

“Practicing the Practical”

Recovering the Art of Discernment

Matthew 10:37-39

Rev. Bob Cummings

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Bob: Good to be with you this morning. We had a tradition in one of the churches I served for years where in the fall we would celebrate our Scottish heritage, our roots. And we would do a Scottish service and would implement some of the liturgies from previous eras. And part of the great joy was actually that bagpipers would take part in the service. And so we had this great idea that we would end with “Amazing Grace” and let the bagpipes lead us.

And what we did was that we had a single bagpiper come to the front of the church where everybody was looking forward. And the bagpiper began with the first verse. And while he was leading us in that first verse of “Amazing Grace,” the rest of the band which was eight more bagpipes and seven drums kind of moved into the back of the sanctuary. And at about the third verse they all came in, and none of the congregation knew that they were there until that point, at which point I probably should have sent for a couple of EMS trucks, *(laughter)*, because people just jumped! *(Laughter)* It was so loud. But that song is just amazing in many ways. Yes?

Don Maurer: Bob, I have a question. Why is it that when “Amazing Grace” is played with bagpipes, it’s always in the key of e-flat? Does anyone know the answer to that? *(Laughter)*

Ted Wood: You know, I’ve often wondered that myself. *(Laughter)*

Don: It keeps me awake at night. *(Laughter)*

Gary Craig: The evangelist might be singing in e-flat. *(Laughter)*

Bob: That’s probably the best answer I ever heard. *(Laughter)* Well guys, can we begin in prayer? And we’ll open the Scripture together.

Father, You’ve awakened us to the day. We are so grateful that You bring Your light to our lives—not just light to the world, but light to our lives—the light of Your word, the light of Your presence, the light of Your Spirit. Father, we ask that that light would fill us in heart and mind and body and in life today, as we turn together to something that You are trying to share with us about who You are, and even who we are with You. So Father, we give this time to You. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen.

Bob: My apologies for not having an outline. Somehow it was a communication issue that I’ll blame on my computer. *(Laughter)* But we’re going to keep it simple this morning. I’m going to ask you to turn to Matthew 10. And we’re going to share and focus on the verses that are completely familiar to you. You’ve probably heard them a hundred times or more.

Verse 37: *“Anyone who loves their father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me, and anyone who loves their son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for My sake will find it.”*

You are familiar with the verses. Jesus is asking us daily to pick up the cross and to follow Him. And most of you have probably made the decision to do that. You’ve made

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that decision to follow Christ Jesus wholeheartedly. That’s why you’re here today; I’m pretty sure that’s the case.

And every Sunday for some of you—not all of you!—I know that if you’re participating in worship here on Sunday morning, there is a little saying that we share together every time we get together in worship. And the saying is this: God is good.

Brave Men: All the time.

Bob: And all the time,--

Brave Men: God is good.

Bob: If we really believe that, then what we’ve been talking about is less of a challenge. But the reality is that we struggle to actually take hold of that. And we struggle to actually do what Jesus suggests to us.

I’m going to try and find something quickly here. I love what Tim Keller says about the gospel. He says, *“The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe. And yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”*

Brave Man: Amen.

Bob: And Tim is so accurate in that. Let me read the beginning of that for you again. *“The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe.”* And one of the challenges, one of the evidences of that statement, is how we live our lives in the world of decision making.

I’m going to try to wrap up five weeks of conversation with you. And as I say that I’m going to make sure—and you’re going to have to hold me accountable—for the fact that we can’t possibly encompass all the concepts that I’ve been trying to share with you in six weeks. But the nature of what we’re trying to say is that the reality of how we’re living our lives doesn’t always match with what we proclaim in faith.

And that’s a challenge for us. And so what we do mostly in that challenge is to default to ourselves and to our sinful nature. And the challenge for us is to not live in default, but to live in faith, to daily pick up our cross and die to what?

Brave Man: Self.

Bob: Ourselves. And I’ve suggested to you that the very nature of how we think and arrange our lives is about ourselves. We are in the realm of modern cognition which follows the Descartes principle: *“I think, therefore I am.”* And so when it comes to living life we live life rationally rather than relationally. And so it’s about what we think, rather than how God dwells deeply in the center of our being.

Bonhoeffer is famous for writing a wonderful book called *Christ the Center*, which challenges the nature of discipleship, saying that in life the center of our lives is really evident in how it’s expressed in our lives. And so if we’re making decisions daily about how it affects us—what’s good for us, what’s of value for us, what’s abundant for us,-- then what we’re saying and what we’re focused on is not who God is, because the goodness of God, the abundance of God, is what God brings to us in Jesus. Rather, it’s about ourselves.

