

## Discerning the Voice of God

June 25, 2017

As I get started this morning, I want you to think for a moment about expectations...

- Because, whether you're conscious about them or not, we all have a lot of expectations **that we carry through our everyday lives.**
- Right now, for example, you might have some expectations about this sermon... whether it will be **good or boring... long or short.**
- When you go to a restaurant you have certain expectations about **how the food will taste** or how good the service will be.

When your birthday comes, you may have expectations about the **gifts you'll receive.**

- When you're having friends over whom you haven't seen for a long time, you'll no doubt have expectations about what that visit will be like.
- When you turn on America's Got Talent or Dancing with the Stars, you have certain **expectations that you'll be entertained!**

And yet, there's another side of expectation—the kind of expectations that **we place on others** or that are **placed on you** by those around you.

- There are even those expectations **placed on us by our culture** regarding **how we're supposed to look**, for example, or **what you're "supposed" to have achieved** by a certain age.
- You see, all of these expectations are the result of the different voices that have spoken into our lives through the years.

Some are **voices of affirmation**: *"I believe in you... You are important to me... I know you can do it... I love who you are."*

- And others are **voices that hurt**: *"You can't do anything right! You'll never accomplish much in life! Why aren't you as good as your brother? You're not good enough."*
- It's these kinds of voices that really **shape & influence** who we are... especially when some of those negative voices have **come from those you love the most** like... demanding parent or demeaning sibling.

Maybe it was a parent who wasn't so much demanding... but who seemed to remain silent whenever you needed affirmation the most.

- And then, **add to all of that** the voices we hear each day from TV, the songs we listen to, Facebook, email, and so on...
- and you realize **just how many voices** are competing for our attention.

But what if... out of all the voices that can influence & shape you... **what if the voice** that was booming through your heart & mind was God's?

- What if His voice was suddenly clearer than all the rest?
- How do you think your life would change if, **through the everyday moments** of your life, you were able to recognize and respond to God speaking directly to you?
- Do you think that might change the way you approach the challenges of your day?
- Do you think it would impact your ability to more effectively deal with the various financial, relational and work (or school) related **stresses** we face from day to day?

Maybe you believe that God's heart is to have not only an intimate relationship with us... but that **He desires open communication** between us as well.

- And yet, for one reason or another, you're not even listening for God's voice in your life any more.
- Maybe you've been hurt by or have been **turned off by someone claiming to have heard** from God.

Back in 1987, for example, Oral Roberts told the world that unless he raised \$8 million that God would take his life.

- In fact, God was very specific... that He would take Robert's life unless he raised \$8 million **above** their regular giving expenses.
- Well, beyond that fact that he did raise that \$8 million and so, lived to see another day,

Many people were absolutely put off by this... and many of those were utterly turned off by the whole notion of hearing from God.

- Truth is, perhaps for some of you, the idea of God speaking at all just hits a nerve that screams, **"that's too weird!"**

- But, as **Lily Tomlin** once said in her stand-up, *“Why is it when we talk to God we’re said to be praying, but when God talks to us, we’re said to be schizophrenic?”*

I mean, think about that... if you believe that God loves you and that He’s with you...

- If you believe that He cares about what is happening in your life;
- If you believe that He is all-powerful and able to do whatever He purposes to do;
- Then, why wouldn’t He want to speak to you when He obvious can? Why wouldn’t He want to speak to the very people He created for intimacy?

The truth is that, throughout the pages of Scripture, we see God speaking to His people. Why would He suddenly not want to speak to us any longer?

- In **John 14:26**, Jesus reminds us that "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."
- Well... How do we think the Spirit will do this? Of course, Scripture is a huge, central part of that.
- In fact, Scripture is always the ruler by which we measure any word we believe we’re getting from God.

You see, it was because of the clear teaching of Scripture, that the Apostle Paul knew how much God loved the people of Macedonia.

