

SALT CO. 2/8/26

“Recognizing the Voice of God”

“My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me.”

John 10:27

Table Talk I

Meet your Table Guide. Do the Valentines Day Trivia. Dick will announce the answers from up front. Have fun!

Salt Talk

We’re learning about what it means to grow in our conversational relationship with God. That’s what “prayer” is. We’re using as our resource Dallas Willard’s classic Hearing God.

Here’s the question for us this morning. When a word or thought comes to us, say in the “still, small voice”, maybe in special experience, when we’re reading the Bible, or some situation in our lives develops, How do we know it is a word of God to us?

Share my encounter in 1971. A “voice” but not in my ears, more like in my mind. In the form of a thought. A statement, of being addressed. This was my question. I wondered, “Was that me speaking? Why would I say that to me?”

It’s obvious that we can tell it’s God speaking in Scripture when we hear, “Do not worship idols”, or “Do not covet”.

Willard writes,

“Beyond this, remember the only answer to the question, How do we know whether this is from God? is *by experience*. Even a word-for-word quotation from the Bible can be put to use that makes it only a message from the Dear Self or from Satan.”

Hearing God, p. 218

We must be aware of the dangers of “proof texting”, pulling out a single verse to support a position we want to defend, or something we really want to justify that we want to do.

“That is why only ***the Bible as a whole*** --can be treated as the written word of God.”

We'll return to this in a bit.

To begin in learning how to recognize God's voice Willard observes how there is voice recognition in nature. He tells the story of a circus elephant named Neeta whose trainer on retirement gave her to the San Diego Zoo. Fifteen years later the trainer came to visit. He called Neeta's name from about a hundred yards away and she came over to him and at his command began to perform all her old routines.

Tigger and Lilly-our rapidly growing kittens-- are getting to know our voices too, because they know where their next meal is coming from!

We humans learn to recognize color, sounds, music (!), and voices, too, but we are different than other animals. When it comes to the voice of God the prophet Isaiah said,

***“the ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.”***

Isaiah 1:3

John's Gospel puts our situation this way,

“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.”

John 1: 9-10

But with the help of God's Spirit making it possible to be “born from above” (we talked about this last time), we get help in learning by experience to hear God as He speaks and to recognize His word and confidently interact with it.

John remembers what Jesus said,

“The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep will follow him because they know his voice.”

John 10:2-4

John touched, shared meals, walked alongside Christ His Lord and friend. And after Jesus rose John learned to recognize when Jesus was speaking to him. Later he could write with bold encouraging confidence,

SLIDE

“As for you, the anointing [=the presence of the Spirit of Jesus] that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.”

I John 2:27

A word of caution here;

“We may mistakenly think that if God spoke to us we would automatically know Who is speaking, without having to learn, but that is simply a mistake- and one of the most harmful mistakes for those trying to hear God’s voice. It leaves us totally at the mercy of any strange ideas we have picked up about what God’s speaking is like.”

Hearing God, p. 220

I think about the voice of the Force in Star Wars movies.

What’s the problem? *Why are we unable to recognize God’s voice right off?*

-We are fallen. On our own we are in the dark (on the edge of an abyss) separated from God.

-Besides the many influences working on us: our own experiences in our families, the influence tech has on our capacity for relational “attuning”, we are also being worked on. Willard writes,

“...on the other hand we should understand that it is in Satan’s best interest to make an inherent mystery of God’s word coming directly to the individual... real as a game of theological charades.”

Hearing God, p. 221

-Also this: the “still, small voice” of our Heavenly Father allows us space to think, and respond.

At first most of us benefit from running our sense of a leading by someone more experienced fellow believer for another perspective as we learn to discern with more confidence to recognize His Voice ourselves.

-That’s what happened for me. One week later with Mary Beth at Magic Mountain, “*You idiot, what do you think?*” Her reaction helped me. I answered, “I think I’m going to do it.”

To begin to answer our question, “How can we know it’s His voice speaking?” Willard talks about the Three Lights

CIRCUMSTANCES

IMPRESSIONS OF THE SPIRIT

PASSAGES FROM THE BIBLE

It is suggested that when these three come together and point in the same direction that we may be confident they point in the way God intends for us to go.

Thing is, this may prove to be right, but only after someone has already grown in their conversational relationship with God to the place where they have familiarity with His voice.

Before this comes about

Even for mature believers--discerning with the Three Lights can be confusing at times!

We can even “game” these lights for our own purposes to validate what we already want. Like with any relationship—formulas and gimmicks don’t work...but principles and guidelines do.

Have you ever been in a group of Christians where someone says: “I just really think the Lord is telling us we should do X, Y and Z.”

And someone else stands up and says: “Well I didn’t get that memo and I disagree!”

