

A Cry for Discernment (1 Kings 3)

In *Fool's Gold*, John MacArthur writes a fitting introduction to the subject of discernment we're going to look at today. It's very fitting based on where we live here, near where **gold** was discovered in the 1840's. We live in what's called "**gold** country" as you see on signs of businesses around here. The name of our church is **Gold** Country Baptist Church. And the Scriptures often use the analogy of **gold** in comparison to spiritual truth, and we should take advantage of these reminders in our community of the spiritually valuable subject we're looking at today.

The first chapter of the book *Fool's Gold* begins with the title "All that glitters ... A Call for Biblical Discernment." It points out that not everything that looks like gold is of real lasting value, and that principle is true with spiritual hype and fads and trends as well:

'for James Marshall (who discovered gold at Sutter's Mill in 1848) and [others] ... "eureka" meant instant riches, early retirement, and a life of carefree ease. It's no wonder California (the "**Golden** State") includes this term on its official seal, along with the picture of a zealous **gold** miner.

News of Marshall's discovery spread quickly throughout the nation. By 1850 over 75,000 hopefuls had traveled to California by land, and another 40,000 by sea. Whether by wagon or by boat, the journey was an arduous one, as adventurers left friends and family behind in search of vast fortunes. Even when they finally arrived in San Francisco, the closest goldfields were still 150 miles away. Undaunted nonetheless, many of the forty-niners set up mining camps and started to dig.

As they traveled out to their various destinations, prospectors quickly learned that not everything that looked like gold actually was. Riverbeds and rock quarries could be full of golden specks, and yet entirely worthless. This "fool's gold" was iron pyrite, and miners had to be able to distinguish it from the real thing. Their very livelihood depended on it.

Experienced miners could usually distinguish pyrite from gold simply by looking at it. But in some cases the distinction was not quite so clear. So they developed tests to discern what was genuine from what wasn't. One test involved biting the rock in question. Real gold is softer than the human tooth, while fool's gold is harder. A broken tooth meant that a prospector needed to keep digging. A second test involved scraping the rock on a piece of white stone, such as ceramic. True gold leaves a yellow streak, while the residue left by fool's gold is greenish-black. In either case, a miner relied on tests to authenticate his finds—both his fortune and his future depended on the results. Doctrinally speaking, today's church is in a similar position to the California gold rushers of 1850. Spiritual riches are promised at every turn. New programs, new philosophies, new parachurch ministries—each glitters a little bit more than the last, promising better results and bigger returns. But, as was true in the mid-1800s, just because it glitters doesn't mean it's good. Christians need to be equally wary of "fool's gold." We must not accept new trends (or old

traditions) without first testing them to see if they meet with God's approval. If they fail the test, we should discard them and warn others also. But if they pass the test, in keeping with the truth of God's Word, we can embrace and endorse them wholeheartedly. California gold miners would only cry "Eureka!" when they found true gold. As Christians, we should be careful to do the same.¹

It was just a few years ago where Charismatics at some wild meetings claimed there was actual **gold** dust coming down from God as a miracle while they were worshipping and that some people's fillings in their mouth were allegedly turning to **gold** during the revivals (divine dentistry?). Hank Hanegraaf traces these and other Counterfeit Revivals as just the latest and craziest of the manipulations and absurdities from bogus "fallings in the Spirit" to these shorter-lived bogus "**gold** fillings in the Spirit".²

In the same way that those in the early Wild West of California found out that not everything sensational was to be believed, it's also true spiritually that not everything that glitters has *real* value.

I want to begin to mine some of the riches of God's Word with you this evening on something of real value, in fact priceless value, the matchless worth of **discernment** or wisdom or understanding from God's sufficient scriptures.

Job 28:12-17 (NASB95)

¹²"But where can wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? ¹³"Man does not know its value, Nor is it found in the land of the living. ¹⁴"The deep says, 'It is not in me'; And the sea says, 'It is not with me.' ¹⁵"**Pure gold cannot be given in exchange for it, Nor can silver be weighed as its price.** ¹⁶"**It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, In precious onyx, or sapphire.** ¹⁷"**Gold or glass cannot equal it, Nor can it be exchanged for articles of fine gold.**

Psalms 19:7 (NASB95)

⁷The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, **making wise** the simple.

