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DISCERNMENT & GODLY CHARACTER

We have all been in God's Church for many years, in most cases probably for several decades. We understand quite clearly that God expects us to live by all of His laws. We also understand that God expects us to develop the attitude of seeking to do whatever will be pleasing in God's sight.

Seeking to please God revolves around changing the way we think, the way we use our minds. Our natural minds seek to please self and not God. The word "repent" refers to changing the way we think. Seeking to please God is the greatest single component of real repentance.

Seeking to please God includes **changing our personalities and our character** to be more in line with what God is looking for. Desiring to please God includes eliminating from our character traits that are unacceptable to God (e.g. pride, vanity, greed, fearfulness, covetousness, hypocrisy, etc.), and instead developing those character attributes that God desires to see in us (e.g. humility, faithfulness, boldness, compassion, selflessness, etc.).

As I explained in my article "What Is Sin?", the most basic definition for "sin" is this: **Sin is anything and everything that God does not like.** The reason for this definition is that anything that God does not like obviously **misses the target** for what God wants to see and wants to accomplish. This is explained in detail in the above-mentioned article "What is Sin?"

In plain terms: all character attributes that God does not like are just as surely sin, as are all transgressions of God's laws.

But it goes one step further than just eliminating from our character any undesirable traits. We must also inculcate into our character those attributes that God **does** want to see in us. There are certain attributes that we must develop and make a part of our very being, or else God will not have us in His Family. Two obvious traits in this regard are the attributes of **unconditional faith** in God (that's the opposite of being unbelieving), and **boldness** (that's the opposite of being fearful). This is clear from God's statement in Revelation 21:8.

In addition to these two there are other equally important character attributes we must also develop in order to please God. Ultimately we will have to develop every single character trait that God Himself has, because that will be the only way for us to ultimately "become one" with God, **having the same character God has.**

One important attribute which God expects us to develop is **discernment**. Discernment is one of God's attributes.

WHAT WE MEAN BY "DISCERNMENT"

Let's start by defining what we mean by "discernment". Discernment refers to the ability to distinguish between things, to separate things, to have good judgmental perception, to have insight, to recognize differences between things. Discernment requires both knowledge and understanding.

Discernment is an attribute of the mind which must be developed over time.

Discernment represents a changed way of thinking.

Discernment is an ability which requires time to be developed in anyone, because discernment requires the accumulation of a certain amount of knowledge. It also requires that accumulation of knowledge to then be processed in the person's mind by usage, thereby developing understanding.

So here is the point:

Discernment represents a different way of processing the knowledge and the understanding we have acquired, different from the natural mind's way of processing that knowledge.

When we came into this world we had no discernment at all. We didn't know what was right and what was wrong. Those are things we had to learn and develop over time.

When people lack discernment they may at times be described as simplistic, naive, shallow, superficial, shortsighted, or even as deceived. In fact, **discernment is one specific opposite of deception**. A deceived person cannot discern between right and wrong. Deception and discernment are mutually exclusive because the one will block out the other.

You understand that Satan has deceived "the whole world" (Revelation 12:9). This means that "the whole world" lacks real discernment, because they are all deceived.

Consider this:

Because **deceived people cannot discern what is right and what is wrong**, therefore deceived people cannot really be called by God in this age. In order for anyone to potentially be called by God, that person must have a certain amount of discernment regarding what is right and what is wrong in the sight of God.

SATAN HAS DECEIVED HUMANITY

Let's look at Revelation 12:9.

And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and **Satan, who deceives the whole world**: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. (Revelation 12:9)

Satan's explicit purpose in deceiving humanity is **to prevent human beings from understanding God's truth**. Without discernment between right and wrong, people are uncallable by God. And that is one of Satan's goals, to prevent people from being called by God. All the "seed by the wayside" in the parable (see Matthew 13:4) represent deceived people who lack discernment of what is true before God and what isn't. They are easy pickings for Satan.

So we need discernment in different areas:

- 1) We need to learn to discern **how and** where Satan has deceived humanity on so many different issues. We have to learn what is God's truth and what ideas are heresies. That requires discernment.
- 2) We also need to learn discernment **in all our personal interactions** with all other people. There are

two aspects to this area: discerning the effect **our words and actions** will have on other people, and secondly, discerning the correct meaning and intentions underlying **the words and actions of other people**.

In regard to this last point, discernment is **the ability to correctly see and understand the viewpoints and the motivations of other people**. That ability will have a major influence on how we relate to and get along with other people. And how we relate to other people, and how we get along with other people is after all a large part of what true Christianity is all about. So **a good sense of discernment has a major impact on the heart and core of basic Christian living**.

