

“Rivals On the Horizon”
Recovering the Art of Discernment

Rev. Bob Cummings

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Bob: Okay. Well, let’s begin with a word of prayer, shall we? Heavenly Father, we are here today because You’ve awakened us, awakened us with the privilege of sharing Your word, awakened us to the privilege of sharing fellowship, of discovering something about ourselves, and more importantly discovering something about You. So Father, as we spend this time together, would You open not just our eyes but our hearts and minds as well, that we might take in all that You would have us to know and to do and even to be? For we come in the name of the One who saves us and makes us one with You—Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen.

Bob: Well, we’ve been talking about discernment. And I’ve kind of led you into a couple of places, and I know it’s been an uncomfortable place for some of you. You’ve asked some good questions. And a couple of you are struggling with the issue. Aren’t we really talking about the difference between spiritual discernment and natural discernment? I mean, can’t the two kind of coexist and go hand in hand? Shouldn’t we rely more on natural discernment in some circumstances and spiritual discernment in other circumstances?

So I want to remind you of some of the pathways and foundations that I’ve laid for you in the answer to that question. And then I think I’m going to answer part of Jordan’s question from last week. I’ll remind you of what that was.

When we talk about the actual discernment, one of the things that we have to kind of really get our cells around is that natural discernment has to rely on the mind, strictly the mind, and everything that is rational about the mind, because that’s what we have in our natural beings. We have our brains, our minds—the little gray cells, as Farrow would say—or Sherlock Holmes would rely on the deductive reasoning kinds of things. And so we rely on the mind—the rational—which is really based on knowledge and the accumulation of knowledge which comes by experience. It is both the Cartesian and Kantian philosophies about things. And if you really want to lay that out, you would even find some who would lead ultimately to some of the more modern philosophies about things which lead to the focus on the self and the self alone. That by the way is a very dangerous kind of philosophy, if you really think and follow that line to its conclusion.

But in order to kind of say that there is an alternative to that, there is the spiritual discernment which relies not just on the mind but also on the heart. As I suggested to you, the Greek notion of discernment—not the Hebrew notion, but the notion of the Greek philosophers—was really that we think with our hearts, not just our minds. It’s not just an accumulation of knowledge, but really something that involves more of the whole being. It is emotions as well as the mind and rationale. But more importantly these things are vetted by a voice that is not ours, but is in fact the voice of the Creator who brings all things into being.

And we talked about the difficulty that we find ourselves in, because from the early days of the Garden, where Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, it exposes their inability not to make decisions—they made many, many decisions. Decisions are always the gift

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of God to us because we have the gift of the mind. But we have trouble discerning in the midst of that what it is that we should be doing with our lives.

One of my favorite places is a line from *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, the first question. And probably many of you know that and have it memorized. “*What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.*”

So there’s a sense of the fullness of life that has to be in relationship with God. But when that relationship is broken, and the voice of God becomes absent in our lives, what do we do? We rely on our natural abilities—that we have been given to by God, by the way—which is an accumulation of our experiences and our knowledge, to help us to decide all things. And so we sometimes confuse decision-making and discernment.

Now to further that point, I’m going to give to you three voices today that are part of our experience, part of our accumulation of knowledge. But they are in fact false voices that do not help us in discernment.

Let me introduce that with two stories, both school related. The first story is that I was a freshman in college. I went to Grove City College, one of the great local colleges by the way. I loved my experience at Grove City College; it was wonderful. And so, as normal, you go through the first couple days of orientation as a freshman, trying to figure out where things are.

And in those days, about the third day in, the president of the college brings all the incoming freshmen together for a little speech. And so it’s late August, and of course that means it’s a little warm. And we’re in this auditorium at Grove City College that was barely air-conditioned. And so we’re all sitting in this auditorium waiting for the president of the college to address us. I’m sitting kind of on the left side of the auditorium, about halfway through the front section. And my suite mates were altogether with me, sitting beside me in this auditorium.

And so the president of the college begins to speak. And he’s kind of like five minutes in. And my roommate is sitting beside me, and he goes, *(snore!)* *(Laughter)*

Now there’s no other sound in the auditorium, *(Laughter)*, but this sudden, loud snore. And everyone—everyone!—turns and looks at us. What do I do? I moved aside! *(Laughter)* I got as far away from him as I possibly could!

So now what’s happened is, the president of the college has focused his attention on us. We were freshmen; we didn’t really care if the professor knew our names. But now we knew that he wanted to know who we were.

Now why do I tell you that story? Because that voice disrupted everything. And it changed the course of everything for a while.

Now the good news about my roommate by the way—the same person who snored!—was that he was a very talented musician. We came and walked into the room, and he’s carrying a guitar, and I’m already feeling envious. You know, one of the things I’ve wanted to do in my life is to learn guitar. And actually, as I went off to college, I asked my parents. I said, “You know, if it’s at all possible, for Christmas I would love to have a guitar for Christmas; that would be fine.” And to my great blessing my parents were gracious and bought me a guitar for Christmas that year.

