

The Gift of Discernment

by Chuck Smith

Chuck Smith's sermon emphasizes the importance of the gift of discernment in navigating the spiritual realm and recognizing false teachings.

Scripture: Matthew 4:10, 1 Corinthians 12:10

Topics: "Discernment", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

Chuck Smith emphasizes the significance of the gift of discernment in understanding the spirit world that coexists with our material reality. He explains that while the Holy Spirit guides us towards truth, there are also deceptive spirits that can lead us astray, making discernment crucial for our spiritual journey. Through biblical examples, including the story of Simon the sorcerer and the young prophet in 1 Kings, Smith illustrates the dangers of failing to discern the spirits and the importance of being vigilant against false prophets. He encourages believers to seek the Holy Spirit's guidance to navigate these spiritual challenges and to develop a keen sense of discernment in their lives.

Transcript

As Paul is listing the various manifestations and gifts of the Spirit for us, in 1 Corinthians 12:10. He tells us, "To another discerning of spirits." There is a spirit world that is just as real as the material world in which we live.

Scientists say that there is much more space in an atom than there is solid matter. In a hydrogen atom, which is made up of one proton and a single electron revolving around it, there is so much space that if you would enlarge the proton to the size of a baseball, the electron would be about the size of a BB. The electron would be rotating around the proton at the rate of 10,000 miles a second, but it would be ten miles away. That is how much space there is in an atom of hydrogen. It is 30,000 times the diameter of the mass. Now if the earth was as a proton and the moon was an electron--if there was the same distance between the earth and the moon as there is between the proton and the electron of a hydrogen atom, the moon would be a thousand times further away from the earth than it is right now.

If all of the atoms in your body would suddenly collapse there would be no more space between the solid matter and we would have to get a powerful microscope to find you. You would be a microscopic speck of dust. The problem is you would still weigh the same as you do now.

Scientists talk about the density of atoms. And we know that there are dwarf stars whose density is much greater than that of the atoms here on the earth. There is a star of the first magnitude called Sirius. In 1888 they discovered that it was actually a double star. It is also called the Dog Star. The smaller of the two is called the pup. It is a dwarf star that seems to rotate around the major star as it orbits out there in our universe. But they say the density of Sirius B (or the pup) is so great that one cubic inch of it would weigh 1,750 pounds.

Now there is another star out there called Van Manen that is even much denser than Sirius B. One cubic inch of it would weigh twelve and a half tons. Now imagine if a small meteorite from that particular star would happen to hit the earth, and you saw it as a pebble on the sidewalk you decided to kick it off! And as dense as the star is, it is still in a gaseous state; there is still a lot of space between the solid matter (the solid parts being the protons, neutrons, and electrons).

Because there is so much space in an atom, some say that it is theoretically possible for two worlds to coexist at the same time and at the same place--both of them passing through each other and both of them unconscious of the other's existence. All it would take is for them to be made up of a different molecular structure.

Now in a sense that is what the Bible teaches--that there are two worlds coexisting, passing through each other. For the most part we are not conscious of that other world. However, the Scripture tells us that the other world (the spirit world) is very conscious of us. The spirit dimension is made up of a different structure. Probably the resurrected body of Jesus was of a different molecular structure. When the disciples were gathered in a room with the doors shut and locked, suddenly Jesus appeared in the room with them. So that this world of spirits is a very real world. And it has a tremendous influence on all of our lives. And the influence can be either for good or for evil.

The Bible teaches us in Matthew 4:10-11 concerning angels that:

He will give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee: And in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.

Concerning the angels, Hebrews 1:14 declares:

Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?

And we are aware of the Holy Spirit and His influence upon our life for good. He is convicting us of sin and drawing us to Jesus Christ. This is the beautiful work of that Holy Spirit and the influence of the Holy Spirit in molding, and shaping, and forming us into the image of Jesus.

But there is another realm of spirit beings that are opposed to your walk in Christ. And these spirit beings can be a very negative influence upon you. As Paul the Apostle wrote,

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. (Ephesians 6:12)

And so there is a battle that goes on, a spiritual battle and we (all of us) experience this spiritual battle. And these forces or spirits of darkness can create a real problem for us as we seek to walk after the Spirit of God.

