

Concluding Exhortations and Commandments (5): “Quench not the Spirit”

Introduction:

We have been working through this last section of 1 Thessalonians 5 for a number of weeks. Today we arrive to verses 20 and 21, which read, “²⁰Do not despise prophecies, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good.”

Now when Paul first penned this epistle to this church, he wrote in the Greek language of the first century AD. Punctuation was not a common or consistent feature of the language. The punctuation in our English translations, therefore, owes its origin to the translators attempting to show the relationships between phrases and clauses in a sentence. It is not surprising, therefore, that different translations differ in their punctuation. We read the following translations and may observe that they differ from one another in their punctuation:

KJV. “Quench not the Spirit. ²⁰Despise not prophesyings. ²¹Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. ²²Abstain from all appearance of evil. (4 sentences)

NKJV. “Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise prophecies. ²¹Test all things; hold fast what is good. ²²Abstain from every form of evil.” (4 sentences)

ESV. “Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise prophecies, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²²Abstain from every form of evil.” (3 sentences)

NASV. “Do not quench the Spirit; ²⁰do not despise prophetic utterances. ²¹But examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.” (2 sentences)

RSV. “Do not quench the Spirit, ²⁰do not despise prophesying, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good, ²²abstain from every form of evil.” (1 sentence)

Greek NT. τὸ πνεῦμα μὴ σβέννυτε, ²⁰προφητείας μὴ ἐξουθενεῖτε, ²¹πάντα δὲ δοκιμάζετε, τὸ καλὸν κατέχετε, ²²ἀπὸ παντὸς εἴδους πονηροῦ ἀπέχεσθε.

I included the Greek text, which originally had no punctuation. We can see that the editors of this Greek NT imposed their interpretation of how the clauses should be understood by the way they punctuated the sentence. They viewed these commands as one sentence, which contains a series of subordinate clauses.

The reason that I desired to point this out was to show that there is a relationship of each clause to other clauses in the sentence, even though that relationship may be weak. And so, although we have been addressing each command, separately, one at a time, but there is a sense in which they relate together in one message. They stand together and one commandment may flow or lead to the one that follows.

The relationship of clauses may be best seen with verses 20 and 21. For although in the KJV and the NKJV, the command in verse 20 appears to stand alone--“Do not despise prophecies.” however, it should be understood as connected with the two clauses that follow: And so, we see in this one sentence the next 3 commands of our total of 18 in this closing section of the epistle.

#13, 14, and 15. ²⁰“Do not despise prophecies, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good.”

In order to understand what the apostle was commanding, we will take each clause in turn, considering its meaning. First, Paul declared,

A. “Do not despise prophecies.” (5:20)

What is meant by prophecies? God has revealed Himself and His ways through history at different times in different ways. The ones through whom God spoke were called His “prophets.” The writer to the Hebrews declared this truth in the opening verses of Hebrews 1:1f.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers *by the prophets*,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Heb. 1:1f)

God raised up prophets in order that through them He would make His will known to His people. In this sense, the term, “prophet”, is a rather broad term. **Abraham** was a prophet of God. God said to the pagan king, Abimelech, “Now therefore, restore the man’s wife; for he (Abraham) is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours” (Gen. 20:7). **Moses** was a prophet of God. We read a summary of his life in Deuteronomy 34:10-12:

But since then there has not arisen in Israel *a prophet like Moses*, whom the LORD knew face to face,¹¹ in all the signs and wonders which the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt, before Pharaoh, before all his servants, and in all his land,¹² and by all that mighty power and all the great terror which Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Samuel was a prophet as well as a judge, a leader of Israel. We read in 1 Samuel 3:20, “And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel had been established as a prophet of the LORD.” Sometimes the Lord sent **an unnamed prophet** to declare His Word to His people. We read in Judges 6 of one of these unnamed prophets:

⁷And it came to pass, when the children of Israel cried out to the LORD because of the Midianites,⁸ that *the LORD sent a prophet* to the children of Israel, who said to them, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘I brought you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of bondage; ⁹and I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land.’ ¹⁰Also I said to you, ‘I am the LORD your God; do not fear the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell.’ But you have not obeyed My voice.” (Judges 6:7-10)

There were prophets who were notable and had long ministries among the Lord’s people. **Nathan** was a prophet who served the Lord during the reign of King David. Later there were **Elijah** and **Elisha**, and numerous others the Lord used to tell forth His Word. And then there were the well-known writing prophets, including **Isaiah**, **Jeremiah**, **Ezekiel**, **Daniel**, and many others.