So the distillation of what I’ve been saying about discernment is about getting out of ourselves and getting into the flow of the way and the work of God. So we need to focus on the impact of our identity, realigning our relationship daily. Who are we?

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The Scriptures are just filled over and over and over again with the story of people who say they want to follow God. And then in the midst of the challenges of daily living they backtrack to themselves.

On the way over this morning I was listening to Alistair Begg doing a passage in Exodus; it was a great sermon. He had been talking about the goodness of God and the challenges that presents. If you have time and can backtrack on that to Word f.m., pick it up because it’s been a really good series. He is reflecting about the people of Israel who have come up. And they have seen the marvelous, wonderful works of God.

And they get out of the place and into the desert and they are facing some of the challenges. And what do they do? They want to go back to what they’ve known: the burning of the sun on their backs. And they’ve known the hardship of slavery. And they haven’t known the freedom of God, or the fulfillment of the promises of God truly in their lives. They’ve not yet reached the Promised Land. And so their tendency is to withdraw back, to go back to what they knew in their practices.

So what we typically do is, we come to a place and we say, “What’s the next right thing we need to do? What’s the thing we need to do today or this afternoon or this evening, or in the business decision we have to make about today?” And what we do is, we default back to what we know. But what we know is in fact sinful. What we know is ourselves—the sinful self.

There are so many wonderful quotes about this everywhere. Even in secularism there are some great perspectives on this. Sartre in his wonderful work *Critique of Dialectical Reason* says: “*Conscious human acts are not projections of freedom that produce humanity, but a movement toward totalitarianism.*”

What he means by that is that if we consciously make decisions about things that are wholly affective to us—and what he meant by that is that they are determined by all the social conditions of our lives—and so what he wants us to do is to create social conditions that give us the determined factor of what we think about. We make decisions about what affects the good of everybody. But more importantly it has been influenced by me. And who am I? It’s my sinful self.

And so I’m looking at the next right thing and I’m wondering, what’s the thing that I should do? And even in that very question I haven’t died to myself.

I was at a gathering a few weeks ago. And a couple pastors were inviting the group to just celebrate the great things of God, the goodness of God. And so the pastor stood up in the group. And he does what I’ve done and what many pastors have done over and over again and says, “Somebody give me a testimony of what God is doing.” And the room is deathly quiet, because we presume that the things that people are interested in are the miracles of God. “I saw God feed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish! I saw the blind enabled to see!” And short of that, there’s nothing.

Can you speak of the things you saw God do yesterday? How many things can you say that you saw God do yesterday?

“Well,” you say, “it’s about trivialities.” It’s about the birds singing. Well, it’s that. It’s about getting up in the morning. That’s a miracle of God for some of us. It’s about some call that was made, an opportunity that was presented that we have recognized because our hearts and lives have been given over to God in such a way that we recognize the goodness of God all the time, because all the time God is good

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So the next right thing is a challenge for us. Do we trust God? Do we know who God is? Do we have faith in the God who is ever-present all the time—omnipresent, all-knowing—and that God has in store for us what Paul describes in Romans 8: all things working together for the good?

And you say, “Well I’m not so sure that the things that happened yesterday were all good.” For whom? For what? Did you see God in those things? Did you even stop to ask that you might see God in those things?

Romans 12 is a call to total surrender; it says, “the renewal of the mind.” And this is a transformation by means of. Paul is not starting with the mind; he starts with the mercies of Christ.

He begins with the mercies of Christ, and from the mercies of Christ our minds are then transformed. Our selves have been taken to the cross. We take ourselves to the cross of Christ. They die there, and in God’s mercies He is transforming us into something that’s new and abundant and rich. And we remember that because we’ve seen God do that over and over again. The testimony to that is all throughout the Scriptures from beginning to end.

It doesn’t matter what book you are going to pick up. You’re going to read about how God intervenes in the midst of life, in the midst of the challenges of life and the decisions of life, in people’s lives. And the reason we have it is to remind us that this can happen for us. That’s going to happen for us.

And so I go to churches which are struggling. And there are very faithful people, people very committed to prayer. And I go and I say to the churches and the leadership, “Can you give me some folks who are really prayer warriors, people who really go to God regularly?”

