Discernment VS. Judgment

11/13/16

Hosea 14:9 (NIV) *Who is wise? Let them realize these things. Who is discerning? Let them understand. The ways of the LORD are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.*

Last week we finished up with wisdom from 30 sayings from Solomon. We learned that knowledge is being aware of something, and having information. It is about facts and ideas that we acquire through study, research, investigation, observation, and experience. Wisdom is the capability to insightfully apply the knowledge that we have obtained in a practical, productive, and beneficial fashion for our lives and for the lives of others. According to our Bible verse, wisdom leads to realization.

This week I want to look at two words that we can sometimes confuse: discernment and judgment.

Again, it helps for us to look at the definitions of these words. Judgment means to apply to a person or circumstance an opinion or estimate, a criticism or censure. Judgment often implies having the power over what we judge. We see this in a court of law as the Judge presides over the case.

But we can also dehumanize judgment. When we call someone a “loser”, our ego feeds our minds a judgment that we are better or worse than someone else. Judgment assumes that the person judging has the power and right to determine what is good or bad in general, not just from their point of view. It usually comes from a reactive place inside of us; it is often a habitual or reactive response.

Judgment also has a sense of finality, like a sentence being passed in court. Even at a social level when someone judges some aspect of us, we can carry the pain of that judgment for weeks or years. Sometimes we allow the judgments of others to determine how we live and how happy we will be.

Discernment, however, is a more even-minded and conscious approach. It’s the cognitive ability of a person to distinguish what is appropriate or inappropriate. Discernment is one component of wisdom. With discernment we make good choices for ourselves, and for the good of others. Webster’s dictionary says that to discern is to “separate (a thing) mentally from another or others; recognize as separate or different” and “to perceive or recognize; make out clearly”. Discernment is described as “keen perception; insight; acumen”; it is about seeing things as they are. Insight is seeing into something, from our inner self, not from outer rigid standards, opinions, or social pressures.

Today’s Bible verse suggests that discernment leads to understanding. When we use our discerning nature, we are tapping into something much deeper than our egos passing judgment; we are using the ability to perceive clearly. It is what each of us as an individual craves: to be seen.

It is easy to judge. Reaction is judgment; it is a condemnation of something or someone. Discernment is not easy to apply in life. It is easy to say, “This sucks! These people are stupid. This is bad; this is wrong.” Case closed, mind made up, and the issue or person is condemned.

But Christ tells us to judge not so that we will not be judged. The Greek word for judging is *katakrino*, which literally means “to judge against”, or denounce. We are told not to do this, not to condemn or denounce, or let the ego close off our mind and heart so that we cannot see that we are as needy as the one we are condemning.

But the Bible also translates the Greek word *krino* as judge. Sometimes it is called right judgment. *Krino* literally means “to differentiate; to separate the good from the bad.”

The pejorative meaning of judgment almost always comes from a spiritually depleted heart, a bad attitude, and when we are not filled with the Christ. On the contrary, discernment carries no ill will, it does not seek to see someone “get what coming to them.” Discernment doesn’t condemn at all; it simply sees things as they really are, with the mind of Christ. Discernment is differentiation through the eyes of love.

God gave us the power of discernment, and it is an important tool along our life’s journey. Judgment polarizes; it sets us against each other. Discernment is inclusive yet with a level head and calm heart distinguishes between right and wrong, good and bad.

When we encounter people who do hurtful and evil things or say spiteful and hateful words, it is best to not move into judgment as a habit or reaction, but instead allow the Christ to enter our hearts. Then we can discern and understand; we can separate the doer from the deed. For in truth we do not know the pain someone has lived through. Perhaps they have experienced the most heinous abuse themselves.

The words of Christ come rushing to our hearts in these times of darkness: love your neighbor, even the ones that lash out from pain, anger, hurt, and fear. But don’t misunderstand Christ’s words: he says to love each other, not to condone or even tolerate their behavior. We can love someone as a Child of God but draw lines about how much time, if any, that we give them. We can love someone yet understand that their action, words, and attitudes will reap consequences.

Through our discerning minds we can refuse to play a role within the drama that surrounds us, or we can choose to embrace it. Either way, it is neither good nor bad, it is just a choice.

It is imperative, and God expects that we will set boundaries about what behaviors, philosophies, beliefs, and attitudes we embrace and allow in our lives. Boundaries can exist without judgment. We don’t have to make someone wrong, and make ourselves right. We can see them as they are. Like in the movie Avatar, when they say, “I see you,” we can see someone who looks differently from us and say in our hearts, “I see you. You are a Child of God, like me, but we look different.”

Discernment affects every thought, attitude, word, and belief that we share and possess. It even affects our attitudes and thoughts around our veterans. How do we treat them and take care of them when they return home. Obviously some of them are able to overcome the wounds they acquire – those injuries seen and those not visible to human eyes - and lead important, productive, and full lives. Other returning veterans are not as fortunate and struggle to adjust to civilian life.

How do we treat our veterans and how should we treat our veterans as a nation? The discerning mind may suggest we can do more. But we don’t blame, and we don’t condemn the efforts made previously; we just make a superior effort and move forward.

Personally, how do we treat each other, especially those different from us? Through discernment, not judgment, we see where we are and without blame or condemnation we make a superior Christ-filled effort to love each other and treat each other with respect. Through our discerning heart we may choose not to spend time with certain people.

But by not judging, condemning, and cutting ourselves off we may find that our discernment leads us to engage others with whom we differ and disagree in an open and sincere attempt to understand. We may never agree, but it is my prayer that through our wisdom, discernment, and understanding we can grow to appreciate the vast diversity of people and thought that God provides for us.

Let us pray….