’t work out. Why did this happen this way? Well, I really didn’t seek the voice of the Lord—the Lord’s guidance, the Lord’s direction. I thought I knew that and assumed that. I listened to other voices.

Okay. We could talk some more and we could talk all day. I know; that’s why this is five weeks, not just one morning. So be prepared as we go to each week. I’ll try to get more up-to-date in giving you things in advance so that you can spend time looking and studying it. Next week Sig is already going to give it to you so you can look at some things. So next week we will be in 1 Kings 19 with Elijah and the voice of God as an example of that. We’ll look at it a little more in depth in that kind of way, too.

Lots more Scripture ahead. As I said, the Scriptures tell us this over and over again. But sometimes we don’t pay attention to what is obviously in front of us.

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So thanks for the opportunity to speak and share with you this morning; I appreciate that. I hope you'll bear with me a little bit longer, for a couple more weeks. I'd like to deal with this and spend that time to finish that with you. So can I just close in prayer?

Mike: Sure.

Bob: Father, I just thank You for the morning and for the day. I appreciate these guys and they have much to do. You will open a gate to them. You will give them energy to focus on the kinds of things You want them to do. And yet we will be exhausted at the end of the day trying to do things even beyond that, because these are the decisions that we will make for ourselves and for those around us. So Father, help us to know Your voice and hear Your voice, not just to know right and wrong, but to have a fullness of heart and life; that's Your desire for us. And so we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen. *(Applause)*