There were prophets in the New Testament era also. **John the Baptist** was a prophet like Elijah of ancient Israel. The **Lord Jesus** was a prophet, indeed, the greatest of prophets. He identified Himself as a prophet. When some had rejected Him and His message, He said, “So they were offended at Him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house” (Mat 13:57). Peter declared that Jesus was the Prophet that Moses said would come, who would be a prophet like him (Moses). We read in Acts 3:

²²“For Moses truly said to the fathers, ‘The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you. ²³And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.’ ²⁴Yes, and all the

prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days.” (Acts 3:22ff)

During the opening period of the church era, God would give some of His people the gift of prophecy to enable them to tell forth God’s Word and on occasion foretell future events. **Agabus** is mentioned twice in the New Testament. We read of him in Acts 11.

Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. ²⁶And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. ²⁷And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. ²⁹Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. ³⁰This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:25-30)

On another occasion Luke wrote of **Agabus** who foretold of Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem. We read in **Acts 21:10 and 11**:

“And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹When he had come to us, he took Paul’s belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, “So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.”’”

Philip, who was an evangelist and probably a deacon in the church at Jerusalem, although not a prophet himself, he had **four daughters** who did prophesy.

On the next day we who were Paul’s companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. ⁹Now this man had **four virgin daughters who prophesied**. (Acts 21:8f)

The New Testament records that our Lord gave the gift of prophecy to a number of His people. It is a spiritual gift that was common in the early churches. We read of this gift in Romans 12:3ff.

³For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. ⁴For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, ⁵so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. *⁶Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith;* ⁷or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; ⁸he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. (Rom. 12:3-8)

Here we see prophecy as a gift to be used by some in the churches. Notice that this gift of prophecy is listed first. It must have been a common gift in the churches, one that was commonly employed.

We also read of the gift of prophecy in 1 Corinthians 12.

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant: ²You know that you were Gentiles, carried away to these dumb idols, however you were led. ³Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. ⁴There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. ⁶And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works

all in all. ⁷But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: ⁸for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, **to another prophecy**, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. (1 Cor. 12:1-11)

The widespread use of the gift of prophecy was an indication that the promised age of the Messiah had arrived. This is what Peter declared on the Day of Pentecost. He quoted Joel 2 in order to explain the phenomenon of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. Peter declared:

¹⁴But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. ¹⁵For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷“And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; **Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your young men shall see visions, Your old men shall dream dreams.** ¹⁸**And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy.** (Acts 2:14-18)

On this day all the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and when the multitude came together, they were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. They said to one another, “We hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God” (Acts 2:11).

The Lord used the gift of prophecy in order both to evangelize the lost and to minister to Christians within the churches. We read of the use of this gift in the church at Corinth. We need to read a long passage, for we need to understand the context and the gift of prophecy that is set forth throughout the passage. Let us read 1 Corinthians 14. In this passage we will also read of the gift of tongues, which was the miraculous gift given to a Christian whereby he was able to speak forth the Word of God in a language that he had never known or studied.

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, **especially that you may prophesy.** ²For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. ³On the other hand, **the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.** ⁴The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but **the one who prophesies builds up the church.** ⁵Now I want you all to speak in tongues, **but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.**

⁶Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge **or prophecy** or teaching? ⁷If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? ⁸And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? ⁹So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. ¹⁰There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, ¹¹but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. ¹²So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

¹³Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. ¹⁴For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. ¹⁶Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? ¹⁷For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. ¹⁸I thank God that I speak in tongues more

than all of you. ¹⁹Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

²⁰Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.

