

7 Keys for Developing Spiritual Discernment

by David Treybig

The world is awash in religious information but floundering when it comes to developing spiritual discernment. How can you sort through the confusion?



Developing spiritual discernment is vitally important. Consider one man's experience:

The young accountant was facing a difficult decision that could greatly affect his life and possibly even his career. The stakes were high.

He and his wife had just learned that the Sabbath was on Saturday instead of Sunday, and switching to a different day of worship had major implications for their future. Having gone to church on Sunday all their lives, they wondered how this could be.

There was also an economic factor. He learned that the Sabbath was to be a day of rest, but he had a job that required him to work half a day on Saturdays. As a young married man with two small boys to raise, he knew his job was very important to his family's survival.

As he considered what he would do, he carefully studied the scriptures that showed the Sabbath was on the seventh day. They made sense.

Then he went to the pastor of the church he was attending and asked why that denomination worshipped on Sundays. The pastor gave a standard answer—Sunday was chosen to honor the resurrection of Christ. Not knowing that Jesus actually rose on another day, this explanation also made sense to the young professional.

That accountant was my father, and he was stymied. Both explanations seemed logical to him at the time.

Need for developing spiritual discernment

The challenge my dad faced called for spiritual discernment—the ability to clearly see what God desired. This ability is a critical need for all who wish to worship God “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24).

John 4:23. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father is indeed seeking those who worship Him in this manner.

24. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth.”

In our world today, there is no lack of seemingly logical explanations for a wide variety of religious beliefs—some diametrically opposed to each other! So how can we acquire the spiritual discernment needed to determine how to worship God as He commands?

Let's look at seven keys for developing spiritual discernment.

What is spiritual discernment?

Why is important to have discernment?

Key # 1: Recognize that there are spiritual absolutes

This is foundational for developing spiritual discernment. Absolutes are required in math, science, construction, logic, reasoning, and in almost every walk of life. But when it comes to God's laws and morality, many people want to decide for themselves what is right and wrong. They refuse to acknowledge that God has authority over our lives and that He gives us specific instructions that we are to *always* follow, regardless of the circumstances.

The truth is, with God there are also absolutes. The Bible clearly reveals what God expects His followers to do. Disobeying what God says to do is sin. Discernment means identifying opposites or contrasts such as clean/unclean, good/evil, right/wrong and obedience/disobedience.

Having spiritual discernment requires us to make judgments. It is no surprise that people who don't acknowledge God's authority to set standards of conduct hate being judged. They don't like anyone saying, or even quietly believing, that their conduct is wrong.

This sentiment was present in the men of Sodom as they accused Lot of "acting as a judge" when he tried to dissuade them of their ungodly intentions toward his visitors (Genesis 19:9).

9. And they said, "Stand back!" And they said, "This one came in to sojourn, and *must* he now play the judge? Now we will deal worse with you than with them." And they pressed hard upon the man Lot, and came near to breaking *down* the door.

People today who reject God's laws similarly accuse people of judging them if their ungodly deeds are not accepted and celebrated.

In today's environment that is hostile toward God's good and beneficial laws, many people cite Christ's statement: "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matthew 7:1). People who reject most of the Bible's teachings sometimes cite this verse. And sometimes even people claiming to be Christians misunderstand what Christ was saying.

A careful reading of Matthew 7:1-3 reveals that Jesus was teaching His followers not to judge in a hypocritical manner. The principle He was teaching was that we need to first resolve our own faults before we try to help our brother resolve his. If we weren't to judge at all, we couldn't help our brother.

1. "Do not condemn *others*, so that you yourself will not be condemned;
2. For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged; and with what measure you mete out, it shall be measured again to you.
3. Now why do you look at the sliver that *is* in your brother's eye, but you do not perceive the beam in your *own* eye?

On another occasion, Jesus said it more clearly: "*Judge* with righteous judgment" (John 7:24, emphasis added throughout).

24. Judge not according to appearance, but judge righteous judgment."

What are some of God's absolutes found in the Bible? List 10 of them below.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Are there other absolutes in the Bible?	Y	N

What does it mean to not judge in a hypocritical manner?

What is “judging with righteous judgement”?

