

# ***“Recovering the Fundamentals of Discernment”***

## **Recovering the Art of Discernment**

1 Kings 19:1-18

Rev. Bob Cummings

October 6, 2023

**Transcriber’s Note:** Bob had the men break up into smaller groups, praying for and with one another.

**Bob:** We’ll close this morning with the Lord’s Prayer. For those of you who are able to stay I’ll try to be more on time this morning as we move forward. Just to catch up, a couple of things about what Don said this morning. What Don did not say in his introduction last week, for those of you who don’t know, I’m Bob Cummings, the pastor of congregational care at Christ Church of Grove Farm. I’m a recent addition to the staff and have realigned myself back to Pittsburgh. I spent most of my life in the Pittsburgh region in different ways.

We have two sons—my wife Peg and I. Our oldest is 39 and lives in Brooklyn, NY. He is a little taller than 6.6. Our youngest lives in Pittsburgh. He’s about 6.3. And so therefore I have short Cummings in my family. *(Laughter)*

**Don Maurer:** Ohhhhhh! *(Laughter)*

**Mike Davis:** That took you a while, Don. *(Laughter)*

**Bob:** So I have a little bit of fun with that. They have a lot of fun with that. *(Laughter)* And so we have a great time together. We’re going to pick up a few good thoughts along the way this morning as well.

I introduced a theme to you last week. Some of you who were here probably ruminated on it a little bit last week and are going, “Wow! This is kind of mind-boggling!” And that’s exactly what the topic is. The topic is discernment. And what I introduced to you has probably created some cognitive dissonance for you, a thought process that just didn’t align with a lot of your practices or even presumptions of how you live your life, because I’ve suggested to you that while we live our lives with this presumption of free will and our ability to make decisions which God does not take away from us. Even after the Fall we do not regularly practice what I call discernment. And so what discernment does is that it brings us into alignment in action, that is, an action that God is already doing.

This is to say that God is active with us in the things that we do in our lives and in the world. God is acting, and acting in a way that sometimes we are not in alignment with. That does not mean that the decisions we make cannot be good decisions; we’ll talk about that in a little bit today and into next week. But those decisions and their value to us to bring us good, are still not always in alignment with God. In fact some of those decisions that we make that we value as good are good because they speak to a different voice other than God.

There are two factors that we’re going to identify and start to open up to make discernment real for us. The first I suggested to you is that discernment is not about the accumulation of knowledge, or necessarily even the practice of wisdom. A passage I did not share with you is the passage from Proverbs 1:6: *“The LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.”*

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It makes sense that a God who is omniscient understands all things and is with all things. John says that “All things happen through Him.” And so we know that God is in the practice of trying to bring all things into alignment with what His will is, which is a challenge for us.

I’m an old Augustinian. And Augustine has a writing on how we were created. For those of you who are Latin scholars, pardon my butchering of the Latin here. We were created *passé peccare*—able not to sin—which means that those decisions we were making are not necessarily decisions that might be practical for us and that were in alignment with what God was doing and is doing in our world.

But with the Fall, suddenly we were *non passé non peccare*—not able not to sin. And if we understand that fully, all the things that we do are then influenced by sin, and that includes our decision aids, which makes discernment significantly impossible, because one of the great things that was affected by that process is not just the mind which is affected by sin—and we’re going to see the example of that even this morning,—but also the heart.

And I suggested to you that one of the definitions of discernment that is really effective are some of the early Greek definitions which say that discernment comes from the heart and not the head. That sounds kind of difficult for Greeks because the Greek influence was the value of the mind, the significance of the mind, which led Descartes, for example, to say, “I think, therefore I am.”

So in my mind I process all things and give definition to all things. Therefore those things which are defined are out of my cognitive abilities, which runs counter to the Scriptural understanding of what that is all about, because it is not just our minds; it is God.

