

MIRACLES AND DISCERNMENT
Opening Your Spiritual Gifts
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Continuing the series on spiritual gifts. We're looking again at 1 Corinthians 12. Tonight focusing in on two of the spiritual gifts from verse 10 – miraculous or the gift of miracles and the ability to discern or distinguish between spirits.

We have a desire, Lord Jesus, to be taught of you. To set at your feet. Make this time of teaching tonight a time of being in your presence, a time of listening to you, a time of hearing your voice. We ask in your name. Amen.

The gift of miracles. I think it may have been C. S. Lewis who used this illustration. He said a very wise, old Christian philosopher was sitting in a room to which a brilliant young agnostic student came. The young student wanted the old philosopher to prove the existence of God. The old man said to the student, "Let us set up some form of experiment to see whether or not you would agree that what happens is the proof of God's existence." The philosopher said, "Suppose this little potted plant upon my invoking the name of God to grow to a very large plant and fill this room within an hour's time. Would you accept that as bone-fide proof miraculously of God's power?" The student said, "Yes, I would accept that as proof of God's miraculous power." The professor said, "I'm not going to ask God to do that. But you must realize that if that plant is left alone and properly watered and given sunshine, in the course of time it will fill the room. And that will be no less a miracle. The miracle of botanical life and all of life is itself a gift from God."

Someone has said that in the miracle of conception if you were to think of the information that is transmitted through the genetic code in concept somebody figured that out that it would take a print out the size of the library of congress to tell you all of the DNA code or imprinting in that life that is being formed in one cell.

Life itself is a miracle. I suppose when we talk about the gift of miracles it's always well first of all to define our term. I marvel at the miracle of the computer. I don't have the foggiest idea of how it works. I haven't figured out how a TV works! But the person who makes it understands it.

No one has ever yet fully figured out the human body. Or the miracles that are involved in life. Only the guy who made it. When we talk about miracle, we're talking about a process here God makes extraordinary provision outside of normal processes. Or in some cases where he shortens a process which would have taken a longer period of time. Or in other cases where he reverses a process.

When the word "miracles" is used as a spiritual gift I would understand that Paul is making a distinction between it and the gift of healing. Therefore miracles is a supernatural manifestation of God's power outside the normal processes of every day miracles which the act of breathing itself is a miracle. And that supernatural working of God's power outside the normal processes in ways that are other than healings of the human body. In the gospels in the life of Jesus, miracles function in the realm of power over nature, power over death, power over demons. One

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never knows exactly where to put the miracle of exorcism – in the realm of healings or the realm of miracles.

We tried to say of the spiritual gifts that they have a common usage. If we have the gift of wisdom that doesn't mean that everybody that doesn't have the gift is then excluded from exercising wisdom – it's ok to not be wise. We try to say there's common wisdom.

There is common knowledge as well as the special operation of the utterance of knowledge. There is common faith. All of us are called to faith. All of us are called to pray for one another, to pray for the sick. And yet there is a special operation of the gift of faith.

I think it's the case with miracles as well. There are events that happen in our Christian experience, probably there could be many testimonies shared in this group, where God has done something extraordinary in your life which you cannot account for by normal, rational processes. But which do not necessarily happen as a result of the use of the gift of miracles operating per se. That is someone was not there as an agent saying, "Now we're going to call upon the name of God and this is going to happen." Rather the event simply happened in a miraculous fashion.

Miracles are happening in a sense every day, every normal process is a miracle. And miracles may happen in an extraordinary sense as some means of God's provision.

But there is also a special gift of miracles, the working of miracles. We see plenty of evidence of this gift in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. As I have tried to isolate the purposes of these gifts – and I think we always ought to understand the purposes – it appears very clearly from the scriptural data that there are three specific things that the gift of miracles accomplish. They are these:

First the gift of miracles when it is in operation vindicates God's name. It clearly identifies who God is on the side of. It clearly reveals his power and his authority. One of the classic evidences in scripture for the gift of miracles functioning in this manner is Elijah's experience on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18. He calls upon the prophets of Baal to offer their sacrifices and attempt to call down fire. Then he offers his, surrounds it with water and he says "Let the God who is the real God answer by fire." God reveals himself indeed as the God of Elijah. And the name of God is vindicated against the helpless belief and hopeless god of the Baal prophets.

