



St. Ignatius' Seven Attitudes or Qualities for an "Authentic" Discernment Process

In his writing on the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius spells out **seven basic attitudes** or characteristics a person needs as conditions to authentically seeking God's will in his or her life.

1. Openness: We approach decisions with an open mind and heart, expecting to find God's will for us to enter the decision-making process without a pre-conceived outcome from our self-will, biases, and what Ignatius calls "attachments." These are areas in our lives where we limit our freedom with "conditions" on our decision making. An example of such a condition is: "I'll go to college anywhere as long as it's within a day's drive of my parents' home."

2. Generosity: To freely enter a decision-making process requires a generous spirit in which we put **no conditions** on what God might call us to. It is like writing a signed "blank check" in which God fills in the amount and content of the check.

3. Courage: Such openness and generosity require courage. In this process God might ask something difficult, challenging, and "risky" of us. It takes courage to give up control and to entrust the decision to God while honestly seeking God's will over our own. There's no telling how God might call us – to a formal vocation (as a professed person or to ordination or a formal professed or lay ministry for the Church), or as a married or single believer with family or other responsibilities. To be open and generous to God's call requires courage.

4. Interior freedom: To make a prayerful, generous, courageous decision requires **personal interior freedom**. Ignatius describes three characteristics of such decision making. (Cf. the Spiritual Exercises, [149-155]): 4a. The "**all talk and no action**" response. This one is full of good intentions but is so distracted by "busyness" with so many things they never get around to the "one thing necessary," namely, discerning God's will. The ultimate decision here is "not to decide!" For example, "discerning" a possible religious vocation takes "so long" there are few options or time for any formal preparation.

4-b. The second type, a **person who does everything but the one thing necessary**. These folk do all kinds of good things without facing the central issue of what God is calling them to. They put conditions on what God can call them to. They'll do good things if that doesn't ask too much of them – e.g., such a commitment calls them to adjust the priorities that God is asking of them in their lives. An example: "I'll enter into any career as long as it will support me in an upper middle-class lifestyle." It precludes options that are truly from God!

4-c. The third type of person is the **one who is truly free**. This person's whole and deepest desire is to do God's will with no conditions attached. This is the attitude necessary to find and follow God's will.

5. A habit of prayerful reflection on one's experience: How do we hear God's call if we are not listening? How can we listen if we are not praying? To make a prayerful decision, we must pray, having enough time (twenty minutes or more) daily to quiet ourselves, be in God's presence, and listen to God speak to us in our hearts. Ignatius suggests using the "Examen" as a key method of prayer to help us here.

We begin the Examen aware of God's presence with us, asking for guidance by the Holy Spirit to prayerfully reflect on our day. In this reflection we ask how God has been present in the events and encounters of our day and how the

feelings we experience can help us better know how Christ has called us through these experiences and how we have or have not responded.

Another helpful *Examen* method is observing what are we most grateful for and what has given us “life” this day. Then, on the other hand, for what we are not so grateful and what has *drained life* from us. Reflecting on these patterns over time will help point us toward what God is using to “awaken” us spiritually. In this more simplified form of the Examen I often simply ask what I have experienced from God during this past day (what were the key “God-moments”) and how did I best respond? Then to note the blessings of the day and to ask God’s forgiveness for any failures to respond well to Christ’s calls that day. I end by begging God’s help to respond generously to Christ’s calls to us in the coming (next) day.

6. Keep one’s priorities straight: There is a logic to Ignatius’s spirituality. If my ultimate life goal is to serve God, my Creator and Lord, then everything else in life must be kept in a subservient position to that end. This means that things such as opportunities, experiences, and relationships are valued and chosen only as they contribute to that goal and are rejected insofar as they deter us from that goal. “What we want above all is the ability to respond freely to God. All other loves for people, places, and things are held in proper perspective by the light and strength of God’s grace. ...In coming to a decision, only one thing is important – to seek and to find how God is calling me at this time of my life. All my choices, then, must be consistent with this given direction in my life.” (Spiritual Exercises, [16, 169, 23]). So, we put serving God first, and then choose whichever state of life is the best way to fully serve God.

7. Not confusing ends with means: Ignatius comments: “It becomes obvious how easy it is to forget a simple truth as the end and goal of my existence when I consider the way I make choices. For example, people choose marriage, which is a *means*. They then secondarily consider the service and praise of God in marriage, even though to follow God’s lead in my life is always my primary human project. Many people first choose to make a lot of money - to be successful, and only afterwards to serve God by it. And so, in striving for power, popularity, and so on, people exhibit an attitude which puts God in second place, for they want God to come into their lives only after accommodating their own self-centered attachments. In other words, they mix up the order of an end and a means to that end. What they ought to seek first and above all else, is often put last.” (Spiritual Exercises., [169])

One of the examples of confusing ends with means is a person who makes a lot of money and only afterwards looks at how s/he might serve God with this outcome (e.g., by making charitable donations or volunteering). This person, in effect, puts God second, only wanting God to come into their life after first choosing what they seek or want. They mix up the order of an “end” and a “means to the end,” and thus fail to put *first things first*.

Having these essential attitudes of openness, generosity, interior freedom, prayerful reflection on experience, keeping one’s priorities straight, and not confusing ends with means, the discernor is pointed in the right direction. Possessing these qualities is the looming precondition for hearing God’s call in an authentic discernment process which guides one’s spiritual growth in the company of God.

If you wish to learn more of the Ignatian prioritizing / discernment process, please contact Dr. Little at thomas.little@archbalt.org