

Listening to God

A young boy, home for the summer, was chilling out in the basement playing some video games when his Dad called down, “Mike! Come on up for dinner.” Mike didn’t move. His Dad called again, “Hey Mike, come on up. Dinner’s ready.” When Mike ignored the second invitation, the third one sounded like this, “Mike? Get up here... now!” He shot up the stairs like a rocket. His Dad asked, “What took you so long?” With a straight face Mike said, “I didn’t hear you the first two times!”ⁱ

How could Mike know that his dad had called to him those first two times if he didn’t hear him? Oh, he physically heard him, didn’t he? But he didn’t choose to listen until the third time. Listening is different from hearing. Listening is a choice.

Today we conclude our series on the Seasoning of the Spirit, not with some rare or exotic seasoning to activate your spiritual taste buds like Carolina Reaper peppers lights up your mouth in a burrito. No, today we examine a spiritual seasoning as simple and basic as salt and pepper. It’s the spiritual discipline, the spiritual seasoning of listening. Did you know that salt is found in the cuisine of virtually every culture in the world? It may take different forms like soy sauce or fish sauce but it’s there in every diet. In the same way, listening is a critical seasoning in every healthy relationship in the world. And that is especially true in your relationship with God.

So, let me begin with this diagnostic question. When you pray, do you spend more time talking to God or listening to God? Most Christians define prayer as communication with God where they express their thoughts, feelings, and requests.ⁱⁱ That’s prayer for most of us—me talking, God listening.

But is biblical prayer supposed to be a sermon or a conversation? A sermon is where one person does all the talking and everyone else does all the listening - what we’re doing right now. A conversation is quite different. A conversation is literally defined as “a spoken EXCHANGE of thoughts, opinions, and feelings.”ⁱⁱⁱ In your prayers, how much time do you give God to speak? I don’t know about you, but when I’m talking, I do a really lousy job of listening. So, let’s begin our Scripture study examining first this question...

I. What Does It Mean to Listen to God?

In our Scripture passage today in John 10, it says that the Jews came to Jesus with a question. Now, when it says “The Jews,” that’s a euphemism for “the Pharisees.” We learn that back in John 9. So, the Pharisees ask Jesus this cynical question,

... **“How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”**
Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”
(John 10:24-27)

Jesus gives us a definition of what it means to ‘listen to God’ here in three words – hear, know, and follow. First the word ‘hear.’ It’s the Greek word *akouousin* from the root word *akouch*, from which we get the English word ‘acoustic.’ But it doesn’t just mean to hear with our physical ears. Just 11 verses earlier, a Greek word from the same root word is used to translate what Jesus taught about ‘other sheep.’ He said:

“And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will (*akousousin*) LISTEN to my voice.” (John 10:16)

So, Jesus defines listening as more than just physical hearing. It's choosing to understand and take action based on what you've heard. Jump back to verse 27 and He attaches to that word 'hear,' the word 'know.' "... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them. ...” When we choose to listen to God, this leads us not only to know God but to know that He knows us.

Do you ever feel distant from God? Do you ever think that you must explain your life situation in more detail, so that God can grasp the seriousness of what's going on in your life? No, it's not in speaking more that God knows you better. It's the reverse. It's in your choosing to listen to God that the assurance of His complete knowledge and care becomes real to you. Listen and you will be known. Then, Jesus also says, follow:

“... and they follow me.” (John 10:27)

The word for “listen,” or its derivatives, either in Hebrew or Greek, is used over 400 times in the Bible. And about half the time it's used in the negative, like it's used by God the Father speaking to his Children, the Jews, in Zech. 7:11:

But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear.

Or when God spoke to them through the prophet Jeremiah, saying:

Yet they did not listen or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck, that they might not hear and receive instruction. (Jer. 17:23)

Or when He spoke through Isaiah and said:

“You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing.” (Is. 42:20, NIV 1984)

What does it mean to listen to God? Gerhard Kittel, in his Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, summarizes it this way:

This means that the only marks to distinguish true hearing from purely physical hearing are faith ... and action.^{iv}

Faith and action require a choice. Listening to God means choosing to understand and then choosing to put that understanding into action. That's biblical listening.

Now, the next obvious question is: Well, how does this work then in real life?

II. What's the Way for Me to Listen to God?

Actually, it's ways to listen – plural. I want to talk about three biblical ways to listen to God. The first and primary way we can listen to God is through His Word, the Bible. The Bible is the only 100% guaranteed source of truth! So, the first way to listen to God is to listen to Him in His Word. In Deut. 5:29 God the Father is speaking and He says:

“Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!”

