

Rhythms Week 6

Cultivating the Virtue of Wisdom Through the Practice of Discernment

What makes for a beautiful, compelling life? What characterizes and cultivates such a life? *Rhythms of Renewal** is a program designed to help us grow in the virtues that characterize a beautiful and compelling human life by helping us engage in practices that cultivate such a life. What makes for a beautiful, compelling life? This week, we will seek to grow in the virtue of Wisdom by engaging the practice of Discernment.

Wisdom is not just an intellectual virtue that has to do with interpreting and understanding rightly. *Wisdom is also a moral virtue that has to do with sound judgment regarding behavior.* Many philosophers regard such practical wisdom as a “higher-order mediating virtue” that governs other moral and intellectual virtues, recognizing that wise practices cultivate a healthy, virtuous life, while foolish practices do the opposite.[1] Throughout the biblical story, God calls his people to this kind of practical wisdom, instructing Israel to “choose life, not death” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20), that is, to conduct their lives wisely in love and obedience to the Lord who gives life and blessing. The biblical book of Proverbs further develops a high view of wisdom, portraying wisdom as God’s own possession that was instrumental in God’s work of creation (3:19-20, 8:22-31), essential for human flourishing (9:1-6), more precious than any other possession (3:11-18), rooted in a connectedness to and consciousness of God (1:7, 9:10), and given as a gift from God to those who seek it (2:1-8).

Discernment is a spiritual practice that cultivates wisdom. *Most basically, the practice of discernment is about recognizing and responding to God’s presence in our lives and in the world.* In other words, discernment is a practice that involves our attention to God’s presence and our intention to seek and do God’s will. Ernest Larkin reflects on what a mature practice of discernment requires: “Discernment in its fullest takes a practiced heart, fine-tuned to hear the word of God and the single-mindedness to follow that word in love. It is truly a gift from God, but not one dropped from the skies fully formed. It is a gift cultivated by a prayerful life and the search for self-knowledge.”[2]

According to Ruth Haley Barton, three foundational beliefs are necessary for practicing discernment [3]:

- 1) that God is good and trustworthy;
- 2) that love is our primary calling; and
- 3) that God the Holy Spirit is alive and working in us to help us know what love requires of us in our various situations.

The practice of discernment, Barton contends, begins with a prayer for indifference, through which we seek to be completely open to God’s will, regardless of what it may cost us. “*The movement toward indifference is the threshold between two worlds: the world of human decision making and the world of discerning the divine will. In this waiting room of the soul we are ready to pray the second prayer - the prayer for wisdom.*”[4]

Barton offers several other questions and prompts for reflection that can help deepen our practice discernment and attune our hearts and minds to God's presence and will:[5]

- Notice and know the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4). What do you desire, and can you distinguish the "wants" that come from within from the "shoulds" that come from without?
- How does this particular choice fit within the general direction of God's calling on my life?
- Which choice brings the deepest sense of life, inner peace, and freedom (John 10:10; 2 Corinthians 3:17)? Will this decision draw me deeper into communion with God or might it draw me away from God?
- What does Scripture say that is relevant to this choice?
- Is this choice consistent with what I know of the mind, heart, and life of Christ?
- Does this choice reflect an eternal perspective that values what is permanent more than what is temporary?
- What does my community think? How does this choice fit with others' observations of who I am and what God is doing in my life?
- What does it feel like when I take some time to try on this decision by taking several days to "walk around as if" you had made it? Does making this choice give you a sense of inner peace and freedom?

In the New Testament, we discover Jesus as the embodiment of God's wisdom in human form (1 Corinthians 1:30) who reveals as foolishness the "wisdom of the world" (1 Corinthians 1:20), and Jesus is also the teacher of wisdom, whose followers will be like "a wise man who built his house on rock" (Matthew 7:24-29). The New Testament writer James describes this "wisdom from above" as "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere," yielding "a harvest of righteousness" that is "sown in peace by those who make peace" (James 3:17-18). This wisdom, James says, is a gift from God who gives generally to all who ask for wisdom in faith (James 1:5-7).