So meanwhile my roommate comes in, having this very beautiful guitar. He’s very accomplished at it. In fact, by the end of the year he played the guitar, mandolin, banjo—12-string, 6-string, electric guitar—all of those instruments in our room. And he was very accomplished in all of those instruments.

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And I’m envious, because it’s now halfway through the year and I have a guitar, and I can barely make it work. But I’m trying my darnedest to do that. All I can do is try to hear the notes on the guitar.

A few years ago I had the privilege of listening to a young woman who had gone to Nashville. And she had gone to Nashville to make a recording. She grew up in our local community of Ligonier, and she had a very strong and very gifted voice. And people encouraged her to go and make a recording.

She comes back with a recording. And we played the recording for some of the folks at a church gathering. And I said to her, “You know, there are probably five or six guitars in this one song.”

She said, “Actually there are nine guitars in this song.”

I said, “How did you even figure that out, that there were that many?”

She said, “Well, after you play a while, you sort of recognize different sounds.” And to be honest, I don’t know how this happened. But as I’ve learned to practice my guitar and play my guitar, I can hear lead lines. I can hear bass lines. I can hear two or three guitars overlaid one along another.

You say, “Well, that’s not hard to do.” Well, actually it is. Until you’ve learned to play the instrument and been around that to recognize how these things are done, you can’t recognize how it all comes together. And so I’ve had that great gift that has been given to me by God to recognize how it all comes together.

And that’s what I want to talk to you about today: about how all of those voices in our lives get overlaid. And sometimes we don’t understand that it seems like a loud sound, and sometimes it seems confusing to us. And sometimes we understand the depths of what’s being communicated to us. Ted?

Ted Wood: I just thought of the analogy of you’re learning the guitar and being able to distinguish different sounds. I mean, that’s in any expertise. I would say that in my fundraising council I sit down with the board and they say, “This is easy.” They don’t understand all the parts, and how the different parts are dissonant, and how to fit in the different parts and components together. In fundraising that’s a constant endeavor. That goes for anybody in their field of expertise, which I think is going to serve the culture of man.

Bob: It absolutely is. Well I’m going to open up with a couple of Scripture passages that talk about how we see that play out in the Scriptures, so that we understand how it works in our own lives. I want to begin with Exodus 32. It is probably a very familiar passage to you. I’m going to be reading verses 1-6.

“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come! Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses, who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’

“So Aaron answered them. ‘Take off the golden earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.’ So all of the people took all of their earrings and brought them to Aaron. And he took what they handed him, and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool.

“And then they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’ And when Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, ‘Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD.’

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“So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. And afterward they sat down to eat and drink, and got up to indulge in revelry.”

Now you’re familiar with that story, right? I mean, there are so many interesting things here. People are going through their lives. All of a sudden they realize what? That the voice of authority, that the voice of dependability, that the voice who had led them was missing. And so what do they do? They go to the next person who they think has that authority and say, “Do something.”

And so what we’re beginning to experience here is that when it comes to points of action, when it comes to decisions or activities in our lives, one of the voices that rises up to us and in front of us is the voice of need. Whatever our need is, that becomes the voice that we start to listen to.

“Hey, Aaron. We don’t have a person in front of us to point the way to God. And so would you do something for us?” So Aaron builds a golden calf. And what does he say? He says, “With the calf we’re going to make a festival to the Lord.”

It’s a total misdirection. Aaron knows that. The people know that. But what they’re depending on is the voice that responds to their need. And so one of the things that happens is that when we’re hungry, when we’re weary, when we’re nervous, when we’re confused, the voice that speaks loudest to us is the voice that addresses our need.

Now you may think, well that sounds logical; that’s the way we go about things. But that’s not always how it has to be. For example, in Romans 8 there is such a great response to this. Paul is talking about life in the Spirit. And he talks about the present sufferings. *“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. For those whom God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.”* Keep that in mind. *“That He might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those He predestined He also called; those He called He also justified; those He justified He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”*

See, Paul is trying to counter this voice of need, saying, “You know, God knows that we’re in difficult places and times. And God is going to address that need by speaking to us, providing for us, guiding us.” And yet we have this inability to trust God or acknowledge God, because the voice that speaks loudest—the snoring in the room—is the voice of need. And it draws our attention to that need.

Well, there are lots of other voices that begin to speak to our lives. One for example is the voice of popularity. And for that I’m going to thank Pastor Craig for kind of placing this in front of me a few weeks ago. We’re going to look at Acts 9 for a minute. And again, for some of you this will be a familiar story. And it’s about Simon the Great. Oh, I picked the wrong Scripture passage there.

Ted: Or Simon the Lesser. Acts 8.

