

## "Spiritual Discernment" Romans 12:1-2; Psalm 131; John 5:19

- **Romans 8:14** says that *those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God*. Being led by God through life is a sign of our legitimacy as sons. This question what does it mean to be led by God, to do his will, is an issue of spiritual discernment. Spiritual discernment, as **Ruth Barton** puts it, "is the capacity to recognize and respond to God's will, both personally and in community." The ability to observe and say, this is of God, and confidently walk in that direction is spiritual discernment.
- The boy Jesus shows spiritual discernment in **Luke 2** when his family leaves Jerusalem after the Passover and Jesus stays behind to be in the temple. Do you remember the story? Remember what Jesus says when his parents find him? *Why were you searching for me? he asked. Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house.* He had to be about the Father's business. How did he spiritually discern that he was to stay behind? How did he know that?
- Practically speaking, I would say most of us struggle to live like this. We know that God has given Holy Spirit to lead and to guide us. And we are supposed to listen to what the Spirit says, discern what he is saying, and do it. But our day-to-day experience isn't usually one of being tangibly led by God to be about the things of God. We led by our calendars, to do lists and watches. We're about our business. Not only do we lack spiritual discernment, in all honesty, we live as practical atheists. We believe in God but He doesn't really lead us. We plot our own course and ask him to bless our plans.
- A wise person in my life used to repeatedly tell me, "Satan rushes, God leads." And there's a world of difference between the two. Rushing into something of your own making leads to confusion. And the life of the Spirit is to be the exact opposite. Christians aren't supposed to be a confused people. What I want to try to do for you is lay out for you a loose process by which you might grow in your ability to discern what the Spirit is saying to you. Sound good?

### Big Idea

- **Spiritual discernment, the ability to recognize and respond to God's will, is a natural by-product of spiritual transformation**
- If we aren't first on a journey of spiritual transformation there is no way we can ever be spiritually discerning.

### Transition

Let me see if I can explain. Turn in your bibles to **Romans 12**.

- Listen to Paul's words. *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. 2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.*
- The Christian life is a life of worship, right? Not just singing. All of life is meant to be worship. Coming to a building to mouth some words is the tiniest fraction of what it means to be a Christian worshiper of God. You prove you're a worshiper by the way you live your life beyond these four walls. *Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, Paul says, this is your spiritual act of worship.* What does that look like?
- The early church father [Chrysostom](#) said this. "And how is the body, it may be said, to become a sacrifice? Let the eye look on no evil thing, and it [has] become a sacrifice; let the tongue speak nothing filthy and it [has] become an offering; let [your] hand do no lawless deed, and it [has] become a whole burnt offering."<sup>1</sup>
- As we worship, out there, with our lives, we are faced with choices. We are constantly, continually bombarded with questions of conformity. Be like the world? Or be like Jesus? We either conform to the world by the way we live; let the world squeeze us into its mold so that our lives looks no different than the way the rest of the world lives. Or we become radically different; a people conformed to the image of Christ, **Romans 8:29**.
- This process of God conforming us to the image of Christ by the Spirit is a transformational process. Far greater than the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. It's a transformation from death to life. From the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of Jesus. From slavery to sin to freedom.
- Post cross, post trusting in Christ for salvation, Paul says this ongoing aspect of our transformation comes about by the renewing of our minds; *be transformed by the renewing of your mind.* How are our minds renewed? By scripture—the Word, the breath of God. By reading and meditating on God's word God breathes his life into us. His thoughts become our thoughts.
- As you let God's word wash over you God gives the mind of Christ, so that we begin to think like Christ, and in turn, we begin to act like Christ. But this transforming of your mind, this 'reprogramming' of the

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<sup>1</sup> Moo, p.754.

mind does not take place overnight. It's a lifelong process.<sup>2</sup> And you can either yield to the sanctifying work of God's Spirit or you can resist him and hold back from him the dark parts of your life that you refuse to let go of.

- Here's the kicker. Paul says there's a connection between committed to the process of sanctification and spiritual discernment. In other words, if the Spirit isn't changing and transforming you from the inside out, don't for a second think that you'll be able to discern God's will for your life. Look at [verse 2](#). *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.* The goal of transformation is so that we might know and do the will of God.
- This is so incredibly important. The ability to approve God's will in your life. "Approving the will of God means to understand and agree with what God wants of us with a view to putting it into practice."<sup>3</sup> The ability to do that is dependent upon you first submitting to God and his desire to transform all of who you are through the saving power of Jesus. The moment you resist God, the moment you stubbornly say God change me, but not that part of me, is the moment you lack discernment for the future.
- God wants something different for us, for you. I love what [Doug Moo](#) says. "Paul's vision, to which he calls us, is of Christians whose minds are so thoroughly renewed that we know from within, almost instinctively, what we are to do to please God in any given situation."<sup>4</sup> Doesn't that sound great? Wouldn't you like that? To instinctively know what you are to do to please God in any given situation? It also sound a lot like Jesus doesn't it? Jesus instinctively knew what to do, how to please God in any given situation. This is what God wants for you.
- I want you to think for a second about how you make decisions, both individually and as a family. To the degree that you are committed to being undone by God and transformed by him; God lovingly pruning the rough areas of your life. To the degree you are committed to yielding to His chisel will largely determine whether you are able to discern the Spirit's leading in those decisions you face.
- Think for a second about what we're trying to do through LifeGroups; missional communities committed to being on mission with Jesus. The