¹⁰They are **more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold**; Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.

King David knew a lot about gold as a king of Israel, but he knew from experience that wisdom or discernment for the simple from the Word of God was of far greater value than any material riches. It should be pursued by believers with the same intensity and abandon as those that rushed to California seeking temporary treasure – but believers get greater rewards. The psalms say we are to love God's truth above gold, even above fine gold, and to see it as better than thousands of gold or silver pieces (Ps 119:72, 127).

David's son Solomon gives perhaps the greatest illustration of this in all of God's Word in 1 Kings 3.

1 Kings 3 (NASB95)

⁵In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream at night; and **God said, "Ask what you wish me to give you."** ⁶Then Solomon said, "You have shown great lovingkindness to **Your servant David my father**, according as he walked before You in truth and righteousness and uprightness of heart toward You; and You have reserved for him this great lovingkindness, that You have given him a son to sit on his throne, as *it is* this day.

⁷“Now, O LORD my God, You have made **Your servant** king in place of my father David, **yet I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.** ⁸“**Your servant** is in the midst of Your people which You have chosen, a great people who are too many to be numbered or counted. ⁹“So **give Your servant an understanding heart to judge** Your people **to discern** between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?”
¹⁰ It was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing. ¹¹ God said to him, “Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself long life, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked for the life of your enemies, but **have asked for yourself discernment** to understand justice, ¹² behold, I have done according to your words. **Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart**, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you. ¹³“I have also given you what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that there will not be any among the kings like you all your days.

As a child I remember a bunch of us were considering the profound hypothetical question one time, “If you were given three wishes for whatever you wanted, what would you ask for?”

I think one of the girls said something like “world peace” for one of her wishes (which I don’t think was any of the guys’ wishes). Some wished for a billion dollars, others wished for something to change in their life, someone may have wished to play in the NBA. Those of us who thought we were clever wanted to use one of our wishes that we would get more wishes.

What would you do if you had to narrow it down to one? What would you request if God Almighty offered to grant you one wish?

Here’s how Solomon answered:

⁶ **Then Solomon said, “You have shown great lovingkindness to Your servant David my father,**

Before we look at his request, notice how he addresses God. Solomon had learned to pray from his dad (notice “Your servant”)

He also learned from his dad to honor his father and mother, which is something we see modeled in the life of David even when employed by King Saul and even when his fame later grows, he always made sure his father Jesse and mother were taken care of.

David and Solomon were both visual illustrations of the O.T. truth of honor your father and mother that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.

Look at chapter 2 at how Solomon honored his mother.

1 Kings 2:19 (NASB95)

¹⁹ **So Bathsheba went to King Solomon to speak to him for Adonijah. And the king arose to meet her, bowed before her, and sat on his throne; then he had a throne set for the king’s mother, and she sat on his right.**

One writer has pointed out: ‘He was a great king and the son of a great king. That means he was famous and powerful and supreme . . . People bowed in his presence. They did what he said. He had immense authority and honor. How did he treat his mother in this exalted role? You recall his mother was Bathsheba. She had married his father David under very ugly circumstances—very displeasing to God. But she was his mother, and this is what it says in 1 Kings 2:19 . . . *And the king arose to meet her, bowed before her, and sat on his throne; then he had a throne set for the king’s mother, and she sat on his right.*

Then they had their conversation. He rose for her. He bowed to her. And he called for a throne to be put beside his for their conversation. She was his mother. Even kings should stoop when their mothers enter the room.³

1 Kings 3:6 (NASB95)

⁶Then Solomon said, “You have shown great lovingkindness to Your servant David my father, according as he walked before You in truth and righteousness and uprightness of heart toward You; and You have reserved for him this great lovingkindness, that You have given him a son to sit on his throne, as *it is* this day.

Twice he mentions “lovingkindness” – *khessed* – covenant love, faithful steadfast love, loyal mercy. It’s not only lovingkindness, but Solomon refers to it both times at “great lovingkindness” – the faithful love of our covenant LORD to those in relationship with Him, a mercy that endures forever and never comes to an end.

