

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 | How to Handle Prophetic Utterances

What has happened since Pentecost is that all of God's people receive the Holy Spirit and so all may prophesy

- I.e. **Know and speak God's mind** (as the Holy Spirit makes possible)
- **Acts 2:16-18**, NASB
- Prophetic utterances should be normative in the church
- **1 Corinthians 14:1 + 39a**, NASB

In the early church, there were men and women who were specifically called "prophets" and "prophetesses"

- Agabus (Acts 11:27-28; 21:10-11); Judas and Silas (Acts 15:32); Philip's four daughters (Acts 21:8-9)
- Some of our Pentecostal and Charismatic friends believe that there are prophets of the same sort of way and measure today
 - That is an open discussion (not for today)—the subject of today's text is **not about prophets** in that sense but the possibility of **normal Christians prophesying** (**knowing and speaking God's mind**)
 - That is **different** from the authoritative prophets and apostles of the NT time

We affirm the supremacy and sufficiency of Scripture

- That we have now a completed and closed canon of Scripture
- No one today speaks revelation that is absolutely authoritative, binding and infallible (the very word)
- There was a uniqueness to NT/OT prophets and NT apostles that was foundational (**Eph 2:20**)

What we have today are **secondary and subsidiary**¹ kinds of prophetic gifts and ministry

- God gives, through the Holy Spirit:
 - Extraordinary insight into Scripture
 - Extraordinary understanding of Scripture's application to the believer and world
 - Extraordinary insight into His particular will for particular people in particular situations
- We can call these prophetic insights or prophetic gifts
 - I.e. **Knowing and speaking God's mind about something**
 - Or: **Speaking forth in merely human words something that God has spontaneously brought to mind**
 - **Foretelling** and **forthtelling** (more than 2/3 of all prophetic activity in the Bible is **forthtelling**)²
 - A God who knows what is happening and what will happen (love)
 - E.g. Churchplants

As we already mentioned, such insight is to be **expected** among God's people

The text is telling us that **prophetic utterances** are to be **heard and tested** (not to be unheard and/or untested)

- We are not to **reject them outright**—but neither are we to **accept them outright**
- We are to be willing to **listen to them**, and we are then obligated to **evaluate them** (vv. 21-22)

Now, be mindful of the context here:

- **Paul is not** instructing them about how to deal with people who claim to be prophets and are not
- The context is the local church (people/believers in relationship) in a good state
 - How to grow in the Lord together and get along with one another as the church (vv. 11-18)
 - = Someone in the fellowship says something along the lines of:
 - **I think, or I believe, that the Lord has shown me, or is telling me...**

- How do we deal with that?

 - We are being instructed here as to **how to handle prophetic utterances**—not necessarily people
 - We are called here to examine the **content** of a message that is claimed to be from God (not here the messenger—though that is elsewhere in Scripture)

¹ John Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 1991), 128.

² Mark Howell, *Christ Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Nashville, TN: Holman, 2015), 164.

How do we **examine prophetic utterances carefully?**

1. Do not despise prophetic utterances (v. 20)

- a. That would be what is meant by **quenching the Holy Spirit** here (v. 19)
 - i. **Quench** =
 1. To extinguish a light or fire (literal picture)
 - a. Can be translated: **Do not put out the Spirit's light or fire**
 - b. Used as a figure of speech here
 2. The idea is like "**to throw a wet blanket on the party**"
 - a. Hence to **suppress or stifle** (versus **burn** and **shine**)
 - ii. Paul is commanding the church to avoid any activity that will thwart the Spirit's work
 1. The **particular concept** here is **the regulation of prophecy** in the church
 2. When we **despise**, reject outright, treat with **contempt**, **scoff** at = quench
- b. If we look at the **purpose** of the NT gift of prophecy we'll see why it is important not to **despise** it
 - i. **1 Corinthians 12:7 and 14:1-4, 12 & 31**, NASB
 1. **Prophecy has the tremendous potential for these things**—common good; helpful; **to strengthen, comfort, encourage and edify** the whole church; learn and be exhorted
 2. Therefore in **1 Corinthians 12:31** it is referred to as one of the "**greater**" or "**most helpful**" gifts
 3. Greatly effective **in giving us a sense** that **God is truly with us**
 - a. **1 Corinthians 14:24-25**, NASB
 - i. "**God is certainly among you**"
 - b. **As the church and in church, we should expect God to speak to us...**
 - i. **The culture at Reality**
 - ii. **God's agent in this is the Holy Spirit**
 1. If we despise prophetic gifts, we **grieve the Spirit** (and so God) who was endeavoring to **bless and lead** us (FOR OUR GOOD AND HIS GLORY)

