

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit - 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

Discerning of Spirits

The first gift we will look at tonight is that of the discerning of spirits. The word 'discerning' in the Greek is 'diakrisis' which means 'to distinguish between'. The gift of discernment is the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to clearly distinguish spirits. We must remember that the devil is a deceiver. He will try and infiltrate the church in order to deceive believers and thwart God's plans for it.

2 Corinthians 11:14,15

¹⁴....Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. ¹⁵It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness.

Matthew 24:24

²⁴...false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.

1 John 4:1

¹Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

As Christians we are to be on our guard against false doctrine. Sometimes as Christians we may believe or say something that isn't scriptural. This isn't to say that we are under the influence of a deceiving spirit. The Bible says we prophecy in part - therefore at times we will naturally get things a little askew and as long as we are open to Biblical correction there is no problem. Sometimes enthusiasm or ambition can get the better of a person and rather than being led by the Spirit of God or for that matter the devil, things become driven by a human spirit. This isn't good either. Discernment is not just about God and the enemy. We also need to discern at times between something having its origins in the Spirit of God and something coming from our own spirit. Sometimes we can give the enemy too much credit. This being said, the devil will make deliberate attempts to pervert the theology of the church and we must be on our guard against this in order to protect the flock and the integrity of the gospel.

The gift of spiritual discernment is sometimes necessary to know what spirit is influencing or controlling an individual or situation. On occasions God will have us look beyond the surface of things and see what is behind it. Not all things that appear spiritual are godly.

One example in scripture concerns mediums. Many people in the world today see it as harmless to consult a medium or spiritualist (spiritist). Their desire to contact those who have died may seem a harmless one to

many but God clearly forbids the practice because He knows the spirit that is operating behind it.

Leviticus 19:31 [NIV]

“Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19:31 [NKJV]

‘Give no regard to mediums and familiar spirits; do not seek after them, to be defiled by them: I *am* the Lord your God.

The reason that God forbids the practice of consulting mediums is that the spirit behind it is a deceptive one and therefore an evil one. It is not with deceased friends and relatives that they are connecting but with what the Bible refers to as familiar spirits – spirits which know the details of that person’s life and are able to pretend to be them after they have died.

When people are alive, whether Christians or not, the details of their lives are available to be known by evil spirits as much as they are to those people living around them. The devil knew the details of Jesus’ life. In fact, evil spirits will know more about that person than we may do because they also see what they are like behind closed doors. When people die, these evil spirits can then bring accurate details forward about that person’s life, pretending to be the spirit of the dead person in order to deceive vulnerable people. This draws people into spiritualism and away from the things of God. It also brings them into close quarters with the demonic realm and the occult. Clearly God doesn’t want this and so He gives us instructions in the Word to avoid such practices.

Evil spirits seek anonymity to work evil without hindrance. They are like cockroaches that always seek to hide in the dark. When shown in the light they will flee away into darkness. The gift of discerning of spirits is given so that we will know what is happening in the unseen spirit realm, bringing it to light. The gift can open our eyes not only to the forces of evil at work in the world around us, but also to the forces of good.

2 Kings 6:17

¹⁵When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. ‘Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?’ the servant asked. ¹⁶‘Don’t be afraid,’ the prophet answered. ‘Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’ ¹⁷‘And Elisha prayed, and said, LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.’

The servant was given the ability to discern the angelic beings that God

had posted around the Syrian army. His eyes were opened so that he saw the spirit realm. When his servant's eyes were opened to the spirit realm he could see that one with God was truly a majority!

Let's look at another example of the gift being used this time in the New Testament. The apostle Paul has arrived in the island of Cyprus during his first missionary tour:

Acts 13:6-12

⁶There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, ⁷who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. ⁸But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. ⁹Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, ¹⁰'You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? ¹¹Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun.'

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. ¹²When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

The gift revealed God's power and His truth and enabled people like the proconsul to believe the Gospel.

In Luke 13 we read of another example, this time when Jesus' eyes are opened to an evil spirit causing an infirmity.

Luke 13:10-13

¹⁰On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, ¹¹and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, 'Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.' ¹³Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

Jesus had discerned that this woman's infirmity was the result of an evil spirit. Jesus loosed the woman from the spirit of infirmity and immediately she could straighten her back. This was deliverance and the effect was immediate.

Whenever God uses this gift in our lives we must act sensitively and with caution. Unless we have experience in this area it is best to check out

what we have experienced with our pastor or another church leader first. God is in control. We never need to act rashly.

Word of Wisdom

I don't think that it's any coincidence that the list of the gifts of the Spirit begins with the word of wisdom. Wisdom is such a powerful thing and God wants us to have it in abundance in our lives.

James 1:5

¹If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

The gift of the word of wisdom is not natural wisdom that can be derived from knowledge and experience. A word of wisdom is supernaturally imparted wisdom from the Spirit of God that can only be known through the omniscience of God. Whenever we find ourselves in a situation when we are unsure of what to do, we should seek God. He has promised to give us wisdom when we need it. Because the gift operates as the Spirit wills, we can often find ourselves receiving His wisdom even when we haven't been actively seeking it.

It's exciting when God gives us wisdom, because we know it's going to be mightily effective!

God can give us wisdom regarding any area of our lives:

- Where to make an investment
- Who to go into business with
- Which house to buy
- Who to promote
- How to broach a sensitive issue
- Who to share the gospel with
- What job to apply for
- Which partner to choose
- How to tackle a perplexing problem
- How to resolve a dilemma

We can see the fruits of the gift of wisdom apparent in many parts of the scriptures. In the Book of Acts we read about Paul during his second missionary tour. The main purpose of this tour was to strengthen the churches already established on the first tour as well as to take the decision of the Council of Jerusalem to those believers. This council had declared that new believers did not have to come under the ritualistic practices of the Old Testament law, for example circumcision.

