

Dec.17, 2017. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24. It's time for *DISCERNMENT*.

Take a look [powerpoint]. You're seeing the invention of an 11-year-old from Highlands Ranch, CO. We'll come back to this in a moment.

God says in this portion of His Word to us: ***"Hold on to the good. Keep away from every kind of evil."*** What does it take to do that? [Put up] Discernment. [Put up definition]: "the ability to judge well." That's one brief definition.

Let's practice with a very *clear* example: Can you discern if this water is safe to drink, or not? Before you answer, consider: do you know the source, where it came from? Do you know if it is pure, or if someone – through intent or negligence – has contaminated it? You realize some contaminants are able to be detected by sight or by smell. Ask children: [Look test] You don't see anything bad in this water, do you? No. [sniff test] You don't smell anything wrong, do you? No. [take a drink - taste test] I don't taste anything strange. But do you or I have power with our senses to detect all contaminants?

In certain cases we need something beyond our own powers in order to act with discernment - to "judge" whether something is good or harmful.

As far as water goes, this reality hit the news a while back in Flint, MI. You recall this? Super high levels of lead were found in the city's water. This problem hasn't happened only there. How could something like that get past the senses of the people living in such areas? Lead is an invisible enemy. It doesn't affect the taste, the smell or the appearance of water in any way. It requires a test beyond our senses to know its presence.

This story captured the attention of the 11-year-old girl from Highlands Ranch, CO. And she eventually came up with this [pp]. Why was she moved to create her invention? Testing water in labs is accurate, but that requires expensive equipment. It's not accessible to everyone. And it takes time to get the results back. Test strips that can give immediate results are sometimes inaccurate. They also can't tell you the level of contamination. Gitanjali Rao explained how her invention addresses all those issues. "It uses a disposable cartridge that can cost as low as a dollar, it is fast, accurate and it [shares and] shows lead contamination levels on a regular smartphone, that are easy to interpret and take appropriate action."

Hopefully this little example is enough to capture our attention. Everyone agrees: discernment, the ability to judge, is an important skill? Any objections?

In a little fuller definition of what we're discussing... *Discernment is:*

- the ability to decide between truth and error, right and wrong. It is the process of making careful distinctions in our thinking about truth.

We see the importance of being discerning about what is true and right for our body's well-being. We should be *even more* concerned about discerning what's true and right when it comes to our soul's well-being. Yes? Of course. That's the truth God is making sure we see right here... ***"Test everything. Hold on to the good. Keep away from every kind of evil."***

This begs the question: what are you using as your tester – your tool to discern (to detect) between what is true and what is error? You realize that not just anything will do. In fact, only one thing will. Answering this question then is just as critical as seeing the importance for being discerning in the first place.

An article, recently published, drives that conclusion home. It was entitled: *The Googled mind* [Church & Culture - Vol. 13, No. 94]. It was raising something to be alert to: the internet giant Google is increasingly "presenting itself as the authority on truth by promoting a single search result as the answer" for users' questions. The "promoted answers" or "featured snippets" are outlined in boxes above other results. Have you seen this? Well, those are believed by many to be the definitive answer. Surveys show people "consider search engines their most-trusted source of information, over traditional media or social media." But the results are often wrong. Here, see for yourself:

- The featured answer to the question, “Why are Komodo dragons endangered?” listed volcanoes, fire and tourism. Now it’s not simply a matter of those causes listed being wrong. It’s that Komodo dragons aren’t endangered at all. For fun, make a guess in your mind at what the source was that google cited. Got your guess? It was an elementary school student’s report, which had been posted online.

How much harm could come from you falling for that faulty info? Not much, I suppose. Some embarrassment if you go citing the error, and get corrected.

But now, think how often answers and information touch / drift into the spiritual realm, making claims or inferring things of a spiritual nature. If wrong, think of the potential for harm now. Let me give you an example:

- To the question “Does money buy happiness?” Google recently featured the result stating: “There is enough scientific research to prove it.”

Just think how God – God’s truth – guards against too high a value placed on money: “Don’t love money. Be content with what you have. Many people eager for money have pierced themselves through with many griefs, even wandered from the faith and ended in an eternity of misery.” True and lasting happiness comes only through faith in Jesus, from having forgiveness and life which only those who are in Jesus enjoy.

