What Is Discernment?

Guest: Hannah Anderson
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Bob: As parents, we often spend a lot of time telling our kids what to stay away from. Hannah Anderson says we should be spending, at least, as much time pointing our kids in the direction of things worth pursuing.

Hannah: If I try to establish categories of wrong without my children understanding, “This is what goodness looks like,” I’m not going to equip them beyond that specific issue. What I want my children to be able to do is understand what “the good life” looks like as God ordained it to flourish. When that’s the standard, they’ll know the counterfeit.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Tuesday, February 4th. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I’m Bob Lepine. You can find us online at FamilyLifeToday.com. Do your kids know what is good, what is pure, what is right, what is noble? Do they know how to think on those things? We’re going to hear more about that today from Hannah Anderson. Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. It occurs to me that we’re having a discussion this week on the subject of discernment, and we kind of dove into it without defining what it means to be discerning. We kind of talked around it, but not a hard definition. Maybe, we can get our guest to help us with that. Hannah Anderson is joining us again on FamilyLife Today. Welcome back.

Hannah: Great to be here.

Bob: Hannah is an author; she is a speaker; a blogger. In fact, she blogs at SometimesALight.com. We’ve got a link to that on our website at FamilyLifeToday.com, and she—you do a podcast; what’s the podcast called?

Hannah: I do; Persuasion.

Bob: Yes; weekly?

Hannah: We’ve moved to series.

Bob: It’s periodically.
Hannah: Periodic.

Bob: It’s as Hannah has time to do it. [Laughter]

Hannah: That is absolutely correct.

Dave: She’s a mom; she’s got kids.

Bob: That’s right.

Ann: She’s got three kids.

Bob: She’s a wife and a mom—got plenty going on. She’s written a book on the subject of discernment, which is called All That’s Good, which is what we’re talking about this week.

Do you have a working definition of what discernment is?

Hannah: I do: “Discernment is knowing the difference between good and evil so that you can choose the good.”

I think the difference, there, is a lot of us will understand discernment as knowing the difference between what’s bad and good. We may reach that level of awareness, where we’ve moved passed a purely negative disposition, where we’re just trying to point out what’s bad. We’ve grown in our awareness that we’re trying to sort through good and evil; but it’s that second half of action moving toward goodness that, I think, for me, was key to making discernment something that went beyond just thinking about things.

Bob: We were talking about this earlier. Dave was talking about the importance of love being integrated in with our discernment.

Dave: That wasn’t my idea, by the way. [Laughter] That came from God; yes.

Bob: Philippians, Chapter 1, talks about that.

I’ve heard people who think of discernment as primarily a critical skill—it’s where you point out what’s wrong with everybody else. When you say, “You’re not being very charitable,” “You’re not being very loving,” they will say: “This is the most loving thing I can do. If I point out what’s wrong, I’m being loving, so I’m speaking the truth in love.” Is pointing out error the same as being loving?

Hannah: You know, I love how Jesus handles this. People will very quickly jump to Christ’s words about “Judge not lest you be judged”; but there is this statement of judge—righteous judgment. What we are to do, as we’re discerning and we’re evaluating, is to judge the way God would judge; or as Philippians 2 puts it: “We are to
have the mind of Christ.” This is what Philippians 2 says—is that the way we move through the world would be humble as Christ is humble, but we would also think as He thinks about a situation.

When we are called upon to call out something as not good, the goal is not that alone. The goal is always for healing and reconciliation. If your discernment stops with, “I’m calling you out, and I’m doing that out of love,”—no, that’s not discernment; because you may have done the first thing, which is to separate good and evil; but you have not have done the second step, which is to pursue good and to pursue the wholeness and the well-being of the person with whom you are engaging.

**Bob:** I’ve quoted this before, but it’s because it’s one of those verses I have to keep coming back to. It’s the instruction that Paul gives to Timothy in 2 Timothy, where he says, “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome.” I think just that verse alone—make that your posted tweet on Twitter: “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to all, patiently enduring evil in hopes that you might lead some to repentance.”

That’s what’s missing in this whole conversation about right and wrong and good and evil—is this idea that we can hold to truth and still be patient, and still be kind, and still not be quarrelsome.

**Hannah:** Absolutely. I think, perhaps, we have a somewhat emaciated view of truth if we think about it as just getting the question right on the test; right? If we think about truth as “Did I get the answers right?” we don’t understand the *purpose* of truth.

