

The Path of Discretion: The Church Fathers on Discerning the Good

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[0 : 00] Um, because the way that I wanted to structure it, so the title of this talk is The Path of Discretion, The Desert Fathers on Discerning the Good.

And so I want to talk about kind of today's central questions. What is it that we're going to be looking at? The first question, I mean, these are big philosophical questions. And so the question is, what is the good life?

How do we live the good life? And I'm sure that everybody here has thought a lot about these questions. And that's why I'm excited to make this kind of a time of discussion, so that we can use quotes from the Desert Fathers as kind of a jumping off point, and so that we can kind of hear from each other's wisdom, and kind of talk around some of these quotes from the Desert Fathers, to think about these questions together.

Now, I don't want to make this a philosophically neutral question, because most of us, if not all of us here, are Christians, and we believe that the good life is found in Jesus Christ, in being in relationship with Jesus Christ, and in following Jesus Christ.

And so this foundation is essential for us in this discussion. And I think on occasion, the Desert Fathers could fairly be accused of taking a bit more of a philosophical approach to this topic than a Christological one.

[1 : 28] And so as we talk around some of these quotes, I want us to keep the foundation of Jesus Christ in mind as we delve into this discussion.

But I also think that we have a lot to gain from the wisdom of the Desert Fathers, as long as we keep the foundation of Christ in mind. So first I want to introduce, by talking about how Christians tend to grapple with this question.

And we hover between two extremes. There's the extreme of legalism, which is rules-based and rigid, and it's safe. Because within legalism, we know what to do in every situation, because we have a rule for it.

But the problem with legalism is two things. First, it contradicts our freedom in Christ. And often, if we push legalism too far, we tend to see ourselves as being saved, and growing even in our sanctification by our own merit, rather than by the grace of Christ.

And then, of course, on the other side of this discussion, you have hedonism. Hedonism, anything goes, do whatever you want, live free of responsibility and accountability. But, of course, the problem with this, is that this is not what Christ calls us to, either.

[2 : 52] We're called to live holy lives, imitating the character of Christ. So the Desert Fathers, like most of us, try to tread a middle path.

What perhaps could be called a third way. Because we don't want to say necessarily that this is in between some sort of spectrum of legalism and hedonism, but rather a third path.

And they call it the path of discretion. Now, of course, the difficulty with this path is that it's ambiguous. We don't always know what to do.

And it requires wisdom to follow the path of discretion. And so Abba Ammon, who's one of the Desert Fathers, I think expresses this well.

He says, One man carries an axe all his life, but cannot cut down a tree. Another man knows how to use it, and cuts down the tree with a few strokes.

[3 : 51] He used to say that the axe is discretion. So the question that we want to talk about a little bit today is how do we learn how to wield this axe to discern the good in a particular situation?

So I want to explore what the Church Fathers, particularly the Desert Fathers, have to say about this. And so first I want to give you an introduction about who the Church Fathers are, and then we'll look at and discuss several quotes from the Church Fathers concerning this issue.

So first, an introduction to the Desert Fathers. So really the beginning of the story of the Desert Fathers starts with the conversion of Constantine in 314.

Now before Constantine, there were a few desert hermits. But with the conversion of Constantine, it really became a movement. And so why is it at this point?

Well, because until this point, Christianity was marginal. It was persecuted, it was looked down upon, and it was seen as dishonorable.

[5 : 00] And so for Christians at that time, it was easy to take up the cross. Persecution and suffering was just a natural part of being a Christian. But after the conversion of Constantine, Christianity became cool.

And it became elite, and it became comfortable to be a Christian. So even though this was a great moment in a lot of ways for Christianity, it did cause an identity crisis in what it means to be a Christian.

Because never before did people have to ask the question, what is genuine Christianity? The question, what does it mean to be a cross-bearing Christian in this world?

Because suffering was no longer a part of normal part of Christian existence. At least not the way that it had been before the conversion of Constantine.

So as a result, many believers felt a call to the desert. And why the desert? It seems like there are two different, but kind of complementary, reasons to this.

[6 : 05] And the first is that the desert was seen as a place of evil. And it was a place to be conquered. You see, Rome had seen the light, so now it was time to go into the wilderness where evil had always prevailed.

And so the idea was that they were following Christ into the desert to face Satan head-on, to be tempted, and hopefully to conquer Satan.

