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**ATTAINING WISDOM AND DISCERNMENT**

*In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen.*

One deaconess is asking how to attain wisdom and discernment. She is also requesting some possible training exercises. St. Paul said, “*And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent* [“*may approve the things that differ*” when translated from Arabic].”[[1]](#footnote-2) This “*approving things that differ*” is the gift of differentiation and discernment. He said things differ and sometimes this causes confusion when a person does not know what is correct­­­ – which choice would please our Lord more, or what would displease Him. Would using force at times please God, or would He be displeased if I do not use it? Sometimes a person stands perplexed before a situation, not knowing which choice would please our Lord.

***A Time for Every Purpose Under Heaven*[[2]](#footnote-3)**

When Eli the priest was negligent in disciplining his children who sinned with the women who assembled at the door of the Tabernacle of Meeting, our Lord was upset with him and broke Eli’s neck. Our Lord said to him, “*Why do you… honor your sons more than Me*.”[[3]](#footnote-4) “You are honoring them at my expense.” The Lord was very upset with him and told him that the priesthood would not remain in his house, and, if anyone remained, he would beg for bread. King Saul fulfilled this prophecy by killing all the priests (This was because David the prophet had taken the sword of Goliath from the tabernacle of meeting). There is a filmstrip of this very gruesome scene; it is moving to watch them all murdered. Eli’s gentleness with his children ruined him, and likewise ruined them. The Lord said to him, “*Behold, I will do something in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle*.”[[4]](#footnote-5) This came to pass at that time: Eli’s neck broke, both his sons died, labor pains came upon his daughter-in-law when she heard that the Ark of the Covenant was captured, that her father-in-law alongside her husband and his brother were dead, and so she also died while giving birth. She called her son Ichabod, because, “*The glory has departed from Israel*.”[[5]](#footnote-6) Everything turned upside down. This was the first time the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the heathen Philistines, but our Lord was able to preserve it even though it had fallen into enemy hands. Had Eli taken a firm stand, none of these calamities would have taken place. I am simply giving an example that shows that gentleness is not always what pleases God. Neither is harshness always what pleases God.

**Exercises to Attain Wisdom:**

This is where the importance of the gifts of wisdom, differentiation, and discernment become apparent. St. Paul’s words are clear that he prays for them to attain these gifts. Whether he prays for them or if they make the request in prayer: “*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God*.” We need to ask for wisdom generally, and especially in specific situations when we need guidance from our Lord. We can attain wisdom by reading hagiography (the lives of the saints) to learn from their behavior and lifestyle, alongside St. Paul’s and the apostolic fathers’ approaches to service. We also need a wise spiritual guide; we may attain wisdom during the course of our conversations with the guide. These conversationsare not wasteful; while conversing we are gradually gaining wisdom. Here are some supporting quotes:

* Ask your father, and he will show you.[[6]](#footnote-7)
* *Obey those who rule over you*.[[7]](#footnote-8)
* Those who live without guidance will fall off like the leaves of a tree.[[8]](#footnote-9)
* *Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct*.[[9]](#footnote-10)
* Examine your guide lest you mistake “the patient for the doctor.”[[10]](#footnote-11)

Sometimes a person is wise and yet the guide is unwise, and so the person’s wisdom suffers loss due to the guide. In this case, it would have been better to pursue the sacrament of confession with the priest rather than to follow the unwise guide. The guide is important if one could be found, if not, then the sacrament of confession is sufficient. The Holy Bible also says, “*Two are better than one… And a threefold cord is not quickly broken*,”[[11]](#footnote-12) those surrounding a person could provide consultation. If you take lessons from the experiences of others, you add ages to your own life. The age of the one who does not ask the elders concerning their experiences and trials remains simply the chronological age, perhaps 25 years or so, but when you take experiences from a spiritual guide who is 60 years old, then the 60 years are added to your 25, resulting in 85.

Also, a person who benefits from previous mistakes gains wisdom, therefore St. Agathon would always say: “I do not allow my conscience to accuse me over the same thing twice.”[[12]](#footnote-13) If he did something and his conscience bothered him, he would not repeat it. This way, he increased in wisdom daily through his own experiences.

Among the items within the church that reveal the voice of our Lord is for a person not to be moved according to personal will, but try to hear our Lord’s voice amid the congregation. Take for example the dispute regarding circumcision. When this occurred the apostles convened a council in Jerusalem. In concluding the letter they wrote, “*For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us*.”[[13]](#footnote-14) Who could be wiser than the apostolic fathers, and yet, there was an issue that called for them to congregate: “*God stands in the congregation of the mighty; He judges among the gods*.”[[14]](#footnote-15) Sometimes, when you need to hear our Lord’s voice, try to hear it through the people around you. If our Lord’s voice is clear there is no need to waste time trying to hear it through people, but, if His voice is unclear, what would prevent hearing His voice through the congregation?

