

Lesson 15

Developing Discernment

Group Icebreakers:

- Bring a book with a Bible cover on it to the group meeting and show it to the group while asking what it is? (The response is most likely to be "a Bible.")
- Bring a book with a Bible cover on it to the group meeting and show it to the group while asking what it is? (The response is most likely to be "a Bible.")
- Have everyone open their Bibles to John 7:24.
- You begin reading a few lines from the book with the Bible cover on it.
- Then ask the group to relate John 7:24 with what has just transpired.

Introduction:

In the previous lesson, the topic of judging other people was discussed. Jesus' disciples were told not to judge other people. Several passages in the New Testament support this action and we will review them here. The first statement is from the book of Romans.¹ *"Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who WILL RENDER TO EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS."* In effect, the apostle Paul equates those who judge other people, as being stubborn and having unrepentant hearts. They are storing up wrath for themselves.

Another statement in the book of Romans says, *"Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand."*² The apostle Paul continues in this vein of thought.³ *"But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, 'AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD.' So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God."*

James, the Lord's brother and head of the Church in Jerusalem adds strength to the issue of judging others in the epistle under his name. He states, *"Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother, speaks against the law, and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?"*⁴ Near the end of his epistle James reinforces the point again when he says, *"Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged;*

¹ Romans 2:1-6

² Romans 14:4

³ Romans 14:10-12

⁴ James 4:11-12

behold, the Judge is standing right at the door.”⁵ Every one of these Scriptures supports Jesus’ teaching: “Do not judge and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned.”

Jesus’ disciples are not to judge other people because God has not appointed them as judge. In the book of Acts it is written, *“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”⁶* The book of Romans adds force to the point as it declares, *“On the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.”⁷* And the book entitled Hebrews sums it up. *“For we know Him who said, ‘VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY.’ And again, ‘THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE.’ it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”⁸*

Although Jesus does not want His disciples to judge other people, he does expect them to discern spiritual truths and make decisions between good and evil. The three words: judge, discern and decision are very similar. In fact the word judge is used many times in place of discern and decision throughout Scripture and it is only by its **use** in the **context** that it’s true meaning can be arrived at.

An illustration of this point comes from the Gospel of Luke 7:41-43 when Jesus tells a parable to a man named, Simon. *“A certain moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. Which of them therefore will love him more? Simon answered and said, ‘I suppose the one whom he forgave more.’ And He said to him, ‘You have judged correctly.’”* In this case Simon did not directly judge another person but correctly discerned a spiritual truth.

The meanings of the word discern are: to **perceive** or **recognize** or to make out **clearly**. It is a discovery of the truth about something or someone in which a personal opinion can be formed. Once the truth is known, an individual may take action regarding the matter. However, the action does not have to be the judgment of another, which requires issuing a decree or passing a sentence upon them. Jesus summarizes the concept in a statement He makes to His disciples at a later time. *“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore be shrewd as serpents (discerning), and innocent as doves (without passing judgment).”⁹*

Reading the Scripture:

Developing Discernment
The Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 7:6
Scripture excerpts from “Follow Me: A Message from God”

Do not give what is holy to dogs¹⁰, and do not throw your pearls before swine,¹¹ lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.

⁵ James 5:9

⁶ Acts 17:31-32

⁷ Romans 2:16

⁸ Hebrews 10:30-31

⁹ Matthew 10:16

¹⁰ **Do not give what is holy to dogs.** Dogs are considered fools, those who say in their heart, *“There is no God.”* Proverbs 26:11 says, *“As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly.”* The point is, don’t give fools those things which are God’s since they don’t believe there is a God anyway.

The Commands:

- ❖ Do not give what is holy to dogs.
- ❖ Do not throw your pearls before swine.