Satan. So they didn't see what they were doing as running away from society. Like I think sometimes we think of it, but actually they saw what they were doing as an essential role in protecting society.

They were spiritual warriors. They were on the front lines protecting society from Satan and the devil and demons. So that was one reason why the desert was seen as an attractive place to be this kind of Christian was because it was the place where evil still reigned.

And you really see this in the story of Anthony where there's a... Athanasius, who's an early church father, writes the life of St. Anthony and throughout this book Anthony is grappling literally physically with demons.

[7 : 23] And the second reason is that it's also seen as a sacred place. And it's a place where God is a little bit easier to hear. So one of the beliefs in their culture, and I think we understand this as well, is that busy lives and focusing on ourselves often makes it very hard to hear God.

And so the desert, the advantage of the desert is that it strips everything away. And every inch of our sinful self is laid bare before the elements. Right?

It's you and God and the desert essentially. And I think that as you read through some of the desert fathers you realize that they have some incredible insights into their own wicked thoughts.

I mean, they live with nothing but their own brain. And you start to see even how sinful we are when we don't have something to distract us. Right? And so as they got to deal with these things they were able to hear God better.

At least that was the theory. And so this leads to another point which is kind of a controversial topic and that's the practice of asceticism. And they, the desert fathers did take what we would consider very extreme forms of fasting for example and just using their body in ways that we might consider kind of a hatred of the body.

[8 : 59] And I think we often tend to criticize the desert fathers and this practice as kind of a form of Gnosticism. An extreme hatred of the body and the material world in favor of the spiritual.

And then another critique that we already talked about is that the desert fathers are again running away from responsibility and from caring for others in their society. And so I do think that there's something fair in both of these critiques.

But I think that it's important as we enter this discussion to try to see the practice from within their context and understand what they were trying to do.

So we already talked a little bit about the second critique. Again, they didn't see what they were doing as leaving society and leaving the responsibility of caring for others. They believed that they were going to conquer the front lines of this battle against evil.

And then, so let's see. Then for the first critique, which is that it was a Gnostic kind of anti-body sort of movement, I think we need to see what they were trying to do.

[10 : 12] And they saw their goal was to get in spiritual shape. So the metaphor that they used is the metaphor of the athlete. So we asked the question, what athlete would fail to prepare their body to do the working out and the running and lifting and all those sorts of things that they needed to do in preparation for the competition?

Well, they saw what they were doing as getting in spiritual shape in the same way. Asceticism was a way of building up their body and soul for a confrontation that they were about to face and to recognize that this is the purpose of life is to be this kind of this kind of Christian who is ready to do the good and to face evil.

So it was a rigorous regimen, but they encouraged moderation. Now, moderation meant something different to them than it does for us.

For us, moderation might mean eating only three cookies after dinner instead of five, but for them it was eating just one crust of bread and a glass of water per day.

So it's a bit of a different foundation level. But it was moderation. They did discourage extremism in this way.

[11 : 40] So the point was not let's see how difficult of a life I can live to prove that I'm able to do this. The point was to grow closer to God and to get into spiritual shape as we talked about here.

I think it was kind of this idea as John the Baptist says, I must decrease so that he may increase. And this was the way in which they saw it happening. Now of course figuring out what this looked like for each of them required discretion and discernment.

And I think that that's one of the reasons why it's so important for the church fathers. So that's what I want to look at first is the question why does discretion even matter?

So now we're going to kind of enter this section where we look at a quote and discuss it together. So I'm looking forward to kind of... Can you say that I'm just that person that guy and he's like in my bottom?

Oh yeah. Goal, spiritual shape, moderate, and it's great. Yes, yeah, no problem. So yeah, so why discretion matters.

[12 : 54] So this is a quote from Abba Poman about why discretion matters. So he says, suppose there are three men living together.

One lives the good life in quietness. The second is ill but gives thanks to God. The third ministers to their needs with sincerity. These three men are alike.

It is as if they were all doing one work. So, I'll give you just a second to meditate on that. So the first question I want to talk about is do you agree with Abba Poman how can the good life look different for different people?

does anyone have any thoughts on that?

they make a great to you. Yeah. I see the balance. The balance, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. He's recognized at the time being a person being a Christian a lot between them and the time they just want to be and that's to say is there other times you know supposed to be quite a bit on that and could recognize right so it's not even necessarily three different people but you can even see this these are different seasons in a single person's life.