And they say, “Yeah, that’s easy.” And so I gather those people together. And I say, “Tell me what God is doing here.” They have no idea.

Why do they have no idea? Isn’t God flowing in the midst of this life? The answer is yes. And so the question is, am I being led by love or pushed by fear in the daily things of which I must make a decision?

You may get an email from someone challenging the things that you’ve done. In your response to that email you’re going to create a response; you’re going to decide to make a response. And the question you have to ask yourself in that response is: Am I being led by love or pushed by fear in that response? Is what I’m going to say true, honorable, commendable, just?

We barely even touched on those tools that God has given to us in Philippians 4:8. And I gave you the homework assignment to really delve into that. And you really should because it will lead you to so many places in the Scriptures.

So for those of you who are saying that you are good Presbyterians—I know some of you are good Presbyterians!—and you say, “Well I believe in the sovereignty of God,” do you? Is God involved in your decisions? Or do you put God away into a corner and say that God is sovereign in everything but this decision today? Ah, you haven’t died to yourself yet to even know the sovereignty of God, because if we knew the sovereignty of God, if we really trusted in the sovereignty of God, that means God is involved in this moment and has things under control. Do I trust that? Will I see the goodness of God in the midst of that? Can I rest assured that God remembers me?

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My wife and I love doing a devotional by Paul Tripp. And on October 16th in the devotional he said this: *“What is God doing in the here and now? He is employing the difficulties of life and the goals of grace to produce a character in you that would not grow in any other way. Your trials are not a sign that God has forgotten you or is being unfaithful to His promises. Rather they stand as a reminder that He is committed to His grace and does not forsake it. He will complete its work.*

“God is not exercising His power to make your life easy. He is not at work trying to deliver your particular definitions of happiness. He has given you much more than that. He has given you eternally faithful, forgiving, transforming grace.

“Spiritual people are not those who engage in certain spiritual practices. They are those who draw their life from a conversational relationship with God.”

And so from the beginning I’ve implied and even stated a little bit here that part of the nature of discernment is the reflection of this conversational relationship with God that we have. And you’re saying, “Well how do I know it’s God’s voice?” Well, we know there are false voices. How do I know that this is God speaking to me, God’s direction to me?

Well, we know about God’s character because we read about those things in Scripture. How am I to recognize God’s voice? By constantly getting into a relationship with Him—by prayer, by Scripture, by dedicated time, giving of yourself to God daily, momentarily.

So when you come to that place where you say, “What’s the next right thing I need to do? God, I know You know. I believe in Your sovereignty. I believe in who You are, that You have and want for me an abundant life.”

Isn’t that what Jesus said? “I came to bring you life and to bring it abundantly.” Do we believe that? Do we believe that God wants to give us the good life of grace for life? It doesn’t mean an unchallengeable life. He may put (you into) the difficulties. He may lead you into decisions which create great difficulties because He wants you to discover where you are alive and where you are dead, so that He can bring you back to life. He may use that difficulty to give evidence to someone else about how He is working in your life, because it’s not about us all the time.

And so the challenge for us is to say then, well if we know God’s voice by going before Him,—and I mentioned to you that Luther in the busyness of his day, in the most difficult of his days, would spend more hours in dedicated prayer. Why? Because he wanted to be clear about what God’s voice was saying to Him. The only way he could do that was to clear up all the other voices and put them aside, and not let them challenge what he was listening to and who he was listening to.

Am I picking up my cross and following Him? Am I even hearing that challenge to do that? Can I faithfully attest to the goodness of God and the abundant life of God? Can I remember?

And here is where the value of Scripture is so good. Some of you have said, “You’re talking about the Holy Spirit and the movement of the Spirit.” The Holy Spirit is the inspiration of the words in Scripture. They are the evidence of that voice of God. From the beginning of creation God spoke and it came into being. God speaks; He still speaks. He still speaks into bringing life into you and me.

And if we say that, well, does that mean that I walk around and listen to voices in my head, like some people who say they are schizophrenics—you know, just kind of hearing

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these voices? No. But God will use the Scriptures. God will use His Spirit to enable you to hear what you need to hear, to know who He is in the midst of where you are, because the role of discernment is to get into the flow of the way and the work of God, and out of the flow of the way and the work of ourselves, to daily die to ourselves by picking up the cross of Christ.

