

FOUNDATION OF FAITH!
GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT
PART 10
THE GIFT OF DISCERNING OF SPIRITS

This morning, as we continue our series Foundation of Faith, we are looking at the gifts of the Spirit and specifically this morning we will be looking at the discerning of spirits. Now I think most of us understand that this is an area today in the church that is truly lacking, discernment! No one judges what is taught, what is said about God and the Bible, all things are true, at least that is what many think. We can't judge if a person's spiritual experience is true or not! We can't judge if what a person said about God, the Bible, our daily living is of God or not!

I totally disagree because God has given us the ability to discern what is true and what is not, what is of God and what is not of God! Yes, we are to judge what a person is doing, what they are saying but not judge their heart or their motives, and that is where many get it wrong! Paul, in I Thessalonians 5:19-22 tells us, "**Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.**"

Now, what some do is that they say we are not to quench the Spirit of God by despising prophecies and they just stop there. But Paul does not stop there. He tells us to test all things. Not only to test them but to see if they are good and if they are good we are to hold tight to them. If they are true, if they are of God we are to hold on to them. But if they are a lie, if they go against the Word of God, then you are to abstain from them. Thus, you have to test things, you have to use the discernment that God has given to you or you will succumb to the lies of the Devil and many have traveled down that path, including leaders in the church today!

Some of you may not agree with me on this, but hear me out. Many feel that everything is from God; there is nothing we should negate and because of that you have all kinds of strange behavior occurring in the church today. The way to expose the lies is to use the discernment that God has given to us and not let people discourage us because they are telling us that we are being judgmental or have a judgmental spirit! We are to judge what people are saying, what they are doing.

Let me show you how bad it is with this story of Hank and his friend Chuck. You see, Chuck wanted to show Hank this “miracle man” and he told Chuck,

“I’m telling you, Hank, thousands, no hundreds of thousands of people have found what I’ve found. I’m telling you, it’s the real thing. Truth is, you’ve probably already heard of him yourself. I mean, by now almost everyone has. His name is . . .”

Before Chuck could get the name out of his mouth, I interrupted him. “Don’t even say it,” I warned. “If I hear his name one more time, I think I’m going to be sick! If I’ve heard it once, I’ve heard it a thousand times. When will people wake up and realize that guys like that are phony? . . . He may be from halfway around the world and have an intriguing accent, but he’s definitely not the real thing.”

In the time it had taken us to finish dinner, the parking lot across the street had blossomed with thousands of cars. I bit my tongue, resisting the urge to voice what I was thinking. P. T. Barnum was right: “Never underestimate the gullibility of the public” - or was it, “There’s a sucker born every minute”?

Security led us past the crowd and through a private entrance to the auditorium. As promised, our seats were front row and center. I could not help but feel conspicuous as people immediately began whispering and pointing in my direction . . .

Surprisingly, I was also feeling uncomfortable at the stark contrast between my own hardened cynicism and the crowd’s sense of expectancy. I was actually beginning to second-guess myself. Perhaps I was too skeptical. Why couldn’t I be like everyone else and approach the evening the way they did?

. . . I spotted a well-known local pastor across the aisle and marveled again at the apparent gullibility of so many seemingly intelligent and discerning people. Were they all just invincibly ignorant . . . or was it me?

. . . The announcer paused dramatically. “And now, please join me in extending a warm Southern California welcome to . . .” The name was lost in an explosion of applause.

From the start, the crowd seemed like putty in his hands. I was amazed at his commanding presence as well as by the control he exerted over the audience. . . . Soon some of them were even laughing robustly along with everyone else. As determined as I was not to let go, I could not help smiling a time or two myself. There was no doubt about it. The laughter was down right infectious.

. . . The pastor I had spotted earlier in the evening had thrown off all of his usual ministerial decorum and now whirled around the stage, howling like a dog. Others stumbled through the auditorium as though in a drunken stupor. One woman, who had lost all sense of modesty, thrashed around on the floor in total abandon.

I was amazed at the power this guy seemed to hold over people. His enthusiasm and encouragement seemed to egg them on to new heights of absurdity. He merely pointed in their direction, and they immediately began to jerk spasmodically. At one point he blew into his microphone, and an entire row of people keeled over in an apparent supernatural faint. As he worked the crowd, laughter echoed eerily through the auditorium.