[14 : 38] Yeah. Not all of us are like you can't first of all we can't be all people all people so we all have our gifts and those are the gifts that we bring to the table these two guys almost brought their gifts to the table.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Doesn't this really go back to what you opened with and if there were one way that tends to be legalized?

Yeah. Yeah I think that's fair. Right. And I mean do you think I mean maybe this is kind of a follow up as we continue to discuss this but do you think that we tend to in our society we tend to look at certain things as or certain gifts as more good than others?

The man that's healthy he can realize what he has he might not be aware of where he's at he might think it's the way I am but he knows his ill friend he's Jesus I'm so lucky that I'm so healthy and the old man to look at the healthy man it's very nice to be healthy but I'm great just what I do have and the third that's able to minister the two others can say well how is this person able to be so helpful and so hospitable and such a fruitful person like serving so they learn because someone might look at us and think oh genius but we're not aware of it because it's always the way we are for the healthy people right so you see the gifts of other people and you learn from them as well and you're able to kind of complement your own strengths and weaknesses yeah yeah the other things too you were referring to what we see in society as being beautiful

I mean your head's been a long emphasis on the extrovert you know the self-scivices cowper's now and I now think you're starting to see that the introvert really thinks more deeply about things and deep the times the missing and the person who go with lots of people who like and is not looking to be the star right yeah so it's not even sometimes it's not even been certain gifts that we tend to prefer but it's even certain personality types things that we can't even necessarily things that we can't control I mean we can't really control any of this but yeah yes I find it interesting that the word is discretion rather than discernment and that as there's a there's a there's a there's a ■ they have it

[17 : 48] I'm glad to stand your eyes the one that's ill. And of course, in our time, we've seen this, the aberration of the industry in third world countries, especially the one that's poorer to the poor media.

So that we've elevated one person upon another. And it's, I guess, you just question that. Yeah. That each one is leading the right that the planet will have.

It's a true, true, true. It is interesting. I think perhaps the place where we see the biggest, because you mentioned this emphasis on people who are doing hard missionary or service work in the developing world.

But I think that the biggest place that we tend to see this distinction is even in the lay clergy distinction. And even if we don't necessarily admit it, we tend to say that clergy are doing a little bit more for God than the lay people are.

And whether or not that distinction is even fair is another question that we don't want to talk about. But I think it's important to see that one of the reasons that discretion matters is because we use discretion to discern how we uniquely, as individuals, are called to serve in light of the context where we are.

[19 : 27] Because I think there's two things that are interesting, right? Not only are these three people doing something that is more their gifts, but actually they're all without, if one of these people were gone in this particular context, it wouldn't be complete, right?

So especially if the third wasn't there to minister to their needs, they couldn't survive, right? And so seeing that it's not just matching our gifts, but it's also matching our context.

And both of those things are necessary for discretion and discernment. And so I think that's one of the things. And then the second thing, we can't judge by our own standards, by our own gifts, what the good life means for others also.

We might be great at evangelism, and that might be what we're called to, but if I point at Traff and say, why aren't you evangelizing in the same way that I am, right?

Then that's not fair, right? That's part of discretion. So that's one of the reasons why discretion matters. So I want to talk about one more.

[20 : 32] Look at one more quote. And this is from Abba Ammon, again. And he says, If an angry man raises dead, God is still displeased with his anger.

Now I don't want to focus on the anger aspect of it. Some of the church followers did believe that anger itself was a sin, but this quote might as well be, If a lustful man raises the dead, God is still displeased with his lust.

Or if a greedy woman raises the dead, God is still displeased with her greed. Right? So the point is, well, we can talk about the point.

So here's the question as we meditate on this quote. Why is it possible to confuse doing great things and living the good life?

Or do you believe that's possible? Yeah? I think, you know, for an art Christian living for life, you're always interested in the body.

[21 : 42] You don't have it. Have a good time. Please believe in your mind. But I think the truth does speak about this and the Holy Spirit, which is possibly that the twist is using the sketch that we don't want to, you know, because the New Testament is such a very distant way and sort of prophesying and able to make it by the Spirit.

So that is over and it's all over and it's all over and it's all over and it's all over and it's all over and it's all over and we have to have it. So, I think there's all that we can help you know, the gifts of experience is prophesy, teaching, you know, these are all evil.