Bob: Acts 8, yeah. I have a typo on that. *“Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city, and amazed all the people of Samaria. And he boasted that he was someone great. And all the people, both high and low, gave him attention and exclaimed, ‘This man is rightly called the Great Power of God!’”*

Now notice. In both of these passages the people are attributing a characteristic of God to someone or something. And it comes out of their desire to acquire something that they don’t have in themselves, but that they see in that other person. In this case Simon is

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giving them the quest for popularity. *“Everybody gave him their attention and exclaimed, ‘This man is rightly called The Great Power of God! They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery.*

“But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. And Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.”

Now what Simon is describing for us is that we look to another voice, sometimes to address a different kind of need. And one of those needs, depending on how you read this text and what word you want to apply, is either popularity or somehow displaying power or possession. Simon enjoyed doing all those great things. People are going “Wow, isn’t that wonderful! I will follow Simon because he is doing all those great things!”

Now there are hosts and hosts and hosts of people around us today who use this basic principle to help us to see this. I’m going to use just a generalization and say that one of those categories is social media influencers. And what they’re trying to do is to say to us, “Look how many people follow us! And therefore, because so many people follow us, we obviously have the right information. We obviously have the right direction, because otherwise why would people follow us?”

And so one of the voices that speaks to us is that. If all these people are following this person, obviously they’re right. They must be right. They must be able to give the right direction for things. Otherwise, why would everybody else follow them?

Sometimes people do that to gain a sense of power. And some would say that Simon was doing that very same thing. He was giving evidence of some power. And so people said, “We lack that power in our lives. We see that power demonstrated. We see people following that kind of power.” So that’s the power that the population wants to follow.

And so one of the voices that speaks to us when we’re looking at how to decide about things, or what kinds of things that might be something of significance for us is, is it popular or is it powerful?

There’s a third voice. And this is a voice—and there is no other way to describe it—it is the voice of evil intent. And it sometimes looks like the right direction. But from the very inception it does not have our good at stake. It is by design a voice that is intentionally drawing us in an attentive way to distract us, to redirect us, so that we follow it not to our betterment, but to our destruction.

There are a lot of practical examples today. Probably weekly or monthly I hear a news report about people who are sucked in by a scam artist on the Internet, who give their bank accounts and just have someone empty their whole life’s savings because they were told that their grandson, their husband, their cousin has been arrested and is in jail. And so in order to bail them out you have to send this much money to this number. And so in panic, trying to do the right thing, they get sucked in and sort of start this process of emptying their bank account. There are voices of evil intent all around, who by design are trying to destroy us and the significant things of our lives.

And nowhere do we probably see that more clearly than in Mark chapter 4. Now when I’m holding out these passages to you I’m just sharing a snippet of the whole of Scripture, because we can find these voices all throughout the Scripture.

If you’re looking at the life of David you can find these same kinds of voices. For example, in the life of David there is the voice of popularity when his son Absalom rises

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up and sits at the gate and everybody says, “Absalom, you should be the next king.” And so he follows the voice of the people and he goes against his father. In fact he drives David out of the city and creates this rebellion. And in the end Absalom dies and it crushes David; it absolutely crushes David.

I heard a great sermon this week about that little incident about why David does not weep at the death of the infant whom he has with Bathsheba. But he does weep greatly at the death of Absalom because he knows where the two of them are. Absalom was risen to a place of great personal destruction with his evil actions. But there are all kinds of great stories about David. You can follow that all throughout the Old Testament.

Mark 4 is the parable of the sower. And you can understand that there are things that fall one way and things that fall another way. And there is a great depth of how things come together. Some things just aren’t going to work at the very beginning, and some things really are.

What I really like actually goes back to Mark 1 as a precedence for that. *“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as Jesus was coming out of the water, heaven began to open to Him with the Spirit descending like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are My Son whom I love, with whom I am well pleased.’*

“At once the Spirit sent Him into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and angels attended Him.”

Now that’s a very short rendition in Mark of the temptation of Jesus. And I just want to call your attention to it in a couple of different ways.

When we read about the temptation of Jesus in the Gospels, we read how Satan time and time again tries to lead Jesus into a path of destruction. And over and over again Satan says, “Well, you know, I will give you this if You follow me.”

And Jesus responds with Scripture, which is important, by the way. And every time Jesus responds with Scripture Satan then goes to another level, a deeper level. He uses Scripture to draw Jesus down a different path, which is a reminder to us—a serious reminder to us—that even though we know that Scripture is God’s word for us, it can be misused. And it is misused not by those who want to help us, but by those who want to destroy us.

And so Satan tries to tempt Jesus. And Jesus keeps responding with the Scriptures, with what He knows about God, what He knows about the character of God. And each time Satan says, “I want you to decide this, which is to follow me. I will give you this. I will give you the things of your need—bread, water. I will give you the voice of popularity of the people; all the kingdoms will be Yours. And Jesus, by the way, if You throw Yourself off this cliff, this high point, nothing will happen to You.”

