

Keep your lamp burning: knowing the times
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All of you graduating seniors have come so far; we're so proud of you and thankful to God for seeing you this far. I'm guessing that you all know that you have many areas to still grow in. I know for me, some of the biggest leaps forward in maturity came in the years immediately after my graduation. One quality I'm praying you receive more of is discernment. Discernment means to judge well. To understand life, to see the good and the bad, the profitable and the pointless in a given situation or opportunity and to choose and live wisely - that's discernment. We're not born discerning; we're born the opposite. We're very undiscerning in our younger years. But given your age, your maturity, and your coming experiences, you are poised for a discernment explosion. You are going to be given ample opportunities to judge well. Sometimes you will; sometimes you won't, but hopefully, you will learn the godly skill of discernment quickly. But that won't just happen by itself; there are some prerequisites.

The first thing you need is a knowledge of God's words. It is absolutely impossible for you to discern well without the word of God. Remember, to discern means to judge well - to be able to make a good decision about friends, about what it means to be healthy, how you should order your day, what your relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend should look like and so much more. To do that you need to know what's good and bad. That's where God's word comes in. The Bible shows you what the shape of your life should look like in all of these important areas of life so that you live a life to the glory of God and for your own good. Without God's words you will always be missing the most important elements and factors when it comes to making friends and being a friend, how you should go about your day and how you should prioritize your time, how you should manage the money you make, and the kind of relationship you should have with coworkers and neighbors. And of course, the list goes on and on. So, think of it: if the word of God informs you what is good about all of these relationships and priorities and opportunities, then you need to know God's word to judge or discern well.

Every single one of us needs to find ways to get more of God's word into our heart and mind. It's the only way we can discern well. It might feel like we beat this drum like a rented mule, but it's just so important. Reading the Bible on your own, studying the Bible with others, making a consistent habit of hearing God's word on a Sunday morning, and maybe most importantly of all, preparing your heart and mind well to receive the word that you read and hear. Your Bible reading won't be very fruitful if you don't turn your phone on silence and put it in another room. You won't hear God's word well on Sunday mornings if you don't start preparing Saturday night. If you don't have a teachable spirit and a hungry soul for God my guess is you won't get much or be excited by what you read. So, think through all of these things when it comes to receiving the word of God so you can discern well.

But you need something more than Bible knowledge to discern well. You need a kind of humility that recognizes you don't discern well without the help of God. And you need a kind of heart and spirit that is alive and sensitive to the truth of what is good and what is bad. Or let me put it to

you this way: you can know what the Bible says about good and bad, right and wrong, life-giving and death-producing, but it won't be any good to you if you're love hearing it and you're not ready to submit to it.

That's what Jesus gets at in our passage this morning. We're nearing the end of our focused attention on being ready for the coming hostilities and pressures of following Jesus in our culture - we've called it *Keep your lamp burning*. Stay alert. If you don't, you might just fall away, or compromise, or be filled with anxiety - ultimately, you might be an unfaithful servant. You want be faithful is you're not discerning. So, let's read our passage together to seek God's help (READ Luke 12:54ff).

You'll notice how there are these subheadings before vs. 54 and then also vs. 57. The first one reads *Interpreting the times* and the second *Settle with your accuser*. Those are not a part of the biblical text, but are added by translation committees to try and help you understand what you're reading. In this case, it's not very helpful in my view. It gives the impression that these two paragraphs are separate and unrelated when they do go together. The first paragraph addresses the failure of the people to discern well and why. And then the second paragraph is a warning about the coming consequence when you do not judge or discern well. So, don't always rely on the information provided in these subheadings or in the structure they suggest; it's not always correct. Instead, look for clues right from biblical text itself.

At this point, Jesus is directing his comments to the crowds; he has a word of correction and it seems to specifically apply to them. He starts by saying, "You are discerning about a few things; you know how to discern the weather. You're good at judging that well." Humans have always been aspiring meteorologists. There is a pattern to weather systems and signs that have helped us make educated guesses when it comes to the weather. I remember when I baled hay for my uncle during my HS years on the SD plains, you could see for miles and miles. With so few trees and hills blocking your view, you could see the blue thunderclouds forming in the distance. And when they did, you knew the rains was coming and you needed to get your work done as quickly as possible. In other parts of the world, the weather is even more predictable than it is here with it's rainy and dry seasons.

Jesus is saying, "you know how to judge the weather, but you don't know how to judge the times." That's what Jesus means by interpret. You know how to interpret, to judge, to discern the weather; why can't you interpret the present time. And Jesus gives us a hint as to why they can't. It's because of their hypocrisy. That's what Jesus identifies as their problem. They have this divided heart. They're trying to straddle the fence; they're trying to give this impression that the things of God matter to them, but inside they love the approval of man more than they love the approval and glory of God. So, because of that, because of their divided heart, they fail to judge the present time well. They are undiscerning.

