



The Art and Practice of Discernment

Ruth Haley Barton

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"Discernment in its fullness takes a practiced heart, fine-tuned to hear the word of *God* and the single-mindedness to follow that word in love. It is truly a gift from *God*, but not one dropped from the skies fully formed. It is a gift cultivated and brought to perfection by a prayerful life and the search for self-knowledge."

Ernest Larkin

I. Discernment: The Journey from Blindness to Sight (John 9)

II. Discernment is _____

_____.

A. The capacity to hear God arises out of a _____ with God that is sustained through _____.
(John 15:15)

B. Discernment is rooted in the belief that

1. _____ is our primary calling. (Matt. 22:37f)

2. The Holy Spirit is given to us to help us to _____.
(John 14:25, 26; John 16:12)

3. God's intentions towards us are always _____.
(Matt. 7:8-10)

"The first objective is to bring apprentices to the point where they are quite certain that there is no 'catch,' no limit, to the goodness of his intentions or his power to carry them out."

Dallas Willard

III. Discernment is first of all a habit

- A. The habit of discernment is the increasing capacity to _____
and _____ to God's voice in the midst of everyday life.

"When I seek for something, I look for it everywhere. It is when we seek God earnestly, prepared to go out of our way to examine anything that might be his overture to us—that he promises to be found. But we will be able to seek him only if we honestly believe that he might explicitly address us in ways suitable to his purposes in our lives."

Dallas Willard

We learn to recognize God's voice by _____.

B. The habit of discernment also involves listening to our own _____

(Deut. 30:11-20, John 10:10)

We listen for experiences that bring _____ (consolation)
and experiences that _____ life from us (desolation).

Exercise: The Habit of Discernment

(Adapted from *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* by Linn, Linn & Linn, Paulist Press.)

1. Ask God to bring to your heart a moment over the last couple of days for which you were most grateful.
 - When were you most able to give and receive love?
 - Which moment seemed to have the most life in it for you?
 - When you were especially aware of God's presence?
 - When did you experience God's love or the love of another person?

2. Ask God to bring to your heart a moment over the last couple of days for which you were least grateful.
 - When were you least able to give and receive love?
 - Which moment seemed to drain life from you?
 - When did you feel disconnected from God?
 - What was said and done in that moment that made it so difficult?

3. Is there any insight, wisdom, or further questions that seem to arise from your awareness of moments that were life-giving and moments that were draining? Note any ways in which you sense God leading you to act or respond to this awareness.

4. Give thanks for whatever you have experienced in "listening" to your life in this way.

IV. The Practice of Personal Discernment

"If we center down...and live in that holy Silence which is dearer than life, and take our life program into the silent places of the heart with complete openness, ready to renounce according to God's leading, then many of the things we are doing lose their vitality for us."

Thomas Kelly

The practice of discernment involves taking steps to actively seek God in

1. Pray for:

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2. Notice without judging

3. Assess the Data

When you are seeking discernment regarding a decision that is facing you, you will need additional time in solitude to create space for listening to God and listening to what is going on deep within you.

There are many questions that help us to reflect on the objective facts and also the deeper dynamics involved in the decisions we face. It is important to resist the tendency to approach such questions in an academic fashion as though trying to complete an assignment; rather, enter into these questions as a spiritual practice, asking God to draw you to the ones that will be most helpful in bringing clarity to your situation. You do not need to answer all of them. Go to the one or two that resonate as being particularly helpful just now:

- **Direction and Calling.** How does this choice fit with the over-all direction and calling of God upon my life? (Remember Jeremiah's experience of calling.) Is there a growing sense of authenticity, wholeness, congruence with who I am and how God has been active in my life to this point?
- **Consolation.** Which choice brings the deepest sense of life, inner peace and freedom? (John 10:10, II Corinthians 3:17) Is there a growing sense of wholeness, authenticity, congruence with who I am in God?
- **Scripture.** Is there a particular Scripture that God is bringing to me relative to this choice? What is it saying?
- **Life of Christ.** Is this choice consistent with what I know about the mind and heart of Christ and his redemptive purposes in the world?

- **Character Growth and Development.** How will this direction nurture the fruit of the Spirit in me—particular the fruit of love. What does love call for? What is God doing in my character and spiritual growth and will this choice continue to nurture this growth?
- **Eternal Perspective.** Does this choice value what is eternal and permanent and holds the deepest value rather than what is transient and impermanent? If I imagine myself on my death-bed, which choice would I wish I had made?
- **Community.** How does this choice fit with others' observations of who I am and what God is doing in my in my life? Am I willing to open up every facet of this decision to a trusted spiritual friend for their wisdom and insight? Is there anything in the overall tradition of the Christian faith that might inform my decision?

4. Clarify your Perspective.

5. Make a choice (interiorly)

6. Seek inner confirmation

7. Just Do It! The One who has called you is faithful.
(I Thess. 5:24)