I’m going to share with you a quote by Dallas Willard. Some of you ask if there are books that can help you to do this. Well this is one of those on your reading list. It’s called *Hearing God*, one of many books of this nature. You might be familiar with some contemporary books; *Experiencing God*, for example. Many of you have done that study book, *Experiencing God*. And you’ve looked at how that pastor talks about doing things and hearing God’s voice, leading him to develop different churches in different places.

And you say, “Well how is that possible?” Well, we become familiar with what God’s voice is. And we recognize it in the midst of what we’re doing when God speaks to us.

You might occasionally notice a pastor pausing in the midst of a sermon. And you’re thinking, “He’s forgotten (something.)” No, it’s the voice of God convicting us about what we’re about to say. And so God speaks to us in the midst of what we’re saying.

I had a friend of mine who was a pastor. He tells the story of getting up there and starting a sermon, and he just stopped. He just stopped for a long time and his eyes closed. And someone leaned over to his wife and said, “Is he okay??”

She said, “He is. He’s better than okay, because God is speaking to him right now.” And he went on to give a great sermon that day.

And later he said, “I had all kinds of different things planned. And as I stood up there God was saying ‘That’s not what people need to hear today. This is what they need to hear.’”

I’ve had that happen. I’ve prepared hours and hours for a sermon and got up to give it. And I went, “This isn’t it.” It was what I thought they needed to hear, rather than what God wanted them to hear.

Dallas Willard says: *“Today, as God’s trusting apprentices, in the kingdom of heaven we live on the Emmaus road, with an intermittently burning heart. His word pours into our hearts, energizing and directing our lives in a way that cannot be accounted for in natural terms. The presence of the physical world no longer has to be the barrier between me and God. My visible surroundings become instead God’s gift to me, for I am privileged to see the rule of heaven realized through my friendship with Jesus. And He makes it so in response to my expectations of who He is.”*

So brothers, my challenge to you has been: Are you discerning? Are you in a place where you can know that God speaks to you? And the Scriptures tell us that He does. And the Scriptures tell us that He is speaking to us. He has given us direction. He’s challenging the perception of who we are or who we think we are, because what God really wants to do is to realign our lives—not in a horizontal way by taking in all of the knowledge of the spectrum of life—that’s what the devil promised in the Garden of Eden. “God wants you to know all things.”

Well, we can’t know all things; we’re not omniscient. We’re limited, finite beings. But we take that as to pull in the spectrum of the vertical realm of life. All things by our experience, our knowledge, our education, all the things of value to us. But what we don’t

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compensate for is this vertical relationship between heaven and earth, between my heart and God, because if my heart is in alignment my mind comes into alignment as well.

Do you have that personal relationship with Jesus? Do you hear God’s voice? Jesus said, “*My sheep hear My voice.*” Do you? Jesus says that you can. Who are we to doubt Jesus?

Well I thought I’d share those things with you because I know you have an abundance of questions. And rather than preach this morning—which is what I’ve been doing!—I want to ask what kinds of questions you may have that I have not answered? Yes?

Jordan Obaker: Clarifying, I think I agree with what you’re saying. But maybe the way I’m hearing it is giving me a pause. So to take a step back, I’m going to say that it’s probably in this group, maybe a year or two years ago, that we heard a phrase that was thrown out called a “unified dispositional complex.”

Ted: I think I remember that one. (*Laughter*)

Bob: Explain it to me.

Jordan: If you think about the words individually and break it up, *unified* means that everything is together. *Dispositional* is the way that you were disposed to making your decisions. And *complex* is being made up of those things. I think it was Jeff who had said this—naturally, knowing him.

Ted: Sure.

Jordan: But the way to say it is that as we look at who we are as humans—mind, body and will—that is our complex; we are made up of those things. And our minds, bodies and wills can be unified or fragmented; either it’s aligned or it isn’t. And so the idea is, is what you know about God aligned with what your desires in your heart are for, and then what your will is purposed to do?

I think that resonates with me. Your heart, your mind and your will needs to be aligned if you’re truly going to be obedient to God’s will. If it’s fragmented you have some kind of disconnect, right? What your mind knows is not what your heart desires; what your heart desires is not what your mind knows.

All of which concerns my question, which is that I think for me, coming from a very Reformed background, there’s a lot of emphasis on that you need to know what’s true in the Bible first, and what God reveals to you. If your mind does not know what the truth is, how can your heart and your will possibly be aligned with that? And I feel like you’re saying that. But I feel like there’s a bigger emphasis of what you’re saying with the heart, where you’re saying that your heart needs to know what God says more than your mind.