To develop real discernment in all areas of our lives we need God's help and God's guidance.

SEEKING GOD'S HELP

God appeared to Solomon at the start of his reign.

In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night: and God said, **Ask what I shall give you**. (1 Kings 3:5)

That's also what God says to you and to me! Jesus Christ very clearly says to us "ask and it shall be given you ...", continuing with "for **every one that asks receives** ..." (Matthew 7:7-8). That's you and that's me. God's offer to Solomon wasn't all that different from God's offer to you and to me.

So let's continue with the account. Solomon said:

Give therefore your servant an **understanding** (Hebrew "**shama**") heart to judge your people, that I may **discern** (Hebrew "**biyn**") between good and bad: for who is able to judge this your so great a people? (1 Kings 3:9)

And God replied:

And God said unto him, Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked for yourself long life; neither have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked the life of your enemies; but have asked for yourself **understanding** (Hebrew "**biyn**") to **discern** (Hebrew "**shama**") judgment; (1 Kings 3:11)

The Hebrew word "shama" has the basic meaning "**to hear**". But it also frequently has the extended meaning of "**to obey**". That is somewhat like when we in English say: "now you listen to me", with the implied message that you will then do what I am telling you to do, that you will then obey me.

In the KJV "shama" is translated 785 times as "hear", 196 times as "hearken", and 81 times as "obey". When "shama" is used in reference to a man responding to God, then it invariably has the meaning of "to obey".

The Hebrew word "biyn" basically means "**to understand, to discern**", etc.

So notice that in God's statement **these two Hebrew words are reversed**, which you would not realize by only looking at our English translations.

Our English translations have translated "**shama**" in verse 9 as "understanding" and in verse 11 as "discern". Then our English translations have translated "**biyn**" in verse 9 as "discern" and in verse 11 as "understanding". These translations imply that "shama" and "biyn" are interchangeable synonyms. But **they are not interchangeable!** Our translations have blurred the intended meanings.

Here is the point:

Solomon asked God not just to give him "**a hearing heart**" so that he could then discern between good and bad. Solomon was also asking God to give him "**an obedient heart**"; i.e. Solomon was asking God to give him an obedient frame of mind.

To this request God then replied: "you have asked for yourself **discernment** to hear judgment". While our English translations are not a major problem, we should be clear that what Solomon asked for was not wisdom.

Solomon really asked for an attitude of being willing to listen, being willing to be obedient to God, so that he would then be equipped to discern between good and bad when he would have to judge the people.

Let's understand that Solomon asked for an obedient attitude, a mind that is willing to listen to instructions; he asked for a submissive spirit. Wisdom, on the other hand, is typically a consequence of this particular attitude, but wisdom is not, and cannot be, a cause for such an attitude.

All our attitudes are always under our own control. And God does not give us attitudes. We ourselves have to provide the right attitudes. **God never gives anyone "an obedient attitude"**. That's not possible as long as we human beings have a free, independent will.

Now because Solomon was already providing the right attitude himself, i.e. he already had a genuine humility when he made this request, therefore God gave Solomon "the consequence" of that attitude. Notice what God said to Solomon.

Behold, I have done according to your words: lo, I have given you a wise and an **understanding** (Hebrew "**biyn**") heart; so that there was none like you before you, neither after you shall any arise like unto you. (1 Kings 3:12)

This may seem like a minor point, but notice the following distinction:

Solomon had asked for a "**shama**" heart (verse 9).

God then gave Solomon a "**biyn**" heart (verse 12).

Strictly speaking God didn't actually give Solomon what Solomon had asked for. Can you see that? A "biyn" heart is not really the same as a "shama" heart.

Here is the distinction:

Solomon had asked for an attitude of being teachable and willing to obey God. But God doesn't give us human beings specific attitudes. And God certainly does not give us "an obedient spirit". We ourselves provide the attitudes we have. Specifically, Solomon himself had to provide a teachable and obedient attitude. And that is exactly what Solomon did at that stage of his life; he provided to God a very teachable and submissive attitude.

What God then gave Solomon was not a teachable, obedient attitude. **God gave Solomon an ability**, specifically the ability to discern between right and wrong. But that ability was 100% dependent on Solomon always maintaining that teachable, obedient attitude. If Solomon would ever **lose** that humble, teachable **attitude**, then he would also **lose the ability** God had given him. This is something we really need to understand.

This dependency of the ability on the continuation of the attitude is also reinforced in what God said next.

