



The Gift of Discernment

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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PM Assembly



Introduction:

By now, you know the drill. This lesson wraps up our look at the various gifts mentioned in **Romans 12:3-8**. Paul said that God has bestowed His grace on us in different ways, granting each of us a different blend of giftedness which makes each of us qualified to work in different functions within the congregation. This lesson examines what Paul calls the gift of prophecy. Though it is first on Paul's list, we are dealing with it last because of its unique qualities.

Prophecy, on the surface, is the only miraculous gift in this list. This leads to some interesting questions. Why include it in this list? Was Paul using this word in a special way, allowing it to fit in this list more appropriately? Was this a gift that was only miraculous and would end when the Holy Spirit no longer used miraculous gifts? Should we just ignore this first gift on the list? Or is it possible that there are natural and non-miraculous aspects of this gift that we can discern even today when the miraculous aspects are no longer in use?

According to M.R. Vincent, "In the New Testament, as in the Old, the prominent idea is not *prediction*, but the inspired delivery of warning, exhortation, instruction, judging, and making manifest the secrets of the heart."¹ Certainly, as Vincent goes on to say, in biblical times the distinguishing feature of this gift was divine inspiration. *Let me make it very clear that I believe the Bible clearly teaches that God no longer makes use of miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit.* However, having examined some aspects of this gift, I think we see some natural and non-miraculous aspects that we still see in people today, making them gifted in ways that we need in the kingdom and this congregation. So, please bear with me as we examine some aspects we can see in Scripture. To help distinguish what we are talking about in this lesson from the purely miraculous spiritual gift of prophecy, I've decided to refer to this gift in a more mundane way and call it the gift of discernment. Are you a Discerner? Take note of the characteristics and struggles that we'll see in Scripture and then figure out how you can work within this congregation.

Discussion:

I. Am I a Discerner?

- A. No doubt we all have responsibility to be discerning. **Hebrews 5:14** says the mature have their powers of discernment trained to know the difference between good and evil. We need to be discerning. However, if I understand **Romans 12:3-8** properly, we see some seem to have a natural gift at being able to discern God's will and understand wisdom. What does that look like?
- B. You may be wondering, "Is that my place? Am I a Discerner?" Allow me to share five characteristics that go along with being a Discerner. We will examine these from two different examples—Joseph and Jethro (Moses' father-in-law).
 1. *Discerners are perceptive (Genesis 41:39; Exodus 18:13-23):* They are wise and understanding. They can cut to the heart of matters. Pharaoh could see that Joseph was wise and perceptive. He would make a great ruler because of that wisdom and so was placed as second-in-command in Egypt. Despite Moses' leadership qualities, he was not quick to see what Jethro saw. Jethro knew Moses' plan for judging the people was bad. Discerners are very perceptive. They quickly perceive God's will in situations. Have you known people who seem to be able to make the complex issues in the Bible seem very simple? These are Discerners. Folks who can cut through to the heart of the matter. But they are not only perceptive with God's Word and will. They are perceptive in life and areas of wisdom. They are also perceptive with people. It's hard to pull the wool over the eyes of a Discerner. They seem to almost intuitively pick up on someone's sincerity or the lack thereof. Those gifted with mercy might tend toward gullibility; Discerners rarely do.
 2. *Discerners can see where today's choices lead (Exodus 18:18):* Jethro is not prophesying in the sense of speaking from God in this passage. But he demonstrates his discernment ability by being able to foresee where Moses' choices would lead. He saw the burn out and struggle that was inevitable for Moses and the people. Some of us look at this and say it was obvious. Yet, Moses didn't see it. Further, many folks make the exact same mistake today and don't see it. Discerners recognize that today's choices are not made in a vacuum and are able to look ahead into the future to see how today's choices will affect the future.

¹ M.R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, MacDonald Publishing Company, McLean, VA, v II, p 742.

