

“St. Ignatius of Loyola notes that sin is unwillingness to trust that what God wants is our deepest happiness. Until I am absolutely convinced of this I will do everything I can to keep my hands on the controls of my life, because I think I know better than God what I need for my fulfillment.”

David Benner

Discernment- Spiritual Discipline

Desire:

To delight in and recognise the voice and will of God.

Definition:

Discernment opens us up to listen to and recognise the voice and patterns of God’s direction in our lives.

Have you ever tried to help a Christian friend make a decision? It can be a confusing process. Some Christians believe God’s will can be found in the most difficult and sacrificial of two options. Others believe the will of God is whatever choice brings the most money, perks, success and personal gain at any particular moment. Some people believe that not wanting to do something is a sure sign that it is God’s will. Others believe exactly the opposite. I’ve met people who open their bibles and expect their finger to fall on God’s guiding word, but others expect to use their brain and want to check out their list of procs and cons, Discernment leads us into deep waters. What are we to make of “signs” and “open doors” and desire and self-sacrifice?

Biblical discernment involves more than good judgement, open doors and decision-making skills. Right discernment arises out of a relationship with God in prayer. It is founded on the reality of the Holy Spirit’s presence within us. Jesus makes it clear the Holy Spirit is our Counselor and Guide into God’s will and ways. The Holy Spirit can be counted on to

1. Assure us of God’s love, goodness and trustworthy nature (Romans 8:16)
2. Convict us of sin, revealing the false self and all its agendas and attachments (John 16:8)
3. Lead us into truth, opening us to the cleansing power of repentance and freedom Jesus brings (John 16:13);
4. Bring glory to God (John 16:14) through everything that happens to us
5. Nurture the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)

To know God's will we must be assured of God's love. Discernment depends on a deep trust in God's good intentions towards us. Distrusting God's intentions and fearing that his will could be life-thwarting rather than life-giving can sabotage our ability to listen and wait for direction. Reveal the source of your distrust to God. Ask for help and healing. The Spirit does not beat us up for expressing our doubts and fears to God. He hears us out, assures us of God's love and leads us into trust.

To discern well we also need the Spirit of truth to open our eyes to our attachments to things that influence our decision making: prestige, personal agendas, comforts, productivity and so on. We need to confess our agendas and honestly ask the Lord what must die in us for God's will to come forth. One of my favourite prayers for guidance is *"Lord I am willing to receive what you give, release what you take, lack what you withhold, do what you require and be who you desire. Amen."*

When our hearts are open to receiving whatever God says, we are in a place where we can wait and listen for a nudge from God. We rest in the confidence that we don't have to figure things out on our own. We become alert to the presence of the Spirit revealed in love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness and self-control. The presence of this fruit reminds us that we can't fall out of God's care or move beyond his notice. When praying for God to make his way plain, I often pray, *"Lord Christ, take those things the evil one would use to discourage and destroy, and turn them to my good, my growth and your glory. Amen."*

Suggestions for Listening to God

Take your time. It is best not to do all these steps at once. The brain gets tired, anxiety takes over, and you can end up trying to force the hand of God. Listening for God's direction takes time. Not every decision you make will need to incorporate all these steps. Some choices are easier than others.

1. Come into the presence of the Holy One focusing your attention on his love and goodness. Thank God that you have a Guide who is on your side and wants to help you.
2. Consider what it means to be totally attached to God's agenda and will. Confess any idols of your heart that block your trust.
 - Acknowledge any compulsions and addictions that get in the way of freely surrendering to God.
 - How does this choice play into your persona and false self? Check out your motives.

- Get some distance from your impulses, agendas and compulsion to decide now.
 - Pray to recognize and relinquish anything that takes priority over God's will. This kind of prayer is the "nevertheless" prayer Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. Not my will but yours be done. It is sometimes called the "prayer of relinquishment." Ask God to move in your will so you want to choose that which promotes his glory and spreads his love. If you can't pray this prayer, then pray for a desire to pray this prayer.
3. Lay your choice before God and examine the matter thoroughly. If it helps to journal the scope of the decision, commit your thoughts to writing.
 4. Share your desires with God. What is it you want? Does your desire reflect some deeper desire? How does your desire or choice line up with love of God and others? How does the choice lead you deeper into faithfulness and goodness?
 5. Use reason.
 - How does this decision enable you to live out the fruit of the Spirit?
 - Will this choice be experienced as a life-giving, loving choice for those it affects?
 - Write your pros-and-cons list: weigh the advantages and benefits, the disadvantages and dangers of each option.
 - Does the choice lead to a yes in your mind?
 6. Attend to your feelings.
 - What about this choice leads to *consolation*—life-giving feelings that bring in the Spirit's fruit of love, joy, faith and peace?
 - What excites you and gives you hope?
 - Picture yourself in this situation for a length of time. What do you sense?
 - What about this choice leads to *desolation*—life-thwarting feelings of turmoil, confusion and anxiety? Desolation leaves us feeling chaotic, cut off from God. We feel demotivated by accusation, shame and fear.
 - Does this choice lead to peaceful feelings?
 7. Listen to God as you read Scripture. Pay attention to where the Word lights up and speaks to you.
 8. Seek the counsel of those gifted in discernment who can listen to you and with you. Ask them:

- Am I being a good steward?
 - Am I running away from or toward something rather than waiting?
 - Am I open to a different path?
 - Does this choice serve communion and community?
9. Offer your choice to God. Pray for wisdom and the freedom of the Spirit to blow through you. Wait. Ask God to bring your heart and head and spirit into agreement. Do they all confirm this course of action?

Reflection Questions

1. How does the way you spend your time and energy reveal what is important to you and reflect the deep desires of your heart?
2. When making decisions, do you procrastinate or become so uncomfortable with waiting that you jump in and decide so you don't have to endure uncertainty?
How does this affect your discernment process?
3. Do you believe that God has only one perfect blueprint for your life? Why or why not?
4. What do you see as the role of the mind in making decisions?
5. What do you see as the role of the heart in making decisions?

Spiritual Exercises

1. To discern where the Holy Spirit has been recently working in your life, answer the following questions:
 - For what am I longing?
 - Where am I struggling?
 - What is most life-giving to me? What is least life giving?
2. It is seldom wise to make a decision at a deep point of desolation, because it can provoke premature decisions. Name some causes of desolation in your life: fatigue, overextension, sloth, fear, emotional blocks, loss of trust.
 - How do these things play into your decision-making process?
 - When you make a choice out of desolation, what is that like?
 - Ask God to enable you to wait through a time of desolation so as better to hear his voice.

3. Catalog major decisions in your life to date. Beside each one, write your decision-making process.
 - Which decisions felt best and worst? Why?
4. Divide your life into seven-year segments. For each period record the deepest desire of your heart. What desires resurface again and again?
 - How do you listen to these desires in your discernment process?
 - Talk to God about the desires of your heart.

Resources on Discernment

Discernment by Henri J. M. Nouwen

Listening to God in Times of Choice and The Voice of Jesus by Gordon T. Smith

Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership by Ruth Haley Barton

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola by St. Ignatius of Loyola

Reference

Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (IVP Books, Illinois 2005) page 109-113