

1Corinthians12:10 "Distinguishing of Spirits"

What if I said to you: For the next hour let's seek the Spirit to fill us that we might manifest His power as we bark like dogs, flap our arms as though we were eagles, and get on all fours and paw the ground as though we were bulls.

Suppose I said that the Scriptures clearly teach that you do not have any assurance of your salvation and that you could lose it at any time.

Or how about the idea that Jesus Christ never meant to teach that He was God in the flesh, only that He was sent from the Father to demonstrate how we too, might attain a righteousness to get us into heaven.

Now you might scoff at these things, you might even be offended. But the fact of the matter is that these types of things are taking place throughout the world in the name of Christ, either through certain teachings or through the actions of people who name the name of Christ.

We live in a world where communications are instantaneous. You turn on the radio, the television, surf the Internet on your computer and within seconds you are in touch with different thoughts, ideas and information.

In fact, Christians even have their own sources of information so they may be thoroughly informed of all that God is doing and wanting us to know about Himself. The 700 Club, Trinity Broadcasting Network, Sky Angel satellite, and a host of others all vying for your time so you may learn the latest work of God.

With so much information and so many different views concerning God and His word how do we truly know what is from God and what isn't? How do we discern?

This is a question you need to ask yourself whenever anybody teaches you about the things of God. Unfortunately, there is a trend which is not really new, but seems to be heightened these days which takes the attitude that if a "man or woman of God" says anything about God, that's good enough for me; no questions asked.

But it's because of this attitude that there are many Christians who are being deceived and wading into spiritual cesspools which are

very harmful and which can actually turn their eyes away from the one true God to a god of their own making.

This morning we will look at the gift of distinguishing of spirits, or as other translations put it, discerning of spirits, and seek to find out why this gift is so important for the church today.

One obvious reason for such a gift is found in what we see repeated over and over again in the word of God found in such passages as these:

ROM 16:17-18 "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are ***contrary to the teaching you have learned***. Keep away from them. 18 For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they ***deceive the minds of naive people***."

2TI 3:12-13 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, 13 while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, ***deceiving and being deceived***.

2PE 2:1 But there were also ***false prophets*** among the people, just as there will be ***false teachers*** among you. They will secretly introduce ***destructive heresies***, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them -bringing swift destruction on themselves.

The reason for such a gift as discerning of spirits is because of the necessity to discern who these false teachers are, and the destructive teachings they bring.

And so, in God's Sovereignty He has given us a gift by which He personally protects us as He watches over us.

Now, does this mean that the only way to be able to expose such false teachers and teachings is through someone in the church who has this gift? Well, what if someone in any particular church doesn't have this gift?

This leads us to the fact that the gift of discerning, or distinguishing of spirits is not necessarily the first line of defense against the wiles of the enemy who would try to come in like a flood and sweep us away in his lies. This is why Paul addresses the church-at-large, including every member when it comes to discernment.

PHI 1:9-11 "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you

may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God."

When it comes to discerning of spirits the word of God must be our only standard by which we can measure those teachings which would be harmful to the church.

This is why Paul exhorts Timothy, as well as us.

2TI 3:14,16-17 "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Of course, the gift of discerning of spirits should be prayed for and it should be utilized in conjunction with our first line of defense, which is the word of God.

Now, the question might be asked, if every Christian has the word of God and the Spirit of God, and every Christian who studies and relies on God's word can be discerning, why do we need someone with the gift of discerning of spirits, and second, what does it mean to be able to discern the spirits?

As to the first question, the reason that Christ has given us the gift of discerning of spirits is the same reason He has given us the gift of teaching when many can teach without that gift; the gift of faith despite the fact that all Christians have faith given to them from Christ; or the gift of mercy despite how all Christians should manifest mercy as the fruit of the Spirit is seen in their lives.

As with any of these gifts they are special endowments by the Spirit to enable His people to have heightened abilities to excel in these areas with the express purpose of being servants to the body of Christ and helping the body to benefit from these special gifts.