And of course Jesus knows that’s not true. Why? Because not only does He know the Scriptures, but He knows the voice of God. How do we know that? The voice of God had just spoken to Him. And the voice of God says, “This is My Son with whom I am well pleased.” And the Spirit of the Lord descends upon Him.

So what happens before Jesus enters into this place of evil intent, with all the voices that Satan can muster coming against Him, speaking to Him about all the things of life that He will encounter—His need, His popularity, His very life—God addresses all of those by descending into the heart of Jesus.

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And so brothers, one of the things that we find is a challenge is to ask the question: Which voice is speaking to us about a particular area for which we need to decide?

Jordan asked a very good question last week. I’m just going to enter into it very gingerly this morning. He said, “My wife and I were in counseling.” I think I got this right. “My wife and I were in premarital counseling. And she said to the pastor, ‘How do I know this is the man I need to marry?’”

And so one of the questions we have to ask at that moment is, what voice brings that question up? Is it a question of need? Is it a question of popularity? Is it a question of evil intent? And then how does God speak in response to that question? When we are making decisions about things we have to ask what voice is arising in us that causes the question?

Again I remind you that my favorite part of *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* is “*What is the chief end of man?*” What is the end of everything we’re supposed to do? “*To glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.*” And if we are hearing that kind of voice, then in every situation what God wants to do is to descend into our lives, into our very hearts, to speak to us about life. And the way He does that is that He sends His Son into the very places where all of those voices are present, so that on the cross we are saved, because all of those voices Jesus puts to rest. And He says at that moment, “I have come to give you life.” All of these voices bring death.

Of course Scripture says, “*I lay before you this day life and death.*” Which one will you choose? Brothers, the only way we can choose life is if we let the heart speak to us, because all of the other voices are rational voices. Yes, Don?

Don Maurer: But doesn’t the Scripture say that our hearts are “*deceitful and desperately wicked?*”

Bob: I knew somebody was going to bring that up! (*Laughter*) Yes, why does it say that? Does anybody want to know why it says that?

Don Bishop: We’re fallen men.

Bob: Yes, because our hearts are separated from God. That’s why I started with Genesis 3.

Don Maurer: As saved people our hearts are separated from God?

Bob: No, not saved people. But what we can do is not allow our hearts to be active with God and to rely on our minds. And that’s when we have trouble with our decision making, with our discernment.

David Miller: Our hearts begin in the natural realm. And God transforms them into the spiritual realm.

Bob: Yeah. Psalm 119 says:
“*Turn my heart toward Your statutes,
Not towards selfish gain.*”

Michael Rush: You know, this is interesting. You talked about the subject of need. I remember years ago being in this very room. Bruce Bickel was teaching on a similar topic. And I remember not long before that with clarity that whenever people say they hear the voice of God, it sounds very arrogant. He asked me to repeat that when I said it. I said it again, to repeat it so the men would hear it. But it sounded strange. That was the interesting thing about it. But I think that to your point, it ties into your point that sometimes as surely as we’re being sanctified and growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, we have to be cognizant of the fact, like Don just said, that prior to regeneration man’s heart is “*deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can*

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know it?” But also as believers we are being “*conformed to the image of His Son.*” And in that we still have this war going on in this flesh. And a lot of times as believers we don’t oftentimes discern the fact that we have these needs and wants and things like that. They are not always from God. But we think as believers that this thing has to be the Lord, and a lot of times it isn’t. And one of the best things that happened to me is being made aware of that. “No, Michael, that’s not what I said to you. That’s you. That’s you wanting what you want.” So I just wanted to share that, because a lot of times we don’t think about that. If it sounds too much like me—unregenerate me!—unsanctified me, immature me, it probably is.

Bob: Yup. So Don, when you say that “*the heart is deceitful above all things,*” Michael says, “*Who can know it?*” That’s the point. In our unrelated, distant life from God, there is no way to know the heart. Our hearts are not focused on God. All of the other Scriptures that talk about the heart that is focused on God talk about how to gain wisdom. Where I’m going with this eventually is to know what God is doing, to know how we can be a part of it. Yes?

David: I’ve noticed over and over again that there’s a pattern to hearing God’s voice. And it’s surprising to me because it’s different from what I would have thought. There’s something new that comes into my life that I wasn’t thinking about, and it agrees with Scripture. It doesn’t agree with my opinion; it agrees with Scripture. I inform my opinion by the word of God.

Bob: And that’s where we’re ultimately going to go to. It’s conforming our hearts and our opinions to where God is. How do we do that? We have to recognize the other voices—the places where our hearts are not—so that we can allow God to descend into those places, to transform these decisions—these actions of our lives—so that the flow of our lives becomes a lot easier.

