

## Spiritual Gifts: Faith and Distinguishing Spirits A Series on Spiritual Gifts: Part 13

### Faith

The spiritual gift of faith is confusing and difficult to understand. While faith is required for initial salvation (salvation from the penalty of sin), faith is also required for sanctification salvation (salvation from the power of sin). Is the faith of the spiritual gift different? If it is not different, how is it related?

Because spiritual gifts are bestowed to Believers, the faith of the spiritual gift of faith is something beyond that of initial salvation.

For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith (**pistis**) by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. (1 Cor 12:8-10)

To begin understanding the spiritual gift of faith, there must be a clear understanding of the meaning of "faith." There are several Greek terms associated with "faith;" and the "pistis" word group is in reference to the relationship between partners in agreement and the trustworthiness of their promises. An example of such an agreement, which shows the relationship between belief and trust, can be seen in Jesus' statement about Lazarus to Martha.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26)

When examining the Greek Old Testament (LXX), the Greek "pistis" word group is used to translate the Hebrew term "āman."

The LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe (**'āman**) in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst? (Num 14:11)

Because they did not believe (**'āman**) in God and did not trust in His salvation. (Ps 78:22)

Throughout the Old Testament, faith is based on is some tangible evidence of God namely the historical act of the Exodus. The nation of Israel was reminded of this annually when the preamble of the Ten Commandments was read:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Ex 20:2)

Because of God's observable work in the history of human beings (i.e. the Exodus, Jesus Christ, etc), faith in God has an objective basis; thus, faith is the belief that God exists and His words can be fully trusted as being true. Yet having a material basis of God is not a requirement for faith as Jesus reveals to doubting Thomas:

Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed." (John 20:29)

Faith entails the belief in the true God and placing a trust in Him. Here Jesus is making a reference to believing in Him the Messiah who was sent by God (John 3:16-17), because through Him, one meets God (John 14:7-12). If one truly has faith in the real God, then one would be obedient to His words.

The Bible records one such person in Abraham, who grew up in a pagan worshiping family (Josh 24:2) and obeyed God without any historical or tangible evidence of Him. Abraham genuinely believed in God and left his home in Haran on the basis of God's word alone. Paul highlights Abraham's faith as an example for all (Rom 4:3-9, 22; Gal 3:6; James 2:23).

**Spiritual Gifts: Faith and Distinguishing Spirits**  
**A Series on Spiritual Gifts: Part 13 (page 2)**

In calling attention to the nature of Abraham's faith, Paul teaches about the quality of faith that gains the approval of God. The writer of Hebrews accomplishes the same purpose by lauding the faith of prominent people in history of Israel (Heb 11:1-40) and introduces faith as the "assurance of things hoped for."

While there may not be any contemporary material evidence of the existence of God and His covenantal relationship to Believers, apart from the Bible, they are no less real. Faith provides that genuine certainty and conviction of the existence of God and His Divine Covenants.

While the prominent people of faith lived their lives convinced that the all powerful God existed and that His words were to be trusted and obeyed, they all died without experiencing the promises of the covenant.

Throughout this discussion about faith, little distinction was made between the faith of initial salvation and sanctification salvation. The difference between the two is the quantity or degree of faith. The apostle Paul was very concerned about the faith of Believers. He notes that there are deficiencies and that faith needs to grow:

**Deficiencies**

For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account, as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith? (1 Thess 3:9-10)

**Faith needs to grow**

For we are not overextending ourselves, as if we did not reach to you, for we were the first to come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ; not boasting beyond our measure, that is, in other men's labors, but with the hope that as your faith grows, we will be, within our sphere, enlarged even more by you, so as to preach the gospel even to the regions beyond you, and not to boast in what has been accomplished in the sphere of another. (2 Cor 10:14-16)

The spiritual gift of faith appears to provide one with a stronger conviction in the existence of God and a stronger confidence in His covenantal relationship with Believers. Paul indicates that the Holy Spirit's spiritual gift of faith is for the purpose of edifying the church and, in light of the church's deficiencies and needs to grow in faith, very likely for building up the faith of others. Here are two examples:

1. Just as the faith of people in the Bible serve as examples of how faith works in practice, those with the spiritual gift of faith can serve as contemporary examples to their peers.
2. Because faith is an essential prerequisite for prayer, those with the spiritual gift of faith can pray for the church by intercession.

And Jesus answered and said to them, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." (Matt 21:21-22)

As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. Being reminded, Peter said to Him, "Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered." And Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you. Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. (Mark 11:20-25)

**Spiritual Gifts: Faith and Distinguishing Spirits**  
**A Series on Spiritual Gifts: Part 13** (page 4)

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:5-8)

Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. (James 5:14-16)

### **Distinguishing Spirits**

The spiritual gift of distinguishing spirits is a challenge to understand, because it takes one into the unseen world.

For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits (**diakrisis pneuma**), to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. (1 Cor 12:8-10)

The Greek noun “diakrisis” is translated into English as “distinguishing” or “differentiation.” When used by Plato (400 BC), “diakrisis” was used as a legal technical term to mean “judgment”. With this legal nuance, “diakrisis” takes on a meaning of discernment based on an objective standard. Thus, when examining its use in the New Testament, “diakrisis” is not in reference of a subjective standard by which to judge good from evil.

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing (**diakrisis**) judgment (**diakrisis**) on his opinions. (Rom 14:1)

But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern (**diakrisis**) good and evil. (Heb 5:14)

The Greek noun “pneuma” means “spirit” and is in reference to the spiritual realm. For human beings this means the inanimate part of the human body as Jesus explains to His disciples:

But they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit (**pneuma**). And He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit (**pneuma**) does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” (Luke 24:37-39)

With this understanding, in contrast to the above uses of “diakrisis” with a view towards human beings, 1 Corinthians 12:10 speaks of “diakrisis” with a view towards angelic beings. Paul recognizes the reality of angelic beings and especially the influence of demonic spirits (i.e. Acts 19:11-12; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:1-3; 1 Tim 4:1-3). Both apostles Paul and Peter understood the importance of discerning spirits to distinguish good from evil:

For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully. (2 Cor 11:4)

Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thess 5:19-22)

**Spiritual Gifts: Faith and Distinguishing Spirits**  
**A Series on Spiritual Gifts: Part 13 (page 5)**

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. (2 Thess 2:1-4)

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (1 John 4:1-6)

Paul sees the spiritual gift of “diakrisis pneuma” serving the important function of protecting the church from false teachers. False teachers, at their core, are deceitful by incorporating a small kernel of truth to promote their lie. Thus, one with such a gift, must have a good working knowledge of the Bible. A good example of deceitful teaching is Satan’s temptation of Eve who sinned, because she did not know God’s word well enough; her discernment was not based on God’s word but on her own standard of good and evil.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden’?” The woman said to the serpent, “From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.’” The serpent said to the woman, “You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Gen 3:1-5)

Guarding against false prophets gain importance with time as the Bible speaks of the end times with considerable warning of persuasive false teaching (Rev 13:14; 16:13-14; 19:20).

References:

1. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1-3, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).