That just makes me nervous, because Jeremiah tells us that “*the heart is deceitful above all things.*” Our hearts can go after passions. Passions tend to be those things that the flesh desires, whereas the mind can discern what God reveals to us. And that’s a matter of bringing your heart and mind to what you know is true, what God tells you in the Bible. I just want to pause and maybe have you clarify how you understand that, and what you’re suggesting.

Bob: Yeah. Many of us come from a Reformed background. The emphasis has been on the rationality of the mind in such a dominant fashion that we begin with the mind. And so if you look at Romans 12 for example, “*Be transformed by the renewal of your mind,*” you start there. But that’s not what the verse says; that’s not what the context is. The context begins with the mercies of God, which is the transformation of the heart. And

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so the transformation of the heart begins the process of the renewal of the mind, so that we can make those rational decisions. Otherwise our minds are focused on their own identity which is the sinful self, because that’s what we are aligned to in the practice of our lives.

Jordan: When you say “the transformation of the heart,” are you talking about regeneration?

Bob: Yes.

Jordan: You’re talking about regeneration.

Bob: I’m talking about regeneration. So to get to your point about the passage of “*The heart is deceitful above all things,*” what Jesus says about that is very simple: “*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” And that’s what that passage is referring to.

So what do we treasure? We treasure ourselves and the value of our intelligence. We have the right knowledge and the inclinations. We have the ability to make decisions, rather than asking the question, rather than being submitted to God in the first place to say, “God, we know that You are omniscient and omnipresent. And because You are sovereign over all things we know that You understand all things. So I’m submitting myself to You.” And the only way to do that is to have a heart of submission, a heart that says, “I realign my life with You, rather than to understand You to bring my heart into compliance.”

Jordan: Yes, but you have to know who God is to know what you’re bringing your heart into compliance with.

Bob: You can’t possibly know who God is outside of God.

Jordan: No, but He’s revealed what He has revealed about Himself to us in Scripture.

Bob: Correct. So then, what stops us from understanding and declaring every day that this is what God is doing, if we’re focusing on that perspective?

Jordan: What stops us from doing that?

Bob: Yes.

Ted: I’ve always thought of it as the persistence of the flesh, which to me is a mystery. I mean, that’s the greatest mystery to me ultimately in the Christian life; it’s the persistence of the flesh. Jeff has talked about it as a stinking dead man. Isn’t that what he used to refer to it as? I don’t find the flesh (to be) a dead man; I find it very active. You know, I may be lost and going to hell because I struggle with that. And maybe you’ve got it knocked out; fine. But I think that the reason we persist in that is because of the persistence of the flesh. (*Unclear*)

Jordan: Well that’s a really good point, because—

Ted: I thought of it. (*Laughter*)

Jordan: When we were going through Romans there was a lot of debate on this, because Jeff was trying to tell us that what God reveals to us in Romans is that the flesh is dead. And we often feel like it’s very much alive, and we were debating. Why is it that we feel like it’s alive when Paul is telling us that man is dead?

Ted: Yeah.

Jordan: And I think that’s kind of where I’m trying to get to: knowing what is true versus what feels like it’s true. And we have to get our hearts aligned with the fact that God has told us that through Christ He has overcome that old man for us. He has

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overcome sin for us. Sin for us is as (if it were) dead. Now go and do. This is true; it has been revealed to us as true. We now need to understand that that’s true, and live our lives in a way that says, “Wait a second. I have been told by God that my flesh is dead.” So now that I have borne this temptation,—

Ted: But that’s not how we actually experience it. I’m saying that God is true, and I’m not denying that. But as we actually experience it, that’s not how we experience it.

Jordan: And I think this is my response. I guess this is really where my mind is. I had recently heard a sermon going through Habakkuk. And I had probably never spent more than two minutes in Habakkuk my entire life, had we not had a sermon—no, six sermons!—on Habakkuk.

Ted: I’ve meditated on three. *(Laughter)*

Jordan: But what we see in Habakkuk is that you see the struggle between what he’s experiencing and what he knows to be true about God. And what he’s experiencing in life is: Why are we—Israel, God’s people—not following God? And he goes to God and he says, “God, why aren’t You doing something here? We are chasing after other gods. We are not loving You. We should not be doing that. And we know You to be a God of love and justice. What are You doing about this?”

And he hears from God and God says, “I’m going to bring the Assyrians in to judge.”

Ted: Yeah.

