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Life in the Spirit

## Sermon Summary #2

### Revelatory Gifts: All for the Common Good 1 Corinthians 12:8-10

***“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30).*** The idea that we can grieve the Holy Spirit is nothing short of stunning. That by our actions and words and unrepentant sin we mere humans can cause pain or distress to the eternal and omnipotent third person of the Holy Trinity is simply breathtaking. It’s scary too.

I won’t enumerate the many ways in which we grieve the Spirit. That would be depressing! But let me mention only one. Surely the Spirit of God is grieved when the people of God bicker and gripe and argue and divide over the subject of the very gifts that the Spirit himself so graciously gives us. There’s no better example of this than the controversy that continues to rage over what I am calling “revelatory” gifts of the Spirit. These are the spiritual gifts known as word of knowledge, word of wisdom, prophecy, and the discerning of spirits. I call them “revelatory” gifts because they are always grounded in or flow out of something that the Spirit of God spontaneously reveals or makes known to the human heart and mind. Today, we are going to look at three of them. I will save the gift of prophecy for our study of 1 Corinthians 14.

If you’re wondering why so many evangelical Christians are opposed to the suggestion that God still speaks, let me explain. Whenever I speak about this subject in churches, some cringe in fear while others get angrily defensive. Having spoken with many of them about this, I’ve concluded that the primary reason for their reaction is their belief that if God were to speak outside the Scriptures or were to bestow these revelatory gifts to the church it would undermine both the finality and sufficiency of the Bible, God’s written Word.

Cessationists insist that if such prophecy or words of knowledge were still being given, or if God were to speak to his people through other means, whether through dreams or visions or the like, on what grounds could one insist that the biblical canon is closed? Would we not be forced to open the canon and begin inserting new verses in new chapters in new books bearing the names of contemporary “prophets”?

Furthermore, cessationists believe that if people begin to act and believe in response to their claim of having “heard God” or having received a revelation, their reliance on the sufficiency of the Bible for all of life would be undermined. It would result in people living their lives and often justifying bizarre (or at least unwise) behavior based on subjective impressions rather than on the objective and infallible written Word of God. People will neglect or ignore the counsel of Scripture because of something “God told” them. Worse still, they’ll be prone to control and manipulate others on the “authority” of some divinely revealed directive.

I understand their concerns. I can appreciate their fears. Like you, I’ve known quite a few people who claimed to have heard God or to have received some revelation from the Spirit who quite obviously did not. They can really cause problems. But the NT is not without a remedy. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 14 that we must “judge” any utterance or word that comes to us claiming to have been revealed by God. In 1 Thessalonians 5 he commands us to “weigh” or “assess” or “evaluate” those who prophesy. If what

they've said passes the test, embrace it. If not, reject it. And in 1 John 4 the apostle again tells us to "test the spirits to see if they are from God."

The last and least helpful thing that God wants in us as his church is a bunch of naïve, gullible airheads who swallow everything that anyone claims is a "word from the Lord." But neither does God want us to be critical, skeptical cynics who refuse to acknowledge that the Lord may well be ministering through such gifts for the building up of the body of Christ.

There has to be a solid, sane, biblical middle ground between gullibility on the one hand and cynicism on the other. That is what I hope this series in 1 Corinthians will help us find.

And today, we look at our first set of spiritual gifts, three of them in fact: word of knowledge, word of wisdom, and discerning of spirits. As I said a moment ago, I've combined these three because they share one important thing in common: they are revelatory in nature; they are based upon and flow out of something that God reveals to us.

### *(1) Utterance of Wisdom and (2) Utterance of Knowledge*

These two gifts, more commonly known as "word of knowledge" and "word of wisdom" (v. 8), like all other spiritual gifts, says Paul in v. 7, are given to the church for the "common good," that is to say, so that you and I may be strengthened and nourished and encouraged and consoled and instructed and built up in our Christian faith. But what are these two gifts?

The problem we face is that the only place they are mentioned in the NT is in 1 Corinthians 12:8, where Paul provides us with neither a definition nor information about how they are to function in the body of Christ. Nothing in the terms *word*, *wisdom*, and *knowledge* themselves provide us with theological insight into how they are being used in this passage. For this, we must look elsewhere in the NT and in 1 Corinthians.

