

Discernment

***Hebrews 5:14 - One aspect of Christian maturity is the capacity to discern good from evil
This takes constant practice***

Other texts to consider: Matthew 15:15-23, 24:10-12, Acts 20:28-31, Romans 16:17-19, 1 Corinthians 1:20-24, Ephesians 4:11-15, 1 Timothy 1:3-7, 4:1-8, 6:3-5, 6:20, 2 Timothy 2:14-18, 2:23-3:8, Titus 1:10-14, 2:6-8, 3:9-11, 2 Peter 2:1-3, 1 John 4:1,

Discussion outline:

Two kinds of discernment - Knowing God's special will & knowing good from evil
How we naturally discern - worldview seep → confirmation bias, appeal to authority

The building blocks of intentional discernment

- Authority

- Worldview

- Thinking intentionally

Understanding content

- Listening

- Asking Questions

- Stripping away the rhetoric

Judging content

- Basic logic

- Internal and External Cohesion

 - Is the argument logically sound? -- Logical fallacies

 - Does it conform to reality? -- Do we share authority?

Growing in the Skill of Discernment

- Listen to content to discern - Debates

- Write your own content

- Be humble

- Be a life-long learner

- Think through both sides

Misc Notes

- Bulk claims

- Questions concerning sources

- Learning pop-culture ideas and labels for them

- Concerning alarming content

Two kinds of discernment and the one we are talking about:

Often, when we think of discernment, we are thinking about the ability to hear and understand God's special or unique will for us. This is different from God's general will for us. For example, it is God's general will that we be generous people, but it may be God's specific will that you give a certain amount of funds to a specific person or group. In this context, discernment is knowing whether or not to give to that person or group along with how much and when. Although that is a fair use of the word, that is now how we mean to engage with the topic today. Rather, we are using it the same way that Scripture uses it in Hebrews 5:14, the ability to know good from evil.

How we naturally discern:

When engaging with new content, an internal question will always arise, even if it is subconscious; "is this true" or "do I believe this?" There are a few ways this gets answered. The first is whether it fits with the rest of our worldview. Our inclination to affirm what we already believe is called confirmation bias. The second takes into consideration the source of the material. If the source is an authority that you are in submission to, then it is received or believed. This is a form of "appeal to authority". Lastly, and this is more rare, we can be genuinely convinced by what is conveyed. We can be persuaded by the intellectual robustness of the content or by the power of the delivery.

These methods of arriving at a decision of agreement are not intrinsically bad. However, if they are happening by accident, then we are susceptible to believing things that are not true or are evil. If we are not building our worldview on purpose or we are submitting to authorities that we ought not submit to, we are open to being deceived. Consider if someone that is not an authority in your life tells you something that is true, but conflicts with what you already believe. We may reject what they have to say, when we ought not. Or consider if someone in a position of authority in your life tells you what you want to hear, but not the truth. Again, we will believe it when we ought not.

The building blocks of discernment:

How can we do better? This is the major question and the purpose of our class.

The answer is in three parts:

1. Have intentional authorities in your life -- Epistemology
2. Build an intentional worldview
3. Think intentionally about the content you hear

These three key areas work in the order given. We begin by choosing what ought to inform what we believe (this is referred to as epistemology). Then we engage these authorities to build out what we believe (what we believe about the world is referred to as worldview). From there, as we engage new content, we move up from the bottom of our order. First, we apply good thinking that engages each new piece of content on its own two feet. Then, we weigh it up against our

existing worldview which, in turn, will be engaging the content through the lens of the authorities that are already in place. For the Christian, of course, this means weighing it against Scripture.

This is not to say that we don't think as we choose authorities to submit to. Of course not. However, once you have these authorities in place, it is good reasoning itself that suggests we should submit to them when we disagree. Consider, for example, going to a doctor (a medical authority) and telling them that you looked up your symptoms and you think you have X illness (your reasoning). After checking you, they assure you that you don't have X virus, but Y virus. In this case, it is wise to submit to the medical authority rather than your reasoning.

Because we already worked through these first two major components, epistemology and worldview, as a church, I will only briefly touch on them. The majority of our time will be spent on the third component of thinking well, while engaging with the first two parts as if they are already in place.

