

“God is Closer Than You Think—The Voice”

Our voices are pretty amazing things. Each of us has a unique and recognizable voice. Some voices are not only unique but stand out in a crowd. If you know Teddy Steen, you can hear her and identify her voice, her laugh, a mile away.

See if you can identify some of these notable voices...**[AUDIO: recorded voices followed by their pictures]**.

The voices in our lives speak to us and shape us. They shape our expectations of ourselves, our children, our futures, our relationships, our educations, our careers. The voices we hear try to influence our buying patterns, our philosophies, our theologies, our fashion styles, hairstyles, lifestyles. The voices we hear from family, friends, teachers, politician, heroes and villains in our world shape us. And there are a lot of voices out there vying for our attention.

There are voices that speak into our souls that shape us. 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.” “I am proud of you.”

And others are voices of defamation: “You’re an idiot!” “You can’t do anything right!” “You’ll never accomplish much in life!” “Why aren’t you as good as your brother (or sister)?” Sadly, painfully, some of those negative voices may have even come from home. A demanding parent. A demeaning sibling. Or a parent who wasn’t demanding—they were just silent—and you never heard their voice of love or affirmation. Add to those voices the voices we hear from TV, the internet, radio, print media, work, etc.—and there are a lot of voices competing for our attention.

Out of all the voices ... what if the voice that was booming through your heart and mind was God’s and you heard it clearly? What if, during the course of every day, you recognized and responded to God’s voice speaking directly to you? Do you think that might have a reorienting effect on your days? How can we hear the voice of Jesus—our Shepherd—and *lock in* on that voice and follow him?

When we talk about being fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ, it means that we know what he desires and we follow through. We can pick his voice out from all the others—and we don’t veer away from where our Shepherd leads. Jesus had some pretty profound things to say about this. Listen to how he describes the relationship he has with his true followers: **[SLIDE...]** **“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.... My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:14–15a, 27).** In the original language, the word that Jesus uses for “know” doesn’t mean to simply be aware of something. It means to have an intimate relationship that is trusting and safe.

Around here we talk a lot about becoming a fully devoted follower of Jesus. How do you know if you are one? How do you really know? What’s the indicator? According to Jesus, one key indicator of our “followership” is if we are listening for his voice and responding immediately to what he says. We’ll talk a little later about how to distinguish his voice.

Jesus’ final words, recorded in the gospel of Matthew are, “I am with you always, even to the very end of the age.” Always. That promise of Jesus is just as true for you and for me today. If you have asked Jesus to be your forgiver and to lead every area of your life, then you can know that he is with you and will never leave you. And not only that, but he also wants to be in a conversational relationship with you.

It’s strange and scary that a lot of Christians have lost touch with the fact that God actually speaks to us through his still small voice, his whisper, his leadings, feelings, dreams. In fact a lot of us feel like it would be cocky to think that we might possibly have “heard” from God. Some Christ-followers are scared to hear from God because he may want us to either *do* something or *change* something. So sometimes we’re like little kids; we stick our fingers in our ears and make noise with our life so that we can’t hear his voice.

A lot of us make the assumption that God only speaks directly to the “paid professional”—the clergy—who interpret what God said for everyone else.

Another one of the things that holds us back from believing God could be speaking to us is all the misguided, wrong, or evil things done because someone has claimed to have “heard” from God. We think of Jim Jones and the Guyana tragedy or David Koresh and the Branch Davidians. They claim to have heard from

God and that makes all of us leery about claiming that we might have heard from God. We don't want to be seen in the same light, so we close off the possibility that God might speak to us.

And then on a personal level, every one of us knows the sin and junk in our lives, and we think that there's no way that God would choose to speak to us. So we start to rule ourselves out thinking that God would not possibly want to talk to us. We think:

- I've done too many wrong things in my life ... there's no way that God would have much interest in me.
- I'm not a good enough Christian yet. When I get to the place where my act is cleaned up ... *then* maybe I'll be ready for God to speak to me—but he wouldn't choose to do that any sooner.
- I don't know enough of the Bible ... when I know more, then he might choose to speak to me.
- God wouldn't be interested in me ... I've never done much good in my life—it's not like I'm an important person in the church or anything.

