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Distinguish Good from Evil

Hebrews 5:11-6:12

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The prophet Amos said, “**Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate**” (*Amos 5:14-15a*).

One of the most important abilities a Christ follower can develop is **the ability to distinguish good from evil**. The ability to distinguish good from evil is essential because every decision we make is shaped by what we believe to be good, true, and worthy of praise, or what we believe to be evil, false, or deserving of condemnation.

You may have heard that Pope Leo XIV released his first encyclical "Magnifica Humanitas", which is about artificial intelligence, human dignity, meaning, and the future of humanity. The document addresses one of the defining questions of our time: what does it mean to remain fully human in an age increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence? As AI rapidly transforms work, relationships, creativity, education, the use of natural resources and energy, and daily life, it raises questions about dignity, purpose, wisdom, connection, and the future of human flourishing. We need to be able to discern both the opportunities and the threats posed by this technology, which will impact us – and future generations – in more ways than we can imagine.

Without discernment, without **the ability to distinguish good from evil**, we become vulnerable to deception, temptation, and what may be harmful for us. What God calls good may begin to seem restrictive, outdated, or naive, while what God calls evil may appear attractive, reasonable, or even worthy of praise and support. On an individual level, the inability to distinguish good from evil can lead to compromised character, broken relationships, destructive habits, and spiritually falling away from God. A person who loses the ability to recognize sin or evil will rarely repent of it, and a conscience that's repeatedly ignored hardens over time.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that mature believers are those “**whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil**” (*Hebrews 5:14*). The question is: How do we become that kind of believer? How do we grow into people who recognize truth, resist evil and spiritually falling away, and persevere until we inherit the promises of God? Listen to *Hebrews 5:11-6:12*.

“About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, **since you have become dull in understanding**. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again **the basic elements of the oracles of God**. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. **But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us go on toward perfection**, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith toward God, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And we will do this, if God permits. For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, **and then have fallen away**, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt. Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly, and that produces a crop **useful** to those for whom it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed; its end is to be burned over. Even though we speak in this way, **beloved**, we are confident of better things **in your case**, things that belong to **salvation**. For **God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints**, as you still do. And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of **hope** to the very end, **so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.**”

Before the writer of Hebrews launches into some of the deepest teaching in the entire letter, he pauses to challenge the congregation. Imagine a teacher who is about to introduce her students to a difficult and important concept. It will require effort, concentration, and maturity to understand. But she worries that her students aren't ready. So, she says, “I have something wonderful to teach you, but you're not prepared for it. You're not mature enough to understand it.”

Immediately the students sit up straighter. “What do you mean, we're not ready?” Their pride is challenged. Their attention is captured. They become eager to prove the teacher wrong. Something similar is happening in Hebrews. The preacher is preparing

to explain the significance of Jesus as our great High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek. It's deep theological truth. But before he goes there, he stops and says, in effect, "I'm not sure you're ready for this." The challenge is designed to wake them up. And perhaps to wake us up, as well.

I. Too Dull to Get It (*Hebrews 5:11-14*)

The preacher begins with a startling statement: "*About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, **since you have become dull in understanding.***" Notice what he says. He doesn't say that the subject is impossible to understand. He says **they** have become dull in hearing. The problem is not with *the message*. The problem is with *them*. Spiritual dullness had settled over them. The word translated "dull" can also mean sluggish, lazy, or slow. They're no longer eager learners. Their spiritual senses had become inactive. The preacher says that, by this time, they ought to be teachers, yet they still need someone to teach them the basic principles of God's Word. Instead of eating solid food, they still require milk. The Apostle Paul uses the same example in *1 Corinthians 3:1-9*. Milk is not bad. Every infant needs milk. The problem comes when a person should have matured, but hasn't. A healthy child that is fed properly grows, and so does a healthy follower of Christ.

The concern of Hebrews is not that they started as spiritual infants. We all start that way. The concern is that they remained there. Then comes one of the key verses in the passage: "***But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.***" Discernment comes through **training**. The writer doesn't describe maturity as merely accumulating information, or happening without effort as time goes by. Many people know Bible facts, but lack spiritual discernment. Maturity is developed and trained through practice. Just as athletes train their bodies, Christians train their spiritual senses. How does that happen? It happens through regular exposure to Scripture. God's Word shapes our thinking. It happens through prayer. Prayer aligns our hearts with God's will. It happens through obedience. Every act of obedience strengthens spiritual muscles. It happens through worship, fellowship, service, and faithful perseverance. Over time, we learn to recognize what pleases God and what does not. We learn to recognize temptation before it takes root. We learn to distinguish between wisdom and foolishness.

