

# *The Gift of True Discrimination*

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The Church at Philippi was dearer to Paul than any other. As a result of his ministry in Philippi almost a decade before Lydia, the dealer in purple, had been won to the Christian faith. After Paul was forced to leave town, the seed which he had sown began to yield a splendid harvest. That little company of Christians who had their first meeting in Lydia's house, grew into a most caring, Christ-like community.

When news reached them that Paul had been arrested and taken to Rome to be tried by the Roman Emperor, the members immediately decided, as we would say in Scotland, "to pass 'round the hat." The collection was then taken to Rome by Epaphroditus, one of their members. He not only handed over the gift of money, but volunteered to stay with Paul and be his servant. Unfortunately, not long afterwards Epaphroditus took seriously ill. When he had partially recovered, Paul felt it would be best if Epaphroditus returned to Philippi. Before he left, Paul decided to write a letter expressing his thanks to the church of Philippi for their gift of money and their genuine concern for his well-being.

"What do you pray for, what do you request for a church so full of wonderfully committed and compassionate people?" That was the question which occupied Paul's mind as he wrote. Paul finally wrote, as the New English Bible puts it, "This is my prayer, that your love may grow ever richer in knowledge and insight of every kind, and that you may thus have the gift of *true discrimination*." Now I am well aware that the word discrimination has been degraded through too often being linked with blind prejudice. But discrimination at its finest is a wonderful and necessary gift. In fact when I think of those who will determine the character of civilization of tomorrow—parents, teachers, professors, doctors, ministers, scientists, politicians, and judges, my earnest prayer for all of them is that they might have the gift of true discrimination.

For Christians caring love is the great governing principle. To be spiritual, to live a godly life, does not mean as some people seem to think being otherworldly or outwardly very pious. It means living this life in such a way as to embody the caring, forgiving love of God as seen in Jesus Christ; it means acting as an instrument and a channel of such divine love in the world; it means using our energies and capacities to serve the larger good of the human family. "You ought to love one another," said Jesus, "as I have loved you."

But the question remains "How do you apply this principle in life's concrete situations? How do you show love?" Fortunately in many cases this is relatively simple. You make meals, you tidy the yard for neighbors who are ill—thus you show love. You stop and help the person who has fallen—thus you show love. You welcome the stranger and make time to listen to the person who has problems—thus you show love. But in other situations it is not nearly so straight forward. Often we lack precise answers as how best to love. There is no dictionary of conduct that we can thumb through to find the precise answer spelled out for us.

How for example do you love the beggar who comes to your door and asks for money? That is not a simple question, not if you think of love as Jesus did in terms of seeking the highest good of the other person. In some cases to give money would be

the worst possible thing to do.

How does the judge love the criminal? How does he express his concern for the person who is being tried, and also at the same time show a real concern for the society the criminal has wronged?

How do you show love to children whose lives are being warped by unreasonable parents? How does a married daughter love a demanding mother without being unfair to her husband and family? How do you love rebellious teenagers?

These are just a few of the many situations which arise where the issues involved are very tangled, where the New Testament does not spell out exactly what we should do. William Morris, the poet, once wrote a poem called "Love is Enough." A critic rightly said, "It is not." Something more is needed, what Paul calls "the gift of true discrimination," the ability to determine priorities and grasp essentials, the ability to discern what is ultimately for the good of individuals and society and what would ultimately be harmful, between what is vital and what is secondary.

Because the technical skill of the human race is immense, the possibilities for good and evil are also immense. We live in an age where not only everything we imagine seems possible—but where the possibilities range beyond what most of us can imagine. In an age of incredible technology, of biological engineering and high tech medicine, the burning question for many scientists and physicians is not so much "Can we do so and so....?" We can do undreamed of things. The vexing question has increasingly become, "Of course we could do X—but should we? It is wise to?"

For example, some scientists believe that with sufficient funding it would be possible, perhaps within two decades to create artificial placentas whereby women could have children outside their wombs. Would such costly research be a wise use of limited funding? Would this even be desirable? Or again should genetics deal only with our needs, or should we allow them to become the tool of our desires. Vance Packard in his book "The People Shapers" speaks of "Designer Children" as a real possibility, of being able to go one day to a genetic supermarket, for gene seed mixed to our specifications—so that we get the right size child, the right hair or eye colouring, the right IQ.

There are eminent doctors who feel such research should be banned, that the lid on this new Pandora's box should be firmly closed, so incalculable are the dangers. Others feel such legislation would ultimately hinder medical progress, that it would prevent the eradication of certain hereditary diseases like Huntington's, cholera, and cystic fibrosis. What is certainly true is that the problem would be nothing like as acute, if all geneticists had the gift of true discrimination, if they were willing to apply a self-censorship in the kind of experiments they perform. It is the few sensationalists—those lacking in discrimination who have aroused the fear of permanent damage to the human race, the fear of what has been called a biological Hiroshima.

Someone once said that to every complex problem there is a simple solution—and that simple solution is usually wrong. Middle ways are not easy. At this moment in history middle ways are becoming less fashionable in most human affairs—including the church. Instead of recognizing that there are many polarities we have to live with and never fully resolve, some want to establish one pole as absolute truth. Many want a clearly defined right or wrong. Middle ways demand maturity. They demand wisdom. They demand discernment.