These are all some big things where we use that. They had a real issue with options there, and so there's people who want the world can have those conditions that they have a pulse for the right things, the right time to to bestien.

There's fellowendencials. Right? Well, I mean, it is very interesting, right, that there's the society, first and foremost, the first thing we need to see is that even the church's view of great things, or at least the New Testament's view of great things, and the society's view, our culture's view of great things, are much different, right?

You know, I think that that's... But then there's also the question, even within the church, certain things that we might see as great things could actually be done for the wrong reasons, potentially.

[23 : 38] Yeah? Doesn't Jesus contradict this? Yeah, tell me. He was an angry man who did raise ladders from the dead, and he was angry at that point, and that's why he works.

Right, well, that's actually why I made the point about the anger not being the thing I wanted to focus on, because I agree that anger sometimes... I think the church fathers potentially had a wrong view of anger in seeing it as always negative.

But I think the point here is if a sinful man, and that's why I said like a lustful man, or if a greedy man raises the dead, God is still displeased with his greed or his lust.

I think that's kind of the... Because I agree, I think that Jesus probably... Like, he was angry... Although he was angry at the right things, right? He was angry at death, and he was angry at the evil that had caused death to become a part of society.

So I do think that there's also the aspect of being angry at the right things. Well, as wrath, anger is one of the seven deadly sins.

[24 : 50] Right. And when I run through the list in my mind, I'd have trouble, I think, applying any of the other six to Jesus.

Yep. So that doesn't allow us to bracket anger here and ignore it. I'm wondering why the desert fathers chose anger for this example.

And anger seems to be an important part of it. Yep. Yep. Possible. Yep. Just from what you have, I don't know any of the things about the desert fathers, right?

Going and living in the desert, they seem to be like, actually there's a fair number of people around living among them that are interested in the extreme.

Yeah. So they wanted this question. So to turn the pages is push it to the limit. Raising from the dead would be impossible.

[25 : 57] anger, anger, and the court that children are killing, would be really, if we want to be discreetly, not healthy, well, that's what we have in the hard spot.

It's, you know, you really, they're, they're, they're really getting to the point. Right. So I'm just, I'm just searching for, why you choose it, and why you're so interested.

And it seems to be. Right. Yeah, no, I mean, I think, yeah, I think that, that the reason why, I think the desert fathers are, one of the reasons why the desert fathers are so helpful, I think, in this discussion, is because they, first of all, they're in a much different cultural context than we are.

And secondly, because, and so we have blind spots that I think we don't even realize. And some of those blind spots, actually, I think, are why we critique the desert fathers. Some of our obsession with materialism, for example, is why we see some of the ways in which they treated the body as negative.

And I'm not saying that one's right or one's wrong, just that they're different perspectives. That we need to hold in tension a little bit. And the second thing is, is because they were, they were people who, who were there with God for so long that basically all they could do was discern, in one sense, you know, like discern what is right for me to even think.

[27 : 28] Right. And sometimes we think about discernment as even actions. But they had to go so far as, as, how does it even affect the way I think. Right.

I mean, that's, that's an interesting part of this, is that, is that this man is doing a great thing. Right. He's doing something that we would probably consider to bring life and to bring goodness into this world.

but it's, it's, his attitude towards it, his motivation towards it even, is seen as, as wrong. And so I think that's, interesting.

Do you guys have any other, any other further, further thoughts on that? Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

I'm sure they gained a lot of wisdom from that time. Yeah. I think areas like that are nice. Personally, I like, uh, there's areas that can be similar. Uh, we have, when we did the present beach, uh, I sleep in the sunroom, I get up in the morning, and I see the low time, I walk all the way out, as far as I could still see.

[28 : 51] And I used to scare the living daylights, that I'm a therapy, see, but, uh, uh, it's complete, space to my, I have a whole, beachy space, to myself.

Yeah. And you know what, uh, I was always so healthy, uh, with that, that's a very natural, um, environment, for human beings. Sometimes, we need to escape something like, uh, often, uh, and purified mouth, you'll walk through on the Stanley Park Sea Wall, or just in the Spirit Park.

Sometimes, the need escapes, let everything come off our mind in layers, and by the time we get home, everything's empty, we don't digest anything into the internal organs, we don't get sick.

Sometimes, we, we need to do things, be in a desert-like environment, every so often. Right? Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I do think that, if there's one thing to come away with, from this talk, I do think that, uh, that something would be, that on occasion, we do need some of this kind of silence and solitude type time, to, uh, to discern some of these things for ourselves.

