

# OpenTheo

## Judging (Part 1)



### **The Life and Teachings of Christ** - Steve Gregg

In this discussion, Steve Gregg examines the topic of judging in Matthew chapter 7. While some may interpret the chapter to mean that God is a tolerant figure who overlooks sin, Gregg argues that there is a place for making judgments in the Christian faith. He cites various passages in the New Testament that advocate for making judgments, particularly when it comes to one's own actions and the actions of others in the church. However, he also notes the importance of testing prophetic utterances and using discernment in one's judgments.

## **Transcript**

Today we'll turn to Matthew chapter 7 and we have the last chapter of the Sermon on the Mount looming before us here. We intend to cover it in a couple of sessions. Today I'd like to take the first 12 verses.

Matthew 7 verses 1 through 12. And you may wish, after you've found that spot, to turn over to Luke chapter 6 and put your finger or some other marker in there so we can look at that in just a moment. I'm going to compare the parallels in Luke 6. Okay, what I'll do is I'll read these 12 verses then we'll go back and talk about them individually.

Judge not that you be not judged, for with what judgment you judge, you will be judged. And with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, let me remove the speck out of your eye, and look, a plank is in your own eye.

Hypocrite, first remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye. Do not give what is holy to dogs, nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet and turn and tear you in pieces. Ask and it will be given to you.

Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father, who is in heaven, give good things to those who ask him? Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them. For this is the law and the prophet. All right.

Now, the first six verses, or I should say the first five, really, are about judging. And the general statement in verses one and two we need to take a close look at, because especially the first line, judge not that you be not judged, has often been used wrongly by Christians as well as non-Christians. Non-Christians use it a lot and almost always wrongly.

Christians sometimes don't use it correctly either. As if any kind of assessment of someone else's behavior, any kind of criticism of another party's beliefs or practices, that this is a violation of what Jesus said. In fact, there is a general feeling among many people who don't know anything about Jesus, and some who know a few things about Jesus, that the Jesus of the Bible was totally non-judgmental.

That Jesus was just a friend of sinners, that he just said, I don't condemn you to the woman taking an adultery. And they forget that he said, go and sin no more, which was a judgment of her actions that he made. They forget about the Jesus who lambasted the scribes and Pharisees repeatedly, and very strongly in words that are almost singeing when you read them in Matthew 23.

Jesus obviously was not a non-judgmental person, nor is God a non-judgmental God. There are people whose opinions about God and Jesus are colored by, I guess, sentiment and wishful thinking. That God is sort of a grandfatherly type of old man who just kind of tolerates and humors his children as they do all kinds of little naughty things, like sin, and he just says, oh well, boys will be boys.

But that's not the way the Bible talks about God, and Jesus is the depiction of God in the flesh for us to know exactly what God is like. And we see in the life of Christ a great deal of judgment. And in fact, he said in John chapter 5 that the Father has delegated the role of all judgment to the Son, to Jesus.

So he's obviously very much concerned about his role as judge. Now, does this mean that since Jesus judges, we don't? That it's just for God to judge? There are people who would take this statement from Jesus, judge not that you be not judged, as if it is to say, listen, God's my judge. I don't have to answer to anybody else.

If God has any complaints about what I'm doing, I'll stand before him someday. Now, there is a sense in which that's an attitude that we can have at times when our conscience is clean before the Lord. There are people who will criticize and judge you whose judgment you don't need to take too seriously.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 4, since you're studying 1 Corinthians at the moment, you may recall this passage. I don't know to what degree Phil may have laid stress on any of these points. But he says in chapter 4 of 1 Corinthians, well, where did it start there? Verse 3, I guess.

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. He says, for I do not know anything against myself, yet I am not justified by this, but he who judges me is the Lord.

Therefore, judge nothing before the time until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsel of the heart. Now, here Paul seems to be saying, don't judge anything until Jesus comes. In verse 5, judge nothing before the time until the Lord comes.

And he'll be the judge. And perhaps on the basis of a passage like this, some would preclude or forbid all judgments being made by Christians. I mean, Paul even says here, I do not even judge myself.

However, later in the same book, in 1 Corinthians 11, he advocates the need for judging ourselves. He says in 1 Corinthians 11, 31, for if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. When we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.