How many ruptures have occurred over such misunderstandings!?

So Willard guides us through some of the practical snags we might hit...to encourage us to keep at it! It's about progress not perfection—

“A large part of the practical problem in working with the three lights comes from the simple fact that they are interdependent. It is difficult or impossible to tell what one is saying without already knowing what the others are saying.”

Hearing God, p. 223

That God's Spirit inspires our understanding of Scripture comes from and is discerned through the teachings of Scripture and the impressions of the Spirit. A sort of Catch 22.

And that Scripture teaches us to test the spirits whether they confess Jesus is Lord, is not very helpful when, for example, we are trying to decide whom to marry, or which job to take= our circumstances.

And regarding circumstances, if a door is open or closed cannot give us discernment without the other two lights. You don't know by looking at these doors **who** is opening or closing them! In fact, often you don't know if they are open or closed until after you have acted!

The point is the Three Lights used as a “formula” seems to work in retrospect! And they cannot be used like a check list or like, as Willard puts it, “consulting three clocks running independently of each other.”

“Still, while the Three Lights provide no formula, nor mechanism, for making decisions, they must not be abandoned.” They serve as a part of our conversational relationship with God. Like every conversation—it's messy and multifactorial...but the fruit of good conversation.

Two considerations:

1. Our own judgment is not excluded, nor is our decision-making.
 - a. the three lights are simply the factors we must consider in the process of making a responsible judgment and decision about what to do. The Three Lights don't decide for us.
2. While neither one light taken individually nor all of them together simply give us God's word, Each or all three together may be and usually are the occasion of God's directive word coming to us.

The voice of God is not itself any one the three lights, nor is it automatically all three of them together. But the voice of God usually comes to individuals as we see time and again in the Bible for those who:

+Practice responsible study and meditation on the Bible

- a. =the whole counsel of God And often, when reading the Bible OR hearing the Word proclaimed...the Holy Spirit can produce in us a fresh awareness of the “significance” of the passage or preaching---this is meant specifically for us at that time in our life.
- b. Sweep and steep. Take in the sweep. Steep in a verse, a phrase, a word.

+ Pay attention to the experience of the various kinds of movements of the Spirit in our heart

- a. Re-memembering how you could see the hand of God in your life, take long walks, reflect in five-year increments, reflect with others, all these and other ways to make connections.

+Intelligent alertness to the circumstances that befall us

- a. =realism, mindful attention paying, challenging our own delusions, our wishful thinking

Thinking about my own story of coming to Calvary.
Circumstances, Impressions of the Spirit, passages from Scripture moving together,

-My calling is informed by Ephesians 4 and many other passages, and calling itself is also discerned in community (Scripture+internal witness+”circumstances/community)

-impression of the Spirit that I was not done!

-Florida “wrapping up” for many circumstantial reasons, sent an email to Pastor Shawn. Suzanne’s idea.

-Shawn’s response, the leading at CCC for 60+ in COVID

-Pondered Shawn’s proposal while out hiking in the mountains, my imagination fired! A strong sense that this was my next assignment.

This was no check list process. Instead, these three work in the setting of, embedded in a long conversational relationship where there have been many learnings over many years.

Willard writes,

“As we reflect on our circumstances, our impressions of the Spirit and passages we read in the Bible, we also listen for the Divine voice. But when God speaks and we recognize the voice as His voice, we do so because our familiarity with that voice enables us to recognize it...”

Hearing God, p. 226

So it will be helpful here to talk about three factors that distinguish a voice

Quality of sound

a matter of tone, pace, smoothness, flow/or the quality of the thought impression. Think of someone you love, can you hear the quality of their voice?

Spirit

passionate, cold, warm, whining/demanding, timid, confident, attitude comes through

Content

information conveyed reveals the history and experience of the speaker. We learn to recognize someone by the words even if they do not speak them. I am using a LOT of Dallas Willard's words. You are getting to know him, and so am I. This series is a big win for me personally. I have been in a personal tutorial with Dallas Willard for the last six months!

What about God's voice? What is the quality of the sound of His voice like?

1. It carries weight of authority. Willard shares this,

“The quality of God's voice is more a matter of the weight or impact an impression makes on our consciousness. A certain steady and calm force with which communications from God impact our soul incline us toward assent and even toward active compliance. Our innermost being

seems to be saying Yes, this is true and right. The assent or compliance is frequently given before the content of the communication is fully grasped. At least I find it so, and others do as well.”

This was most certainly my experience when He said to me, “Throw it away and follow Me...”

Hearing God, p. 228

- a. As we said, even though His voice may be “still and small” it is not weak!