²¹In the Law it is written, “By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.” ²²Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, **while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers.** ²³If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? ²⁴**But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.**

²⁶What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. ²⁷If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. ²⁸But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. ²⁹**Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.** ³⁰**If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent.** ³¹**For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged,** ³²**and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.** ³³For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

As in all the churches of the saints, ³⁴the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. ³⁵If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

³⁶Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? ³⁷If anyone thinks that **he is a prophet**, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. ³⁸If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. ³⁹So, my brothers, **earnestly desire to prophesy**, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰But all things should be done decently and in order.

We may assert several principles regarding the gift of prophecy. (1) First, the gift of prophecy was a common gift that was commonly used in the churches. (2) The prophetic message that the Lord would speak through the gifted Christian was for the purpose of building up the church. Verse 3 states, “**the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.**” And verse 4 further states, “**the one who prophesies builds up the church.**” (3) The one with the gift of prophecy was “greater”, in other words, of greater benefit to the church, than the one who spoke in a language did not understand what he was saying, nor did the others, unless the one speaking that message in a foreign language, or one hearing him, had the gift of interpreting the gift of tongues. This is why Paul could write, “**The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up**” (v. 5). (4) The gifts were always to be employed in the building up of the church body. Verse 6 reads, “Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge **or prophecy** or teaching?” (5) The gift of prophecy also had an impact upon unbelievers who were in the church services. Verse 24 reads, “**But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.**”

There was a major problem, however, with the use of the gift of prophecy in the churches. There were not only those whom God used through the gift of prophecy to build up the church, but there were those who gave forth prophecies that were not of the Lord, but purported to be so. There were many false prophets and false prophecies that presented themselves before the churches as though they were speaking forth the Word of God. And so the churches had the responsibility to evaluate prophecies to determine whether or not the message was from God. When someone gave forth a prophecy, it was the responsibility of others in the church who also had the gift of prophecy to pass judgment on what they heard. Verse 29 reads, “**Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.**”

Now there were women in the churches to whom God had given the gift of prophecy. They as the men were passive in that God the Holy Spirit spoke through them His Word to the congregation. But when it was necessary to assess and pronounce the validity of a prophecy, the women were not allowed to take part. This is what Paul declared in verses 33 and 34: “...***As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says.***” This is not an absolute prohibition for women to speak in the church, but this prohibition was for women not to participate in publicly affirming or rejecting a prophecy as legitimate.¹

The problem of false prophets is seen throughout the biblical record. They have always been present to trouble the people of God, giving forth falsehood that they perceived to be of God. Some wrongly think that if someone gives a word of prophecy that the validity may be determined if that which was predicted comes to pass. But this is not a valid test. We may see this from what Moses wrote in **Deuteronomy 13:1-5**.

“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, ²***and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass***, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ ³you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. ***For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*** ⁴***You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice***, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. ⁵But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”

Notice that the standard by which the prophet’s message was to be assessed was if it was in accordance with the Word that God had already revealed to them. In other words, the Scriptures were the standard by which the prophets were to be assessed and measured as to their legitimacy.

Now sometimes the Word of the Lord through His prophets in the churches, was not welcomed by all. Sometimes the word of prophecy would reveal and make known sin, perhaps secret sin of members within the church. We read of this in 1 Corinthians 14. Someone coming into the church may have “***the secrets of his heart***” disclosed. This and due to the presence of false prophecies, one can see how some may have dismissed or rejected prophecies altogether. The words of Paul in our text would have been applicable, “Do not despise prophecies” (v. 20).

Now how are we to assess the gift of prophecy today? We understand that the gift of prophecy was a temporary gift for the early church. As the gospel became proclaimed throughout the Gentile world, and as the Lord had established His church as comprised of Jewish and Gentile believers, the revelatory gifts diminished in use within the churches.

Paul wrote of the temporary nature of the revelatory gifts in two places. In Ephesians 2:20 Paul wrote of the gifted men which the Lord gave to His church.

¹⁷And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. ¹⁸For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰***having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets***, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, ²¹in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²²in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Eph. 2:17-22)

¹ It was legitimate for a woman to pray or prophesy if her head was covered (Cf. 1 Cor. 11:5). The Lord has provided a woman’s hair as a natural covering for her head, which was a visible acknowledgement to her submission to the God-ordained authority of her husband and men in the church (Cf. 1 Cor. 11:15).