Jordan: And then Habakkuk goes, “whoa, whoa, whoa, God! We know we are not good. But the Assyrians? *(Laughter)* When I experience this, this is not matching up to what I know has been true about You.”

And through Habakkuk we see this change where he starts to say, “What is it that I know to be true about God?” And ultimately he brings what he’s experiencing in line with that. But it starts with this. What do I know to be true about God?

This is what I’m saying. We have to know Scripture; we have to know doctrine. And if we don’t know that as our starting point, the rest of it is going to be off. And I guess that’s sort of why the emphasis has to be on what we know. But you have to be spending time in Scripture and doctrine to know what God reveals to us.

Bob: So I’m not denying what you’re saying about the need to spend time in the Scriptures; that’s absolutely true. Where it stops us is to say that we have to accumulate all the knowledge of the Scriptures before we make a decision. And that’s going to be an impossible task.

Jordan: Sure.

Bob: Because we will not in ourselves have the ability to accumulate all the knowledge that’s the sinful part of us that says, “I choose from the garden the fruit of the knowledge of all good and evil.” We can’t possibly know that. What that does is, it causes us to withdraw from God in the presumption that we have that knowledge, rather than drawing us to God who wants us to live in relationship with Him.

So it’s a careful mix. I understand the dilemma; it’s a careful mix. But what we also have to understand is that the voice of God the Holy Spirit is actively, actively speaking to us in the Scriptures and through the Scriptures and in prayer, because it’s a conversational relationship that allows us to put our minds into the place of where God is, and knowing who God is. And the Holy Spirit is the voice that speaks to us because it is God. And God is actively involved in our lives every day. And the more we die to

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ourselves in saying, “I need to know. God, would You show me? God, would You draw me to that place? I submit myself. I submit my mind to what You’re doing and how You are acting. Does that make sense?”

Jordan: Yes. I think I’m aligned with you. There needs to be a humble submission here.

Bob: Yes. That’s important. Those are good words: humble submission. Don?

Don Maurer: I have several questions. I guess I have to admit that one thing you said troubles me a little bit. You were talking about a pastor who was preaching and then he stopped.

Bob: Yes.

Don: “This isn’t what God wanted me to preach, and it’s not what God wants you to hear.” I can’t fathom that.

Bob: What I meant by that illustration is to say that the pastor worked to develop a sermon that by education or circumstance he perceived to be relevant. God stopped and said, “What’s relevant is what I want you to present at the moment.”

Don: But see, like Jordan I guess I’m used to expository preaching every week.

Bob: Yes.

Don: I’m not a big topical preaching fan. I think that when you preach a passage, the Bible is always relevant every week.

Bob: I’m with you; I’m 100% with you. So why does the Bible—relevant every week, preached every week from the pulpit—change how we make decisions?

Don: Well obviously it should. But—

Ted: And it does, but in a flawed way. And that’s why I said it’s the persistence of the flesh. If we didn’t have the persistence of the flesh we would do exactly as we are told to do.

Don: I can’t fathom somebody in the pulpit preaching expository and all of a sudden stopping. “Oh, wait a minute; this isn’t what God wants you to hear today.”

Bob: He didn’t say that until afterwards.

Ted: Don, it isn’t impossible. I’ve had this experience in preaching expositionally, verse by verse, word by word. God gives you some new understanding right out of the text.

Don: Okay.

Bob: I hope that happens.

Don: Yeah.

Ted: Otherwise you finish Saturday night and put it down and say that it’s all done. Well it’s not all done. It’s never all done.

Don: Very true.

Ted: Did you find that helpful, Don?

Don: Yes, I did. I guess I was thinking something else along the line.

Bob: Our reaction typically as Reformed people is to put such a heavy emphasis on foreknowledge, but not to live it out practically. And so we have a challenge to ourselves to say, “How do we live this out practically without all the preparation?” If God is the immanent God, if God is the eternal God, meaning that God is present this very second and at the next very second and at the next very second, and also the past few seconds—always ever-present; that’s the nature of eternity—and what we do is transform that in

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our linear way of thinking and movement into measured time sequences, which is a whole other topic altogether. We fail to comprehend God because we want to fit God into our measured meanings of life. And the challenge of discernment is to reverse that.

The challenge of discernment is to say, “How am I going to fit into the eternal movement of God, rather than to have God fit into my measured meaning of life?”

Don: You touched on this in the first lecture. Where does freedom come into the picture? A couple weeks ago, for example, you gave the example of should I go to Sheets this way, or should I go to Sheets the other way?