So I want to introduce to you a passage you are probably familiar with in a lot of different ways today, but for a lot of different reasons. I want to introduce this to you, starting with 1 Kings 19. I’m going to read it for you. I’m reading out of the NIV because that’s the rendition and the translation that is common here at Christ Church at Grove Farm. I’m going to start with verse 1 of chapter 19 and read through to verse 18 for you, and we’ll kind of set the context in a moment.

*“Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, ‘May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, by this time tomorrow if I do not make your life like one of them.’*

*“Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. And when he came to Beer-Sheba in Judah he left his servant there while he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it, and prayed that he might die. ‘I’ve had enough, LORD,’ he said. ‘Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.’ Then he laid down under the bush and fell asleep.*

*“At once an angel touched him and said, ‘Get up and eat.’ He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals and a jar of water. And he ate and drank, and then lay down again.*

*“And the angel of the LORD came back a second time, touched him and said, ‘Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.’ So he got up and ate and drank,*

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*strengthened by the food, and traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. And there he went into a cave and spent the night.*

*“And the word of the LORD came to him: ‘What are you doing, Elijah?’*

*“And he replied, ‘I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected Your covenant, torn down Your altars, put Your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.’*

*The LORD said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.’ And a great and powerful wind tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD. But the LORD was not in the wind.*

*“After the wind there was an earthquake. The LORD was not in the earthquake.*

*“After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. And Elijah heard it and pulled his cloak over his face, and went out and stood in the mouth of the cave. Then the voice said to him, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’”*

*“And he replied, ‘I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected Your covenant, torn down Your altars, put Your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.’*

*And the LORD said to him, “Go back by the way you came, and go to the desert of Damascus. And when you get there, anoint Hazael king over Syria. Also anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi king over Israel. And anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel-Meholah to succeed you as a prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I have reserved thousands in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and whose mouths have not kissed him.”*

**Don Maurer:** This is the word of the Lord.

**Brave Men:** Thanks be to God.

**Bob:** Okay. You know that this text has a context. And the context is a powerful one. It’s one of the most incredible visual stories in the Bible. It’s Elijah on the mountain. He’s challenging the prophets of Baal to build a fire and to sacrifice and see who’s altar is consumed. And so the Baal prophets dance, and they do all kinds of crazy things. Nothing happens. And Elijah soaks his pyre and his altar with water and douses it over and over again. And then the fire of the LORD comes down and consumes the altar. And then the Baal prophets come down and Elijah slaughters them. It’s an incredible picture as it happens.

And Elijah does all these things because he is led to do them by the Lord. And by the way, these things are not the usual mode of living life. This is an incredibly challenging moment—going against the culture, going against the prevailing notions of who’s in charge and how it works, and what kinds of things to do and who to worship. And so this is the classic text of victory of good over evil. But it is also one of great confusion.

Elijah has conquered the prophets of Baal and so confronted the king and the queen. He listened to God; he acted according to the directions of God. And what happens after that? He runs. He’s scared. He goes into hiding. And what is he seeking?

**Don Bishop:** Protection.

**Bob:** Protection. More than that, what is he seeking?

**Don Maurer:** Death.

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**Bob:** Death; he’s seeking death for himself. What else is he seeking?

**Isaac Pockras:** God’s guidance and comfort.

**Bob:** He’s seeking God’s guidance and comfort. The easy part of doing what’s right is following God’s authority. But when you do that you often find yourself at odds with all the world around you. And so one of the things that happens in our decision-making process is that we suddenly become overwhelmed with that notion that maybe what we’re doing, even though we’re convinced it’s the right thing, that the God thing isn’t our thing. What other people are expecting of us matters, and influences even what we expect of ourselves.

In one of the books I recommended to you by Hannah Mears—it’s a great little book, a simple book on discernment—she writes this. She’s the wife of a pastor and she says this: *“Now in our pursuit of discernment, the first question we must ask is whether the sacrifice of pursuing it is even worth it. And the answer depends on whether goodness exists in the first place.”*

Why did Elijah want to die? He had just seen the glory of God do the most incredible things, and came out victorious. Why did he suddenly want to die?