Just as the apostles were the foundation of the church, so were the prophets. The Lord began and established His church through the apostles and the prophets. With their function being accomplished, they both, apostles and prophets passed from the scene.

Paul also wrote of the temporary function of the revelatory gifts in 1 Corinthians 13.

⁸Love never fails. ***But whether there are prophecies, they will fail;*** whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. ⁹***For we know in part and we prophesy in part.*** ¹⁰***But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.*** ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. (1 Cor. 13:18-11)

The Lord has left us a higher and more sure standard to assess claims of truth. He has given us the Holy Scriptures. Our Confession of Faith states the matter well. This is Article 1, paragraph 1, of **The Baptist Confession of 1689**:

1. The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience, although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and his will which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times and in divers manners to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterward for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan, and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, ***those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.*** (2 Tim. 3:15-17; Isaiah 8:20; Luke 16:29, 31; Ephesians 2:20; Romans 1:19-21; 2:14f; Psalms 19:1-3; Hebrews 1:1; Proverbs 22:19-21; Romans 15:4; 2 Peter 1:19f.)

The Holy Scriptures is the sole and sufficient source of all information that God has given us regarding Him and His will for us. The Bible is the record of many “prophecies” that the Lord gave through history, the record that culminates in the Word of God proclaimed and demonstrated by the Lord Jesus and His apostles. Because God is unchanging, His Word once spoken and recorded for us, continues to have the same authority over us as it did when He first delivered it unto His people.

Now Paul not only told these Christians not to despise prophecies, he also wrote,

B. “But test everything” (5:21a)

Christians are not to be gullible, accepting everything and anything as a legitimate “word from the Lord.” Christians are to “test everything.” We are to be in the business of assessing and evaluating what we see, what we hear, and what we read. We are to be a discerning people, for many false prophets and teachers are in the world. John wrote, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). They stand and proclaim to the people of God that they have a direct word from the Lord for them. We would say, “No, they do not.” We take to heart the words of Isaiah: “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isa. 8:20).

The Scriptures speak forthrightly to the need of God’s people to be discerning in order that they may understand fully the will of God for their lives. There is much error about us and God’s people are capable of embracing much of it to their own detriment. This is so, due to their ignorance of truth, the craftiness of deceivers, and their own susceptibility to being deceived. Epaphras, a servant of Christ, was concerned for the young Christians at Colossae respecting this matter. It would do us well to have the same healthy anxiety for ourselves and others about us. Paul wrote of him, “Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondsman of

Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, *that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God* (Col. 4:12).

The Bible refers frequently to the concept of discernment as the responsibility to make judgments of what is true and false, right and wrong, truth and error. The two words which are most frequently used to connote this process are the Hebrew word *bin* and the Greek word *diakrino*. According to Jay Adams in his book, *A Call to Discernment*, the Hebrew word is used 247 times in the Old Testament.² The word has been translated variously as “understand, discern, and distinguish.” When it is used, the word suggests “to separate things from one another at their points of difference in order to distinguish them.” Adams goes on to write that “it refers to the process by which one comes to know or understand God’s thoughts and ways through separating those things that differ.”³ The Greek word is used similarly in the New Testament. It too refers to a process of separating or discriminating whereby truth may be set apart in relief from that which is false. In short, discernment is a filtering process by which a person distinguishes and separates good from the bad, right from wrong, and truth from error.

We should emphasize that discernment is not merely a function of the mind. Discernment is a spiritual work which uses the mind to ascertain what is true. And as a spiritual work, only the Spirit of God can illuminate the mind, thereby enabling us to make proper judgements. As Paul wrote, “*Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised*” (1 Cor. 2:11-14). Take note, and this is important: the mind is still in the process. One must “understand” with the mind, but understanding can only come through the illuminating work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit illuminates the mind with spiritual words--words of Scripture--as they are pondered.

