

Jason Upchurch - 1 Corinthians 12:10 - The Spirit's Gift of Discernment and Tongues

As we study this portion of the Word of God this morning, I want to remind us that understanding spiritual gifts properly is not just an interesting side note in the Christian life. It's really central to our understanding of who God is.

These gifts are all given by God the Holy Spirit. As much as we understand them correctly, we understand and worship him correctly. As much as we misunderstand them, we misunderstand him. I think it's safe to say that the Holy Spirit is the least understood person of the Trinity but in these few chapters we have his work in our lives on fully display and my hope is that as we understand these better we will grow in our worship of him more.

I know this has been a little slower than usual, but I hope it's been helpful to you to unpack these different spiritual gifts a little more in depth.

For many years I sort of looked at spiritual gifts like going to a buffet restaurant. "I'll take that one and that one, that one looks good. I'll pass on those ones and I'm not even going to the salad bar or the Chinese food station."

Like I get to pick and choose what gets put before me. No, as we've seen, it's the Holy Spirit, by his own sovereign will, who decides who gets what gift.

We don't get to decide that. We can ask for gifts and we should desire gifts, but we don't get to determine who gets what. Which is pretty cool when you think about it: The Holy Spirit has given each of us - and our church as a whole - the exact mix of gifts he sees fit. He's given us the right amount of people equipped with mercy and service and faith and teaching. No more and no less. We might want different gifts or want people with other gifts to come to our church. But he determines all of that for our good and his glory.

All these gifts are for the building up of the church and for the glory of God so whatever we have here we can rejoice in.

1) Discerning of spirits.

This gift is another gift, like words of wisdom or words of knowledge, that we wish we had a little more information on. Like those 2 gifts, this is the only place the gift is specifically mentioned and there is no other explicit description beyond the phrase itself.

The good news is that we might have a few more puzzle pieces we have to get the whole picture of what this gift is.

Now, first let me say, that I don't believe this gift is simply being discerning. Discernment is the ability to tell the difference between truth and error. Light and darkness. I don't think that's what Paul is getting at here because all Christians are called to be discerning.

If you are a Christian you should be growing in your ability to tell the difference between what God says is true and right and godly and what is error and wrong and ungodly.

In the book of Hebrews the author is frustrated that the believers he's writing to are still babies in the faith. Listen to what he says:

Heb. 5:11-14: About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

He's frustrated that these Christians have not matured as they ought to have. All Christians are expected to grow in maturity. To wean off the proverbial milk of simple doctrine and teaching and grow in our comprehensive understanding of the Bible and to eventually be able to teach others.

Our little baby's whole diet right now is milk. And that's good and he's growing. But imagine that if in 7 years he was still only drinking milk from a bottle. We wouldn't be excited about that, would we? We'd be gravely concerned for his health and development.

The reality is that many Christians are in the faith for 5, 10, 20 years and they don't ever seem mature in the faith and have no ability to discern between good and evil. They struggle to work through very basic moral questions. They struggle to understand very basic doctrinal questions. They have no advance in their biblical understanding. That's a scary place to be in because if someone doesn't grow for years you have to ask: are they truly a believer?

Phil 1:9: Paul prays that "their love may abound more and more with all knowledge and discernment."

Biblical loves actually matures and grows over time in it's ability to accurately reflect God's love in knowing what is good and right and true.

Eph. 5:10 we are called to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. It's not always easy. The situations in our lives are complex and we need to carefully work through what is pleasing to God.

We are **all** called to this. Why do I bring all this up?

Because there are some who believe that the gift Paul is describing here is just a generic gift of discernment. As though the Spirit only equips some people with this ability.

But all Christians are called to be discerning - this isn't a gift for just a few people. Biblical discernment is the filtering system of the church and all believers are called to grow in their discernment.

So what's Paul talking about here? Here's the best I can tell about this gift of distinguishing of spirits: The ability to determine the spiritual source of prophecies.

This is not a hill I would die on, but when we put some pieces together it seems as though what Paul is describing is a companion gift to prophecy. This is like the filtering mechanism for those who have the gift of prophecy.