Now, Paul indicates that being judged by the Lord is for us a chastening. If God judges us in the temporal sense, then that's a chastening, so that we'll repent and won't be condemned ultimately with the world. But if we would just judge ourselves, we wouldn't have to be even subject to such judgment from the Lord, such chastening from the Lord.

And therefore, judging yourself is a good thing. Now, how is it that in one epistle, Paul can say in chapter 4, I do not even judge myself. And in the same epistle, chapter 11, he can say, if we would just judge ourselves, we wouldn't have to be judged by God, which would be better.

Now, I think what we have to understand is there are judgments we are to make and we have to make, both about ourselves and others. But it is judging sin, and it is judging on the basis of what God has said, what God has revealed. And yet, many times people make judgments on a false basis, on a wrong basis, which they have no right to make.

And we don't have to be concerned about their judgments. If we know for a fact that what we are being judged for is not a sin, then we have nothing to be intimidated by people judging us, or even human courts judging us, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4. He said, it's a small thing to me if I'm judged by you or by a human court. So what? My conscience is clear.

I don't know anything against myself. Of course, he says that doesn't prove that I'm

innocent of all charges. God knows.

But, my conscience is clear, and therefore, I don't care what you think about what I'm doing. Now, the other situation that he advocates, judging yourself, is where people are actually doing things that their conscience should not be clear about. They were getting drunk at communion and doing other bad stuff, defiling the Lord's table, and he felt like a little bit of introspection would be all that would be necessary to be able to see immediately if that's wrong behavior, and to judge oneself in the sense of correcting your behavior, recognizing your sin for what it is, repenting and correcting it, so that you won't have to be chastened by the Lord.

Now, in the one case, the case where he says, I don't care what you say about me, I don't care whether you judge me or not, only God is my final judge, he's talking about a situation where he has no known sin in his life. He's not sinning. He knows of no sin in his life.

Even his judges don't know of any sin in his life. His conscience is clear, but he's being criticized, apparently on some basis other than a question of sin. But people were in fact, as you may have learned in your introduction to 1 Corinthians, suggesting that Paul was not a real apostle, for example.

That was a judgment they were making of him. Now, that's not a question of sin in his life. That's more of an assessment of the validity of his claims to be an apostle, or whether he really held that office.

Now, people can make that judgment. There's nothing wrong with making such a judgment about a person, but the man himself doesn't have to defend himself against it. I mean, God knows if he's an apostle or not, and so do those that God has told.

In Revelation chapter 2, the Church of Ephesus is addressed in the first of those seven letters, and it says that one thing they did that was commendable was they judged those who called themselves apostles, and found them not to be. It says in Revelation 2.2, it says, I know your works, this is to the Church of Ephesus, your labor, your patience, in that you cannot bear those who are evil. You have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars.

Now, that's in their favor. That's to their credit. If someone claims to be an apostle or a prophet, there is a judgment call that every person makes, whether they do so actively or passively.

You either accept or reject what they say or their claims, and that requires some judgment to be made. Now, that's the area where it's not really judging sin. It's just a matter of judging the validity of someone's claim.

I mean, the person may think he's an apostle. He may not be lying. He may be mistaken.

But you have to make a judgment as to whether you accept him as an apostle or not. There are judgments you do have to make, and that are important to make, and judgments of yourself that you need to make with reference to sin in your life. But there are also judgments that are not with reference to sin in your life, that people may make against you that you needn't worry about, and you need to avoid making them against others.

We'll talk about that a little more. I can think of a few cases, well, one in particular, I guess, maybe a couple in my life, where I have been judged by people, Christian people. And, you know, there were people whose opinion mattered to me at one point, and they were friends of mine.

But I had to just ask myself, okay, they're making these criticisms. I have to look at it. Is that true? Well, even if the things are true, what they're saying, they're not criticizing sin.

I mean, they're criticizing, you know, a lifestyle or a method of raising children or something, you know, some issue like that, which is certainly not anything where they could pin some kind of biblical text on it and say, you're doing the wrong thing. It's just a matter of difference of opinion. And they have elevated their own opinion to the level of canon, you know, scripture, and judge on that basis.

Well, in cases like that, you know, when people do that kind of thing, they choose some criteria of their own to judge you by that has nothing to do with sin in your life. You can say, like, oh, well, it's a small thing to me if you judge me. I mean, God's my judge.