Notice his focus on the greatness of God’s grace and the lowliness of himself in relation to God. The way he prays reveals a high view of God and a low view of self – notice his humility and fear of God which results in fear and trembling at his responsibility before God

⁷“Now, O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king in place of my father David, yet I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸“Your servant is in the midst of Your people which You have chosen, a great people who are too many to be numbered or counted.

There’s a background to what Solomon is saying here that I think will be helpful for us to look at briefly. *Turn back to 2 Samuel 7*

⁸“Now therefore, thus you shall say to My servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, “I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people Israel. ⁹“I have been with you wherever you have gone and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make you a great name, like the names of the great men who are on the earth. ¹⁰“I will also appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, that they may live in their own place and not be disturbed again, nor will the wicked afflict them any more as formerly, ¹¹ even from the day that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. The LORD also declares to you that the LORD will make a house for you. ¹²“When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³“He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴“I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, ¹⁵ but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took *it* away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. ¹⁶“Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.” ’ ’ ¹⁷ In accordance with all these words and all this vision, so Nathan spoke to David. ¹⁸ Then David the king went in and sat before the LORD, and he said, **“Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that You have brought me this far? ¹⁹“And yet this was insignificant in Your eyes, O Lord GOD, for You have spoken also of the house of Your servant concerning the distant future. And this is the custom of man, O Lord GOD. ²⁰“Again **what more can David say to You?** For You know Your servant, O Lord GOD! ²¹“For the sake of Your word, and according to Your own heart, You have done all this greatness to let Your servant know. ²²“For this reason You are great, O Lord GOD; for there is none like You, and there is no God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears. ²³“And what one nation on the earth is like Your people Israel, whom God went to redeem for Himself as a people and to make a name for Himself, and to do a great thing for You and awesome things for Your land, before Your people whom You have redeemed for Yourself from Egypt, *from* nations and their gods? ²⁴“For You have established for Yourself Your people Israel as Your own people forever, and You, O LORD, have become their God. ²⁵“Now therefore, O Lord God, the word that You have spoken concerning Your servant and his house, confirm *it* forever, and do as You have spoken, ²⁶ that Your name may be magnified forever, by saying, ‘The LORD of hosts is God over Israel’; and may the house of Your servant David be established before You. ²⁷“For You, O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, have made a revelation to Your servant,**

saying, ‘I will build you a house’; therefore Your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to You.²⁸ “Now, O Lord GOD, You are God, and Your words are truth, and You have promised this good thing to Your servant.²⁹ “Now therefore, may it please You to bless the house of Your servant, that it may continue forever before You. For You, O Lord GOD, have spoken; and with Your blessing may the house of Your servant be blessed forever.”

The greatest thing a father can pass on to his child is this God-centeredness (where it’s truly “All about You, Lord”), this humility, this lowly servant heart that says “Who am I?” Amazed praise and prayer in light of God’s undeserved and unexplainable great kindness toward fallible sinful people like us! The fact that God allows us to keep breathing and living in this world when we sin, when sin deserves instant death and eternal punishment, that in and of itself is astonishing. But what is mind-boggling and unfathomable to His true servants is that He extends grace and covenant love, adopts us as His own children, blesses us eternally and even gives us many blessings in the meanwhile! That should make us pray like David “that God’s name be magnified”!

So now turn back to 1 Kings 3

⁶Then Solomon said, “You have shown great lovingkindness to Your servant David my father, according as he walked before You in truth and righteousness and uprightness of heart toward You; and You have reserved for him this great lovingkindness, that You have given him a son to sit on his throne, as *it is* this day.⁷ “Now, O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king in place of my father David, yet I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.⁸ “Your servant is in the midst of Your people which You have chosen, a great people who are too many to be numbered or counted.

My responsibilities in my life are nothing like what Solomon had been given over a whole nation, but I certainly feel what he expresses here. If I could paraphrase verse 7, there are a lot of areas in my discernment and experience as a young man that I feel like a kindergartener in some of the things of the Lord. I’m just a little child, I don’t know what I’m doing, and God has called me to this responsibility?! I don’t only *feel* inadequate, I *know* I am! That’s not trying to be humble, that’s just being real!

Even in the far smaller responsibilities God has given me to be a father and to lead my wife and teach my children, a much smaller group than Solomon was responsible for, my utter need for God’s wisdom and discernment is essential to depend on Him daily.