Although it would be misguided to speak of Jesus as possessing "spiritual gifts" in the same way that we do, nevertheless he certainly ministered in the same power of the Holy Spirit and on numerous occasions exercised what we might describe as precursors to the word of knowledge and word of wisdom. Some contend that Jesus "knew" the thoughts of others or certain facts about them because he was God and that he was simply drawing upon his divine omniscience. But I'm convinced that Jesus, when he became incarnate in human flesh, temporarily suspended the use of his divine attributes in order to live as a human being would live. Thus, these expressions of supernatural power and knowledge are the work of the Holy Spirit in and through Jesus. Some examples:

- (1) Matthew 9:1-8 - Here Jesus is described as "knowing" the "thoughts" of the scribes (v. 4), in response to which he speaks a powerful rebuke.
- (2) Matthew 12:22-37 - Again, Jesus, "knowing their thoughts" (v. 25), began to speak a word of rebuke and instruction.
- (3) Luke 6:6-11 - Here it is said of Jesus that "he knew their thoughts" (v. 8).
- (4) Luke 9:46-48 - Again, Jesus is described as "knowing the reasoning of their [his disciples] hearts" (v. 47).
- (5) John 1:43-51 - This is the story of the calling of Nathanael where Jesus, without having met the man, knew his moral character and describes having "seen" him sitting under a fig tree.
- (6) John 4 - Here is the most frequently cited example, where Jesus tells the Samaritan woman the secret sins of her life.

- (7) Acts 5:1-11 - It would appear that in some way, most likely by revelation, Peter gained knowledge about the secret and sinful activity of Ananias and Sapphira and spoke a word of judgment accordingly.
- (8) Acts 8:26-40 - Was Philip's experience in hearing the Spirit give him instructions concerning the Ethiopian an example of a word of wisdom?
- (9) Acts 9:10-19 - Ananias is given "knowledge" in a vision of a man named Saul and receives divine guidance and instruction on what to say.
- (10) Acts 10 - Were the revelatory experiences of Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10 examples of words of knowledge?
- (11) Acts 13:1-3 - Was the word that came to the church at Antioch concerning the mission of Paul and Barnabas an example of this gift? How did the Spirit "say" this? Audible voice? An inner impression that all experienced simultaneously? This might be an example of word wisdom in that it concerned a decision for future ministry and the practical steps needed to respond.
- (12) Acts 14:8-10 - Some have suggested that Paul's revelatory insight and word to the lame man was a word of knowledge. What did Paul "see" that led him to the conclusion that this man had the sort of faith that God was about to honor with healing? Did he literally "see" something, perhaps by way of a vision? Or did he "see" in the sense that he "perceived" or "understood" this to be true of him? If the latter, how might this revelation have come to Paul? A strong impression in his spirit? The internal audible voice of the Spirit? Did he have a vision of the man standing and walking and rejoicing?

Each of these instances is undoubtedly *revelatory* in nature, which is to say that God disclosed information otherwise unattainable. But should we call any of these incidents "word of wisdom" or "word of knowledge"?

An interesting illustration of this comes from the ministry of Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), who tells of an incident in the middle of his sermon where he paused and pointed at a man whom he accused of taking an unjust profit on Sunday, of all days! The culprit later described the event to a friend:

"Mr. Spurgeon looked at me as if he knew me, and in his sermon he pointed to me, and told the congregation that I was a shoemaker, and that I kept my shop open on Sundays; and I did, sir. I should not have minded that; but he also said that I took ninepence the Sunday before, and that there was fourpence profit out of it. I did take ninepence that day, and fourpence was just the profit; but how he should know that, I could not tell. Then it struck me that it was God who had spoken to my soul through him, so I shut up my shop the next Sunday. At first, I was afraid to go again to hear him, lest he should tell the people more about me; but afterwards I went, and the Lord met with me, and saved my soul" (*The Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon* [Curts & Jennings, 1899], II:226-27).

Spurgeon then adds this comment:

"I could tell as many as a *dozen* similar cases in which I pointed at somebody in the hall without having the slightest knowledge of the person, or any idea that what I said was right, except that I believed I was moved by the Spirit to say it; and so striking has been my description, that the persons have gone away, and said to their friends, 'Come, see a man that told me all things that ever I did; beyond a doubt, he must have been sent of God to my soul, or else he could not have described me so exactly.' And not only so, but I have known many instances in which the thoughts of men have been revealed from the pulpit. I have sometimes seen persons nudge their neighbours with their elbow, because they had got a smart hit, and they have been heard to say, when they were going out, '*The preacher told us just what we said to one another when we went in at the door*'" (ibid.).