He knows whether I'm sinning or not, and I guess the way it's going to have to stand until he comes. Then you'll see, you know, when he makes the judgment. Don't judge prematurely.

There are a number of fine points about the issue of judging that we need to talk about, because this first part of chapter seven of Matthew is about judging. And there are judgments that we are forbidden to make, and there are judgments that we are required to make. Now, the statement Jesus makes in verse one, taken without any modification, without any context, without any cross-references, would simply forbid all judging in any form.

Judge not that you be not judged. And if that was not in any sense modified in the passage or elsewhere, then we would have to be persons who live without any moral sense whatsoever. There'd certainly be no grounds anywhere for moral outrage, you know, or for criticism of anybody's lifestyle, or even of sin.

Certainly there'd be no place for discipline, either of children or of criminals or of church discipline. I mean, those all require making judgments. And, you know, the fact is that a

lot of people, when they quote this verse, usually they're quoting it in their own self-defense, because you're telling them something they're doing is wrong, and they say, well, judge not that you be not judged.

But many people who quote this in their own defense are doing something wrong, and, you know, they haven't really thought through what it means, judge not. Because if you just take it in the absolute sense, don't make any judgments at all, what you have to do is make yourself a non-moral entity. Because as soon as you say, I don't think it's right, then you fill in the blank, you know.

Regardless of what's filled in the blank, as soon as you say, I don't think this is right, that's a judgment, that's a moral judgment. You're saying some things are right and some things are wrong, and you're deciding which things are right and which are wrong. And you have to do that.

How could you ever guide your own conduct? How could you have your own personal set of ethics? How could you ever train your children? How could you ever speak to society as a conscience if you didn't make any kind of moral judgment? The question, of course, is when is it right and when is it wrong to judge? And what kind of judgments are right and what kind are wrong? And I'd like to look at some of the things the Bible says about that. First of all, it's probable that Phil made mention at the beginning of the study of 1 Corinthians, or at least on the way through it, that there's a great deal said in 1 Corinthians about judging. Almost everything is positive about judging and the need to judge.

Did he go through passages and show you some of those? You did that in your self-study questions, didn't you, on 1 Corinthians? You know, in chapter 2 of 1 Corinthians, around verse 14 or 15, he says, The spiritual man judges all things, yet he himself is judged by no man. In chapter 5, when he's talking about a man living with his father's wife in sin, he says, I've judged him already. I, being absent in body but present in spirit, I've already made my judgment about him.

And he goes on to say, Don't you judge these things? Don't you make judgments about these things? He says, What do I have to do to judge those who are outside the church, those who are outside God's judges? But certainly you must judge those who are inside, don't you? That's what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 5. In 1 Corinthians 6, he's talking about lawsuits. People are going to court against each other before he even judges. And he says, You know, it's better to be defrauded.

But if you insist on taking your grievance before anyone, at least take it before a Christian judge. He said, I say this to your shame. Is it so that there's not one wise man, one just man among you who can judge between brethren? He acts as if it's a scandal, as if there's no one in the church who can make judgments.

Because judging is a thing for a spiritual man to do. A spiritual man can judge all things, Paul said. In chapter 7, in 1 Corinthians, he points out on the issue of virgins.

He says, I have no words from the Lord, but I'll give my judgment. I give my judgment as one who's found mercy from God to be faithful. In other words, I'm going to make a decision here about what's advisable, what's not advisable, what's right, what's wrong.

That's a judgment. And a little later on, he talks about, in chapter 11, judge among yourselves. Is it seemly for a woman to pray a prophesy with her head uncovered? Now, regardless of what the answer to that would be in our modern situation, I know Phil's working on that right now in the class.

But regardless of what the answer is on whether it's right or wrong for a woman to wear a head covering, Paul indicates that one way you could know is by making a judgment on the matter. Judge in yourselves. What do you think about that? Over in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul says, let the prophets speak two or three, and let the others judge.

Now, that's an interesting case. In fact, I'd like you to look there, if you would. And talk about the positive aspects of judging, first of all.