And **if you will walk** in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as your father David did walk, **then I will lengthen** your days. (1 Kings 3:14)

God's conditional "if ... then ..." statement shows that God required Solomon to always maintain that humble, obedient heart.

At this point let's understand something very basic:

Sometimes we ask God for something that God doesn't give to us human beings, because what we are asking for is actually under our own control.

Our attitudes are one example in this regard. It never works for us to ask God to give us a good, teachable, humble, obedient attitude, because we ourselves have to provide that good attitude. This point also applies to other things for which we sometimes ask God, that the things we ask for are actually things for which we ourselves are responsible.

For example, God does not give us any of the fruits of the holy spirit, like love, joy, peace, faith, meekness, etc. (see Galatians 5:22-23). That doesn't stop people from asking God to give them love for other people, faith and meekness, etc.

The problem in this case is that people don't understand the difference between God's spirit and the fruits of God's spirit. God gives us His spirit, but then **we ourselves are required by God to use that spirit in order to produce all of the fruits of God's spirit**. God gives us the tools and the means for us ourselves to then produce fruits.

That's what Jesus Christ meant when He said:

"herein is my Father glorified, **that you bear much fruit**; so shall you be my disciples" (John 15:8).

God upon real repentance gives us the holy spirit, and we ourselves then have to produce "the fruits of the spirit", which Paul listed in Galatians chapter 5. Asking God to give us the fruits of His holy spirit is something that God will not do, because we ourselves are expected to produce those fruits by putting God's spirit to use in our lives.

We need to understand the difference between what we can ask God for, and what we ourselves are expected to do.

Getting back to Solomon:

Solomon asking God to give him a teachable heart was the same thing as when Elisha asked to be given "a double portion of Elijah's spirit" (i.e. to be given a double portion of Elijah's attitude, see 2 Kings 2:9). Both of these requests were for a specific frame of mind, and they were **impossible requests**, because we cannot get somebody else's frame of mind. (See my 2011 article "**The End-Time Elijah**" for a thorough discussion of Elisha's request for a double portion of Elijah's spirit.)

Now don't misunderstand.

Solomon's request was great, even as Elisha's request was great! Solomon's request was great because it was the expression of a very humble attitude. And Solomon's request pleased God. But it

was also a request that was made from a position of a certain lack of understanding.

Let's keep in mind that at that point Solomon was still a young teenager. And there was much that Solomon did not yet understand at that point in time. I suspect that Solomon within the next two decades (i.e. before God appeared to him a second time) learned that **he himself was responsible for always maintaining the right teachable, obedient attitude**. He learned that this is not something that God somehow gives to people.

So for us the point in this account is this:

We ourselves have to provide the right, submissive, obedient attitude for God to work with us. When we do provide that right attitude, then God will make discernment, amongst many other things, available to us, by giving us understanding. We must provide the fertile soil in which God can then plant the seed.

So in order for us to develop the attribute of discernment, **we need to ask God for understanding**. It is understanding that will then empower us to develop discernment in all areas of life. Without understanding, discernment is impossible. We develop discernment by making use of the understanding that God makes available to us.

Let's now also look at verse 10.

And **the speech pleased the Lord**, that Solomon had asked this thing. (1 Kings 3:10)

As the Apostle John explained:

And **whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we ... do those things that are pleasing in his sight**. (1 John 3:22)

God was pleased with Solomon's desire to want to have a teachable, humble, obedient attitude. Solomon's attitude in making this request was pleasing to God. Therefore **God answered Solomon's request in the best possible way**. God doesn't give attitudes, but God does give abilities. So God gave Solomon the ability to produce what is typically one of the fruits of the right attitude.

This is a vital lesson for us!

If our speech is the expression of an attitude that is pleasing to God, then God will also answer our requests. That's what God did for Solomon, and that is what the Apostle John tells us God will also do for us.

When we bring our requests before God, then **we should be following in the footsteps of a very young Solomon**, one who was very humble, obedient and teachable.

We should also note that **God was very pleased with the motivation** for Solomon's request. It was pleasing to God when Solomon desired a better discernment so that he might do a better job in ruling over the people of Israel. This was not a selfish request. Solomon recognized his own inadequacies for coping with the great responsibility of ruling over God's people, and therefore he desired a teachable, obedient attitude, which would form the foundation for developing the ability to deal wisely with that great responsibility.

The same is true for us.

When our motivation is to develop a sense of discernment so that we can then more effectively

fulfill our Christian responsibility to love our neighbor as ourselves, by the way we treat our neighbor, and by the way we correctly understand the motivations for his actions, then our prayerful requests will also be pleasing to God. And when our requests are pleasing to God, then God will also answer our requests.