Key #2: Ask God for help

Realizing that we don't inherently know all that we need to know is another fundamental principle for developing spiritual discernment. Today's popular mantras to simply follow your heart or to look inside yourself for answers to life's questions are not biblically correct.

Realizing that we don't inherently know all that we need to know is another fundamental principle for developing spiritual discernment. Early in his reign King Solomon said: "Now O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little

child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ... Therefore *give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge* Your people, that I may *discern* between good and evil” (1 Kings 3:7, 9).

His words “pleased the LORD,” and God gave Solomon what he had requested (verses 10, 12). When Solomon recorded some of the wisdom God had given him, he twice in the book of Proverbs noted that “there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25).

Echoing our need for help, Jeremiah told God: “O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps” (Jeremiah 10:23). Later, the prophet added: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9). And the psalmist requested of God: “*Teach me good judgment* and knowledge, for I believe Your commandments” (Psalm 119:66). We can do the same. We can ask God for spiritual discernment and know that Jesus promised, “Whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Matthew 21:22).

Were we born knowing all that we need to know about God, His plan, & how to live?

Y

N

Where should we look for truth & understanding?

☐ inside ourselves

☐ in our hearts

☐ our friends

☐ God’s Word

The Bible says we can ask God for good judgement & discernment.

Y

N

Rewrite a scripture that shows we do not have understanding, wisdom, & discernment on our own.

Key #3: Hate what God hates; love what God loves

At creation, mankind was made in God’s image, and God’s desire is for us to eventually become like Him as members of His eternal family. Paul explained that God has called us to be “conformed to the image of His Son,” and that the end result of this process is that our bodies will be “conformed to His glorious body” (Romans 8:29; Philippians 3:21).

Romans 8:29. Because those whom He did foreknow, He also predestinated *to be* conformed to the image of His own Son, that He might be *the* firstborn among many brethren.

Philippians 3:21. Who will transform our vile bodies, that they may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the inner working of His own power, *whereby He is able* to subdue all things to Himself.

With this concept in mind, Paul admonished the Corinthians: “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Imitating God is how we become more like God, and the more we are like God, the better our spiritual discernment becomes. As we grow in discernment, our values, our thinking and our judgment become more and more like God’s. So what should we imitate about God?

A good place to start is by hating what God hates and loving what God loves. Please note that God loves people and wants everyone to be in His family, but He also hates sin because of the toll it takes upon humans (John 3:16-17; 2 Peter 3:9; Romans 6:23).

John 3:16. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes (see explanation) in Him may not perish, but may have everlasting life.

17. For God sent not His Son into the world that He might judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

2 Peter 3: 9. The Lord is not delaying the promise *of His coming*, as some in their own minds reckon delay; rather, He is longsuffering toward us, not desiring that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

So what does the Bible reveal regarding things God hates? The list is quite extensive, but here are a few types of conduct that God loathes—some of which He even describes as abominations: **false worship** (Deuteronomy 12:31; 16:22), **divorce** (Malachi 2:16), **humans eating unclean meats** (Leviticus 11:11), **cross dressing** (Deuteronomy 22:5), **businessmen cheating others** (Proverbs 11:1), **lying** (Proverbs 12:22), and **the way of the wicked** (Proverbs 15:9).

For seven more things God hates, see Proverbs 6:16-19.

16. These six *things* the LORD hates; yea, seven *are* an abomination unto Him:
17. **A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,**
18. **A heart that plots wicked imaginations, feet that are swift in running to evil,**
19. **A false witness *who* speaks lies, and he who sows discord among brethren.**

Capping off this point, Psalm 97:10 says, “You who love the LORD, *hate evil!*”

And what does God love?

He loves a **cheerful giver** (2 Corinthians 9:7). He appreciates our **heartfelt prayers** (Revelation 5:8). He is pleased to see us **do good** and **share with others** (Hebrews 13:16), and He will take pleasure in **inviting the saints into His Kingdom** (Luke 12:32).

Amos the prophet summarized this key as he succinctly admonished the people of his day: “Hate evil, love good” (Amos 5:15). This advice is also valid today.

God wants us to conform to _____.

We need to _____ what He hates & _____ what He loves.

How can we find out what God hates & loves?