By the time it was over, I was chomping at the bit to meet this guy up close and personal. After the last person exited the auditorium, we met backstage. He had shed his jacket and was mopping his face with a towel, still flushed from the exuberance of a successful performance. I impatiently endured the small talk and introductions. Impulsively, I blurted out, "Over the years I've been exposed to some of the best con men, illusionists, and religious charlatans around. But you've taken this to a whole new dimension. I thought I'd seen it all, but tonight I experienced things I never knew existed. I want to know how in the world you pulled this off!"

Although stunned by my bluntness, he recovered quickly. He methodically completed wiping his face then calmly handed the towel to his attendant. “I see your reputation doesn’t do you justice,” he began. “I can’t remember when I’ve been approached more directly.”

“Listen”, I interrupted, “I have seen performers break the fourth wall. I’ve seen them use altered states of consciousness, peer pressure, expectations, and suggestions to great effect. But never before have I seen so many people so completely mesmerized. . . .”

Before I could finish my sentence, his broadening grin erupted into a chuckle. “That’s high praise, coming from you. Truth is however, there’s nothing particularly supernatural about what I do. Quite frankly I’ve done it so often it’s become second nature to me. In fact, maybe that’s why I’m always billed as,” he gave a dramatic pause, and then his voice boomed, **“TONY ANGELO - THE WORLD’S GREATEST STAGE HYPNOTIST!”**

- Hank Hanegraaff, Counterfeit Revival, pp. 3-8

Were you shocked by that story? You should be! That was my intention with that true story. And the reason you were so shocked is that you thought I was speaking of a televangelist or some faith healer instead of some hypnotist! And that is the problem. You see, many in the church today are drawn to preachers that entertain rather than teach. They whip the people up into a state of chaotic frenzy instead of building them up on the solid foundation of God's Word. We see all kinds of so called "manifestations of the Spirit" like barking like dogs, laughing in the spirit, drunk in the spirit, and-so-on, instead of the fruit of the Spirit being produced in their lives. We have people encouraging health, wealth and prosperity rather than denying self, taking up the cross and following Jesus. We have the church embracing ecumenicalism with a different Jesus. We have the church interested in building the kingdom of God on this earth apart from Christ, who will do it! We have the church embracing Yoga instead of meditating upon the Word of God! And in saying all that I think you can clearly see that the church is in need of real Biblical discernment today!

And please, don't think these things are new to the church for Jesus warned that these things would come to pass. In Matthew chapter 7 we see Jesus warn us of the false prophets that are out there, dressed in sheep's clothing but the reality is they are wolves ready to devour the flock of God with their perverted message. He said beginning in verse 15 of Matthew chapter 7, "**Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.**"

Matthew 7:15-20.

For those that say we are not to judge, Jesus puts that idea away. You see, Jesus is telling us that we need to be fruit inspectors or we need to examine what is being taught. We will know the false prophets, the false teachers by the fruit they produce, by the teachings they are bringing into the church. And please don't make the mistake that some do and say that if their ministry is big, that must be good fruit! Think about that one for a minute. Look at Islam, if you take that to its logical conclusion then Islam must be of God because look at how it is growing! But that is false, Islam is not of God and thus, we must inspect what is being taught and bring it into the light of God's Word!

Also, in Matthew 24:24 listen to this warning that Jesus gives us regarding the false teachers and what they are able to do. He said, “**For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.**” Do you see that these great signs and wonders are done to deceive the people, even those that claim to be Christians can be deceived? But how can that be? Because they do not know the Word of God or they are ignoring the Word of God.

Remember what Paul said in II Corinthians chapter 11, he had this warning for us. He said beginning in verse 13 of II Corinthians chapter 11, “**For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.**” II Corinthians 11:13-15.

In other words, there is going to be great spiritual deception in the last days, so much so that even the elect can be deceived by these things. The only way to know what is right and what is wrong, what is of God and what is not of God is the Word of God and to use that spiritual discernment that God has given to us! And please, in hearing those warnings that God has given to us we should not take them lightly. Satan is a master counterfeiter and his desire is to deceive and destroy people.