The New Testament teaches that the ability to discern is linked with the measure of the maturity of a Christian. To become a discerning Christian is what it is to become a mature Christian. Consider **Hebrews 5:11-14**. The writer was speaking of the Old Testament person of Melchizedek and how he prefigured our Lord Jesus in His priestly ministry:

(Melchizedek) of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. ¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. ¹³For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. ¹⁴But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (Heb 5:11-14)

The writer was addressing Hebrew Christians of the first century who were under the threat of persecution for their faith. They faced the temptation of removing themselves from hardship by renouncing Christ and returning to Judaism, which was an accepted and legal religion of the empire. The writer set forth a word of exhortation to them, urging them to persevere. There was no return possible. Christ and the salvation He brought had fulfilled Old Testament religion. Among the many arguments set forth, the writer sought to show how superior Christ’s high priesthood was to the Levitical priesthood of the old covenant. The ministry of Christ as a high priest resembled that of the Old Testament priest Melchizedek, who was neither a descendant of Abraham nor a Levite. But the writer paused, and gave a rebuke to his readers. For although the matters he discussed were complex, they would not have posed difficulty for the Hebrews had they not been “*dull of hearing*” (5:11). Furthermore, the writer rebuked them, for they were but babies when they should have long since become mature teachers (5:12). The writer then explains what constitutes maturity in verses 13 and 14: “For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who “*because of practice have their senses*

² Jay Adams, *A Call for Discernment* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1987), p. 46.

³ *Ibid.*

trained to discern good and evil.” The measure of Christian maturity, by definition, is the ability to exercise discernment. We will say more respecting these verses later.

We find the same link between discernment and spiritual immaturity in **Ephesians 4:11-16**.

And He Himself (the risen and enthroned Lord Jesus) gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, ¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, ¹³ till we all come to the unity of *the faith* and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; ¹⁴ that we should no longer be children, *tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine*, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, ¹⁵ but, speaking *the truth* in love, *may grow up in all things into Him* who is the head-- Christ-- ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Eph. 4:11)

Now we could say a great deal about this passage, but will have to do so another time. But I might make this comment in passing. Sadly, some churches and preachers, as well as many, many Christians have bought into the idea that doctrine is something that should not be emphasized for it results in disagreement, dissension, and division. Yet we see hear in Paul’s words that sound doctrine is to be the very subject of the minister of the Word whom God has called to His churches. Now yes, in one sense doctrine is divisive, but it is supposed to be! The Lord is in the separation business today in our churches, if we were doing His will. He would have us proclaim the truth in its entirety, without apology, and do so continuously. And truth divides and separates the people of God from all others. But again, take note of what Paul says here. Sound doctrine is the ground on which unity is to be built; we are to be striving to “the unity of the faith.” If we are not doctrinal in our preaching and teaching in our churches, there is something terribly deficient and errant.

Now consider the wording of verse 14 carefully in Ephesians 4: Paul identifies undiscerning persons as “*children*” in need of growth who are “*tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.*” Again, to increase in the ability to discern is to move toward spiritual maturity.

What is the standard with which we are to test all things? That would be, of course, the Holy Scriptures. The Scriptures have always been the standard by which all claims of spiritual truth are to be tested and assessed.

Here is a final word of application. The Holy Scriptures declare, “Despise not prophesying.” Does this kind of warning need to be given to the people of God? Yes, for preaching the Word of God is the one form of prophesying that the Lord authorizes today in His churches. **Matthew Henry** wrote of this:

By *prophesyings* here we are to understand the preaching of the word, the interpreting and applying of the scriptures; and this we must not despise, but should prize and value, because it is the ordinance of God, appointed of him for our furtherance and increase in knowledge and grace, in holiness and comfort. We must not despise preaching, though it be plain, and not with enticing words of men’s wisdom, and though we be told no more than what we knew before. It is useful, and many times needful, to have our minds stirred up, our affections and resolutions excited, to those things that we knew before to be our interest and our duty.

However, due to pride, love for sin, and our stubborn and rebellious nature, we may be tempted to first doubt, then, resist and even reject God’s Word when it is proclaimed to us. ***There are many who claim to be Christian but despise preaching, the public proclamation of the Word of God.*** They do so to their own peril.

