

## Discernment Romans 12

Paul in Romans 12 begins his discourse on what theologians call sanctification. Being holy. As contrasted with justification. Which is how God saves you. Paul has spent 11 chapters showing that we are all unworthy sinners, unable to uphold the good, and how God shows his justice and mercy on the Cross, sending a substitute that you may be saved for free, by grace.

The question of sanctification then is, “well, now that Jesus has saved me, what do I do with the rest of my life?” Well, read Romans 12.

If you would allow me to hone in on one word from Paul’s introduction to sanctification, I would point out the word Discern. To discern is to perceive or recognize. To distinguish by sight or other senses. It’s to be able to tell one thing from another.

We are born with this capacity. It’s the two year old at the dinner table, how discerning they are! That’s a vegetable in my pasta, I will go ahead and move that to the side.

But just because we have a capacity to discern, that does not mean we discern well. Yes, that two year old can discern between his cheesy pasta and his vegetables, but he cannot discern that it might be for his benefit to actually eat those vegetables anyway.

But we are mature. We are smart. We have life experience so we know how to discern what is good for us, and what isn't. Surely we therefore have risen above the binges, the fits of anger, the lust, greed, and surely depression cannot penetrate our cold hard logic!

So how good are we at discerning? And between what? Vegetables in our food? Paul tells us, that we, Christians, who by the mercy of God have been brought into the Kingdom, who have been saved by grace through faith are called to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your logical worship." Your ESV says spiritual worship, but that Greek word isn't pneuma – spirit, it is logika – logic or reason. Which sheds a different light on how we do worship and live, I think. Indeed Paul continues: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may DISCERN what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

So if I may: I think that Paul is telling us here to Discern the will of God, and I might say, out from the will of the world that we should not be conformed to. And you do that by changing your mind. Change how you think, change your worldview, your priorities, where you find value and meaning.

So instead of looking at a plate of pasta and trying to pick out what's good in it. Lets look at your household. Or your work office. Just as a fly on the wall, you

know? What in there is of the world? Is of greed, pride, anger, grudge, lust, abuse, fear, loneliness, depression? And what is being brought into that space to encourage such things? Media, news, that one friend, social media, entertainment, substances. None of those things are inherently bad, but are they conforming you to the World? Then we need to be discerning, folks.

“Oh it’s just a sitcom, pastor, lighten up.” Well let me ask, are you, in that sitcom, rooting for those two to get together (outside of marriage)? Then the conformation is happening. And don’t mishear me, I think it is entirely possible for a Christian to watch such a sitcom, and be discerning enough to know what about it is good, what isn’t, and to take the portion, and leave the other without it changing them. But that’s hard to see at times, and it is often subtle. And we commit hours and years to these things. So be careful.

Let’s go back to your house or office now. What brings about pious laughter, joy, meaning, purpose, forgiveness, and sacrificial love? What of those things? Are they there? What encourages those? Prayer, God’s Word, a different friend who is encouraging and stands for the truth? What of media that doesn’t tempt you so? What is beautiful? Should we not pick such things out of the world to be in us and near us? Upon our doorposts and upon our hearts?

I think that may be a good start.

But we cannot ignore the fact that so much of the world is already in us and our fallen nature that I think we can confess, “I know what’s bringing so much stress and anger into my house – me!” Can’t really run from that can you? And it’s true, you could cut out all media and hide in a cardboard box and guess what, would there still be sin in that box? Yes, because a sinner is in it!

And so God gives us, who are not stuck in cardboard boxes but in the world, he gives us some encouragement and exhortation from his apostle: Discern, discern, discern! May God help us! Is this thing of the resurrection? Is this thing of truth? Is this thing of mercy? Is this thing of hope and life? Is this thing of sacrificial love? If so, rejoice in it. Fill yourself and your life with it! If not... discern. Are you able to consume the good, or funny, or entertaining, and dismiss the bad out of hand? That’s going to be different for every person. Discern, discern, discern.

