

Discerning Good and Evil

“Good” and “evil” exist. Our challenge is to know how to tell them apart, and how to navigate the complex interplay of both in our lives.

“Therefore, give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may **discern between good and evil**. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?” (1 Kgs. 3:9).

“Solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to **discern both good and evil**” (Heb. 5:14).



When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they not only introduced sin into the world, they also placed upon themselves and their descendants the burden of having to evaluate every future decision as either “good” or “evil.” Ever since then, the ability to “discern good and evil” has been essential to living life well. These two passages suggest several lessons for helping us distinguish between the two.

First, notice that these passages clearly infer *a difference between good and evil*. To say that some things are inherently “good” and others inherently “evil” requires an objective moral standard that exists outside of human preferences. An external standard or law requires an external Lawgiver—what we have historically called “God.” While that may seem too obvious a point to bother with, our postmodern culture, having rejected God, is struggling

with a growing inability to discern *any* difference between good and evil. Isaiah described his generation as people who “call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness” (Isa. 5:20). They lost the ability to recognize any distinction between right and wrong, and ended up embracing behaviors that led to their destruction. The same spiritual blindness explains much of the madness that is plaguing our society today.

These passages also emphasize the need for *making a conscious effort to understand the difference between good and evil*. When Solomon became king of Israel, he knew that a tremendous burden had been placed on his shoulders. The decisions he would make as king would either lead his people to greater prosperity and peace, or to disaster. So, when God gave him a “blank check,” he wisely asked for only one thing: the ability to recognize good and evil when he saw them. We need to have that same passion to understand what is right and what is wrong so that our decisions will be rooted in wisdom.

Furthermore, we must *acknowledge God’s role in providing that wisdom*. Solomon did not consult mediums or wizards for guidance in his decision-making. He went directly to God. We, too, must ask God for the wisdom to make good choices (Jas. 1:5). God’s word serves as the foundation for that wisdom.

However, the Bible does not address every detail. One more ingredient is required, and that is addressed in the Hebrews passage: we must have our “senses exercised” to discern the difference between good and evil. That is another way of saying that we should *listen to the voice of experience*. God’s word furnishes the foundational guidelines, but the day-to-day experiences of life sharpen our ability to apply those guidelines to specific situations. When we make mistakes, we will learn from them. We will figure out what works and what doesn’t. As we study these experiences over a lifetime of patient study, practice, and prayer, we will be able to fine-tune our understanding of good and evil.

God granted Solomon’s request: “See, I have given you a wise and understanding heart” (3:12). For many years that wisdom served Solomon and his kingdom well. Late in life, however, the king’s desire for wisdom faded, and he lost it. We can lose it, too, if we do not strive to maintain a spirit of discernment.

— David King