What better way to see how one might show mercy than to watch someone with the gift of mercy. What better way to understand how all of us should walk by faith than to see someone with the gift of faith walking under circumstances where the Spirit of God gives them a special faith for their benefit and ours. What better way to see how we can gain insights into God's word than to have someone with the gift of teaching demonstrate how we can search His word effectively.

And what better way to see how one can be discerning than to see someone utilizing the gift of discerning of spirits.

But this does raise the question: what does it mean to distinguish or discern spirits? To a number of our more Pentecostal or Charismatic brothers and sisters in Christ there is a tendency to make this gift into a "sensing the spiritual vibes" sort of gift.

There is certainly an aspect of a spiritual awareness in this gift, but to relegate it to that alone can create a spiritual guru status where everyone in the church has to take their cues from a select few when it comes to the goings-on in the spiritual world and how it effects the church.

Let me give you an example. Suppose someone comes into our city and holds a seminar on Jesus Christ. And let's say that there is a Christian who claims to have the gift of discerning of spirits who hears about this seminar and immediately goes to prayer seeking the Lord as to whether or not this is a viable ministry that might encourage his particular church.

In his prayer time he senses that there is something wrong with this outsider as he senses that the spiritual forces at work are not of God. Now it may be true that God could certainly give this person a word of knowledge and alert the body of Christ to such a false teacher.

But what happens when you rely on your spiritual senses alone? What can often happen is to be lulled into thinking that your spiritual gift takes precedence to anything else. Instead of talking with this outsider and examining his doctrinal stance on Christ and salvation, and then comparing that with the word of God, one can think that looking at the objective truth isn't necessary, but rather depending only on what you "feel" from the Lord.

And so, you can become judgmental of the heart of a person instead of measuring the fruit of that person and the very teachings they may bring. We can judge teachings, we judge behavior according to the word of God, but we are not given permission by God to judge the hearts of others. We may recognize the hearts of others by their actions, but that's different from making a final judgment of the heart which only God can do.

"But still, I just "feel" that there's something wrong with this person", might be the response of such a Christian not relying on the truth of God's word as their first line of defense.

The apostle Paul was one who was certainly discerning of spiritual things and yet we know on one occasion it took him a number of days before he made the determination that a certain woman was being used by the enemy to thwart his efforts for Christ.

ACT 16:16-18 "Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. 17 This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." 18 She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her."

He discerned that the spirits involved were those of the enemy, but he took the time to watch her, to listen to her, and to determine the things she did and said before he took the action he did. He may have sensed something was wrong immediately, but he didn't divorce the objective truth of her actions and words from that determination as he compared them with the truth of God's word.

It must be pointed out that what Paul was sensing was a spiritual reality as he understood that demons were the one's, in this case, utilizing this woman to thwart Paul's ministry. And so, in this case, he casts the demon out.

And so, we can conclude that when we talk about the gift of discerning of spirits we are talking about understanding the spiritual source which is being used to come against Christ and His work through His people.

This is why Paul could write to the Ephesians that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (EPH 6:12)

But here's the problem; though we may ultimately be fighting against spiritual forces, they are expressed through people more often than not. Paul was confronted by a woman who was influenced by a demon, not the other way around.

And though demon possession is a reality, a person does not have to be demon possessed to be influenced by demons and doctrines of demons. Paul addresses this when writing to Timothy.

1TI 4:1-3 "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. 2 Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. 3 They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth."

Notice that the false teachings don't come through Satan or his demons appearing on the scene and conducting seminars on false teachings. The false teachings come through false teachers, human beings, who are themselves deceived by the lies of Satan.

In the case of Paul addressing Timothy, these teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth.

Though certainly influenced by demons it is the persons themselves who have made the decision to bring falsehood into the church. Their own sin natures are being employed. The devil is not making them do anything. They are doing it because of the hardness of their hearts.

The apostle John tells us the same thing.

1Jo 4:1 "Dear 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."