I bring this to your attention partly because in one of the contexts I heard some Christians not too long ago saying, judge not, let you be judged, was in terms of judging prophesy. I don't remember whether we were talking about the Kansas City prophets, or whether we were talking about someone who prophesied an earthquake a while ago or back last year, or what the situation was, but there's been a heap of opportunities in the last few years to talk about people's prophecies that don't come true and stuff. And I don't remember exactly which of those occasions it was, but I was basically expressing some skepticism about a particular prophecy that had been given by some person.

I remember one of the callers on the radio said, well, we shouldn't judge those things. Jesus said, judge not, let you be not judged. And the irony is, of course, that's one of the things Paul specifically said, we must judge.

Jesus implied the same too, by the way, because later in Matthew chapter 7 he says, beware of false prophets. How in the world do you know the difference between a false prophet and a true prophet unless you make a judgment about it? He said, you'll know them by their fruit, which is the criteria for judgment. But the point is, the very chapter in which he opens with the words, judge not, let you be not judged, before the chapter is over, he's talking about making the distinction between true prophets and false prophets.

By the way, immediately after his discussion about making judgments in Matthew 7, in verse 6 he says, don't give that which is holy to dogs and don't cast your pearls before swine. Well, presumably dogs and swine are metaphorical for some type of human

beings, but how would you know who is one of those if you don't make a judgment? I mean, how do you know if you're casting your pearls before a swine unless you judge someone to be a swine? Obviously, you cannot obey what Jesus said even in this same chapter in Matthew 7 without making judgments. So clearly he's not abolishing all judgments.

So let me say a word or two about the judging of prophecies. Now I'll tell you why. And I don't even know where Phil stands on this, and you have yet to cover these chapters with him, so he might stand a little differently from all I know just because we haven't discussed it.

And I've never really met anyone who says exactly what I have to say about it, so if he says the same thing then that would really be proof that it's true. But, you know, a while ago I was in an environment, a Christian environment, where people were discussing what New Testament prophets were, and what the New Testament gift of prophecy is or was, and my contention has been that the gift of prophecy in the New Testament is the same as the gift of prophecy in the Old Testament, and in particular that if it's from God it has to be 100% true. And we know that in the Old Testament if a person prophesied and it wasn't 100% true, they were stoned to death.

Now what was being discussed was whether that's true of New Testament prophets too, not the question of whether we stoned them to death, but whether New Testament prophecy had to be 100% true. Because there's a number of teachers around, and, you know, there's definitely, it's a difficult question. There's a number of teachers around who say, well, the reason that the prophets had to be 100% correct in the Old Testament is because they were the writers of Scripture.

However, in the New Testament, it's not people with the gift of prophecy who write Scripture, but apostles who write Scripture. And when the Bible speaks about apostles and prophets, it's the apostles, of course, who have to be accurate enough to write Scripture. The prophets were a lesser officer, a lesser gift, and so forth, and not necessarily, since they don't write Scripture, they don't have to be as accurate or whatever.

And there's one particular view by a guy named Wayne Grudem, and argued in what was, I think, a doctoral dissertation of his on the subject. He basically felt like in the New Testament, prophecy was people getting sort of an impression from God, and then just presenting it in their own words, and according to their own grasp of what it was the impression was, though they might well mistake the impression. Sometimes Agabus is given as an example of a prophet who made a mistake.

Frankly, I don't think that Agabus made a mistake. But many people do. But the point is, I still have seen nothing that proves that a New Testament prophet can afford to be less accurate than an Old Testament prophet.



And sometimes one of the arguments that's brought up to say that New Testament prophets don't have to be as accurate is that Paul says we should judge prophecy. Prophecies have to be judged. Now, he says in 1 Corinthians 14, for example, let the prophets speak two or three, and let the others judge.

Now, if the prophets are speaking, and if New Testament prophets are 100% accurate, why should anyone need to judge what they're saying? You see, that's the question. In 1 Corinthians 14, 29, let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. Now, Paul speaks of the person speaking as prophet.

No doubt he means New Testament prophets, since he's talking to a church and not to Israel. And then he says, you know, let this prophecy be judged. Now, the argument is that if New Testament prophets, even their words had to be judged, it suggests that they may not be 100% accurate.

There may be a part of it that's accurate and a part of it that's not, and that's where the judgment has to be made. I understand this a little differently. In the Bible, in the Old Testament certainly, the word prophet is used both for true and false prophets.

Anyone who prophesied is simply called a prophet. You know, the expression false prophet isn't even found in the Old Testament. Just prophet.