So let's move on. I think, um, I think kind of, one of the, a couple main points, just to point out from this, is, um, one is, I think we're prone to self-deceit, when it comes to discretion.

[30 : 09] And this, this person may have thought he was doing the right thing, but there was, but there was an aspect of his motivation that actually showed that he didn't understand what he was doing. And then the second thing is that doing great things, in and of itself, may seem godly and good, but that doesn't necessarily mean that we're living the right life for ourselves, or the good life.

Um, so I want to talk now about discerning the goals of the good life. So we talked a little bit about why, but now we have to think about the what.

What are we moving towards? Right? And so let's look at this quote from Sun Desert Father. Um, I tell you, that many have afflicted their body, but gained no profit because they did it without discretion.

Even if our mouths stink with fasting, and we have learned all the scriptures, and we memorized the whole Psalter, we still lack what God wants, humility and charity.

So let's, let's, as we meditate on this, I think the question we want to talk about is, what do you think are the goals of the good life? And then secondly, we can talk about this as well.

[31 : 23] How do we discern, or whether or not we're achieving these goals? Thank you.

Well, yeah, I mean, I think that this is almost, it's almost a re-quote of, of, of 1 Corinthians 13. I do think that is where, where this is coming from.

A lot of, yeah. So. Good. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

yeah yeah how do we evaluate our own humility how do we evaluate our own charity I mean that is a good question and I mean I do think that's part of what like that's part of the purpose of this discussion actually is to think through is to think through that do we can we do this I mean I think there are certain ways in which we can but there are also certain ways in which we have to we have to lay ourselves upon the grace of God and say we're doing you know we're trying to live in light of these things but I do think if we think about this it will help us to discern what we're trying to do yeah

I don't think that we can know these things that are part of the living community yeah or at least being part of things that are just happening because it's not ourselves that know if we're human or terrible it's the people that know and love us and so we can't identify we can't identify our selves we need the body to identify them and see what it looks like so in a way I wonder the desert fathers was there a community yeah did they know one another and I think I mean from what I remember they did have a kind of sort of desperate community and they know God and they think about it right yeah I mean I think that that's that's a helpful point is that

[34 : 41] I mean what is is charity even possible if there's nobody to be charitable to you know or love you know I mean I think that's a fair I mean it's a fair question of course you know I mean what does it mean to be in a relationship with God in that as well and so I think I do think that the community is an important aspect and we will talk a little bit about that further the community is an important aspect of discernment discerning the good life it can't all simply be about ourselves yeah I wonder if you can arrive at the definition of what is it like this I believe we still struggle in distinguishing about what Jesus meant the kingdom of God the kingdom of heaven and now I would never from a practical thing if I would ask different people in the shopping mall what do you think what is your idea of the food like

I would get totally different answers for instance even he would call us a campus he openly admitted that he is very very happy this little interaction with other people and be quiet in the book the good book in the book and and there are people who strive of being and there and someone who is different next to the and so so so yeah what this what this is going to be to try to be holy like God says in the book to be holy but I am so how does this have definitely with us why do you guys think do you think that the goals of the good life are different for different people yeah yeah because if you are like from an old money family in Shaughness you eat drink and sleep and it is so average to you you might not even be aware of it but then sometimes you get some really good big philanthropists that come from that area to their house down to the church for example and something like that but then you get people that are more new money that can afford background kind of can roll their heads and sometimes like people that like want these and sometimes that can be more destructive so you get two people in quote unquote the good life that can be completely different one seems to do okay the other one can get destructive marriage ends up in divorce legal things

I think sometimes someone's trying to be like the old money people and can get destructive and they can get the good life yeah that's interesting because that's even basing the good life on what what kind of maybe what society might see as the good life you know and even there you can see how different ways of approaching that life can lead to completely different results you know and I think as Christians I do think I would say that there are big goals that are that I mean that are true for all of us you know and that's to grow to be more like Christ and to and to and to learn what it means to love being in relationship with God right but those things like love like we talked about already love can look very different for different people depending on their gifts their personality these sorts of things and Christ likeness I mean that's kind of a little bit like you were talking about be holy as I am holy well what does holiness look like for each of us and so

