

2025-12-11: Discernment (SALT)

Introduction

- Διακρίνω (diakrino): Separate one from another; decompose into elemental parts; distinguish; decide
- The ability to perceive what is from God, what is from myself, and what is from the enemy - and to choose the path that leads to life
- To see reality truthfully
 - See yourself truthfully - what are my strengths, what are my weaknesses, what are my motives, what are my biases
 - See others truthfully - without judgment and without idealization
 - See events truthfully - without deception or passion
- **To see everything as the Lord sees it**
- "Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God" - St Anthony
 - St Anthony put discernment even above asceticism. And most of the desert fathers see discernment as being the most important virtue!
 - What about love??!
 - **Discernment is what guides all other virtues**
 - Without discernment, other virtues can be displeasing to God
 - Love can be misguided if it isn't accompanied by discernment/wisdom
 - Love without discernment can go wrong - and it can't be corrected because there is no discernment.
 - Discernment without love, however, can be corrected
 - Example: St Peter
 - St Peter loved the Lord. But he lacked discernment.
 - "This led him on little by little to self-confidence. Christ then, out of a desire to put down this, permitted his denial. For since he neither submitted Him, he is instructed by deeds.

The Lord said to Peter "I have prayed for you, that your faith fail not," sharply reproving him, and showing that his fall was more grievous than the rest, and needed more help. For the matters of blame were two; both that he gainsaid; and, that he set himself before the other; or rather a third too, namely, that he attributed all to himself."

From where did this come to him? From much love and from much pleasure."
(St John Chrysostom Homily 82.3 on Matthew)

- He didn't discern his thoughts and his speech

- "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble." (Matthew 26:33)
- He didn't consider how these words would be with the disciples - "even if all of them stumble, I won't" - are you better than them?
- He didn't discern the will of God
 - "Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, and cut off his right ear." (John 18:10)
- He didn't discern his ability and his weakness
 - "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" (Matthew 26:35)
 - He did not discern his own abilities and his weakness and his inability under pressure
 - So when he was in the courtyard of the High Priest, he denied the Lord three times

Discernment of Thoughts and Speech

- "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1)
- Origin of a thought
 - From man: "The Lord knows the thoughts of man, That they *are* futile."
 - From God (Holy Spirit abiding in us): "But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you." (Matthew 10:19-20)
 - From the devil: "And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son to betray Him." (John 13:2) and "But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?'" (Acts 5:3)
- Discern the Origin of a thought
 - One challenge is that a thought from God can be immediately followed by a thought from Satan
 - Matthew 16: "You are Christ the Son of the Living God... flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven... far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" ... "Get behind Me, Satan!"
- How to Discern a thought
 - Question it
 - "bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (1 Cor 10:5)
 - Is it filled with the fear of God?
 - I have the urge to forgive someone... this is the Holy Spirit's work in us. God's voice.
 - Then, I get a thought "well, he needs to apologize first" - "how is it gonna look if I forgive him without an apology" - "I would enable him in not apologizing" - "Honestly, this will teach him a lesson and it will be better for him"

- Thoughts from God **humble us**, point us to obedience, reverence, etc.
- Is it filled with goodness towards every one?
 - Your colleague gets a better grade than you, or a better job than you. You're happy for him... and then a thought comes. "I deserve more than they do." - "They didn't even work as hard as me."
 - Thoughts from God encourage love, compassion, concern for others. If a thought stirs envy, resentment, harm, etc. it is not from God.
- Does it agree with the actions of the Lord and the Apostles?
 - You see someone who is in need. I feel a desire to help him... but then a thought. "What if he's a drug addict? What if he's going to buy alcohol? I bet if I offer him food, he won't even take it. He just wants money. Honestly, in this economy, he should go and get a job."
 - Thoughts from God will NEVER contradict the Scripture or the teaching of the Church or the model of Christ
- Does it evoke peace, tranquility? Or anger, bitterness or turmoil?
 - Gossip. I am tempted to gossip about a friend. To reveal their shortcomings or their struggle or even (God forbid) their past sin. Why? To get someone to laugh? To fill the time? To make them look bad? To make myself look good?
- Does the thought come with a sense of urgency?
 - If you feel compelled to do it right away, say it right away, etc. then it is likely from the Tempter!
 - Stirrings of the Holy Spirit come gradually and gently, not impulsively
 - It might even be a pious thought - "starting today I will pray the whole Agpeya every day." - this sounds pious. But its path is to failure or worse, pride.
- Reveal it to your Father of Confession
 - Story of Fr Athanasius Iskandar and the church building project
 - Again, the thought might even seem PIOUS!
- Discerning Speech
 - "In the multitude of words sin is not lacking,
But he who restrains his lips *is* wise." (Proverbs 10:19)
 - "So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath;" (James 1:19)
 - "The heart of the wise teaches his mouth, And adds learning to his lips." (Proverbs 16:23)
 - "Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God *is* in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few."