One other occasion is worth noting, in which Spurgeon broke off his sermon and pointed at a young man, declaring: "Young man, those gloves you are wearing have not been paid for: you have stolen them from your employer" (*Autobiography: The Full Harvest*, 2:60). After the service the man brought the gloves to Spurgeon and asked that he not tell his mother, who would be heartbroken to discover that her son was a thief! This information could not be found by Spurgeon from reading the Bible. It was undeniably spontaneous, overtly supernatural, and revelatory.

### (3) *The ability to distinguish between spirits*

Once again, although we are not given a definition of this gift, I'm inclined to believe that this is the ability to distinguish between what the Holy Spirit does and what another "spirit" (demonic), or perhaps even the human spirit, does. Not all miracles or supernatural displays are produced by the Holy Spirit. Whereas all Christians are responsible to "test the spirits to see whether they be of God" (1 John 4:1), Paul has in mind here a special ability that is fundamentally *intuitive* or *subjective* in nature. The spiritual gift of distinguishing of spirits or discerning between spirits is probably a supernaturally enabled "sense" or "feeling" concerning the nature and source of the "spirit".

Some possible instances where this gift is in operation include:

- (1) Acts 16:16-18, where Paul discerns that the power of a certain slave-girl is in fact a demonic spirit.
- (2) In Acts 13:8-11, Paul discerns that Elymas the magician was demonically energized in his attempt to oppose the presentation of the gospel.
- (3) This gift is also in operation when a person is able to discern whether or not a problem in someone's life is demonic or merely the consequence of other emotional and psychological factors, or perhaps a complex combination of both.
- (4) People with this gift are often able to "detect" or discern the presence of demonic spirits in a room or some such location.
- (5) In Acts 8:20-24, Peter is said to "see" (not physically, but to "perceive" or "sense") that Simon Magus was filled with bitterness and iniquity.
- (6) It would seem that Jesus exercised something along the lines of this gift when he looked at Nathanael and described him as "a man in whom there is no guile" (John 1:47). In John 2:25 it is said that Jesus "knew what was in a man." Was this a "gift" of "discernment" or "distinguishing of spirits"?

I can't think of another spiritual gift that is so desperately needed in the life of the church today. Consider the many instances when it would prove immensely helpful to know whether or not a sin or an addiction or the breakdown in a marriage or a display of what appears to be mental illness is the work of sinful choices, or biological factors, or emotional wounds from an abusive past, or perhaps the influence of a demonic spirit or perhaps even some combination of all of them.

### *Illustrations of Revelatory Gifts in Operation*

It's not unusual for a gift of healing to be imparted in conjunction with the operation of a revelatory gift, whether the latter be word of knowledge or prophecy. A young lady who was attending one of our church

conferences in 1997 was frustrated that her asthmatic condition was so severe that she was unable to worship without the use of an inhaler. She cried out to God for healing from her affliction, but told no one about her condition. She had suffered from asthma since the age of twelve but when she reached seventeen the condition had noticeably worsened. It was then that she began to experience chronic bronchitis (suffering from it 8-9 months each year) and repeated bouts of pneumonia. She coughed almost constantly, eventually requiring the use of steroids and antibiotics on a monthly basis. It was so bad that she couldn't climb a flight of stairs without using the inhaler. Taking his cue from the movie, "Dances with Wolves," her husband affectionately nicknamed her, "Walks with a Cough"!

After giving birth to her first-born son, it was soon discovered that he suffered from asthma as well. At the age of two his left lung collapsed. Soon he was being treated with heavy doses of steroids and four breathing treatments a day, as well as countless antibiotics.

At the close of the conference, on Sunday morning, two days after her prayer of desperation, a man came to the microphone and spoke this word:

"There is a lady here today whose name I don't know, but the Lord has told me she has dark hair [which she does]. He also indicated that when you were seventeen years old you became quite ill which aggravated your chronic respiratory problems. I would like to pray for you. It may be that the Lord will heal you today."