John Calvin wrote of Paul’s words, “Despise not prophesying”:

The statement, however, is a remarkable one, for the commendation of external preaching. It is the dream of fanatics, that those are children who continue to employ themselves in the

reading of the Scripture, or the hearing of the word, as if no one were spiritual, unless he is a despiser of doctrine. They proudly, therefore, despise the ministry of man, nay, even Scripture itself, that they may attain the Spirit. Farther, whatever delusions Satan suggests to them, they presumptuously set forth as secret revelations of the Spirit. Such are the Libertines, and other furies of that stamp. And the more ignorant that any one is, he is puffed up and swollen out with so much the greater arrogance. Let us, however, learn from the example of Paul, to conjoin the Spirit with the voice of men, which is nothing else than his organ.

As an illustration of those who despise prophesying, consider the situation in the days of **Jeremiah**. The people of Jerusalem refused to hear him, though he spoke for God. They despised Jeremiah's prophecies, but embraced the words of the false prophets.

An astonishing and horrible thing
Has been committed in the land;
The prophets prophesy falsely,
And the priests bear rule by their own power;
And My people love to have it so. (Jer. 5:30f)

Isaiah was another prophet whose message from God was rejected by the people of God.

Now go, write it before them on a tablet,
And note it on a scroll,
That it may be for the time to come,
Forever and ever.
That this is a rebellious people,
Lying children,
Children who will not hear the law of the Lord;
Who say to the seers, "Do not see,"
And to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us right things,
Speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits.
Get out of the way,
Turn aside from the path,
Cause the Holy One of Israel
To cease from before us." (Isa. 30:8-11)

On another occasion we read of a **king of Israel** who rejected the Word of God because he did not like what was being proclaimed to him. An ally, King Jehoshaphat, asked him if there were a prophet of God from whom they could hear from God.

And the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, "There is yet one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may enquire of the Lord: but I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil."

Time has not changed human hearts. In New Testament times **Stephen** rebuked the Jewish unbelievers of His day for despising prophecy when he told them,

You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, you do always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. (Acts 7:51)

May we never be that way when we hear the Word of God proclaimed. Let us not despise "prophecies" that are made known to us, but let us humbly embrace and respond to what God is saying to us through His Word being proclaimed in our hearing.

Lastly, we are to...

C. “Hold fast what is good.”

John Gill said it clearly:

Hold fast that which is good; honest, pleasant, profitable, and agreeable to sound doctrine, to the analogy of faith, and the Scriptures of truth, and is useful and edifying, instructive both as to principle and practice; such should be held fast, that no man take it away; and be retained, though a majority may be against it, for the multitude is not always on the side of truth; and though it may be rejected by men of learning and wealth, as Christ and his doctrines were rejected by the Scribes and Pharisees, and rulers of the people; and though it may be reproached as a novel, upstart notion, or a licentious one, since these were charges against the doctrine of Christ, and his apostles; and though it may be attended with affliction and persecution, yet none of these things should move from it, or cause to let it go.

Let us purpose by the grace of God to cleave to what we discover and confirm to be good.

To one last application, we may assert that we each have a duty to test what is taught and preached from this pulpit or any other in the light of the Holy Scriptures. Here is one final word of **Matthew Henry** respecting this duty each of us has:

“Prove all things, but hold fast that which is good.” This is a needful caution, to prove all things; for, though we must put a value on preaching, we must not take things upon trust from the preacher, but try them by the law and the testimony. We must search the scriptures, whether what they say be true or not. We must not believe every spirit, but must try the spirits. But we must not be always trying, always unsettled; no, at length we must be settled, and hold fast that which is good. When we are satisfied that any thing is right, and true, and good, we must hold it fast, and not let it go, whatever opposition or whatever persecution we meet with for the sake thereof. Note, the doctrines of human infallibility, implicit faith, and blind obedience, are not the doctrines of the Bible. Every Christian has and ought to have, the judgment of discretion, and should have *his senses exercised in discerning between good and evil*, truth and falsehood. And proving all things must be in order to holding fast that which is good. We must not always be seekers, or fluctuating in our minds, *like children tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine*.

But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus,
after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.
To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet. 5:10f)