I think that is actually part of the purpose of discretion yeah isn't our experience teaches that if even with holy motivations our search for the good life is essentially self-centered it's bound to be self-to-do yeah tell me more I'm just asking if that's a common perception yeah I mean and so this this is a question like is this is the good life the right way to even put this I mean and that was a little bit why I wanted to talk about that foundation and keep us centered on that foundation of Jesus Christ right is that we as Christians cannot see the good life in that kind of way right in the way of self fulfillment or aggrandizement or it being about us becoming what we want to be right that's not what the good life can mean for us and so

I think that that's I mean that's part of this discussion right yeah well I'm just starting to think about your phrase there good life and it actually sounds very Greek to me yep and when I think of the Bible does the Bible probably not no yeah I think the one place where the Bible does use that phrase was where the rich young ruler came to Jesus and said what must I do to live the good life and I think what the Bible speaks about is the life of faith and if we read Hebrews 11 it seems like the life of faith is trust and it's obedience and Jesus answered to the rich young ruler was sell everything you've got and follow me which is basically calling him to trust Jesus and to obey him good good yep and there are a lot of scriptures that say if you want to hold up to your own life and do that you might feel so you want to go to him and you know so he's dealing with all these things of giving up and you might want to give up right

[41 : 13] I mean, I would say abandonment, abandon, you know, you go over there, and I will do what you should do, and I will do what you do.

Right. Because now, what you do is, if you, you're fixing it. So, in fact, you're living, it's a hard thing. I don't think you can talk about that, right?

Right. You don't have to. Good, good, yep. Correct, the other thought? The, just in the Mass, it's right from the beginning of the church, and if you look at the Roman church with all the different orders, and each one of them has its own specific view of a rule.

Right. They want to live. Benedictine, Dominican, Pauline, you know, the whole world. But, it's hard for us today, in this type of world, to understand what those people are doing.

And, you know, they've relinquished everything that's called the Jesus, and live in community. And, you know, we look at the desert flood, and you know, we say, well, maybe he's out of whack here and out of whack there.

[42 : 29] But, you know, the whole idea of them was to try and discern what was really going on in time, and so they, the faith has been passed down through the church itself.

And, I think we lose touch with, because of society and the advertising and the greed and the lust and everything else, of what it is we're really after.

And, you know, we find, even when we've got all the money in the world, we've got all the women or all the men, you know, and all the other lusts. We're still drugged, and not the fallen side of us.

There's nothing to kill. Right. And that's only Jesus Christ that can still be. So, when he says, follow me, that's the way you can live it. The good life.

The good life. The good life. Yeah. Yeah. And so, I think this is a good discussion, because this is what we're talking about. Right? We're talking about the goals. And if the good life is the wrong term, I think that's fair.

[43 : 38] But I think, you know, I think the question how we should live matters. Whether or not we want to call it the good life, or we want to call it losing ourselves, or we want to call it taking up our cross and following him.

I mean, all of these, I think that's why I wanted to start the conversation again, centering it on Jesus Christ. Yeah. Yeah, I think you can look at the good life both criticizing and look at it positively through scripture, like Jesus saying, come and follow me.

And I'm just kind of reminded of that verse, you know, where Jesus says, I came to give you life upon you. And obviously that sounds pretty good. Right? So, yeah, I think it's more great to look at it.

Yeah, Jesus doesn't have a problem with life. In fact, he is life himself. Right? So, but I think this question is absolutely key for us as Christians.

Because if we think the goals are the same as what society tells us the goals are, you know, money, self-fulfillment, sex, power, whatever, you know what I mean? There are lots of cliches we can put out there.

[44 : 48] But that's not what our goals are. And so I think, you know, I mean, look at this, just to kind of close on this scripture.

It's similar to 1 Corinthians 13, right? These are the things that the church fathers, the desert fathers valued more than anything. Fasting, scripture memorization, right?

I mean, these things were considered the highest values in that society. But, if we don't have humility and charity, humility and love, self-forgetfulness, and loving others, we don't get it.

Right? And so I think that that's what I wanted to look at here. So this is, we've kind of already gotten to this, but this is a good point, to stop and remember.

And I don't want to talk about this, but I wanted to. What is the power behind this? And here's the question, or here's a quote from another desert father. If you see a young man climbing up to heaven by his own will, catch him by the foot and pull him down to earth.

[45 : 57] It's not good for him. And of course, here's the business ladder of success that's such a popular clip art, right?