When miracles function today they're still doing that same thing.

Miracles, I think you'll agree if you look at history, have a tendency to occur most and with most stunning power in areas where the gospel is coming for the first time and people had no witness at all. In fact, Jesus made a very interesting statement when he shows in the story of the rich man and Lazarus that the rich man wants to come back and tell his five brothers that there is a hell. Jesus responds that they would not believe if even Moses came back. No one beyond the grave would convince them. Jesus says they have the law and the prophets. In other words the Lord was not going to send them a miracle since they had within their revelation of God sufficient evidence to make a decision.

I'm not saying that miracles only happen when you're establishing a church in an alien culture where people do not have the example of other Christians, the word of God or the church. But I

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am saying that as an observation, when you're reading the book of Acts or when you're looking at missionary activity you will find this on a much more frequent basis when the gospel is breaking into new ground.

A second purpose for the gift of miracles to function is to simply deliver God's people out of the hands of the enemy. Moses was a man in the Old Testament who functioned with the gift of miracles. Through the ten miraculous plagues or signs God through Moses allowed his people to be led out of captivity. And through miraculous manifestations in the wilderness he provided for his people to be delivered from the enemy.

Daniel was miraculously given an ability to exist in a lion's den. Jesus did miracles when his whole kingdom was in a boat threatening to go down on the lake of Galilee. He did a miracle to save his people, his disciples.

Prison experiences in the book of Acts we know that God preserved his people out of the hands of the enemy. And that's by the way a thing all by itself. Some prison escapes actually in Acts and there are some imprisonment from which there is no escape. Again, the sovereignty of God. You can't reduce these things to a law.

Third, miracles happen to provide for those in need. The widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17 is without flour or oil except to make one last meal. Through the gift of miracles operating through Elijah she is given enough to eat to last through the whole famine.

Jesus feeds the five thousand and the four thousand – miraculous miracle of provision.

People that need a miracle to have faith who already have the scripture it seems to me by very definition deficient in faith. And we know in the scriptures, Jesus never did miracles to satisfy the curiosity or the faith demands of people who already had the prophets and the writings.

But miracles do happen to those who are in need. The gift of miracles may function in those regards.

Miracles are never done for miracles' sake. Throughout the scriptures, as Jesus said to the Pharisees, You seek a sign but you'll have no sign other than the sign of Jonah. If you feel like you'd exercise the gift of miracles what should you do to begin developing that gift? I would simply say the two principles that I shared last week of healings are operative here. Dare to step out in a ministry when you will fail unless God comes through. And be profoundly moved by human need. And the chances are much higher that God may begin causing you to begin functioning in this area.

I'd also add to that based upon what I said earlier, find a place in the world that has never heard the name of Jesus and go out and claim it for the Lord.

The gift of miracles.

A second gift that we're looking at this evening is the gift of discerning of spirits.

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Why do we need to discern spirits anyway? Because there are really spirits in three realms aren't there? There is the Spirit of God. There is the spirit of man. And there is the spirit of the evil one – demonic spirits. So to discern spirits is to tell whether in a given situation a person or an event is happening at the instigation of the Spirit of God, the spirit of man or the spirit of the enemy.

Discernment is especially needed in certain circumstances. It will help us and all of us should be discerning. We all ought to know that we can discern between good and evil, between the better and the best. We're all called to wisdom in that respect. But the spiritual functioning of the gift of discernment is to help us to distinguish first of all whether or not a person who brings a spiritual message is from God. That's where discernment ought first to function. How do we know when someone speaks to us individually or in a group setting whether that person indeed is bringing a message from God, from their own spirit, or from the evil one.

The Pharisees did not have discernment. They did not understand that Jesus who spoke to them was speaking to them by the Spirit of God. They attributed the source of his speaking and his actions to the spirit of man or the spirit of the evil one. They failed in the gift of discernment and therefore they lost out.