Group Discussion:

1. What criteria do you use to discern between good and evil?

The Lesson:

Throughout Scripture disciples are encouraged to be discerning. In fact, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is the discerning of spirits, which is to assist the Church in determining what is good and what is evil. Discerning good and evil according to the writer of the book of Hebrews requires training the senses.¹² Through training and practice, maturity in discernment comes. In trials, two or more witnesses were required before a judgment could be rendered. To accurately discern between good and evil, three factors need to be considered before an opinion is formed. All three are to be in agreement. They are:

1. The individual's **actions** or deeds.
2. The individual's **words**.
3. The Word of **God**.

As the saying goes, “You cannot judge a book by its cover” neither can you discern good and evil by outward appearance alone. An individual's actions or a situation's outward appearance is important in discerning but cannot be the exclusive test. For example, if we saw someone pointing a gun at someone else, we don't have enough information to discern whether it is good or evil; we need more information. Nicodemus once reminded the rulers of Israel about making an accurate discernment when he said, “*Our Law does not judge a man, unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it.*”¹³ Jesus also said, “*As I hear, I judge.*”¹⁴

Words are an important indicator of what is in the heart: the spirit behind the motive. Jesus alluded to this when speaking with the Pharisees. “*For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil.*”¹⁵ **Motives matter to God.**

Previously in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus used three illustrations of men **doing good deeds**: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. The people who did these good deeds received rewards. Those who did them privately received their reward from God. Those who did them to be seen publicly received praise from men, but Jesus labeled them as hypocrites. He knew their motives. According to the book of Proverbs, “*Every man's way is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the hearts.*”¹⁶

The Word of God, as revealed through **Scripture** or the **Holy Spirit**, is the final factor in discerning good and evil. Do actions and words or appearances and motives line up with the

¹¹ **Do not throw your pearls before swine.** Swine are those who lack discretion, the ability to make good decisions. Proverbs 11:22 says, “*Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a woman who shows no discretion.*” The point is, don't give women, who show no discretion, something that is valuable since they won't know what to do with it anyway.

¹² Hebrews 5:14

¹³ John 7:51

¹⁴ John 5:30

¹⁵ Matthew 12:34

¹⁶ Proverbs 21:2

Word of God? The book of Hebrews says, “*For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*”¹⁷ For those who use the Scriptures in discerning, it is important to do so correctly and calls for more than just a cursory knowledge of them. The Apostle Paul encouraged Timothy in his study of the Scriptures. “*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.*”¹⁸

In the first part of his teaching on discernment Jesus issues a pair of commands to His disciples that require discerning good and evil and then taking the appropriate action. “*Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.*” These commands test the disciple’s ability to understand the Scriptures and accurately apply them. In the literal sense, no one but a child or insane person would even think of doing anything like Jesus is indicating. Common sense dictates that animals do not know the value what is holy or valuable, so why give them holy things or pearls in the first place. It is better to give them their food.

However, most people upon hearing the commands recognize that there has to be more to them than the literal interpretation. They understand that Jesus is using these commands figuratively in order to communicate a deeper spiritual truth to the disciples. But it takes more than this intuitive sense to know what Jesus is talking about and then to apply it accurately.

In the natural world, children begin using their five senses immediately, but it takes several years to develop them fully. Part of this natural maturing process requires learning words to communicate the senses. And children must also learn to associate concepts and ideas to make mature decisions. In most societies, children are not even held accountable for their decisions until they reach puberty. For example, a three-year old child might attempt to feed a pig his mother’s jewelry but a twelve year-old wouldn’t even consider it. The same principle holds true for disciples as well. Once a person has been born again into the kingdom of God he begins to develop his spiritual senses, learns words to communicate them and uses Scripture to develop God’s ideas and concepts.

In order to understand what Jesus is spiritually talking about in issuing these two commands we’ll start with some general observations.

1. The commands are more specifically directed to an immature disciple, since a mature one would not even consider doing anything like this in the first place. The mature person has had his senses trained to discern good and evil.
2. The giving or throwing action indicates an attempt at feeding something to the animals.
3. Dogs and swine are beasts. They do not have the same nature as the one doing the feeding: in this case a disciple. Therefore they cannot be fellow believers in Jesus Christ.
4. The word “holy” indicates something belonging to or dedicated to God.
5. The term “your pearls” indicates something valuable that the individual who is doing the feeding possesses.

The first command deals with giving something **holy** to dogs. Dogs are referred to in the book of Proverbs, “*Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.*”¹⁹ Through this

¹⁷ Hebrews 4:12

¹⁸ 2 Timothy 2:15

¹⁹ Proverbs 26:11

Scripture we discover a dog is likened to a fool. And a fool according to Scripture is more than a silly or unwise person; he is one who does not believe in God. Psalms 14:1 says, *“The fool has said in his heart, there is no God.”* In the proverb, both the dog and the fool return to their vomit, which consists of something they have eaten or partaken of and rejected.