Everybody reaching their goal in life. And I think that's what we need to remember. Like, discretion, we can talk about this all we want, but if we forget that it's the Holy Spirit in our lives, working in our lives, that will actually allow us to do this, we're not going to get it again.

So, good time to talk about that. So now I want to talk about a couple barriers to discernment and discretion.

The first, so this quote is from Abba Pombo. A brother asked Abba Pombo, why do the spirits prevent me doing good to my neighbor?

The old man said, do not talk like that or you will make God a liar. Say, I do not at all want to be kind. For God came down and said, I have given you the power of treading upon scorpions and snakes and over all the might of the enemy.

[47 : 10] So here's the question. What do we tend to blame for our own sin? And do you agree that God has given us this kind of power over sin and Satan?

Well, I mean, based on faith, you know, so that you can devout faith is impossible to be taught. And you're going to come to believe in the Bible and your sense of faith. So I mean, if you don't have to believe in the Bible and the Bible and the Bible, you know, it's impossible to be taught.

And you're going to come to believe in the Bible and your sense of faith. So I mean, if you don't have to believe in the Bible and the Satan's power, you know, Satan's power, you can't believe in the Bible, then you don't have it.

Right. So that's fine, right? I could say, not faith, not faith. Yeah. Maybe it is as simple as that. I don't know. It seemed pretty hard in my life.

Yeah. Simple but not easy. Yeah, there you go. Okay. My husband and I got to the new boy and she's had him for a year now.

[48 : 21] And it's about midway, at this point, somebody asked me, so what have you learned thus far? And I didn't give him an answer at once, but I said he said, but I said, I learned that I need to be selfish and selfish.

No! And what I mean by that, and you laugh, so you know what I'm talking about, is that there's never going to be a child to show you what to coach.

I'm telling you. So I was thinking, taking my time to read, I was thinking, how did you become a girl? Now I'm in a position to teach the spiritual person what it is.

And then it causes me to reflect on my own experiences. And now I'm in a position to be completely conscious of what I think, what I do, because I have a good person watching me.

And the worm watches me, and my neighbor watches me. You know, everybody's watching me to see what she was going to do. And I used to think it was funny, you know, people that had on bumpers, you know, disrepected, whatever.

[49 : 37] And I used to kind of think it was, oh, please be careful. Because people see that, and then it just had to label that now people have that expectation. Right.

And so now I just have the idea of having this own child, and you know, just watching everything. I have to remind the Bible, and what teaching.

Because my, you know, it's like you said before, my choice is, you know, a sense of the peace. And then the Bible is just really, you know, to come through to it. And I, as you spoke, I kept thinking about that.

I'm skipping the heart of the peace. Because it's a little bit more than a basis in each other. Yeah. Yeah, and I don't want to spend too much time on this particular point. But I think that that's the main thing that comes out here is that we and our self-deceit is a barrier, is a barrier to our own ability to discern what's right and what's wrong.

And I think, I do think that relying, learning what it means to rely on the Spirit and to recognize that if we believe that we have the power of God inside us, we actually can live in this way.

[50 : 58] But we set ourselves in between it. And one more barrier. This is an interesting one.

And just to set the context a little bit of this quote, this is talking about a monk discerning whether or not they should follow the order of the devil.

And just to set the context a little bit of this quote. And so I think that this opens the question, of course, what are some ways, and this is, I think, something that hopefully you guys have heard about.

What are some ways you've learned to discern what is from God and what is from the devil, what is not of God? Anyone have any thoughts on that?

Yeah. It's not that I'm trying to tell you a lot of things, because you start to mind, and then you think about broken up that. Why didn't I have that, and what that time is like.

[52 : 25] I'm a baby's standing in my feet, and so why didn't I have that? And it just plays on the mind, and that's about how it's going to be, and how many people feeling, and people feeling it.

It's important for it, because it's not strong to me, and it's really, really. So the things that are very interesting to me, is that part of it.

I think it's hard for us to discern as sinners or a great trauma, and we're talking sometimes we see things in a blur. And sometimes you might look at other people's life, and it's easy to get jealous.

And some people, they look at someone's life, and they get jealous. And I think I've had that happen to me a bit at work. And you know, you're trying to get envious of so-and-so, such.

Like, oh, my boy told me the nice thing, right? And some people, they think that way. And I think, too, if there's pride that runs in the roots of the family, too, that can be like a defensive thing.