A basic key for us to understand:

If our requests are pleasing to God, then God will answer those requests in God's own way. If our requests are not pleasing to God, then God will not answer our requests. The only requests God answers are those that are pleasing to Him.

Therefore the most important point to ensure that God will answer our prayers is to **always ask God only for things that will be pleasing to God**. If that's what we do, then we can be certain that God will answer our requests, just like God answered Solomon's request.

We must provide the humble, teachable attitude, and then God will provide the abilities and the means we will need to live the Christian life. And never forget that through the words of Jesus Christ **God has already said to us: ask what I shall give you**.

DEVELOPING DISCERNMENT

Let me give you an analogy. Here in the USA most adults learn to drive a car. And learning to drive is not difficult. All drivers know how to operate the steering wheel: when they want to turn right, then they turn the steering wheel to the right; and when they want to turn left, then they turn the steering wheel to the left. All drivers also know how to use the gas pedal and the brake pedal. When they want to slow down, then they step on the brake pedal; and when they want to speed up, then they press down the gas pedal. (We'll ignore analogies to cars with a stick-shift transmission.)

Yes, learning to drive is quite easy.

What is not so easy to learn is how to deal with **unexpected circumstances**. What do you do when a small child suddenly runs in front of your car? What do you do when you suddenly see a big pothole right in front of your path? What do you do when you drive around a corner and there is a large object lying in the middle of your lane?

What do you do if after some very heavy rain the road in front of you is flooded by what you think is a foot of water? What do you do when your car starts to make some unexpected noises ... do you turn up the radio to make the noises go away or what do you do? What if it is winter and drizzling with the temperature just above freezing, and then as you drive into the night the temperature starts to drop. How do you establish whether the road is still safe to drive on, or whether it is freezing over and becoming very dangerous?

What do you do when one of your tires suddenly bursts? What do you do when you are driving down a hill and your brakes fail? What do you do when your window wipers stop working during a rain storm and you must get to your destination in a hurry? What if there is a fire ahead of you, and the flames have already jumped over the road, and there is dense smoke everywhere? What do you do when there is a stretch where your dirt road is very muddy ... do you drive through the muddy section or not?

How does a driver handle all these and a thousand other **unexpected circumstances**?

Even though the driver knows how to drive his car, **a lack of experience** can lead to a driver **making wrong decisions** in such unexpected situations, and perhaps getting stuck or perhaps having a serious accident. **An inexperienced driver commonly does not read the unexpected situation correctly**, and as a result he easily makes a bad decision.

In a way **that is what discernment is like!**

Correct discernment prepares a person for correctly dealing with unexpected circumstances. A person with good discernment is like a very experienced driver. A person who lacks discernment is like the novice driver who has no experience at all with unusual circumstances, and whose reflexes have not been conditioned to respond to unexpected situations.

A prudent man foresees the evil, and hides himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished. (Proverbs 22:3)

"The prudent man" is someone who, like an experienced driver, has discernment, while "the simple" is someone who, like the novice driver, lacks discernment. One key for developing discernment highlighted in this verse is to **always look ahead**. In driving looking ahead gives us an earlier warning of potential problems on our road, and in life looking ahead helps us to anticipate potentially undesirable situations in our personal dealings with other people.

The single greatest factor that sets people with discernment apart from those who lack discernment is this matter of looking ahead! Discerning people look ahead and people who lack discernment don't really look ahead.

Whoso keeps the commandment shall feel no evil thing: and **a wise man's heart discerns both time and judgment.** (Ecclesiastes 8:5)

The person with discernment knows when to present some information, and when to keep that information to himself. He knows whether that information is suitable for sharing with other people or whether it should be kept private. The foolish person commonly does not discern that his words can very easily cause a great deal of damage.

It goes without saying that **a person who gossips is utterly devoid of discernment**. As Solomon wrote:

A talebearer reveals secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit conceals the matter. (Proverbs 11:13)

The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly. (Proverbs 18:8; Proverbs 26:22)

A lack of discernment marks the talebearer. **Talebearers have an awful lot of hatred in their lives.** And they have no discernment at all. And wherever there is a total absence of discernment, there is also an absence of conversion. In plain language: **talebearers are not converted**. Their minds have not been changed.

THE BIBLE GIVES US DISCERNMENT

Notice what the Apostle Paul told the Hebrews.