What’s fascinating about Paul calling us to whatever is true—that’s the first in the list in Philippians 4:8,9—is that truth establishes a common point, where we all can live in unity; because calling people to truth is, not just calling them to agree with your opinion; it’s calling them to a reality that is bigger than any of us.

What truth does—especially an emphasis on objective truth, not subjective truth found in our own opinions or our own emotions, but objective truth outside of us, where we come together around shared fact and shared reality—it actually unites us. I think all of us living in this very fragmented age want that; we want the unity that we feel we’ve lost. We want to be able to know that we share certain basic values and realities in common. I don’t think, though, that we would think truth would be the way to get that.

**Dave:** I’m in a relationship—with people in my church, or a couple of my best friends, or you can apply it your spouse and your marriage—and I need to speak the truth in love: Ephesians 4:15. I’m in a relationship—I love my spouse; I love my best friend—but there is a truth—I should say that I need to hear, but I don’t want to hear it; I want them to hear it—so I have some discernment. Walk us through: “How do I do this well, in love, in a way that brings unity and not division?”
Hannah: Well, for me personally, the first thing I have to do is make sure that I am humbled before the Lord before I approach anyone else. Practically speaking, what that means is coming with an attitude that recognizes the limits of my knowledge. Having a humble attitude before the Lord means saying: “You, Lord, know everything. I feel like I might have insight on this particular question. I feel like You’ve revealed something that I may need to speak the truth about”; but I’m moving into that with the awareness that I could absolutely be wrong. If you don’t start with that, you should not start at all.

Dave: Yes.

Hannah: Once you’ve kind of established that—and you’ve prayed and you feel that, “Yes: the Spirit is leading you to continue to approach this conversation,”—one way, with my husband, that we try—[Laughter]—we try on our good days; you know?—is to approach it this way: “Honey, I don’t know if I’m understanding this correctly; but I feel like this is happening...”; rather than coming to him and saying: “You’re doing this—

Bob: Right.

Hannah: —“and you need to stop,” and “This is where you’re wrong...”

Bob: There are some folks, who hear us talking about humility in relation to truth, and they will go: “Well, humility puts truth out of reach. If you’re so humble as to say, ‘Well, I could be wrong,’ and you’re saying that about everything; then you can never know truth.”

Hannah: And that’s a really legitimate kind of pushback, and it’s a legitimate question; because we do have this approach to truth that says, “It’s so subjective that we can’t establish any sense of shared objective truth.”

When I say, “We approach truth with humility,” we’re talking about the individualist tendency that, “I know truth,” which ironically is a subjective—

Bob: —conclusion.

Hannah: —conclusion.

Bob: Yes.

Hannah: It is.

Bob: Right.

Hannah: It absolutely is. So when I approach truth, what I am looking for—and the way the Scripture presents this question—is I perceive something to be true. I do doubt my own perception to a degree; but I come to the Scripture; I come to other believers in the
body of Christ, who either confirm or to correct. That’s the difference between saying, “I'm humble in my handling of the truth.” We're not saying there isn’t truth; but that I, myself, alone cannot establish reality.

**Bob:** When you say, “Go to the church,” it’s your local congregation first; but it’s the church universal. It’s the church from 20 centuries of church. It’s inviting in the wisdom of all of God’s people throughout time so that we learn what truth is by seeing what those who have gone before us learned and understood; and then humbling ourselves and recognizing, just because we think this is right in 21st century America, doesn’t mean it’s a universal truth. The broader church, on all continents through all time, can help inform and help us understand what truth is so that we can focus on what is really true, not just what's culturally true in our moment. That’s so good.

**Ann:** Fascinating. Let’s go to what is honorable.

**Hannah:** I think one of the things that we struggle with in the digital age is knowing who to give honor to and what not to give honor to. There are some things that we know by their goodness—they reflect the character of God, and they should be lifted up and celebrated.

What happens in the digital age is that celebrity becomes something of an end of itself. You become famous, not because you’ve done anything or there’s any inherent goodness in the work that you are doing, but because you have three million followers. We live in an age where celebrity for the sake of celebrity is what gets honor.

When we’re online, particularly, and we’re trying to decide, “Is this a person or a voice that should be honored and elevated?” I’m seeking honor: “Well, what are things worth honoring?” “Well, they are the things that God honors. Things that I should honor are the things that God honors. Are those things present in this voice or in this ministry? If they are not, I don’t care how many million followers you have. I should not honor and raise that up as something worth honoring.”