1. REFLECT. Consider these questions on your own or with a prayer partner/group :

- Why do you think discernment is a practice that cultivates wisdom?
- Who do you think of as wise? Why?
- What has been your own experience of practicing spiritual discernment?
- How does discernment differ from how our culture typically teaches us to make decisions?
- What does practicing discernment have to do with trusting God?
- What might make the practice of discernment difficult or even scary?

2. UNMASK THE CORE LIE: Recognize the power of a core lie we often believe: *"I am on my own."*

One obstacle to our practice of discernment and growth in wisdom is our believing the lie: "I am on my own." I am on my own to... make big decisions, navigate life in a confusing world,

determine what is good, plan for the future, raise my kids, deal with my problems, manage my money, process my story, work through relational challenges, you fill in the blank.... When we lose sight of God's presence and God's purpose, we begin to live as though we are independent agents who are writing our own stories, for better or worse. We aim our hopes, dreams, and effort at goals that don't align with God's purposes to restore his creation to wholeness and peace, and we embrace means that don't align with Jesus' way of cross-shaped, sacrificial love. We also begin to live as though God were absent or irrelevant to our lives, which hinders our practice of discernment and stokes our anxiety and demand for control. Read the anti-Psalm[6] below as a way to reflect on this.

Anti-Psalm 119:125-135

I am nobody's servant; I am making my own way. I am on my own.
My feelings and my rational thinking give me understanding of all I need to understand.
I don't need a guide. I don't need God. I don't need anyone's direction but my own
(unless it's an expert I seek out to help me achieve my goals).
"Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" - this is the law I love;
this is the law that gives true freedom.
No one else should dictate what I do.
I will direct my steps however I want -
for success, I will follow the best practices that are proven to work;
for enjoyment, I will follow my impulses and appetites;
in relationships, I will do what every sane person does -
be with people who make me happy; not waste time on people who don't.
God and religion don't really do anything for me;
the Bible, church, praying and all that - not really my thing.
If all of that makes you happy, that's fine - you do you.
I'm pursuing happiness by other ways.
I don't see why you would care so much about "wisdom"
unless it's going to make you rich, successful, happy, famous, etc.
Whatever it takes to fulfill my dreams, that's what I'm going to do.
Freedom is being your own boss, calling your own shots,
not having to do what anyone else says,
having enough money to do whatever you want,
not having to make sacrifices for others,
not having to live within uncomfortable limits,
not having to deal with people you don't want to deal with,
being able to give my kids everything they want and deserve,
being able to "give back" whenever I want to be part of a feel-good story... all that stuff.
That's what I'm after.
Whatever road will take me there is the road I plan to travel,
and the only "wisdom" I want is that which will help me navigate it successfully
toward my desired destination:
"work hard but network harder, work smart not hard, buy low/sell high,
fight dirty when you have to, attack the day, don't sweat the small stuff,

follow your heart, unfriend/unfollow anyone who brings you down,
keep your options open....”
That’s the wisdom that serves my purposes.

Notice the core lie at work in your life. Where in your life do you notice yourself believing the lie: “I am on my own?” If that doesn’t feel like your core lie, what do you think it might be? Ask the Spirit to give you wisdom.
Become curious about your believing the core lie. What do you feel when you are believing this? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

3. REMEMBER THE CORE TRUTH. You are not on your own. God is with you. Your only hope in life and death is that you belong, body and soul, to Jesus Christ. God is making all things new through Jesus and his Spirit of resurrection life, and God has included you in that good purpose. The safest and best place for you is to be with God, entrusting your life to God’s care, provision, protection, and guidance. The way of life and wisdom is the path God reveals and illumines through Jesus, the Spirit, God’s word, and the community of those who are seeking God’s will together.

