

Discernment is What I Need

Philippians 1:9-11

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August 2, 2020

As many of you know, I recently had surgery to remove colon cancer, and I can attest to the kindness of God in the overwhelming support from you through prayers and acts of kindness. My thanksgiving to God for you all is not unlike Paul's thanksgiving and prayers for the Philippians, which he expresses in Philippians 1:3-4. This isn't just a standard greeting. Paul is actually praying for them, and in vv. 9-11 we see what he prays for them to have. The popular song "What the World Needs Now is Love" states that love is the only thing that there's just too little of. But today the world needs more than just love. Scripture tells us that we need not just love but discerning love. This is what Paul prays for the Philippians to have. Amidst debates about mask wearing, church gatherings, and racial justice, the world needs discernment to be able to see things clearly and distinguish right from wrong. We need to grow in loving discernment effected by Christ Jesus so that we may live with integrity and good works bringing glory to God.

Rightly in v. 9 Paul begins with praying for the Philippians' love to abound more and more. Without mentioning an object for this love, he gives the idea that their love should overflow upwards toward God and outwards towards each other in ever-increasing abundance. Christian love isn't about sensuality or emotion, but rather it's the self-sacrificial love that puts others before oneself, the same love that God has for us in giving up His Son, that Jesus has for us in sacrificing Himself on the cross, and that flows through us by the life we have in Him and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, Paul desires in v. 9 for this love to be accompanied by full knowledge and discernment. This love is informed by personal relational knowledge of God and Jesus through His word. The more you know God, the more reason you will have to love Him and each other. All of Paul's prison epistles (Philippians included) express this desire for knowledge of God to increase (Ephesians 1:16-17, Colossians 1:9-10, and Philemon 6). In v.9 Paul balances this foundation of knowledge with the discernment that is built upon it. It's the ability to differentiate the fake from the genuine. Just like with currency, identifying the counterfeit requires knowledge of the genuine article. Although Paul only uses this word for discernment once in his letters, this same Greek word appears 22 times in the Greek translation of the Book of Proverbs. And here it

has the connotation of practical insight, moral discrimination, and ethical judgment. It's the crucial ability to differentiate moral standards and the practical understanding of people and situations that allows us to know how we can best show love towards them.

Third, Paul says in v. 10 that this knowledge and discernment helps us discern what is excellent. It not only helps us tell right from wrong, but right from almost right. It helps us distinguish between best and second best, and prioritize what is truly important over what is secondary, according to God's word.

So what does loving discernment tell us about wearing masks? The Bible is clear that we must love our neighbor, set aside our freedom and rights for the sake of others, and put others' interests before our own. Thus it should be clear that we should be willing to sacrifice our own comfort to protect others from this virus. What about the prohibition of physical church gatherings? It's clear that this mandate is for public health and shouldn't be considered persecution, especially compared to what churches experience in places like China. Here we should submit to the authorities placed over us by God for our good, because their ruling is in line with God's command for us to love one another and hold all human life as sacred, created in the image of God—the sanctity of life. We should comply not just to protect lives in our congregation but also in the community. What kind of witnesses are we if we blatantly disregard others' safety? We don't have to make the false choice between protecting others and the command to meet together in Hebrews 10:25, because today we can still meet online.

Finally, with regard to racial justice controversies, again, the principle of sanctity of life is at play here. As Christians we can affirm both stamens of "Black Lives Matter" and "All Lives Matter" as true without any reservations. However, in my opinion, "All Lives Matter" is a pointless response to "Black Lives Matter" unless the claim is made that "Black Lives Matter Only," or something like that. Imagine, if only your house is on fire and you try to convince your neighbors to help save your house, which matters to you, how unloving would it be for your neighbor to respond that all houses matter? Those who are suffering gain attention because they have urgent need, not because they matter more. Directing attention away from those who are in need of relief from suffering is not showing love.

With all these complex issues and in this cultural climate of appealing to emotion and personal beliefs rather than objective facts, it's more important now than ever to have discerning love and loving discernment. Next time we will see how we can develop this discernment. But in

the meantime let us pray for each other that we may be able to grow in Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in knowledge of God's word to discern what He has marked out as essentials for us.