Now the thing about the evil spirits is that they are able to come on as angels of light. And thus it is possible for a person to be deceived by these evil spirits who, as 2 Corinthians 11 says, "Satan is able to transform himself as an angel of light." His ministers are able also to do so and that is why we need to have the gift of discerning of spirits.

Now have you ever met people who seemed to be all right--what they said was fine. You watch them and they seem to do the right things, but yet you had an uneasy feeling about them? There was just something that you could not define and you could not describe. There was just an uncomfortable feeling around them. And then later on you discover that it was just all a charade with them. There was no reality of a walk or a relationship with the Lord and you understand why you had that feeling of discomfort when you were around them.

That is the way the gift of discernment of spirits operates. There is just something that is not quite right. It is sort of an intangible thing. You cannot really put your finger on it always. But I have discovered that one of the difficult things in having the discerning of spirits is that if a person does not have the discernment of spirits you cannot understand why they can be so gullible. It is so plain. It is so obvious. You say, "Can you not see?"

This gift of the discerning of spirits apparently was in operation in the church in Ephesus. For as Jesus addresses the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2, He commends them because they had tried those who claimed to be apostles and were not, and they found them to be liars.

But the most classic use of the gift of discerning of spirits is probably found in Acts 8. When Philip had gone to Samaria and preached Christ unto them and there was a genuine revival, many believed and were baptized when they saw the miracles that Philip did. Among those who believed and were baptized was a man by the name of Simon, who before Philip's coming was a sorcerer and he was held in great awe by the people. They thought that he had the power of God in his life. But when Simon saw the miracles, he wondered at the miracles that Philip was able to do and he believed and was baptized.

Then we read that when the church in Jerusalem had heard that the Samaritans had also received the gospel, they sent unto them Peter and John, for as yet the Holy Spirit had not come upon them. They had not had this release, the outflow, the over-pouring, or what many term the "baptism" of the Holy Spirit. So that, Peter and John came and laid their hands upon the Samaritan believers and they received the Holy Spirit.

Now when this Simon saw that through the laying on of hands by Peter and John, that the Holy Spirit was imparted to these Samaritan believers, he desired to have this power. From the context he evidently offered money to Peter and John. He sought to buy this power. In the realm of the magicians there is the selling of the tricks. "How did you do that?" And with many of their magical tricks--the secrets of how they do it are for sale. The magicians will buy tricks from one another. This has been going on as long as people have been tricking each other--that is the buying of the inside information.

And evidently this thing with Simon was something like that. He had been into sorcery. He had been used to fooling people or deceiving people, and working seemingly magic tricks. And now here is something that he cannot quite figure out. All Peter and John are doing is laying hands on these people and they are receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. Simon said, "I would like to do that. How do you do it? What would you charge me for that one?"

So Peter said unto him,

Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. (Acts 8:20)

Peter was reading the spirit of the man. Although he had joined company with the people who were being saved, followed into baptism, and was there with Philip, yet his heart was not right in the sight of God. And so Peter said,

Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. (Acts 8:22)

So here Peter was exercising the gift of discernment of spirits, as he saw that the spirit that Simon had was wrong. His heart was wrong. And he encourages him to repent. He said,

For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity. (Acts 8:23)

It is quite possible that down in his heart he was jealous that the attention that he once had (the power that he once had over these people) was being diverted to Peter and to Jesus Christ, who Philip was preaching. And thus, he thought that if he could buy this power, he could again get the people under his control. But in his heart there was bitterness; there was this gall of bitterness and there was the bond of iniquity.

Now throughout the Scriptures we are told that we are to try the spirits to see if they be of God. And there are many prophets who have gone out into the world who are not of God. And therefore it is important that we have the discernment of spirits, so that we are able to try the spirits. As in the church at Ephesus, when someone comes along and claims to be an apostle, we have that capacity of spiritual discernment and we can find them to be liars.

Throughout the Scriptures there are the warnings concerning the false prophets--those who would come in the name of God and supposedly speak the word of God. But God said so many times that He did not send them. He did not speak through them. And He denied the words that they were saying as coming from Him.