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

Jesus Christ is the Word of God, and Jesus Christ has perfect discernment. And the Bible, the written word of God, makes discernment available to us. The more fully we understand God's mind and God's intentions, as revealed in the Bible, the greater our discernment is going to become. **The Bible is a tool for developing discernment in us.** It is a tool that we must use.

Specifically, the Bible enables us to discern between outward actions and appearances on the one hand, and the inward motivations and intentions and desires of the heart on the other hand. This discernment between these two things will help us distinguish between right conduct and right actions which stem from a godly motivation, and right actions and right conduct which are based on selfish and ungodly motivations.

But just like becoming a good driver requires a lot of experience in actually driving a car, so also getting discernment requires a lot of use. It requires a lot of practice, like an athlete training for a competition.

For every one that uses milk *is* unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongs to them that are of full age, *even* those who **by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.** (Hebrews 5:13-14)

We have to practice discerning right and wrong. And after 20 or 30 years in God's Church we should expect someone to have greater discernment of God's mind and God's purposes than someone who has been in God's Church for only a few years. Discernment comes with lots of practicing.

Notice what God tells us through Jeremiah.

Thus says the LORD; **Cursed be the man that trusts in man,** and makes flesh his arm, and whose heart departs from the LORD. (Jeremiah 17:5)

God tells us that it is dangerous for us to rely on human beings. That is where we need discernment. We all experience many situations where the people we are interacting with have some kind of self-interest at stake, as for example when we are dealing with people who want to sell us something. Often such people attempt to disguise their own self-interest, trying to appear objective and unbiased.

Now surely all of us have at one time or another been tricked into buying something we didn't need or want, or buying something that wasn't nearly as good a bargain as we thought we were getting. Perhaps we bought "a lemon" from a second-hand car dealer? Or we were conned into buying a totally new piece of equipment when our old piece of equipment could easily have been repaired very cheaply. Or we bought something that turned out to be totally useless. etc.

What was our problem in those situations?

Our problem was that **we lacked discernment.** We did not discern that the other person was trying to get as much money from us as they could possibly finagle out of us. We were being deceived in some way, and we didn't even know it. Had we correctly discerned the true motivation of the person we were dealing with, we would not have given them our money for an inferior product, or for something we didn't really intend to buy in the first place. But we were deceived, and we were then tricked into buying something.

Quite some time ago I downloaded a file called "70 Different Closing Techniques", which article lays open the many different ways salespeople try to trick other people into buying their products. It is all psychological trickery. It is especially helpful to keep Jeremiah 17:5 in mind when dealing with salespeople. Yes, this may not always apply, but a lot of the time Jeremiah 17:5, coupled with verse 9, nails it. No matter what salespeople tell us, their job is to get our money.

Anyway, here is the point:

After going through the 50+ pages of "Technique >> Examples >> How it works" for all 70 techniques, I now have much more discernment in situations where some salesman is trying to pitch one of these closing techniques to me. It has opened my eyes. I can say to myself: oh, now he is trying to use technique X or Y on me; hmm, let's see where he goes from here. And sure enough, he presents the exact approach I had seen explained in that article.

Likewise, the Bible can open our eyes to the endless array of "**closing techniques**" that **Satan pitches to us**, to persuade us to sin and to reject God's ways for conducting our lives. And if we read the 1500+ pages (i.e. the Bible) of "**techniques >> examples >> how it worked in biblical times**", then we too will have more discernment regarding how Satan tempts us with his particular "closing techniques".

The Apostle James wrote:

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that gives to all *men* liberally, and upbraids not; and it shall be given him. (James 1:5)

In our context, what will be given to us is an ability, but not an attitude. As we study the Bible, and as we face situations where we need to have discernment, we need to ask God for "the ability" to discern right and wrong. And if we ourselves provide a humble, teachable attitude, then, as James tells us, that ability will be given to us. We must provide the attitude, and God will then provide the ability.

The fear of the LORD *is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding* have all they that do *his commandments*: his praise endures for ever. (Psalm 111:10; see also Proverbs 1:7 and Proverbs 9:10)

"The fear of the Eternal" is a description of the right attitude that we ourselves must bring to this process. If we diligently search with the right attitude, then God will give us the wisdom and the understanding.

Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard *it*, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spares his own son that serves him. **Then shall you return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked**, between him that serves God and him that serves him not. (Malachi 3:16-18)

In our age today, with the right foundation we will be able to discern between the very many Church of God groups, between those who serve God and those who don't.

