

The Joy of Practicing Discernment

Philippians #7

Philippians 3:17-21

Therefore, brethren, set your minds on the things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

You're a mean one, Mr. Grinch. You're heart's an empty hole. Your brain is full of spiders. You have garlic in your soul. Mr. Grinch. I wouldn't touch you with a thirty-nine-and-a-half-foot pole! I used to have bad dreams about that song this time a year as a kid. I was convinced that, somehow somehow, the Grinch would manage to leave Whoville while being pulled on his sleigh by his dog, Max, and make his way to Boiling Springs, SC. When he did, I just knew that the first chimney the Grinch was going down was not going to be the first house on the square. It was going to be mine. I was sure that the one who has garlic in his soul was coming for my Christmas presents, my Christmas feast, and my Christmas tree.

Friends, I am convinced that what I feared most as a child has come true. Though the Grinch has never slumbered down a chimney, his spirit is alive and operational in our world. It inspires those who live as enemies of the cradle of Christ to do everything they can do to keep Christ out of Christmas. But that's not all. The spirit of the Grinch wants nothing more than to keep your eyes off of Jesus. The spirit of the Grinch wants nothing more than to keep your mind on earthly things. The Spirit of the Grinch wants nothing more than to keep your heart turned away from the things of God. The spirit of the Grinch wants nothing more than to keep your body from experiencing the joy that comes from living in the knowledge that our citizenship is not of earth, but of heaven. And the closer we get to Jesus coming back, the greater the Grinch's influence will be. Not in Whoville. But in your life and mine.

There is great joy in pain (Phil 1). There is great joy in serving the Lord and others (Phil 2). There is great joy in our salvation (Phil 3). There is great joy in going forward (Phil 3). Today, people of God, I want to tell you there is also great joy in discernment. It's the ability to distinguish - to separate - to set apart - good from evil, truth from falsehood, and wisdom from foolishness. And if the Grinch steals your discernment, he will take your joy with him.

Philippians 3:17-21 is a practical how-to manual for developing a discerning spirit; one that is able to spot good from evil, truth from falsehood, and wisdom from foolishness. Doing that requires the full use of our eyes, mind, heart, and body. Consequently, there is a lesson about discernment you learn with your (1) eyes; one you learn with your (2) mind; one you learn with your (3) heart; and one you learn with your (4) body. We see them in Philippians 3:17-21. Turn there with me.

¹⁷Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. ¹⁸For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

1. The Lesson of the Eyes (17)

- **The All-Seeing Eye** – (1) On the back of the dollar bill, there is an eye. (2) It's known as the Eye of Providence, or the All-Seeing Eye. (3) Above it is the Latin phrase *Annuit Coeptis*, meaning "he favors." (3) The eye on the great seal on that dollar bill is a reminder of God's provident watch care over our nation. It's there in the morning, in the evening, at noon, and at night.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** Discernment, the ability to distinguish good from evil, truth from falsehood, and wisdom from foolishness, begins with your eyes. There is an observation component that must take place within the lives of the people of God.
- **These Forces Were at Work in the Founding of the Church at Philippi:** (1) On one side, there were the heralds of the cross of Christ: They were Paul, Timothy, and Silas. In Acts 15, they hadn't planned to go into Philippi, a city in Roman Europe. They were told to go by the Lord himself, for he had opened a door to share the Gospel in Macedonia. (2) On the other side, there were the enemies of the cross of Christ – According to Acts 16, there was a slave girl who followed them around who made her owners a great fortune by fortune telling. When Paul, Timothy, and Silas rebuked and exorcized her in public, the family started losing money. As a result, they went to the magistrates and said: "these men are throwing our city into confusion...they are advocating customs that are not lawful for us to practice since we are Romans." (3) Consequently, the court and the crowd attacked them, ordered them beaten with rods and thrown into prison. (4) Those were the realities at work in Philippi: heralds of the Gospel vs enemies of it.
- **Therefore, Discernment Requires Evaluation with the Eyes:** In v17, we see two words and a phrase that are all synonymous: example, model, "those who live as we do."
- **App:** There is a reason we struggle with discernment: We don't know the difference between judging and discerning. Judging is opening up the soul and shaking your head "no." But discerning is observing and paying attention to those observations and making decisions in light of them. That's what Paul called the Philippians to do. Their joy depended upon it. Ours too.

