1. Testing the things which differ.

Some translations use the phrase, "testing the things which differ". Others have, "approve the things which are excellent".

The Greek word for "sort out" is δοκιμαζω dokimazo 1381. This means testing for approval, or examining things as to which are better than others.

The Greek word for "differ" is διαφερω diaphero 1308. It means differ in the sense that one thing is better or more important than another.

The skill Paul prays for is the ability to think about things and test them in such a way that we can discover how they differ, and which is better or worse. We can then decide which should have priority or be chosen, and which should be rejected as undesirable or unimportant.

If you were buying a pearl necklace, you'd like to think that whoever selected the pearls could tell a bad pearl from a good one, and knew which pearls were natural, cultured, or fake. A person who could not "sort out how things differ" in looking at pearls, could not be trusted to make a good pearl necklace.

Just think what the lack of this skill would mean to someone looking for a marriage partner, or a career, or a church to belong to, or a new home to buy, or some food to eat? Such a person could make serious mistakes and end up divorced, unemployed, deceived by a false prophet, homeless, or obese!

I even need this skill as a minister of the gospel tonight. Otherwise, instead of teaching you about one of life's most important skills, I might have come to teach you about who the "chosen lady" is to whom John wrote (2Jn 1:1). Both are Bible subjects, but they differ in that one is a more worthwhile subject than the other.

Just as "star differs from star in glory" (1Co 15:41) so in all our lives and pursuits one thing differs from another in value, and this we need to discern day by day.

2. Bible examples of "testing the things which differ".

We have several examples in the Bible of people with or without this skill. For instance...

Mary had this skill, whilst Martha lacked it (Lke 10:38-42)

Simon the Sorcerer was able to see the difference between his magic and Philip's miracles, but he couldn't tell the difference between a priceless gift from God and an item that can be bought with money (Acts 8:9-13, 18-20).

Moses had this skill, and saw that suffering with God's people was better for him than luxury with the sinful in Pharaoh's palace (Heb 11:24-26).

You may think of many other examples.

3. Understanding the Bible by "testing the things which differ".

Now let us turn to one special application of the skill of "sorting out things which differ". Let's apply this skill to interpreting the scriptures.

Why do you think people differ so much about what the scriptures teach? It's not because the Bible fails to communicate properly. It's mainly because people treat as equal those things which in the Bible actually differ.

It can also be the other way round. People treat as different those things in the Bible which are actually the same.

For example, in the Bible, death is a thing which differs. You may some day be "dead and buried" (Acts 2:29). You may be in danger of "the second death, the lake of fire" (Rev 20:14-15). You may be "dead in your trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1). You may be "dead to sin but alive to God" (Rom 6:11). Here are four different deaths.

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