

Rebuking Demons and the Danger of Playing Holy Ghost

When Paul and Silas were on the mission field, a slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination started following the team, declaring, “These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17).

The Bible says the girl did this for many days before Paul finally cast the devil out of her. For years, I was taught that Paul waited “many days” (v. 18) because he was trying to discern the spirit that was operating so he could cast it out. I believe that teaching is in error—and the truth holds a key lesson for us all.

It’s clear that Paul already knew the spirit the servant girl was flowing in. Scripture reveals, “Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling” (v. 16).

Hindering God’s Work

Essentially, she was the town witch—and everybody knew it. Indeed, it didn’t take any discernment to understand what spirit she was tapping into. This servant girl was widely known in the city as one who had demons that could tell fortunes.

The *Matthew Henry Commentary* says, “She was actuated by an evil spirit, that dictated ambiguous answers to those who consulted her, which served to gratify their vain desire of knowing things to come, but often deceived them. ... Many came to consult this witch for the discovery of robberies, the finding of things lost, and especially to be told their fortune, and none came but with the rewards of divination in their hands, according to the quality of the person and the

importance of the case.”

By following the apostles and proclaiming to the city who they were, this servant girl was actually hindering God’s work—even though what she was saying was absolutely true. Of course, it didn’t take Paul “many days” to figure out she was a distraction. They could not make a move without being noticed because she announced their coming. Doubtless, this caused some—especially those who stood against spirits of divination—to put their guards up against the gospel message that could bring salvation to their households.

I believe Paul discerned quickly—not after many days—that a spirit of divination possessed the servant girl. Why, then, did Paul wait many days to cast it out? Clearly, the girl was in error. Clearly, she was deceived and deceiving others in the city with her fortune-telling. Clearly, she was merchandising people for the sake of sordid gain. Clearly, she was in bondage to this demon and also to her human oppressors who profited off her false prophecies. It seems he would be doing everyone a favor by rebuking this devil straight away.

So why did Paul wait many days to rebuke the spirit? I believe the apostle was waiting on God’s timing. In other words, Paul knew what spirit he was dealing with but he was seeking understanding from the Holy Spirit about how to handle it. The Bible says Paul was “greatly annoyed” (v. 18). I’m sure it didn’t take “many days” for this servant girl to annoy him. But he waited on the Lord’s timing to take action.

Don’t Get in the Holy Spirit’s Way

Here’s the lesson, especially for prophetic types who tend to see the error everywhere: Just because we see error, deception or even heresy doesn’t give us a license to rush in with guns blazing and fire bullets of rebukes. Just because someone is hindering God’s plan doesn’t mean it’s our job to set them straight. Just because the Word of God speaks against a

certain sin, for example, that doesn't give us the right to play Holy Ghost in the person's life.

Am I saying that we tolerate sin? Am I saying that we ignore devils? Am I saying that we tolerate Jezebel? God forbid! But there's balance in all things. When we discern an enemy working in someone's life, the first response should be prayer. When we are faithful to pray for a person or situation, it helps us keep a right spirit. Lord knows, it's easy enough to become like the sons of thunder and want to call down fire from heaven. But remember, Jesus rebuked John and James for being so quick to rebuke.

We need to pray, and when the Holy Spirit—who is far more patient than we are—leads us to speak to the person, then and only then should we speak. We only know in part—and we don't know if the Holy Spirit is on the verge of a breakthrough with the one in error. We don't know if that person is on the edge of repentance. And we don't know if our correction will push them further away from the God who is actively wooing them. Again, we can't play Holy Ghost. That job belongs to One and only One.

As we keep praying, if the Holy Spirit wants to use someone as an instrument of correction, you are first in line to serve God's purposes because you kept a right spirit. So, again, don't be so fast to issue a harsh rebuke to a brother or sister. Don't get in the Holy Spirit's way. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God (Rom. 8:14).

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