Now, some people get spooked when God says, “*Oh, that they had such a heart as to always... FEAR me.*” They think, “What kind of a God would want us to fear Him? We should be living lives that are free of fear, right?” Well, do you fear gravity? Do you fear a CAT 5 hurricane? Those are realities in the natural world that will do you serious harm if you don't respect them with caution and even appropriate fear.

God is longing for you not only to have that kind of respect for realities in His created physical world, but even moreso to respect with appropriate fear realities in His spiritual world.

The number one way to listen to God is to listen to everything he says through His Word, the Bible. This includes both the promises of blessing AND the warnings of the consequences of sin.

Now, let me ask - what are you hearing from God these days from His Word? Mary, the mother of Jesus, not only knew the Word of God, but she went a step further and meditated on it in preparation for putting it into action. After the shepherds came to the manger and told Mary and Joseph all about the angels that had come to them and announced Christ's birth, it then says:

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. (Lk. 2:19)

Mary was a ponderer, she took the events of the day and before taking action, she considered what they meant, if anything, in light of Scripture. She was an active listener. She took time to evaluate rather than just react. Mary knew how to meditate. Ps. 77:11-12 says:

I will remember the deeds of the LORD;

yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds. (NIV 1984)

The person who meditates on God's Word, takes the posture of humility, of listening to God first, not requesting something from God first. And we see that Mary had this posture long before she had her own visitation from an angel. In Luke 1:28 it says:

The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! ..." (NIV 1984)

What does 'highly favored' mean? The Greek word translated "favored" here is *charis*, or grace. So, Mary was favored, filled with grace, BEFORE the angel spoke to her. Maybe that's WHY he was speaking to her.

In the Magnificat, which Mary speaks BEFORE she gives birth, she says of God:

"He has performed great deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants forever,

even as he said to our fathers." (Lk. 1:51-55, NIV 1984)

How did she "know" what God had said to her fathers? How did she "know" that he had been merciful? How did she "know" that he had lifted up the humble, brought down the proud, performed mighty deeds, and helped Israel? She knew all this because she had meditated upon the Word of God as a child and young teenager! She had been listening to God for years through His Word! God's Word is the voice of God to us. Listen to His voice there first.

But God can also speak to us through fellow believers. One Sunday morning, I was at the back door with Liz, greeting people when a woman came to us weeping. She said to me, "I have to speak with you." We stepped to the side and she said, "I've had a dream about your son Adam. It's a very sad dream. In the dream I saw that he had fallen out of faith." She began to weep almost uncontrollably.

I thought, "How could this be possible? He has a strong faith now. He's in a weekly Bible study with friends and there are no signs of any spiritual trouble. How could this happen?"

After composing herself, the woman said, "I did see at the end of the dream that he would come back to faith in Christ. I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, but I believe God wanted me to

tell you.” Two years later, when everything she saw in her dream had come true, how strengthening do you suppose it was to have had that dream shared with us? God sometimes speaks to us through other believers. Are you listening?

Then, finally, there’s one more way, one more voice God uses to speak to us. It’s the Holy Spirit. In John 16, Jesus is speaking to His disciples about his departure. He tells them that His leaving will be a benefit to them because in His place He will send the Holy Spirit with a new job description. In the old job description, the Old Testament job description, He came upon just a few people: prophets, kings, etc. But in the New Testament job description, He comes within every believer. And what will the Holy Spirit do inside us? He will guide, He will speak, He will declare. Listen to Jesus:

“... if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you. ... When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.” (John 16:7, 13)

Guide, speak, declare... Let me give you one more example what this looks like in real life. Erwin McManus is the pastor of Mosaic Church in Los Angeles. When Erwin’s son, Aaron, was in middle school, he asked his dad, “What does God’s voice sound like?” Erwin wasn’t sure how to answer. He did the best he could but wasn’t sure he explained it all that well. Then, that summer Aaron went to camp and in the middle of the week got into a fight with another camper. He called his dad to come and bring him home. When Erwin got to the camp, he asked Aaron if he would take a walk with him before they left. On the walk, Erwin asked his son, “Is there any voice inside you telling you what you should do?”

Aaron said, “Yes.”

Erwin asked, “What’s the voice telling you?”

Aaron said, “That I should stay and work it out.”

Erwin said, “Can you identify that voice?”

Aaron said, “Yes, it’s God.”

His dad said, “Do you realize what just happened? You heard God’s voice! He spoke to you from within your soul. Forget [what’s just] happened. God spoke to you, and you were able to recognize him!”

Aaron said defiantly, “Well, I’m still not doing what God said.”