I want to explore this discernment more, what it means, and how you get it, but let me show you how that second paragraph fits it. It's another parable. Jesus is trying to persuade you with a

warning to get on the discerning path right away. If you're accused of theft or something like that, and you're guilty, repent and settle up quickly. Save yourself from standing before the judge where the penalty will be great. You can repent of your hypocrisy; you can turn from your divided heart that leads you to being terribly undiscerning. So, actually, there's hope in the warning. You still have a chance to turn; with repentance will come a new beginning and salvation from not discerning well.

Let me ask you a question: how well do you interpret the present time? If you're like me, maybe you're wondering, "What does that even mean?" There's a clue in the very next vs - vs. 57; that might be easier to see if there wasn't that paragraph break and subheading between 56 and 57. Jesus says in vs. 57, "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" That's what discerning the present time means; judging what's right. Judging what's true, correct, life-giving about the present time. Also, it's judging what's harmful, what's going to be condemned, what's wrong about the present time. It's looking at everything around you and being able to know the good from the bad and the right from the wrong.

Several things come to my mind when I think about judging rightly about the present time. Here's the first and maybe most obvious one: knowing the difference between right and wrong. When you are untethered and disconnected from the words and ways of God you won't know the difference between right and wrong very easily. No wonder there's more and more cultural confusion out there. Do you know what's contributing to our culture's growing difficulty discerning what's right and wrong?

- It starts with the *centrality of the self*, which is celebrated and encouraged everywhere today. Nothing in life is more important than me. And because I'm at the center of life, there's nobody better to make decisions and determine my path than me. I'm going to do it my way and nobody knows what I need more than me.
- Next, *rejecting authority* is a step towards being unable to discern right from wrong. Now, let me offer some sympathy here: sadly, too many authorities in our society have proven untrustworthy. So, it's hard to blame a person who distrusts authority. But our problem is bigger than distrusting a particular authority; we're beginning to reject authority altogether. When you're at the center of your own life you realize there is no greater authority than you and you won't recognize any authority.
- Finally, *trusting your feelings* guarantees your inability to discern well. When you go all in on self-determination and reject the need for authority, what else is there than what I feel? Your dreams? What your heart says? What makes me feel good? One day I feel like being with this woman and the next with that one? And if that's how I feel who are you to tell me I'm wrong? I don't feel like going in to work today or listening to my supervisor? So, I'm walking out or I'm giving him a piece of my mind. And when I get fired, who do I blame? Not me, that's for sure. It's my supervisor's fault.

This is a recipe for being completely unable to judge rightly. It's the complete opposite of how we should live our lives so we can judge well. And do you know what's really scary and sad; many people who say they follow Jesus live like this even if they talk differently. They are the center of their own life, they reject authority, and they listen to their own feelings. The right recipe would be something like

- Centrality of God
- Accept His authority
- Don't trust your feelings

Judging the times rightly also include understanding the consequences of what's right and wrong. People who discern well can see the good of doing the right thing and can also see the foolish and the danger of doing the wrong thing. Can you see the difference I'm trying to make? There's a difference between knowing what's right and knowing the good that will come from it. Wise, discerning people can do more than merely see if something is right or wrong, they can see if something is good, if it's helpful or harmful, life-giving or dangerous. Think of it: you get invited to go to a party; you're pretty sure that God's law and man's law will be broken there. You know that it's probably wrong. Good, you are beginning to judge rightly. But that party is more than right or wrong. It's also good for you or bad for you. It's also helpful to your future or harmful to your future. It's either going to enhance your relationships or jeopardize them. Judging the times rightly means you can see the consequences of what's right and wrong.

There's a verse from Psalms that I think would be a great life-verse to know and memorize to help you be discerning. It's Psalm 86:11, which reads, "Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth. Unite my heart to fear your name."

We need the teaching of God; that's how this prayer starts. This teaching comes from God's word. He has instruction and commands for us. The goal of this teaching is for us to walk or live our lives in the truth in a world full of deceit luring us away into darkness. But we need more than teaching and truth; we need a right heart. We need to be changed so that we want this truth, that we love God's word. And this united heart is centered on fearing God. Respecting his authority. Recognizing there are consequences for ignoring God and trusting yourself.

What if Psalm 86:11 became a life verse for you? What if you memorized it: Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth. Unite my heart to fear your name? What if you made this a regular prayer to God? And what if you took faith steps so this would become true of you? What if you made a point to be taught and instructed in the scriptures by your church and trustworthy teachers? What if you had weekly, maybe even daily, reminders of the power, the majesty, the authority of God where you had a fear of God before your eyes? Imagine how well you would judge the present time. Can I challenge all of you to learn, to memorize, to pray, and to implement Psalm 86:11 so we can be the discerning men and women, boys and girls God wants us to be.

Key vs. Luke 12:57

Questions for the week

- What was the most important thing you heard today to grow in discernment?
- Which part of discernment do you want to grow in more?
- Do you think you would be well served by memorizing Psalm 86:11? Will you do it? What's keeping you from saying yes?