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<sup>2</sup> Moo, p. 756-7.

<sup>3</sup> Moo, p. 757.

<sup>4</sup> Moo, p. 758.

goal of these communities is to hear from Jesus and then follow Jesus to be his eyes and feet and hands in the community. In other words, LifeGroups need to be spiritually discerning together. What is God's direction for us as a group? How do we serve? Whom do we serve? The ability to discern the Spirit's leading is critical. So LifeGroups only work if every person in that group is committed to being transformed by Jesus. Otherwise we won't be able to hear what Jesus has to say to his church.

- Think about an elder board entrusted with the task of leading God's church. Elders are to inquire of God and ask Him where He wants His church to go. The ability of those elders to hear and discern what the Spirit says is dependent upon those elders being personally committed to the process of spiritual transformation. I can't imagine a scarier scenario for a church than to have elders who have stagnated spiritually and have become unable to test and approve God's will for the church they lead.
- Think about the beloved congregational business meeting. Think about the times we come together to call a pastor, approve a budget, buy property, whatever. We are asking God to lead us in those matters. Corporately we're trying to discern what the Spirit says. [Roberts Rules of Order](#) mean nothing if individually, on our own, we aren't being transformed before we get to that meeting. How in the world can we come together and expect to discern God's will for us as a congregation if he isn't changing us the other six days of the week?
- In Mark chapter 5 Jesus frees a man from an evil spirit. The people in that region, once terrified by this man who would break chains and cry out and cut himself with stones, these people witnessed this miraculous transformation. "They saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind." [Mark 5:15](#). [Ray Ortlund](#) says, "There is no temperament Jesus cannot control. There is no madness he cannot soothe. There is no darkness he cannot illuminate. There is no chain he cannot break. There is no raving he cannot calm. There is no shame he cannot dignify. There is no nakedness he cannot clothe. There is no legion he cannot command.
- And when he proved his power, restoring this dear man who had suffered so much for so long, sending the demons into the nearby herd of pigs, the people "began to beg Jesus to depart from their region" (Mark 5:17). Jesus forced on them a choice — his transformation or their pigs? They preferred their pigs."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/rayortlund/2010/01/12/transformation-or-the-pigs/>

- So where are you at right now, today? God, change me? Undo me? Transform me? Or are you, deep down, content to stay as you are? Undisturbed. If so, here's the warning, you will continue to make undiscerning, pain bearing choices that so that all of life feels like a deep, dense, dark, black fog.

### Transition

What I want to do now is move on and assume every single one of us is committed to being transformed by Jesus. What does the process of spiritual discernment look like from that point forward? What next?

- Prayer is obviously a huge part of it. **Jeremiah 10:21** says this about prayer and the discernment process and the failure of the leaders of Israel. *The shepherds are senseless and do not inquire of the LORD; so they do not prosper and all their flock is scattered.* Prayer is essential to spiritual discernment.
- But what do we actually pray? When we inquire of the Lord what do we say? Where do we start? Let me just say I'm indebted to a woman named [Ruth Barton](#) for helping me understand this.
- She suggests we begin with **Psalm 131**, the prayer of quiet trust. Turn to Psalm 131. When you are facing circumstances that require spiritual discernment start here. This Psalm teaches us how to quiet our hearts and trust God when things are too complicated.
- *My heart is not proud, O LORD, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. 2 But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me. 3 O Israel, put your hope in the LORD both now and forevermore.*
- What are we doing when we pray like this? Quieting our hearts. Calming our souls. Trusting. We are getting ready to listen. I think Jesus does this routinely in his ministry. **Matthew 14:23**, [Jesus] *went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.* **Luke 6:12.** *Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.* I'm not sure if he is praying **Psalm 131**. But he might. Why does Jesus get away to pray? To quiet his heart so he can listen to the Father.
- Someone has said, I don't disagree, that without solitude it's impossible to have a spiritual life. God speaks softly. Think Samuel. Think Elijah in the cave and God's gentle whisper. Life is noisy. He will not shout over your iPod or the TV. We need to intentionally quiet our hearts to be able to hear when God speaks. Quiet and solitude open the space necessary for the Spirit to work.