Acts 16:1-5

¹Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a

Greek. ²The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. ³Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴As they travelled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. ⁵So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Paul was in full agreement with the council's decision and yet he had Timothy circumcised. Why? Wisdom led him to act in a way that would remove Jewish opposition to the gospel he was delivering. This allowed his work to be effective and the church grew in number as a result.

Jacob's son, Joseph, received wisdom from God in order to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. On the basis of that interpretation Pharaoh appointed him second in command. Egypt stored up grain as Joseph directed them to do during the seven years of plenty. Just as Joseph had predicted, seven years of terrible famine followed and as a result of Joseph's directions, many lives were saved, including those of the nation of Israel.

We must be careful not to mistake an emotional response to a particular situation or problem as a word of wisdom. It is therefore sensible to seek the good counsel of mature believers when making important decisions even when we feel we have heard from God. Often God will confirm the wisdom He gives us with a word of scripture. God's guidance will never contradict His Word.

Word of Knowledge

When it comes to the gift of wisdom and the gift of knowledge, it can be difficult to distinguish between them. Both gifts can help to untangle a tricky problem or difficulty. The real distinction between them is that where the gift of wisdom deals with the 'how' side of things the gift of knowledge deals with the 'what'. By way of illustration I will try to make this a little clearer.

Imagine that you are counselling a Christian who has a marital problem. As you are listening God tells you that this person has committed adultery. This information relates to the 'what' side of things and the gift of knowledge is operating. On the other hand, suppose that instead God tells you that the two people should start to date again, maybe a couple of times a week, and that this will bring them together again. This is the 'how' side of things and the gift of wisdom is operating.

In a sense, wisdom looks ahead (start to date again) where knowledge looks backward (I believe that you have been unfaithful). Both however help the believer to move forward more successfully - i.e. in this situation, for the marriage to be repaired.

When my son, Matthew, was three years old, he swallowed a drawing pin. It ended up stuck fast somewhere down in his esophagus. He was taken to Redditch Hospital where they made the decision that he needed to go to the Children's Hospital in Birmingham. Sandra went with him in the ambulance, blue lights flashing all the way. They were very concerned that the pin could either cause a choking hazard or that it would end up in his lungs. Having x-rayed him in Redditch, they decided that they had to operate to remove the pin that they decided was stuck fast. Sandra asked Matthew whether he wanted to trust Jesus or have the operation. Matthew said that he wanted to trust Jesus - who wouldn't, when it comes to a choice between a prayer and a scalpel? It was at this point that God told Sandra that the pin had moved into a safe position where it would continue safely through his digestive system. She had received a word of knowledge. She told the medical staff at the Birmingham Hospital that she wanted another x-ray. They refused seeing it as entirely unnecessary. However, the word of knowledge made her stick to her guns and against their better judgment, they took another x-ray only to have the word that Sandra had received, confirmed. A few days later (and with the help of a sieve that we never used again for spaghetti!) we managed to retrieve the said drawing pin.

Now this is how closely related words of knowledge and words of wisdom can be. If God had told Sandra to get Matthew x-rayed again, then that would have been a word of wisdom - 'how' to proceed. Instead God chose to give her the 'what' - the fact that the pin had moved. Either gift would have led to the same action. Now, if God had told her right at the start of the incident that the pin would move before reaching the Birmingham Hospital, then that would have been the gift of prophecy and again would have led to the same action. By now you will understand that what's most important is following God's lead. We don't need to be caught up by what type of gift is operating!

A word of knowledge can warn, guide, inform or encourage. The gift can help us to witness and to counsel. The gift can operate with regard to important matters as well as to more trivial matters. The gift remember, is as the Spirit wills.

In John 4 we see how this gift can be used to preach the gospel effectively to others. The gift can demonstrate the power of God through the fact that God is omniscient - all knowing. Jesus has just arrived in Samaria and He sits down next to a well in one of its towns. There he starts talking to a Samaritan woman. In the course of the conversation, the woman tells him that she has no husband. Jesus then proceeds to tell her that she indeed has no husband, but has had five husbands in the past and that the man she is currently with is not her husband. This word of knowledge allows the woman to see that Jesus was sent by God, for He knew things about

her that He couldn't otherwise have known. In turn this provides the way for others in the town to believe also.

John 4:39-42

³⁹Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I've ever done.' ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. ⁴¹And because of his words many more became believers. ⁴²They said to the woman, 'We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world.'

The word of knowledge caused her to believe and in turn created an opportunity for Jesus to witness to the people of the town. Without the initial word of knowledge, neither the woman nor the people of the town would probably have had cause to listen to Him.

A word of knowledge can be used for the following reasons:

- To empower believers to act with confidence.
- To warn the church so that it is not deceived
- To reveal understanding of why something has or hasn't happened
- To break down barriers when witnessing to people
- To provide specific information concerning issues for prayer
- To illuminate who God is in our lives

This last point is perhaps the most important of all. God will give us a greater revelation of who He is as we grow in the faith.

The next step...

Well we've reached the end of our study of the spiritual gifts. Having studied the theory, we must be willing to embrace the practical. Paul encourages us in his letter to the Corinthians to seek the gifts, especially the ones that build up the whole of the church. Let's be willing to step out in faith when we feel Him prompt us and let's see what God will do through us.