There is sort of a dilemma because today there are many false prophets who are gaining a great amount of notoriety. As a shepherd over the flock of God, I feel a certain responsibility of warning the flock of God concerning some of these false prophets. The problem is this: the minute I begin to give names and incidences and proofs that a person is a false prophet, then there are always those weaker souls who are offended. And they say, "Oh, how can you say that about brother so and so? I was blessed by his ministry. I was healed when I reached out and touched the television set. I have been supporting him." So, many times it is difficult to warn the people of things that you know or understand. Sometimes you know by the Spirit and just sometimes by observation and sometimes you know by information that is coming to you.

We had an evangelist who came to our church when we were pastoring in Tucson many years ago. And he was fleecing the flock of God. He was fleecing the flock that God had put me over. I was very, very young in the ministry. In fact, this was just the second church that I had pastored. But both Kay and I recognized that this fellow was just plain fleecing our flock. Now I think there was a bit of discernment involved, but yet there were other big clues. He was praying for a badly-needed new pair of shoes, size nine, black wingtips, and one of our sweet members brought those shoes to him the next night. He said,

"Oh praise the Lord." I said, "No, no, no! Do not praise the Lord. Thank them. You know, everybody heard your prayer." He was a very humorous man in his preaching and many people were taken in by him. But he was obviously fleecing the people and they just did not seem to realize it.

We had an elder in the church--and to show you how long ago it was--it was the time when tape recordings were just coming in. Now prior to that they had wire recorders. And they would record on little wires. But the wire recording industry did not last very long. It was very short-lived because they soon had the tape recorders. But this evangelist had a wire recorder. It was not working and of course it was fast becoming obsolete. And he wanted to buy a new state-of-the-art tape recorder.

So one elder had invited him out to dinner at their home, which was a very lovely, hospitable thing to do. But the evangelist told him all about this wire recorder that he had and he would make him a real good deal on it. Which really was not a good deal, but he made out like it was a good deal. So that night before service, the elder said, "You know the evangelist was over and I am buying his wire recorder." I said, "Be careful, that thing does not work." And I said, "It is obsolete. You probably will not be able to get the parts to fix it."

Well, he went around the church telling people that I was jealous of the evangelist. And you know, I was young and he was an older evangelist and skilled and all. They said that I was just jealous because he was such a good preacher. About a month later the elder came to me and he said, "I have had that recorder in the shop for repair and the fellow said he cannot get parts. Do you have any idea where I might be able to get the parts for that?" I said, "I told you." As I said, the difficulty with the gift of discernment is when you can see something so clearly and others just cannot seem to see it.

Now Jesus warned in Matthew's Gospel,

For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. (Matthew 24:24)

That is why it is extremely important to have the gift of the discernment of spirits. You cannot always tell a false prophet by what he says. Many times what he says is 99% correct and that is what makes them so dangerous. You cannot always tell them by their actions. Here Jesus said they are going to do great signs and wonders.

Peter warned that:

But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not. (2 Peter 2:1-3)

But here is a key: through their feigned words they will make merchandise of you (that is, take advantage of you financially). Through feigned or false words--through flattery or whatever--their whole motive is just to make merchandise of you.

Paul, writing to Timothy said,

If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself. (1 Timothy 6:3-5)

Those who would teach you that godliness is a path to riches are false prophets. Paul warns us against them.

Now there is a classic story in the Old Testament that perhaps better than any other, warns us of the dangers of not discerning the spirits. And that is found in 1 Kings 13. It was the time when Jeroboam was the king of Israel in the northern confederacy. And Jeroboam was a wicked king. He had led the people in idolatry. He would offer himself sacrifices and incense at the altars of the pagan gods. There was a young prophet who had come from Judah--the southern tribe. And Jeroboam was there offering incense before the altar and we read that this young prophet cried against the altar in the word of the Lord and said,

Oh altar, altar, thus saith the Lord, "Behold a child shall be born unto the house of David, Josiah by name, and upon thee shall he offer the priest of the high places that burn incense upon thee and men's bones shall be burnt upon thee." (1 Kings 13:2)

This is an interesting prophecy concerning this altar to the pagan god in the nation of Israel. "Altar, altar, your priests will be burnt upon you and men's bones." And that prophecy was later literally fulfilled.