And that term is used whether it's prophets of Baal, or whether it's a prophet who is from God or not from God, or even whether it's hard to tell whether they're from God or not. There are some passages where it's hard to tell whether the prophet is a prophet of God or not. But he's called a prophet.

Many of the kings had prophets who prophesied falsely against things that the prophets of God were saying. But what I'm saying is the Old Testament never called them false prophets. It was deduced that they were false prophets by the fact that they prophesied falsely.

Now Paul, when he says, let the prophets speak, two or three, may not necessarily be giving his endorsement of everyone who speaks as a prophet. Some of them may be false prophets, in fact. Anyone who prophesies, it could be arguably called a prophet, he's either a true one or a false one.

I'm neither a true prophet nor a false prophet because I'm not a prophet. I don't prophesy. But anyone who prophesies is a prophet, whether he's true or false.

He's a prophet. He's either a true prophet or a false prophet. And when Paul says, let the prophets speak, two or three, he's not making the assumption that all prophets who speak in the church will be real prophets.

I'll tell you why in a moment. But my argument is, let the prophets speak, two or three,

and let the others judge, suggests that the person speaking as prophets might in fact be false prophets. And that's the judgment that's being made.

It's not a question of judging the truth content of a real prophecy from a real prophet. And was this prophecy 90% accurate or was it 80% accurate or was it only 50% accurate? I don't know how much of this was accurate. No, I think he's saying anyone who prophesies is at least masquerading as a prophet at the very least and we need to judge and find out whether they're true or false prophets.

Let me back this up for you. Look over at 1 Thessalonians 5 verses 19 through 21. 1 Thessalonians 5, 19 through 21.

It says, do not quench the spirit, do not despise prophecies, test all things, and hold fast to what is good. Now actually this scripture is brought up by Wayne Grudem in his book again to suggest, you see, when prophecies are given you have to test them and hold fast to the part of them that's good and reject the rest, you know, kind of eat the meat and spit out the bones, everyone says. And so it says, do not despise prophecies, test all things, and hold fast to what is good.

Now some feel that what Paul is saying here is when a prophet, a true Christian prophet speaks you need to test it for its, again, truth content, how much truth is in this prophecy. And when you discover 20% truth in the prophecy you hold fast to that 20% and discard the 80% that's not truth or whatever. I understand that very differently.

If you'll look at one other passage, keep your finger at 1 Thessalonians 5 and look at 1 John, chapter 4. 1 John, chapter 4 beginning with verse 1. The leper do not believe every spirit but test the spirit whether they are of 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 of God.

Every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God and this is the spirit of Antichrist which you have heard was coming and now is already in the world. Now, he here tells us to test the spirit and in the context it's clear that spirit refers to the message of the prophet. If a spirit is confessing proper things about Christ it's a genuine prophecy.

If the spirit that is speaking or the utterance is not confessing the right things about Christ it is a false prophet speaking. Now the important thing to point out is he says don't believe every spirit. You've got to judge prophecies.

When you hear a spiritual utterance which is here referred to as a spirit and I'll show you elsewhere in the scripture it is also. A spiritual utterance is here called a spirit. You test those spirits.

You test those utterances. Now do you test the utterances because a true prophet might

indeed give some error in his prophecy? No. He tells us why to test the spirits because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

The purpose of testing prophecies is to identify who is a false prophet. Not to identify how much falseness is in a true prophet's utterance but to discover whether the prophet speaking is a true one or a false one. He says do not believe every spirit but test the spirits whether they are of God because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

That's why you have to test the prophets not because there might be a little bit of error in the prophecy of a true prophet but because if you find error you know that you've found a false prophet. Now I would point out to you too that the word test in 1 John 4.1 and the same word in 1 Thessalonians 5.21 which says test all things with reference to prophecy is the same word in the Greek. The Greek words are the same.

It is the word let me see if I can get it right here dokimadzo or dokimadzo this is the word test in 1 Thessalonians 5.21 test all things hold fast that which is good in the context of do not despise prophecy and also the same Greek word is used by John test the spirit, test the prophet or their messages. Now it's clear then that testing prophecy is not necessarily testing what percentage of it is accurate but testing whether the prophet himself is a real prophet by testing what he says. You can tell a false prophet in the Old Testament there were two tests of false prophets given there is even more in the New Testament but certainly the Old Testament would hold true as well as the additional ones in the New.