And the weight of the responsibility to be a pastor in a local church of our Living God is utterly overwhelming and daunting! People often ask me how they pray for me and I often ask for wisdom – that God would give me beyond my years discernment, because on my own I am ill-equipped, insufficient, inadequate, incapable by myself for this task. Which is why in the church God doesn’t call one man to pastor or shepherd his flock – it is by a plurality of godly men. But in my role as a full-time pastor-teacher I greatly need wisdom and discernment I don’t have, and I am thankful for prayers that have been answered in some measure, still I always need prayer that God would protect me from messing up what He is doing in this wonderful church. Keep me humble, dependent.

When Moses felt overwhelmed in Deuteronomy 1 with the size of the task before him, he cried out to God in help, and God told Moses to select “discerning and experienced men from your tribes” to share the load of leading and being heads over the people. We need to surround ourselves with others more wise and discerning. Praise the Lord for those in my life.

Whatever responsibilities God has called you to at whatever stage of life, we all need to recognize our desperate need for discernment. The good news is whatever God calls you to none of us can do on our own – what God expects He also enables by His grace alone.

Jeremiah 1:6-8 (NASB95) ⁶ Then I said, “Alas, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, Because I am a youth.” ⁷ But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am a youth,’ Because everywhere I send you, you shall go, And all that I command you, you shall speak. ⁸ “Do not be afraid of them, For I am with you to deliver you,” declares the LORD.

David as a young man was blessed with discernment and wisdom beyond his years, and it was obvious to others that God’s hand and spirit was upon him when they recommended him to King Saul. Solomon undoubtedly saw discernment in his dad. Even one of the maidservant who came before David recognized this quality

2 Samuel 14:17 (NASB95) ¹⁷ “Then your maidservant said, ‘Please let the word of my lord the king be comforting, for **as the angel of God, so is my lord the king to discern good and evil.** And may the LORD your God be with you.’”

There we see a key definition of the word “discern” which has to do with knowing good and evil. This is what Solomon asks for:

1 Kings 3:9 “So give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?”

I was always taught that Solomon asked God for **wisdom**. But if you look carefully at the text, it actually doesn’t use the word “wisdom” in any of the major English translations. He asks for discernment from an “understanding heart” (lit. a *hearing* heart, truly listening to and applying God’s truth) in order to judge or discern things rightly. There was another Hebrew word for wisdom that is not used for here. Listen to how God summarizes Solomon’s request as really being a plea for discernment or ability to discern:

¹⁰ It was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing. ¹¹ God said to him, “Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself long life, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked for the life of your enemies, **but have asked for yourself discernment to understand justice,**

God says clearly that Solomon “asked for ... **discernment** to understand justice” and that pleased the Lord. The ESV has “understanding to discern what is right” which is similar to the NKJV. Discernment to understand and obey what’s right – that is what the Lord would want all of us to ask for.

Because Solomon asked for this, it pleased the Lord so much that He gave Solomon the most blessed reign in terms of peace and prosperity of any biblical figure ever (only to be surpassed by the coming Son of David, the Lord Jesus Himself)

¹² behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, **I have given you a wise and discerning heart,** so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you. ¹³ **“I have also given you what you have not asked,** both riches and honor, so that there will not be any among the kings like you all your days.

Solomon asked for discernment, and as a result God gave him both discernment and wisdom and unparalleled riches and honor as well that he didn't ask for, because God was so pleased with the request

Tim Challies has written the most helpful book I know of on this subject, *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*. (Unfortunately my lack of discernment left my copy on the coffee table next to a full cup of coffee that was unattended with our then 1-year old in the room and she poured out the cup to see what would happen, so the pages are thoroughly coffee-stained).

He writes on this passage: ‘the “understanding mind” Solomon requested was really a “hearing heart” or a “listening heart” – “a heart giving heed to the law and right of God.” Solomon was given wisdom to be sure, but he was also given a hearing heart. He was given discernment such as no mere human has possessed before or since. We might even say that Solomon requested discernment, but because of the connectedness of wisdom and discernment, God gave him both what he requested and its important prerequisite. Solomon became both wise and discerning.’ (p. 21)

What is the definition of discernment?