As Christians we need to be able to discern between the true and the counterfeit or we can get swept away with these false teachings that are going on, the winds of false doctrine that come blowing through the church. As John admonishes us in I John 4:1, **“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”** May we heed his words and test the teachings that are given to us to see if they are of God or not.

Now in saying all that, Paul in I Corinthians chapter 12 places this spiritual gift, the discerning of spirits, right after the gift of prophecy, and that was no accident. I truly believe the Holy Spirit inspired Paul in the order of these gifts. Not that one is more important than the other, but when things are taught they need to be tested to see if they are of God or not. If they are not of God then toss them aside and hold onto only that which is good, only that which is from God, that which is found in His Word.

Now let me clear this up, we touched on it earlier today but I think we need to understand what Jesus is saying here. You see, today we hear Matthew 7:1-2 quoted when anyone comes against these false teachings and they say, **“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.”**

But when Paul spoke of the gift of “**discerning of spirits**” he uses the Greek word DIAKRISIS, dee-ak’-ree-sis, which means, “judging through.” You see, the idea is to test if something is of God or not. Thus, you have to judge it. Jesus, in Matthew chapter 7 was speaking of judging a persons heart, their motives. But to test if anything is true or false it must be judged, and not according to our own wisdom, but according to the Word of God. In fact, as you read further down in Matthew chapter 7, as we saw, Jesus says we are to judge if something is of God or not. So again, in verses 1-2 of Matthew chapter 7 Jesus is speaking of judging the motives, judging a persons heart, not their actions, not what they are saying!

And we need to understand that this gift is not just using the knowledge that God has given to us to determine what is right and what is wrong, but it is the supernatural ability to, in a sense, see right to the heart of the matter. Donald Gee put it this way when he said this regarding this gift, “The essential thoughts of the word are a piercing of all that is merely outward, and seeing right through, then forming a judgment based on that insight. It is a sharp and powerful word.”

Another writer put it like this, “Discerning of spirits is the supernatural ability given by the Holy Spirit to perceive the source of a spiritual manifestation and determine whether it is of God (Acts 10:30-35), of the devil (Acts 16:16-18), of man (Acts 8:18-23), or of the world. It is not mind reading, psychic phenomena, or the ability to criticize and find fault.”

And another writer wrote, “Discernment in Scripture is the skill that enables us to differentiate. It is the ability to see issues clearly. We desperately need to cultivate this spiritual skill that will enable us to know right from wrong. We must be prepared to distinguish light from darkness, truth from error, best from better, righteousness from unrighteousness, purity from defilement, and principles from pragmatics.” (J. Stowell, *Fan The Flame*, p. 44).

Now, in saying that, there is learned discernment and then the discerning of spirits, and we will look at both of them to get a better understanding of them. You see, I think it is important that we use the learned discernment as well as the discerning of spirits so we are not taken in by false teachers, false doctrine, the false prophets that are out there who look like the genuine, but are wolves in sheep’s clothing!

DISCERNMENT

1. LEARNED DISCERNMENT

Now when we talk about learned discernment it really means just what it says. It is something that develops or grows over time. In Hebrews 5:12-14 Paul tells us, **“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”**

Paul, the writer of Hebrews is coming against those who have not matured in the Lord, those who have remained spiritual infants. They should have grown and learned how to discern between good and evil. You see, as a person grows in their relationship with God, taking the Word of God and applying it to their lives, they are exercising their faith, applying it to their lives.

We love to watch babies grow. The noises they make, the first steps they take, how they begin to speak in sentences and have a conversation with you, they go to school and they continue to grow and mature. If they never grew up, if they never learned anything, that would be tragic. Imagine a 50 year old man who is just a baby in his actions. That is not good!

And yet, when it comes to people in the church, many have remained spiritual infants or babies, they have not grown up and yes, it is the churches fault many times as they do not feed their sheep the Word of God. But you are also responsible to grow in the Lord, to mature in the faith. You need to be reading your Bible, you need to be studying the Word of God and applying it to your life. Grow up is the idea here and to grow up in the Lord!

