

Discernment - Part 1

by Vance Havner

The sermon emphasizes the importance of discernment in the Church today, and the need for worshiping God in spirit and in truth.

Duration: 30:58

Scripture: Exodus 30:33, Amos 4:4-5, Amos 5:4, Matthew 7:21, Ephesians 2:19, Hebrews 10:25, James 1:21

Topics: "Discernment"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of discernment in the Church today. He emphasizes that spiritual truth may seem foolish to the natural man, but it can only be understood through the Spirit of God. The speaker also criticizes the practice of trying to manufacture spiritual experiences, stating that true worship and songs of praise come from a genuine place within the heart. He then introduces the topic of discerning the truth and highlights the confusion and uncertainty that many Christians face in discerning what is true and false in today's world.

Transcript

It has been announced already, beginning tonight, the Lord willing, we want to thank together for the rest of this conference on the subject of discernment. There are five verses, or really six, one about the word of God being a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. That applies to all the other five, so I sort of make it an auxiliary to all of them.

We will be thinking about discerning the truth, discerning the times, discerning the spirits, discerning the Lord's body, and discerning good and evil. Tonight, discerning the truth. In all these years, I have never seen so much bewilderment and confusion and uncertainty as plagues the Church today, even evangelical Christianity.

I have never seen so many preachers and Christians in general shaking their heads and wringing their hands and saying, I don't know what to think about this, and I can't make up my mind about that, and I can't decide what's true and what's false. We've developed a tolerance and a permissiveness and an acceptance and an acquiescence that was unthinkable only a few years ago. I like to read sometimes what one great preacher says about another, and this is what Joseph Parker said about Spurgeon.

The only colors Mr. Spurgeon knew were black and white. With Mr. Spurgeon you were either up or down, in or out, alive or dead. As for middle zones and graded lines and light compounded with shadow, in a

graceful exercise of give and take, he only looked on them as heveradopts and the implacable enemies of the metropolitan tabernacle.

Evidently, Mr. Spurgeon knew what he believed and knew where he stood. Today in this lay of the seeing age, when we're neither cold nor hot, we've been brainwashed into a pleasant middle-of-the-roadism, trying to be neither-nor in a world that's either-or. Middle-of-the-roaders, but the middle-of-the-road is a poor place to drive, poor place to walk, poor place to be any time.

Then we've had two wars that we neither won nor lost. That's strange for American history. Paul Harvey said we were afraid to win them and ashamed to lose them.

But Douglas MacArthur said there is no substitute for victory, and that still holds. There is no peaceful coexistence with Communism or the devil. It's like cancer.

If you don't get the cancer, the cancer will get you. And it seems to me, beloved, that we ought to know where we stand. We are not of the light or of darkness if we're Christians.

We have a Bible, we have the Holy Spirit, we have the testimony of the Church, we have the witness of history, we have our hope, sanctified common sense. And if with all that we don't know, who does? We lack a very rare ingredient in evangelical Christianity, discernment. There are several words that mean almost the same thing.

We say distinguish or differentiate or discriminate, but I think the best word is discernment. There's a lot of difference between guessing at a matter and presuming. When Paul started toward Rome on that ill-fated, if you want to use such a term, trip by sea, I read that the captain of the ship said everything would be lovely, but Paul said there would be a storm.

And they listened to the mariner instead of to the minister. They listened to the skipper instead of to the seer, and sailed away to shipwreck. And today we're listening to the skipper, the expert.

He ought to know. I'm sure some of the passengers on that boat must have said, well, what would a preacher know about navigation? That's the business of the captain of the ship. So away they went to a storm.

And we read that the moor apart, and your King James said, well, let's go. It says Paul proceeded and the rest of them presumed, and when the south wind blew softly, and that's the sort of wind that's blowing today pretty generally over the land in some ways, they sailed away to shipwreck. You see, the expert thought he knew and didn't.

That's the trouble with experts. Somebody said if you laid all of them in a row, you never would reach a conclusion. I believe that's a pretty fair description.

And these discussions on television, don't they just wear you down? These experts get together and have a symposium. That's where we pool our ignorance. And they decide what's the matter with this and what's the matter with that.