Bob: Yup.

Don: But do you really think—

Bob: You’re a Reformed guy, Don. Right?

Don: Yeah.

Bob: Define for me the nature of sin in life.

Don: Well, the nature of sin is disobedience to God, the transgression of the law. Now which of the Ten Commandments does it violate if I go to Sheets one way or the other way?

Brave Man: Adultery. *(Laughter)*

Bob: To covet, yes. *(Laughter)* If we truly reflect on our Reformation heritage, of the total nature of sin’s involvement overwhelming our lives, we are totally depraved.

Don: Right.

Bob: So what part of that decision isn’t totally depraved?

Don: Well, all the decisions I make in life are totally depraved; we’re sinners. We’re at the same time just and sinners.

Bob: So how is a decision redeemed?

Ted: It’s redeemed because the primary Actor is God. He is “*working in you both to will and to do His good pleasure.*”

Don: Amen.

Ted: It says, “*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling*” based on what? That He is at work in you both to will and to do His good pleasure. I mean, that’s my great hope. I’ve been made to sit in the heavenlies; that’s my great hope. “*Our life is hidden in God in Christ.*” That’s my great hope: not my performance or how consistent I am.

Bob: So if we remove God from that equation, what is left but our total depravity? So if we say, “Where is free will in that?”, if I’m a truly Reformed guy I have no free will, because my will has been influenced by the sin which so overwhelms me and so pervades my life. So every decision is either a sinful decision or a godly decision.

Don: Well as Christians, though, in a sense we get our free will back. We’re slaves of Christ and we’re free. I’m sure that somewhere out there God has a will of what I should eat for breakfast today or whatever. But He hasn’t revealed it to me in Scripture. And so I’m not sure where you’re going.

Bob: Scripture doesn’t tell us what we should eat for breakfast, right?

Don: No.

Bob: So what do we do with that decision?

Don: I want a concrete example of how this works out in life.

Jordan: Don, if I may add to that, I know I’m a big fan of the Westminster Standards.

David Miller: Not you! *(Laughter)*

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Jordan: I think they relate to what you’re saying. This is from the Shorter Catechism. *“What did God at first reveal to man for the rule of obedience?”* How has God revealed to us what we need to be obedient? And the answer basically says that it’s the moral law. And it says, *“Where is the moral law inscribed for us?”* It’s in the Ten commandments. *“What is the sum of the Ten Commandments?”* *“To love the LORD our God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.”* So I think—

Brave Man: Jordan, would you read the question again at the top line, the first line?

Jordan: *“What did God at first reveal to man for the rule of his obedience?”*

Brave Man: And the answer?

Jordan: *“The rule by which God first revealed to man for his obedience was the moral law.”*

John Gratner: So that’s incorrect.

Jordan: Okay.

John: Or it’s incomplete at the very least.

Jordan: Okay.

John: Because He revealed Himself. It was a relationship, which is what you are talking about. There’s a lot of confusion here. But how much of God do you need to know in order to know? That’s not then. It can’t be the question, because you can’t know the end of God ever, right?

Ted: Yeah.

John: But you can know Him because He revealed Himself to His creation. He called Adam and breathed into him the breath of life, and he knew Him.

Jordan: Okay.

John: Because truth isn’t a set of things; it’s a Person. And from all that we know about the Person, that set of things is derivative from the eternal reality of who Jesus is.

Jordan: But how does He reveal that to the rest of us?

John: The same way He did it to Adam; it’s through Himself.

Ted: And that would mean His word. But you know, as we’re talking I think a good analogy for this is my relationship with my wife, because Diana and I are very different personality types. We’ve been married for quite a few years now. And there is so much that I don’t know about Diana. But I know her; I have a relationship with her, and I know her in that way. But in another way I don’t know her at all. She has always mystified me, and there is always more that I learn about her. And actually in learning more about her what I mostly find is that it’s not so much knowing her as submitting to who she is. I mean, it took me thirty years to finally say, *“I’m not going to change this bulb.”* *(Laughter)* *“It’s not going to happen.”* So it was a matter of me having to just accept the way she does things and trying to be nice, and how she looks at things and trying to be nice. And I know Diana, I love her; she’s a great woman. But at the same time there is so much I don’t know and can’t figure out about her.

I mean, it may be the difference between surface knowledge and knowledge. I would like to know a heck of a lot more about her. We’ve got a cabinet inside right now. I’ve debated; she has notions about keeping that cabinet, and I can’t figure it out! *(Laughter)*

Bob: John?