List 8 things God hates:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

List 8 things God loves:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Key #4: Seek counsel

Seeking advice from people who have knowledge and experience is another key that can help us make sound judgments. Wise King Solomon emphasized this point in several of his proverbs. “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14).

“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel is wise” (Proverbs 12:15).
“Without counsel, plans go awry, but in the multitude of counselors they are established”
(Proverbs 15:22).

Even though Solomon was granted so much wisdom and knowledge by God that rulers of other nations came to hear him (1 Kings 4:34; 10:4), he still recognized the value of seeking counsel from others.

When we seek counsel, we should do so from people who have the knowledge, experience and wisdom to properly advise us. Just talking with our friends—who may not have the necessary expertise to provide sound counsel—is unlikely to always provide wise answers and good results.

What is counsel?

What does God say about the value of godly counsel?

From whom should we seek counsel?

Why is it important to seek counsel from the right people?

Key #5: Practice making good judgments

When athletes want to become good at their sport, they practice, using the best techniques. And in most cases, they practice *a lot!* Generally speaking, the more they practice, the better they become. Perfect practice makes perfect.

This point likewise applies if we want to develop spiritual discernment. We can’t just read about or think about discernment. We have to actually do it!

The author of the book of Hebrews illustrates this point: “But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their *senses exercised to discern both good and evil*” (Hebrews 5:14, emphasis added throughout).

Understanding head-based and heart-based decision-making styles

Researchers have found that when making judgments, most humans have an innate preference for making either head-based or heart-based decisions.

People who generally make head-based decisions are often described as logical, rational, detail-oriented and objective.

People who more often make heart-based decisions are thought of as emotional, passionate, empathetic and feeling-oriented.

Both preferences have strengths and weaknesses. Head-based decision making is often strong in terms of following rules, but can unnecessarily hurt people’s feelings. Heart-based decision making generally relates well to people, but can overlook important rules or principles.

The best decisions are usually made using a combination of both types of judgment. This kind of judgment respects both truth and love.

We should never compromise God’s truth out of an attempt to show love to others. And we should never use truth to unnecessarily hurt others. Reflecting this point, Paul admonishes us to speak “the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15).

Making good judgements is something that should be _____ daily so that get better at it.

How do you typically make decisions – with your heart or head?

Heart

Head

List benefits & cautions to your primary way of decision-making.

Benefits –

Cautions -

The best way to make decisions is with both the head & heart. Y N

We should never _____ God's truth out of an attempt to show _____ to others.

Eph. 4:25 says: _____

Key #6: Choose your friends carefully

The people we spend time with tend to influence our thinking and, subsequently, our actions. While we can't control who we will meet in public or who we will work with in our jobs, we can decide who we will be with during our free time.

Addressing this concept, Solomon wrote: "The righteous should *choose his friends carefully*, for the way of the wicked leads them astray" (Proverbs 12:26).

In the first century, Paul reiterated this timeless principle: "Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits'" (1 Corinthians 15:33). He also wrote that we should "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness" (Ephesians 5:11).

Expounding this point, Paul taught, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14).

On the positive side, when we fellowship with people who share our religious values, it encourages us to remain faithful to God. When we are together, we have the opportunity to "stir up love and good works" (Hebrews 10:24).

This is why fellowship with believers was such an important principle during the founding of the Church of God (Acts 2:42) and why it continues to be important for us to practice today.

42. And they steadfastly continued in the teachings of the apostles and in fellowship, and in the breaking of bread and in prayers.

When we fellowship with believers, we grow in our love and respect for each other and God. As John explained, "That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have *fellowship with us*; and truly *our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ*" (1 John 1:3).

Why is choosing our friends wisely so important?

What 3 guidelines God gives us in His Word about choosing friends?

1.

2.

3.

If we go against God's advice on choosing friends, what could happen?

What is the most difficult part for you in following God's ways in choosing friends?

Key #7: Learn from your mistakes

The cold, hard truth is that all of us have made mistakes and will make mistakes. This is repeated multiple times in the Bible.