What’s fascinating about what God honors—the Scripture tells us that it is often counter to what we would honor. We honor wealth; we honor power; we honor privilege. The Scripture tells us that God has taken the low and the weak things of the world so that He might be honored.

**Ann:** And that’s hard, especially with kids growing up, because, culturally speaking, they are worshipping athletes, and actresses, and actors. They are all a different array of things that we honor and our kids and culture honor. How did you do that with your kids?—to get them to be discerning and honoring to what God elevates.

**Hannah:** Well, very practically, I think for us, it became explaining them to why we place our time and our money in different spaces; because, really, what you give your money to/what you give your attention to is what you are honoring. Our kids would grow up,
recognizing that our family was spending Sunday at church when their friends were, maybe, doing something else. We would have to say, “We are choosing to honor/we are choosing to give attention and glory to the things that God gives attention, and honor, and glory to.”

Dave: I’d love to have you talk to my congregation right now. I’m thinking—and I’m being facetious a little bit—but it’s like, “Okay; so what I honor”—and you use the example of Sunday morning. So many families today—and it’s always been true, but it’s really now—they are honoring Sunday morning on a soccer field or a ball diamond. Again, we were a sports family; so I understand that world.

What would you say to them?—because they are like: “No, no; this is really important. It’s not as important as God and church, but soccer is on Sunday; so we’re going to be there during this season,” and “We’ll get to church when we can.” What would you say? Speak for me on my behalf.

Bob: A pastor’s wife—[Laughter]—a pastor’s wife is going to speak to this.

Hannah: I completely understand the tension. I’ve got kids, who are in sports; I understand the pull. I’m going to come at this a way that I don’t think we normally think about this. We think about it as dueling sport against God/sport against church. To me, what we’re really dueling with is rest versus continued work. God honors the Sabbath Day as a day of resting from our labors. If your kids are not resting from their labors, they are not honoring what God is honoring.

If I were sitting down with a family and talking through this issue with them, trying to give perspective and advice, I would say: “Talk to me about your schedule. Talk to me about your family life. Where is your family resting? Where is your family resting with God’s people?” I think, sometimes, we have this very legalistic approach of: “Well, you need to be at church on Sunday.”

Ann: —so we guilt them into it.

Hannah: —so we guilt, because it’s that negative disposition: “This is wrong—not to be in church.”

I want to say: “What’s good? What is goodness for your family is that you would not pack out your children’s schedule so that they don’t even have one day, where they are resting from their labor. For us, Sunday is that day where we rest from our labor; and we rest in the family of God.”

Dave: Very good.
Bob: That is good. I’m thinking, as I listen to the conversation, what is honorable simply comes back to: “What would Jesus/what would God say?—‘This—I delight in this,’ ‘I find this commendable,’ ‘This is something I would affirm.’”

If you’re stopping to go: “Do I think this is honorable?”—“I’m going to go to this concert,” or “I’m going to watch this movie,” or “I’m going to participate in this activity,”—just to ask: “Do we think—based on what we read in the Bible/based on what we know about the character and nature of God/of Jesus—do we think He would go: ‘I find that to be a commendable thing you’re going to do. That is something I would delight in, Myself, as God. I’d go to that concert, and I would love that concert; because I would love to hear that violin player using their gifts and abilities and that creative expression. I would be delighted at seeing that creativity pour out of that person. That would be an honorable thing?’”—versus that person is going to use their gifting in a dishonoring or a dishonorable way.

I think the point here is—when we think about those things that are honorable, it’s by whose criteria are we basing honor?

Dave: How about this one?—because I was thinking about that example, Bob, and the concert. I’ll switch it to a bar. I coached high school football for 15 years with a bunch of guys, that don’t go to church, at a public high school; my sons went to that high school. One of the things they would do after our games—kids go home; coaches would all go to this—it’s not really a bar; it’s just sort of—but it’s—they’d go get a keg of beer. They’d talk and have a—I’d hear about it on Monday: “Hey, you know, we went to RJ’s and—blah, blah.” I never went. I’m the pastor; Christian coach there. I had a buddy with me from my church. He was the special teams coach, so we held each other accountable.

One day, Ann’s dad was there, and he—after the game—we were undefeated that season. He was like, “Don’t you do anything with the coaches afterwards?” I said, “Ah, they all sort of go and hang out at this place. I don’t think it’s appropriate for me to go.” He goes, “Aren’t you trying to reach them for Jesus?” This is my non-churched, non-Christian father-in-law saying, “Don’t you think it would be better to hang out with those guys and be there with them?”