In His teaching, Jesus said that the beasts would trample underfoot or despise what the disciple gives them and then turn on the disciple himself, to destroy him. A reference to this is found in the book of Proverbs, *“He who corrects a scoffer gets dishonor for himself, and he who reproves a wicked man gets insults for himself. Do not reprove a scoffer, lest he hate you, reprove a wise man, and he will love you.”*²⁰ A scoffer and a fool are one in the same. **The point concerning dogs is** “don’t give anything that belongs to God to one who has rejected God already.” (i.e. Holy Communion, spiritual gifts, yourself, etc.)

The second command involves casting pearls before swine. From Scripture we learn that pearls are associated with wisdom or precious truths. The book of Job 28:18 says, *“And the acquisition of wisdom is above that of pearls.”* Swine are referred to in the book of Proverbs 11:22, *“As a ring of gold in a swine’s snout, so is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion.”*

A woman who lacks discretion is one who lacks: taste, perception, reason, intelligence, advice, behavior, judgment, or understanding. She entices people to sin. This reference to her character is found in the book of Proverbs 9:13-18. *“The woman of folly is boisterous, she is naive, and knows nothing. And she sits at the doorway of her house, on a seat by the high places of the city, calling to those who pass by, who are making their paths straight: ‘Whoever is naive, let him turn in here,’ and to him who lacks understanding she says, ‘Stolen water is sweet; and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.’ But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.”* **The point concerning swine is** “don’t give wisdom to one who can’t perceive or understand it.” (“Remember, the **fear [reverence] of the Lord**²¹ is the beginning of wisdom,” Proverbs 9:10)

Summary:

Many sincere Christians want to give godly things they possess to everyone around them. However Jesus commands His disciples to be mature and discerning in giving these things to others. They include such things as the gospel, communion, wisdom, instruction and spiritual gifts. He recognized that some people will not only reject what the disciple is trying to give them but will actually despise it and turn on the disciple as well. Jesus sets boundaries for His disciples to live within because He loves and wants to protect them. So each of us should heed His warning and obey His commands.

Application:

Read: Mark 7:24-30 and answer the following questions. Briefly explain the reasons for your answers.

²⁰ Proverbs 9:7-8

²¹ **Fear [reverence] of the Lord.** Holding God’s Word above all other words.

The Syrophenician Woman Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30

Scripture excerpts from “Follow Me: A Message from God”

AD 30, Summer

And from there He arose and went away to the region of **Tyre**.²² And when He had entered a house, He wanted no one to know of it; yet He could not escape notice. And behold, a **Canaanite**²³ woman came out from that region, and began to cry out, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed." But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came to Him and kept asking Him, saying, "Send her away, for she is shouting out after us." But He answered and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" Now the woman was a Gentile, of the **Syrophenician**²⁴ race. And she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And He was saying to her, "Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the **dogs**,"²⁵ but she answered and said to Him, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table feed on the children's crumbs." And He said to her, "O woman, your faith is great; be it done for you as you wish; because of this answer go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter." And her daughter was healed at once. And going back to her home, she found the child lying on the bed, the demon having departed.

1. Was the Syrophenician woman a swine? (No, she recognized value and went to receive it from Jesus.)
2. Was the Syrophenician woman a dog? (Although Jesus initially associated the woman with dogs, she proved to Him that she was a believer.
 - a. She recognized and honored God.
 - b. She called upon the goodness and mercy of God.
 - c. She recognized and honored God's children.
 - d. She recognized her place, accepted it in humility respecting God and His choices.
 - e. She assured Jesus that she would accept anything at His hands and not turn on Him.)
3. How did Jesus make His judgment? (By what He heard.
 1. "I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me," (John 5:30)
 2. "For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil. And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned," (Matthew 12:34-37)
 3. "Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is counted prudent," (Proverbs 17:28))

²² **Tyre.** A city located in Phoenicia (present day Lebanon) on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. It is approximately 35 miles NW of Capernaum.

²³ **Canaanite.** Descendants of Canaan on whom a curse was placed by Noah, which called for them to be a race of servants. These people once inhabited the land of Israel but were driven out when the Israelites were given the land by God.

²⁴ **Syrophenician.** An individual who came from the area of Phoenicia that was absorbed into the Syrian kingdom.

²⁵ **Dogs.** In this case the word used is for the household pet, not the wild dogs.