Remember, from last time, we saw that prophecies are often weird and unusual. Even prophecies we have written down in the Bible. And that the church is called to not despise prophecies. We're not to hate them, but desire them. Why would need that command? Because they're often weird.

Well, when you have a weird prophesy how do you know if it's from God or not? How do you know if it's true?

One way, for sure, is to measure it against the Word of God. We all have this ability. But because of the nature of prophesy, even when we do that, it doesn't appear that it's always immediately obvious who it's from. And so it seems that the Lord has gifted some believers to be able to instantly determine the spiritual source of prophecies, whether they are from the Holy Spirit or from Satan.

So that's what I think this gift is: It's the ability to determine the true source of a prophecy.

The phrase here is "distinguishing of spirits." Spirits is the word we should key in on. What we have to understand is that all around us is an unseen spiritual world. And there are good spirits and bad spirits.

The Holy Spirit animates believers for the glory of God, but there are other spirits, demonic spirits that animate unbelievers. Maybe even people who claim to be believers and are in the church, but are not actually believers and they might give prophecies too.

Look back to **Matt. 7:21-23** for a moment. This is the scary portion of Scripture where Jesus basically says that not everyone who cries out to him saying “Lord, Lord” is actually a believer. But look at what’s going on here. **Read 21-23**

First, let me say that the reason Jesus says he never knew them is because they were dedicated to lawlessness. They never truly repented from their sins, they loved darkness rather than light. They called Jesus “Lord” with their lips, but their hearts were far from him.

But notice what they point to as supposed evidence that they are saved. “Did we not prophesy, cast out demons, and do many mighty works.”

They point to these works - all of which would have been amazing. They would have been supernaturally powerful works. Exorcism which is the casting out of demons. Mighty works, probably healings of various kinds. And here’s what we need to understand: they probably really did these things, otherwise they wouldn’t have pointed to them as evidence to Jesus. This was real power working through them.

But where did the power come from? It didn’t come from Jesus. It didn’t come from the Holy Spirit. Who did it come from? Satan and his demons.

They cast out demons, did many mighty works and what’s the third? They prophesied. These would have been false prophesies. They would have appeared to the people of God to be legitimate and right and good - at least on the surface. But what was animating those prophesies were demonic spirits, not the Holy Spirit. Jesus says “I **never** knew you.” Not even once did he know them - he didn’t produce these works in them. Satan produced them.

So unbelievers can prophesy, it might seem legitimate at least for a time.

Look at **1 John 4:1-6**. Here we have almost the same language. And there’s a call to be discerning with spirits. **Read 1-6**

John says test the spirits. And what he means is test what people say to us because what they say is animated by spiritual realities - either from God or from Satan.

Now, this is a command for all believers, Like I said before, we all have the truth of the Word of God so we can all do this.

But I don’t think it’s a coincidence that discernment and prophesy are put together here. Test the spirits to see whether they are from God. Not all prophesies are from God. They need to be tested. They need to be sifted. They always have.

Deut. 13:1-4: If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him.

God wants all prophets to be tested. He always has.

It seems as though in the NC he has given an amazing gift instantly discern the origin of prophecies: the gift of discerning spirits.

Look at one more place with me. **1 Cor. 14:26-40**. Here’s where I think we actually have this gift in practice. Now, this is an interesting section, but let me sketch out what I think we see here, then we’ll read it and put the pieces together.

In the Corinthian church there would be people who would stand up and speak in tongues. And that was fine as long as there were only 2 or 3 and as long as there was an interpreter. We'll talk more about that later.

Well, the same thing was true with prophecy. Prophets could speak - two or three at the most - but there'd be an evaluation of that prophecy. Was that message really from the Holy Spirit or was that from some other spirit?

And it seems like that sifting process - at least when the church gathered - was reserved for men. Women, it seems, are not allowed to speak in judgment of those prophecies because that would be exercising authority over men.

So let's read this and unpack it a little more. **Read 26-40**

So when the church is gathered, two or three prophets can speak - that's **Vs. 29. Verse 31** says the purpose of prophesy is to be an encouragement. That's the whole point. It's not to be weird or crazy - even though apparently it can seem odd sometimes. God works in people with this gift to encourage the church.