Psalm 25

I am your servant; give me understanding,
so that I may know your decrees.
It is time for the Lord to act,
for your law has been broken.
Truly I love your commandments
more than gold, more than fine gold.
Truly I direct my steps by all your precepts;
I hate every false way.
Your decrees are wonderful;
therefore my soul keeps them.
The unfolding of your words gives light;
it imparts understanding to the simple.
With open mouth I pant,
because I long for your commandments.
Turn to me and be gracious to me,
as is your custom towards those who love your name.
Keep my steps steady according to your promise,
and never let iniquity have dominion over me.
Redeem me from human oppression,
that I may keep your precepts.
Make your face shine upon your servant,
and teach me your statutes.

Become curious about believing the core truth. What do you feel when you are believing the truth instead of the lie? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

4. FOOD FOR INSPIRATION & IMITATION. Look at how Jesus exemplifies curiosity and compassion in Mark 5:21-43.

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.' So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" ' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.' He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

5. Questions for Prayerful Examination

- When you think about becoming the person you long to be, what do the virtue of wisdom and the practice of discernment have to do with your becoming that person?
- When you think about the decisions and developments that are in front of you right now, which one would be the hardest for you to let go of in order to seek "indifference" (in the sense Ruth Haley Barton uses the word above) and become truly open to God's will? What is the cost or risk of trusting God with the outcome?

- How do you think practicing discernment might help you become a better friend, neighbor, family member, ally, spouse, parent, roommate, or co-worker?
- What do you find inspiring about Jesus' life of wisdom and discernment? What's one way you can imitate Jesus' discernment this week?
- In light of this conversation, where in your life do you need God's help right now?
- How might you discern God's presence with your community? What role does community play in your life regarding wisdom and discernment?

6. MICROPRACTICES FOR THE WEEK.

Arrow Prayers. We'll offer some of these each week. The title comes from Sally Lloyd Jones, whose "Jesus Storybook Bible" many of us have loved and used. The idea is that prayer doesn't have to be complex to be meaningful and real. Here are some "arrow prayers" for this week's practice:

- Lord, I give myself to you. Give me wisdom and grace.
- Jesus, help me to trust you with the outcome.
- God, I release my demand to be in control
- Not my will, but yours be done.
- Speak Lord, your servant is listening.

Bite-Sized Scriptures for Memorization

- Proverbs 3:5-6 - Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.
- James 1:5 - If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.
- James 3:13 - Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

Habit Stacking. Habit-stacking is the practice of adding a new habit onto something you already do habitually (e.g. brushing your teeth, doing the dishes, or walking to work), a term we learned from James Clear in *Atomic Habits*. Some ideas:

- As you walk or drive to work, take some time to pray for the day ahead. What part of your agenda might you need to let go of this morning in order to open yourself to God's presence and purpose today?
- At the dinner table, discuss everyone's "highs and lows" from the day. What was joyful and life-giving? What was difficult, sad, or upsetting? When did you sense God's presence or absence? Give thanks to God for the gift of today, and ask for God's help and guidance for tomorrow.

Practices for Community & Mission

- Sit prayerfully and contemplatively with these three questions this week: 1) What kind of neighbor do you want to be? 2) What kind of neighbor does God want you to be? 3) Who is your neighbor?
- Are you currently wrestling with a significant decision? Message your City Group, prayer partner, or a few close friends to invite them into your discernment process. You are not on your own and cannot discern alone.
- With your City Group, household or friends, pray through either Psalm 119:125-135 or Mark 5:21-43. Listen to what the Spirit of God is saying to you, and discuss it with your group.

Sources Cited

[1] James S. Spiegel, "Wisdom," Pages 53-71 in Michael W. Austin and Douglas Geivett, eds., *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 70.

[2] Quoted in Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 110.

[3] *Sacred Rhythms*, 115-18.

[4] *Sacred Rhythms*, 121.

[5] *Sacred Rhythms*, 121-29.

[6] We got the "anti-Psalm" idea from Dr. David Powlison, "Anti-Psalm 23," which we use as a model for exploring the Psalms devotionally as windows into both our own hearts and the mercy of God.

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