And God’s Word guides us in this. Since the world has muddied the waters so much and calls evil good and good evil. God’s word, not a politician, God’s Word, not a podcaster, God’s Word, not a fad, God’s Word, not a feeling, God’s Word, not a movement, God’s Word, not our own independence, God’s Word, not pride, God’s Word, not our passions, God’s Word, not our pleasures, God’s Word, not society, God’s Word not our sinful hearts, God’s Word is our compass, our barometer, our guide, our lamp, our rule to discernment.

Why? Because it's true and good. And if you doubt that, well then you aren't ready for Romans 12. You need to back up, you need to chew on the evidence of the scriptures, and the manuscripts. You need to wrestle with the question Jesus asks in our Gospel lesson, "Who do you say that I am?" And hear the evidence of his resurrection. You need to hear the promises of God in our Old Testament to comfort his people by His Work and His work alone over creation, over time, over life and death.

But you, Christian who believe in God and know the scriptures are his word, why would we let anything else take precedence? So let his word and truth guide your discerning.

If he is real, if he has saved you, then let him and his Word sanctify you. All the problems and pitfalls around sanctification come to the surface when we try to divorce it from justification and the cross. Let me show you:

The first pitfall is pride. "I'm doing great, I'm sure better than those other people, yessir, God must really like me because of how good I am." Folks, the very first thing Paul talks, his very introduction into the Christian life is – "don't let any one of you think of yourself more highly than you ought." It's pride.

If your discernment is so good, if your holiness is so great. What did you say the confession for today? What do you even need a Savior for? And I daresay, again,

this is Romans 12, did you miss Romans 1 and 2 where Paul proves that all of us are sinful and deserving death? Let us come before the cross and see our sin nailed there. Leave sanctified by a God who is good and just.

Which is the second pitfall. You hear all this talk about how Christians are supposed to live. You hear all these rules and right and wrong and well, you don't measure up. "Is this all one big guilt trip? Because I got guilt and this isn't helping. Maybe God is angry, maybe God won't want me." Well, At the risk of being redundant, "this is Romans 12!" Don't forget Romans 3 and 4 where he tells us we are saved by grace through faith! Don't let the law shroud the cross, rather let the law, and our inability to keep it, drive us straight to the cross. Hear that absolution, that Jesus in our Gospel reading tells his Church to give out, because he wants you to hear it! Go to the cross and see your sin nailed there, because of God's great mercy and love for you. And there, and at his tomb see that you are free, you are forgiven, eternal life is yours the price has been paid by Jesus! Leave sanctified by a loving God.

Which can lead to another pitfall. "Well, if I'm free, and he's going to forgive me anyway, then I guess it doesn't matter how I live." But, Christian this is Romans 12, did you miss Romans 6 "shall we go on sinning that grace may abound? By no means!" Jesus died for you, and your response is – "thanks, bud, so I can keep on sinning!" Is that a good thank you? Let alone the fact that sin hurts us and others.

Which is exactly why, Paul, and Jesus, encourage us in the ways of truth, and, again, why he had to pay such a high price. So go back to the cross, see the nails the whips, the blood, the spear, and say sin is “no big deal.” You won’t. You’ll leave sanctified and desiring to serve your Savior and King.

So we cannot move sanctification away from the cross. You are a sinner, you have been saved. What do you do with the rest of your days? Well, listen to Paul and Discern, brothers and sisters. Seek the wisdom of God. And in times of failure, doubt, or worry, remember the cross which is so near to you. And consider this: God looked at this world with it’s rich and famous, with it’s martyrs and the pure of heart. And then he looked at you. And he could quite easily toss us aside like a child with their vegetables. But instead he discerned that you were worth his all, his life. And he gave it, that you might be his, freed from sin, forever. That’s our loving God and savior and that is why we love in response. God be praised. Amen.