Hold on a second, Don. When you look up some of those references, you might find for example Psalm 119, that great Psalm that goes at length for every letter of the Hebrew alphabet to bring our lives into conformity with God: how to follow the law of God, over and over again. And in Psalm 119 over and over again you find things like this:

*“I have hidden Your word in my heart,
That I might not sin against You.
I have chosen the way of faithfulness;
I have set my heart on Your laws.
Give me understanding, so that I may keep Your law
And obey it with all my heart.”*

What the Psalmist is saying is that the heart is not yet aligned with God until God descends into that heart. And then the ability to do the right thing becomes easy.

*“Turn my heart toward Your statutes,
Not toward selfish gain.”*

I mentioned a couple books. And I want to just take a moment to remind you of some of the things that are part of the research behind what we’re sharing. There are four books that I find very helpful on the question of discernment. *The Discerning Heart* by Wilke and Noreen Au is from University Press. It’s a rather intellectual approach. But again it revolves around the question of the heart.

Henry Nouwen in his book on discernment gives a whole different perspective. Nouwen, remember, is the professor who leaves his post after achieving one of the

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highest points one could have in an academic career in life, and goes and lives in community. And it’s in that community that he recognizes that as he has made decisions in his life, he has not been in alignment with God. And so he writes his book on discernment as a personal reflection of where his heart has not been but now is, and why he is at peace with where he is, because his heart is in a different place.

For those of you who are struggling with that question of other voices, Dallas Willard has a book called *Hearing God*. And in this particular book Willard says this: “*God is not impassive toward us, like an unresponsive pagan idol. He calls us to grow into a life of personal interchange with Him that does justice to the idea of our being His children and being part of Him.*”

Ted: Bob, I guess the question which is rumbling through my brain—excuse me, my heart!—*(Laughter)*

Bob: Probably your brain this morning. *(Laughter)*

Ted: When you talk about God calling us, I’d just like to pose this. When you’re talking about God calling us, what do you actually mean? When people say, “God spoke to my heart,” what does that mean? The only way I am processing that is through my brain. There’s not a separate kind of thing up there. Maybe you all have it, and you would say, “Oh, that’s my heart.” And I’m hearing from my heart, but it’s the brain that’s the hearer. So—

Bob: It does.

Ted: So I get very nervous when people start talking about “the Lord said this to my heart.” I mean, I’m reading here in Psalm 119:

*“Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
Who walk in the law of God.
Blessed are those who keep His testimonies,
Who seek Him with their whole heart.”*

Okay; good luck, brothers. Do you seek Him with your whole heart? How close do you get to that? I mean, I find that these discussions often come down to those who are kind of delighted, to those who are very optimistic about their ability to do that, and those who are pessimistic. I’m the pessimistic type. I think my heart is deceitful and wicked.

Michael: We know it is, Ted. *(Laughter)*

Bob: And Ted, I would say that you are absolutely right. For the majority of the things about our lives we have to admit that our hearts are deceptively wicked.

Ted: They are deceptive. And I told you guys that I had this conversation with a Mormon about a month or two ago. And I said, “Do you believe what it says in Genesis 6:5, about the fact that all the thoughts of man’s heart are only evil continually, all the time?” And I said, “Is that your heart?”

And he said, “Oh, no! I’m not like that!”

I said, “It’s my heart.” And he looked at me like I was an alien from another world, because he was very optimistic about his ability to improve, to get to this place. And some of you may say, “Well Ted, you’re quite a sinner. You know, you’re just a wicked person.”

Michael: We know it.

Ted: “That’s what your problem is. You’re really not very grown up in your faith; you aren’t very mature.” Okay, fair enough. Those are my thoughts.

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Bob: But our confession of our inability is the beginning place for God’s entry into our lives.

Ted: Absolutely. I believe in growth and maturing in the faith and growing up in the faith; I believe it. But I’m not optimistic about how far down the line I’ve gotten to in terms of seeking Him with my whole heart. That’s not me. I live by the grace of God and by the power of Christ in me, not because I seek Him with my whole heart.

Bob: So when the Pharisee comes to Jesus and says, “Which is the greatest of the commandments?”, Jesus says, “To love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all of your mind and with all of your strength.” And he says, “Well, I’ve done all those kinds of things.”

And Jesus says, “I don’t really think that you have.” *(Laughter)* “And just to give evidence of that, go and sell your possessions.”

Ted: Yes.

Bob: And the guy says, “I can’t do that.” Well then, the admission is that my heart’s not in that place. But there’s good news on the horizon, Ted. That’s next week’s topic. *(Laughter)*

Ted: For me the good news is “*Christ in you.*”

Bob: Yeah, that’s where we’re going to be.

David: Aren’t you going to talk about 1 Corinthians chapter 2 this week?