**Brave Man:** He was of the opinion that he was alone.

**Bob:** He was alone.

**Gary Craig:** He saw others cut down.

**Bob:** He saw others cut down. When those visual perceptions challenge our hearts, they motivate our hearts to move in a different alignment. And one of the alignments is am I safe?

*“Given the challenge of sorting through the noise and fighting to make things right, we’re more likely to opt out of the struggle entirely, to retreat into safe spaces, hunker down, and stay in comfort zones. And what’s interesting is that in today’s culture, the digital era uniquely fits this. We can withdraw into what we perceive to be safe spaces to protect ourselves, and only pull up those things which we are inclined to.*

*“Filters allow that to happen. In fact, the digital marketplace says, ‘We’ll filter what you choose, and so we’ll re-present to you only those things that you like.’”*

Now what this text about Elijah says is kind of interesting. What we expect of God—God’s ability to speak to us and direct us—is what? It’s the earthquake, the fire, the tumbling of the mountains, the storm. In those dramatic moments we expect to say that those are the ways in which God speaks to us. Those are the ways in which God will draw our attention to Him so that we know and we are convinced and have an assurance that this is the voice of the Lord, and this is the way in which we should go.

Now I’m going to venture to guess that almost everyone in this room has faced significant storms—things that are just crashing all around you, raining on your parades, challenging the way in which you’ve reoriented your expectations of life. The storms come. In fact they can even start to rock your world. And also earthquakes, really shaking the foundation. Something happens to you to shake the foundations of your life.

And you’re going, “God, what are You trying to say to me in these moments?” Isn’t that what we say? “God, what is this all about? Aren’t You trying to tell me something by these bad things that are happening to me?”

And what do we know from this text on Elijah? God was not in those things. And so our expectation is that we are looking in our safety, in our anticipation of safety for

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ourselves, for God to use great and grand things to bring us into alignment with Him. But He has already done that. And yet we kind of put it aside going, “There has to be something more”; we need something more.

It’s interesting that Elijah witnesses all of these things. And then there is this quiet, gentle voice. Elijah says, “Ah! This is God. This is God speaking to me.” And God says, “Why are you here?”

Now God knows why he’s there. What is He trying to do in those words? He’s trying to bring Elijah’s heart into alignment. “It’s not about what you know, Elijah. You’ve already seen dramatic, powerful things. But I’m going to re-align your heart to Me.”

Self-authority and self-accumulated knowledge are voices that often lead to conflict and division. What we’ve seen, what we’ve experienced, are an accumulation of all things where we say, “Well, all of those things will give us the wisdom we need to decide.” And they contribute significantly to that; I’m not saying that they won’t or don’t.

But what we’ve done in the process is that, given our definition of how to make a decision based on what we’ve accumulated by knowledge or experience, *cogito ergo sum*; I think, therefore I am. And so all the knowledge revolves around me.

This is exactly what happened here in the Fall, by the way. We started with this last week. But let me suggest to you, as Augustine said, that there is no aspect of our lives after the Fall that is not influenced by sin. So too is the discernment process; it is influenced by sin. And until our hearts are re-aligned with God we will not make good decisions and not have the ability to discern the ways of the Lord. Does that make sense to you so far? Okay, probably not. (*Laughter*)

The purpose of discernment really is to know God’s will, that is, to find, accept and affirm the unique way in which God’s love is manifest in our lives. When our hearts are re-aligned with God, our lives then, because our hearts are re-aligned with God and are brought back into alignment with God, to know God’s will is to actively claim an intimate relationship with Him. And what is lacking after the Fall is an intimate relationship with God.

**Mike:** I think it’s really, really spectacular—God’s faithfulness to Elijah in re-aligning his heart and bringing him back in again, just like he does with us. It’s an amazing thing: His faithfulness when we’re faithless. And that’s a great example with Elijah.