- But there was no Bible verse or chapter that told him that he was supposed to go there.
- So, how did he know. Well... God impressed it upon his heart. And how? How did God speak to Paul?
- Well, the same way He speaks to us!

Now, when we talk about hearing God’s voice, most often we’re talking about impressions that He places within us...

- Like an idea that suddenly comes to your mind at work... or like the **sudden realization you have when your body tells your mind** that it’s time to eat.

- Sometimes He'll **communicate through a dream** or **picture** or **specific word or idea** that He brings to your mind.
- Sometimes He communicates through **a combination of these things**.

For example, you might be reading a passage about His love, which you've read a hundred time before...

- Except this time, you can almost hear Him speaking those words directly to you.
- In fact, you feel like He's repeating those words over and over again so you know that it's Him speaking to you.

Now, you may be thinking, "*how do I know that's not just me feeling that?*" Well, you may never know for certain.

- But, just like having a conversation with someone in a crowded room with so many voices around you...
- You really can learn to discern His voice from your own and all the others.

God will also **speak to us through those around us**. I was just minding my business some time ago when, out of nowhere, I felt like I was supposed to call a friend from college.

- She happened to be crying when I called her. She was sure God told me to call her.
- Then, a few months later, I called her again... and, at that very moment, she was crying again!

Because we hadn't really been in touch for a few years, she couldn't believe I caught her crying again.

- Well, believe it or not, a month later, I felt like I was supposed to check in... and, guess what?!
- The thing is that she told me that she hadn't cried once between the two calls.
- She was so thankful for how God was showing her His presence that she... guess what? Yep... she cried!!

But maybe the issue for you **isn't so much self-doubt or a bad experience...** but rather, you feel as though the idea of your having “heard” from God is a little presumptuous.

- After all, you look at the **sin** and **junk** in your life and think that there's no way that God would choose to speak to you.
- In fact, whether consciously or subconsciously, **you start to wonder if God would ever have anything to say to you** other than a word of **rebuke.**
- You think, *“Maybe when I get to the place where my act is cleaned up a bit more... maybe then God will speak to me— but even if I do start to pull things together, why would He be interested in me? Who am I?”*

We've all had thoughts like that at one time or another... but if that's where you are right now... then hear me when I tell you that it just isn't true.

- The grace that the Bible talks about is called GRACE because it's undeserved... unearned...
- because it **flows from a loving Father** who sent His Son to die for us while we were sinners...
- a merciful, tender Father who promises to never turn away from us.

**Isaiah 30** talks about how God longs to be gracious to you... He longs to reveal Himself to you... that when you cry out to Him, He will answer you.

- In **Isaiah 65:1** we see God's heart to reach out and speak to His people. *“I revealed Myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on My name I said, ‘here I am, here I am!’”*
- In fact, nearly every chapter in Isaiah, from chapter 40 to chapter 55, begins with God saying, **“Listen to Me...”**
- Even to **“those who did not ask”** for Him... God reached out over and over again... *“Listen to Me... I've got something to say.”*

Let me tell you, if something is stirring up within you right now to hear more of God's voice in your life... **THAT** might just be God speaking to you!

- Seriously, guys. We have to de-mystify the idea that God speaks to us. He's your dad... He loves you...

- and desires to have more of a conversational relationship with us through our day to day lives.

Maybe you completely believe in God's desire and ability to speak into your life. Maybe your struggle with **ISN'T God's ability to speak...** but rather, **your ability to hear!**

- I mean all of us from time to time can be spiritually hard of hearing... especially because of the fast pace in which we live our lives.
- But understand that our confidence for hearing God's voice can never be **based on our phenomenal ability to hear** or our **not-so-perfect** walk with God.

Rather, our confidence for hearing God's voice in our lives is based on God's incredible willingness and desire to speak.

- You see, if you remember nothing else, remember that the secret of hearing God's voice isn't about our great faith and our ability to hear... but His great faithfulness and desire to speak.
- And yet, listen... it's not enough for us to simply know that God has something to say to us... we also need to make sure we're in a place to **really hear** what He has to say.