Notice the direct correlation John makes between testing the spirits, and the false teachings coming from these spirits, and the false prophets who deliver these false teachings. And this gets to the heart of the how the gift of discerning of spirits must be utilized.

To only use the pretext that "I sense there are spiritual forces at work which are not of God", while not recognizing the means through which those spiritual forces are being utilized; in other words, through lost human beings delivering doctrines contrary to God's word, this will hamstring the Christian from effectively dealing with it.

And the way in which any false teaching needs to be dealt with is to have an understanding of the Holy Spirit's solution to such a

spiritual falsehood. That spiritual solution is the very word of God which the Holy Spirit inspired.

This was true of first century Christians as well as Christians today. Yes, it's true that first century Christians initially had only the O.T. Scriptures, but they are not any less the word of God or any less instructive when it comes to false prophets or teachers. God was constantly instructing Israel about false prophets through His word.

To leave out the word of God when utilizing the gift of the discerning of spirits, regarding how the spirits of the enemy try to disrupt the body of Christ through false teaching, is to leave out the very sword of the Spirit which is our offensive weapon in this spiritual battle.

The sword of the Spirit not only enables us to expose the false teachings and teachers, but it also cuts to the heart of the truth as the Holy Spirit uses it to speak to the hearts of the lost and the church.

HEB 4:12-13 "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. 13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

And so, we must conclude that when we talk of the gift of the discerning of spirits we are talking about a gift which the Lord utilizes to alert the church to the potential problem and then to use the proper means to deal with it.

Again, does this mean that the Lord may not reveal certain things in the body of Christ through this gift that have to do with a spiritual problem, which may not involve false teaching?

Sure. There were times when, for example, the apostles were confronted with demons who inhabited the bodies of people and needed to be cast out. The apostles were given a spiritual insight into what was happening and how to deal with it.

But for the most part whenever we see the apostles dealing with spiritual realities inside the church, which can adversely affect the church, it comes primarily through a person who has an improper understanding of God's word, or a reluctance to walk according to that word.

Remember, that this very letter is written to believers who are not walking in the Spirit. This is a spiritual problem in Corinth and the spiritual solution is to first and foremost learn to love God above all, which would certainly include the truth taught by Jesus Christ Himself; "If you love Me, do what I command."

And so, when Paul identifies such a gift as the discerning of spirits, he's addressing a gift given by the Spirit to help promote such an attitude among God's people, as those within the church who have this gift or any gift, to encourage every believer to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior.

Quick test of discernment. I mentioned a few moments ago that the apostles occasionally dealt with people who were demon possessed. Can a Christian be demon possessed? Before you answer to yourself what would you use as a source for your answer? That's right, the word of God.

In Christ, we are temples of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit cannot dwell together with demons. A house divided against itself will fall. And so contrary to what some Christians believe, who have not distinguished between spirits as they influence people, a Christian cannot be demon possessed.

That does not mean a Christian is exempt from the outward influences of demons. But even so, we need not fear them because as God tells us, 'greater is He who is in you, (that is Christ's Spirit), than he, (Satan and his demons), who are in this world.'

But, how will this gift of the discerning of spirits actually work in the body of Christ today? Well, since it is a spiritual gift it will not be given to everyone in the body. And so, there will be those who are more aware of certain teachings which might be suspect as the Spirit of God alerts them.

I can tell you though that there is so much false teaching being accepted by Christians today, one has to wonder if this gift exists at all. Of course, the answer is that it does. But it seems to be used sparingly, partly because it carries with it the responsibility to measure all teaching against the word of God.

If someone with the gift of discerning of spirits is not willing to be in the word of God and study to show himself, or herself approved, then it will be difficult at best for that individual to effectively use this gift.

It doesn't mean that they may not be sensitive to the Spirit's leading to be acutely aware of false teaching or a wolf in sheep's clothing, but unless the problem is addressed according to the word of God the only thing the believer is left with is a spiritual sense that something is wrong without being able to deal with it biblically.