Intentional authorities:

I like John Wesley's quadrilateral for this discussion. They include, in the order of important; Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience. Experience is used to get to the truth, but it submits to good reason. Reasoning is used to get to the truth, but when in conflict with the majority of the Church in both the past and present, reason itself suggests that the thinking capacity of the whole is more potent than the thinking capacity of the individual, therefore we trust the whole. When the whole community speaks in unison to disagree with God, God is true and every man a liar. This is because God is the only real authority on truth. God has spoken through Scripture and therefore Scripture sits alone at the top of the authority structure on truth.

Christian Worldview (basics):

When we have that in place, we are able to begin building out our worldview. It is implied, at this point, that we have a high view of Scripture. That is to say that the Scriptures, in their original manuscripts, are inspired by God and totally trustworthy and true in all that they affirm. In this sense, they are inerrant (without error) and infallible (accomplish their purposes). The defense of this point is big enough that it deserves its own time/class.

When it comes to specifics of the Christian worldview, there are too many to put into our time together, lest we endeavor to write out an exhaustive systematic and biblical theology. However, it is fitting to at least put the big five out there. God, humanity, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

God: That God exists and is, in nature, the God described by Scripture, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Humanity: In relation to their existence before God, humanity is fallen/sinful, separated from God in terms of right relationship.

Jesus' life: He is Immanuel, God with us, and lived the perfect, righteous life that images the Father without flaw.

Jesus' death: Jesus died the death that we deserve, in our place, so that all who put their faith in Him would receive His righteousness as He pays their debt. He chose to lay His life down, according to the will of the Father, taking the wrath of God against sin.

Jesus' resurrection: He rose from the grave, forever conquering sin, death, and the power of darkness for all who follow Him to join in His new life forever. His resurrection vindicates His claims and proves through practice the resurrection life to come.

Before stumbling into new content, be constantly engaging what is trustworthy. Another way of saying this is; read the Bible regularly.

Now, with authority and worldview in place, we are ready to engage with “thinking intentionally”.

Understanding the content:

When engaging content, there are essentially two tasks that must come in order. The first is understanding what is being said. This is not only understanding the conclusions, but how the communicator is getting to their conclusions. One helpful strategy for growing in this skill is to repeat back their argument and ask them if you rightly captured it.

It is common that communicators will presume agreement on certain points that are important to their conclusions. In this case, especially when that implied point is unclear or not actually agreed upon, when given the opportunity, asking good questions can be very helpful. If you are unable to ask questions (for example; when watching the news), then the gaps in logic must be filled, to the best of our ability, with the ideas that the original communicator would affirm, if they were to see it. Doing this step poorly is a version of the “straw man” logical fallacy, which we’ll get to in a minute.

Most likely the most important and difficult task of this process is separating the content from the rhetoric. Rhetoric is all of the emotion, energy, and language that has nothing to do with the argument itself. This could include the context, the lighting, smoke missions, fireworks, and whatever else is brought in with the hope of adding power to the argument. All of that must be stripped away in order to get underneath to the actual claims.

Questions:

It is important that I understand what you are saying, so how did you come to that conclusion?
Oh interesting, what makes you think that?

Judging the content:

Only after understanding the content are we ready to move to the second step of critiquing the content. It should be noted at this point that the topic we are stepping into is large enough that

someone could get a PHD in it. That being said, the content we engage with will not be exhaustive. The hope is that it is sufficient to get us far enough downstream in the discussion to be helpful for growth in this area.

Premise & conclusion. Most of the content that we might engage with will be in the form of an argument (or could be restated that way). Often this takes the form of “if A then B”, where A is the premise and B is the conclusion. If we listen well, we will understand the parts of the argument and will be able to engage each part of what is being suggested.

There are two good questions to ask (internally) to judge the content:

Is A true?

Does A actually lead to B?

Internal and External cohesion:

As we engage with the argument of what is presented, we want to make sure that it passes two essential tests. These are the internal cohesion/consistency and external reality. We will consider each in turn.

Internal cohesion/consistency is asking the question: Does this idea contradict itself? Or is this idea internally sound?

There are a number of ways ideas fall apart here.