On the other hand in Acts 17:11 a congregation in Greece called the Bereans exercised discernment, searching the scripture to see whether or not the things that Paul was preaching were true and born out. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:29 that any prophet's words are to be weighed. You're not to take somebody's message simply because they are saying, "I the Lord thy God say unto thee." We're to test all utterances, all messages and the primary test of course is whether it bears fidelity and allegiance to Jesus Christ. Whether it is in agreement with the scripture. Whether it fits and responds to the occasion. Discern whether or not a person bears a spiritual message from God.

A second reason for discernment is to distinguish outward appearances from inward reality.

Often things aren't what they seem to be. The gift of discernment will help keep purity in the body because the gift of discernment will help us distinguish inward reality from outward appearances. For example, Simon Magus looked like he wanted to be real spiritual. He wanted the gift of giving the Holy Spirit. He offered money. You could probably chalk it up to a naïve mistake. He hadn't been a Christian that long and he doesn't understand yet. But Peter discerns in the spirit and says, the inner reality is that Satan is filling him.

The same thing happens of course with Ananias and Saphira. The same thing happens with Jesus and Peter where Jesus says I'm going to the cross and Peter says, Oh, no you can never do that! And Jesus turns with discernment and rebukes Peter. Revelation 2. The Ephesian church looks like a church that anybody in their right mind would like to be a part of. It did not let its light go out. It had witnessed faithfully. It had endured hardship. Yet the discerning eye of Jesus saw a difference between the outward appearance and the inward reality. "You have left your first love."

The work of the Spirit is always to strip away the pretenses of our life, the games we play. And get to the inner meaning of our heart. This message in itself can be an act of discernment by the

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Spirit in your life. If you're keeping up an outward appearance of something but lack an inward reality the Spirit is concerned about that.

So the gift of discernment distinguishes whether or not a person who brings a spiritual message is from God, from man or from the devil. It distinguishes outward appearances from inward realities.

Third, it distinguishes whether or not a person is possessed by an evil spirit.

Not everyone who functions on a so-called evil realm is necessarily possessed of an evil spirit. One of the intriguing things, by the way, about the works of the flesh in Galatians 5 is that witchcraft is listed as a work of the flesh. If I didn't have that scripture I'd tend to say that anyone involved in witchcraft was automatically involved in spirit possession – being possessed of an evil spirit. Not necessarily Paul says. It maybe a work, a manifestation of the flesh. That is the flesh is the human spirit apart from God. Not bone and muscles and things like that. Flesh is human life apart from God. So witchcraft can be a work of the flesh, not necessarily in every circumstance a demonic manifestation.

How do we discern demonic involvement in temptations to sin and temptations in the human life? If you're being pressed on a number of issues in your life, how do you know whether that pressure against you is coming from the devil, from your own human spirit, is it a trial sent by God. How do you function in the realm of discernment?

I want to talk about that a little bit – how we can discern demonic involvement or the lack of demonic involvement in temptations to sin and in our human life.

I think we need to realize that there are four kinds of temptations to sin. We can be discerning as we approach these. The scriptures of course always give us the basis for how a spiritual gift ought to operate. As I've indicated, discernment happens on a common and ordinary level for everyone. Yet there is a special time when not everyone can see what may be at stake. Someone with the gift of discernment will see it very clearly.

There are temptations arising out of our own sinful human nature and no demonic involvement is involved. It is not "the devil made me do it," it's "I wanted to do it myself and I did it." Ever done that? I'm convinced that God could kill the devil tonight and that wouldn't do away with sin in your life or my life. In fact, Jeremiah 17:9 says "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt [beyond cure, says the NIV]." Jesus says "From within out of men's hearts comes evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, luteness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean." James 1:14 says "Each one is tempted when by his own evil desire he is dragged away and enticed."

There are things stirring up with us that want to sin. So it's not always appropriate to say "the devil is bringing that pressure on me." It is my Adamic human nature that wants to stray from God and do my own thing and forget the consequences. It just wants the lust of the eyes, the pride of life and the like.

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So I must discern that. We'll talk about strategies for dealing with that level of temptation. We'll just define the levels at this moment.

Then there are temptations arising from direct demonic origin. Some of you are experiencing in your life right at this point things in your life that can only owe their source to Satanic or demonic involvement. Not that you are possessed but that is the source of the pressure.