And now you're back to simply sensing spiritual vibes without truly understanding how to identify those promptings from the Spirit in a way that will help the body of Christ. Dealing unbiblically with a problem in the body of Christ can be as bad or worse in some cases as not dealing with it at all.

However, what happens if the Holy Spirit gives a new Christian this gift of discerning of spirits and yet doesn't have an exhaustive understanding of the Scriptures? Can this gift still be utilized? Absolutely.

If there is someone in the body of Christ with this gift, who is just learning what the Scriptures teach on any particular area of life, they can still be used as they are encouraged to go to those who may have a better handle on the problem according to God's word, that the Spirit of God may bring to their attention.

Suppose a new believer goes to a Christian rally or revival meeting. And in that time there is questionable teaching which no one else seems to be too concerned about, and yet in their spirit it just doesn't sit right and yet they don't necessarily have the answer as to why it might be wrong.

What better way to grow in the gift of discerning of spirits, in that case, then to go to someone with the gift of teaching or the gift of Pastor or the gift of exhortation and pose the problem to them. More times than not they will have an answer and now so will you.

And so, through the gift of discerning of spirits, the Lord is helping you grow, as others with differing gifts are being challenged to consider what the Spirit of God has laid on your heart. It may be that your sensitivity to a teaching is something others in the body hadn't considered from a biblical stand-point, especially as it applies to much of the wisdom of the world being promoted in the church today.

And so, what we see is that all of the gifts are meant to compliment other gifts so that the entire body can be built up and encouraged as we each use our gifts to the glory of God.

Some of you here this morning have got the gift of discerning of spirits and some of you with this gift have approached me with questions you've had on questionable teachings or behavior and there have been times where it has challenged my gifts to help give you answers. And so, you keep me sharp. That's how the gifts are to be used.

But we'll also see this gift being used in a much broader sense, especially in today's world, with such fast communications going on. I mentioned this at the beginning of this study. All of the media is vying for our attention, and this includes every conceivable ministry which claims to be Christian.

This is why I believe the Lord has raised up specific ministries where the gift of discerning of spirits is being utilized to address these false teachings and teachers in the public arena. Some might suggest that we shouldn't question a ministry, according to God's word, outside of our little sphere.

The problem is that if a false teacher has access to your home through radio, television, Internet, audio and video tapes, they have stepped out of their protective bubble and have opened themselves up to a wider scrutiny. And in those cases, as did Paul, names can be named to protect the body.

I believe ministries like CARM, Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry, <https://carm.org/> is such a ministry which keeps a watch for false teaching and false teachers. It measures all of these teachings according to the word of God. And where new teachers and new teachings may be suspect they are often one of the first ministries the Holy Spirit uses to alert the rest of the body of Christ world-wide to watch out for them.

Every one of us needs to be discerning. But there will be no discernment if there is no standard by which all else is measured.

The Spirit of God is the One who enables us to discern those things of the Spirit as He directs us to His word. And so it is the Spirit of God who is called our Teacher and Comforter and Counselor who must be sought as we come to the Word and as we desire to know the truth, whether we have the gift of discerning of spirits or not.

Discernment starts with a love for Christ who is the Truth, the living word. If we love Him above all then our desire to represent Him properly will be at the forefront.

2Ti 4:3-4 "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."

How do we combat the false teachers and the false teachings they bring? With the truth of the whole counsel of God's word and an earnest seeking of God as we humble ourselves before Him.

When it comes to growing in Christ His word is vital for our ability to know the difference between what is false teaching and what is of God. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way.

Heb 5:14 "But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

We must all pray for discernment and we must ask God that He would use His gift of distinguishing of spirits in our midst as well as thanking Him for this gift working in such ministries as CARM and others like them.

Praise God He gives us eyes to see and ears to hear. But unless we are in His word and obeying His word in the power of His Spirit our eyes and ears can become dull.

Let me end with an exhortation from Paul which is the Spirit's prayer for all of us.

^{NAU} **Colossians 1:9** For this reason also, since the day we heard *of it*, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,