Had one the other day on alcoholism. Never said a word about alcohol. I may be a country preacher, but I have always thought that the real trouble with alcoholism was alcohol.

I think that's what caused it. But then I'm not an expert. Now, discernment is just about the scarcest commodity in the church today.

The first verse, the one we want to think about, is the familiar 1 Corinthians 2.14. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. Now, the natural man means the sons of Adam, what we have by our first birth. And no matter how high his intellectual capacities and moral qualities may be, he simply cannot comprehend spiritual truth.

You might as well try to describe a sunset to a blind man, play music for a deaf man, you might as well try to discuss nuclear physics with a wooden Indian in front of a cigar store, as to talk about the things of God your man never has been born again. He doesn't know what you're talking about. And the trouble with Nicodemus was that although he was a religious teacher, he was ignorant of the kingdom of God and impotent to enter it.

You just don't arrive at spiritual truth by the normal faculties. They have their place, to be sure. But if that's all you have, and if that's all a man preaches, what he has learned by his natural wit without the illumination of the Spirit of God, it's casting holy things to dogs and pearls before swine, as our Lord said.

A Ph.D. degree does not improve old Adam's apprehension of God. It may help later on as he studies about it. But if all he has is the Ph.D., then in his case that just means phenomenal dead.

You just don't have what it takes with that. And we have a lot of light today, but beloved, what this world needs is not light. We never had more light, nuclear and otherwise.

What we need is sight. All the light in the world won't do a blind man any good. We need sight.

And it's so difficult for us pompous Americans, so proud of learning, to believe that the commonest day laborer may apprehend divine truth while the literati utterly miss it. How many times have you heard some humble preacher with a limited library preach nuggets of truth and gospel gems, while some scholar misted them out? You don't have to belong to who's who to know what's what. Now, if this little preacher had the scholar's library and the scholar had the little preacher's discernment, they'd be in business.

Blessed is the preacher who has both, and some do, thank God. Discernment is just as important in hearing the truth as it is in preaching it. Somebody has said that the reason we don't have many great preachers today is we don't have many great listeners.

That's quite true. I used to think that with all this education, the modern congregation ought to be an easy crowd to preach to. It's never been more difficult to preach than today.

And after 63 years of it, I think I can offer a few observations. It's not easy to me. How we hear is as important as what we hear.

Some dear souls can listen for 25 years to the sound of preaching and to sound preaching. And then the next preacher will come along, a preacher, and they listen with equal satisfaction. As long as he makes some nice references to Jesus, they don't know the difference.

There is no discernment. There's a preparation for the sermon as well as the preparation of the sermon, wherefore they are part all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness and receive with meekness the

engrafted word which is able to save your soul. You see, there's a preparation for the sermon.

I wonder how many people heading for church over America ever make preparation to hear the sermon. They barely make it on time, getting ready to go to church otherwise. I wonder how many ever prepare their minds and their hearts for the message.

Everybody expects the preacher to be ready to preach. Who thinks of the congregation's preparation for the sermon? I realize today that we live such a fast life that we don't have time for a lot of things, but we certainly ought to take our time for that. Think how little discernment is exercised in congregational singing in general.

I've shuddered as I've watched some crowds of comfortable Americans on Sunday morning singing, Faith of our Father, with holy faith we will be true to thee to death, and they weren't even faithful enough to get back for the evening service. To the old rugged cross I'll ever be true, its shame and reproach gladly bear, and I shudder. Why, most of them wouldn't bear it any kind of way, let alone gladly.

Break down every idol, cast out every foe, wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. I find myself saying, Lord help us. Some of them have got a truckload of idols, and they're not about to give up any of them whatsoever.

If we honestly checked on what we sang, I think we'd choke up sometimes before we got to the chorus. I doubt whether we'd ever make it through the first verse. The Bible says, I will sing with the spirit and with the understanding also.

We are exhorted to make melody in our hearts unto the Lord. The trouble with a lot of singing today is to begin with, it's not melody. Some of the music that creeps into some of our churches today, I don't know what it is, it isn't music.

It may be an excuse for not being able to make music, but it isn't music. And it's not from the heart, and it's not unto the Lord. So it fails on all three counts.