John: Jesus said, *“Know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* And He said, *“I am the ... truth.”* He didn’t say, *“Know about Me”*; He said, *“Know Me.”* And there is

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plenty to know about Him. But again we are supposed to be like little children, and to trust our Father.

Jordan: If I could just follow up,--

John: Sure, of course.

Jordan: The question is, what did He reveal to us for our obedience, not how did He reveal Himself?

John: If we want to take a really strict Reformed position, you couldn't know any of the doctrine until He by His Spirit revealed Himself to you.

Jordan: Ultimately what I'm trying to get to with Don's question is that I think there's a difference between obedience and discernment. Don's question is, does it matter which way I go to Sheets?

John: Sure.

Jordan: And it's not a question of obedience. If you're stopping at a mistress's house along the way, well then yeah, there's a wrong way to go to Sheets. We're not talking about obedience, which is sin versus not sin. How do we know it's sin? It's revealed for us in the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments say, “Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul and mind; love your neighbor as yourself.” So if what you're doing is not transgressing that or failing to live up to the requirements of that, then I think it becomes a matter of discernment.

And discernment to my mind is just like good and less good choices. If one way to go to Sheets is six hours, and you have other commitments that you need to be doing, you may say that's a less wise choice; I shouldn't take that path. Or with that path I might miss some potholes on this other road. Now if you have a flat tire that might be a financial burden to you. I probably shouldn't go that way.

But in my mind—and I guess this is where I'm focused on your question—I think there's a difference between obedience and discernment. If it's a question of obedience, we don't have a choice; we have to obey. We have to follow what has been revealed to us in the Ten Commandments. And if it's not sin, then it's a matter of discernment.

Bob: I'm going to go a little deeper with a deeper challenge, and we're not going to have enough time to go into this. Yes?

Gary: I just wanted to say to Don that the pastor changing what his sermon is going to be doesn't mean he's going to go off and read from Mark Twain. He'll still preach from the Bible.

Bob: He's still preaching from the Word, still preaching from the focus of the Scriptures.

Gary: Yes, but perhaps he might go for a different subject.

Don: In the middle of a sermon?

Gary: Yeah.

Ted: It could happen.

Bob: It could happen. It does happen.

Gary: And what I think I hear you saying is that as far as knowing what God is doing here in this church, and what we should do about it and what part you should play is not necessarily written by Paul in the Bible, because it doesn't say, “In this church do this.” So God can speak to our hearts and influence our hearts more than He can explain a bunch of details about what's going on.

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Bob: The challenge for us is the struggle we have because of our sin nature, to convince ourselves that we have the ability to know and to decide, when in fact with the sinful nature we don't. And we have to humbly submit ourselves to God, who is the guiding voice in our lives, to lead us in the right pathways.

So when I decide to go to Sheets, does it matter which way to go? Why is that an important question? Because I in my sinful self want to dominate the nature of God's decisions.

Don: How is that sin though, Bob? I'm just not clear on that.

Bob: When you say “I'm more important than God,” isn't that a sin?

Don: How am I saying that?

Bob: Because I have the right to decide which way I go.

Don: God gives me that capacity.

Bob: So when you say that, you say, “Am I submitting my decision to God with the capacity He has given me to know which way is right?” So in the moral law the question I'll come back to—and we're way over time; I apologize—the summary of the Commandments says this: “You shall love the Lord with your mind and your heart and your spirit and your soul.” No, that's not what the commandment says. The commandment says to love the Lord with all your heart first. There is a definitive reason that we begin there.

Don: But Bob, none of us do that.

Bob: Yes, Don; that's exactly right! (*Laughter*) And that's what I've been saying. The reason we're challenged in life is that we don't do that. And the way we can fix that challenge in our lives is to begin there, and to know that the voice of God—the Spirit of God—moves our hearts first and changes our minds by His grace and mercy, revealing who He is first in our hearts.

Don: Okay.

Ted: This has been a very fruitful discussion, but we need to wrap up.

Bob: Yes, we do.

Ted: So would you politely dismiss us?

Bob: Yes, I will. Let me just pray and dismiss you guys; we need to do that.

Father, I know this topic is long and arduous and hard. And we challenge ourselves in that and we challenge each other in that. And because we do that it's like iron sharpening iron. So it penetrates deeply into the way we live for you. That's my desire, that's our desire. Father, would You take that with us today? We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.