Discerning the Will of God

- Why is it important to know the will of God?
 - Because it is good and acceptable and perfect. It lacks nothing. It will satisfy my spiritual, physical, psychological and emotional needs.
 - "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." (Romans 12:2)
 - God knows what will be good for me in the long term
 - My own will is not perfect
 - I look for benefit in the short term without considering the long term
 - So a wise person seeks the will of God
- How to Discern the Will of God
 - Renounce my self-will
 - Show God that I am really seeking His will
 - Sometimes I ask God to reveal His will but I've already made up my mind
 - Or I seek the will of God as long as it agrees with my will (I'll keep asking servants and priests until I get the answer I'm waiting for)
 - God will NOT reveal His will to me if I am acting this way
 - St Theophan the Recluse: If you have a glass full of vinegar and you want to put honey, you must first throw away the vinegar, wash the glass, put it out in the sun for the vinegar smell to go away, and then put honey in it.
 - Vinegar - my will
 - Honey - God's will
 - Neutralization of my self-will
 - Intentionally identify and magnify the negative aspects of the decision that I WANT to take
 - Go to my Father of Confession
 - Ask him to pray for you that God reveals His good and perfect and acceptable will to you
 - Reveal to him what is in your heart and the decisions in front of you
 - Ask him if he identified anything you didn't see or think of
 - **This is an act of humility** and a prerequisite for God to reveal His will to me
 - The Lord will reveal His will to me - **and it might match my will!**
- Life is like two people sitting in a boat. One rows and one holds the rudder (to steer). The wise man rows and gives the rudder to God to steer his life. Many times we want to hold the rudder and for God to row.

Discerning My Abilities

- What can I do physically and spiritually? What am I not able to do [yet?] physically or spiritually? Need to be honest about my strengths and my weaknesses and understand my limitations.
- Without discerning my abilities I might:
 - Overconfidence: Taking more than I can handle
 - Discouragement: Avoid doing something good because I underestimate myself
 - Misguided zeal: Acting without God's guidance, exhausting myself, exhausting others
- Video Game Analogy
 - You can't fight the boss until you've leveled up and gained experience
 - And if you find a hack that gets you lots of experience points, so that you can get to the boss right away... you haven't built up the skills yet to actually beat him.
- Gym Analogy
 - If you go to the gym for the first time and load up on weights, you will injure yourself. Start small, with what you can handle, and increase slowly.
- Boat Analogy
 - If I row too hard, I capsize. If I row too slow I won't be able to gain momentum.
- How to Discern my abilities
 - Recognize my limits
 - Can I maintain this without pride, anger, despair?
 - Fasting too much too soon can lead to failure and eventually despair
 - An imbalanced spiritual canon too quickly will lead to the same
 - I am balancing schoolwork, church, service, a job. Don't overload yourself just to impress. Don't take on leadership positions if you can't commit to it. Don't join new clubs or events if you don't have time (or energy or mental capacity).
 - Prioritize Quality over Quantity
 - **Spiritual progress is not measured by how much we do but how well and how faithfully we do it**
 - Patience and endurance develop lasting virtues
 - "But the ones *that* fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep *it* and bear fruit with patience." (Luke 8:15)
 - What I gain quickly, I can lose quickly. What I gain with patience, will be harder for me to lose
 - Fasting: Instead of abstaining for longer and longer - maybe my FoC will tell me that I need to contemplate more on the Lord in my abstinence (or to wake up earlier).
 - There are plenty of starving people, made to unwillingly fast, that don't have a deep relationship with the Holy Trinity; performing a godly external action will

not help us in
our relationship with the Holy Trinity if we do not also have a godly
purpose in our soul
as the root of the action.

- Prayer: Instead of praying more and more hours or more and more psalms, maybe I need to be more mindful in my prayers
- Doing one act of kindness with focus and with love is better than doing many acts of kindness haphazardly
- Align my abilities with God's will
 - What is God calling me to do in this season of my life?
 - What is my motive?
 - Sometimes I'm taking easy classes just to get an A - and then I finish college and realize I barely learned anything. I'm ill equipped for the real world. I'm ill equipped for grad school. I'm even ill equipped for the applications and exams that will get me into grad school. Why? Why did I go for easy A classes? Why didn't I challenge myself? Why didn't I develop myself?
- Learn from Failure
 - This week I tried to add xyz to my plate - it was too much. Next week I'll excuse myself.
- Seek Guidance from your father of confession

Ask the Lord for Discernment

- King Solomon asked for wisdom and discernment
 - "Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" (1 Kings 3:9)
- Conscious Purpose of Mind - Intention
 - Abba Anthony said, "Whoever hammers a lump of iron, first decides what he is going to make of it, a scythe, a sword, or an axe. Even so we ought to make up our minds what kind of virtue we want to forge or we labor in vain."
 - "Do not think or do anything without having a purpose directed to God; the person who journeys without direction will have labored in vain"
- Always always always seek the guidance of your father of confession

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