

Wisdom from the Desert

Discernment of Spirits for Teens

What is Discernment?

Discernment of Spirits

Discernment of Spirits or just plain "Discernment" is a term used by Christians to describe how to make solid decisions, even in the toughest of times.

What do you mean by "spirits?"

The Early Church Fathers described "good spirits" and "evil spirits" as those forces that push us toward God or pull us away from him. Their language included the use of devils and demons to describe evil forces. Today, we don't use this exact language. Instead, we understand that there are thoughts and actions in life that can bring us closer to the love of God, or pull us away from his love and light. (McAloon, PP Mod2, Wk2)

The Early Church Fathers

Who were the Early Church Fathers?

These holy men spent their lives practicing **Contemplation**, which means they made it a habit to constantly fix their minds on things having to do with God and Christ. (Cassian, 36) They lived lives of solitude, often alone or just two or three together in the desert. People traveled great distances to seek them and learn from their knowledge. They were pursued for their words of wisdom to help build God's kingdom on earth. (Cassian, 41)

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When did they live?

St. Antony (died 356 A.D.) was believed to be the first monk to practice an ascetic life in the desert during the 4th century. This means he lived a life of discipline which included fasting, prayer, scripture reading, abstinence and solitude. (McAloon, PP Mod2, Wk1) Many holy men and women modeled their ways of life in the desert after St. Antony.

Beware of the Deluder & the Viper!

The Deluder

Evagrius the Solitary (345-300 A.D.) taught that the sly and subtle "Deluder" can take our focus away from holiness and towards pleasure. The Deluder tempts people to desire wealth and glory. Evagrius taught that the Deluder can be defeated by examining our thoughts and finding where and why we became jealous, angry or prideful. (Evagrius, 44)

The Viper

Evagrius also cautioned to beware of the "Viper." The Viper tricks those already living a simple life to think that they must give up more and more, until finally they become dejected and quit. The Viper can be defeated by remembering to live a humble life in balance between simplicity and excess, keeping our self-esteem in check. (Evagrius, 45-46)

The Middle Way

John Cassian (365-435 A.D.) preached that people should live according to a "Middle Way," which is restraint between a life of discipline & simplicity, and a life of excess & self-indulgence. (McAloon, PP Mod2, Wk2) He wrote that discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It can grow through humility, being honest by making our thoughts and actions transparent, and consulting with elders in the Church when making decisions. (Cassian, 90-93)

Discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit

Climbing the Ladder

John Climacus (579-649 A.D.) is another church father that described discernment as "understanding the will of God in all times, in all places, in all things." (Climacus, 229) Climacus taught that seekers climb a spiritual "ladder of ascent" which starts with detachment from the world and material things and finally ends living a life in union with God. (McAloon, PP Mod2, Wk2)

Although Climacus' ladder of growth can be a challenge, he still takes into account human weakness. He advises that we should be shrewd and know when to stand and fight against sin and when to choose to walk away. Once a person is adept at climbing the ladder, they will be able to tell whether a thought comes from themselves, from God or from the demons. (Climacus, 255).

How to Exercise Good Discernment

Practice Makes Perfect

All three of the Early Church Fathers mentioned here taught that practice is needed in order to perfect the gift of discernment. What do we practice? We must pursue a life of virtue, prayer, humility and self-knowledge. (McAloon, PP Mod2, Wk2)

Pray, Pray, Pray

How can you discern the will of God? Practicing daily prayer is a good place to start. Through prayer, we can establish a relationship with God and determine his will in our lives. We can also seek the advice of others that walk with God when we need to make difficult decisions in life.

Choose Love

Eventually, we learn that choices that bring us peace, joy, light, freedom and love are the ones that also lead us to the kingdom of God.

References

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