**Bob:** Yup; absolutely true. So what this introduces to us—Yes, Don?

**Don Maurer:** Bob, are we talking here about sin, or are we talking about something else?

**Bob:** Well, both. (*Laughter*)

**Don:** Okay.

**Bob:** Sin is at the heart of our disconnect. Our hearts are no longer in relationship with God. Our lives are no longer in relationship with God because of sin. And that affects all of our abilities to make decisions.

Again, put this in the context of Elijah. Elijah is seeing God do things. Elijah has heard the call of God to stand up, to confront the prophets of Baal, to confront the king and queen. He has done exactly as God has spoken to him, and he does those things. And God

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does the most amazing, incredible things. And then what happens is that he suddenly realizes, “Oh, am I safe?”

Now why would that question of safety even arise in the context of the great, magnificent things God has done, except that sin pervades?

**Don:** But he was a believer. You’re not saying he wasn’t—

**Bob:** No, I’m not saying that he was not a believer. Nope, I’m not saying that.

**Don:** Okay.

**Bob:** I’m saying that sin pervades. And what Elijah begins to introduce to us is that there may be other voices, other than the voice of God, that we are paying attention to in our lives that can challenge and change our hearts. And so what I want to do is to begin to introduce some of those voices to you, and perhaps we could talk about those.

Next week we’ll just talk about some of the rivals of God. Let’s see if I can adjust these sheets and things here; I want to make sure that I’m not over-stepping for next week. *(Laughter)* What I want to do this week is to kind of introduce the reality of the voice of God, so that when we see the false voices we’ll be able to know them.

You’ve heard the great story of Secret Service people. They are trained to recognize true currencies. They study the true currencies significantly so that when the false currencies are presented, they say, “This is fake.” Well how would you know it’s fake? Because you study the true currency significantly.

So I want to do that by asking the question: How do we know when somebody comes to us from an inner voice that’s from God? To that I just want to turn to John 10.

Jesus said, *“Very truly I tell you,”*—“I tell you Pharisees”—*“anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The One who enters by the gate is the Shepherd of the sheep. The Gatekeeper opens the gate for Him, and the sheep listen to His voice. He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. And when He has brought all of His sheep He goes on ahead of them. And His sheep follow Him because they know His voice. They will never follow a stranger. In fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.”*

*“Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what He was telling them.”*

That’s just an incredibly telling passage. What Jesus says is that as we begin to realize and recognize the voice of God, we begin to align our hearts to the action of God’s leading.

Shepherds do not speak “sheep,” which is now a challenge for us, because shepherds don’t speak “sheep.” And yet the sheep listen. What this is saying to us is that God may be speaking to us, and we’re not recognizing His voice because it’s not in our language.

**Don Maurer:** Can you say that again? Shepherds don’t speak “sheep?”

**Bob:** They do not speak “sheep.”

**Don:** You mean the language of sheep.

**Bob:** Correct.

**Don:** Okay.

**Bob:** Whatever language sheep speak.

**Brave Man:** Bah!

**Bob:** They make vocalizations as far as I know. They don’t have a language that I can discern and find the language.

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**Don:** I didn’t grammatically make sense there. I thought you were saying that they don’t speak to sheep.

**Bob:** Oh no; they speak to sheep, but they do not speak “sheep.”

**Don:** Okay.

**Mike:** Don knows they speak Chinese. *(Laughter)*

**Bob:** But God does speak to us in ways in which we can understand. And when we start to recognize His voice, as Jesus said, we begin to move in alignment with the direction God gives to us. So one of the great difficulties in discernment is not just aligning our hearts, but recognizing the voice of God, which is exactly the problem that Elijah had. How do I know this is God speaking to me?

So I wanted to address the most common ways in which we can think about this. And the first is *the practice of the study of Scripture*, because when we hold up the Bible we say that this is the word of God, do we not? We just said it as I read through the passage: “This is the word of God.” It is.

And there are some great texts in front of you, like Isaiah 1:3 and Jeremiah 8:7.

**Transcriber’s Note:** Isaiah 1:3, ESV.

*“Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth,  
For the LORD has spoken.”*

Jeremiah 8:7, NKJV.