Remember what we are told in Isaiah 8:19-20, “**And when they say to you, ‘Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter,’ should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.**”

What we see here is that God is indicting His people for turning away from the truth of God's Word and getting their truth from occult practices, experiences that are not found in the Word of God. And because of that they are lacking in spiritual discernment, in judging between good and evil, truth and lies!

Let me share this story with you from Donald Grey Barnhouse. He wrote,

There are poisons that look like crystal spring water. A glass of such poison, placed next to a glass of clear water will fool the eye; the two look exactly alike. But one has death in it, the other life. You have to discover by other means than drinking the true nature of the two liquids.

In the same way there are many things in life that are deadly, but have the seeming appearance of goodness. This is why, when you must make a choice about some pleasure, amusement, or action, you must not come to your decision on the basis of appearance.

- Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Timeless Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching*, p. 63

Again, don't go by appearance, don't go by feelings, don't go by anything but the Word of God and the Spirit of God speaking to you about the issue so you can know if it is good or bad, of God or not of God!

Now in this section on learned discernment, something that each and every Christian should be exercising like a muscle, I would like to discuss three types of false teachers or false prophets. Again, each one of us are responsible for recognizing them and not accepting that which is false, exposing that which is a lie and holding onto that which is true, that which is of God. The three areas that we are going to be examining are the *DENIERS*, the *DISTORTER'S*, and the *DECEIVERS*. As you will see, some are very obvious while others are not, but the point being, none of them are speaking for God and they are to be exposed and not followed because of that! Some of these may even overlap some, but as you will see, they are all dangerous!

A. THE DENIERS

The first group of people we are going to look at are the deniers! Now these people, these teachers are the easiest to spot. They flat out deny the faith, they reject Christ and they reject Christianity. As believers in Christ we should be able to see clearly they are not of God and yet some Christians embrace them because they are not exercising discernment, they are truly immature in the faith.

Now groups that are out-and-out deniers of the faith are Buddhist, Hindus, Muslims, the New Age, Eastern Mysticism and Mind-Science cults, the Occult such as Satanists and-so-on. These deniers of the faith should be very obvious to us as I have said.

And yet, when you look at the church today, they are embracing these deniers of the faith, they are embracing their teaching and even incorporating it into the Christian faith. That should not be, we should be ashamed of ourselves for allowing that to happen. But again, many are not discerning the truth from the lies, and they are receiving these deniers of the faith!

B. THE DISTORTER'S

The second group of people that we are going to look at is the distorter's. And these people, these teachers are a little harder to spot and yet, when you bring what they say in the light of God's Word, it is not that difficult. You see, this group teaches heresy that is many times coupled with the truth and they believe they are Christians. They may even use the same Christian jargon as we use and yet their definition of those phrases or words are completely different.

Now groups that are distorter's of the faith are the Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Christian Science, the Unification Church of Rev. Sun Myung Moon, Herbert W. Armstrong's World Wide Church of God, although it seems that the leaders are now retracting what Herbert W. Armstrong taught, and I guess time will tell if their words are genuine or not, and yes, even the Catholic Church. And of course there are others that fit into this section. When you examine what the distorter's of the truth teach, they too can be exposed as false teachers.

What has become difficult today is that these distorter's are found in the church and when you come against what they are teaching, what they are doing, people become upset. And their churches are filled with people because they either don't know how to discern the truth from the error or they just don't care! These are the distorter's of the faith!

C. THE DECEIVERS

The third group of people that we are going to look at is the deceivers. Now these people, these groups are probably the most difficult to spot. They are very subtle in the error that they teach for they mix it in with much truth. They of course look like Christians and some times they are, but other times they are nothing more than wolves in sheep clothing. When you listen to their teaching you hear about health, wealth and prosperity but never on denying yourself, taking up your cross and following Jesus. They may refer to the cross but then never preach it.

They bring New Age and Eastern Mysticism in the church claiming that the early church fathers practiced these things. That may be true, but that doesn't make it right if what they practiced went against the Word of God.

Now as difficult as these may be to expose, I again think God's Word sheds light upon their error. Let me give you an example of what I mean. Some in the church today are teaching godliness is a path to gain riches. One faith teacher has said, "Not only is worrying a sin, but being poor is a sin when God promises prosperity!"