[53 : 32] Oh, I have to feel good about myself. I have to feel proud about myself. I think we just, we get it wrong so many ways, and so many times. And it's very hard to tell right from wrong and good from bad, and God from the devil, and something comes from God or from the devil.

If we get pictures and visions in our mind, like, who knows where that comes back to be if our total wild imagination might not be too bad at all. Right. Yeah. I want to say something about the link between discussion and wisdom.

We have to go to the first chapter of James, and we give you wisdom on these two stars. Now, here we are in a situation that has been bad now by the Curious, the Lord's very remarked about church planting, and this is what we are trying to do, that is what we are doing.

And so, James, both Alistair and Julie are going to be confirmed. Right. And we are right smack in the middle of this question, what do we do in this tradition that David Shaw is reading us here?

Right. And so we have to decide what we have to do to honor the promise of the Holy Spirit, that if you follow Christ, all these other things would be added in the way.

[55 : 06] At the same time, if you look at the reality, we may have to restructure our life and define it totally different, because of this church planting that God has given us.

It is the great convention, grow and make disciples. So we are back to linking discussions with discipleship, what are the requirements of discipleship and women?

Yeah. Well, that's good, because, I mean, it points to a practical reality, right? I mean, this is, the point of this discussion is not to be set up in theory, but discretion matters in practice.

And so the barrier here that I just wanted to mention briefly is, Satan and evil is always against us.

And I think learning how to recognize that is very important when it comes to discretion. But before, because I only have a couple minutes left, I want to talk about a couple practices that the church fathers suggest, as to help us with discretion.

[56 : 17] So one's very obvious, but I think there's a helpful point here. The first is prayer, right? But Abba Isaac has an interesting quote here. He says, Whatever the mind has been thinking about before it prays will certainly come to you while it is praying.

Therefore, before we begin to pray, we ought to be trying to be the kind of people whom we wish God to find when we pray. So, just to kind of talk about this, prayer is an essential practice in discernment.

But it's important to approach prayer ready to listen and open to discern. And to think about some of these things that we've been talking about, what it means to approach God in a kind of way that is ready to receive and hear from Him.

That doesn't mean that's the only time we can pray, of course. But, in the second practice, this is one I don't think we think about as much nowadays, and that's imitation.

This is about Anthony. He was sincerely obedient to those men of zeal he visited, and he considered carefully the advantage in zeal and in ascetic living that each held in relation to him, gathering the attributes of each in himself, striving to manifest in himself what was best from all.

[57 : 55] And I think something that, this is, as a young person, this is something that I've struggled to do, especially in this society, where authority and authority figures are seen very negatively.

This aspect of imitating and seeking to imitate those who we see are living and following the Christian life, I think is an important thing that we tend not to think about as much anymore.

And even somebody who ultimately became one of the most respected monks, it was because of his humility in learning from many who had gone before him what it meant to live this kind of life that helped him to become that, while also recognizing that he was himself, and something that worked for this person might not necessarily work for him.

And I want to end, and hopefully you guys will have a bit more discussion, because there's still lots to talk about with this, of course. But I want to end with this encouragement.

God wants us to succeed in this. And this is a quote from John Chrysostom. Why would he have stretched out so great a heaven, spread the earth beneath, extended the sea, poured out the air, and demonstrated such providence, if he were not intending to protect us in the end?

[59 : 29] And I think that's kind of a general quote for the Christian life in general. But I think that sometimes, and I don't know if this is true for you, but I think sometimes when I'm trying to discern or figure out how I should live, sometimes I feel like God's maybe trying to trick me, or he's trying to make it really, really difficult for me to figure out what he's calling me to.

And in the current moment that I'm in in my life, where I'm trying to figure out where God's leading me next, this is a particularly big question for me. And I'm kind of like, why haven't I figured it out yet? Like, why hasn't God put something obvious in my path?

And so this is an encouragement to me that, ultimately, ultimately he wants us to succeed in being his disciples, in following him, in being in relationship with him.

There's nothing more that he wants. And it's interesting that those barriers, and I think it's helpful to see those barriers, they're not God. The barriers that I pointed out are ourselves and evil.

Those are the, God himself is not the barrier to discerning. And so I think that that's, that hopefully, that hopefully that's an encouragement to you, as I know it is to me, that God does want us to figure this stuff out.

[60 : 47] So thank you. Thank you. Thank you.