

Breaking Unintentional Agreements: The Gift of Discerning Spirits

Midway through my second year of college, I was invited to serve on a campus ministry leadership team. I was thrilled to be asked and immediately said yes.

A few months flew by when the campus ministry director called an emergency leadership team meeting at his home to discuss a difficult matter. He said, "We have to pray for Easton (not his real name), and we have to pray now!"

Breaking Unintentional Agreements

He explained that Easton was being tormented by a demon almost every night. Easton, a leader just like me, went on to describe the hair-raising details of each incident. A giant black snake would wake him up in the middle of the night and threaten his life over and over.

As Easton continued to share his story, I felt as if I was being pulled to the back of the house. It was an unusually strong feeling. I interrupted him and asked if I could go look in his room, as he was living with the campus ministry director at the time.

I walked into Easton's room and then into his closet. I normally wouldn't go into someone's closet without permission, but in this situation, it seemed appropriate. As I reached toward the back of his closet, I discovered his personal collection of Heavy Metal Band LPs tucked neatly away under some clothing. I handed the LPs to Easton, saying, "I think this is your problem!"

Easton responded by breaking each record into pieces,

realizing he had cohabitated with compromising music that clearly hosted both sexual and occult themes. He repented of his sin, and that spirit never came back.

What took place in Easton's life that day all began with the gift of discerning of spirits being in operation. This story also presents us with several questions, namely, "How could secular LPs sitting in a closet be the cause of a demonic attack? And, is this something that could happen to me?"

This is where we need to expand our paradigms to include and not exclude the spiritual. We not only live in a natural realm, but we also live in and are impacted by the spiritual realm. Both realms are governed by spiritual laws defined for us in the Bible (see Deut. 28; Luke 1:28; Rom. 2:6-8).

Easton had violated God's clear word about sexual impurity and false religion through his choices in music (Eph. 5:3; 1 Cor. 10:14). Being ignorant or dismissive about the spiritual does not absolve us of consequences, either. When we violate God's holiness, it's like leaving the front door to our house unlocked. A thief might not discover it immediately, but eventually, the thief comes to our neighborhood looking for opportunity. And when he finds an unlocked door, he will enter in to try and steal, kill or destroy (see John 10:10). Fortunately for Easton, his situation was short-lived because the gift of discerning of spirits was in operation.

The Gift of Discerning of Spirits Explained

A common description for the gift of discerning of spirits is that it's a supernatural ability from the Holy Spirit to distinguish between spirits—divine, demonic and human. It also enables us to discern the hidden motives of the heart. Since this gift embraces the hard-to-explain and intangibles of the spiritual realm, it has been historically difficult to teach as we've lacked adequate language to explain it properly.

The Apostle Paul shared a similar struggle in discussing

visions from the Lord, specifically third heaven and paradise, referring to both places as “inexpressible” (see 2 Cor. 12:1-4). This is the same challenge we face in describing the workings of the gift of discerning of spirits.

There are numerous examples of the gift of discerning of spirits in both the Old and New Testaments. Remember, this gift sees past the natural realm to reveal the spiritual realm so we can know how to rest our hearts and how to respond. For example, the prophet Elisha prayed an unusual prayer for his servant during a time of battle: “Lord, open his eyes and let him see” (2 Kings 6:17b). Elisha wasn’t referring to his servant’s physical eyes but to his spiritual ones.

Elisha and his servant had been targeted for certain death by an enemy army. His servant had become terrified with that strangling fear that manifests when you know the worst is about to happen. Elisha could see into the spiritual realm, which is the gift of discerning of spirits in operation, and saw the true spiritual conditions of the matter. The truth was a fierce army of war-like angels had jam-packed the spiritual horizons, ready to fight on their behalf. Their physical enemies were completely outnumbered, which dispelled all thoughts of death and execution. This is what Elisha wanted his servant to see, and God answered the prophet’s prayer.

In the New Testament, Jesus not only cast demon spirits out of their helpless victims, but He could identify them by their kind—unclean, infirmity, deaf and mute, and so on. Later, the apostle Paul did the same by identifying a spirit of divination that had possessed a young female fortune-teller in Ephesus, a spirit he cast out of her that caused the entire city to go into an uproar (see Acts 16:16-20). Finally, the apostle Peter knew by the gift of discerning of spirits that a husband and wife, by the names of Ananias and Sapphira, had brought to him a deceptive offering (see Acts 5:1-10).

These examples exhibit the gift of discerning of spirits in

operation, only they don't explain how this gift operates. We see the end point but not the process. And it's the process of discerning that is often misunderstood, ignored or rejected.

This Gift Operates Primarily Through Your Senses

The writer of Hebrews provides us some insight about how the gift of discerning of spirits works. "But solid food belongs to those who are mature, for those who through practice have powers of discernment that are trained to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:14)." In other words, this gift from the Holy Spirit causes us to discern good and evil through our own physical senses. That would be through our eyes, ears, smell, taste and touch, as well as through our emotions. And the mature have learned through practice how to accurately sort out what they are sensing so they can respond to the information appropriately. This implies that the gift of discerning of spirits has a learning curve that requires community and accountability to grow in accuracy.

Around the same time as the situation with Easton, my neighbor, Patricia, invited me over to her home. She was an avid garage sale shopper and had decorated her home with several objects she had purchased over the years. Patricia recognized I might be walking in the gift of discerning of spirits and asked me, "Are any of these objects in my home spiritually unclean for any reason?" I looked around and picked out four or five items that irritated my spirit. She said, "Hmmm. All of those objects were purchased from the same home." Neither of us knew exactly why I felt that irritation, but it prompted Patricia to pray. She prayed that anything unholy or demonic still lingering on these household objects would be removed and then ask for God's blessing on them.

It's important to point out that the gift of discerning of spirits is not just the discerning of evil, but both good and evil. The evil and the demonic just seem to stand out more

once you've tasted of heavenly things and finally know the difference.

Steve Shultz shared with me recently that while reading something on his computer, he suddenly experienced a fragrant scent all around him. He thought it might be soap on his hands, but checked it out and realized his hands didn't smell like anything at all. He knew through his sense of smell that He was experiencing the presence of the Lord (see 2 Cor. 2:14). I've also smelled the fragrance of Christ in worship and have even tasted a sweetness in my mouth knowing I was sensing His presence by taste. These simple but profound experiences bring the Scriptures to life.

We can experience the aroma of Christ (see 2 Cor. 2:14) and we can, "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good ..." (Ps. 34:8a). Many people have cited that they've felt goosebumps or electricity on their skin, recognizing these feelings as pointing to the presence of the Lord. Others have heard the voices of angels singing in heavenly chorus or felt the wind of the Holy Spirit upon their person.

The gift of discerning of spirits is multifaceted in expression but works powerfully through our sensors to reveal the spiritual realm. It is also a gift the Holy Spirit is releasing and increasing in the body of Christ.

Have you noticed an increase of spiritual sensitivity lately? Have your physical senses become heightened without explanation? Expect more to come and even more grace to walk out your new sensitivity. {eoa}

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