Now what God says contradicts what they are teaching, and I think you can guess who is wrong and who is right. In I Timothy 6:5 we read Paul speak of, “**useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself.**” And notice that Paul does not say that we are to listen to them, embrace them but to withdraw yourself from them!

Also, Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:19-21, “**Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**” Thus, these men are deceivers, for their teaching is in error and leading people astray and they are exposed by the Word of God.

Another so-called prophet of God said that, “God is going to renovate the entire understanding of what Christianity is in the nations of the earth. . . . In twenty years there will be a totally different understanding of Christianity as we know it.” And yet Paul said in Galatians 1:8-9, “**But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.**” I think that is pretty clear!

“In the August 1994 issue of Charisma, Rodney Howard-Browne was quoted as saying: ‘One night I was preaching on hell, and laughter hit the whole place. The more I told people what hell was like, the more they laughed.’ On another occasion, Howard-Browne said: ‘I’d rather be in church where the devil and the flesh are manifesting than in a church where nothing is happening because people are too afraid to manifest anything. . . . And if a devil manifests, don’t worry about that, either. Rejoice, because at least something is happening.’” That should be obvious where that kind of teaching comes from, and it is not from God!

Now, listen to what Rick Warren said and you see if this is of God or not. You need to be able to use the learned discernment that God has given to you, to compare it with the pastor-teachers and teachers, what these people are saying about God and His Word. Rick Warren tells us,

In the past twenty years, spiritual seekers have changed a lot. In the first place, there are a whole lot more of them. There are seekers everywhere. I’ve never seen more people so hungry to discover and develop the spiritual dimension of their lives. That is why there is such a big interest in Eastern thought, New Age practices, mysticism and the transcendent.

- Rick Warren

Now when you hear that the hair on the back of your neck should stand up because of the things he is promoting. And there is more. He further explains what the “Emerging Church” must do in order to emerge:

Today seekers are hungry for symbols and metaphors and experiences and stories that reveal the greatness of God. Because seekers are constantly changing, we must be sensitive to them like Jesus was; we must be willing to meet them on their own turf and speak to them in ways they understand.

- Rick Warren

You see, we can't understand God from His Word any longer, we must go to New Age practices, Eastern thought using symbols and metaphors and experiences and stories that speak of God. But the Word of God is not from God, they are just stories, metaphors that we can learn from! That is very dangerous and will destroy many lives if you follow his teachings!

Let me share this with you from a book called *The Stormy Search for Self*, by New Age authors Christina and Stanislov Grof. In this book they describe how strange behavior can be triggered by an advanced spiritual leader or guru. They said: “Individuals involved in this process might find it difficult to control their behavior; during powerful rushes of Kundalini energy (the serpent force) people often emit various involuntary sounds, and their bodies move in strange and unexpected patterns. Among the most common manifestations are unmotivated and unnatural laughter or crying, talking in tongues and imitating a variety of animal sounds and movements.” That should not only shock many people but it should be a warning to those who are involved in these practices!

Also, in the Hindu world or faith, “Many well-known practitioners of the ‘shaktipat’ have sat with large crowds of their devotees, waved their hands and people have collapsed in ecstatic laughter. When Rajneesh, the deceased cult leader of Oregon, touched his followers, they convulsed in laughter, shook uncontrollably and passed out. The recipients said they all felt such intense peace and joy.” Sounds like what is going on in some churches today!

ABC news aired a Prime-Time television special several years ago that was hosted by Peter Jennings and was titled, "In The Name Of God." And listen to what this unsaved host said to his audience in regards to churches who are seeking, "to attract sellout crowds [and they] are in danger of selling out the gospel." An interesting statement he made and he went on to say that these changes that are occurring in the church, the seeker friendly church, the laughing in the spirit and all the strange and unbiblical manifestations associated with it may be, "compromising the essence of Christianity."

I find it very interesting that an unsaved news reporter has the insight to question these things while a majority in the church sits in silence, not exercising any kind of discernment. More than a century ago Abraham Kuyper wrote these words, and we would be wise to listen to them and heed his warning. He said, "When principles that run against your deepest convictions begin to win the day, then battle is your calling, and peace has become sin; you must, at the price of dearest peace, lay your convictions bare before friend and enemy, with all the fire of your faith."

