

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! In this edition I'll be looking into the meaning of "discernment" as it is used in the scriptures.

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1 Kings 3:9 Give, therefore, thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad. For who is able to judge this thy people, so great a people?

Ezekiel 44:23 And they shall teach my people the difference between the holy and profane and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean.

Matthew 16:3 O hypocrites! Ye can discern the face of the sky; but ye cannot tell the signs of the times.

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.

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of body and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Alma 14:58 And thus we can plainly discern that after a people have been once enlightened by the Spirit of God, and have had great knowledge of things pertaining to righteousness, and then have fallen away into sin and transgression, they become more hardened; and thus their state becomes worse than though they had never known these things.

Alma 16:162 Oh, then, is not this real? I say unto you, Yea, because it is light; and whatsoever is light is good because it is discernible; therefore, ye must know that it is good.

As you can see from these scriptures, the term "discern" is used in a number of ways. Solomon, for example, wanted to be able to determine who the guilty party was in disputes, made famous by the way he handled the dispute between two mothers over a child. His method of discernment in that instance was to put the two mothers to a test and to evaluate their reaction to a pretty radical solution to their predicament.

Solomon, therefore used a contrived means to bring the truth to light so that it could be "discerned." This is how the Lord blessed Solomon - with the wisdom to understand how to figure things out. This kind of discernment made something that was indeterminate into something very clear. It was accomplished by being given an understanding of how the real child's mother should react given the option of either having their child cut in two and having a child live regardless of who with. It may have been made clear to him from the attitude of the false mother that she was uncaring about the outcome.

From this case we see that Solomon was really kind of devious, but it made the answer quite obvious.

For several of these passages we see the use of the term "discernment" or "discern" as being able to identify good from evil, but not all of them.

Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees indicated that they could not discern the signs of the times. In this case discernment is not strictly to know good from evil, but to recognize what the events of the day told them in regard to the fulfillment of prophecy. This might be termed in today's jargon as "pattern recognition."

Consider this scenario: you are standing outside on a foggy day - like the real "pea soup" kind of fog that you can almost touch. In front of you about a hundred yards away there is a slightly darker form in the fog, fairly large. You can't really identify what it is because the actual form of the object is indistinct. You cannot "discern" what it is. If you see a rotating light on it, you still can't tell if it is a ship, an airplane on a runway, or a lighthouse. Only when you either get closer or if it makes a noise, or if the fog begins to lift will you be able to identify what it is.

That is the context in which I understand Jesus' words - the Pharisees were in a fog and unable to see who stood before them. Or if you can understand the circumstance of having a difficult time understanding what someone is saying because the words are muffled by wind or background noise - you can't discern those words either.

In the sciences we would call that a bad signal-to-noise ratio. The real thing cannot be identified because it cannot be well-enough contrasted with things it coexists with.

Both the first and second uses of discernment discussed so far can really be described as making the truth more clearly obvious - making a contrast that is understandable. Whether it is Solomon's wisdom in making the proper judgment stand out in contrast to the conflicting information presented to him, or Ezekiel's admonition to make good stand out from evil, or Jesus' remarks about understanding the signs of the times, they each relate to bringing clarity to an otherwise foggy view.

We now enter into 1 Corinthians 2:14. How do you discern what the things of God are - and spiritually in particular? What makes something natural versus spiritual, and how do these make a difference in how you understand things?

We don't have to look very far. In our own day and age, the "naturalistic" view is one that depends on things that can be measured, touched, designed, fabricated, analyzed or otherwise dealt with in a physical manner using our hands or instruments that we can make with our hands. Many atheists take the "naturalistic" view of the universe because it is abhorrent to them to consider that there is something other than the physical fabric of space and time to describe the behavior and existence of the world around us.

Can you measure kindness using a tool? Can you calculate love? Can you place a value on life in terms of dollars or deutschmarks? Can you design an imaging device that can see hope? Is there a flow rate meter that can measure past history? Or can you compress joy into a

cylinder? That is the naturalistic view - it is simply incapable of dealing with the intangible even as it struggles to explain the physical nature of the universe itself.

Discerning the things of God must be a spiritual exercise, and it is not well-suited for the naturalistic view because not all things that exist are physical. To the naturalistic eye the very concept of a being that you can't see seems a contradiction, but to the spiritual it is a necessary context for the existence of everything. But it is not like there aren't hints and suggestions in the physical world.

We measure the effects of gravity, and we design electrical circuits, and we are warmed by the fusion reactions taking place in the Sun, and we power our toasters using the decay of nuclear particles in reactors hundreds or thousands of miles away. We cannot see gravity, nor electrical charge, magnetic fields, or the quantum events that make nuclear fusion and fission a reality - but we use them anyway. Some would say this is because of a naturalistic view of measuring things, but we never directly measure anything - we measure the *effects* of forces that we have put labels on.

So it is with faith, hope, and love - we cannot measure these things, but that does not mean they don't exist. We measure their effects, and so there is a relation between the physical world and the spiritual world - we measure the effects of forces in both.

It takes a spiritual kind of discernment to recognize the effects of things like faith and things like gravity because it takes the admission of their existence to enter into reasoning about them. An inability to admit the existence of either the one or the other excludes the ability to understand them.

The word discernment takes yet another slight turn when we look at Hebrews 4:12. If the Lord can discern our thoughts it is because he is privy to information available to no one else. It may be that we can suspect what someone is thinking because of an understanding of past behaviors, conversations, or even body language, but we never truly have knowledge of what they are thinking. For the Lord this is not the case - he has a perfect knowledge of our thoughts - he can see them clearly even if we ourselves do not.

This kind of discernment is beyond making choices or being able to compare two things to understand them. It is the nature of God's existence that defines his ability to know all things. This is a form of discernment that is based on pure knowledge, and it is because of his other attributes that it is possible - he is present everywhere and is all powerful for all eternity.

The closest analogy we might have in modern times is that of a radio receiver, though that is a very crude and limited analogy. God is tuned into our thoughts in ways we cannot even begin to understand. Discernment of this nature is a matter of being in possession of all truth at all times.

I sometimes (in the backwaters of my astronomy thinking) consider that God knows the pressure, temperature, and chemical composition of any given cubic inch of space inside the atmosphere of Saturn, or some distant star, or in the seemingly empty space between galaxies, and he can tell it to you in real-time, or he can relate the history of it since the beginning, or what it will be at

the end of measured time and into eternity with infinite precision. Knowledge of everything everywhere at all times. That is God's discernment.

Is it any wonder then that he can tell us of things that are yet to come, or make plans based on any decision that lies before us? God is, among many things, a deterministic being who does not have to guess about anything.

This is discernment in the form of absolute knowledge of things that cannot be known by any other means.

It should not be surprising that God is able to manifest that knowledge to us, thereby granting *us* discernment.

Alma 19:88 And it came to pass that Ammon, **being filled with the Spirit of God, therefore, he perceived the thoughts of the king.**

When reading the scriptures we often think of discernment mainly in terms of discerning spirits (either seeing them or understanding who their boss is), and while it is true that we do need this gift, we also know that there is much more to the story than just that. Indeed we can begin to learn discernment as a skill as we grow in understanding, and that includes both physical and spiritual things. Yes, it is also a gift that is given from time to time and as we apply ourselves to prayer and study, but if we want to have discernment as those did in times past we need to ask ourselves what they did to receive it.

Thus concludeth the exercise and exploration of ***discernment*** for today.

Let me know your thoughts.

Jared