**Bible Study The Gifts of the Holy Spirit part 6, 13th July 2023**

Last week wee looked at the gift of prophecy. This is a very important gift, in fact Paul tells us in **1 Cor. 14.1** “Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.”
Paul strongly encourages us to desire this gift because when we meet together it can be used for the benefit of others.
In **1 Cor.14.1-5** Paul says that the purpose of this gift is for
1. Upbuilding (also translated edify) 2. Encouragement
3. Consolation or comfort
As Charles Ellicott sums it up: “building up, stirring up, cheering up”

This week we are going to look at the gift of discerning of spirits or the ability to distinguish between spirits. Read **1 Cor. 12.7-11.**
There is some debate about how to define this gift. There are three views:

1. Howard Carter’s view – being able to see into the spirit world i.e. to actually see angels or demons. There are three problems with this view:
Firstly, the gift is discerning spirits/ the ability to distinguish between spirits, not the gift of seeing spirits. Secondly, many of the people in the Bible who saw angels were not Christians,e.g. the guards at the tomb of Jesus (Matthew 28.2-4) and Balaam’s donkey (Numbers 22.23ff). Thirdly, there are no instances recorded in the Bible of people actually seeing demons. (There is, however, the famous example of Martin Luther:
While in hiding at the Wartburg Castle after being declared an outlaw, Luther was translating the New Testament into German. He reported that the Devil appeared to him in various forms, trying to tempt him and discourage him. Luther described throwing an ink pot at the Devil. This is depicted in a painting by the German artist Johann Wittmer in 1872).
It is, no doubt, possible for Satan to appear to someone; although he may do so disguised as an angel of light (**2 Cor.11.14**) but it is unlikely that this is what Paul is referring to.
2. Weighing the source of a prophecy. In favour of this view (held by Gordon Fee) is the order in which the gift appears in Paul’s list (**1 Cor. 12.10**). Tongues and interpretation of tongues are very closely linked; just before them in the list come prophecy and discerning of spirits (the ability to distinguish between spirits).
There is another link in **1 Cor. 14.27-29**. Tongues should be followed by an interpretation and after a prophecy the others should weigh what is said. The Greek word for “weigh” is diakrino, which means “to distinguish”, this is the verb form of the noun, diakrisis “the act of distinguishing) which is used in **1 Cor. 12.10**.

**1 Thes. 5.19-22** – a different Greek word is used here, dokimazo – to test, but a similar meaning.

As we saw last week, when someone prophesies there are two main ways that we can weigh what is said:
a) Was it a message of upbuilding, encouragement and consolation?
b) Is it in line with Scripture?
**1 Cor. 12.3, 1 John 4.1-3 & 1 Tim. 4.1-3** are examples of making sure that what someone says is in line with Scripture.

However, there are times when someone may say something that is doctrinally correct, but the source of the prophecy may be an evil spirit. In my opinion, this is when the gift of discerning of spirits is needed. As with the other gifts, this is a supernatural gift. There are occasions when the ability to discern that the source of a prophecy was an evil spirit does not come from someone having a good knowledge of Biblical doctrine but by revelation from the Holy Spirit.

For example, **Mark 1.23-27 & Acts 16.16-18**. These people didn’t actually say anything that was false but Jesus and Paul were able to discern that what they were saying was not inspired by the Holy Spirit but by unclean spirits.

1. A third way in which some people define this gift is to give it a broader definition of detecting the presence of evil spirits. This is the view favoured by David Petts and in addition to discerning whether it is through the Holy Spirit or an evil spirit that someone is prophesying, it also includes the ability to distinguish such things as if an illness is caused by an evil spirit or whether a miraculous sign has been done by the power of the Holy Spirit (Heb 2.4) or by a demonic spirit (2 Thes. 2.9-10).

How does this gift work in practice?
A personal illustration is when Gloria Armstrong, Pastor Howell and myself received an invitation to be in the studio audience of a TV programme called Granada Upfront, which had heated debates about topical subjects. That evening the debate was about Halloween and because Gloria and I were organising the Bright Lights Night we got an invitation. We only got the invitation at very short notice. As we approached the studio we heard a men’s choir practicing a song. The singing sounded good but as we entered the room I felt an extremely cold and evil presence such as I have never experienced before. At first, I thought it was nerves and tried my best to overcome how I was feeling. Then I discovered that in addition to a debate about Halloween, that evening there was also a debate about whether someone could be a Christian homosexual. The choir was from a church in Manchester for gay people. So, I was in a room with a small representation of Christians and a lot of people who were involved in the occult and some “gay Christians”. I think God gave me some discernment concerning the spirits that were present .
- I’ve had two occasions since then when I have felt that same cold evil presence. One occasion was a telephone conversation from someone who pretended to be enquiring about the church. After a couple of minutes, I felt that same cold evil presence and I think the Holy Spirit was telling me that this person was not what he was claiming to be. He began asking questions about what I believed and wanting to argue with me. When I told him what I believed about Jesus he became extremely antagonistic. I asked him if he considered himself to be a Christian or to belong to a different faith and, at first, he would not answer but eventually he admitted that he was a Jehovah’s Witness and it seems that he had phoned up several churches with the intention of picking an argument. I said to him that if he was so convinced that what he was saying is true, why did he go about telling people in such a deceitful way?
- On another occasion I was walking down Antrobus Street on my way to church when I felt that same cold evil presence. Two seconds later a car passed me and I concluded that the Holy Spirit was telling me something about what type of spirit was influencing the people in that car.

It has never happened to me, but if someone ever gives a word of prophecy and I feel that cold evil presence, I will conclude that the Holy Spirit has given me the ability to discern that the prophecy was inspired by an evil spirit rather than the Holy Spirit.

That is my limited experience but we are all different and it may be that the Holy Spirit may work in a different way through someone else. The important thing is that we seek to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit and that we earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.