*“Even the stork in the heavens  
Knows her appointed times;  
And the turtledove, the swift, and the swallow  
Observe the times of their coming.  
But My people do not know the judgment of the LORD.”*

**Bob:** You can look those up at a later time; we’re not going to do that this morning. But I will say this. This is a quote from William Law. *“Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit the word of God must remain a dead letter to every man.”* “Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit,” who is God, “the word of God must remain a dead letter to every man.”

In other words, when we say that the Scriptures are the word of God, we’re saying that God is in that Word, *“living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword”*, says Hebrews, and so “penetrating even to the heart and soul, spirit, bone and marrow,” into the very present heart and structure and heart of life. And so one of the ways we can learn to understand the voice of God is clearly in the word of God.

So the more we read the Scriptures, the more we allow the Holy Spirit to illuminate the Scriptures to us, which is aligning our hearts to God, God being present in the midst of all that and recognizing God’s presence in the midst of all that, the more we recognize that this is God’s word speaking to us. And so when we ask the question, “God, what are You directing me to do?”, we turn to the word of God.

Now we have to be a little careful about this, because we have to depend on the Holy Spirit. You’ve heard the story of the man who was seeking what he should do. He was just very unsettled about his life. And he said, “Well, everybody says I should turn to the Scriptures. So I’ll open the Bible and put my finger on the passage. And whatever that verse says, that’s what I’ll do.”

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And so he opens the Bible and puts his finger on the passage. And the passage said, “*Judas went out and hanged himself.*” And the guy says, “Oh, that can’t be right. So let me try this again.”

And so he opens the Bible up and puts his finger on the passage. And the next passage says, “*Go thou and do likewise.*” (*Laughter*) Oh come on, guys; you can do better than that! (*Laughter*)

That’s not what the Holy Spirit is going to say to us about God. That’s not the kind of direction that we’re seeking from God. We’re seeking concrete definitions of things just like Elijah was. God, how will I know I am safe? How do I know this thing that I’m about to do is what You want me to do? What assurance will You give to me?

So one of the first things that has to happen is that the Lord has to adjust our hearts. How does God do that? God sent His Son Jesus Christ into our lives. So the Gospels tell us how we can re-align our hearts.

**Gary:** It’s about transforming our inability not to sin. Being able not to sin is something else entirely.

**Bob:** Actually this is the third phrase that Augustine uses. And this is where we are going to be challenged. When you’re saved in Jesus Christ, and when your hearts are re-aligned to God, so that we begin to hear the voice of God, we are “*not able to sin.*” Why? Because suddenly we are aligned to God’s actions.

**Ted Wood and Don Maurer:** We are “*able not to sin.*”

**Bob:** I said that we are “not able to sin.”

**Ted:** Yes. In English the order of the words is very important; in other languages it is not. (*Laughter*)

**Don Maurer:** In glory we are not able to sin.

**Bob:** I’m going to go even further than that, Don, and say this. What does God say to us about how we live our lives? And God looks at us with forgiveness always.

**Don Maurer:** Amen.

**Bob:** So when our hearts are aligned with Jesus Christ, God doesn’t look at the things that we’re doing wrongly. He looks at us and says, “I see Jesus in you.”

**Don Maurer:** Amen.

**Mike:** “*Holy and blameless in His sight.*”

**Bob:** “*Holy and blameless in His sight.*”

**Brave Man:** Say that again.

**Ted:** Say that again. (*Laughter*)

**Bob:** When God looks at us,--

**Don Bishop:** What did Mike say?

**Don Maurer:** “*Holy and blameless in His sight.*”

**Mike:** Ephesians 1:4.

**Ted:** Yet at the same time suffering the consequences for sin. We stand forgiven, right? And we stand in Christ perfected.

**Bob:** That doesn’t mean that the consequences won’t follow from our previous decisions.

**Ted:** Or be caused by those decisions.

**Don Bishop:** David may be a good example of that. God forgave him of his actions with Bathsheba and so forth. But he still suffered the consequences.