- [Winnie the Pooh's](#) got his thoughtful spot. Where's your quiet, thoughtful spot? We have to become familiar with the voice of God so that we can distinguish God's voice from all the other voices. And the only way to do that is solitude. Quiet.
- [Susanna Wesley](#). Mother of John Wesley. Nineteen children. Apron over her head.
- Once our soul has been quieted and ready to listen [Ruth Barton](#) suggests we start that time of listening with a prayer; the prayer of indifference. It's what Jesus taught his disciples. God as I listen to you, for you, *your will be done*. Lord, not my will but your will. God, not my feelings about things, not my agenda, not my human understanding, but your will in this matter. The prayer of indifference asks is a plea to God that our will become indifferent to everything but God's will. Nothing more, nothing less than your will in this matter God.
- If we don't pray this way the discernment process becomes a rigged election, doesn't it? What good is it to listen or even hear from God if we're only going to do what we want to do in the end anyway? Lord, make me indifferent to everything but your will. This is what carries us across the threshold from human decision making into the realm of the spiritual.

### Transition

So, a commitment to transformation, a quieted heart, the prayer of indifference, and then listening. Spiritual discernment is dependent upon being a good listener.

- [Ecclesiastes 5:1](#) says *Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong*. Fools rush in. We do that when we pray, don't we? I believe our failure to listen contributes to our lack of spiritual discernment. Listen. Listen. Listen and wait on God. Listen to him speak through Scripture. Then pray for wisdom. [James 1:5](#) *If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him*. But listen.
- Listen to him speak through a few wise counselors. Listen. And listen some more. *I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it. 11 "But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. 12 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices. 13 "If my people would but listen to me.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Psalm 81:10-13

- Be patient. Don't rush. Wait for God to speak. Wait for him to show you what to do. Don't act, don't move, don't buy, don't sell until you hear from him, until he tells you to break camp.
- **Isaiah 30:18** says *Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!* That verse is hanging on the wall in my office. It's the verse I ran to over and over as we waited a year and a half for God to lead us to the right church, to this church. I love God's promise. *The LORD longs to be gracious to you; Blessed are all who wait for him!*
- Most of us simply don't have the patience to wait for God to lead us. **Romans 8:14** should say *those who are led by the Spirit of God [and have great patience] are sons of God.* With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day. His actions are not bound, constrained by time. But he is a gracious God. And he does speak. And by his Spirit he leads. If we would just wait.
- So how do you know? Let's say you've waited. You've prayed for wisdom. You've quieted your heart. By the way, this is a non-linear process, non-mechanical process. It's not like you can punch A, then B, and get God's direction, C. God will not be put in a box. He's not your magic genie. But let's say you've done all the right things. How will you know if what you're hearing is from him? How will you know his will for you?
- Through this process we need to recognize *that the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom.*<sup>7</sup> We may hear something from God that simply does not make sense. So don't dismiss what you hear from him just because it doesn't make sense.
- But certainly you should test what you hear. Test the spirits, **1 John 4:1**. Does what you're hearing mesh with what God has already said in his Word? God will never lead you to do something that is contrary to what he's already said in Scripture.
- You can check your own will again. **Psalm 139**. *Search me O God.* Ask God to check your motives.
- Consider this. Is there a lightness, a peace that accompanies what you think God is asking you to do? What he asks of you may in fact be the most difficult thing in the world but if he's led you to it there should be a yoke is easy, burden is light feeling that God, through Christ, will make a way when there doesn't seem to be a way.
- Only then, only when you have his peace and a sense that the Spirit of God is truly at work do you act. But, man. When God leads there is

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:25

clarity, and security and confidence and joy. And I want that for myself and for you.

### **Conclusion**

- Fog is amazing stuff, isn't it? A dense fog covering seven city blocks to a depth of a hundred feet, all of that fog, condensed into water, wouldn't even fill a drinking glass.
- Something that deeply saddens me is how many Christians live life in what I call a spiritual fog. Disoriented, unclear in their direction. Debilitated, unable to make decisions. One question I get more than almost any other is this. What's God's will for my life? Do I take the job? Do I not take the job? Do I move? Do I stay? Do I marry this person? Do I not marry? Do I do this? Or that? Spiritual fog. Confusion.
- *Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.* God's desire for you is clarity, peace, joy, confidence. And clarity for a reason. The goal of spiritual discernment isn't just to make good decisions as individuals or as a group. The goal of spiritual discernment, the goal of knowing and doing the will of God, is God. He is goal. He is found in the process. And as others observe our life, as we move in step with the Spirit, others see the Father in us.