3. *Discerners see God's plan behind all things (Genesis 50:20; Exodus 18:19, 23)*: Joseph was able to see God's plan behind all of his hardships. He was able to see how his own suffering was actually beneficial both for him and for his family because he could see God's involvement. Jethro saw his advice as being beneficial to Moses because he knew God would bless this wise course of action. Both Joseph and Jethro saw God's involvement in what was going on. Discerners look beneath the surface of our actions and reactions to see God's participation in all that we do. Discerners are quick to acknowledge God's involvement and quick to recognize that without God nothing we do will work.
4. *Discerners have strong convictions and strict standards (Exodus 18:13-17; Genesis 39:8-9)*: Notice how Jethro approaches Moses. He doesn't equivocate. He doesn't give a suggestion that Moses might want to consider, just maybe. Rather, he has strong convictions. What Moses was doing was bad. He boldly proclaimed those convictions. Hand in hand with the strong convictions, we see Joseph demonstrate strict personal standards. He doesn't justify because God let him go into slavery. He doesn't equivocate because no one will know. He doesn't excuse himself because she is his owner's wife. He stands by his convictions with strong standards. Discerners are convicted and strict. They don't see a lot of gray. Things are often very black and white in their minds and they hold themselves (and others) to high standards.
5. *Discerners see sin in relation to God (Genesis 39:9)*: Though Joseph talked about his place in connection to Potiphar, in the end his big concern was about his relationship with God. How could he commit this wickedness against God? Some people see sin simply in terms of right and wrong. Some avoid sin because of what it means about their relationships with other people. Some avoid sin because they fear punishment. Discerners avoid sin because of how it affects their relationship with God. They don't want anything coming between them and God. They want to obey Him and serve Him and be like Him. The other benefits are all icing on the cake to the Discerner; the most important issue is their relationship with God.

C. Does these characteristics fit you? You might just be a Discerner. That's great. We need Discerners like you.

II. The struggles of a Discerner.

- A. As with all the gifts, there are struggles that seem to go hand in hand with being a Discerner. If these are your natural struggles, don't beat yourself up too much about it. Certainly, they may demonstrate where you need to grow and they show that you have room to improve. But what they show is you may just be a Discerner.
- B. As with the gifts of sharing and mercy, we are going to look at various passages to help us see some of the natural struggles that go along with this giftedness.
 1. *Discerners tend to be judgmental (Jonah 4:1-4; Luke 9:51-56)*: Jonah didn't want the enemies of God and his people to be spared. He wanted them judged. James and John were quick to judge the Samaritan village. They wanted immediate condemnation and punishment. They wanted fire brought down on these people who would not accept the Savior. Because Discerners are so perceptive and because they see these issues of sin as matters of people's relationship with God, they see almost any infraction as devastating. While Exhorters are able to see folks on a spectrum of spiritual growth and Givers of Mercy are able to look for the good in people, Discerners have a tendency to view people as either in or out. They are quick to cut the cord and bring judgment and condemnation. While sin needs to be rebuked and error needs to be warned against, Discerners need to learn the fine line between warning in love and trying to put people in their places.
 2. *Discerners can be impatient with those who don't measure up quickly (Acts 15:38-41)*: While Barnabas was able to see John Mark on a spectrum of growth and therefore see his potential, Paul was ready to cut him loose. Going along with the Discerner's tendency to be judgmental, Discerners tend to be impatient with people. They are willing to give folks a chance, but they better make it count the first time, definitely at least by the second time. To the Discerner everything is so important that we just don't have time to deal with folks who won't get it together today. Discerners need to take some time to examine themselves and be honest about how much patience God has had to have with them.
 3. *Discerners struggle with poor self-image (Isaiah 6:5)*: Despite having been used by God as a prophet through the first five chapters, Isaiah still saw himself as unclean and unusable. God had to provide him a great vision to help him overcome this. God had cleansed him and made him useful, but Isaiah still had struggles with this. No doubt, there is a healthy sense in recognizing our unholiness before God. I don't want to speak against that. However, Discerners can carry that to a personal extreme. I once heard a person describe himself as an ego-maniac with an inferiority complex. I think that can describe a Discerner living in his weaknesses very well. The ego-maniac is the part that looks at everyone else and lets the Discerner think they are worthy of judgment for their sins while he/she is just a growing Christian who should be saved. But if the Discerner is honest, he/she can't help but see all the sins in his/her own life. You'll never here a Discerner say, "Hey, I'm only human." They'll rarely say, "God's still working on me." They'll not often say, "I'll do better next time." Rather, they struggle with feeling unclean. What if everyone else finds out how unclean they are? This

sometimes sets them up on a cycle of these first three struggles. They bring judgment down on everyone else in an attempt to make themselves appear more holy than they really are. I think everyone can have some struggle with this cycle. But Discerners can get really bogged down here. Because they are so perceptive about God's will and people, they are just unable to turn a blind eye to their own shortcomings. They even have a hard time being able to live in God's grace because they so desperately want to be in perfect alignment to what they perceive as God's will.