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**Bob:** That’s right. So even the decisions that we make prior to that are fallacious. Intelligence, accumulated knowledge, or even experience do not necessarily lead us to understand those things. But more about this is what Paul says in Romans 10: *“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* We can’t transform our hearts, we can’t hear the voice of God, until we get into the word of God, letting the word of God dwell in us richly.

And so there is a matter of having the mind of Christ. Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 2. And what that does then is that it develops a sense of faith and trust. Going back to Elijah again, as he began to hear and to dwell in the word of God, the voice of God, as that voice began to minister to his heart, saying, “You’re not alone, Elijah. In fact, I’ve raised thousands. These are the things I want you to do. And I will lead you and go with you in that process of establishing a new king who will do these things. I will develop new prophets who will succeed you. I have taken into account all things that you can’t possibly consider but that you’re worried about. I’ve taken all those things into account.” We’ll begin to develop a sense of faith and trust.

And one of the things that begins to show to us is what I call *the inter-connectedness of all things.*” One of my favorite passages is Psalm 19: *“The heavens declare the glory of God.”* You know that passage. *“Day to day pours forth speech, ... but their voice is not heard.”*

In other words, the sun, the moon and the stars are trying to tell us something. And yet what do we say? “Gee, that’s nice! I wonder how old those things are?” (*Laughter*) “I wonder how far away those things are?” They’re trying to tell us something more about the inter-relatedness of God’s work in our lives. In creation we see this inter-connectedness that doesn’t disappear. It doesn’t vanish.

*“If we approach all of our ordinary experiences with the same open, expectant attitude that God’s wisdom will in some mysterious way manifest itself to us in innumerable threads that make the web of our daily lives, we will enhance our ability to recognize God’s guidance.”* Dallas Willard said that. In other words, we are not alone.

What was God’s assurance to Elijah? Elijah said, “I’m afraid and I’m all by myself. I’m afraid because of the pressures of this world, the threats of the queen who is going to assemble an army to come and get me. I’m running for my life! I am so out of sorts with that; I’m even leaving my servants behind. I’m running in exhaustion without food.” And God says, “Wake up, Elijah; I have provided for you. Continue on your journey.”

“But God, I’m still running—forty days and forty nights.” Forty days and forty nights he’s on the run! He doesn’t stop to listen to God at all.

Finally he runs into the cave where he feels safe. But where is the inter-connectedness of all things? God is there. “I send you the earthquake and the storm, Elijah, just so you know that I am in all things.” It’s the still, small voice.

God has to show us the connectedness of all things so that, when we start to make decisions about things, what we do is, we tend to isolate those things. You probably do what I do. “Let me write down all the pros and all the cons.” We isolate all of those things that are important, that are influential, that are the other voices that I need to listen to.” We’ll talk a lot about that the next time we’re together. But all of those things are in such a way that the influences of my decisions are the accumulation of my experience, my security, my filters. But where is God’s heart? And where is God’s voice?

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Think about some of the decisions that you’ve made—simple decisions, crucial decisions. Did you ever stop to pursue the heart of God in that process?

We say, “Well, it’s business.” Is God in business? Isn’t God in the same business that you’re in? Isn’t God in the same life that you’re living? Doesn’t He want to be in the same life that you’re living? Sure He does. But He wants to be in your heart, to have His voice to be the one you listen to, to bring you the safety, the assurance, the comfort and the direction—all of those things that we value in our decision-making process. Don’t

**Don Maurer:** Bob, is it necessarily wrong, as Jesus said, to count the cost when you’re making a decision and you’re seeking God?

**Bob:** It depends on the voice that you listen to, Don. And we’re going to spend a little bit of time next week, because some of the voices we listen to are the voices of popularity, purpose, and intentional evil, misdirection. Yes?

**Jordan Obaker:** I’m curious to hear your thoughts. Is it possible that we go too far in trying to listen to God’s voice in some immediate situations?

When I proposed to my wife, she said yes.

