

Discerning the Spirit in Decision Making

STRATEGY FOR DISCERNING THE SPIRIT OF GOD IN DECISION MAKING

A) Presumptions:

1. *God has a “voice” and we can learn to listen for it and recognize it.*
2. *God is not a God of confusion, He desires clarity, consistency, and order. God doesn’t play games with us to confuse or tease, but he will test our character to cause us to mature and become more dependent upon Him.*
3. *God has hopes for us that involves more than just “one particular thing for us to do” in a given situation. God’s Sovereign will, God’s prescriptive will, and God’s permissive will all work out in a way that gives humanity free will choices. God’s Sovereignty works wonderfully through all the circumstances and choices in life.*
4. *God wants to know our heart’s desire and what we earnestly seek. God doesn’t compel us to love Him or obey Him, but He encourages us to do so in a gracious and respectful way.*
5. *Haste is the enemy of the spiritual life. Slowing down our pace in life is a pre-requisite to listening to the Spirit’s guidance.*
6. *We have confidence, for God who precedes us, who is at work in us, is good and is always at work for good.*
7. *God’s guidance will never make sense except when set within the larger life of his Kingdom.*

B) Specific steps:

- 1) **Meditate** – often upon God’s principles for life as set forth in the scriptures, always striving to penetrate more deeply into their meaning and into their applicability for your life. Since the Spirit is your “breath,” that gives life, then the Scriptures are your “bread” that feeds you.

“This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; but you shall meditate therein day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written therein: for, then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.” – Joshua 1:8

- 2) **Be alert and attentive** – to what is happening in your life and in your mind and heart. It is there that God’s communication comes and identifies itself, whatever the external occasion may be. Of the prodigal son it was said that he came to *himself* (Luke 15:17), and then he found the truth and repentance that saved him from his plight. You must intentionally, humbly and intelligently cultivate your ability to listen for the Spirit’s “voice” and see what is happening at your “gut level” and thus recognize the movements of the Spirit within.

- 3) **Be Patient** – Guidance from the Spirit of God is seldom a simple experience. It is a process (involving listening, testing, questioning and discerning) that leads to confident obedience. Good decisions can be

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made slowly; and time is always on God's side. His silence is useful and purposeful. God is at work even if we are only able to wait. F.B. Meyer describes the process as follows:

God's impressions within and his words without are always corroborated by his providence around, and we should quietly wait until those three focus into one point. If you do not know what you ought to do, stand still until you do and when the time comes for action, circumstances like glowworms, will sparkle along your path, and you will become so sure that you are right, when God's three witnesses concur, that you could not be surer though an angel beckoned you on."

- 4) Converse with God** – constantly and specifically about the matters that concern you/us. This is essential to your part in the “dance with the divine.” You would not continue to speak to someone who did not talk with you; and you could not carry on a coherent conversation with someone who spoke to you rarely and on odd occasions only. The same is, in general, true of God.

Nothing is too insignificant or hopeless to communicate with God about. Share all things with him by bringing them to him in prayer and asking for the Spirit to guide you even in those things that you think you already understand.

- 5) Use a regular plan of listening** – carefully to God. (Silence, solitude, meditation & contemplation will help.) Operate with the mindset Ignatius of Loyola practiced of “finding God in all things” (and I would add in all activities) – paying attention to details in the ordinary and daily encounters (i.e. Quotidian challenge). Keep a journal so that when the Spirit does speak you can note the patterns after a period of reflection. Examine these patterns and meditate on any salient truth that the Spirit brings to the surface. Remember to give thanks whenever the Spirit does speak. When he speaks it is not to amuse or entertain you, and not even just to encourage you, but more importantly to make some difference in you.

- 6) When facing a decision** – between two good and godly choices:

- a) **Make a List** – of the positive and negative aspects of the decision. No choice is made in a vacuum... it will impact your life and the life of your family and friends. List all the possible ramifications of the choices as well.
- b) **Employ your imagination** – to consider what the immediate and long-term future will be like should you say “yes” to one choice or “no” to the other. For example: Imagine holding choice ‘A’ in your right hand. Spend a few minutes paying attention to how holding this choice feels. When you have paid attention to all the feelings, images, words or memories that this choice brings, then...do the same for choice ‘B’ in your other hand by saying, “I’ve changed my mind and instead I’m going to choose this.” While holding choice ‘B’ spend a few minutes paying attention to how holding choice ‘B’ in your hand feels. Your feelings are the liveliest index, the raw materials to discern. Your intellect judges the source of those feelings and your will makes a choice and decides to act on the basis of this judgment.