I'll try to say this as subtly as possible: ***DON'T YOU BELIEVE A WORD OF IT!*** Those are the voices that need to be ignored and rejected. If you have those words or anything like them going through your mind when we talk about hearing from God, then it's your place to say something like: "On the basis of the authority of the Bible I reject those ideas. When I asked Jesus into my life, he joined me right then. Imperfect, a sinner, not knowledgeable about the Bible—he loves me 'as is' and wants a relationship with me just as I am." In the Bible God spoke to people who were far, far from perfect. God spoke to Abraham and he was a liar. Moses was a murderer. Jeremiah was depressed all the time. David had an affair with a married woman and had her husband killed. Peter betrayed Jesus. God spoke to all of these people...and God wants to speak to you.

The same God who spoke in the Bible is the same God who speaks today. As we talked about last week, if you've chose to be a Christ-followers, God has put his Spirit in you as a gift to lead, guide, empower, convict, comfort, and equip you. It is a gift you can never lose—but you can quench it, subdue it, and ignore it because he will not force his way on you. Let's take a closer look at one biblical account of God speaking.

This comes from the Old Testament, from 1 Samuel 3. It's the story of a boy whose parents dedicated him to serving God at the temple. So as a boy, Samuel grew up serving in God's house. Eli is the high priest and Eli and God are watching out for this little boy, Samuel. One night Samuel is lying in bed, and he hears his name. And he figures Eli called him, so he runs into Eli's room. "Here I am." And Eli says, "I didn't call you." It happens again, and Samuel runs into Eli's room again and Eli says, "I didn't call you."

Did you ever know of kids who interrupt their parents' sleep at night for all kinds of odd reasons? 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**" (1 Samuel 3:7). So when it happens a third time, Eli knows that God is speaking to Samuel, but Samuel doesn't know it's God. This is important, it's possible for God to speak to somebody and for that person not to know that it's God speaking. Learning to identify the voice of God is an acquired skill. It's learned behavior. And the ministry of Eli is to help Samuel learn to recognize the voice of God in his heart.

There's a crucial element in this we've got to look at. Take a look at 1 Samuel 3:19. Samuel is learning from Eli how to discern God's leading, God's guiding, God's whispers in his life. The Bible says: **[SLIDE...]** "**The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up and he let none of his words fall to the ground**" (1 Samuel 3:19). In other words, anything God said, Samuel did. Any time God said, "Go," Samuel went. Any time God said, "Speak," Samuel spoke. He didn't let any of God's words fall to the ground. He caught them all. He's the Golden Glove prophet. He said, "God speak, your servant listens."

So that takes us to the question of how. How do I discern God's voice from among all the voices out there? In his book, *Listening to the Voice of God*, Roger Barrier offers some excellent guidelines for discerning God's voice. Here a few of them.

1. *God tends to speak with gentle leadings.* Don't be looking for the spectacular "fire from heaven," but listen for the gentle whisper, the inner promptings. Let your spiritual ears become sensitized to God's voice.

2. *God's voice produces freedom.* Jesus said, **[SLIDE...]** "**My yoke is easy and my burden is light**" (Matthew 11:30)

3. *God tends to speak when I am seeking him.* The prophet Jeremiah reported God as saying: [SLIDE...] **“Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:12–13).**

4. *God convicts of specific sins.* John 16:8 teaches that the Holy Spirit [SLIDE...] **“will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8).** When God convicts us of sin, he gets real specific: “Yesterday at 2 p.m. you did *this*.” Satan and self accuse in broad generalities that will leave you with an unfocused sense of haunting guilt about poor choices, questioned priorities, unfinished responsibilities, or unmet expectations. So when you feel accused or have a nagging sense of unspecified guilt, stop right there and figure out why you feel so guilty. If there’s not a definite sense of conviction about a specific sin, the feelings are not from God’s Spirit. (Paraphrase from Barrier).