And let's be quite clear: **there are many "false brethren"** (see Galatians 2:4 and 2 Corinthians 11:26) **amongst us today!** And that is one reason why correct discernment is such a vital attribute in our age, as it in fact has always been. Discernment in this particular area is something that God has to give to us in response to us approaching God with the correct attitude, even as discernment is something God gave to Solomon. What God did for Solomon, God will do for you and for me.

If we seek understanding here, then God will make that available to us, and we'll be able to discern who

are "false brethren", even as the Apostle Paul was able to discern this.

God can and will show us **the things** that are wrong, **the attitudes** that are wrong, and **the motivations** that are wrong. It is not a matter of us saying to ourselves about someone: "he has a bad attitude because he disagrees with me". It is a matter of God helping us to discern **those situations** where "the thoughts and the intents of the heart" are wrong before God.

Consider what God said to the Prophet Jonah.

And God said to Jonah, Do you well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, **I do well to be angry, even unto death**. Then said the LORD, Thou have had pity on the gourd, for the which you have not labored, neither made it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that **cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand**; and *also* much cattle? (Jonah 4:9-11)

It is quite clear that Jonah not only had a rotten attitude, but he also totally lacked real discernment. **Jonah was bitter**. Now it is one thing for people in the world to lack real discernment, and that is something God takes into account (the second resurrection is proof that God takes their lack of discernment into account).

But it is something altogether different if we in God's Church continue to lack discernment. We are supposed to grow in knowledge and in understanding and in discernment. And if we don't grow in these things, then we will be "unprofitable servants" to God. We are required to grow in our ability to **correctly process all the knowledge we receive**. We must process that knowledge from a godly perspective.

If we don't correctly process the knowledge that is made available to us, then we are still deceived, and then we certainly lack discernment. Jonah did not "correctly process" the knowledge God made available to him; Jonah wanted to see Nineveh destroyed, which was not God's intention.

God really wanted to avoid having to destroy Nineveh, but Jonah didn't want to see it that way. The fact that the Ninevites could not really discern right from wrong (i.e. between their right hand and their left hand) meant nothing to Jonah. He wanted to see them destroyed.

So regarding Jonah: he did correctly discern that God intended to not destroy Nineveh. But **Jonah openly disagreed with God's will**, and if anything, that is worse than not growing in a correct discernment of God's will ... to correctly discern God's will but to disagree with it.

HOW GOD TESTS US

When people are first coming to understand God's truth and then seek to be baptized, many of us have to face various tests and trials. Typically our main tests revolve around living by all of God's laws. Some people may face problems in order to keep the weekly Sabbath and the annual Feasts and Holy Days. And other people may face financial problems once they come to understand God's laws of tithing. Or people may face hostile relatives who resent us becoming involved with God's Church.

What very few people who come into God's Church understand is that there are two distinct types of tests to which God exposes us. Those two categories of tests are:

Category #1: The tests which God expects us to pass before we even receive God's spirit, tests we have to pass before we are even baptized. In analogy I have referred to this category of tests

as our "entrance exams" for being accepted into the program aimed at becoming a part of the people in the first resurrection.

These tests are aimed at finding out whether we are prepared to live by all of God's laws. In other words, they test whether or not we are willing to change away from the carnal mind that is spontaneously hostile towards God's laws (see Romans 8:7), and then be determined to live by God's laws.

Note!

We have to deal with these tests before we can receive God's spirit. These tests reveal whether or not we are willing to repent, i.e. to change the way our minds work and reason. These tests reveal our mindset and how much effort we ourselves are willing to put out for the convictions we have reached. And they can certainly be quite stressful, like the possibility of losing a job, etc. But they only mark the start of our Christian lives.

Category #2: These are the tests which God expects us to pass after we have received God's spirit. These tests are aimed at testing how we will use God's spirit. This is the category of tests implied in the parable of the talents. At repentance and baptism God gives us one or more "talents" of holy spirit.

Once God has given us His spirit, then God in effect says to us: **I want to see what you will do with the spirit I have given you.** If we do nothing with God's spirit, then we are "burying it" (see Matthew 25:18). In other words, if God's spirit has no effect of any kind in our lives (i.e. in the way we interact with everybody else, in the way we fulfill our responsibilities, in the way we control our temper and our emotions, if our conscience does not become more sensitive, if bad character or personality traits are never confronted and dealt with, etc.) then we are indeed burying God's spirit.

That's because in all of these examples I have mentioned, God's spirit will be prompting us to change! If we don't change, then we are ignoring or suppressing the prompting of God's spirit; i.e. we will be "quenching the spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

Can you understand that this category of tests is not about whether or not we will tithe and keep the Sabbath and not smoke and not eat unclean meats, etc.?

