

# The Gift Of Discerning Spirits

by David F. Maas

**Forerunner, "Ready Answer," January-February 2012**

*"... to another [is given the gift of] discerning spirits . . ." —I Corinthians 12:10*

For over a year, I have been pondering whether the spiritual gifts mentioned by the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 12:8-10 are something a Christian in today's world should desire or pursue.

As many know, I am a professor at a small college in East Texas. Often, as I deal with my students on a day-to-day basis, I would like to be able to read between the lines, determining their motives—not only for *what* they ask, but in the *way* they ask, such as sincerely, sarcastically, flatteringly, etc.

When we think reflectively, Christ's mandate to us that we become "wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16) implies that we must develop discernment, the ability to detect motivation and the spirits that motivate. The gift of discerning the spirits will become increasingly important as we approach the end of this age because deception will be the hallmark of these extremely dangerous times.

In the Olivet Prophecy, the disciples ask Jesus to reveal the sign of His return. Jesus does not give one sign but several. At the top of the list, he warns the disciples of deception, and follows it up with warnings of false prophets, false miracles, and the warning not to be deceived (see Matthew 24:4-5, 11, 23-26).

We deduce from this last warning that false "Christian" ministers and ministries will have the capability of performing convincing lying wonders and signs. These false ministers will demonstrate power—occult power—for the specific purpose of leading all people astray, including the most sincere believer.

We have a clear warning from the apostle Paul that the battles we face on a daily basis cannot be won by conventional weapons that we can attain from the world. The weapons we must seek should be spiritual, having the power to destroy arguments and every false claim that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and God's Word (II Corinthians 10:3-5).

## The Purpose of Gifts

Spiritual gifts are valuable assets that we should desire, but we must examine the reason they are given in the first place. I Corinthians 12:7 reveals why God distributes these gifts; they are given for the profit of all: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (English Standard Version [ESV]).

Asking for the gift of discernment or any other spiritual gift should not be to give us a more special or holier status than our brother or sister in Christ, but instead, to promote the common good for the entire body of Christ. If we think of it this way, it should deter us from corrosive pride, as we realize that each gift has a specific use, and one gift is not any better or inferior to any other.

However, suppose that one gift did contain more value or status than another. Did we do anything to deserve this status or recognition? Of course not! God Almighty distributes these gifts to each member specifically and individually as He wills, as we see in I Corinthians 12:11: "But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills."

We must also realize that all these gifts are meant to interact; no one individual, except for Jesus Christ, has all these gifts. Thus, we need other members of the Body of Christ, with their unique gifts, to complement our own God-given gifts. Christ's Body is meant to work together.

I Kings 3:9-10 records the wisest mortal man who ever lived making a request to God for discernment: "Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" The speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing."

We learn from Ezekiel 44:23-24 that to discern spirits enables one to make distinctions between holy and profane as well as clean and unclean. The discerner can also make decisions according to biblical judgments, based on knowing the commandments, and if people should violate them, what the appropriate punishment should be. A discerner is one who habitually obeys God's laws and statutes and who faithfully keeps God's Sabbaths.

### **A Supernatural Ability**

To discern spirits is a supernatural ability enabled by God's Holy Spirit that allows a person to determine the source of a spiritual manifestation, whether it emanates from God, the Devil, the world, or man. If we have this gift, God will reveal information about the presence or absence of spiritual entities. Usually, people regard this gift as useful to detect evil spiritual forces or influences. It can also detect the presence or absence of angelic intervention or the prompts of God's Holy Spirit working within us.

The apostle John writes in I John 4:1, "Beloved do not believe every spirit, but test [try] the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world." We are commanded to examine thoroughly any spiritual teaching with our critical faculties to see whether the presenter is handling the Word of God accurately. Because evil spirits have the capacity to produce paranormal phenomena, the Scriptures exhort us to prove or test the spirits, proving all things, holding fast only to what is good (I Thessalonians 5:21).

It is highly imperative that we use our God-given reasoning and understanding in doing this, but we should not rely exclusively on our intellect. Likewise, it is unwise to allow our inward feelings to sway us, but we should seek the guidance of God's Holy Spirit. Undoubtedly, the most reliable guide concerning the testing of Spirits would be the Scriptures. We know that God's Word—the Bible—is truth (John 17:17).

We must remember that just reading or mumbling God's Word without understanding is next to useless. We have leaders who eloquently read teleprompters but have not the foggiest notion of what they are saying. Likewise, reading the Word of God without understanding makes us a spiritual "empty suit." Reading God's Word with understanding via the Holy Spirit enables us to tap into the spiritual realm, know "the things of God," and make right judgments (I Corinthians 2:10-16).

What Jesus says about His own words parallels this truth: "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63).

