

DISCERNMENT 101

INTRODUCTION

Do you know who Tessica Brown is? Maybe you've heard her story. Tessica is a 40-year-old woman who ran out of hairspray one day this past January, and so she grabbed a can of Gorilla Glue spray and sprayed it into her hair. She tried to get it out herself, without success. She went to the ER, and they weren't able to help her. She was finally helped by a plastic surgeon in California. It took three days, but they managed to remove the glue and protect her scalp.

What did Tessica need in the moment she reached for the spray glue? She needed what the Bible calls "discernment." Discernment is the ability to perceive or note a distinction between things. We also call it differentiation; we even call it discrimination. And it's something that we all do every day of our lives.

For instance, when we are driving down the road and see a left-turn lane, we distinguish between that lane and the regular driving lane. When we open a package of chicken from the store, our noses tell us whether the chicken is fresh or not. Discrimination means noticing the differences between things, like left-turn lanes and driving lanes, or fresh chicken and spoiled chicken. It's important for life itself.

In [Matthew 7:6](#) Jesus gives us a basic lesson in discernment, which is connected to the previous lesson on judgment. We are not permitted to condemn another person, or judge them as God judges. But we must, Jesus says in [Matthew 7:6](#), distinguish between different types of people; we must discriminate; we must discern.

This is what Jesus says:

Matthew 7:6 2016 ESV

“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

Let's pray and consider these words.

DOGS & PIGS

Let's just jump in to the uncomfortable part of this verse. Jesus calls some people “dogs” and “pigs.” He is not talking about pets and livestock; He's talking about people, human beings, perhaps people that we know and love. He is continuing the discussion of God's judgment that He began in [Matthew 7:1-5](#). In those verses we see that we have no right whatsoever to condemn others. But in [Matthew 7:6](#) we see that we have a responsibility to relate to others according to judgment of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Our God determines that some people are already in a severe state of judgment, and that our behavior toward them is determined by Him.

Is Jesus simply insulting certain kinds of people? Certainly not. He is declaring His judgment upon them. There is nothing casual or mocking or contemptuous about His words. He is serious and sober. He is speaking with holy precision. There are people who trample that which is holy and precious, and attack the giver of those things with force and violence, usually verbal, sometimes physical. People who do such things have been given over to the judgment of God, and we are not to interfere with His judgment.

Clearly, it is not a good thing to be judged by God to be a “dog” or a “pig.” It’s a terrible thing, actually. It means that this person has been given over to their sin and rebellion. Their Creator has chosen to let them have their own way as sinners.

There are some who are deeply concerned that God respects their own free will, rather than imposing Himself on their lives. Some go so far as to say that God cannot save someone without their permission. Well, this is what you get. Apart from the sovereign grace of God, His loving and holy interference with our own plans and desires, human beings behave as spiritual “dogs” and “pigs.”

That IS a terrible thing to say. That’s because it’s a terrible thing that anyone would hear the glorious, holy, precious Gospel of Jesus Christ, and mock it, and mock Him, and joke about His cross and His resurrection, and treat those holy and precious things with utter disregard. Can there be respect for those who do this? They have denied the very God in whose image they were created. They have denied that image within themselves. They have made themselves animals, not people. In a very real sense, they themselves have chosen to be nothing more than “dogs” and “pigs.”

HOLY, PRECIOUS THINGS

Jesus speaks of holy, precious things. What does He mean by that? He means the holy, precious things given to us by God: the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ Himself. The Word of God. The truth of eternal life in Christ, of forgiveness of sins, of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The word of our testimony of Jesus’ saving power. What Second Peter calls **all things that pertain to life and godliness**. ([Second Peter 1:3](#)).

If you have received the good gift of God in Christ, the Gospel, new life, the Holy Spirit, forgiveness, repentance, eternal hope, then Jesus commands you NOT to share those things with those who will trample them and mock them, and turn and attack you. You are not under an obligation to argue with a fool who will only mock and belittle those holy and precious things. Jesus says, Stop talking to them. Cut off the conversation. Let them have the last word, and then walk away.

You know, someone might say, “Well, you should keep talking; maybe they’ll believe, you don’t know!” That’s true; we don’t know if some day they will believe. What we know is that in this moment, the moment that they are mocking and denigrating and insult the holy, precious things give to you by Jesus, you are to shut your mouth and leave them to the judgment of God. Whether the Lord might have mercy on them in the future or leave them to their judgment is up to Jesus. What we do in the moment they are mocking the Spirit of grace is also up to Jesus, and He says that we are to stop talking.

A CLEAR COMMAND

The command is so clear. It’s easy to understand. It’s exactly like don’t run with scissors, don’t put beans up your nose, don’t play with matches. Don’t give that which is holy to the dogs, and do not throw your peals before pigs.

People who have a hard time with this command aren’t tripped up by the command itself, but by what sounds like insulting, mean-spirited language. But remember, God has the right to judge anyone, at anytime. Jesus referred to Peter as Satan in a particular moment in time, because in that moment Peter was acting like Satan.