Erwin replied, “That’s your choice, but if you reject His voice, let me tell you what will happen next. Your heart will begin to harden and your ears will begin to close. If you stay on that path, His voice will become fainter and fainter until a day will come when you will deny that God speaks at all or that He has ever spoken to you. But if you will listen today and do what His voice says, your heart will remain soft and your ears will become more and more attuned to His voice so that even when He whispers, you’ll hear it.” After that conversation with his dad, Aaron chose to stay at camp because, he said, “I want to continue to hear the voice of God.”^v

What does God want from you? He wants an ongoing, never-ending conversation.

Which leads us lastly to consider, “Where will listening to God take me?” Answer:

III. Listening to God Leads Us to Deep Satisfaction even in Disturbing Circumstances.

We see in Mary a surprising response to the disturbing message from the angel Gabriel. In Luke 1:38 Mary says:

“I am the Lord’s servant ... May it be to me as you have said.” (NIV 1984)

Now, let's think about this for a minute. By human standards, what the angel said to Mary, should NOT have brought her satisfaction. In short, he came and offered to blow up her life. My friend and mentor back in Minnesota, pastor Ross Foley, put it this way:

Instead of bringing order out of chaos, as far as Mary was concerned, ... the favor of God brought chaos into the order of her life. Here she was, ... a simple peasant girl of fifteen or sixteen years of age, engaged to a solid, dependable man named Joseph. And boom! An angel appears suddenly and everything she held dear was placed in jeopardy – her body, her reputation, her impending marriage – every facet of her existence. ^{vi}

And after Jesus was born, this was only confirmed further by the prophet Simeon who said to Mary: (Lk. 2:34-35, NIV 1984)

... “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Where would Mary ever find the strength to deal with the gigantic task facing her? Mary didn't suddenly find it. It didn't appear out of nowhere. No, Mary already possessed the strength. It was a by-product of her listening to God, which she had been doing for years.

What is it that threatens to blow up your life right now? Yes, if you have unconfessed sin in your life, that's capable of blowing things up. If it's sin that threatens, repentance and returning to God are the solution. You should apply that solution. It has never failed to work.

But, what if like Mary, it's "God's favor" that threatens your life? What then? Has anyone here felt that? Sin is not your biggest problem. What's really messing up your life is God's will. If you just didn't have to play by His rules, things would be bearable. But, doing life His way – telling that uncomfortable truth, bearing that impossible burden, living by that unbreakable vow – THAT is what's threatening to make your life miserable. Is this how life looks to you today? Clean your glasses because you're not seeing clearly if you think God's will is a problem. Take a lesson from Mary. Begin to meditate. Become a 'ponderer' so that you can be ready to respond to an angel like Mary did when she said, "Let it be to me as you have said."

And what might that look like in the too busy, too fast, too loud world we live in? Well, what if Mary had said to the angel, "No. I don't want this favor. Please give it to someone else." What would she have missed? Oh, her life would've been a lot easier, no dealing with the condemning stares while pregnant, no relocation to Egypt to hide from Herod, no watching her 30-something son die on a cross for no reason! She would have "missed" all that pain!

But she also would have missed some amazing blessings. She would have missed those glorious three months with her cousin Elizabeth as they shared this incredible moment of knowing that they both were being used miraculously by God to accomplish His divine mission on earth. She would have missed the unspeakable joy of seeing the fruit of her womb heal the sick, feed the hungry, and even raise the dead. And, yes, though she would have missed three days of the most intense sorrow any human being has ever carried, she also would have missed the rest of her life, knowing that because her son had been raised from the dead, all the world would have the opportunity to be saved!

Mary, the one who pondered God and His will, the one who had pounded her own will into the mold of God's will, this young-woman-warrior who would settle for nothing less than complete surrender of her own thoughts to God – this Mary stood before the angel Gabriel and said: **"I am the Lord's servant! May it be to me as you have said."** (Luke 1:38, NIV 1984)

So, if God calls you one day to join Him in a great and awesome adventure, will you be ready to respond? Will you say, "I WANT to be your servant," or "I'm TRYING to be your

servant”? Or will you be ready on that day to say, “I AM your servant. Let’s go!” Will you be ready to travel the road that leads to the deepest satisfaction? You will, if starting today, you prepare as Mary did by truly listening to God which will enable you to say with Jesus:

My Father is greater than all and no one can snatch me out of His hand.

Let’s pray...

Benediction:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. 1 Thess. 5:23-24

ⁱ Michael Hodgin, *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998)p. 228

ⁱⁱ A conclusion found from the question, “How do most people define prayer?”

ⁱⁱⁱ The American Heritage College Dictionary, 3rd ed., (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co. 1997, 1993) p. 304

^{iv} Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Co., 1964) p. 220

^v Erwin McManus, *The Barbarian Way* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), p. 87-89

^{vi} Rev. Ross Foley in his sermon, “The Mother of Our Lord,” preached at Faith Covenant Church in Burnsville, MN., Dec. 20, 1987