2. The Lesson of the Mind (18-19)

- **Mind Sayings:** (1) We have a lot of one-liners in our vernacular with the word “mind” in them: (a) Don't mind me. (b) I don't pay him any mind. (c) Mind your own business. (c) Preacher, if you preach for more than 10 minutes, then I'm going to give you a piece of my mind. (2) When it comes to discernment, here's another “mind” statement we need to incorporate into our vernacular: “let the mind of the Master be the master of your mind.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** Discernment begins with your eyes but moves to the mind. A mind fixed on temporal things that lead to temporal decisions. But a mind fixed on heavenly things will lead to heavenly decisions.
- **What a Mind Fixed on Temporal Things Looks Like:** (1) Paul uses a subtle phrase that informs us of a pervasive problem in the church in Philippi in v 18: “many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.” (2) It's a subtle phrase because it implies that their confession of Jesus is in line with the message of the Gospel. The devil, however, is in the details. Even though they confess the Gospel, they live as “enemies” of the cross. (3) They are the same people Paul has in mind in ch1 regarding those who preach Christ out of self-ambition and empty conceit. (4) What made them “live as enemies of the cross of Christ” is that they were proud of things they should have been ashamed of. (5) Consequently, their “destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame.” (6) Then he tells us why: their mind is set on earthly things.
- **What a Mind Fixed on Heavenly Things Looks Like:** (1) We can learn this by reversing the argument of v18-19. (2) Many live as “friends of the cross of Christ” because their mind is set on “heavenly things.” Their destiny is heaven, not destruction, because their God is Jesus, not their stomachs, and their glory is in their salvation, not their shame.
- **App:** ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.^[b] ⁷You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator (Col 3:2, 5-10).

3. The Lesson of the Heart (20)

- **The First Successful Open-Heart Surgery:** (1) Historians tell us that the son of a barber, Daniel Hale Williams, performed the world's first successful open-heart surgery in 1893. (2) I beg to differ. Jesus has been performing successful open-heart surgery from the moment he became flesh and dwelt among us, and the Magi brought him gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
- **Main Idea of the Point:** Discernment begins with your eyes, moves to the mind, and makes its way to your heart. In the ancient world, the “heart” was the core of your being. Discernment has to be practiced there also.
- **How the Heart Helps with Discernment:** (1) Here's how it helps: it yearns for something. The question then becomes: what does it yearn for? (2) Verse 20 begins a contrast that goes through the rest of the passage. In v18-19, the heart of those who live as “enemies of the cross” yearn for earthly things.” In the core of their being, they yearn for “earthly things.” But, Paul, in v20, begins with “but.” It's a conjunction that denotes the beginning of a contrast. Then he says, “our citizenship is in heaven” (That's a yearning of the heart. It's why we sing songs about heaven and glory and smile. Then he continues by saying “we eagerly await a Savior from there” (That's also a yearning of the heart. It's also why we sing the King is Coming and we smile).
- **App:** When your heart yearns for heaven and the return of Jesus, it will cause you to filter things in life through that lens. When it yearns for the things of earth, it will cause you to filter things in life through that lens. Pay attention to the yearnings of your heart. Discernment lies therein.

4. The Lesson of the Body (21)

- **The Greatest Epitaph Ever Recorded:** (1) Like the cover of an old book, its contents torn and stripped of its lettering and gilding. It lies here, food for worms. But the work shall not be wholly lost: for it will, as he believed, appear once more in a new and more perfect edition, corrected, and amended by the author. (2) Penned by Benjamin Franklin himself
- **Main Idea of the Point:** Discernment begins with your eyes, moves to the mind, makes its way to your heart. But it also knocks on the door of your mortal body and says, “there's a lesson or two here about me for you to turn in your present state also.”
- **Before We Can Learn What Our Bodies Teach Us About Discernment, We Have to Understand How the Body Functions in a Christian Sense:** (1) The body we have right now is mortal and fading away. It's consequence of the fall and therefore now a product of the 2nd law of thermodynamics. It will wither away eventually. (2) The body we will have in the future will not be like this one. It will be a glorified one; one free from the consequences of the fall. It will not wilt. It will be a glorified body instead (though what this will look like is a mystery).
- **Since Our Present Body is Temporal and Our Heavenly One Will Be Glorious:** (1) Every chronic injury, every pain, every illness beckons you to think, reflect, and yearn on the things of God in light of the fact that it is in the process of turning to dust with you still in it. (2) The reason that I think, reflect, and yearn for the things of God and not earthly things is (a) because it is wilting away and (b) a glorified one awaits. (3) That's how your body informs you of your need to be discerning.
- **App:** Oh yes. The Grinch is alive and well. He wants to not only steal the Christ in your Christmas. He wants you to dwell on earthly things, not heavenly ones. And the chimney he uses is our lack of discernment. But, friend, there is great joy in discernment. There is great joy in meeting him at his sleigh and saying “no.” You are not going to hijack my house, my temple. Not tonight. For this night belongs to Jesus.