This ability is desperately needed today. Mature believers learn to evaluate everything through the lens of God's Word. Spiritual maturity isn't measured by age, popularity, or even years in church attendance. It's measured by trained discernment. Can we recognize good and evil? Can we identify what honors Christ? These are marks of maturity.

II. No Turning Back (*Hebrews 6:1-8*)

Having challenged them, the preacher urges them forward. ***“Therefore let us go on toward perfection”*** (*Hebrews 6:1*). The word “perfection” here means maturity or completeness. The call is to build upon foundational truths, including repentance, faith, baptism, laying on of hands, resurrection, and eternal judgment. These doctrines are essential. Every building requires a foundation. Without a foundation, the structure collapses. But no one pours a foundation and thinks the job is done. The foundation exists so that a house can be built upon it. Likewise, Christ followers must continually grow beyond the elementary stages of faith. The goal is not merely conversion. The goal is transformation. The goal is maturity.

Then comes one of the most sobering warnings in the Bible. Hebrews describes those who have experienced remarkable spiritual privileges — being enlightened, tasting the heavenly gift, sharing in the Holy Spirit, tasting the goodness of God's Word and the powers of the age to come — and then falling away. The author of Hebrews wants the congregation to understand the danger of falling away from Christ. Spiritual decline often happens gradually. It begins with neglect. Worship becomes optional. Scripture reading becomes occasional or nonexistent. Prayer becomes sporadic or stops. Obedience becomes selective. We let our political, economic, social, or personal views shape our faith and spirituality, rather than our faith and following Christ guiding, shaping, and forming those opinions and views. Eventually, the heart grows hard. That's why Hebrews repeatedly warns believers against falling away.

The preacher uses an agricultural illustration. Rain falls on two fields. Both receive the same rain. One produces useful crops. The other produces thorns and thistles. The difference is revealed by the fruit. The image reminds us that God's blessings always call for a response, and part of that response is to make ourselves useful to God and to God's people.

We've all received blessings from God. The question is what those blessings are producing. Are our lives bearing fruit? Or are they producing thorns? Jesus taught the same principle. A healthy tree bears good fruit. Fruit reveals the condition of the root. What kinds of fruit demonstrate spiritual health? Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Generosity. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control. A growing desire for holiness. Increasing love for God's people. A willingness to serve. A heart that seeks Christ. These are evidence of an authentic Christlike spiritual life. Someone who is lacking in that spiritual fruit, and who consistently fails to demonstrate and live those virtues, can hardly be considered a genuine follower of Jesus. The warning is severe because the stakes are eternal. The preacher wants the congregation to understand that following Christ is not a casual matter. It requires perseverance.

III. Diligent Students Who Inherit the Promises (*Hebrews 6:9-12*)

After delivering this strong warning, the tone changes dramatically. The preacher says: ***“Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case” (Hebrews 6:9)***. What a beautiful expression of pastoral care. The warning is real, but so is his confidence. The preacher sees evidence of God's work among them, and points specifically to **their love and service**.

“For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do” (Hebrews 6:10).

What an encouraging promise. Many of us participated in a wonderful example of love and service, this weekend, as we participated in the Feed My Starving Children Mobile Pack at Trinity Christian Academy. Hundreds of volunteers served, and many people donated funds, to help us get food to those who need it most. Thank you to all who were a part of this act of love and giving. Perhaps you've felt, at one time or another, that your faithful service has gone unnoticed. I'm grateful to every volunteer and staff member who is a part of BBC. It's important for all of us to acknowledge and appreciate the services of others. A Sunday school teacher prepares lessons week after week. A volunteer serves behind the scenes in the nursery, kitchen, Meditation Garden, food pantry, or Media Booth, just to name a few. You listen to, and offer encouragement to, someone who is struggling. A caregiver quietly ministers to a family member or friend. No one else may see. But God sees. God remembers. God doesn't overlook

faithfulness. The world often rewards visibility. God rewards faithfulness. Every act of love done in Christ's name matters. Every sacrifice, every act of service, every prayer, matters. The preacher wants them to continue, and urges diligence. ***“We want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end” (Hebrews 6:11).***

The Christian life is not a sprint; it's a marathon. Faithfulness is measured over a lifetime. That's why believers need examples. The writer says: ***“Do not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (Hebrews 6:12).*** Throughout the Bible, we meet such examples – and, as we'll see later this summer, *Hebrews 11* is filled with them. Abraham and Sarah waited decades for God's promise. Moses endured years of hardship. David trusted God through seasons of uncertainty. The prophets remained faithful, despite opposition. The apostles endured persecution. Throughout church history, countless believers have persevered with faith and patience through suffering, hardship, and sacrifice.