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Ultimately, ask yourself, of which outcome can it be most truly said that it is what you think God is asking of you now – what is “for the greater glory of God.”

7) **When God does not speak** (when he is silent) on matter(s) of concern to you:

- a) **Seek guidance on guidance.** Ask God to inform you, in whatever way he chooses, if there is some hindrance in you. Be quiet, wait and listen in the “inner forum” of your mind (or the inner chamber of your heart) for any indication that you are blocking the Spirit’s guidance (i.e. by fear, anxiety or control) and thus grieving the Spirit. But do not endlessly pursue this. In prayer, set a specific length of time for this inquiry about guidance itself – normally no more than three days. But be aware some choices may take months to unfold and God prepares you. TRUST that if there is a problem, God will make it clear to you. Embrace the confidence of Abraham Lincoln, who is reported to have said: “I am satisfied that, when the Almighty wants me to do, or not to do, a particular thing, he finds a way of letting me know it.”
- b) **Counsel with at least two people** whose relationship with God you respect because of their maturity of faith and who understand prayer and the struggle in discerning the Spirit. This may be done in a group setting (e.g. The Quaker’s concept of “clearness committees”). Sharing your thoughts and feelings with those who are close to you, whose affection you enjoy, and whose wisdom you respect, helps you to avoid self-deception and impulsive actions.
- c) **If for whatever reason guidance doesn’t come**, remember in its absence that your confidence is the Lord who goes before you and who is with you even if we blunder or flounder. When there is no apparent direction, find out why, and then try to address it. In these moments you must remember that you may not know God in his guidance, but you will know him in his faithfulness. *“His mercies they fail not. They are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness.”* (Lam 3:22-23) Jeremiah wrote these words in a time of utter failure, when the guiding of the Spirit was totally hidden from Israel and his disciplining hand raised against them.
- d) **If, you cannot find such a reason**, then act on *what seems best to you* after itemized consideration of the details of the alternatives. If certain options seem equally desirable, then select on e as you wish (refer back to #6). Often God will give you the choice of how you would serve Him, rather than compelling you to do something that is totally in conflict with your likes, hopes, or aspirations. Commit it all to God and expect Him to work.

8) **Confirmatory signs** will usually accompany any decision made under the Spirit’s guidance.

- a) **A sense of peace** even though the proposed change may be difficult (Col 3:15 – *Let the peace of Christ guide all your decisions.* A closeness with God and the deepening of faith, hope and love will also be evident. A lack of these signs is usually an indication that God is not in the proposal. Internal perturbation surrounding a preferred option may suggest that the Spirit is not in this option but rather in an alternative.

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- b) **A challenge to change direction** or do something new, which comes strongly from within, or from someone you respect or knows you, or unanimously from some group whose spiritual maturity and commitment is transparent needs considerable attention on your part.
 - c) **If you find yourself** frequently, spontaneously, joyfully, and enthusiastically considering and thinking about one choice over the other (or a proposed change), in spite of yourself, then you need to have a very good reason for not embracing it. God is likely lining up your desires with his hope for you.
 - d) **Give the problem areas over to God** to act in. In the list you previously made, point out the more difficult matters and ask God to solve them supernaturally. When He works in this fashion you can have confidence He is leading you.
 - e) **Strange coincidences** sometimes occur when the Spirit is nudging us in a particular direction. A friend not seen for years offers unsolicited encouragement, a song heard on the radio seem like God speaking to your heart, your morning scripture reading just “leaps out at you” in regards to your decision.
- 9) **Do not slip into the mindset** that being obedient to the will of God means taking the hardest, most difficult, most costly option. It is God’s love for us, and not our perceived idea that God “wants to get us,” which is the beginning and the end of blessing and the source of his leading. We must remember we have a Father who loves us, his Son who died for us, and his Spirit given to us to guide and empower.
- 10) **Pray unceasingly**, but remember prayer is not a special tactic to be used in discernment. Rather, it is the outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible relationship. In prayer we come into that alignment, orientation, and communion with the Spirit of God, which surrounds and underpins all of our seeking. Pray until you have peace and certainty in what God’s direction is leading you.

***NOTE:** This material has been gleaned from the works of Dr. Dallas Willard’s *In Search of Guidance*, St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, and Dr. Doug Gregg and Dr. Sian Yang Tan’s *The Disciplines of the Holy Spirit* – it was presented in class sessions at Western Seminary and modified by authenticdiscipleship.org.