Let me share with you a story of a young boy who made that kind of commitment... not only to hear from God... but to respond to whatever God was sharing with Him.

- We looked at this story before, so I'm only going to give the highlights now.
- So, if you have your Bibles with you, go ahead and turn to **1 Samuel 3.**

Beginning at about the age of three, Samuel grew up serving in the temple where **Eli** was the high priest.

- Well one night while Samuel is lying in bed, he hears his name. But because no one else is around, he just figures that it must have been Eli calling him.
- So he runs into Eli's room. "*Here I am.*" But Eli says, "*I didn't call you.*"

- A little while later it happens again, and so Samuel runs into Eli's room again and Eli says, "*I didn't call you.*"

So, clearly, God isn't speaking to Samuel in an audible voice... or else Eli would have heard it himself.

- God was speaking to Samuel through an impression, which should have allowed Eli to sleep through the night!
- And yet, because Samuel hadn't yet learned to discern God's voice in his life, he kept waking Eli up.

How frustrating this must've been for Eli...to have Samuel waking him up over and over again. Believe me... I understand!

- My girls love to wake me up when I'm sleeping!
- In fact, I've told you before that Sarah used to wake me up by propping up my eyelids and sticking her face right in front of me!

But Eli finally realizes what's going on. Look at **1 Samuel 3:7**: "*Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.*"

- So, when it happens a third time, Eli knows that it's God who's speaking to Samuel... but Samuel still has no idea.
- You see, it's possible for God to speak to somebody and for that person **not to know** it's God speaking.
- In other words, learning to discern the voice of God is an acquired skill. It's a learned behavior.

And so, what we see is that an important part of Eli's ministry is to help Samuel learn to recognize the voice of God in his heart.

- Just look at this teaching moment between Eli and Samuel in **verse 9**.
- It says, "*So Eli said to Samuel, 'Go and lie down again, and if someone calls again', say, 'Speak, LORD, your servant is listening.'*"
- Now look at how hungry a learner Samuel is. In **verse 10** we read, "*So Samuel went back to bed. <sup>10</sup>And the LORD came and called as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel replied, 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.'*"

Now if you're turned there, jump ahead to **verse 19**. Samuel is now learning from Eli how to discern God's leading & voice in his every-day life.

- We're told that **"The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up"**—and here's the phrase I really want you to see—**"and he let none of God's words fall to the ground."**
- In other words, Samuel let none of God's words go unheeded.

In other words, **Samuel learned to both discern and respond to** whatever God was saying to him.

- Any time God said, **"Go,"** Samuel went. Any time God said, **"Speak,"** Samuel spoke.
- He let none of God's words fall to the ground. He said, *"Speak Lord, your servant is listening."*

I want to tell you, in this whole business of learning to discern the voice of God... being immersed in Scripture, having wise friends to get counsel from, and so on—those are **all important**.

- But perhaps most important is that you **make the decision** to say, *"God, speak, and whatever You tell me to do, I will do. Even if it feels a little awkward or a little hard, I will let none of your words fall to the ground."*
- If you have a prompting and you think it's from God...
- If it's consistent with Scripture, and it moves in the direction of the fruit of the Spirit...toward **love** and **joy** and **peace**, etc.—do it!
- Don't let a single word fall to the ground.

If it's to encourage somebody, to share your faith, to do an act of kindness, to confront in love, **do it**. Don't let a single word of God fall to the ground.

- Some of you today need guidance. And your prayer today just needs to be, *"God, will You show me the way?"* Well know that God really does that!
- So, **here's how it can play out in our lives this week**—how we'll make the choice to be with Jesus and listen for his voice—
- to begin to increase our sensitivity to hearing the voice of our Shepherd.

**First off, make the decision at the start of each day to invite God into your day...** inviting Him to speak to you along the way.