Ann: And my dad’s a coach too.

Dave: Yes. I called up Rob, my buddy; and I said, “Let’s go to RJ’s tonight.” He goes: “What?! We’re going to RJ’s?” “Yes; let’s go.” We walk in there; and when we—and this is very interesting. We walk in this pub, and all the coaches—probably 12 coaches—stand up and give us a standing ovation.

The whole place is like, “Who are these guys?!”; right? We sit down, and they’ve got their beer; and they are doing their thing. I get a Diet Coke® and just start hanging out with them; and started doing that after every game and led Jack to Christ in that bar.
Now, you could look at it and say, “That’s not honorable to go to that place”; but my vision was bigger. I’m not going there—I’m not going to drink. I’m going to be very pure in what I do and how I talk. One of the first conversations Jack had with me, at that bar, was: “Why don’t you ever cuss?” He said, “I’ve never heard you ever one time curse.” I told him why. That led to a conversation; and he’s now just an amazing guy, trying to raise his family.

Talk about that—that was, in a sense, could be not honorable; but there was something bigger than that that made it honorable. Am I right?

**Hannah:** I think what you described really helps us recognize how Christians could come to this same situation and discern their actions differently—

**Dave:** Yes.

**Hannah:** —which brings up this essential question of: “When you’re seeking goodness, and you have been persuaded by the Holy Spirit that goodness would mean going to be with your coaches, maintaining your testimony—but going to be with them in a place that someone else would say: ‘I can’t do that;’—

**Dave:** Right.

**Hannah:** —‘I can’t go there,’—what we have now is: ‘Well, what is goodness?’”—right? So often, we would just throw our hands up and be like, “Well, I guess you can’t know what’s right to do; so there isn’t a right”; right? That’s one answer people would give. The other one would be to fight over that—

**Ann:** Yes.

**Hannah:** —and to say, “My way is right”; or someone else would say, “No; my way is right.”

It’s fascinating; that is exactly what Paul presents in Romans 14—

**Dave:** Right.

**Bob:** Yes.

**Hannah:** —where the church was seeking goodness. They were seeking what they believed was true, and honorable, and just, and pure, and lovely; and they were coming to radically different conclusions based on their background, based on different pressure points, based on the fact that some of them had been raised in idol worship. So, now, they say: “I’m not going to have anything to do with meat offered to idols. I will not eat that.” Others were saying: “Actually, an idol isn’t anything; it’s not the true God, so we can engage in this practice.”
What’s fascinating is that Paul doesn’t come along and tell them what the “right” thing to do was. He doesn’t say, “Well, actually, this is what you should do in this situation...” Instead, he comes to them and he calls them back to submission to God first and love for each other.

**Bob:** Yes.

**Hannah:** It is that sense of pursuing goodness as God leads us to pursue it in our lives—making choices for our families, making choices for our relationships, and recognizing that ultimately what we are discerning is before the Lord and out of love for our brothers. I think, once that positive trajectory of moving toward the goodness of the Lord and moving toward the care of our brothers is in place, we have a great deal of freedom.

**Dave:** Yes; at the same time, there is discernment I had to be using. There are other places I would never go with those guys.

**Bob:** Yes.

**Dave:** But that was a safe place to say, “I can honor God here, and there is a bigger purpose.”

**Bob:** And to ask the question: “Is this honorable?”

**Hannah:** Right.

**Dave:** Right.

**Bob:** “Is this true?” and “Is this pure?”—and all of the questions there—and seek wisdom from others, with humility, saying, “Coach me on this.” You got wisdom from your father-in-law on this issue.

To meditate on this/to think deeply about this—this is where your book, Hannah, is so helpful. I hope our listeners will go online and get a copy of the book, *All That’s Good*, so that we can be changing how we exercise discernment as moms and dads and then helping coach our kids in this area as well by focusing on what is good, and pure, and right, and true, and noble, and all of the things that are talked about in Philippians, Chapter 4, verse 8.

Go to FamilyLifeToday.com to find out more about Hannah’s book, *All That’s Good*. You can order it from us online, or you can call to order: 1-800-FL-TODAY is our number. Again, our website is FamilyLifeToday.com; or call 1-800-358-6329—that’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY,” to order a copy of Hannah Anderson’s book, *All That’s Good*. 
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We hope you'll join us again tomorrow as we continue to meditate on all that is good. Hannah Anderson will be our guest, again, tomorrow as we talk about discernment. We hope you can be here as well.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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