In Deuteronomy 13 Moses warned that prophets might come and even give signs and wonders and yet lead you away from God. They might advocate the worship of a different God than the one that the Jews had been taught about by Moses. That would be proof that this man was an imposter.

He might be prophesying but if his message does not uphold the true faith the true God and advocates something that is tantamount to a defection from God or to another God or another religious system that person is a false prophet. That's in Deuteronomy 13 verses 1-3. But then in Deuteronomy 18 the closing verses of that chapter he gives another test of false prophets he doesn't say false prophets but he tests how to tell who is a true prophet and who isn't and he says in Deuteronomy 18 verse 21 And if you say in your heart How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken? Then he answers his own question When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord if the thing does not happen or come to pass that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken the prophet has spoken it presumptuously you shall not be afraid of him.

So you can see that if the thing spoken does not come to pass the prophet has spoken presumptuously. Now, that was true in the Old Testament we have no reason to believe it was not true in the New Testament. If New Testament prophets could speak falsely

then maybe the book of Revelation is false it's a prophecy it identifies itself as a prophecy.

When Paul says the spirit speaks expressly and he gives a prophetic word well maybe since New Testament gift prophecy isn't 100% accurate they say well maybe we can't trust those utterances. In fact, those would be the only utterances we couldn't trust unless they say it's the Lord or where the spirit speaks expressly because most evangelicals believe that Paul is to be trusted most of the time I mean that they believe in the inspiration of Scripture generally but what is the inspiration of Scripture but a continuation of the spirit of prophecy in the Old Testament. It's true it's apostles through whom it operated in writing the New Testament but it is still the gift of prophecy when the apostle says the Lord says or God says or the spirit of the Lord has spoken expressly about this that's still the gift of prophecy going on there.

It's the gift of prophecy and it's the gift of prophecy and it's the gift of prophecy and it's the gift of prophecy and it's the gift of prophecy and it's the gift of prophecy and it's the gift of prophecy and it's the gift of prophecy I want to make it one other observation on judging prophecy and we'll get back to what Jesus said in more particular about judgment in a general sense in first Corinthians 12 I'd like to make a suggestion that I've never heard made by anyone else before it may be true and it may not be true you have to judge that for yourself that's the judgment you have to make test of spirit in first Corinthians 12 and verse 10 where Paul is listing nine of the gifts, one of them that's found in that list is discerning of spirit. Now, 1 Corinthians 12, 10, discerning of spirit. When I entered the charismatic renewal and became aware of the gifts of the spirit and began to read books by Pentecostal people and charismatics and began to hear the preaching on the gifts and tape series on the gifts from charismatic teachers, it seemed that almost everyone agreed that the gift of discerning of spirit was the ability to see or sense the presence of demons.

Some would say you could also discern, if you had this gift, you could also discern the presence of angels or other spirits as well. But certainly the thing that was most connected in the mind of the mainline charismatic teaching 20 years ago was that discerning of spirits was the ability to detect the presence of demons, to know if someone was demon possessed or not, for example. Or simply to discern, sometimes people would even not emphasize the demons part but just be able to tell what's in the spirit of another person.

To tell that somebody, almost it was a mind reading kind of a thing. I've met many people, mostly women I have to say, who have boasted of having tremendous discernment. I've lost track many years ago of the persons who have told me what a great gift of discernment they have.

And usually that's in the context of telling me that they have discovered that such and such a person has problems with a demon or something like that. You know, oh God's

really given me a real gift of discernment and I can tell that such and such a person is demonized or that person is oppressed by demons or something like that. Now, I want to say first of all that discernment is not a gift.

According to scripture, discernment is something developed by maturity. I can say that on the basis of Hebrews chapter 5 and the general usage of the word discernment in the Bible. But the most obvious place where we can see this explained is in Hebrews chapter 5 and from verse 12 on.

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God. You have come to eat milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he's a babe.

But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Now, the ability to discern good and evil is something that you develop by use of scripture. The person who has his senses exercised or developed, spiritual senses, you discern natural things by your natural senses.