- Ask Him for discernment to hear what He might be saying in the midst of the busyness and stress that will inevitably come your way.
- Remember, even Samuel, one of the most important prophets of the Old Testament, had to learn to hear and discern God's voice.

Then, just go about your day **in partnership with Him** as you head off to work or school... or as you begin to tackle the eighty things on your to-do list at home.

- And so, as you're walking through your office or through the supermarket, and you see someone who seems sad, just talk about it with Him...
- *"God, that person clearly needs some lovin'... would you minister to her, God? Would you bless her today?"*

**At some point tomorrow**, you might actually have some leisure time. Of course, in our society, there's one primary activity that people engage in during leisure time...

- Yes... TV! If you watch TV, watch it... but just make a habit of interacting with Him about what you see.
- Now, maybe that's a bit challenging while watching Breaking Bad, but all I know is that when I'm watching America's Got Talent,
- I find myself praying for the contestants... especially those who've come out of significant trial.

While watching a program on **Afghanistan** around six years ago, God just really touch my heart. Honestly, I just prayed as I cried.

- But out of that time of prayer came the decision to start Arms Around Morristown.
- It was while watching a documentary on Afghanistan that God spoke to me about His heart for Morris County!

If you're not a TV person, then, when you're reading the newspaper tomorrow... read with Jesus.

- Talk with him about what you're reading. The newspaper then becomes an invitation to pray for the world...

- for what's happening on the streets of your neighborhood, your city, in Washington, in Afghanistan, and in the West Bank.
- Just talk to God about the world.
- Whatever the day ahead holds out for you—household errands, interruptions, deadlines at work— know that **every one of these is an opportunity to hear** from Jesus.

**When you forget**, and you will... when you **mess up**, and you will... here's a real important rule you need to follow: No beating yourself up!

- You see, with every passing moment or experience, we're given another chance. God just keeps sending them. That's grace.
- Every new moment is a chance for you to be with him... to hear from Him.

**Tomorrow night** when you lay down your head on the pillow, **review the day**. Thank Jesus for going with you.

- Thank him for his **gentle whispers**. Remember the moments when you heard his voice.
- And then decide if you'd like to spend another day with him on Tuesday. If you would, invite him because He'd love to!

You see, one thing **you** must do is decide. You will not simply drift into this way of life by accident. You must decide.

- And, if you're willing, I'd like to encourage you to make that decision today before you leave.
- Maybe you'll want to just **write the words**, "*Speak Lord, your servant is listening*" somewhere on your bulletin.
- Maybe you'll want to just **speak out to Jesus as we close** the service, "*Jesus, I want to spend tomorrow with you, listening to your voice.*"

David wrote in **Psalm 16:8**, ***"I have set the Lord always before me. Because He is at my right hand I will not be shaken."*** ***"I have set the Lord always before me..."***

- Take a few moments as we close the service today to consider what this could look like in your life right now.
- What would it be like to wake up with God on your mind... ready to hear His loving affirmation?

What would it feel like at **night** if you were aware of Him as you dropped off to sleep?

- What would my conversations be like with other people if I really was able to “set the Lord before me?”
- What would work or school be like if I really connected to God throughout my day **as I sat at my desk**, asking for His help and guidance... not carrying the burden by myself.

Maybe you'll just want to say to Him, *“God... that’s the life I want for myself... to hear Your voice above all the other voices in my life.”*

- What if tomorrow and the next day, what if all week long you make Samuel’s prayer your prayer... *“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”*
- Just remember, that **along with that desire...** are a LOT of competing voices out there.

→In fact, just to drive the point home, let me demonstrate what these competing voices look like in our everyday lives. I’ll need a couple of volunteers.

- **Person 1:** You’re going to represent all of our lives at one time or another.
- **Person 2:** You’re going to be the Holy Spirit... and what I’m going to have you do is pretty simple. I’m gonna have you share something with Person 1.
- Now, **Person 1**... your job is to simply listen.

But to bring this into the real world a bit, we’re going to need to add some of those “outside” voices into the mix.