**Ted:** What did you propose? (*Laughter*)

**Jordan:** When we were going through marriage counseling with our pastor, one of the things that she had indicated that she was struggling with was this: “How do I know that Jordan”—me—“is the man that God wants me to marry? There’s only one option, and I need discernment. Is that the one?”

And the way that my pastor had counseled her—thankfully!—was on trying to discern things like this. As a first matter, *is it sinful?* And if it isn’t sinful, then it becomes a matter of wisdom. Is that a good choice? You know, there are degrees of good choices; good, less good. “So is it sinful for him to marry me?”

And he would say, “Well, is he a believer in Christ? The Bible says that you are not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers.” And so he would say that from that perspective no, that’s not a sinful choice. “Will he lead you in the way that Scripture says husbands should lead you? Based on what you know about him, that’s not a sinful choice.”

So there’s just a degree of wisdom at that point of life, okay? “So it’s within God’s will for you to do this. Now it’s just a matter of are there better choices out there for you?” Do you get what I’m trying to say? When we’re trying to discern God’s voice, this is what I want to better understand. Are you saying that there is one will of God for us and our decisions, and we need to figure out what that is? Or is there sinful and not sinful, and then degrees of wisdom?

**David Miller:** The word of God has a lot of instruction in God’s will for us. And much of it—possibly most of it—is general instruction for the church and all Christians. And the question is, how do we hear God’s voice saying, “Don’t go in this direction; go in that direction?” That’s in the Bible, too. He said, “I will tell you: Don’t go in this direction; you will go in this direction.” Are you going to get into how we discern if we’re hearing God saying, “Don’t go in this direction; do go in that direction”, specifically in regard to information?

**Bob:** So the answer to both of your questions is sort of yes, and I’ll try to do that briefly. So ultimately we’re going to go to a passage in Philippians before we get too far down the road. And it will be the answer to what you’re saying. How do I know it’s

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God’s voice? How do I know it’s God’s heart? Guys, this is the very same direction; it’s the word of God.

But what we tend to do is that we listen to other voices that challenge that direction and that voice. And so when we start recognizing that there are other voices that say, “Is there another direction? Is there another choice?” Well, we know that in the Garden there was always another choice. And God gives us the ability—the challenge of the free will kind of thing—to say, “I’m going to lean toward one direction, or one decision or another.”

And one of the questions we need to ask ourselves is, how does that glorify God? How is that action aligning with God’s actions?, because that’s what discernment is. How are the things that I’m learning, doing and thinking aligning my life into God’s action?

And so we tend to be very specific and say, (even with the nature of sin, for example, to use your word), is it more good or less good? That’s a value judgment based on how it affects us, not whether to not it’s in alignment with God, because we say to ourselves, “Is there a lesser sin, or a greater sin?” And we convince ourselves that there is. But what’s the truth?

**Brave Man:** Sin is sin.

**Bob:** Sin is sin.

**Jordan:** But there are degrees of sin.

**Bob:** (*laughing*) That’s a long conversation; we’re not going to be able to explore that. (*Laughter*)

**Jordan:** I mean, even *The Westminster Confession of Faith* talks about digress of sin. A sin that just affects you is a lesser degree of sin. I’m not saying that it means it’s good. But a sin that you involve with somebody else is more heinous because you’ve now brought somebody else into sin.

**Bob:** And the consequence of that is because of its effect; it’s effect is greater. It doesn’t present a value of inherent sin or of rightness because it’s a lesser or greater sin; sin is sin.

**Ted:** Jordan, I wanted to pick up on something you said. That was a great example, by the way. I think I would have told your wife to just say yes. (*Laughter*)

**Bob:** By the way, your wife has great wisdom to ask that question. (*Laughter*) Ted, go ahead, please.

**Ted:** That was a great story. And the thing that is missing is that Protestants tend to do this. They miss the church, because you went to the church and you submitted to the church, right?—the authority of your pastor. And he scrutinized your decision. I get a bit concerned when the conversation is between me and God. I’ve pointed this out a number of times with the charismatics. You know, the church is the body of Christ, and that’s not just a euphemism; it really is. And God was speaking through your pastor, and giving you counsel. Isn’t that the truth?