Bob: Yes.

David: Okay.

Bob: Don’t

Don Maurer: A couple things, Bob. Going back to Jordan’s question,--

Bob: Yes.

Don: You asked why his wife was asking that question, whether it was out of popularity or need or evil intent. I don’t see how that question was any one of those things. I think that she was genuinely seeking the wisdom of God there in regard to how I know this is the man for me.

Bob: So the question is behind that, and let me explain that a little bit more, Don. I think you’re right. The question is not really a challenge; it’s a different kind of a challenge. But what voice caused that question? Is it the voice of “I need assurance of God’s provision?” Is it “Am I supposed to be married, because all my friends are married? And I want to get married; is this okay to do?” Or is this something where “I want to get out of the house and my family situation and away from that, and so I want to marry this guy. Is it okay to do that, to get out of my family situation?”

All of these things by the way are real questions because they are based on real issues in people’s lives. People get married to get away from their families without any idea that the person they are marrying is going to care for them, provide for them and shelter them.

David: They also want to find somebody who is not going to spoil the marriage.

Bob: Right.

David: And there is really no way to tell that I know of.

Bob: Ah, but there is! There’s actually a small, small text we’re going to focus a long time on next week. I’ll just introduce it to you, because part of the response Paul gives to us is how do we make these decisions? How do we know that our hearts are in the right place?

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Well, part of knowing that our hearts are in the right place is that we have to have the heart of Jesus in us; we have to start there. We have to start with the heart of Jesus. And we have to say that we have been separated from God; our hearts have been separated from God. Our hearts are of no use to us in discerning things because our hearts are turned to the other voices of life. And if we're to think with our hearts we have to get our minds and hearts into alignment, in a vertical alignment. The only way we do that is through salvation in Jesus.

So the first question that you have to ask yourself—that each of us has to ask ourselves—is: If we want to discern life properly, are our hearts united with Jesus? Is Jesus the Lord and Savior of our life? Is Jesus the One who redeems and restores us, because our hearts are wicked above all things? Is Jesus the One for me that brings me together with the God of creation who understands all things?

Do you know what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, the great chapter on love? We're going to touch base on this text in this next minute too. It begins: “*If I have all knowledge and understand all things, but have not love,*”—*agape*, the love of God,—I am what? Nothing! Nothing. And so until we have the heart of God beginning to reside within us, until our hearts are united with His, the only way that can happen is salvation in Jesus. Jesus becomes our Lord and Savior. Until that happens, our ability to discern does not exist.

We can decide. We can accumulate knowledge. We can gather experience. But we will not have discernment, because we will not be able to think with our hearts.

David: With what you said, I've heard the spectrum of people who would answer yes to your questions. Is Jesus Lord of my life? Am I seeking Him in all things? I think the spectrum of these people would be very wide. The immature person has to go through a lot more experiences to get to the point where the more mature person is in actually living out his desire to realize the answer to these questions.

Bob: So one of the things that we begin to wrestle with—and you're absolutely right—is how do we begin to discipline ourselves in the process? How do we let God move into our lives more and more? There's some great old literature that talks about that.

The Mumford book *My Heart, Christ's Home*, reminds us that in every area of our lives Christ has to move in. But we don't allow Christ to move into our closets. We don't allow Christ to move into our business world. We don't allow Christ to move into our kitchens, because we don't think there's a need for God in that place. Because we are there and our hearts are there, there is a need for Christ to be there.

And so one of the great books, if you get a chance to look at that, about discipleship is a man named Brother Lawrence. He wrote a book called *Practicing the Presence of God*. And what Brother Lawrence did was that as he began to isolate himself and said, “I'm struggling with these questions about how to live solely for God,” he started to look at the small things of life in which God needed to be present.

For example, one of the things he would do, as the brothers would finish dinner, he was assigned dish duty. He would take a plate, and as he was washing the plate he would try to imagine which brother fed off that plate, and he would pray for that brother. As he was cleaning the plate he would bring God into the presence of that moment. And the more we do those kinds of things, the more we allow God to be present in the practical moments of our lives, the easier it becomes for us to discern.

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We’re at a stopping place. Let me introduce the theme; you can do your homework on this. Really the turning point for making this very real is Philippians 4—Philippians 4:8 to be specific.

Transcriber’s Note: Philippians 4:8-9, ESV. *“Finally, brothers: whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”*

Bob: And we will focus on Philippians 4:8 next week, because if we ask the questions that Paul is encouraging his brothers in Philippi to ask in every instance, what we are going to be doing is bringing out the character of God into every moment. And what is the character of God? It is the heart of God for our fullness and abundant life—not out of need, not out of popularity, not out of evil intent. But in fact the voice of God speaks to us in such a way that we are able by fine-tuning God in every moment of our lives, to say, “That’s guitar 1. That’s guitar 2, and that’s the bass line, and that’s the drum line.” And suddenly all the layers of life become clearer and more discernible. And then we understand this: Oh, this is what God is doing right now. Don?