How important the gift of discrimination is in medicine. Many British doctors

believe that the Italian doctor who recently made it possible, by means of in vitro fertilization, for a fifty-nine-year-old millionaire businesswoman to give birth to twins, was lacking in discrimination. In Scotland pneumonia used to be known as the old person's friend. Today it is possible to give drugs to counteract pneumonia in the very frail and elderly. But should such drugs always be given? When should doctors operate or resuscitate and when should they not? Legislation is sometimes necessary to prevent abuses but at other times legislation simply complicates matters. How wonderful when doctors have the gift of true discrimination. Alongside scientific research and the enlargement of the frontiers of knowledge, there is a burning need for the pursuit of what has traditionally been called wisdom, something larger and deeper than mere knowledge.

My prayer for judges is that they might also have the gift of true discrimination, so that having carefully examined all the factors, they might be able to decide what will ultimately be in the best interests of the offender and society—that they might know, for example, when to enforce the letter of the law and when to show mercy. Love and true discrimination can add depth and humanity to justice.

My earnest desire for ministers is that they might also have this gift. Like everyone else, ministers like to be loved and don't like to be unpopular. If we are not respected we will not be listened to. Part of a minister's work is to try and communicate certain abiding truths, to try and reconcile estranged people, to help heal broken families and mend broken hearts. If we are disliked we will obviously not succeed. But on the other hand the longing to be liked can at times impair our effectiveness as a minister. Dr. Carlyle Marney was minister of the prestigious Myers Park Baptist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina, in the 1950's. On one occasion a member asked him what he would do if a Black man presented himself for membership of the church. Without hesitation Dr. Marney replied "I would say to him, 'from this moment I am your pastor.' Then within a week I would meet with you and the other office-bearers, to find out whether I was just going to be his pastor—or his pastor and your pastor as well." If we challenge our people to live and love as Christ did, if we take a stand for truth and justice and racial equality, we will make enemies as Jesus did. After Dr. Marney's death a little book was published containing stories about him. It was dedicated "to those who liked him and those who did not."

Ministers need the gift of discrimination so that they might know when to compromise and when not to compromise—when a thing is worth fighting for, worth making enemies over, and when on the other hand it is not really worth getting people's backs up about.

It is this same gift—the gift of true discrimination that I most covet for my family—the ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood, good and evil, the way of life that leads to fulfillment and freedom, and the way of life that ultimately leads to misery and slavery. In life there is that which ennoble and that which degrades—there is that which puts us in harmony with ourselves, with others, with the world and God—and there is that which alienates us from ourselves, our neighbors, the world and God. The ability to discriminate between these and between the true and the false, the noble and the mean—there is no more vital gift.

An antique dealer's ability to recognize and value a rare piece of porcelain is acquired from others who love beautiful porcelain. It is further nurtured by disciplined habits of seeing and valuing. So too it is with the Christian's ability to discriminate

wisely. Many have acquired this ability from being a member of a home or community which values those great truths and values for which Jesus stood.

When I was a student in New York, Charles Malik, the former secretary general of the United Nations, came to the seminary and addressed us. His address made such an impression that it was finally published. Let me share a few sentences with you. "Should you read the Bible—especially the Psalms and Gospels—reverently and prayerfully every day, should you read the writings of the deepest and purist saints and men of God, should you faithfully serve the church and participate in the fullness of its life, despite its endless frailties and imperfections and tribulations; should you practice the great art of mental and moral discipline; should you seek with love and expectation and self-giving the company of those who do these things, I guarantee you two things: first that you will experience in your own life and being, a taste of what is beautiful and strong and certain and free; and second you will develop such a sharpness of vision as to be able to distinguish the true from the false." In his letter to the church of Philippi Paul said much the same thing. "Let that mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."

By taking "time out" to meditate on the life and teaching of Jesus, God has a chance to reduce our tendency to act selfishly or rashly, and to increase the likelihood that we will act more wisely and compassionately. Such meditation does not provide neat answers or detailed instructions, but it does provide profound insights which we can use as the foundation for our thinking and deciding. It can make us more sensitive to God's way of doing things. Without such study and meditation there is the real danger of the individual accepting his or her own preferences—what he or she feels inclined to do—and calling them by the grand words "Christian Love."

Let me in closing draw an analogy. How do you love the person who has been stabbed by a knife? Simply to jerk out the knife could be mistaken kindness. Medical experts will only remove the knife once they have studied the x-rays, for a wrong jerk might sever some vital artery. Likewise in many of life's complex situations if love is not to be misdirected, it must go hand in hand with the best knowledge available and with an understanding of ourselves and our place in God's purposes. Love is enriched when guided by those principles and ruling considerations which God has given us in the life and teaching of Jesus, principles and a quality of spirit which are as relevant in our computer age as in agricultural Palestine.

"Whoever heareth these sayings of mine and acts upon them, I will liken him unto a wise man." This is my prayer that your love may grow ever richer in knowledge and insight of every kind and that you may thus have the gift of true discrimination.