

St. Mary's Sermon Series

Acts 5

Spiritual Gifts: Discernment

Discerning the spirits is the last of the three revelation gifts, the others being wisdom and knowledge – which we have looked at in this sermon series. Again, it is the mind of Christ being manifested through a Spirit-filled believer

The gift of the discernment of spirits enables Christians to distinguish between truth and error, and to know with certainty when behaviour is either of the devil, of human origin or of God. Hebrews 5:12-14 tells us that all believers are able to distinguish truth from error to a certain extent, but those with the gift of discernment are endowed with the special ability to know with certainty what is true and what is false.

I chose the reading from Acts 5 as I believe this is one of the clearest biblical examples of the demonstration of this gift. It is Peter who discerns that Satan has inspired Ananias to lie to the Holy Spirit.

Christ's Church is one body, marked by a shared life and the presence of power and grace. Ananias and Sapphira undermine this shared life and the grace which enables it. They live for themselves and their giving is pretence - a display of the hypocrisy so hated by the Lord. Their action is a denial of God's Grace and a denial of God's power. It is hard to imagine a more dangerous course of action. Peter discerns the truth that it is Satan who has caused them to lie - the drastic consequence of this was death. We do not know the mechanics of it but it is through Peter's gift of discerning of evil spirits that opens up the deceit.

Perhaps before we talk about spiritual discernment we need to consider what discernment is in general. Firstly there is natural discernment, which both Christians and non-Christians have. It is derived from teaching in our own homes and the effect of our environment and culture. It is the judgement we pass on people and circumstances. I suppose it can be a mixture of evil, truth and error. It can be positive or negative and we can use it to make poor decisions and judgements on people. Yet it can be used to see the positive side of a person or situation.

I had once said something about someone – I can't remember whom or what the circumstances were, but William said, "How do you know that – is it because you are a Mum?" Mum's are discerning (as in perceptive), when it comes to their children."

Intellectual discernment

The gifts of the spirit are there to build up the body of Christ and to reject the devil. True discernment comes not from the fallen natural mind but from the mind which is being renewed in Christ. This discernment grows as we meet and receive Christ through meeting with other Christians, worship, reading God's word and prayer. It grows as we meet with God and He enters our lives. As we grow in the Christian life the Holy Spirit sorts through

our minds and consciousness discarding wrong and adding what is right. As we develop in our knowledge of God then we can discern false teaching; for example, as we develop our intellectual discernment we can reject what is brought to us by Jehovah's witnesses on our door step.

False supernatural discernment

Those who claim to detect spirits such as clairvoyants and spiritualists are not of God and we should not meet with them. We often find that they work against and condemn the church, the body of Christ and we should pray that God will change their ways and that they will turn to him. Only God can predict the future and His purpose is to build up the body of Christ on earth.

Finally we come to the gift of discerning of spirits. This is a true Revelation Gift, recognizing what is of God, versus the world, the flesh, and the devil(e.g. Peter recognised the devil at work in Ananias).

Discerning of spirits is the supernatural ability given by the Holy Spirit to perceive a source of a spiritual manifestation and determine whether it is of God (Acts 10:30-35), of the devil (Acts 16:16-18), of man (Acts 8:18-23) or of the world. It is not mind reading, psychic phenomena, or the ability to criticize and find fault.

Discerning of spirits must be done by the power of the Holy Spirit; He bears witness with our spirit when something is or is not of God. The gift of discerning of spirits is the supernatural power to detect the realm of the spirits and their activities. It implies the power of spiritual insight - the supernatural revelation of plans and purposes of the enemy and his forces. It is a gift which protects and guards your Christian life.

The Bible speaks to us of the Spirit of God, the spirit of man and evil spirits.

Therefore, the gift of discernment of spirits is to be able to distinguish whether or not a person is acting and speaking by the Spirit of God, by their own human spirit or under the influence—or possession—of an evil spirit or spirits. Discernment is especially needed in certain areas:

First of all it is needed to distinguish whether or not a person who comes to us brings a spiritual message from God.

Secondly it is to distinguish outward appearances from inward realities. In Acts 8 a man called Simon wants to buy the gift of the Spirit. From an outward reality he looks like he's enthusiastic for spiritual things; so much so that if he needs to empty his pockets to get them,

he will. But Peter looks upon the heart. The gift of discernment is in operation and he sees that Simon's motivation is full of bitterness and false witnessing.

A third functioning of the gift of discernment is to distinguish whether or not a person is possessed by an evil spirit. This, perhaps, is the most common understanding of discernment functions.

I work in the area of Mental Ill Health; the highly complex nature of the human personality, especially when in a disturbed state, reminds us of the extremes (for good and evil) to which the human spirit can be taken. It's so crucial to distinguish what is ill health and what is of the devil and demons.

I once went to a lecture at Southwell Minster on Mental health and afterwards I heard two ladies talking saying, "... well yes people with mental health problems often say they are Jesus so it is all spiritual". I believe wrong connections were made here. There is spiritual but there also is delusional.

I knew a man in a rehabilitation secure hospital, who said that he was Jesus come again. He had a phenomenal knowledge of the resurrection and the book of Revelation. Clearly he was not spiritual but had mental ill health.

David Prior writes 'This discernment (between mental ill-health and being of the evil spirits or the holy spirit) shows how important it is for psychiatrists and Christian ministers to seek more ways of expressing real partnerships in dealing with such links, and the Southwell and Nottingham Diocese are developing such links.

As with other gifts of revelation it is important that it is exercised within the worshipping life of the body of Christ. David Prior writes that it is very easy for someone who has been used in this discerning ministry to slip in to the habit of seeing evil spirits in any unusual situation or behaviour.

Again, I was working with someone who was told by a church that they were demon possessed. After praying regularly with them I did not detect evil spirits, but the other church was constantly telling them they were demon possessed. I spoke to David about it and both David and I prayed with the person; clearly, to us and the person they were not demon possessed.

As we pray for the gift of discernment our actions and words must be tested out in that it shows what is right or wrong in the scriptures, in the body of the Church and in the eyes of God.

We pray for the gift of discernment of spirits Lord so that we can distinguish what is right and what is wrong, if there is false prophecy or any false teaching. We ask you to show us what is right Lord.

Amen