But those who prophesy are to be evaluated. Just because someone has the gift doesn't somehow mean they are above being held accountable. There's no "Well, God told me so that's that." No, there's "I've got this revelation and I'm not sure if it's from God. So here it is, what do the others think?" There's a humility in knowing they could be wrong.

And then, in the middle of all this discussion there's this really weird pause where Paul talks about women being silent in the church. And then he comes back and talks about prophecy again. What's up with that? Why's that there? Is this a blanket prohibition against women saying anything at all in church?

No I don't think it is. Paul says clearly in chapter 11 that women can pray - use their words - or prophesy in the church. They should have their head covered if their married. But he clearly expects them to be doing this. So this isn't a blanket prohibition.

Why's it here? Well, I think it's here - and most scholars think it's here - because when someone evaluates a prophesy it's a role of authority. **Vs. 32** says that the spirits of the prophets are subject to - submissive to - the prophets. There's a submission and authority issue at stake.

If you stand up and give a prophecy and a couple of people in the church with the gift of distinguishing of spirits say "Uh, that ain't from Jesus" then you sit down and be quiet in submission to them. So prophets are submissive to people who would publicly judging their prophecies.

Why mention women? Because it's improper for women to fulfill that role. **1 Tim. 2:12**: I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man.

I think this little side note is Paul saying, "Look, prophecies need to be evaluated, but when the church is gathered they're not evaluated by women because women are not allowed to have authority over men in the church."

Since there's an issue of submission and authority, women are to be silent. If they have questions about what a prophet said they can ask their husbands about it later.

So this is not a blanket prohibition on women speaking in church. It's a prohibition against them authoritatively evaluating prophecies in the church.

The context seems to make that abundantly clear because Paul talks about prophecy and evaluation, side notes to women, then comes back to prophecy. This isn't a random side note, this is in the context of evaluating what's being said. **Read 36-40**

Paul says “If you’re really filled with the Holy Spirit, you’ll agree with these things because these are commands directly from God.”

What do we do with this gift? Well, let me say inasmuch as God still gives the gift of prophecy I think he still gives the gift of distinguishing between spirits. It does seem as though prophecy as a gift is less frequent than it was in the past and so I’d venture to say distinguishing of spirits is less frequent as well.

I don’t think this is intuition or street smarts about strangers. This isn’t just having a feeling about people or being really precise with your theology - which is a good thing. I think there are people whom the Spirit empowers that can more quickly tell if someone is speaking on behalf of the Holy Spirit or the spirit of Satan.

What does this look like? I honest to goodness have no idea except to say that when someone comes saying they have a revelation from God, and your response is strong and you don’t know exactly why, that might be a good indication to be cautious with what this other person is saying.

Alright, that was a lot of time on this one gift.

Speaking in Tongues:

Because speaking in tongues is such a big issue in modern Christian society, I want to spend some time on it. What I want to do this morning is just give an overview of the gift from a purely biblical perspective. And then next week we’ll flesh this gift out a little more. **Read 10**

Let me give you my definition: Supernatural ability to speak in a language that you’ve never learned. And, you might not even understand what you’re saying in that language.

Now, let me just say that the phrase “speaking in tongues” is a very unusual phrase because it implies something really odd.

In Greek, the phrase is literally “speaking in languages.” The Greek word is glossa which could be refer to the physical tongue - the organ in your mouth. That’s not what we’re talking about.

Or it could be the set of sounds and words that make up a language. That’s what we’re getting at. This is the supernatural ability to speak in known languages that you’ve never learned.

We see it played out 3 times in the book of Acts and each time they’re all basically the same phenomenon. Let’s go there and take a look. **Turn to Acts 2:1-13.**

Remember that this is shortly after Jesus has ascended into heaven. He said that shortly they would receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. So this is the day of Pentecost, 50 days after the crucifixion of Jesus. And this is the day when the Spirit comes upon the believers. They’re all sitting in a room hiding for fear of being persecuted. **Read 1-13**

So here’s what happened. In Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost you had Jews come from all over the world Mediterranean world to celebrate. They all came to Jerusalem because that’s where you celebrated Jewish feasts. So you’ve got these guys from all over the world who are in town.