Many of us can think of personal examples of people in our lives who inspire, or have inspired, us. Perhaps, a parent, who prayed faithfully for years. A grandparent, whose faith remained strong to the end. A mentor, who modeled integrity. A church member, who served with joy, devotion, and selflessness, for decades. On Thursday, Bob Linnell spoke at our Christian Men's Luncheon. Bob is the longest tenured member of BBC. He served as a Deacon for over 40 years, chaired three building committees, and has gone on many mission work trips, including our most recent one to Camp Judson in Pennsylvania – even though he has been battling cancer for years and is 86 years old. Bob is the kind of example to imitate that Hebrews is talking about. People like Bob, and those who come to our mind, remind us that faithfulness matters. They show us what perseverance looks like. They challenge us to remain diligent. The opposite of diligence is **sluggishness**. **Notice that word appears at the beginning and end of this passage.** The congregation was becoming **sluggish in hearing**. Now, they're warned not to become **sluggish in living**. The cure for spiritual sluggishness is **active faith**. We continue listening. We continue learning. We continue obeying. We continue serving. We continue trusting. We continue following Christ.

Why is it important to distinguish good from evil? Because spiritual maturity depends upon it, and because our future likely depends on it, also. Falsehood often

disguises itself as truth. As Paul writes, in **2 Corinthians 11:14-15**, *“Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness. Their end will match their deeds.”* The danger of being deceived, led astray, or falling away spiritually, is real. We need to remember that fruitfulness matters, perseverance is necessary, and that God's promises belong to those who continue, diligently, in faith and patience.

The preacher of Hebrews challenged the congregation to grow; to move from milk to solid food; to become mature believers, whose spiritual senses have been trained through practice. We face the same challenge today. Are we growing? Are we training our spiritual senses? Are we becoming more discerning? Are we moving beyond the basics into deeper maturity? Are we bearing fruit? Are we persevering in faith?

The good news is that Christ, our great High Priest, is committed to bringing His people to maturity. Christ is the source of eternal salvation. Christ strengthens us through His Spirit, nourishes us through His Word, and sustains us through His grace.

So, let us press on – rejecting spiritual sluggishness, training ourselves in godliness, and learning to distinguish good from evil. May we become imitators of those who, through faith and patience, inherit the promises of God.

Blessing: 1 Thessalonians 5:13-22

“Be at peace among yourselves. Beloved, admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, **but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.**”

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. “Too Dull to Get It” (*Hebrews 5:11-14*)

Hebrews says mature believers are trained “by practice to distinguish good from evil.” What are some practical ways Christians develop spiritual discernment over time?

2. Moving Beyond the Basics (*Hebrews 6:1-2*)

The writer encourages believers to move beyond the “basic teaching about Christ.” Why is it important to have a strong foundation, while also continuing to grow deeper in faith?

3. The Peril of Falling Away (*Hebrews 6:3-6*)

This is one of the strongest warning passages in Hebrews. What attitudes, habits, or circumstances can slowly lead a person toward spiritual drift or hardness of heart?

4. Useful Ground or Thorny Ground? (*Hebrews 6:7-8*)

The image of fruitful land versus land producing thorns highlights the importance of spiritual fruit. What kinds of fruit show that someone is spiritually healthy and growing?

5. God Remembers Faithful Service (*Hebrews 6:9-10*)

Verse 10 says God will not overlook the work, love, and service shown to others. How does remembering that God sees our faithfulness encourage us when ministry or service feels unnoticed?

6. Diligence and Imitation (*Hebrews 6:11-12*)

The passage calls believers to avoid becoming sluggish, and instead, imitate people of faith and patience. Who are some examples of faithful believers — biblical or personal — that challenge you to stay spiritually diligent?