- So, we’re going to divide you all up into six groups...
  - **“Anxiety”** group is going to repeat, *“I’m so worried, I’m so worried.”*
  - **“Frustration”** group: Repeat *“Not good enough!”* in an angry voice.
  - **“Discontented”** group will repeat, *“Money. Money. Money.”*
  - **“Burdened”** group will repeat, *“Oh, those gas prices!”*

- “**Exhausted**” group will say, “*Somebody help me; Somebody help me.*”
- “**Distracted**” group will repeat, “*What about this? What about that?*”

And so, when I give the signal, in just a moment, you’ll all need to start repeating your lines.

- And after they start, Person 1 & 2 each have a job to do:
- I’d like to have you, **Person 1**, repeat the line, “*I’m a busy man!*”
- And then, **Holy Spirit**, you’re going to read this message (see below), in a regular speaking voice... and we’re going to see how it goes.
- Everybody got what they’re supposed to say? Ok... Start!!

So... how’d it go? **Person 1**, can you tell us what the Holy Spirit was saying to you? Did quite get it, huh?

Ok, then let’s do this one more time... but now I want everybody here to be absolutely still. **Person 1**... you just need to be quiet... and listen really carefully.

- Now, **Person 2** (Holy Spirit), get ready to start: “*I want you to know two things. The first is that you are deeply loved by the Father. You just don’t realize how special you are to Him. Truth is, there isn’t a moment of any given day when the Father isn’t thinking loving thoughts about you. The **second** is that I have something for you to do. Your friend, Dave, is hurting and tempted. I’d like you to go see him and give him some encouraging words. Don’t worry if you’re unsure about what you should say... I will help you. I love you... and I’m so proud of you.*”
- Did you hear what the Spirit said that time? [*send helpers back to their seats*]
- Now, getting from that first scenario to the second can be a challenge at time. It starts with a desire to hear from God...

→ And then **requires that you slow down and quiet down enough to hear what He has to say.**

- You know, one time... when God wanted to speak to Elijah... he had Elijah climb up a mountain.

- So, he climbs the mountain... but finds the place filled with all kinds of noise... the *least* of which was the wind, which was so fierce that it was shaking the very ground he was on.

And yet, when God spoke, He spoke in a still, small voice. And usually, that's what the Holy Spirit does.

- You see, we can't control all of the messages and voices coming at us from the world around us... but even in the midst of the noise, we can learn to be still.
- This is important, because if we wait till everything within and without is perfectly calm and peaceful...
- If we wait until there's no pressure or expectations or deadlines... Then, the truth is, **we'll rarely be in a place of hearing God's voice.**

And so, to help bring us to that place of hearing God amidst all the noise of life, I want to **briefly share six "pre-requisites"** that should be in place as we purpose to hear God's voice in our day-to-day lives.

### 1. **We need to know God as Living God.**

- **Jeremiah 10:10** says, "*But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King.*"
- You see, our God is living God who 100% present... actively participating in our day-to-day lives.
- I think we get that for the person sitting for the "other guy," for the **spiritual heavy weights** out there... but *not you!*
- And yet, **we misunderstand God's grace** if we think that He only speaks to the spiritual superstars out there.
- He loves you... He **wants to be** with you... He **wants to hear** from you and **He wants to speak** with you.

### 2. **We need to know God as a Loving God.**

- In **John 15**, Jesus says that we need to not only abide in Him... but that we need to also abide in His love.
- God wants you to know that His love for you is a fact... that there is nothing you can do or stop doing that will make Him love or accept you any more than He does now.

- **Jeremiah 31:33** says, “I will be their God and they will be My people.” You see, God loves being your God... He loves being your Father.
- A few chapter later, He says, “*I have loved you with an everlasting love.*”

### 3. We need to be yielded to the Lord.

- In **1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 5**, Paul tells us to “*pray continually*”. How in the world can we pray continually?
- What Paul is saying here **isn’t so much** that we need to be speaking continually to God, but rather, we need to keep a direct line open between God and ourselves.
- In other words, when I speak of being yielded to the Lord... I’m talking about God having access to you throughout the day... so, **when He chooses** to speak to you... you are postured to hear.