Willard quotes E. Stanley Jones,

“Perhaps the rough distinction [between the voice of God and our own subconscious] is this: The voice of the subconscious argues with you, tries to convince you; but the inner voice of God does not argue, does not try to convince you. It just speaks, and it is self-authenticating. It has the feel of the voice of God within it.

Hearing God, p. 229

2. The Spirit of God’s voice

- a. of peace, joy, warmth, sweet reasonableness, good will.
- b. Not the voice of a bully. His voice will not run you over, or force. your will.
- c. It is the Spirit of Jesus.
- d. “You’re welcome”!!

3. Content

“The content of a word that is truly from God will always conform to and be consistent with the truths about God’s nature and kingdom that are made clear in the Bible. Any content or claim that does not conform to biblical content is not a word from God. Period!”

Hearing God, pp. 231-232

“In order to qualify as the voice of God, a thought, perception or other experience must conform to the principles- the fundamental truths- of scripture. It is the principles, not the incidentals of Scripture, that must count here.

Hearing God, p. 232

where...

“Principles of Scripture are to be identified most of all from the actions, spirit and explicit statements of Jesus himself.” (the Word of God with us).

Hearing God, p. 234

Here is some wise counsel: If the Bible says something once, notice it, but don't count on it as a fundamental principle. If it says something twice, think twice about it! If it repeats it many times, dwell on it.

We learn over time, with experience, study, good teaching to tell the difference between peripheral and essential messages.

On the negative side, we can say any voice that promises complete exemption from suffering and failure is most certainly NOT God's voice! So what has been called the “health and wealth “ gospel.

The word of God does not come just to lead us out of trouble, or to make our lives easy and to make sure everything goes our way!!

We must not be misled by our own wishful thinking...

In summary

“...what we discern when we learn to recognize God's voice in our heart is a certain weight or force, a certain spirit and a certain content in the thoughts that come in God's communications to us. These three things in combination mark the voice of God. To those well experienced in the Way of Christ, these give great confidence and great accuracy in living day-to-day as the friends of Christ and as collaborators with God in his kingdom.”

Hearing God, p. 235

Let's talk about this

Table Talk II

1. Have you ever had a “thought” that carried weight that you knew you needed to mull on, that caused you to move toward it in curiosity or some specific action? Would you be willing to share your experience with your table?

2. Share an experience of discerning that led to a decision. How did the Bible help you? How did others help you? How did praying help you?
3. Why can't someone just use the Three Lights like a check list to hear God's voice?
4. Who has helped you or is helping you now to hear God's voice?
5. "...the only answer to the question, 'How do we know whether this is from God?' 'is by experience.'" Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. "Any voice that promises total exemption from suffering and failure is most certainly not God's voice." What do you think of this claim? Why do you think people so readily reduce the Bible to a how-to book, a manual for the successful life?

Wrap Up

Willard wraps up with five practical results of knowing the voice of God.

1. Direct, daily access to God and His kingdom for all believers.
 - a. God talks to His church! "*We stand in the community of the spoken to.*" (p. 239)
 - b. When we align, attune with the kingdom of Christ and come into the family of God we become an outpost of that kingdom, we are SPECIAL OP'S with our earpieces in!
 - c. This is SO important for Seasoned Adults to remember.
2. Protection from mad religionists and legalism
 - a. From those who will use religion for personal power and self-justification. Church and spiritual abuse is very real. Willard writes,

"It is of vital importance that we are able to recognize when people in positions of power do not know what they are talking about (even with all their authority), or when they are being guided by evil."

Hearing God, p. 242

- b. So cult leaders in all their forms practicing spiritual bullying.
- c. Legalism also happens, doctrine and some system or paradigm takes precedence over the voice of God.

1. Some systems of theology that dictate what God will and can do, what God “no longer does...”
3. A quality of life like those in Scripture
 - a. Experience and understanding of God’s voice can alone make the events of the Bible real to us and allow our faith to rise beyond mere abstract conviction that it must be true to a vital on-going conversational relationship that we also witness in Old and New Testaments. We find ourselves entering into the scenes, of being addressed through them.
4. Plain communication
 - a. So David asking for guidance, gets it from out of his conversational relationship with God
 - b. God will not be vague, we are not left with mysterious feelings or curious circumstances.

“On the contrary, we can expect (given the revelation of God in Christ) that if God wants us to know something, he will be both able and willing to communicate it to us plainly, as long as we are open and prepared by our experience to hear and obey.”

Hearing God, p. 250

(I said there are five practical results. Here’s the fifth one...)

5. Confidence, comfort and peace
 - a. In His presence, the face of the Lord. His joy! The “sparkle in His eyes”
 - b. Take this in, Numbers 6:24-25

Blessing

***“The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his face upon you,
and give you peace.”***

Numbers 6:24-25

Doxology

Go in peace and serve the Lord.