

Reflection - discipline five in our spiritual formation series

PART 3: DISCERNING WITH GOD



MISSIONAL COMMUNITY DISCUSSION

Read this Overview Together

While self-examination and reflection look primarily at the past, discernment and reflection engage with the future. As we look back in times of reflection with God, we are also able to look forward to discern God's presence and direction for the future. Discernment is a word often tossed around in Christian community without explicit conversation around what it really means to have discernment and how one might know they have it. Often, it is used in the context of trying to know, or discern, God's will for one's life. His will for each one of His kids is the same; to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31, Luke 10:27, Matt 22:37-40). The context of how we uniquely live out this calling, and through which vocation, is often where we seek discernment. How do we know we are properly discerning God's desire and direction in our lives?

We discern with God when we understand where our will connects with God's will. In Psalm 37, God says that when we delight in, commit, and trust in His ways, He will lead us and give us the desires of our hearts. This is God's path for how we align our hearts with His so that we are able to discern with Him how to live our lives.

In his book, *Hearing God*, Dallas Willard gives a simple, yet powerful illustration of what it's like to be in God's will. When his kids were little and played in the backyard, he says they were often totally in his will as they roamed around, choosing what to play. Though he hadn't told them how or what to play in the backyard, they were completely in his will. And had they decided to play a game in the living room, or have a snack in the kitchen, they would still have remained in his will. Speaking of this type of agency and freedom God gives us, Willard goes on to say, "Too often we assume that what God wants us to do automatically excludes what we want to do. That is not true. Generally speaking, we are in God's will whenever we are leading the kind of life He wants for us. And that leaves a lot of initiative on our part. God respects our initiative and ideas and thinks they are central in doing His will in our lives."¹ The initiative and agency God gives and expects from each one of us is meant to give us freedom and creativity as we move in the world and share His love.

However, sometimes we reduce or restrict this freedom and creativity because we have a false understanding of God's love and desire for us. We can become fearful and paralyzed because we perceive God as an exacting God—punishing us for our missteps and waiting for us "get it right." But, like Willard's kids safely playing in the boundary of the

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¹ Willard, *Hearing God*, pg. 20

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backyard and family home, God is happy to let us engage our freedom to explore, and choose, and even to fail. God uses everything in our lives, even the hard stuff, to speak to us, minister to us, love us, and redirect us so that, ultimately, we draw closer to Him. If you've been practicing the Prayers of Examen from Parts 1 and 2, you've hopefully been discovering this.

The spiritual practice of Discerning with God can be understood as a habit of recognizing and becoming familiar with God's presence and voice in our life. It's a way of being and moving in the world that allows us to "find God in all things in order that we might love and serve God in all things." It's growing familiar with the specific ways God speaks to us and is with us, according to the unique way He has made each one of us, so that we begin to think with God. This intimate and familiar awareness of God's heart and purposes within you develops over time through the everyday circumstances and situations of your life. We begin to ask questions like: "Where is God at work?, What is most loving in this situation?, Is my heart turned toward God regarding this person or situation?" We see this "thinking with God" in the way Jesus intimately knew the Father's will and voice; and in the way Jesus only did what the Father instructed. (John 5:19-20) Because we have the same Spirit who was with Jesus, discerning this way is possible for us as well.

Practicing "Consolation and Desolation" is a method by which we come to discern between what gives us life (leads us toward God) and what debilitates and drains life from us (leads away from God) as a way to understand God's will for us. Ignatius called this inner discernment "Consolation and Desolation"; the ability to let our internal dynamics move us toward that which is life-giving and away from that which is not.¹ To many of our ears, this can sound counterintuitive to following God. We can falsely believe that we are too sinful or broken to discern God's direction, or as Willard shared earlier, we assume that what gives us life couldn't possibly be what God also wants for us. But remember in John 10:10, Jesus tells us that He has come to give us life, life abundant. As we make decisions and choices in our lives, discerning God's will starts simply by noticing what ignites who God has created us to be and what gives us life.