It is not time to sit back and allow these false teachings to come into the church by the deniers, by the distorter's and by the deceivers! Yes, we are to expose these lies in love, but we are to expose them also at any cost. It doesn't matter what people may think, if what is being taught is contrary to God's Word, it is false and to ignore it or accept it is wrong!

And please understand that learned discernment is not only to gain head knowledge but to take those truths of God and apply them to our lives. Learning what is good and what is evil and holding on to the good and standing against that which is evil. The church today is lacking this, and the words of Jesus spoken of in Luke 18:8 are an eerie call for us to stand up for what we believe in. Jesus said, “**... Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?**”

The deception is only going to get worse and worse and many will be taken in because they have not grown in the Lord, they have not matured and thus, they cannot discern good from evil! Learned discernment is an important part of our Christian life, may we not take it too lightly or ignore what God is saying to us!

2. THE GIFT OF DISCERNING OF SPIRITS

When we speak of the gift of the discerning of spirits we need to understand that this is different than learned discernment in that the discerning of spirits is a supernatural ability to see right to the heart of the matter, to judge whether a teaching or a person is of God or not. It is a non-verbal revelation that the Holy Spirit gives to you, bearing witness with your spirit, that this person is not of God, the teaching is in error, their motives are wrong, there is pride or bitterness in their heart, not to place them in a ministry at this time or not at all. It is not the word of knowledge but just a feeling in your heart that something is not right.

Paul speaks of this gift in I Corinthians 12:7-11, as he wrote, **“But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.”**

Now before I show you how this is manifested in the Scriptures, let me show you what this gift is not. Listen carefully to what this person is saying. We are told,

What is the gift of discerning of spirits?

Discerning of spirits is the God-given ability to detect the presence of and the identity of spirits. It gives supernatural insight into the realm of “spirits.” It’s not just a discerning of devils or evil spirits, but a discerning of both good and evil spirits.

Many times when I’m ministering, the Lord will speak to me and give me the name or names of demonic spirits that are operating within an individual’s life. He doesn’t do this to embarrass the person, but He reveals specific things so that the individual can be set free from the control or power of those spirits. It’s not God’s will that His people live in spiritual bondage when He has made a way of escape.

- Donna Kazenske, The Gift of Discerning of Spirits

This is not at all what this gift is all about. First of all it is not the ability to identify demons or to give them names, like the demon of baldness or whatever! Secondly, Christians cannot be possessed by demons because the Lord is on the throne of our lives. We can be oppressed but not possessed and there is a big difference. And to know what are good spirits and what are bad spirits, really? We need to know what is of God and what isn't and again, that is not what this gift is all about. Let me show you in the Scriptures the operation of this gift.

A. JESUS SEE'S THEIR HEART - JOHN 8

In John chapter 8, after Jesus shared with them that He was the light of the world, that He is God, we read in verse 30, “**As He spoke these words, many believed in Him.**” Now you would think, “Great, they got saved!” Yes, from a human perspective of things, that is what it looks like; you would have no reason to doubt them.

And yet Jesus is going to press them for He saw their heart, exercising the gift of discernment. Now as much as they said they believed, their hearts were far from God. For as Jesus questioned them they became defensive, said that Jesus was an illegitimate child, having a demon in Him, and picked up stones to kill him. This is an excellent example of Jesus exercising this gift, the discerning of spirits as He saw into the heart of the matter and he brought it to the surface!

B. JESUS KNEW ALL MEN - JOHN 2:23-25, 6:64

The Scriptures tell us that Jesus knew all men; He knew what was inside of them. An example of this is found in John 2:23-25 where we are told, **“Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.”** Jesus knew who were His and who were not. He knew those that were false.

In fact, in John 6:64 we read, **“But there are some of you who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him.”** Jesus knew that Judas would betray Him, and yet He kept extending His love to Him. Many people today say they follow the Lord, are doing the work of the Lord, and yet they don’t know Him, they are not one of His. The parable of the wheat and the tares speaks clearly on this. They look just like us and it won’t be until the harvest time that the truth of the matter will be known unless the Holy Spirit reveals that information regarding some individuals. And at times He does as you are talking with someone and they are speaking of the Lord and yet you know that they don’t know Jesus, there is something wrong and you can’t figure out what, but God’s Spirit is showing you!