The premise might not lead to the conclusion – Forrest eats bread therefore Bread is healthy

The premise might not allow for the conclusion – All truth is subjective ...

Most logical fallacies live here: It is worth looking up a list of logical fallacies. Here's one list.
<https://yourlogicalfallacyis.com/>

The next essential test is concerning external reality. Does the argument presented actually match up with reality. It is important to note that an argument can be both logical and incorrect. Someone can be intelligent and wrong at the same time.

Consider the following argument:

Sarah gives Sammy one apple → Sarah has one less apple.

This is a logically sound argument. However, you may discover that Sarah did not give an apple away to Sammy, but kept them for herself. The argument was sound, but the conclusion is incorrect, because it does not conform to reality.

Every worldview will have an authority on truth at the base. However, not every worldview will share the same base. That means that there will be a different form of “good thinking” between secular and Christian people.

Whenever we are judging content, we should ask what authority the person is pulling from to draw their conclusions. Did they hear it from another source? Did they do a statistical study (if so, what did that look like)? Is it from reason, experience, tradition, or Scripture? Once we understand where the idea is coming from, we want to look for affirming or non-affirming ideas either at the same level or higher on our own epistemological framework

The inverse is also true. Someone can use poor logic, yet land at a conclusion that conforms to reality. Consider the following argument:

People should always do what makes them happiest → telling the truth makes me happy → people should tell the truth.

There are a number of things wrong with the logic in this argument. However, the conclusion is correct.

Growing in the skill of discernment

How can we practice, as the author of Hebrews suggests?

Of course, there are plenty of opportunities, since there is no shortage of content coming at us.

Aside from this, there are a few other things we can do to practice this.

Write

The best practice at judging others thinking and content, is to build your own ideas. I find writing to be very helpful. By writing out your own ideas, making sure you are making your arguments soundly will help you engage with the content of others. In some ways, writing is thinking.

Be humble

As odd as it sounds, recognizing that you are wrong sometimes is extremely critical to this process. This is the best guard against confirmation bias. Recognizing that your heroes (aside from Jesus) are wrong sometimes and sinners at heart is also helpful. This is the best guard against appeal to authority. Recognizing that every person bears the image of God is helpful. This will guard against the temptation to throw out every idea from any particular source.

Listen genuinely, presuming that you may be able to learn something or grow in some way. The worst case scenario is that you're wrong and you've wasted your time. The best case scenario is that you're right and you learn something.

Be a life-long learner

Never be done learning. This is particularly important as disciples of Christ. If we are done learning, we are done being a student and therefore done being a disciple. The most important part of this is continuing to approach God's word, understanding and even expecting the Lord to meet you in the text and continue to shape you.

Of course, this does not mean that you never come to conclusions. To never come to conclusion would be the very opposite of the point. Learning presumes concluding. Therefore, we are not suggesting that we should forever be open to being wrong about certain core things of the faith. For example, we do not need to hold the gospel with an open hand.

Think on both sides

When thinking about an idea, try to think of how you would personally argue it. Use your epistemological ladder. Then, think about how you would argue the other side or how you might take shots at the logic being used. Attempting to genuinely engage on both sides of the discussion is a helpful tool in growing in this area.

Other misc. tips:

Be careful about believing or dismissing ideas in bulk

Asking questions about the source:

- Is there an implicit bias
- Is there a form of accountability, if they lie
- Is there a track-record of reliable content from this source
- Was this sent to me by a chain of forwarded sources or can I get to the original source?

Learn Pop-culture ideas and their labels

Concerning alarming content:

- How are they getting to their conclusions
- What are the actual claims?
- Are they asking or answering questions?
 - Is it merely suggestive or is it making concrete claims based on evidence?
- If they've done research, what is the nature of it?
 - If it's a poll, is the sample size statistically significant? Is the sample group sufficiently random?
 - Does the study support the claims?
- Is this gossip, slander, or reviling?
- If this ends up being false, am I willing to apologize for spreading it?

- Is the source motivated to alarm me to keep me interested and coming back?
- Does this have any bearing on my immediate responsibilities as a Christian?
- Is this better explained by human incompetence or by conspiring parties?