So how do we do this? First, we don't do this in isolation, we seek the leading of the Holy Spirit, petitioning Him for wisdom and understanding in partnership with the people who know us well. Consolation and Desolation is not about preference or comfort. Labelling as "Desolation" things you want to avoid or that make you uncomfortable due to fear or preference misses the point and can actually move you toward habits of sin. Consolation is not just doing what you want or what you prefer; sometimes God asks us to step into hard things in order to grow us, transform us, or show us what we are capable of. This practice is about learning to notice what is happening in us as we engage our days so

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1 "Consolation and Desolation" content adapted from Ruth Haley Barton's *Sacred Rhythms*, pgs. 112-114.

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that we recognize when we feel unsettled or energized. This ability can help us know what things God may be asking us to speak to, or to start doing or stop doing on behalf of ourselves, our families, and our communities.

Second, discerning with God is dependent on living a life surrendered to God (Psalm 37). As we surrender, God's Spirit within us will use our unique individual desires to help us discern His will. This is the intersection of God's Spirit and our unique person. In Deuteronomy 30, God, speaking through Moses, tells the whole of Israel that He has set before them life and death, blessings and curses, and he commands them to choose life so that their descendants may live. (Deut 30:11-20) This is the same sentiment Jesus echoes in John 10:10. Speaking of these verses, Ruth Haley Barton says, "God's will for us is generally to do more of that which gives us life and to turn away from those things that drain us." She goes on to point out that the spiritual wisdom that enables us to choose life is not found outside of ourselves, but that it's very near to us; it is in our mouths and in our hearts for us to notice and observe. (Deut 30:14)

Practically speaking, Consolation and Desolation is the process of personally knowing what leads to us toward God, goodness, freedom in the Spirit (2 Cor 3:17), and peace (Phil 4:7) in our lives and hearts (Consolation) and knowing what leads us away from God toward what inundates us, drains us, and could even lead to wickedness (Desolation). Learning to notice and then listen to the internal voice within ourselves is about acknowledging how we really feel and trusting that those feelings are revealing something to us about how God created us and where He is leading us. These feelings won't necessarily be colossal, it could be something like a tension headache that begins to form during a conversation with someone or a work task that depletes you. It could be the low-level anxiety you feel every time you engage a certain activity or have a particular thought. These are examples of Desolation. Alternately, Consolation may feel like the life-giving energy you experience with certain people or while engaging a particular activity. It could be the sense of peace felt entering a certain space, or of "being in the flow" while doing something. He wants us to notice these feelings and allow them to help navigate us toward His will for us, toward choosing life.

When we learn to be curious about these moments of Consolation and Desolation in the day-to-day experiences of our lives, we better understand how God has made us and what he might be calling us into. We are better able to discern His will and step into the "good works he has prepared in advance" for us as well as discern areas that we may need to explore due to sin, broken relationships, or wounds that need healing. (Eph 2:10) As people who love Jesus and want to follow God's will for the sake of His name and glory, we can easily get pulled off course by listening to the "oughts" and the "shoulds" that are not of God. We have good intentions, but sometimes we succumb to acting out of guilt, compulsion, or someone else's idea of what is good and right for us. Barton

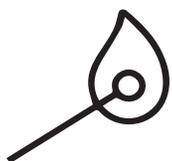
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reminds us, “the will of God is manifest deep within, where the Spirit dwells and bears witness with our spirit about things that are true (Rom 8:16). A profound life orientation is revealed in our deepest desires and consolations, when we are able to get in touch with them.” It’s in our deepest desires and consolations where we often find our calling—the very purpose for which God has created us.

Questions for Missional Community Discussion

1. What do you believe about discerning God’s will? How did you come to believe that?
2. Do you struggle to understand God’s will for your life? Or to discern how to live in God’s will?
3. As you reflect on your current process of decision-making, how would you describe it?
4. When you make decisions do you generally feel confident or unsure, afraid or at peace? What leads to these feelings?
5. How do you feel about Barton’s statement that, “God’s will for us is generally to do more of that which gives us life and to turn away from those things that drain us”?
6. When you think about discerning with God, what does that mean?
7. Where in your life do you experience the “abundant life” that Jesus talks about?
8. Do you know what your own consolations and desolations are? Do you know what draws you closer to God and what draws you away from God?
9. Spend a few minutes discussing the individual practice for this week, Consolation and Desolation.



INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE: CONSOLATION AND DESOLATION

When we think about discerning God’s will for our lives, theologian and pastor Frederick Buechner, says that God calls us to the place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep need. The reflective practice of learning to discern God’s direction through Consolation and Desolation helps us see how

God will use our unique desires to meet the world’s deep need. While paying attention to what brings us life and what drains us may seem too self-focused, it actually births in us a greater capacity to be available to God and to others in the specific ways He’s designed us for. It helps us say yes to the right things, and no to the wrong things so that we experience freedom to engage all of life – the good and the hard – with confidence, knowing that God is with us and for us because we have learned to notice the tangible ways he is moving in us and through us.

For this practice¹ set aside 10-20 minutes, ideally at the beginning or end of your day. Begin your time with a moment or two of silence. You might take a few deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling slowly. Invite the Holy Spirit to quiet you and to open the eyes of your heart.

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1 Practice adapted from Ruth Haley Barton’s, *Pursuing God’s Will Together*, p. 62

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Individual Practice Continued...

When you're ready, spend the next five to ten minutes and notice experiences of Consolation and Desolation over the last twenty-four hours. Ask God to reveal a moment of Consolation to you. Something about your day that you are the most grateful for—a moment that was life-giving, energizing, where you were able to give and receive love, when you were at your best self, when you felt connected with God. Then ask God to show you a moment of Desolation; a moment for which you are the least grateful—a moment that drained life and energy from you, when you were unable to give and receive love, when you were not able to be your best self, or you felt disconnected from God.

Some questions you might consider as you reflect on these moments of Consolation and Desolation:

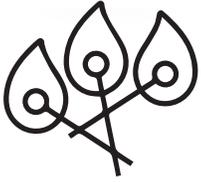
- What about that moment or situation was life-giving or life-draining?
- What was happening right before that moment or situation occurred?
- What did you feel right before or after the moments of Consolation or Desolation? Joy, anger, frustration, tiredness, shame, apathy, energized, hopeful/hopeless? Try to identify what you might have been feeling and why you might have had those feelings.
- Did you have a sense before, during, or afterward that you want more or less of that experience?
- What do you think God wants you to know about these moments and your feelings?

Spend the last few minutes of your time reflecting on what you discovered from these experiences. Is there any wisdom or insight that comes to you about how you can choose life? Make note of that and consider doing this reflective practice a few times each week or daily.

Over time the practice of Consolation and Desolation can form into a habit of paying attention to your internal dynamics in real-time as a way to discern with God about how you live your life, how you spend your time, and who you invest in. As you begin to regularly notice these moments and talk about them with Him, you can begin to move toward more consolation and less desolation. God's will for us is to choose the abundant life Jesus has secured for us for the sake of His glory, the good of others, and our joy.

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DNA GROUP OR PERSONAL REFLECTION

After you have tried the practice, find time to meet with your DNA group and reflect together on your experience. Let the conversation go wherever God leads; here are some questions that might be helpful.

1. Did you engage the practice of noticing Consolation and Desolation? What was your experience like? (*Did you note any fear or pull to avoid something that informed your decisions? Did you discern areas that you may need to explore due to sin, broken relationships, or wounds that need healing? If you feel comfortable, share those with your DNA.*)
2. During your reflection time, did you notice the freedom and desire to say yes or no to something? Or the compulsion to yes or no? What was the source of the freedom or compulsion?
3. Are there areas of your life you feel controlled by thoughts or feelings of "I ought to" or I "should"? Why do you think that is?
4. How did the noticing what brings you life and what drains life from you impact your week? Were you able to notice yourself noticing throughout your week?
5. How might believing that God's will for you is to say yes to what brings you life and joy change the way you make small and big decisions in your life? What might you say yes to more often? What might you start saying no to?
6. Does it make you nervous to trust your inner dynamics (the intersection of God's Spirit and your unique person) to discern God's will and direction in your life? If so, what makes you nervous about it?
7. Do you think you will incorporate this practice as a regular part of your life? If so, brainstorm together how you can make this a habit or rhythm in your routine.