You can discern the presence of fresh baked bread in a bakery by the smell of it. You can discern the presence of a visible entity by seeing that person. Your natural senses are the avenue of discerning what's going on in the natural world.

In terms of discerning that which is not in the natural world, the moral issues, good and evil, that is a developed spiritual sense. And that is, according to the writer of Hebrews, developed by becoming skilled in the word of righteousness. The babe is the one who is unskilled in the word of righteousness.

The mature person is the one who, by reason of use of the word, has his senses, his spiritual senses, exercised to discern what's right and wrong. And it's quite obvious to anyone who has done this, anyone who spends time in scripture, immediately begins to have an awakened sense of what's right and wrong. And can make moral judgments somewhat more accurately because of their having applied scripture.

Now, that's what discernment is. But what is discerning of spirit? That's a gift listed in 1 Corinthians 12.10. And I'd like to suggest to you that spirit, in that expression, discerning of spirit, spirit is not a reference to demons, or angels, or human spirits. I believe that this is a place where the word spirit is used, in the same sense John used it in 1 John, we looked at a moment ago, as spiritual utterances.

The utterances of alleged prophets. Now, there is strong reason to believe that the Bible makes this usage of the word spirit. One of the places we looked at was 1 John 4. Do not believe every spirit.

Test the spirit. The passage makes best sense if we understand John to mean by spirit, the utterances of spiritual people professing to prophesy. We could use prophecies, or prophetic utterances.

Whether that's true in 1 Corinthians 12.10 or not, is not apparent from chapter 12, but from chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians, it would seem to be true. If you look with me at that place, well, no, before we look there, I want to look there last. I want to look at 2 Thessalonians chapter 2, show you another place where prophetic utterances apparently are called spirit.

Apparently it was a typical usage in biblical times. In 2 Thessalonians 2, verses 1 and 2, Now brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to him, we ask you not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. There's three ways that they might be informed or really misinformed that the day of Christ had come.

One was by a letter that professed to be from Paul. Another was by a word, perhaps a sermon or something like that. Another was by a spirit, which I take to mean a prophetic utterance in the church.

It doesn't have to mean that there, but it most likely does. Corresponding to a letter from Paul or a word, a spirit would most likely be a means by which Christians gained information about such things as this. And something comparable to a letter from Paul carrying that kind of authority would probably be a prophetic utterance or something like that.

Now, it can't demonstrate beyond the shadow of a doubt that the word spirit means a prophetic utterance here, but it fits best the context. Now, now look at 1 Corinthians 14. I've been putting that off, but let's take a look at that now.

I'd like to suggest to you what may be a new way of looking at some of this discussion about to get to prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14. Begin with verse 29. We read 29, but let's read a few verses beyond as well.

Let two or three prophets speak, let the other judge. But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent, for you can all prophesy one by one that all may learn and all may be encouraged. And the spirit of the prophets are subject to the prophets.

Now, that statement, the spirit of the prophets are subject to the prophets, in my early charismatic training, when I would hear cassette tapes or read books on this subject or hear people preach, that verse was said to mean a prophet has control over himself. The spirit of the prophets are subject to the prophets. That meant, as I was taught, that a prophet, when prophesying, can control himself.

He doesn't have to, you know, use King James English. He doesn't have to scream and shout. He doesn't have to shake.

And if you ask him to stop speaking, he can do so. He is in full control of himself. Now, that may be true.

It may not be true. I don't know. Some of the prophets in the Old Testament weren't in full control themselves.

There were times even when a guy like Saul would be chasing David and he'd pass through a group of prophets and the spirit would come upon him and he'd fall on the ground and prophesy until the end of the day. I don't have the impression he was fully in control of himself. Balaam does not appear to have been fully in control of himself.

Now, both of those cases, we could argue, they were not true men of God and therefore not true prophets. But the Lord was prophesying through them, it would appear. It was the spirit of God that came upon them in those instances.

And so I'm not sure that it could be argued that people who prophesy always have full control over themselves. Amos said, the Lord has spoken, who can but prophesy? In Amos chapter 3, I think it's around verse 7 or 8. The Lord has spoken, who can but prophesy, as if I can't help it. Jeremiah tried not to prophesy.