Have you thought about the superficiality of our dedication? Sometimes I think we Southern Baptists have rededicated ourselves to that. We've gone down more church aisles and made God more promises and done less about it than any crowd doesn't think of sometimes. The old Adam Improvement Society, having begun in the spirit, we would perfect ourselves in the flesh.

And people who have never died to sin or risen to walk in newness of life march down aisles and promise God things they don't really intend to do. They that are in the flesh cannot please God. That ought to be placarded in every church.

You can't do it. I read that not many wise, mighty, and noble were called. Why? That no flesh should glory in his presence.

That was God's purpose. There are four kinds of people in the New Testament that are not going to heaven in big numbers. Not many rich people are going to make it.

That's not because God has anything against rich people, but it's pretty hard for a rich person to become poor in spirit. Now, there are some, thank God, but not many. Jesus said that.

How hardly shall they that be rich enter into kingdom. And then Paul added three more to the catalog, wise, mighty, and noble. Wise, they are the intellectuals.

They are trying to get to heaven head first, and you don't get there that way, you get there heart first. The thing I know of that's got its head and heart in the same place is cabbage, and you're no cabbage. That's not the way you get.

And then the mighty. How many Presidents of the United States can you think of that you believe were born again spirit-filled New Testament Christians? Sort of discouraging, isn't it? We've had a few. The surgeon, the doctor who attended William McKinley after his assassination, said, I always said that a man couldn't be a Christian and a politician until now.

Mr. McKinley died as a Christian, and with a Christian spirit and attitude. And we've had others, but not many mighty, not many noble. They're the aristocrats, proud of their ancestry.

The trouble with this ancestry business is, it's a lot like potatoes, the best part is usually under the ground. You don't get there that way. So God just doesn't accept old Adam.

I don't care if he dedicates himself a thousand times. We are dead, and our lives are hidden with Christ in God. Put on the new man, that's what baptism signifies.

Neither the natural nor the carnal man can glorify God, only the spiritual man. You remember Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. Bones, body, breath.

That'll make a good outline for a sermon, three points, you don't even have to have a poem. Bones, body, breath. Now, a church may have the bones of orthodoxy and be sound theologically, and every joint may be in place in the organization.

But that's not enough. It may have body, may have a big membership, to all appearances strong and successful. So was Sardis.

Sardis had a name to be a live church. A mortician can make a dead man look better than he ever looked while he was living, and church experts can do that too. And if you have the bones and you have the body and you don't have the breath, if the Spirit of God doesn't blow through that church, it's dead.

That was the trouble of Sardis. God must have been ashocked to that congregation when they read that letter on that Sunday morning, Thou hast the name that thou livest. And they're dead.

That's the diagnosis of our own. In Exodus 30, verses 32 and 33, we're told about the anointing oil that was poured on the priest. And there were three restrictions.

It could not be poured on man's flesh. You cannot anoint old Adam for the service of God. There must be no imitation.

You cannot compound it in the apothecaries of this world. And it must not be poured on a stranger who did not belong to the priesthood, and today to the priesthood of believers. No wonder we have so many dry meetings, because we have so many who don't belong to the priesthood.

Oh, last night when you sang my song, I'm so glad I'm part of the family of God. I preach on that sometimes, all this and heaven too. But I think one trouble today is we've got a lot of people in the Church

who are not members of the family of God, and they don't understand what I'm talking about this morning.

And no wonder today the meeting is dry, and no wonder if there are enough of them, they produce a dry meeting. I heard of a preacher who met one of his delinquent members downtown and said, Well, I haven't seen you in church in quite a while. Well, he said, You know how it's been.

The children have been sick, and then it's rained and rained and rained. The preacher said, Well, it's always dry at church. He said, That's another reason why I haven't been coming.

No wonder the meeting starts at 11 o'clock sharp and ends at 12 o'clock dull. Anybody in here, how many of you folks have ever heard of Billy Sunday? I know we haven't got many survivors anymore. If you heard him describe the average midweek, weekly, W-E-A-K-L-Y, weekly prayer meeting, that was worth going to the tabernacle.

Here, he said, you get there 15 minutes late to start praying. Nobody to play the piano. Finally, some dear sister of Theo's moved upon to play the piano.