Temptations do arise from demonic origin. Christ was tempted by Satan. Paul had a messenger of Satan, 1 Corinthians 12, to buffet him. Satan filled Ananias' heart to lie, Acts 5:3. David did a census because he was incited by Satan, 1 Chronicles 21:1. Ephesians 6:10-18 we fight against supernatural forces. Yielding to our own sinful human impulses may provide an opening for demonic temptation. Judas' love for money for example made him more susceptible to Satan entering him. John 8:34 Jesus says everyone who goes on committing sin is a slave to sin. And he tells us we're to pray not to be led into temptation.

We'll look at how to deal with temptation rising from a demonic origin in just a minute.

A third level of temptation and stress in our life maybe demonic oppression. We have had several instances over the last few years of children being bothered by knockings and strange noises in their house which were confirmed by adults. In the two cases that I'm thinking of at the top they were clear cases of demonic oppression. I have a feeling that people who lived in the house prior to that had been involved in some sort of occult practice. Persons from our body went out and prayed in that place, pled the blood of Jesus, stood at the doors and prayed for the peace of Christ and the whole kind of demonic oppression lifted.

Demons may exert powerful influence but not necessarily possess. This happened with Saul for example. 1 Samuel 13 and 15. Two errors in his life there comes an evil spirit periodically to torment him for the rest of his life.

Oppression according to scriptural data may be associated with blindness and hardness of heart toward the gospel, 2 Corinthians 4:4. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel or the glory of Christ who is the image of God. In other words when a person steadfastly refuses to receive Jesus ultimately a blindness comes to them as a result of satanic oppression.

Satanic oppression may be involved in apostasy. 1 Timothy 4:1, the Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. 2 Peter 2 tells us that demonic oppression may be associated with indulging ourselves in sinful and defiling behavior.

I personally feel that this may be one of the phenomenon associated with homosexuality and lesbianism that makes it so very difficult to shake. And why psychological cures are not working. More is at stake that one's psychological nature. One's spiritual nature is bound up with it as well. Therefore a spiritual cure must be effected alongside the psychological cure.

A fourth level of temptation or falling or dealing with sin is demonic possession. I'm glad I had the experience of my mom and dad being missionaries in Tibet. I have seen it with my own eyes. There are people in the western world who have never seen demon possession. I like what

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C.S. Lewis says, the devil adapts a strategy to fit culture. When a culture believes in ideas Satan will possess those ideas. When a culture believes in individual mysticism Satan will possess those persons. In the east we see a much more common association with demon possession because of the transcendental nature of the religious experience. But in the west we have science and everybody knows in a scientific community that the devil is a superstition.

The devil, in fact, is the only major world power whose foreign policy goal is to convince people he doesn't exist. So he infiltrates ideas. Where did Marxism come from? Where did the *Playboy* philosophy come from? They came from hell, that's where they came from. From demons. They came from the doctrine of demons. Forms of capitalism came from the same source. There are some forms of capitalism where the rich get rich and the poor get poorer and there's great distance separating the two and it's ok to pounce on the poor – that's not of God either. That's from the pit.

Possession, individual possession. There are five cases of individual possession in the gospels. Several cases of exorcism and possession in the book of Acts. If you've ever worried about being possessed by a demon let me tell you what the characteristics of demonic possession are.

First, demons physically manifest themselves. There is disordered behavior. The demonic possession may parallel an illness. But it is different from an illness in that it involves an invasion from an outside source. In the physical possession there may be grades of possession. The demon of Gadarene in Mark 5 is far more possessed than the demon of Mark 1 in the Capernaum synagogue. The Gadarene demonic would never sit still long enough to get into a synagogue much less put clothes on to get there. There's a difference in physical manifestation. The demons will manifest themselves.

Second, demons are self-destructive and bring violent behavior. When the demon comes out of the Capernaum man in Mark 1 he shakes the man violently. He falls to the floor. The Gadarene demonic in Mark 5 has bizarre behavior including being naked, living in tombs, always cutting himself with rocks and crying out. And unusual superhuman strength. The demoniac boy in Mark 9 falls to the ground into the fire. He foams at the mouth. He gnashes his teeth and he becomes rigid. And by the way the gospels know the difference between epilepsy and demonic possession. In Mark 4, right at the end of that chapter, there is a statement that Jesus healed demoniacs and epileptics. The gospel writers themselves knew there was a difference between the two.