And he gave a sign the same day, saying, "This is the sign which the Lord has spoken. Behold the altar shall be rent and, the ashes that are upon it shall be poured out." And it came to pass when King Jeroboam heard the saying of the man of God which had cried against the altar in Bethel that he put forth his hand from the altar, saying, "Lay hold on him." And his hand which he put forth against him, dried up, so that he could not pull it in again to him. [I mean, it just locked.] And the king answered and said unto the man of God, "Intreat now the face of the LORD thy God, and pray for me, that my hand may be restored me again." And the man of God besought the LORD, and the king's was restored to him again and, became as it was before. And the king said to the man of God, "Come home with me, and refresh thyself, and I will give thee a reward." [Really showing now that he is a man of God.] And the man of God said unto the king, "If thou wilt give me half thine house, I will not go in with thee, neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place. For so it was charged me by the word of the Lord, saying, "Eat no bread, nor drink water, nor turn again by the same way that thou camest." So he went another way and returned not by the way that he came to Bethel. Now there dwelt an old prophet [and here is where the plot thickens with this old prophet in Bethel] and his sons came and told him all the works that the man of God had done that day in Bethel: the words which he had spoken unto the king, them they told also to their father. And their father said unto them, "What way went he?" For his sons had seen what way the man of God went, which came from Judah. And he said unto his sons, "Saddle me the ass." So they saddled him the ass: and he rode thereon. And went after the man of God and found him sitting under an oak: and he said unto him, "Art thou the man of God that came from Judah?" And he said, "I am." Then he said unto him, "Come home with me and eat bread." And he said, "I may not return with thee, nor go in with thee: neither will I eat bread nor drink water with thee in this place: For it was said to me by the word of the LORD, "Thou shalt eat no bread nor drink water there, nor turn again to go by the way that thou camest." He said unto him, "I am a prophet also as thou art; and an angel spake unto me by the word of the LORD, saying, "Bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water." But he lied to him. So

he went back with him, and did eat bread in his house, and drank water. (1 Kings 13:3-19)

So the old prophet said, "Well I am a prophet too. And the angel of the Lord came and brought me the word of Jehovah and told me to come and get you to bring you home." So he went back with him.

Now it is interesting he had this powerful prophecy. He gave the word of the Lord. It was confirmed. Jeroboam the king stretched out his hand to order the old prophet to be arrested and the hand was frozen. Jeroboam begged that the old prophet would pray that he might be healed and he did and Jeroboam was healed. The altar was torn and the ashes spilled like he said--but here he does not have the discernment of spirits. When the old man comes to him and lies and tells him something that is contrary to what God had spoken.

Now let us be sure about this. God does not contradict Himself. And also, it is possible that God will speak to you through someone else but God is capable of speaking directly to you. I am always very skeptical when someone comes to me and says, "The Lord told me to tell you," because I wonder, When did He lose my address?

So here the old prophet is bringing word that is contrary to the word of the Lord to him. The Lord told me to bring you back."

And he went back with him and did eat bread in the house and drank water and it came to pass as he sat at the table that the word of the Lord came unto the prophet that brought him back. [Now there is a true prophecy.] And he cried unto the man of God that came from Judah saying, Thus saith the LORD, "Forasmuch as thou hast disobeyed the mouth of the LORD, and hast not kept the commandment which the LORD thy God commanded thee, but camest back, and hast eaten bread and drunk water in the place of which the LORD did say to thee, 'Eat no bread, and drink no water, thy carcass shall not come unto the sepulchre of thy fathers.' "And it came to pass, after he had eaten the bread, and after he had drunk, that he saddled for him thee ass, for the prophet whom he had brought back. And when he was gone, a lion met him by the way, and slew him: and his carcass was cast in the way, and the ass stood by it, the lion also stood by the carcass. And behold, men passed by, and saw the carcass cast in the way and the lion standing by the carcass: and they came and told it in the city where the old prophet dwelt. And when the prophet that brought him back from the way heard thereof, he said, "It is the man of God, who was disobedient to the word of the LORD: therefore the Lord hath delivered him unto the lion, which hath torn him, and slain him, according to the word of the LORD which he spake unto him." And he spake to his sons, "Saddle me the ass. And they saddled him. And he went and found his carcass cast in the way, and the ass and the lion standing by the carcass: the lion had not eaten the carcass, nor torn the ass. And the prophet took up the carcass of the man of God, and laid it upon the ass, and brought it back: And the old prophet came to the city to mourn and to bury him. And he laid his carcass in his own grave; and they mourned over him saying, "Alas, my brother!" (1 Kings 13:19-30)

It is an interesting story of a man who had power--a man who had the gift of prophecy, but also a man who lacked the discernment of spirit and it cost him his life. Because he respected the older prophet, accepted his word and did not have the discernment of spirits to know that he was lying to him. A tragic story, really it is a very sad story. But what makes it so sad is that it is a story that is so often repeated by people who do not always listen to the word of the Lord. And people get ideas and they lead other people after themselves. And tragically, many people have lost their lives because of false prophets.