All those tests were about whether or not we would obey God's laws. Obedience typically involves category #1 tests.

Category #2 tests are about **how we will use our minds**, whether or not our conscience becomes more God-oriented. When these category #2 tests are about obedience, then it is usually obedience on a higher level, **a level that will require from us a greater sense of discernment.** Typically these are the tests we face after we have been in God's Church for several years or even a decade or more.

Most people in the Church never even recognize these tests when they are confronted by them. These situations test the way we will think and reason. Is it the same way that unconverted people in the world will reason? Or has their type of reasoning become "foolishness" to us? And is the way we now think and reason looked upon as "foolishness" by people in the world?

But the natural man receives not **the things of the Spirit of God**: for they **are foolishness unto him**: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:14)

These tests reveal how our minds work, whether or not we are capable of discerning between right and wrong, between what God will accept and what God will not accept.

Put another way:

The "**entry-level tests**" into God's Church **focus on God's laws**, and our willingness to obey God unconditionally. These tests are usually clear-cut and **easily identified**. Will we keep the Sabbath or not? Will we keep God's Holy Days or not? Will we accept and practice God's tithing laws or not? Are we prepared to stop smoking or not? etc. These tests revolve around the question: are we prepared to obey all of God's laws or not?

These tests do not require a great deal of understanding on our part. That is in line with us not yet having God's spirit to guide our decisions. With these tests we easily understand what is required. The only issue is: will we abide by all of these readily understood laws of God or not?

Once we have coped with all the "entry-level tests", then God frequently moves us up to the next level of testing. These tests almost always require from us a greater level of understanding and discernment.

This **next level of tests** from God tests our ability to **correctly discern attitudes and motivations**, and to correctly discern **God's real intentions** underlying all of His laws.

On this level our tests frequently revolve around **things that appear to be right** but sometimes are not, or around **things that appear to be wrong** but sometimes are not.

Frequently the tests regarding things that appear to be right don't seem to present direct challenges to any of God's laws. With these types of tests challenges to God's laws only become apparent upon **deeper examination of the principles** that may be involved.

God expects us to discern what is right and what is not right. And God also expects us to discern what God's actual intentions are for every law that God has given.

With this category of tests **it is absolutely devastating** for people to have the attitude: just tell me what to do and I'll do it; and just tell me what to believe and I'll believe it! With this category of tests **it is absolutely devastating** for the minister to make all the difficult decisions for the members in his congregation, practically running their lives.

The reason this approach is so devastating is that the people involved develop **zero discernment**, and they are virtually guaranteed to fall away when doctrinal upheavals come along, as they did after Mr. Armstrong's death.

This category of tests makes it imperative that we learn to make right decisions in very difficult circumstances.

One biblical example of a test on this level was how David handled the situation when he and his men had not eaten anything for about three days. David then accepted the "hallowed bread" (1 Samuel 21:4), which was "not lawful for him to eat" (see Matthew 12:4). You know the story. This was a test where David made the decision to do something that **appeared** to be wrong.

David had the discernment that in his circumstances God would accept him and his men eating bread that was normally restricted to the priesthood. David even explained his reasoning to the priest (1 Samuel 21:5). And Jesus Christ very clearly accepted David's reasoning and even used the word "guiltless" (Matthew 12:7).

[Comment: In Matthew 12:7 Jesus Christ implied that all three parties were "guiltless", i.e. His disciples eating ears of corn on the Sabbath, the priests performing temple duties on the Sabbath, and David

eating the showbread.]

With this category of tests God wants to know how well do we understand God's thinking, **how well do we understand God's actual intentions** for all of God's laws?

For example:

How well do we understand the Sabbath commandment? Anyone who thinks that Jesus Christ, technically speaking, broke the Sabbath commandment when He healed people is totally out of His mind! Correct discernment should make clear that when God gave the Sabbath commandment, it was never God's intention that this law would restrict the power of God to heal sick people! To claim, as the Pharisees did very hypocritically, that Jesus Christ healing people on the Sabbath somehow broke the commandment is preposterous, and totally devoid of any understanding and any discernment.

A vital key to understand:

For all of God's laws **the intention underlying each law** always, without exception, takes precedence over the actual literal wording of those laws.

On this higher level of tests from God, it is our responsibility to clearly establish God's actual intentions for every law. **That requires discernment.** It is only once we have clearly established God's actual intentions for a law, that then we can evaluate how that law applies to various unusual circumstances.