4. *Discerners can think they know and see more than everyone else (Numbers 22:22-35)*: Balaam was a prophet. He clearly was able to perceive and discern all kinds of things. Yet, on this trek he was missing something. He believed he knew all that was going on, but in this scenario his own donkey knew more than he did. I can almost imagine it now, Balaam thinking, "Hey, I'm a prophet, you're just a donkey." Discerners can get a little full of themselves. They are the ones who are quick to see where we fall short. They are the guardians. They are the watchmen. No one else can be as right as they are and know as much as they do.
 5. *Discerners can get puffed up and rely too much on their own wisdom (Romans 12:3, 6)*: When Paul encouraged the prophets to prophecy, or for our purposes the discerners to discern, he told them to do so in proportion to their faith. This is actually a reference back to vs. 3, in which Paul said God has given gifts according to the measure of the faith He has assigned or distributed to each. When Paul claimed the prophets should prophecy in proportion to their faith, he is reminding them to rely on God and what He has given them, not branch out and go beyond the faith God has assigned. Obviously, this isn't saying, "Don't have more faith than God is allowing you to." Rather, the point is rely on God. Don't go beyond God. Discerners apparently have the natural struggle of thinking too much of themselves and their ability to perceive and foresee. If they are not careful, they can move from true godly wisdom and assume that anything they think must be right and every concern they have must be a major warning. They move from "thus says the Lord" to "I said it and I'm always right." Especially since God is no longer using the miraculous gift of prophecy, Discerners need to be very careful to stick with book, chapter, and verse and not simply rely on what they have reasoned out and drawn conclusions for themselves. It is too easy to step away from true biblical thinking to just following human reasoning.
- C. Again, if these are your struggles, don't spend too much time beating yourself up about them. Certainly, they show areas where you need to work and grow. But what you really need to see is that you may just be a Discerner. That means you are useful to the kingdom and this congregation. We need Discerners like you.

III. Opportunities for a Discerner.

- A. There are many places in God's kingdom and this congregation that you can use your gift of discernment. If what we've said so far sounds a lot like you, then you need to ask, "What am I doing with my gift of discernment? What function am I filling?" Consider some opportunities that you have.
- B. Some opportunities to use discernment within the congregation.
 1. Prayer/Intercession
 2. Preaching
 3. Teaching
 4. Bulletin articles
 5. Website articles
 6. New converts work
 7. Foreign missions
 8. Shepherd
- C. Some opportunities to use discernment with other Christians.
 1. Prayer/Intercession
 2. Bible studies
 3. Teen studies
 4. Parenting studies
 5. Marriage studies
 6. Counseling and advising
 7. Mentoring
 8. Accountability partner
- D. Some opportunities to connect and evangelize.
 1. Prayer/Intercession
 2. Counseling and advising
 3. Bible studies
 4. Neighborhood studies
 5. Newspaper articles
 6. Blogging

IV. Improving your discernment (help for the non-Discerner).

- A. As we saw earlier, everyone has responsibility when it comes to discernment (**Hebrews 5:14**). But some of us aren't as naturally gifted in that area.
- B. So, let's wrap up with some help for the non-Discerner. Here are five ways to help you grow in your discernment.
 1. *Become friends with a Discerner*: I know you're glad to hear this for the last time. Obviously, if you want to become more discerning, spending time with someone who is naturally gifted in this area will help.

2. *Spend time in the Word*: **Hebrews 5:14** flat out says that spending time in God's Word will help you train your senses to discern better. When you spend time in God's will, you will be better able to discern God's will as you face your life.
3. *Pray*: Clearly you can pray for wisdom and discernment. But that is not really what I'm pointing out here. Rather, if Discerners see God behind all things and they see sin as a primary issue in their relationship with God, it makes sense to spend time working on that relationship. Prayer, along with Bible study, is the number one way to work on that relationship.
4. *Take time to acknowledge God in all things*: Discerners see God behind all that is going on. If you want to grow in your discernment, spend time acknowledging God. Stop and ask how God is involved. If you can't figure it out, at the very least give Him the glory knowing that He is involved.
5. *Consider the consequences*: Discerners are able to see where choices will lead. Some of us don't even consider that. Rather, we impulsively jump in with both feet. If we want to improve our discernment, we need to hit the pause button and consider where this choice might take us. If you're having trouble with this, find your new Discerner friends and ask them.

Conclusion:

We all have a place in the kingdom and this congregation. Is yours as a Discerner? What will you do about it? Don't be embarrassed if you can't do what someone else does. Make sure you are pursuing the gift God has given you. We need the encouragement, edifying, and building up you can provide through your discernment. Like **Ephesians 4:15-16** says this congregation is held together by what every joint supplies. We need Discerners like you.