He said, I decided because I got persecuted so much for speaking the word of the Lord, I said, I'm never going to speak the word of the Lord anymore. But he said, but his word was in me like a fire and I couldn't hold it back. And so I, I'm not sure that, I mean, I've always taught because it seems orthodox to do so, that a Christian exercising the gift of prophecy has control over himself.

And usually the proof text that is the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet. But as I think more, you know, more scripturally about it, I'm not sure that that can be argued in every case. And I'm fairly sure these days that that's not what the verse means.

In the context, Paul said, let a couple or three people prophesy. The rest sit in judgment. The rest of whom? Well, not certain, but I personally feel like it's the rest of the prophets.

There is a group of people in the Corinthian church recognized as those who have the gift of prophecy. They are the prophets of the church. In any given service, Paul says two or three of them can speak.

The others who don't get a chance to speak in that service should sit and judge the word that's being spoken. Now it says, right after saying let the others judge, it says if anything is revealed to another who sits by, that is, I think, another prophet who's judging it and he gets a revelation about this. In making a judgment about the word

that's being uttered, if something is revealed to him, this is not from God or something like that, well then the first one has to be quiet.

The prophet who's sitting in judgment of the speaking prophet can interrupt him. And he says, and there's a reason for this in verse 32, the spirit of the prophets are subject to the prophets. I'd like to suggest to you that the word spirit of the prophets means the utterances of the prophets are subject to the prophets, that is, the group of prophets in the church.

Now you needn't follow me on this, that is, you don't have to agree with me, but I'd like you to consider that when you read this passage. Paul is talking about the maintaining of order in the use of prophecy in the church. He says, well, let's have only two or three speak, and the other prophets who aren't able to speak because it's limited to two or three in a given meeting, let them, they have a prophetic function too, even if they don't speak, they can sit and judge the validity of the prophecies that are being offered.

And if something is revealed that someone is a false prophet, giving a false word, then they are to interrupt him and say, wait a minute, hold it right there. Why? Because every prophet who speaks his spirit, his utterance, is subject to the judgment of the prophetic body, to the consensus of the prophets. So that the spirits of the prophets, which just means the utterances of any individual prophets, are subject to, that is, subject to the judgment of and the endorsement or disapproval of, the prophets, the group of prophets.

It would not in this case be saying that the individual prophet necessarily has control over himself while he's prophesying. While that may be true, I don't know if that's true in every case or not, but that may be a true statement. In the context, I don't think that's what it's saying.

I think what it's saying is prophetic utterances are subject to the judgment of the body of prophets. And that is why if one is uttering something and one of the other prophets gets something revealed to him, implying that while he's judging the prophecy, something's revealed that makes him need to interrupt that prophet, well, the speaking prophet can't shout him down. He's got to stand under the authority of the prophetic group and accept their judgment of his prophecy, of his word.

Now, I bring this passage up in connection with the discerning of spirits for this reason. In 1 Corinthians 14.29, where it says, let the others judge, in the context of judging prophecies, or more properly, in the context of judging prophets, it doesn't say judge the prophecies. It says, let the prophets speak and let the others judge, what, them.

Judge whether they're real prophets or not. And there were no doubt a lot of false prophets in a town like Corinth, you know, and in the church like the Corinthian church. But the word judged there, in the Greek, is the same word, or it's the cognate of the word discerning in chapter 12, verse 10, which is discerning of spirits.



The word discerning in the Greek, in chapter 12, verse 10, is diakrisis, which is a verb. And the noun form of the same word is diakrino. I'm sorry, it's also a verb, my mistake.

It's another form of the verb, diakrino. And that's the word used in chapter 14, verse 29. So, when Paul says there is a gift called discerning of spirits, it could be translated judging of spirits.

And if spirits means prophetic utterances, then the gift is the ability to make judgments of the prophecies that are given in the church. And he goes on to expand on what that gift, how that gift functions in the church in chapter 14, when he says, okay, let the prophets speak to a theory and let the others discern, let the others judge, discern. And if they discern something about it, then let them interrupt the guy and say, wait a minute, I discern that that's not right.

Something's been revealed to me about that. And so there is a judgment function there. Now, not everything I've just said on this tangent has been a necessary part of expounding on Jesus' statements, judge not that you be not judged.

But what I wanted to say is there is a very positive teaching in the scripture about judging in many kinds of situations. You do have to make moral judgments. You do have to judge yourself with reference to your own obedience to God.