Now I’m not saying google searches need to be banned. It’s simply a matter: it can’t be your ultimate authority on truth. Neither can social media posts or feedback. Peer input, the going consensus in society, or even what seems to make most sense – none of these can serve as your final authority on truth.

Instead of “the Googled mind,” may I suggest a description to go with our verses? “The Bibled mind.”

That’s really what God is telling us to have – the Bible as our authority for truth. Against it then, we test everything else to discern if the spiritual ideas or claims being offered are good and true, or if they are wrong and harmful.

And once a conclusion is discerned by this method, there is another urgent step: act on the findings! Think of the nonsense of not acting. You wouldn’t do that if a test just showed lead contamination in your drinking water. You’d act!

God tells us: **“Do not extinguish the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt. But test everything. Hold on to the good. Keep away from every kind of evil.”** - vs.19-22

How do we have faith in Jesus – how do we know this saving message and have a grip on God’s eternal truths? It’s through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has brought us to know through the Word. **“Do not extinguish the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt.”** “Prophecies” is another expression for all that is here in the Bible – given by the Holy Spirit. Another meaning for “treating with contempt” is: “to empty of authority.” Don’t empty God’s Word of its authority.

How does that happen? It happens if we turn a deaf ear to the teachings here. And that may occur not only as a conscious stand, like if you or I were to suddenly say: “Oh, I don’t want to listen to God’s Word anymore” or “I don’t want to listen to that part.” Emptying God’s Word of authority could also happen in a very practical sense, like a failure to search the word when discernment is needed. Think about that. Whether consciously or not, if practically speaking you or I swap out the very concrete practice of using the Bible as our tool for discerning what’s good and true, we by default easily slip into accepting answers and truths coming from the other sources in our world.

Here, chew on a quote that I came upon:

“Unfortunately, discernment is an area where most Christians stumble. ...they unwittingly engage in all kinds of unbiblical decision-making and behavior. In short, they are not armed to take a decidedly biblical stand against the onslaught of unbiblical thinking and attitudes that face them throughout their day.

“Discernment intersects the Christian life at every point.

“And God's Word provides us with the needed discernment about every issue of life.”

Examples make the case of how often – and how important it is – to use God’s Word for discerning issues which we encounter in life. Parents, take your children through examples like this – teach them how often they’ll need, and how to use, discernment that turns back to God’s Word.

- A glance through the young adult National Book Award Finalists of the past year reveals, just because something is judged award winning in our world, it doesn’t mean you want to pick it up and read it.
- A well-known journalist wrote about something that “... felt so sacred, so divine... something sacred, holy to me about what we were doing...” What do you think she was describing? Various encounters breaking the 6th commandment. Just because words such as “holy and divine” are used doesn’t mean it’s actually something good. Discernment is needed to pick out evil masquerading as good.
- Mention a couple living together before being married as “harmful for a relationship” – what reaction do you think you’ll get? Complete surprise that you’re calling this harmful. This isn’t merely hypothetical. When God’s truth seems so surprising to the world, because the popular opinions are different, discernment that goes to God’s Word helps to quell doubts about what is healthy.
- Several of you have shared the discernment needed to not join in unethical practices being encouraged in the work place.

And the examples could go on and on. “Discernment intersects the Christian life at every point.”

No matter how well you’ve faired at taking a stand against the unbiblical thinking and attitudes that we face each day – we all must admit the times we’ve failed.

- Live in repentance – asking God’s forgiveness each day.
- Live in the joy and peace of knowing that through faith, you are forgiven in Christ Jesus (vs.18). His perfect life counts as your own before God.
- Live then rejoicing – praying – giving thanks to God.

The good news of our God’s love and care for us leads us to trust– to have the attitude live and grow in us like expressed in Psalm 119:125-130: “I am your servant. Give me discernment, so that I may know your testimonies. ...because I value everything in all your precepts, I hate every wrong road. Your testimonies are wonders. That is why my soul guards them. The doorway to your words lets in light. It gives understanding...”

The same one who brought us to faith, our God, is the one who strengthens us in faith and strengthens us for our Christian lives. Hear that encouragement with the closing verses of our Bible verses today:

²³May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.