I think of those who followed Jim Jones. I think of those who were following David Koresh and the tragic thing is that there is that lack of the discerning of spirits. When a man professes to be a prophet of God and the people do not seem to have the discernment to realize that they are being taken--hoodwinked!

So this gift of the discernment of spirits is an important gift. And as I said, I am certain that many times it has operated in your life without your being thoroughly cognizant of the fact. There is just that queasy, uneasy feeling that you often get when someone comes along and they seem to say the right things and do the right things, but there is something that seems just--well, you cannot put your finger on it. It is an intangible thing but you are just uncomfortable. When I get that kind of a check in my spirit, I always walk very carefully.

Now I have not always been correct in my evaluation of a person. Again when we were pastoring in Tucson, we were very young and green and we were in a denomination at the time. And we received a letter from our denominational headquarters warning us of a couple who were going around fleecing the churches. It described the couple, and they were name droppers. They would drop the names of the leaders of the denomination. They were very smooth operators and had taken many of the churches for tidy sums of money on the basis of borrowing funds and bringing them right back.

So there was a knock at the door and I went to answer it and here was this man and a lady. They fit the description perfectly--even with the dark glasses. And immediately they started name dropping the names of all of the leaders of the denomination. I thought, "Man, I have got them!" So I was just very cool. I was cold. And they said, "You know we started the church here in Tucson." I said, "Yeah, tell me about it." "May we see your new sanctuary?" I said, "Yes, come on in." Then they got very dramatic. He turned and he said, "Honey, look. It was worth it all." I said, "Give me a break," under my breath. I was just thinking, "You are not fooling me."

And then he started the old thing, "We are passing through and our car broke down." Man, I have heard that so many times. "And we do not have the money to get the repairs. We just need so much to get the thing fixed." I said, "Yeah, I know all about it. Yes, uh-huh." And so I was certain that this was the couple I had been warned about. And they said, "When do you have church?" I said, "Well it is Wednesday evening. We have church tonight." They said, "We are going to come." I said, "Yeah, I have heard that one before." And so, they were there but to my amazement, when one of the long time members of the church came in and saw them, she let out sort of a scream and hugged them and said, "Oh, how are you?" And they were legitimate.

And here I had been so icy cold, frozen and all. Oh, did I feel horrible. I lacked discernment! Here I should have been showing compassion and love. And they actually stayed around town and painted a few houses to get enough money to get his car fixed and they went on. He never did put the bite on me. He never did say we need the money. He never did get to that and how I had to apologize! I showed them the letter I had received. I said, "And look how you guys fit the description." And I asked for their forgiveness.

The Lord wants us to be wise but there are the limitations to our wisdom and that is where the Spirit comes in. And He is able and He is faithful also. And I have been taken more than once but every time I have been taken there was a check, or there was a warning, and I sort of just said, "No, they are fine. I can tell by the look in his eye." How important it is that we learn to follow the leading of the Spirit. It saves us from a lot of trouble.

Father, we thank You for the help that the Holy Spirit gives to us. How He helps our infirmities, which are so many. Not only do we not always know how to pray as we ought, but Lord, many times we do not know who we can trust or not trust. We do not know if the man is a deceiver or real. And so Lord, we pray that You would grant to us that discernment of spirits. Lord, You know the hearts, and You know the thoughts and the intents of a person's heart. And Lord, we want to be kind. We want to be generous. We want to be giving and compassionate to those who are truly in need. But Lord, we do not want to be taken. And so, help us, Lord. Give us keen, sharp discernment. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

May the Lord watch over you and fill you with His Spirit, until your life just overflows--not just content to be filled, but may it be overflowing. Like Jesus said, "Gushing like a torrent of living water." May you be drawn close to Him. May there be a renewal of commitment and dedication. May the Spirit of God just work in our hearts and in our lives, until we become everything He wants us to be, all the time.

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