And in some instances certain things that are perfectly acceptable in accordance with God's intentions, may to the undiscerning mind appear to be transgressions of certain laws. In those cases the undiscerning minds will be in the wrong. **The letter of the law never supercedes the intent underlying that law!**

Another example:

When God gave the law that says "you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor", it was never God's intention that **criminals** and **hypocritical cheats** could appeal to this law to force their victims to truthfully divulge personal information, to enable those criminals to steal from their victims.

When someone is forced at gunpoint to reveal private banking information, then God certainly does not expect that victimized person to give the criminals the information they demand. In those circumstances it is perfectly acceptable for the victim to lie and to provide false information ... and that victim will be "guiltless" before God, even as David was "guiltless" in the matter of eating the showbread.

This type of situation is simply not what God intended to regulate with the ninth commandment. This situation in fact has nothing at all to do with the ninth commandment.

But this type of situation has everything to do with a correct discernment of the mind of God.

These two examples should suffice. The point we need to understand is this:

Once we have passed all the "entry-level tests" in coming into God's Church, from then onwards God wants to see our minds develop and change and become more like His Own mind. And so God then confronts us with **the next level of tests**, which will test our understanding and our level of discernment. Those tests are more difficult to identify, and they require a deeper level of thinking from us. Shallow, superficial thinking will only lead to failure and to rejection. And **we must learn from every mistake we**

make, because we will surely make some mistakes along the way of trying to develop a good sense of discernment.

Many people have never grasped that coming into God's Church involves anything other than passing those "entry-level tests". They make no effort to progress past those "entry-level tests" to the next level of developing an understanding and discerning mind. They don't apply the Apostle Paul's instruction.

Wherefore be you not unwise, but **understanding what the will of the Lord is**. (Ephesians 5:17)

Paul is not just talking about the ten commandments here! He is not just talking about the "entry-level tests". He is talking about the next level. To "understand the will of God" requires great discernment. This involves understanding God's real intentions underlying all of His laws.

It involves understanding what God is actually trying to achieve with every law that He has given. This requires us to not just seek answers to "**what** does God say to us?", but even more so to seek answers to the question "**why** has God given us this law, and what is God wanting to achieve with this law?".

There are many people in the various churches of God who have never made any attempts to apply Ephesians 5:17 in their lives, beyond dealing with the "entry-level tests".

They don't use their minds to evaluate every situation with which they are confronted in their daily lives, regarding what they hear and see and do. Consider God's instruction in Deuteronomy.

Therefore shall you **lay up** these **my words in your heart and in your soul**, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes. (Deuteronomy 11:18)

This is an instruction to meditate on God's laws, to ponder over how they apply in all of our daily life circumstances. This is an instruction to develop discernment by using our minds (i.e. in our heart and soul). "Frontlets between our eyes" means that **everything we see and experience** must be evaluated against the principles of God's laws, and our minds must perform that evaluation.

This is an instruction to develop correct discernment regarding everything that enters our minds through our eyes. This process of evaluating everything that confronts us in our daily lives, and thereby constantly developing and refining our discernment of right and wrong, will present us with tests on a higher level.

Let's look at a principle that Solomon presented.

As the fining pot for silver, and the furnace for gold; **so is a man to his praise**. (Proverbs 27:21)

This proverb has two distinct areas of application. Both applications deal with refining a person's character.

The first application is this: **How we respond to receiving praise** from other people reveals certain things about our character, things like humility or arrogance and pride, etc.

The second application is this: **The things and the people we ourselves praise** also reveal certain things about our character, things like sincerity or hypocrisy or naivety, etc. This is the application I want to briefly focus on in our context here.

When we praise people or things where God will disagree, then we lack discernment. **Will we praise adulterers and blasphemers**, because they happen to have said something or done something that we

agree with? Will we praise actions that are wrong before God, but which actions are in some way favorable to our personal financial circumstances? In other words, do the things we praise expose our own selfishness, or is the law of God the criterion that determines whether or not we praise someone or something?

The things we praise reveal things about our character. The things we praise also reveal our level of discernment or lack of it.

There are many other things we could still discuss on this subject of discernment. But the bottom line is this:

God requires us to develop a correct sense of discernment. And we develop such discernment by exercising our minds. We need to ask God to open our minds and to give us the ability to discern right from wrong. But we ourselves have to provide the attitude that desires to understand the mind of God more fully, and the attitude that is not going to be satisfied with having dealt with nothing more than all the "entry-level tests" for becoming a part of God's Church.

If we diligently seek to grow our sense of discernment, by constantly seeking a better understanding, then that attitude will be pleasing to God. And then God will answer our requests for better understanding.

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