I will give you an example: at times, I am presented with pastoral issues in my bishopric during the Priests’ meeting. If the issue is clear, I make a decision; if I have several choices, I ask their opinion. I ask them, “I have three solutions to this problem, but I cannot decide which solution to choose. Which do you think? Who agrees to the first solution? [Perhaps two or three agree.] Who agrees to the second solution? [Perhaps five or six agree.] Who agrees to the third solution? [Perhaps about twenty agree.]” From there I begin taking indicators as to which decision is best suited. I was unable to decide since I was puzzled.

Although, supposedly, priests take their guidance from me, there is nothing to prevent me from listening to our Lord’s voice through them. This is the idea of church counciliarity (the church assembly or unison). Church counciliarity means that I believe that the Holy Spirit could speak through the assembly, as for example in the Ecumenical Councils. We could learn to hear our Lord’s voice in the assembly, therefore in church we often pray: “Remember, O Lord, our assemblies, bless them.”[[15]](#footnote-16) This is one of the meanings included in this prayer: “When we assemble, You lead our assembly and guide us with Your voice, so that this assembly brings us to a positive result that is beneficial to the church and to our souls.”

So, among the very important ingredients that help a person gain wisdom is benefiting from your own experiences and from the experiences of others. I want to focus on, and emphasize, benefiting from your own experiences. If a person does not benefit from personal experiences, then a whole lifetime could be spent without gaining any type of wisdom.

**Double-Minded Man:**

Why does St. James say, “*A double-minded man, [is] unstable in all his ways*,”[[16]](#footnote-17) although St. Paul said, “*We are perplexed, but not in despair*.”[[17]](#footnote-18) The double-minded man St. James is referring to is a person whose heart is divided between loving God and loving the world; not every person who has two opinions is a bad person. He clarified this by saying, “*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God*.”[[18]](#footnote-19) This is pointing to a confused person who needs our Lord’s guidance. St. James comes back to say, “*A double-minded man, [is] unstable in all his ways… For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord*.”[[19]](#footnote-20) Here, double-minded refers to two purposes, not two opinions from which to choose. Double-minded is a love for the world and a love for God, and this is why he will not receive anything from God. God puzzles over this person; He wants to guide him, but his heart deviates from Him. Each time He comes to lead him to what is right, He finds that he flees and does not want help. He is partial to his heart’s desire and personal inclinations. This is the double-minded man: split internally between loving God and loving the world. As for a person who has two opinions on an issue and needs our Lord’s guidance as to the right opinion, this is not wrong in and of itself, but rather this is very normal.

Let us provide the complete meaning: if God guides a person and reveals what is right, but the person changes his mind, this is a double-minded man unstable in all his ways. This one asks guidance from our Lord, Who reveals it either through signs, a clear voice, or by other means, until that person is relieved to have heard our Lord’s voice through the assembly, guidance, prayer, etc., and decides to carry out the decision. But then he meets another person who questions his decision and confuses him, such that he returns to indecision. In this case, the Lord’s response would be “Why should I offer you guidance? Every time I guide you, you change your mind. Why should I guide you?” “*Let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord*.” This is a second meaning for a double-minded man; this differs from the one whose heart is torn between God and the world. This person changes his mind after our Lord has guided him.

**Clinging to Him:**

For this reason, our fathers the saints advised that if you are perplexed over an issue pray thrice: three liturgies, three days, three Horologion (Agpeya) prayers. If there is absolutely no time, then pray the Lord’s Prayer three times. The important thing is to pray three equal times and the decision to which you feel internal peace and complete comfort after the third time is our Lord’s voice. No matter what do not change it, because once you hear our Lord’s voice the devil will come to interfere with the signal; as long as you have taken the answer, cling onto it.

*Glory be to God forever. Amen.*

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1. (The New King James Version 1982), Phil 1:9-10. All Biblical References are from the New King James Version (NKJV), unless otherwise stated. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Ecc 3:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. 1 Sam 2:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. 1 Sam 3:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. 1 Sam 4:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Deut 32: 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Heb 13: 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Unknown Elder (Bishop Mettaous 2005), 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Heb 13: 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. John Climacus (Payne 1982), 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Ecc 4: 9, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Saint Agathon. Cf. (Ward 1984), 20 {2}. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Acts 15:28. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Ps 82:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. (H and H 2007), 79. This is taken from the Five Short Litanies of the Offering of Incense. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Jam 1:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. 2 Cor 4:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Jam 1:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Jam 1:8, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)