2. Evaluate prophetic utterances (v. 21a)

- (i.e. examine closely for the purpose of determining authenticity)
- a. The clarity of Scripture (Acts 17:10-11)
 - b. The person of Jesus (1 John 4:1-3)
 - c. The integrity of the Gospel (Galatians 1:6-9)
 - d. The character of the messenger (Matthew 7:15-20)
 - e. The effect/outcome of the message (1 Corinthians 14:3)

"Paul had in his mind the kind of evaluation whereby each person would 'weigh what is said' in his or her own mind, accepting some of the prophecy as good and helpful and rejecting some of it as erroneous or misleading."-Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, p. 57

= a great responsibility in and of itself—all this keep us prayerful and dependent on Jesus and the Bible

3. Hold on to what is good and avoid what is bad (vv. 21b-22)

Why might there be both good and bad in a prophetic message?

The NT gift of prophecy is different from the OT office of prophet

- OT prophets spoke the very words of God and as such had absolute authority in what they said
 - To disobey a OT prophet was to disobey God
 - As such, they had tremendous responsibility. When they were wrong, they were **held accountable with their lives**
 - Their words became Scripture (**Cf. NT Apostles**; see: 1 Thess. 2:13; 4:8, 15; 2 Thess. 3:6)

- The NT *gift of prophecy* does not give us the very word of God and so does not have the same authority
 - We now have the completed Bible and it holds **absolute authority** for what God speaks
 - To disobey Scripture is to disobey God
 - Since we have completed Scripture, the NT gift of prophecy **is not** the reporting of the very words of God
 - Rather, it is reporting in merely human words something that God has brought to mind

God and Scripture are infallible, but people and the exercise of the NT gift of prophecy are fallible

- a. We may hear incorrectly
- b. We may interpret wrongly
- c. We may add negatively
 - i. And yet, it is part of what Christ has for His Church
 - ii. Speaking forth in merely human words something that God has spontaneously brought to mind

Because of the nature of it, it **may require interpretation/translation** by the one receiving the revelation

- And so in the reporting **there can be error**—either in **what we think it means** or the **words we use** to report it

An example: **Acts 21:4, 10-14**, NASB

- What is happening here?
 - Paul received a prophecy that if he went to Jerusalem he would suffer persecution
 - He decided to go anyway—why?
 - **1 Thessalonians 5:20-21** (*examine carefully*)
 - Paul judged the **content** of the prophecy to be right (**what would happen**), but the **interpretation** to be wrong (**what he should do**)
 - Those urging Paul not to go to Jerusalem had received revelation of the persecution awaiting him and were correct in reporting that, **but wrong in** their interpretation/application/implications (that he should not go)
 - Perhaps the reporting or interpretation should have been: God is revealing to you that hard times are coming, but He is with you and will sustain you through them—that He loves you and cares for you and is using you in amazing ways
 - **The exercising of NT gift of prophecy does not produce the very words of God (i.e. Scripture) but is rather the reporting in merely human words something God has brought to mind**

Can be messy

- **But God loves us and wants to speak to us and lead us!**
 - = **hear** and **examine**
 - = **hold** and **abstain**
 - **Hold** = in heart, have effect, act accordingly
 - **Abstain** = Let it go (there will be mistakes)

Keeps us dependent upon **Jesus** and not people

The church is about Jesus—when in doubt go hard after Him (prophecy will have that effect!!!)

- He is the full and final revelation!

Putting it in context:

- Imagine a church where:
 - We always sought to build each other up, held our leaders in correct esteem, lived in peace, helped each other, rejoiced always, prayed without ceasing, always gave thanks and heard from God with great discernment all the time!
- Let's not just imagine the church pictured here—lets be that church! (by grace and for His glory!)