There are people who, in our view, are just normal, nice, regular people, but in the mind and judgment of God are “dogs” and “pigs.” He tells us how to tell who they are – they are the ones who trample holy and precious things underfoot, and then turn and attack whoever gave them those holy and precious things. And Jesus gives us a clear, simple, straightforward command: stop talking to them. Their dismissive, arrogant attitude denies them the right to hear more.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

What does the future hold for these people? We have no idea. It may very well be that they are under the eternal judgment of God, condemned and lost in their sins, and that there is no hope for them. If that is the case, you can give them holy and precious truths until Jesus comes, and they will never stop trampling them underfoot and attacking you, because God is not going to rescue them from their sin.

Or it may be that at some point in the future they may be saved. But they won't be saved because you decided to disobey Jesus' command. When Jesus commands you to stop speaking, and you disobey by continuing to speak, He will not bless your disobedience. It's possible that the Holy Spirit will even bring your words to that person's remembrance at some point. But in this moment of obedience, we need to stop talking and leave these people to the judgment and mercy of God.

LESSONS IN DISCERNMENT

Let me give you a few lessons on discernment, a few principles to follow. These certainly apply to [Matthew 7:6](#), but they apply in every other biblical setting as well.

First: We Discern Every Day

Every time you open a pack of fresh chicken, your nose sniffs for the smell of decomposition. Is this chicken fresh or is it going bad? Should we eat it, or throw it out? That's discernment. When you fuel your car or truck, you discern between gas and diesel, and between different grades of gas. We discern things all day long. It shouldn't be surprising or strange that we would discern spiritual things as well. When a man tells me that he visited Jesus in heaven a long time ago, and Jesus told him what was REALLY going on, discernment lets me know this man is terribly deceived.

Second: Discernment is Not About Personal Feelings or Opinions

Discernment must be carried out in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. We trust that when He speaks – as He does in [Matthew 7:6](#) – He speaks with purpose. Discernment is carrying out HIS instructions, not making personal decisions about right and wrong.

You see, whether or not someone is a “dog” or a “pig” is not a judgment that you make. It's a judgment that person makes, by how they respond to the holy and precious things you offer them. And ultimately, it is a judgment that God makes according to His holiness and justice. Obeying Jesus' command doesn't mean imposing our own definitions on someone, but agreeing with God according to His definitions.

Third: Discernment is driven by the Word of God.

Discernment is not a gut feeling, a tickle on the back of your neck, or intuition. [Deuteronomy 29:29](#) says that **the secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and our children, that we may do all the words of this Law.** WHY are some people “dogs” and “pigs”? That’s a secret thing that only God knows. WHAY are we to do when someone tramples the things that are holy and precious, and attacks us? That’s revealed to us in the Word of God.

The Word of God tells us exactly how to respond to most events in our world. There is no guesswork involved. The better you know the Word, and the more faithful you are to the Word, the better your discernment will be. And it’s obvious that new encounters with new objections and attitudes should drive us to the Scripture to learn and continue to improve in discernment.

Fourth: Discernment Requires Ability

Discernment is not magical. It is an ability that we gain through our own growth in faith and the Word of God. Obviously, abilities differ. By the providence of God, I’m the resident expert for our church. I’m here to teach and proclaim the Word of God, and to help you as you grow in Christ.

But the truth is that I only know in part, as [First Corinthians 13](#) says, and I also have to go talk to the experts when I’m not sure about something.

So if someone tells you that Jesus was not raised from the dead, but decomposed in the grave, I trust that each of you have enough knowledge and discernment to show why that is a lie. If someone says to you that Mormonism is Christian, you might need to talk to me to find out why Mormonism is not only not Christian, it's a religion without any particular god at all. But if you ask me about how supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism differ, I'm going to go to the experts; I have a basic idea, but I don't comprehend the details. For what it's worth, one of the most trusted theologians I know, John Frame, believes that arguments about infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism are pointless.

Fifth: Discernment is Obedience that Glorifies God

When we are given a clear instruction, as we are in [Matthew 7:6](#), our obedience glorifies God. Jesus said to the church in Ephesus, **I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and have found them to be false** ([Revelation 3:2](#)). Their obedience brought glory to His name. For one thing, they were rightly trusting and obedient to Him. In addition, they followed His instructions not to believe every spirit ([First John 4:1](#)), but tested those who claimed apostolic authority, and rightly discerned that those people were liars.

Finally, Discernment Does Not Mean Winning

Discernment means that YOU recognize the differences between things, not that you are able to convince someone else that those things are different or that those differences matter. In fact, discernment usually means letting the unbeliever have the last word.

When we are faced with a mocking unbeliever, one who tramples holy, precious things, and then attacks us, Jesus doesn't tell us to shout them down, but to stop talking to them. He tells us to leave them in their mockery, in their shameful behavior, in their ignorance, in their foolishness, in their sins.

On the other hand, if we share holy and precious things with someone, and they listen, and give heed, and come to faith in Jesus, their cry of faith and repentance is the last word. We have no need to keep talking, "See, I was right, wasn't I, I was right about Jesus and your need, wasn't I?" We just stop and give glory to God.