

Discernment and Counseling

When we talk with others we typically gather information. But information does us no good unless we interpret it accurately. For that we need discernment.

Discernment allows us to distinguish between things that look confusingly similar: truth and error, reality and illusion, even good and evil. The ability to discern uses our physical senses – we see and hear, perhaps even hug the person we're with – but the Holy Spirit extends this ability beyond physical awareness into a more subtle moral and spiritual awareness. Discernment is a gift from God. Although (as with all spiritual gifts) discernment is more pronounced in some, it's available to all. The Spirit is generous, particularly in time of need.

Practicing Discernment

We can't be helpful to others if we aren't aware of what's going on behind the surface they present. That's how discernment and counseling intertwine. We listen and look, of course, but it's more than that. We also sense what's going on. We become aware of what lies behind what we physically perceive. Discernment involves the **“discipline of awareness”** about which Ken Gire writes when he guides us to see surfaces as windows.

What happens when we discern?

- We “see” from inner person to inner person. (This deep seeing is more than observing body language or communication patterns. We're looking beyond someone's flesh, differentiating what they do from who they are.)
- We are broadly receptive to another person, paying attention to what they are actually trying to express. (We expand our awareness rather than trying to focus on specific issues that we find interesting or important; we function more like a floodlight than a microscope.)
- We assist others in communicating what they may have difficulty putting into words.
- We notice what is being communicated and what is left out. (Why this story right now?)

Discernment is the opposite of projection. When we project we take the thoughts inside our heads and assume they're going on outside of us. If I'm angry at you, I may assume you're angry at me. Discernment flows in the opposite direction. When we discern we notice what actually goes on outside of us and take it in. Discernment is receptive; it connects us with reality.

What Makes Discernment Possible?

God gives us the ability to discern reality, but we'll never test our ability if we think reality is hidden from us. It isn't. Jesus clearly tells us that reality isn't some well-kept secret:

***Luke 1:2-3** ² But there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. ³ Accordingly, whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms shall be proclaimed upon the housetops.*

As you read the gospels, watch how Jesus helped people by making visible to them what they were hiding (perhaps even from themselves). Jesus noticed people and regularly communicated what He noticed. God has given us these same abilities; we can discern and we can communicate. We're to follow Jesus' example, always taking care to use what we discern for the other's benefit (not to satisfy our own voyeuristic curiosity). The goal is to help others learn things that will set them free. To do this we must pay attention before we speak, and, when we speak, we must do so in love.

What Blocks Discernment?

Four seemingly unrelated conditions block discernment: guilt, fear, shame, and arrogance. What do these four share? A desire to avoid being seen. Whether we attempt to divert attention from our guilt, try to avoid feeling vulnerable, work to conceal our shame, or put on an impressive act, in each case we're attempting to hide.

Hiding, all hiding, is self-centered. If I'm focused on me, I'm not paying attention to you. I become foreground; you become background. Peripheral. Of secondary importance.

Self-centeredness, whether a brief event or an ongoing pattern, renders us blind and unable to discern. And whenever it occurs it blocks discernment.

Self-centeredness blocks discernment.

How can we notice others if we're preoccupied with noticing ourselves?

The Freedom to Discern

While it is true that everything we say and do is a revelation of our character, this truth only threatens us if we think exposure will shame us.

Discernment is primarily confined to Christians because God has freed His people from shame – He's given us a new identity. We can count on the fact that there's something to us besides our flaws, something already present, real, and wonderful that won't disgrace us. Inwardly we are new creations, and that newness will manifest if we don't quench it by trying to hide our flaws. God wants us to test that truth.

When we're sure of our new identity we'll be free to pay attention to others. We no longer have to monitor our own behavior or hid or cling to self-manufactured pride. Now we can take our eyes off ourselves and discern what's going on with others. Now we can help.

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