In his sermon, "The Two Witnesses (Part Four)," Richard Ritenbaugh asserts:

. . . one of the main manifestations of God's Spirit is words. The entire revelation of God that we have before us, [the Bibles] in our laps, is made up of words. And if this is not a manifestation of God's Spirit, I do not know what is! Many of these words are the words of God Himself. Many of the words—far fewer, but many of them—are words of God's servants that have been written down for our admonition. But everything . . . comes down to words because the way of God is a set of ideas. These ideas we put down on paper as words, or when we speak, we speak them as words. We cannot understand them otherwise. . . .

So, the servant of God may do other works. He can do healings, which are not necessarily manifested as words—although often there are words that accompany a healing, that is, specifically, a prayer. Casting out demons is the same way: There is usually a prayer involved. There are miracles, and often miracles involve certain words that are spoken. The works themselves—the healings, the casting out of demons, and the miracles—are not words, but they are manifestations of the Spirit.

In this vein, the Proverbs teach us that good words have the power to heal (Proverbs 16:24), and bad words have the power to destroy health (Proverbs 12:18). There is great power in words.

The best safeguard to determine the authenticity of spirit entities, then, is God's Word, the Holy Scriptures. When we examine a counterfeit bill, we have to know what a true dollar looks like. God's Word resembles a crystal glass: It rings true because all the impurities have been purged out of it.

If we are, through constant practice studying and meditating on the Scriptures, keeping in tune with the themes of the Bible, we will detect those discordant sounds that are not in harmony with the scriptural motifs.

### **An Exercise in Discernment**

Dr. Basil Frasure, a counselor and minister with the Fellowship Church of San Angelo, Texas, has written a fascinating article, "Discerning of Spirits." Dr. Frasure has authored several psychology self-help books, including *How to Destroy the Evil Tree*, a popular and informative book on overcoming generational curses, as well as *Bringing Every Thought Captive, Vol. 1*, also a great self-help book, which he describes as an informative manual on Whole Person Counseling. He also has designed and taught competent counseling courses.

In the course of his article, Dr. Frasure explores just what kind of spirit visited Job's friend, Eliphaz. This episode appears in Job 4:12-21:

Now a word was secretly brought to me, and my ear received a whisper of it. In disquieting thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones shake. Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair on my body stood up. It stood still, but I could not discern its appearance. A form was before my eyes; there was silence; then I heard a voice saying:

"Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his Maker? If He puts no trust in His servants, if He charges His angels with error, how much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed before a moth? They are broken in pieces from morning till evening; they perish forever, with no one regarding. Does not their own excellence go away? They die, even without wisdom."

Dr. Frasure writes, "One of the best ways to discern the nature of a spirit is to check the Word of God. Does what the spirit says match up with the Word of God?" When we apply biblical themes and principles to Eliphaz' encounter with the spirit, it does not pass the "smell" test.

When we closely examine the nature of the being that troubled Job's friend, we learn that this spirit appealed to the carnal desire for a special revelation. If we remember the content of serpent's appeal to Eve, "Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5), we see a similarity.

We notice that the spirit came at nighttime, in the form of a nightmare, an approach that could be characterized as intimidation, not an approach that God chooses to use with believers. We remember from Paul's second letter to Timothy that "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (II Timothy 1:7).

Generally in Scripture, when people express fear at the appearance of angels, the angels comfort them, saying something akin to "Fear not" (see, for example, Daniel 10:12; Luke 1:13, 30; Revelation 1:17). Yet, this elusive being in Job 4 prefers to remain obscure and daunting, something atypical throughout God's Word.

We also observe that this spirit's message begins with an accusation, a technique usually ascribed to Satan (Revelation 12:10). The being insinuates that God does not trust the angels. However, we understand that God often entrusted His Word and weighty responsibilities to angels. If this spirit is so sensitive about God charging some of His angels with folly, it is perhaps that this message came from one of the rebellious angels who followed Satan. It is no wonder this evil spirit had bitterness and animosity against God.

In several places, the Bible contradicts the assertions that this demon makes. In fact, God Almighty has trusted His church—human beings!—with the mandate to carry His priceless gospel throughout the world. As for no one observing when a person perishes, we are assured by Christ Himself that no human being ever dies without God being mindful. As He keeps meticulous records of all the falling sparrows (Matthew 10:29), He also keeps track of the deaths of His saints, which He regards as precious (Psalm 116:15). Our God is not intent on destroying us, as the demon intimates, but as Paul writes in Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

Dr. Frasure takes issue with several Bible commentaries, including *Barnes Notes*, which erroneously suppose that this communication is consistent with God's revelations. We can extrapolate from God's stern rebuke of Job's friends (Job 42:7-9) that He considered the communication not to have been consistent with His character.

Remember, the main principle of interpreting Scripture is that the Bible interprets itself. Contextually, then, Eliphaz probably received his counsel from a familiar spirit totally out of sync with the whole counsel of Scripture.

We see that only by repeatedly cycling through God's Word in the manner of the Bereans (Acts 17: 11) can we properly exercise the gift of discerning of Spirits.