Don Maurer: Bob, I’m sorry.

Bob: No; go ahead.

Don: I guess it makes me a little nervous when we disparage the use of the mind as opposed to the heart, because we live in a very anti-intellectual age spiritually. And today the reaction of a lot of people, even a lot of Christians, is this: Well I just feel this way. I know that this was the voice of God because I just have this feeling. Doctrine? I don’t need doctrine. I don’t need to wrestle with what the Bible says, or whatever. I just have this feeling; I know God spoke to me because I feel this way.

Bob: Listen to the words that you just spoke. “I don’t need. I feel,” instead of “God says.”

Don: But they say “God said it,” you know?

Bob: Well, here’s what I will say. If we say that Scripture is God’s word, then God speaks to us.

Don: Amen.

Roger Myers: But wouldn’t liberal theologians say completely the opposite things. I mean, take same sex marriage and women pastors and different things. I mean, they say the voice of God tells them something else.

Don Maurer: Yeah.

Roger: Yeah. But which one is right?

Bob: But the voice of God can’t tell them something else because that becomes inauthentic to the character of God.

Roger: But experientially how can you deny that they’re hearing the voice of God?

Bob: Well, because it’s the natural discernment process; it’s all based on experience; it’s not based on the voice of God. It speaks to the heart of God, which has a purpose for us. What’s our purpose?

Ron Baling: To glorify God.

Bob: Do you see where I’m going with this? It’s all intertwined. The world wants to separate out these things. And the more we allow ourselves to separate these things out, and not bring them back together again, the more difficult discernment becomes. And we begin to rationalize all the other components.

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So for example, one of the things that happens with same sex marriage is that we start to rationalize a different interpretation of Scripture.

Roger: Right.

Bob: Because it's based not on God's heart, mind or spirit, but on our experience.

Don Maurer: But see, Bob, my point on this is that you have to use the mind, for example, in discerning and interpreting Scripture. There was a woman who I heard about a couple months ago. She drowned her children because God told her to. And after all, didn't God tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?

Bob: Mm-hmm. Yup.

Don: We have to use our minds in order to wrestle with these things.

Bob: Again, to emphasize what you're saying, Don, I don't disagree; we have to use our minds. But when we isolate our minds as the primary way in which we make discernments, then we do injustice to the spiritual place of our lives and the prominence of the God who is in our midst at the moment.

This is what Henry Nouan says. *“The church and the Bible uniquely address individual needs—the Law, the Prophets, the wisdom, the spiritual. In every critical event there is an opportunity for God to act creatively, and to reveal a deeper truth than what we see on the surface of things.”*

So what is the deeper truth? From beginning to end the Scriptures are about what?

Don Maurer: God.

Mike Davis: Our relationship with God.

Bob: Our relationship with God, and God's purpose of salvation in that relationship for us from beginning to end.

Michael: I think Caleb has something—

Bob: Okay, Caleb. Sorry; I missed you.

Caleb Falbo: Well, it seems to me in this discussion that we're tending toward one extreme or the other.

Michael: Right.

Caleb: There are a lot of Reformed-thinking guys in here thinking that we have to leave the doctrine behind and allow our hearts to be subservient to Scripture. And of course I think you are in agreement with that. But I think that on the other side—and this is where the concern is for a lot of the guys here—is maybe leaning too far on the spiritual side in the charismatic realm, where the Scripture is sometimes subservient to our experience. And I think what you're trying to do is to hold those in balance.

Bob: There's a great tension between them; they work together, not separate from.

Caleb: I'm thinking of the Scripture that says: *“Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart.”* And so we can't dismiss the fact that, you know, in some cases “Thou shalt not lie” is clear. You can say that's your mind that's telling you that you shall not lie. Now you have a decision to make: lie or don't lie. It's an easy decision, right?

Another one might be the question of marriage. Should I marry this guy? What you're saying, at least to my understanding, is that this runs on this spiritual heart, delight.

Bob: As long as the question is spiritual.

Caleb: Right.

Bob: There is a good spiritual answer to that question.

Caleb: Yeah.

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Bob: We’re not there yet. That will be clear next week. When you read Philippians 4:8 the spiritual questions start to become clear, even to the minutiae of our lives. In other words, what is God asking me to do today? Actually, if you ask some of those questions, what God is presenting to you becomes clear for today.

Michael: You know, this is really interesting. I agree with what Caleb was saying. I don’t think that anybody is saying that you never experience the word of God. You’re talking about a certain thing. You know, sometimes, if you’ve grown up in a certain system or denomination,—or maybe you’re Reformed and you have a big R on your head,—you’ve got to take this seriously. Sometimes our framework can screw us up.

Here’s what I see. On Sunday mornings I go here.