### 4. We need to be willing to do what He says

- I said earlier that the heart of hearing God’s voice is a conviction that God is *not only willing to speak...* but that we really can learn to hear and recognize His voice.
- That includes making room for God to speak... and being willing to respond to whatever He might say in obedience.
- One of the greatest models of this in the New Testament is Mary.

This godly young woman receives an angelic visitation regarding how she would give birth to the Messiah.

- Knowing the implications of this... knowing what she would be accused of, she still responds, saying, “*I am a servant of the Lord... I will do whatever He wants me to do.*”
- Is there anything in your life that God has called you to that you are not submitting to Him?
- If not... just remember that God is the God of “do-overs”. We just confess, receive His forgiveness... and remain open.

### 5. We need to be honest and real with God.

When we come to God, we need to come to Him the way we really are at the moment.

- Don't come to God with some kind of religiousy prayer or formula prayer that is disconnected from how you are really feeling...
- He wants to hear from you... the real you! Remember that prayer is a dialogue between a real God... and a REAL you!
- Talk to Him about what's going on in your life... invite Him into your circumstances... dialogue with Him about what's on your heart and mind.

## 6. We need to live godly lives.

- What does it mean to be a godly person? A godly person is someone whose **life & identity** are centered on God. You see...
- *Being a godly person isn't about our own ability to live without sin and struggles...*
- rather, a godly man or woman is someone who gives God access to their heart.

Believe me... if you look through Scripture at the people God spoke to... they weren't very perfect!

- For God... the issue comes down to your heart... does He have your heart?
- If not, would you share with Him the words from an older Vineyard song, Surrender: "I'm giving You my heart, and all that is within. I lay it all down, for the sake of You my King..."

You see, if you're embracing and walking in these six realities and truths... and if you desire to hear God's voice in your life...

- Than with all of my heart, **I believe that you really will** cultivate more of a conversational relationship with God.
- It's God's heart for us. Jesus said in **John 10:27**, **"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me."**
- Will you purpose to listen to the Shepherd's voice this week?

Guys... I can't give you any more encouragement in your desire to hear God's voice in your life than this...

- That God speaks loud enough for even someone like you and me to be able to hear...

- Because **He is more desirous of revealing His will & heart to you...** than you are in hearing His will and heart.
- Remember that the secret of hearing God's voice isn't about our great faith and our ability to hear... but His great faithfulness and desire to speak.

So, as I close, the first bit of business you need to do... is decide. You need to decide that cultivating this kind of conversational relationship with Jesus is something you're after in your life right now.

- Would you purpose to live out David's words in **Psalm 16:8**, "*I have set the Lord always before me.*"
- Would you take hold of Samuel's words this week and make them your own... "*Speak Lord, your servant is listening!*"
- Would you decide today to wake up tomorrow... ready to begin this journey together...
- The journey of hearing God's voice as we walk in step with the Spirit through our every-day-lives?

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*Ministry Time:*

I want to ask that you just be very still for a moment, and you not think about leaving or what you're going to do next or where you're having lunch. Just simply be present and still before God as Conrad begins to play in the background.

*"God... that's the life I want for myself... to hear Your voice above all the other voices in my life. So... speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."*

**HOLY SPIRIT:**

*“I want you to know two things. The first is that you are deeply loved by the Father. You just don’t realize how special you are to Him. Truth is, there isn’t a moment of any given day when the Father isn’t thinking loving thoughts about you.*

*The **second** is that I have something for you to do. Your friend, Dave, is hurting and tempted. I’d like you to go see him and give him some encouraging words. Don’t worry if you’re unsure about what you should say... I will help you.*

*I love you... and I’m so proud of you! In every way, you are My treasured possession.”*