

DISCERNMENT AND DECISION-MAKING: A Guide to Good Decisions

Foundations for Guidance

1. The Character of God.
2. The Nature of Man's Relationship With God
3. Our Allegiance to Christ.
4. The Will of God is revealed in the Word.

How Does God Speak?

- Because the Holy Spirit indwells us, God speaks to us in our hearts
- God speaks to us in "consolation" – that is, inner peace and joy. "Desolation", i.e. anxiety, fear, anger, etc. make it difficult to hear God's voice.

Rules for Discernment

- Never choose in desolation.
- Peace must be tested: Ask God to show you if this decision is overly influenced by a desire for:
 - Security, possessions, comfort and pleasure?
 - Notice, prestige, fame?
 - Power and influence?

Satan's lie is that we need to find security and pleasure, notice and recognition, and power and influence from something or someone other than God. Our decisions may be motivated by a desire to find those things for ourselves. We need to invite God to test our motives. In order to discern well – we need to see what is going on inside us.

A Plan for Discernment

1. RATIONAL CONSIDERATION OF OBSTACLES AND OPTIONS

Collect information and evaluate the options:

- How has God led you in the past?
- What are your desires and motivations?
- What are your gifts and abilities?
- What are the possibilities you have before you?
- What are the advantages and limitations of each?
- What will help you to become the kind of person you want to be?

Frame the decision clearly: separate the different options so that you make one decision at a time - a yes or no decision for each option.

2. EXTENDED TIME OF PRAYER AND REFLECTION (see Suggested Order for A Day of Prayer)

3. ACCOUNTABILITY AND DISCUSSION WITH OTHERS

A spiritual mentor, friend or group of friends who will:

- Pray
- Listen for issues that we may not have taken into consideration, helping us be honest about our own motivations and impressions. This group or person is not to give advice or tell you what to do!
- Ask questions focusing on motives and values to help you discern how God is leading you.

Behind the clearness committee is a simple but crucial spiritual conviction, without which the practice makes little sense and can even become destructive: Each of us has an inner, divine light that gives us the guidance we need but is often obscured by sundry forms of inner and outer interference. The function of the clearness committee is not to give advice or alter and "fix" people but to help people remove obstacles and discover the divine assistance within. (Parker Palmer, "The Clearance Committee: The Way of Discernment" *Weavings*, no. 4, July-August 1

SUGGESTED ORDER FOR A DAY OF PRAYER

(from Gordon Smith, "Alone with God")

Center and Focus:

Bring clarity to the day by beginning with a time of worship. In silence or through scripture reading and singing hymns, allow your mind to be focused on God and His grace and goodness.

Thanksgiving:

In a time of discernment it is crucial to recognize clearly that God loves us and has been faithful to us. In a time of choice we must come to the Lord with a clear sense of his unconditional love. We need to know we are loved; we need an assurance that we will not approach our choice with the thought of gaining God's love by our obedience. For this assurance the simple exercise of thanksgiving is most helpful. Review your life and note the evidence of God's faithfulness and goodness. Enumerate his blessings. As you are assured of God's love on the one hand and his faithfulness on the other, you will be freed to hear his voice....Only in gratitude can we see clearly.

Meditation on Scripture:

Choose a text that is familiar to you...you may wish to choose an extended passage for mediation through out the day. Or you may choose shorter passages to inform and guide each segment of prayer....

Resolution and Cleansing:

Honestly acknowledge if you are feeling anger, fear, mourning or a sense of loss. These need to be acknowledged and resolved...we also need cleansing. To hear the voice of God, we need to come clean before him, repent of known sin, confess the error of our ways and receive and appropriate his forgiveness....resolution also includes forgiving those who have wronged us.

Confirmation of our allegiance:

Our ability to discern well and make good decisions is entirely dependant on whether we are clear on our fundamental commitment. We could meditate on John 21 "do you love me more than these? And consider this question in the face of all the loves of our lives - all the things we hold dear.

Silence:

accept silence as a time of listening rather than talking to God. In silence, distractions will come and the mind will wander, but gently, without self-castigation, bring your thoughts back into the presence of the Lord. Believing that the Lord is present, simply be in his presence. (This is hard to do! I find it helpful to have a picture of Jesus from the gospels in my mind and imagine myself in it - C.).

Journal writing:

At points throughout the day...record the developments of the day. Make note of the impressions, feelings and frustrations that have arisen in your prayers. Use the journal as a vehicle for prayer, not for speaking with self, but preferable for communicating with God. What do you sense him saying? ... By the end of the day, more often than not, there will be an abiding impression that has arisen from our prayers and extended reflection. Sometimes we will have done nothing more than raise questions or concerns that need to be clarified. We may need to go back to our responsibilities and do our homework, clarify the options and do some research... But usually, if we are open with God, sincere in our desire to attend to his voice and o his will and prepared to be thorough in approaching discernment, a clear and distinct impression will arise out of the day, some measure of resolution to the question.... There is no guarantee that God will answer. At times God will remain silent, and we will not have a clear sense of direction. But then the word from God may well be that we are to wait and not worry, that we will assuredly know what is best in due time when we need to know...