

# The Secret of Discernment

by Zac Poonen

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*Zac Poonen explores the nature of discernment through the example of the thief on the cross, emphasizing that true discernment comes from a sincere heart and is evidenced by peace rather than agitation.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 27:41

**Topics:** "Discerning Truth", "Spiritual Wisdom"

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## Description

Zac Poonen delves into the story of the thief on the cross, highlighting how despite the religious rulers, soldiers, and even the other criminal mocking Jesus, the thief recognized His innocence and divinity. The thief's discernment came not from intelligence or Bible knowledge, but from a sincere heart given discernment by God. By observing Jesus' forgiving spirit amidst accusations and hatred, the thief was able to discern the truth and reject falsehood, teaching us a valuable lesson in exercising discernment in our own lives and within the church.

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## Transcript

"The religious rulers were sneering at Jesus.....The soldiers also mocked Him.....One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him.....But the other rebuking him said, `This man has done nothing wrong" (Lk.22:35-41). It is indeed amazing that while the elderly Bible-scholars in Israel, and the shrewd, educated Roman soldiers could not discern Who Jesus was, a thief-cum-murderer who knew nothing of the Bible could do so in his last moments on earth. Why was this so? Discernment does not come through intelligence, Bible-knowledge or experience. It is given by God to those who are sincere of heart. The thief on the cross teaches us how we can have discernment. The entire range of bishops, priests and Bible-scholars in Israel were there at the foot of the cross that day accusing Jesus of one thing and another (Mt.27:41). Many of the chief citizens of the nation also, who were passing by, were abusing Jesus mercilessly and accusing Him of saying that He would destroy the temple (a false accusation, since Jesus never ever made such a statement) (Matt.27:39). Both the thieves were so convinced by these accusations, that they too joined in the tirade against Jesus (Matt.27:44). But all of a sudden, one of them stopped, and said concerning Jesus, "This man has not committed a single sin" (Lk.23:41).

How did he know that? How did he discern that Jesus was the Messiah that He claimed to be? How did he reject all the accusations of the people as false - at a time when no-one took up for Jesus? After all, "there cannot be smoke without a fire". Going by the worldly wisdom of that proverb, the thief could have thought that there must be some grounds, however small, in Jesus, for all these hundreds of people to accuse

Him. Yet the thief said that Jesus did NOTHING wrong!! How did the thief become so spiritually-minded as to reject "what his ears heard" (Isa.11:3)? Because he heard Jesus saying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Lk.23:34). On one hand, the thief saw the unrest, the agitation, the bitterness and the hatred of those Bible-scholars. On the other hand, he saw the forgiving spirit, the total absence of a complaining spirit and of any self-justification, and the rest that there was in Jesus. Thus he discerned who was right and who was wrong.

In the church too, this is how we are to exercise discernment. When two brothers or sisters have a controversy, if you use this thief's yardstick, you will soon be able to discover who is right and who is wrong. "The wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up refuse and mud. 'There is no peace', says my God, 'for the wicked'" (Isa.57:20,21). Those who are wrong in God's eyes are doomed to a life of constant agitation and unrest, in which they will keep on tossing up rubbish and mud from their mouths (gossip, accusations, complaints and abuses) against godly brothers and sisters. When you meet such a brother or sister, you can, without any hesitation, categorise him/her as a wicked person, for that is what God calls him/her (in Isa.57:20,21). There is no need for further evidence or even to look into the facts of the case. The unrest and agitation in that person are the clearest evidence of all. In worldly court-cases, the judges sometimes take many years to sift through all the evidence, before arriving at a judgment. And even then they could be wrong. If we have to adopt this method for disputes in the church, then we will have to spend all our life just listening to one side and the other before arriving at a conclusion. And we could still be wrong! But God has given us a better way: Just check as to who is at rest and who is in unrest. Check as to who refuses to justify himself and who is full of complaints. And you will have the answer straightaway, as to who is righteous and who is not. The thief on the cross has shown us the secret of discernment.

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