Transcriber’s Note: Christ Church at Grove Farm.

Michael: And I’ve been to many other places. What I’ve seen much of the time is that almost nobody has one of these. (*A Bible*) Nobody. And when you talk about this, nobody knows what I’m talking about. They don’t know this on one hand. They don’t have what theologians call a high view of Scripture. The reality of that is evident. And because that is not held in our churches even by some of our ministers, people listen to and discern all kinds of voices and call it God. “*I beseech you therefore, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and set apart to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.*” The only way our mind can do this is from here. (*The Scripture*)

Bob: That’s correct.

Michael: Now the Holy Spirit agrees with this, right? It’s the word of God. And what I find, as Caleb said, is that sometimes, when you start talking about Scriptural things, people that aren’t used to discerning get really scared about the spiritual things. And I want to make this clear; I’ve been listening very closely. You’re not talking about anything that doesn’t come off of this (*the Bible*.) It has to agree with this. The renewing of our minds is generally important. And I know for a fact there are a lot of people in this room. If we don’t know the word of God, sometimes we get fearful about stuff because we don’t know Scripture ourselves.

Because of the way it was in the churches I grew up in, everybody had a Bible It pains me that how many of the people in our churches don’t know this; they don’t know nothing. “*Jesus wept*” is sometimes even foreign—just two words.

And then I know a lot of guys that are very full of doctrine. But they can’t discern out of a paper bag. They minimize the role of the Holy Spirit because of the abuses. And if you know the Word you don’t have to be scared; you don’t have to be afraid of the Holy Spirit. There are many voices out here. But any voice that contradicts this is the voice of Satan in some way, shape or form. And we don’t have to be fearful about that. We can communicate with God. If this is our guideline and our benchmark, with the Holy Spirit we learn to know Scripture.

So I just wanted to say that, because I think that sometimes there’s a misunderstanding of where you’re going. And I’m going to stick close to you, because I don’t detect anything false.

Bob: Good. Thanks. I appreciate that.

Michael: I’ve been through the roof with a lot of it, and I’ll call it out in a heartbeat. But I want to just encourage the men to be patient and just listen. Ask your questions. But also don’t just sit here as fruit inspectors. Listen to learn and discern, because sometimes

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we’re in these groups. Everybody else must not be Reformed if they’re not wearing the big R, and everybody is just worried about who’s chosen. They are discerning the wheat and the tares. And you don’t have that; that’s God’s thing. But in the midst of that, those same guys who know every doctrinal point of regeneration and justification and sanctification, when we start going through the Word, they don’t know that.

I’m getting on a soapbox here. But I think it’s important because I want to make sure that you’re respected and not having people shout over you. I’ve been in all these groups. We’ve got to be careful not to lean too much on one side or the other. We want to have a balance, and there is a tension. And I’m done.

Bob: So let me remind you of a couple things. We have a limited amount of time, but let me emphasize Michael’s point. Our minds can’t be renewed without our hearts starting to process. Our minds need to be renewed. The only way they are renewed is by the reading of God’s word which is inspired by the Holy Spirit; it is given and directed by the Holy Spirit. God is not three separate and distinct gods. God is a triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—united and presented for us in the Scriptures with the Scriptures, so that the Scriptures would inform our minds, and challenge and change our hearts. So those are integrated kinds of things. When we separate them out we run into difficulties.

An example of that is very clear in Psalm 19, where it begins: *“The heavens are telling the glory of God.”* The stars, the moon, the sun *“pour forth their speech, and their voice is not heard.”*

What are they trying to tell us? They’re trying to tell us about God who is glorious, about God who is creative, of God who is infinite. Do we hear their voice? No, we analyze their positions, so that if we know how far the sun and the moon and the stars are, we’ll be able to calculate speed so that we can drive faster in our lives.

That’s not God’s intent. God’s intent in all of creation is to bear witness to the One who gives us life, and wants us to have life abundant and joyous and fruitful and eternal. And so I don’t see anything separate.

So I know I’m challenging you. It’s a strain where we are so far. But we will absolutely turn the corner next week, because the fundamentals of how we make discernment are in Scripture itself. So do your homework in Philippians 4:8. *(Laughter)* Would somebody like to close us in prayer this morning? All right, thank you.

Mike: Father, we thank You for the opportunity we have to think and to be challenged. Lord, we thank You for the opportunity to study Your word. Your word is truth. You’ve called us to grasp not just little bits and pieces, but Lord, You’ve called us to grasp it in its completeness. So Lord, You’ve told us so much. You’ve told us that we have the mind of Christ. Lord, we would ask that You would help us to grab hold of the meaning of that. And as we go through this exercise of studying Your word I pray, Lord, that You would give us that discernment of hearing You, to direct our path. Lord, guide us and direct us this week in all we do in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen. *(Applause)*