In his dedication prayer for the temple Solomon noted, "There is no one who does not sin" (1 Kings 8:46; 2 Chronicles 6:36). In the book of Ecclesiastes, he similarly said: "For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin" (Ecclesiastes 7:20). Later, Paul explained, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

The question is not whether we will sin. That is a given. What is important is what we will do after we sin.

God's desire is for us to repent of our ungodly acts and to return to living as He commands. Commenting on the tenacity we need to have in the face of mistakes, Solomon noted: "For a

righteous man may fall seven times and rise again, but the wicked shall fall by calamity” (Proverbs 24:16).

The point is, we need to keep getting back up whenever we fall. And we need to learn from our mistakes so we don’t fall again or at least not as often.

We all sin and will continue to sin.	Y	N
Since we all sin anyway, we won’t be accountable for it.	Y	N
We need to come to God in repentance & learn from our sin.	Y	N
“Practicing sin” means we commit these same sins consistently even when we are aware that we are sinning.	Y	N
Those who “practice sin” will not inherit God’s Kingdom.	Y	N

Spiritual discernment grows and confusion disappears

At the beginning of this article, I explained how my dad had to make a judgment regarding the day on which he would worship God. Initially, the case for worshipping on the seventh day as the Bible teaches and the case for worshipping on Sunday in honor of Christ’s resurrection both seemed to make sense to him.

But as he grew in spiritual discernment, the confusion disappeared. He and my mom came to understand that the Bible doesn’t say that Jesus rose from the grave on Sunday and that the switch from Saturday to Sunday as a day of worship was not sanctioned in the Bible.

Now armed with greater biblical understanding and spiritual discernment, they began worshipping on the day God blessed and sanctioned for this purpose. (By the way, shortly after Dad asked his boss if he could have Saturdays off, the whole company stopped working on Saturdays and everyone had Saturdays and Sundays off. My family considers this a blessing from God.)

In life you will face challenging moral and spiritual decisions. Use these seven keys so you can “abound still more and more in knowledge and all *discernment*” (Philippians 1:9).

Study more about this in our online articles “*The Power of Discernment*” and “*The Importance of Wisdom and How to Become Wiser.*”

What will happen as you grow in discernment?

What Things Must Christians Judge?

Contrary to the mistaken idea that Christians should never judge (often wrongly attributed to Matthew 7:1), people who serve God are told to judge many things. Here are a few issues and areas of life that require us to make judgments.

- Doctrine: Is it sound or flawed (1 Timothy 4:1, 16; 2 Timothy 4:3-4)?

1 Timothy 4:1. Now the Spirit tells *us* explicitly that in *the* latter times some shall apostatize from the faith, *and* shall follow deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons;
16. Be diligent with yourself and with the doctrines; continue in them. For in doing this, you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

2 Timothy 4: 3. For there shall come a time when they will not tolerate sound doctrine; but according to their own lusts they shall accumulate to themselves a *great number of* teachers, having ears itching *to hear what satisfies their cravings*;

4. And they shall turn away their own ears from the truth; and they shall be turned aside unto myths.

- Religious teachers: Do they teach truth or error (Matthew 7:15; Acts 20:29-31; Colossians 2:8; Revelation 2:2)?
- Morals: Do we accept and live by godly standards or those of the world (1 Thessalonians 4:1-7; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10)?
- Friends: Do we choose them wisely (Proverbs 12:26; 22:24-25)?
- Culture: Do we strive to live godly lives or to be accepted by the world (1 John 2:15; Revelation 18:4)?
- Ourselves (2 Corinthians 13:5).

5. Examine yourselves *to see* whether you are in the faith; prove your own selves. Don't you of your own selves know that Jesus Christ is in you? Otherwise, you are reprobates.

It is not our job to judge people in the sense of condemning them. The responsibility for that kind of judgment is given to Jesus Christ, and His judgments are completely fair and merciful (Psalm

96:13; Acts 17:31; John 5:22). But God does expect us to discern what is godly and what is ungodly so we can live in obedience to His good and beneficial laws (Deuteronomy 10:13).

List 6 things God *expects* us to judge:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Judging right from wrong & condemning others are the same thing.

Y N

God only is given the responsibility for judgement & condemnation.

Y N

God expects us to determine what is godly & ungodly so we can live in obedience to Him.

Y N

About the Author



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