After hesitating momentarily, she went forward and identified herself to the man. She also requested prayer for her then four-year-old son. She was instantly healed as the man and his wife prayed for her. In the years since that day she has had no recurrence of asthma or pneumonia. Her son has needed neither steroids nor the breathing treatments that once were a routine part of his daily life.

My friend Nancy Heche has endured incredible suffering in her life and yet remains strong in the Lord. But even the strong need encouragement now and then. At a conference in 1998, I was sitting with Nancy when she was given a "word" by a man with a powerful prophetic gifting. Although he had never met Nancy, he asked her to stand up: "Nancy, I saw the March winds blowing. March is a special month for you. The Lord is going to bless you and give you the spirit of Nathan."

This is an excellent example of how a revelation might come accurately to someone who is, however, uncertain of its interpretation. When this man heard the Spirit speak the name "Nathan" he thought it had something to do with the OT prophet who confronted David. What he didn't know is that "Nathan" was the name of Nancy's son who had been killed at the age of 18 in a tragic car accident.

The next day he again called out Nancy and asked her to stand. "I saw that precious young man that was taken from you. The Lord said, 'I gave him to her in the springtime of the year. And I took him away in the middle of the year.'" He continued: "I got a glimpse of him [Nathan] standing before the Lord and he looks like he's 33 years old. That's all he's ever going to look from now on. That's not a doctrine, but that's how old he looks at this time."

Here's the significance of that word of knowledge. March is indeed quite special to Nancy. Her birthday is March 10<sup>th</sup> and her husband passed away on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1983. The Lord revealed that Nathan had been "given" to Nancy in the "spring" of the year. Nathan's birthday is April 21<sup>st</sup>! "I took him in the middle of the year," said the Lord. Nathan died on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1983, only three months after Nancy's husband had died.

As would be true of any mother devastated by the loss of a child, Nancy often had wondered if Nathan truly knew Jesus before his death. This word of encouragement is that he did. As a way of confirming it,

the Lord had revealed that on this day in 1998 Nathan looked “33 years old.” Do your math. If Nathan was 18 in 1983, had he lived he would have been exactly 33 when this word of knowledge was delivered!

### *Conclusion*

Practical guidelines for moving forward:

(1) Acknowledge and embrace from the outset that you can do nothing to force God’s hand. Whether or not he reveals something to you for the edification of another is entirely dependent on his will, not yours. If God chooses not to bless you with this gift, rest assured he has other, equally important, plans for you and how to use you in the life of the church.

(2) Make this a specific and consistent focus of your prayers. Cry out to God daily that he would bless you with this gifting (1 Cor. 14:1).

(3) Monitor your heart’s motivation: be certain that your longing for this sort of gifting is your love for the welfare of others and not the notoriety or attention that such a gift might bring to you.

(4) Learn from others who are already operating in revelatory gifts. Identify who they are, seek them out, ask them questions, listen to their story, learn from their mistakes, and be encouraged by their success. In a word, hang out with people of similar passion and who have a track record of accuracy in this gifting.

(5) Learn the many ways in which God communicates: dreams, visions, impressions, internal audible voice, symbols, sympathetic pains, providential occurrences, etc. Don’t be surprised or put off if what you hear seems weird, but don’t be weird just for the sake of being weird!

(6) Immerse yourself in God’s Word. Meditate on who God is, what he’s like, and how he communicated to others in biblical history. This will help you discern whether or not it is God who is speaking. He will never reveal anything to anyone that is inconsistent with his character or his ways.

(7) Be attentive to the Spirit of God. Listen! Watch! Write down what you think may be the word of the Spirit. Be attentive to the revelatory language that God might choose to utilize for you. He doesn’t always make himself known to everyone in the same way. Illus: “hats” / “prayers passages” . . .

(8) If you think God has revealed something to you for the edification of another, first share it in confidence with trusted and mature Christian friends who can help you process what has happened. There is wisdom in the counsel of community.

(9) Be willing to risk being wrong. Step out in faith and humility: “I may have entirely missed this, but I think God may have put something on my heart for you. If this doesn’t make any sense, you won’t hurt my feelings by telling me so.” Resist the temptation to say: “Thus saith the Lord” or “This is the will of God for your life!”

(10) Certain things to avoid: a) be careful about sharing negative or critical words (1 Cor. 14:3); b) don’t assume that every random thought that passes through your brain is from God; c) don’t rely on revelatory gifts to make routine decisions in life.