Then they get up and sing, Throw Out the Lifeline. They haven't got strength enough to put up a clothesline. Then the leader gets up and says, Prince, I'm sorry, but I didn't have time to prepare anything.

He said, You didn't need to say that. You could have told you hadn't prepared anything. Then they stand and sing, Day is Dying in the West.

He said, That's not the only thing dying, is it? I think I've been in a few like that. Then, in order to offset that, they go too far the other way. I like the singing we had here last night.

I'll tell you, there was exuberance in it. The next issue in joy. But sometimes, and I'm in a different church nearly every week, and I get in some situations where they try to produce, they try to work up, get a song out that isn't there.

You know what's down in the well will come up in the bucket. And if you haven't got a song down there, it's not coming up. I was in New England somewhere, and the dear brother who was trying to get them to sing, he was a whirling dervish, believe me.

He said, Now we're going to sing of power in the blood, four times power, four times this verse, next time six times. We got around to six times, you know, power, power, power, power, power, power. You'd have thought you were listening to gun smoke.

That's not the way you do it. Clovis Chappell went to one of those meetings, that grand old Methodist preacher, and he had a sly humor. He said the young fellow tried to work up the spirit.

He said, Shake hands with five people down this way, shake hands with five people down this way, and all the rest of it. Clovis Chappell said, You might as well try to boil water over the picture of a glowworm. It's not done that way.

People with discernment realize that only by the Spirit of God can we sing songs that are acceptable to him and edifying to anybody else. Paul says that spiritual truth is foolishness to the natural man, moronic to the old Adam, for he has no discernment along that line. He may be able to discern good poetry and chemical solutions and answers to problems in big business or how to locate bugs in engineering, but such abilities of no value in comprehending the things of God.

Suffering from an awful ignorance of divine truth today because too many don't have the discernment. Consider the shallowness of our worship. Now, I know that the emphasis I'm changing this morning because tonight, and I assume we have more people, there are some things I want to say about evangelism that I think would be more suitable.

But you are aware, I'm sure, of the shallowness of our worship. There are three kinds of worship. There is I-D-O-L, idol worship.

A man from Africa who comes over here will find more idols here than he ever found over in Africa. And then there is I-D-L-E, idol worship. In vain do they worship me, my Lord said.

And you've sung it. I was brought up on that old song, Brethren, we have met to worship and adore the Lord our God. Won't you pray with all your power while we try to preach the word? All is vain to speak of the Holy One come down.

Now, three things. Isaiah 1, he ridiculed the worship of his time. Honestly, a full church on Sunday morning doesn't always exhilarate me.

Sometimes it worries me, because I'm reminded that in Isaiah 1 he spoke to a crowd that would be comparable to Sunday morning Saints these days, and they were proud of their religion and what a scathing message it was from God himself. And then old Amos went up to Bethel, that country preacher from Tekoa. Come to Bethel and transgress, that Gilgal multiply transgression.

Bring your tithes, you better not say that now, and your offerings. He's making fun of the whole business for this reason. The rest of that chapter, every verse and letter, ends, Yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord.

Yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. That's the peril of ideal worship. But there's another kind, the ideal worship.

What's that? In spirit and in truth. If you don't have that, all you hear is vocal sounds emanating from the pulpit. But if we don't have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying, we don't have the right equipment.

You might as well try to catch sunbeams with a fishhook, as to try to lay hold of the truth of God with the faculties of the old Adam. You can't be born again except by the Holy Spirit. You can't confess Jesus as Lord but by the Holy Spirit.

You cannot understand the Bible but by the Holy Spirit. You cannot worship God but by the Holy Spirit. You cannot serve him but by the Holy Spirit.

It's not a do-it-yourself religion. And never forget that it is still foolishness, and the word there is the word from which we get moron. If the preaching of the gospel is moronic to this world, if it's foolishness to this world, one grand old Saint has said, then of necessity the preachers of the gospel are to the world fools.

That's logic. If you're preaching something that's foolishness to the world, that sort of makes you a fool in the eyes of the world. But we are fools for Christ's sake.