My simple definition would be: the ability or insight *to apply wisdom or knowledge* to choose what is right and prudent.

Tim Challies suggests that ‘by studying Proverbs and other portions of the Bible, it seems that discernment is a subset of wisdom. There seems to be a progression from knowledge, which refers to bare facts, to wisdom, which refers to understanding moral and ethical dimensions of facts and data, to discernment, which is the application of wisdom. Wisdom is a prerequisite to discernment. Discernment is wisdom in action.’ (p. 57)

The Hebrew word *bin* that is sometimes translated “discernment” is more often translated “insight.” It’s an insight or prudence or perception or greater understanding of how to judge or distinguish or separate two things to determine what is best and wisest. You weigh the options, make distinctions based on God’s truth, and can make difficult decisions between what is truth and what is error (which may not be obvious to others). You can discern which path to take and which to avoid, as your insight applies biblical wisdom.

Discernment is the skill of understanding and applying God’s Word with the purpose of separating truth from error and right from wrong. (p. 61)

Another source points out that the word is often used of “an insight into a person’s character or by an event that comes through insight that goes beyond the facts given.”⁴

Jay Adams reminds us it’s of God and from God: ‘the divinely given ability to distinguish God’s thoughts and ways from all others.’⁵

This is what Solomon is asking for from God. By itself it would have been the greatest blessing and gift, but because he asked for this, God gave him many other blessings and gifts as well.

It's been pointed out that 'God commended Solomon because his request was completely *unselfish*: "Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself." Selfishness is incompatible with true discernment. People who desire to be discerning must be willing to step outside themselves.

Modern evangelicalism, enamored with psychology and self-esteem, has produced a generation of believers so self-absorbed that they *cannot* be discerning. People aren't even interested in discernment. All their interest in spiritual things is focused on self. They are interested only in getting their own felt needs met.

Solomon did not do that. Although he had an opportunity to ask for long life, personal prosperity, health and wealth—he bypassed all of that and asked for discernment instead. Therefore God also gave him riches, honor, and long life for as long as he walked in the ways of the Lord.

James 1:5 promises that God will grant the prayer for discernment [or its companion wisdom] generously: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him."⁶

This is how God answered Solomon's prayer:

1 Kings 4:29 (NASB95)

²⁹ Now God gave Solomon wisdom and **very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore.**

If discernment is this valuable in God's Word, how do we get it?

Proverbs 1:1-2 (NASB95)

¹ The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel: ² **To know wisdom and instruction, To discern the sayings of understanding,**

A few verses later he says it begins with the fear of the Lord.

Proverbs 2:1-9 (NASB95)

¹ My son, if you will receive my words And treasure my commandments within you, ² Make your ear attentive to wisdom, Incline your heart to understanding; ³ For **if you cry for discernment,** Lift your voice for understanding; ⁴ If you seek her as silver And search for her as for hidden treasures; ⁵ **Then you will discern the fear of the LORD** And discover the knowledge of God. ⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth *come* knowledge and understanding. ⁷ He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; *He is* a shield to those who walk in integrity, ⁸ Guarding the paths of justice, And He preserves the way of His godly ones. ⁹ **Then you will discern righteousness and justice And equity and every good course.**

As we read God's Word and study God's Word, we pray and plead with him to teach us discernment to apply His wisdom and truth.

Lord-willing, next time (in 2 weeks) we'll look at how we can cultivate discernment and grow in pursuing discernment more.

¹ *Fool's Gold*, edited by John MacArthur, Crossway, 2005, Wheaton, Ill.: p. 20-21.

² <http://www.equip.org/atf/cf/%7B9C4EE03A-F988-4091-84BD-F8E70A3B0215%7D/DP245.pdf>

³ http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1994/873_Do_Not_Forsake_Your_Mothers_Teaching/

⁴ Ryken, L., Wilhoit, J., Longman, T., Duriez, C., Penney, D., & Reid, D. G. (1998). *Dictionary of biblical imagery* (p. 207). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

⁵ Jay Adams, *A Call to Discernment*, 46.

⁶ John MacArthur (1994). *Reckless faith : When the church loses its will to discern* (p. 83). Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books.