5. *Get wise counsel from Christ-followers you trust!*

6. *Make sure that what you are sensing is from God really agrees with the character and nature of God and of the Bible.* For example, God’s voice wouldn’t approve of a couple living together outside of marriage or of a married person having an affair so that they can be “happy.” Those things go against what the Bible teaches and contrary to God’s holy and pure character and nature.

7. *Ask yourself, “Does this agree with my conscience?”* You need to know that it’s real natural to ask yourself, “Is it possible that maybe, just maybe, after going through this checklist—I could be mistaken about God’s promptings? Could I possibly have missed something and be heading way off-base?”

I love what Dallas Willard says about this. He writes: “Of course you could be wrong. God doesn’t intend to make us infallible by his conversational walk with us, but you are usually correct.” In other words, don’t minimize, don’t rationalize. Don’t compromise.

I spoke with two people this week that God has been speaking to about starting a new ministry here at Saint Paul’s, and as we talked it’s clear to me that it’s in line with all these principles. One of the people expressed some fears about this idea failing. The idea is God-centered, it’s all about loving people, it resonates with scripture, it fits all these guidelines. It could still fail, but as I say so often, if we’re going fail, let’s fail forward. Let’s fail at doing something rather than succeed at doing nothing at all.

So here’s how it’ll 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. Tomorrow you’ll have some leisure time. Of course, in our society, there’s one primary activity that people engage in during leisure time, so it leads to the question: “Would Jesus watch TV?” Well, it depends on what’s on. If you watch TV, watch it, but watch it with Jesus and talk to him about what you see. If he wants to change your habits, he’ll speak to you about that. You can trust him to do that. He really will.

When you read tomorrow, read with Jesus. Talk with him about what you’re reading. Then the newspaper 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.

Tomorrow, whatever the day holds—household errands, interruptions—every one of them is an opportunity to be with Jesus. When you forget, and you will, when you mess up, and you will, here’s a real important rule for tomorrow: no beating yourself up. Because every moment is another chance. God just keeps sending second chances. That’s called grace. Every moment is a chance for you to be with 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. Decide if you’d like to spend another day with him on Tuesday. If you would, invite him because he’d love to.

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 the most important thing 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 won’t let any of your words fall to the ground.” You have to decide if you want to hear from God or not.

And then there is another part that's very important. Pay very close attention to this: the desire to hear from God also means a desire to obey him. The desire to hear his voice, needs to be coupled with being ready and willing to submit to what he is going to say and follow through with immediate obedience.

If you have a prompting and you think it's from God, and it's consistent with Scripture, and it moves in the direction of the fruit of the Spirit—toward love and toward 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. And some of you today need guidance. And your prayer today just needs to be, "God, guide me." God really does that. The decision to hear God's voice is also a decision to follow what he says. And this is where so many of us get tripped up. We want to hear God's voice, but we're not quite sure we really want to do what God suggests because it may take us out of our comfort zone.

One thing you must do is **decide**. You will not just drift into this way of life on accident. Our culture will not make it happen; you have to decide. So I'm going to give you a moment right now to decide. **[MOSAIC ONLY...SONG "Voice of Truth"]** I'm going to invite you to write one last thing on your outline right now, so take your pen. Maybe it's just one word like, "yes," to express your heart or, "together," to remind yourself that you'll go through the day together. Maybe it's a phrase, "I'll walk with you."

Right now, as you write that on your outline, tell Jesus, "I want to spend tomorrow with you, listening to your voice." Put that paper someplace where you'll see it all day, maybe on your desk, taped to a mirror, or maybe in your calendar. Remember that this same offer came so many years ago to Peter, James, and John, and it changed their lives.

This is the best offer you'll ever have. You will never in your life—I don't care what happens, I don't care how much money you make or what ladder of success you climb—you will never have another offer like this one. People miss it all the time. People miss it every day, day after day, until the end of their lives. Some people go through their whole lives and they never take it. It's your day. Don't miss it. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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