A third characteristic of possession is that the evil spirit speaks thereby differentiating himself from the person, a different voice.

Fourth, demons always know who Jesus is. They inevitably know his identity far better than other people. And frequently when they are cast out there is a convulsive exit.

It's interesting to watch Jesus dealing with demons. Several characteristics of his dealing with demons.

First, he never told anyone they had a demon. Never do you find Jesus or an apostle ever telling anyone they had a demon. You know why? Because when a demon is around spiritual authority they can't sit on it. They will erupt. That's why I have my problems with what I call the

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charismatic demonologists who are discerning people who have demons. That's not scriptural. Around Jesus, around the apostles, around people filled with the Spirit, demons can't set on it. They've got to make themselves known. So he never tells anyone they had a demon.

Secondly, he ordered silence. He didn't let them speak. He was not interested in them telling anybody what it was like in hell or anything like that. He just shut them up.

Third, Jesus counseled prayer and faith. He said if you want to drive out demons you must be a person of prayer and you must be a person of faith.

Fourth, he commanded exit and the exit was immediate. It was not a process involved. It was done.

Fifth, he left the person whole.

One of the problems with going around telling people they have demons is it removes responsibility from them for their own action. If the devil made me do it then I don't have to take responsibility. Also it really ravages a person. If someone says to you, You have a demon, that can be devastating to you.

You'll know you have a demon if you have one. It won't be a matter of doubt. If you're wondering whether you have a demon, you wouldn't wonder if you had one. That's scripture. Born out by scriptural data.

How do we discern how to become spiritually whole in looking at these four areas of involvement to sin?

Let's work backwards. Demonic possession. There's only one way to be free from demonic possession and that is exorcism. Pray the prayer of faith, the prayer of relief and the command to leave. You can't read a book, go to classes, that it will gradually work itself out. It's exorcism, casting out of demons. That is sufficient. There's power in the gospels to do that.

It will require on occasion discernment to distinguish between a person who feels they have a demon versus the presence of a demon.

Second, in regard to demonic oppression. If you're oppressed by the enemy. You're not possessed but you're oppressed by him. Crushed down. How do you deal with that? If the oppression is due to sin in your life, clear sin in your life – moral sin – then start there. Begin to lay that sin out before God in confession. Begin to ask godly people who walk with the Lord to pray with you. That that area of sinful disobedience in your life over which you don't seem to have any control over at all that the power of the enemy will be broken.

If you've been involved with the occult, confess that, repent of it and put it away. Confess the name of Jesus. In demonic oppression keep reminding the devil and his demons the power of Jesus. The blood of Jesus on the cross. Satan is a looser. In the name of Jesus. By the blood of Jesus, we rebuke you. Ultimately Satan must have know he cannot stay around those kind of language. The memory of Calvary drives him away. He cannot take the victory of the cross.

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There is temptation from demonic origin, a third level we look at. When that occurs we need like Jesus to use the word of God. We know Satan knows the scripture and he will use it well. We must use the word in response. We must resist as James 4 says to us “resist the devil and he will flee from you.”

What do we do about discerning when temptation comes from our sinful fallen human nature. That’s where most of us are tempted and tested. How do we deal with temptation on that level. How do we discern it? We should begin by recognizing the sinful impulse. If we are led to sin in any particular given area especially on a repeated basis we need to recognize that that strong thing is trying to assert itself in our life. That dimensions of the flesh, that dimension of our personality which stood apart from God wants to assert itself. We need to recognize it and be honest with it. Confess your sins.

Secondly, we need to remove ourselves from a temptation-producing environment. If we are in an area where we are exposed to a particular weakness. For example if you are a kleptomaniac – you’ve just got to steal, that’s an impulse with you – don’t go into a store alone. Take somebody with you. Prudence. Don’t expose yourself to those kind of situations. If you’re a person who does things that are really wrong when you’re alone, then reduce those lonely times. Remove influences. Programming that comes to you. Literature that comes to you. Social situations that expose you. If you have a tendency to use drugs you’re going to have to break those situations with people who are into drugs. We have to be very careful of associations that can lead us into a pattern of sinfulness.