C. PETER SEE'S SIMON'S HEART - ACTS 8:9-23

In Acts chapter 8 Philip goes down to Samaria and revival breaks out, people are getting saved. And we read starting in verse 9 of Acts chapter 8, **“But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is the great power of God.’ And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.”** Acts 8:9-13.

Again, the logical conclusion is that Simon is saved. He believed and was baptized. On the surface everything looked good. And that was the problem it was all on the surface, his heart was far from God. Now if I was down in Samaria and said that about Simon I would be called, “unloving”, “judgmental”, but listen to what transpired as Peter came down to Samaria.

Beginning in verse 18 of Acts chapter 8 we read, “**And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’ But Peter said to him, ‘Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.’**” Acts 8:18-23.

Peter comes in and exposes this false believer. He tells him that his heart is not right with God, that it is filled with bitterness and he is still bound in sin. The only way Peter could have known this is that the Holy Spirit revealed it to him; He showed Peter that something was not right in Simon’s heart, even though Philip saw nothing wrong and allowed him to be baptized.

D. PAUL EXPOSES A FALSE PROPHET - ACTS 13:9-12

In Acts chapter 13 we met a person who is called Bar-Jesus, or the son of Jesus. The problem was that it was in name only, he was not a believer and beginning in verse 9 of Acts chapter 13 we read, **“Then Saul, who also is called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, ‘O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord? And now, indeed, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind, not seeing the sun for a time.’ And immediately a dark mist fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had been done, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord.”** Acts 13:9-12. Paul discerned that this guy was not of God and he was not afraid to stand up and say so!

Now in saying that we must also be careful that we don't allow jealousy, criticism, suspicion, or hate to be called discernment. Feelings are subjective and we need to be careful and make sure that what we are saying is from God, that our hearts are right and we are walking in the Spirit, not in the flesh. On the other hand, if the Holy Spirit has spoken to your heart, then you need to stand up for the truth, and speak it forth. The only way the church is going to remain pure is by using learned discernment and also this supernatural gift of discerning of spirits.

As I begin to rap this study up let me share with you a few more Scriptures in regards to this gift and that it should be exercised in the church today. First of all we see that in one of the seven letters that Jesus wrote in the book of Revelation, to the church in Ephesus, they are applauded for practicing this gift. In Revelation 2:2 we are told, “**I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars.**” You see, they used the gift of learned discernment and may have even used the gift of discernment to expose those who said they were apostles and were not!

On the other end of the spectrum, and again in one of these seven letters found in the book of Revelation that Jesus wrote, this time to the church in Thyatira, they were slack in practicing this gift and using the learned discernment they should have had. We are told in Revelation 2:20, “**Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.**” You see, Jesus is reprimanding this church for not using the learned discernment and also probably for not using the gift of discernment to expose the lies that were coming into the church!

And so I believe that this gift as well as the learned discernment that God has given us is to be exercised in the church today. You see, this gift of the discerning of spirits is needed even in the church today, to test the spirits, the teachings to see if they are of God or if they are truly doctrines of demons! To make sure that what is spoken, what is taught, what people are doing is consistent, is in accordance to the Word of God!

Let me leave you with this thought from Jeremiah 5:30-31 where we read, “**An astonishing and horrible thing has been committed in the land: The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end?**” Is this not speaking to the church in America today! Why are false prophets and false teachers always around? Because there are people that don't want to hear the truth but do love to have their ears tickled. People love to hear positive things today just like back in Jeremiah's day. He was preaching of the coming judgment and the people didn't want to hear that negative message and tried to silence him. But in the end the message the false prophets gave was empty and so too will be the false message of health, wealth and prosperity teachers, it is empty. The message of Seeker Friendly and Purpose Driven is empty as well. And so to is the message of the Emerging Church and whatever other false doctrine, false teaching comes down the pike! Let us be wise and use discernment that God has given to us and also the supernatural gift of discerning of spirits. It is truly needed in our lives and in the church today! The gift of the discerning of spirits!