At the same time, you have the disciples of Jesus also in Jerusalem basically hiding for fear of persecution. And they’re praying together and Spirit comes upon them in this unusual way. Tongues of fire are hanging over their heads and they begin to speak in other languages.

And this important: these are all known languages. They start speaking in the languages of all these other Jewish people. And they understand them!

You can count them up, but Luke lists 17 different languages that are being spoken by the followers of Jesus. This was amazing because Jesus’s followers are basically all from Galilee. These were country boys from up north who wouldn’t have been learned a lot of other languages. They spoke Aramaic because that’s what Jews

spoke locally in Israel. And they spoke Greek, because that was what everyone spoke in the Roman world. They probably also were educated in Hebrew, but Hebrew was only spoken in the synagogue.

They wouldn't have known these other languages. But they are speaking them to the whole crowd.

And this isn't gobbledygook. Somehow they are genuinely speaking the languages they've never learned and the people from out of town are amazed. **Read 7, 12**

Now, here's the interesting thing, not everyone is understanding what's being said. The folks from out of town understand. But it seems that the local Jews don't understand. They think the disciples are all drunk. **Read 12-15**

So all the out of owners understand, but you've got others who don't understand. And to them, because they don't understand these foreign languages, it sounds like the disciples of Jesus are all drunk. You ever heard a drunk person try to talk? It's a mess. It sounds a whole lot like someone speaking a foreign language you don't understand.

So what's happening is that the disciples are speaking in these foreign languages, but not in the language of the local Jews. The local Jews are getting cut out of what's going on.

Why? Why would God use a gift like this? What's point?

We'll learn more later in **1 Cor. 14**, but the gift of languages - or tongues - is partly an act of judgment on Israel. It's God basically saying, "You rejected my Son Jesus, so I'm going to send my praise out of Israel and into the whole world in their language."

Paul says that this gift - as much as it encourages the church - is act a sign for unbelievers.

And interestingly, the three times we see people speak in tongues, it's not used in evangelism to break down some kind of language barrier. You'll hear people say "Well, maybe God would give this gift for missionaries to overcome language barriers." But we never see that. Two of the three times in Acts it's simply an act of praise to God, almost as though God is saying "See, my glory is going to be celebrated in all languages."

And what we see in the book of Acts is the gospel spreading throughout the whole of the Roman world into all these other languages. I mean think about this: we come together and praise Jesus in a language that didn't even exist when Jesus was alive and we are about as far from Jerusalem as you can get.

So the local Jews don't understand what's being said; God is judging them. The out of owners all understand and want to know ore about Jesus.

That's when Peter gets up, gives his speech and 3,000 people come to faith in Jesus in a single day.

Turn to Acts 10. This is important because here we have the conversion of a man named Cornelius. Cornelius was not a Jew, he was a Gentile who feared God.

But what we learn is that the Holy Spirit is poured out on this man and his whole household simply because they believe in Jesus. The Spirit does not come based on works or circumcision. **Read 10:44-48**

This is amazing! God is saving Gentiles - how do we know? How do we know it wasn't a false profession of faith? Because they begin speaking in languages. Again, this is not an evangelism thing. The people speaking in tongues are those who just got saved. They are extolling God - praising God.

This was a huge deal in the church. Chapter 11 is a big church council about why exactly Peter would dare to go to a Gentile and baptize him. Peter says, the Spirit came on them just like he came on us. It was proof of salvation.

Turn to Acts 19:1-7. Here we have the same kind of thing except it's with Paul. He gets to Ephesus - he's a long ways from home. And he comes across some people who know about John the Baptist but not about Jesus or the Holy Spirit. **Read 1-7**

So they hear about Jesus and believe. Paul lays his hands on them as a sign of his apostolic authority and they begin speaking in tongues and prophesying. Why did they do that? It showed they were genuinely in the New Covenant through faith in Jesus.

These 3 instances are the only descriptions we have. We know that since Paul is talking about speaking in tongues in Corinth it happened other places, but this is the gift.

Supernatural ability to speak in a language that you've never learned. And, you might not even understand what you're saying in that language.

We'll come back next week and flesh this out more.

Pray