If you tend to be a person who is a real critic, a gripper, a downer, look at the people you’re around. Negative people hang out with negative people. You ought to look at that and start getting with a different crowd.

Temptation from sinful human nature. Recognize the sinful impulse. Remove yourself from a temptation producing environment.

Confess the sinful desire. Lay it out on the table. Start dealing honestly with it.

4. Share your struggle with other Christians who will pray for you. There is a tyranny of silence and loneliness in the Christian community. The devil always likes to isolate sheep. Always likes to make us feel that we’re the only ones. That’s one of the reasons I try to be somewhat vulnerable in the pulpit lest you think you get to a place in your life where you’re free from temptation like the pastor. The devil likes to make us think that we’re the only ones. We find that when we begin to open up with our life with other people that strength comes to us. That’s why the growing in fellowship together, the groups are so important. Or any means we have a way of sharing with other believers what’s happening in us. There’s strength that comes through that. We get things out in the open and we deal with them.

Fifth, seek thought patterns, which are pure and wholesome. Begin to re-educate the mind. To think the thoughts of Jesus. Say the words of Jesus. Scripture repetition. Scripture memory. Committing to 3x5 cards certain affirmations about the Lord and about his will in our life are helpful. Thought patterns, which are pure and wholesome.

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Another step that the Lord has especially impressed upon me, is that when struggling against the flesh you must always live in the grace of God. If you don't, you're in trouble. Romans 7 always tells us what the trouble is if we don't live in the grace of God. If we try to base our relationship with God on how well we're doing in terms of keeping his law we will always wind up feeling frustrated and wretched. No one on his own has ever fully kept the law of God. Only Jesus. Therefore we must continually step into that arena of reality that reminds us of the grace of God. "There is therefore now no condemnation to those that are in Christ Jesus." It's been a long way for me to come from eternal insecurity to a place of resting in God's grace. That he accepts me as his son. That he accepts you as his son or daughter and within the context of relationship we are growing and working out our salvation with fear and trembling. Not working to attain the salvation but working it out in terms of its practical effect and demonstration. Discerning.

It almost goes without saying that if you want to regularly function in the gift of discernment obviously you have a concern for helping people. You have a concern for being involved in human lives. You may have tendencies toward being a counselor, being a facilitator of spiritual growth in people. That is certainly a marvelous way you can begin to develop this gift in your own life as it relates to others.

Our Father, we come to you this evening and we bring to you this scriptural teaching now, always asking within our hearts that your word be far more than information to us. That it be life to us. Lord, there are some within this body whom you want to use in the gift of miracles, to rescue your people, to vindicate your name, and to provide supernatural supply for your people. We ask, Lord, where there is the desire within lives here to truly function in this area of spiritual giftedness, that this would come to pass in them. As we read the scripture, especially the scripture for this morning in Acts 6, it was that when Stephen began to proclaim your name to move out past the limits of his deacon office to assume new territory that signs and wonders began to flow through him. Lord, you're always at the cutting edge of faith when we step out. Not foolishly or rashly or in an attempt to prove you. But when we step out in obedience you're here to under gird us. Even in the times when we fail you're there to teach us through that. The world has not all been reached. Large sectors even in the community in which we live are ignorant of you and of any revelation of yourself and your Son. We realize that miracles especially flourish in places where your name has not been named, where it has not been honored, and where your word is absent and your people not present. It very well may be that some within this body are being called by you to serve in areas like that. Where especially the gift of miracles might function. Do it Lord. Raise up this area of ministry for your honor and glory. In our lives we all need discernment. We need special discernment at various moments. Help us to take the practicality of this teaching tonight and to discern the areas in our life where we are struggling, to learn the source of that struggle, and then to deal with that struggle effectively in Jesus' name. So many times, Lord, on the human level the reason why we struggle so hard with sin is because we have unforgiveness and unresolved anger in our life. Again, we ask for the healing presence of Jesus to wash out any bitterness that may be in any life here, any spirit of anger or vengeance, any grudges, any hurts that has been done at the hands of another. And to bring a healing of the inner life. Repair the damage. Bring wholeness. We ask as we enter into a time of closing and worship that your Spirit would be honored among us and that you would reveal yourself in a further way to our hearts. We ask it in your name. Amen.