

How to Discern Between Evil Spirits and the Holy Spirit

Scripture is clear about the spiritual realm: “Beloved, 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” (1 John 4:1). John warned us to test, examine and scrutinize to discern if the spirit is good or evil.

With darkness rising, the gift of discerning of spirits is greatly needed for the times in which we live. Since not all supernatural activity comes from the Holy Spirit, it can sometimes be hard to tell where it originates. But those who can penetrate deeply with the gift of discerning of spirits can tell the difference between supernatural activity from the Holy Spirit and that from another source. As evil continues to escalate on the earth, so does the need for a higher level of discernment.

The gift of discerning of spirits (“distinguishing of spirits” in some translations; see 1 Cor. 12:10, NASB) provides perception into the spirit world—which includes the Holy Spirit, both good and evil angelic spirits, and individual human spirits. It gives supernatural insight into the realm of spirits.

Put another way, the gift of discerning of spirits is the God-given ability or enablement to recognize the identity (and very often the personality and condition) of the spirits behind different manifestations or activities. The dividing line between a human and divine operation may be obscure to some believers, but those with the faculty of spiritual discernment see a clear separation.

To discern means “to distinguish, to differentiate or to perceive,” and people exercise the gift of discernment in

different ways, often through their senses. Some receive the revelation visually, some “just know” and some hear or taste perceptively, while others have a heightened capacity to feel differences and discernments.

We each must surrender our five natural senses to the Holy Spirit and practice discerning good from evil (see Heb. 5:14). In God’s kingdom, we can learn to be “naturally supernatural” and “supernaturally natural.” I have been walking in the supernatural ways of God for over 40 years, and I am still discovering fresh ways to move in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including the gift of discerning of spirits.

We see different categories of discernment illustrated throughout the New Testament accounts of Jesus’ ministry and that of the early church.

Discerning the Holy Spirit Himself

John the Baptist discerned the Holy Spirit when the Spirit descended upon Jesus from heaven like a dove at His baptism (see Matt. 3:13-17). John didn’t let familiarity get in the way of discernment. Remember, Jesus was John’s cousin, and they were about the same age. They probably knew each other well and perhaps even played together as children. Yet John may not have been sure Jesus was the Messiah until he saw the dove (see John 1:32-34).

About three years later, the believers in the upper room on the day of Pentecost discerned the presence of the Holy Spirit as the sound of rushing wind and then as tongues of fire resting on their heads (see Acts 2:2-3). We do not know if they could discern these things with their natural ears and eyes or if it was entirely supernatural, but in any case, they agreed on what they had experienced.

Discerning Ministering Spirits We Call Angels

Scripture tells us an angel appeared to Jesus in the Garden of

Gethsemane, “strengthening Him” (Luke 22:43). After Jesus’ resurrection, Mary saw two angels in the sepulcher where Jesus’ body had been laid (see John 20:11-13). An angel appeared to Paul to give him a message of reassurance in the midst of a violent storm at sea (see Acts 27:23-24).

Based on these and other verses, we can clearly see angels do not look or act the same at all times. Therefore, it takes divine discernment to know whether or not what you are seeing is an angel you can trust. Second Corinthians 11:14b warns, “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.”

Discerning the Human Spirit

Human beings are spirits who have souls and live in bodies (see 1 Thess. 5:23). Therefore, we can also discern the spirit of a person. From afar, Jesus discerned a guileless spirit in Nathanael (see John 1:47-48). Shortly thereafter, He discerned the opposite of a guileless spirit in people who believed in Him only for His miracles (see John 2:23-25).

In Acts 14:8-10, Paul discerned a spirit of faith in a lame man in Lystra. You would not expect to find any faith in a man who had been lame since birth. He had never walked in his life.

After looking at him intently, Paul could discern the man’s faith, and he proceeded to simply tell him to walk. He didn’t do that with every lame beggar he passed. But Paul was so well-attuned to the Spirit that when he came to this particular beggar, he paused and took time to discern what the Spirit wanted to do, resulting in a miracle. Paul stopped for the one.

Discerning Evil Spirits

During His earthly ministry, Jesus discerned many evil spirits manifested in various forms. Once, He cast out a spirit of infirmity that was causing a woman to have serious curvature

of the spine. This deliverance from an evil spirit resulted in the woman's immediate healing, yet Jesus didn't make the incident into a spectacle. In fact, in this case, He did not address the unclean spirit verbally at all (see Luke 13:11-13).

Jesus laid His hands on the woman, and the evil spirit departed, as demonstrated by her immediate ability to stand up straight. I call this "leaning in"—making an evil spirit leave simply by bringing the Spirit of God too close for the evil spirit's comfort.

Often, when I discern an unclean spirit, by leaning in, I'm counting on the reality that greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world (see 1 John 4:4). By releasing the opposite Spirit—the Holy Spirit—a displacement happens that results in people being set free and atmospheres cleansed.

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