The notions going around today that we must make the gospel acceptable to the wisdom of this age were plainly told that this world regards the gospel as nonsense. When Billy Graham preached at Princeton some years ago, Princeton University, it was complained that he did not sufficiently relate the ambiguities

of the New Testament to the complexities of modern life. That sounds really intelligent, doesn't it? And young Peter Marshall, the son of the famous Washington preacher, himself a minister, said, Well, that could have been said about Peter and James and John.

What do these ex-fishermen know about the problems of the Roman Empire? What do they know about Greek philosophy? Paul was educated, but he counted everything but refuse to know Christ. He thought out his message in Arabia, and that's where you get Romans. Natural man can't receive it.

He never went back to Athens. He made one trip to Athens, and they said, Well, we'll hear what the seed picker has to say next time. But there wasn't any next time.

He didn't have any time to waste on that. He went back to Lystra, where they had dragged him out of town dead. You couldn't keep him out of a place like that, but he had no time to waste on Athens and that sort of a reception.

They tell us today that we must use the new language of the times. We must brush up on all this. It used to be a problem, and now it's a hang-up.

It used to be a blessing, and now it's a meaningful experience, whatever that is. We must be relevant and communicate and dialogue with the now. And then we must get down to the nitty-gritty.

I've often wondered, What is the nitty-gritty that we're all supposed to get down to? I don't worry about it. They used to call it itch, and now they call it allergy, but you scratch just the same. I don't intend worrying about that.

Isaac Watts wrote some wonderful hymns, and they're saying now that the young people cannot comprehend the idiom of Isaac Watts, that we've got to get some new songs out in the language that they can understand. I think that's an insult to the intelligence of this young generation, to say nothing of if the Holy Spirit guides them. I have a better response today at 75 from young people than I've ever had in my life.

All this talk about a communications gap and a generation gap, that's a lot of eyewash. If they think you're not a phony and mean it and down to business, you'll get a reception, and generally you'll get a response. These kids today are perfectly capable of comprehending majestic sweetness sits enthroned upon the Savior's brow and all the rest.

No mortal can with him compare among the sons of men. They know what that means. If they don't, we ought to tell them.

If we know, you don't have to change the idiom. They're not changing the idiom in Shakespeare, and the kids are studying Shakespeare, and they don't change the language of the medical profession, and medical students have to learn that, and that's a load, believe me. And the legal language that the young lawyers are studying, that's pretty rough.

They're not getting it down to a new idiom for the young law students and the young medical students. I thank God that it is profound, and we'll spend all eternity understanding some of it, but we can get enough of it without dragging it through the dust of the vernacular of this age to make it acceptable in such a time. So, beloved, we must remember that God has his own way of illuminating our minds and clearing us up, and it's through the foolishness of preaching and through the Spirit-led study of the word of God.

I rode along that lovely highway, as many of you no doubt have done, along by the Aegean line with its oleanders and its vineyards and orchards on the way from Athens to Corinth. I don't know how Paul made that trip, but to him it was a lot more than a journey between two points on a map. When he got to Corinth, he was sold out on one conviction.

He was committed to one message, Jesus Christ and him crucified. The foolishness! Some preachers have never made that trip. It's through the foolishness of preaching and through the Spirit-led study of the word of God.

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He was committed to one message, Jesus Christ and him crucified. The foolishness! Some preachers have never made that trip. They're trying to please the intellectuals in Athens, blowing a fuse, trying to be highbrow, dressing up the foolishness of God and the wisdom of man, trying to fortify the weakness of God with the power of man and modernize religion and give Jesus a new look.

I grew up in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, old Corinth church. My father wasn't an educated man. He loved the things of God.

Our home was always the staying place for the preachers. We only had one Sunday preaching a month, one sermon. Some of them were long enough to last a month, but we only had one sermon a month there at old Corinth.

The preacher always stayed at our house. Those plain men of the horse-and-buggy days weren't intellectuals, but they knew God and they knew their Bibles. My father would keep a preacher up till midnight.

I tell you, that preacher earned his bed and board every time he stayed in Africa. My father would pump him for all the Bible information he could get. I've heard some pretty smart ones, and thank God I've heard some great ones, who do combine intellect with great dedication.

But I have listened to some that made me long to go back for a change. In certain old Corinth churches there are some of those old expounders of the Word who loved it more than their necessary need.

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