**Jordan:** Yes.

**Ted:** Even for a Presbyterian. (*Laughter*)

**Jordan:** You see that in some of Paul’s letters to the church as well, where he’s instructing Timothy to establish elders in the various cities. And he’s constantly telling Timothy, “*Preach sound doctrine,*” because there are false teachers that are out there. And he’s trying to tell them, “You need to establish the church in sound doctrine with

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what I have taught you, not what somebody else has taught you. And if what they’re saying isn’t what I said, that is not sound doctrine.” That kind of goes back to that. You have to know what sound doctrine is, because false teachers are trying to deceive us. And what Satan does, he’s using deceit to try to tell you, “Is that really what God’s word says?” The heart can be deceitful above all things.

**Bob:** That’s one of the passages that we’re going to pick up next week: Luke 4 and the temptation of Jesus, where that exact thing happens. And part of that is, who’s direction will you listen to, and what voice? And so the sources of intentional evil are false teachers. Why? Because it doesn’t lead to Christ, but away from Christ. And that’s a part of the warning. How do I discern? Well, I have to identify false voices so I can understand the true voices. You ask appropriate questions about that.

So your wife was very wise to say, “How do I know? How do I discern that this is the right man for me?” The question is, how do I get my heart into alignment with God’s actions?, because that’s what you really want. 1. Marriage is in God’s word. 2. It’s fullness for our lives, for your life and mine. It’s a help meet, from out of us; it’s part of us, aligned with us. That’s a whole other conversation again. *(Laughter)*

The point is that her question is how do I get into alignment with God’s actions? And that’s really what discernment is about. How do I get my life into alignment with God’s actions so that, when push comes to shove, when difficulties come, and the storms arise and the earthquakes are present, and the mountains shake, that I know God’s presence with me, God’s direction for me, God’s safety for me, God’s salvation for me. And so our salvation ultimately is found there.

**Don Bishop:** Ted, that’s a good point about the community of the church being part of decision-making, being able to discern God’s will. We have the word of God. But we are not created just as individuals.

**Bob:** Correct.

**Don:** And not only the pastor when he preaches the Word has wisdom, and so forth, but even other members. We can go to other members and say, “What do you think is the right decision?”

**Bob:** Guys often come up to me and say, “I think I’m going to find God on the golf course today,” on a Sunday. Can you find God on the golf course on Sunday? You absolutely can. But what does it disengage? It disengages the presumed inter-connectedness of all things, and it disengages from it.

**Don:** Mm-hmm.

**Bob:** So the body is really about re-presenting to us the inter-connectedness of life and the word of God. The value of the body is that the church says that together we hear and see the word of God saying this to us. And we see that this in fact is happening by presenting that to us over and over and over again to one another, to help us to discern. Submission includes the body of Christ.

I know this is mind-boggling with lots of things. So we’re going to slowly chip away at this. Next week I’m going to talk about those other voices that we want to listen to, like Elijah. Elijah could have said, “He’s in the earthquake. He’s in the storm.” And still he found a way to find the still, small voice. How did he identify God in the midst of that? We’re going to talk about that more next week, about the false voices and the true voices.

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And then ultimately I’m going to give you a good tool for discernment before this is all over, I promise. Is that good with you?

**Don Maurer:** Amen.

**Bob:** All right. Thank you for the opportunity to join you this morning. It’s a really challenging subject, because it certainly presents us with how we make decisions. Are they good decisions? Are they my decisions? Do they bring me back into alignment with You? Why didn’t they work, God, after all the good things that I know or have experienced? Father, You want to bring our lives into alignment with Yours. That’s why You sent Your Son Jesus to die on the cross for us, to set us free from that sin that so easily pervades our lives, destroying sin forever, an atoning sacrifice. Father, may we begin to make that real in our hearts today and always. I pray this in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

**Brave Men:** Amen. (*Applause*)