

Why Believers Need to Grow in Discerning of Spirits

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1).

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, sometimes it can be hard to tell where it originates.

But someone 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.

Defining the Gift of Discerning of Spirits

The gift of discerning of spirits (“distinguishing of spirits” in some translations; see 1 Cor. 12:10 NASB, NIV) 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.

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 that are behind different manifestations or activities. The dividing line between a human and divine operation may be obscure to some believers, but one with the faculty of spiritual discernment sees 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 (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.

New Testament Glimpses of Discernment

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

John the Baptist discerned the Holy Spirit when the Spirit descended upon Jesus from heaven like a dove at His baptism (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. And yet, John may not have been sure that Jesus was the Messiah until he saw the dove (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 (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 Angels

Scripture says that 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 (John 20:11-13). An angel appeared to Paul to give him a message of reassurance when he was in the midst of a violent storm at sea (Acts 27:23-24.) 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 actually an angel that you can trust.

Discerning the Human Spirit

From afar, Jesus discerned a guileless spirit in Nathanael (John 1:47-48.) Shortly thereafter, He discerned the opposite of a guileless spirit in people who believed in Him only for His miracles (John 2:23-25).

Paul discerned a “spirit of faith” in a lame man in Lystra, according to Acts 14:8-10. 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 the man to walk. He didn’t do that with every lame beggar he passed. But Paul was well-attuned to the Spirit so 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 (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” (1 John 4:4). By releasing the opposite Spirit—the Holy Spirit—there is a displacement that happens resulting in people being set free and atmospheres cleansed.

Guidelines for Operating in the Gift of Discerning Spirits

The only way to learn your own “language” for the gift of discerning of spirits is through practice; the gift can be cultivated. Your senses can be trained, and over time you can learn from experience how to interpret what your senses pick up. Scripture says, “Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (Heb. 5:14). You can also immerse yourself in the Word so that you can recall key truths, as needed, to confirm your senses.

Sometimes, the clearest way to understand your discernment is to examine the fruit of a person’s life. Is it good fruit or not-so-good fruit? Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruit. Do men gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit. But a corrupt tree bears evil fruit. A good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a corrupt tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore, by their fruit you will know them” (Matt. 7:16-20).

The gift of discerning of spirits is not the “gift of suspicion.” Your insights and perceptions should never be used in gossip or for purposes of defamation, but always for edification and building up the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit wants to cure and mend the members of the body, not harm them. Never ally yourself with the accuser of the

brethren, the devil (Rev. 12:10)!

As you can see, the gift of discerning of spirits has the potential to be explosive; therefore, it is crucial to use wisdom while exercising it. To keep from learning everything the hard way—and potentially doing damage—obtain wisdom by consulting others who have greater experience. In addition, draw on other complementary gifts, such as the gift of faith. It will make things a lot easier!

God will guide you all along the way; just keep up an ongoing conversation with Him. With the apostle Peter, I say to you, “Grace and peace be multiplied to you through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness ...” (2 Pet. 1:2-3).

Are You Hungry for More?

Are you satisfied with your own level of discernment, or do you believe the Lord has more for you? I want to more precisely perceive the operational spiritual forces that are behind things; and when they are forces of darkness, I want to displace them and release more of the brilliant light of God’s kingdom rule and reign. That is why I believe that we should ask for this gift of the Holy Spirit. “You do not have because you do not ask” (James 4:2 and John 16:24).

He is waiting for us to become all we can be in Christ Jesus. Come on! Step up to the plate with me! Let’s ask for an increase of this vital gift of the Holy Spirit.

Dear Lord, I am not satisfied! In Jesus’ great name, I ask right now for an increase of the gift of discerning of spirits. I want to be able to know the very moving of the Holy Spirit, to detect angels, to displace demons, and to discern the inner motivations of the hearts of men and women. Thank You for the increase in Jesus’ mighty name. Amen and Amen! {eoa}

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