

January, 1997    Discernment of “Spirits”

I found myself caught in an experience of “discernment of spirits” just the other morning. I will share my experience with you as I recorded it in my journal. See if you can discern the identity of some of the “spirits” which were involved. See if you can relate to the experience.

I woke up tired this morning. I had gotten to bed a little late and when I woke up, I did not feel “ready to go.” I lay in bed for a moment, remembering my dream, getting adjusted to life. It was cold out, I could tell. It was nice and warm in bed. But it was time to get up, time to have my morning prayer time. It was about then that the dialogue began.

“You’re tired, Evan, real tired, aren’t you.” (I feel more tired)

“Yes, I am, but it is time to get up, time to get dressed in warm clothes, go up to the hermit hut and open myself to Jesus for a while” (already I’m beginning to feel the tension and “cognitive dissonance” between my desire to stay in bed and my desire to get up. I imagine myself getting dressed in the cold house). “Hah, open myself to Jesus — not much to open *this* morning. Maybe it would be just as well if I laid here and had my time with Jesus. I’ve done that before.”

“Now that’s an idea” (now imagining myself staying in bed).

“Yes Evan, but that was for reasons of necessity. Remember, just the other day you prayed and concluded that you really want to establish this schedule of prayer.” (feeling a sense of responsibility)

“Yes that’s right.” (Wait - yawn). “I really should get up.”

“You’re stalling, Evan. See, you’re never going to make it spiritually. You might as well give up. Here you are, trying to be a big shot specialist in spirituality, and you can’t even get up regularly to pray. You’re not getting up now, and you’re not going to get up later. You are going to fail, now and always, just like you always thought you would. Face it, Evan, all this holy man stuff is just a pipe dream.”

“That’s right. (now feeling guilt, depression) - “I feel like laying here and giving up, now.”

“Hey, Evan, don’t beat yourself so much. (I relax a little) It won’t matter if you just sleep a little longer. Listen, Jesus loves you unconditionally. You don’t have to live some legalistic approach to spirituality to be accepted by him. Come on, Evan, enjoy life! Go, ahead. If you want to sleep, sleep” (yet with the relaxation there is a nagging sense that something is not quite right. In fact by now I am beginning to feel a bit confused).

“You really are tired, aren’t you. Very tired. Just stay here and pray a little, and if you fall asleep, its OK. You really are tired.”

“Yes, that’s right. I am tired” (paying attention to my tiredness). “I can’t make sense of all my motives this early anyway. I’ll just lay here and pray over my day for a while” (a minute goes by as I imagine the activities of my day and begin to pray).

“But Evan, think of what you want most. Think of your desire to spend real quality time with God. Think of how much you have received from these times with Him. Get up, go up to the hermit hut” (a slight feeling of life is communicated with this word; I remember good times

I have spent with God).

“You know, that’s right. I *do* want to get up. I do want to spend quality time with God. I know he loves me unconditionally, that’s *why* I want to be with Him. I’m getting up right now and getting dressed. I don’t care how tired I am or how cold it is. I’ve wanted to devote my early mornings to Jesus for a long time, now. I’m not going to waste today’s time fussing or sleeping here in bed” (starting to get dressed).

“Congratulations, Evan! Man, isn’t that great. You’ve gotten up. Here you are, early in the morning getting up to pray. That’s just fabulous. You are such a great Christian. In fact you are a model Christian. Why, others are going to want to be just like you. Isn’t that great? If other people only knew what you do for the Lord, boy would they be impressed. But *no*, they aren’t going to know, are they? No, Evan, you are too humble for that. That’s what makes you even better. In fact you’re a superstar!

(I finish getting dressed and walk to the hermit hut for prayer)

Now that you have heard my story, what did you notice? Did you recognize some of the ‘spirits’ in the story? Have you heard any of these yourself?

“Discernment of spirits,” as it is discussed in the Christian tradition, involves the identification and response to impulses which arise in our awareness. These feelings, thoughts, images, etc. sometimes seem to impose themselves upon us from without. Other times they well up from within us. They communicate to us something of the “spirits” with whom we relate. They communicate to us aspects of our own self, our ‘spirit’. The grace of our adoption and the presence of our Father through the Holy Spirit are also perceived through the inner motions of the human person (Gal 4:6; Romans 5:5). Likewise, the enemy and evil spirits use thoughts, feelings, images, etc. to communicate their deceitful work (notice the inner motions connected with the enemy’s work in 1 Corinthians 7:5; 2 Corinthians 2:10-11; Ephesians 4:27; and 1 Timothy 6:9-10). At times these impulses are not easy to distinguish. So the scriptures urge us to “be alert” (1 Pet 5:8-9).

St. Isaiah the Solitary, a fifth century Palestinian monk, echoes this sentiment of scripture. “I entreat you,” he writes, “not to leave your heart unguarded, so long as you are in the body. Just as a farmer cannot feel confident about the crop growing in his fields, because he does not know what will happen to it before it is stored away in his granary, so a man should not leave his heart unguarded so long as he still has breath in his nostrils. Up to his last breath he cannot know what passion will attack him; so as long as he breathes, therefore, he must not leave his heart unguarded, but should at every moment pray to God for His help and mercy.”

Ordinary life is a battleground where the gracious presence of God and the life-stealing action of the enemy meet. The very gifts of God can be distorted and their life sucked away. Be watchful! Learn by experience to recognize the voice and leading of the good shepherd, so that, remaining in this attention, you may receive the His gift, “life and that more abundantly.”

May God the Father bless you with His riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.

By His Grace,

Evan B. Howard