

THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH – Hearing God’s Voice

Renewal Memphis

November 26, 2017

BIBLE READING – John 16:12-25

INTRODUCTION

Greeting – Introduce Myself

It is a joy to be with you again. I love being with people who belong to Jesus—people who I call family and among whom I share a bond of unity, purpose and hope that transcends every other part of life. But for many of us in this room, we show up on Sundays for another reason that’s just as important—**a deep and persistent hunger within us to connect with the living God**—to encounter and experience the presence, power and person of Jesus in a tangible way. We want to sit at the feet of Jesus, hear His voice, and experience the peace and joy that emanates from wherever His Spirit dwells.

So this morning my hope is to give you something tangible and practical—simple, replicable practices anyone can experiment with in order to connect with Jesus more often in your day-to-day lives.

Because I believe it is this intimacy with Jesus—this powerful, relational and ongoing interaction with our Risen King—that is the source out of which all other spiritual life and discipline flows.

I am convinced, that for the follower of Jesus, true worship, righteous living, and purposeful mission all flow from this active connection to and dependence on Jesus Himself.

Today we are going to focus on the practice of hearing God's voice—because communication is the foundation of relational intimacy, and so often I encounter fellow Christians who long to hear from Jesus but struggle to do so with confidence or consistency. Pursuing intimacy with Jesus often seems like spinning a spiritual slot machine which only occasionally lands on jackpot; the rest of our lives, we wander in seasons of dryness, disconnection, or even disbelief. We wonder why our Shepherd King feels far off, despite so often reading the words of Jesus Himself...

'...Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

Luke 11:9-13

PRAYER

QUESTION 1 – How does God speak to us?

As a preface, let's briefly look at two passages that lead into our main text:

Hebrews:1-3a

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

In the Old Testament, God spoke to His people through prophets who delivered God's messages on His behalf. Because of this incredibly important role, OT prophets carried tremendous authority as well as solemn responsibility.

But the need for a prophetic intermediary was eliminated with Jesus' coming. The books of Hebrews and John clearly point to Jesus as the 'logos'—the complete and full embodiment of God's Word to His people. The person and teachings of Jesus are the perfect expression of God's Word to mankind.

And because relationship and intimacy with God are at the heart of our redemption, Jesus made it clear to His disciples that God's word would continue to be expressed even after He physically left the earth to return to the Father. And so He promised the Spirit...

John 14:25-26

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

In the upper room, the night before Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus promises His disciples again and again that He will continue speaking to them through the soon-coming Holy Spirit...

John 16:12-15

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 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. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

In these texts, Jesus makes it clear—He isn't done speaking to His disciples. He has more to say, and He is sending the Holy Spirit to continually speak to us on His behalf. Again and again in the book of John, Jesus describes the nature of our relationship with the Spirit as personal (he dwells with you and will be in you), experiential (I will love him and manifest myself to him), and revelatory (the Spirit speaks, reminds, reveals, and teaches).

The Holy Spirit is the conduit of God's word today to followers of Jesus. He is the one who reminds us of what Jesus already said, reveals God's truth to us anew, and continues to speak to us on Jesus' behalf.

This is a living and active conversation, ongoing between the Spirit and ourselves, out of which flows all communion, direction and insight for our lives.

QUESTION 2 – What hinders us from hearing Him?

So why is it that so often followers of Jesus struggle to hear the Spirit's words? Why do we feel disconnected from what Jesus is saying? Why do we fail to discern the voice of God, or lack confidence in what we may hear?

Here are 3 common barriers to hearing God's voice:

1) Cultural Brokenness / Poor Theology

In Western Christianity, especially within the Protestant and Evangelical streams of our faith, acceptable ways to hear from God are limited to a narrow few spiritual disciplines. In the most conservative of churches, God's words are only expressed in the canon of Scripture. What is written in the Bible is the only means we are now given to hear from the living God.

But even if allowance is made outside of that, our contemporary churches often emphasize ways of hearing God's voice that focus on the rational and cognitive—they frame our interactions with Jesus solely in the realm of intellect, knowledge and understanding. Too often our cultural brokenness limits Christian faith to an act of thinking, knowing and then, nothing else.

ILLUSTRATION

So, what do I mean by cultural brokenness?

James K.A. Smith, author and Christian philosopher, spoke about this rationalization of our faith at a conference I attended in Denver a few years back. In one of my favorite talks of the whole week, Our Secular Age, he describes how the Reformation coupled with the rise of secularism has inadvertently produced this flattening of our spirituality into a singular dimension. Smith says...

'In a secular age... we have sort of unhooked the cosmos from its Creator. And in many ways we have to be honest that the Protestant reformation was one of the engines that drove this disenchantment. Perhaps unintentionally all kinds of aspects from the fallout from the Reformation kind of flattened the world, left us with the sterility of naturalism, and it evacuated the cosmos of mystery and transcendence. And here's the problem—it did the same thing to Christianity...it enclosed us in a kind of claustrophobic lecture hall—the church becomes this box where brains on a stick receive information in messages. And we flattened Christianity in a dynamic (Charles) Taylor calls 'ex-carnation'. We disembodied it—it become less communal, less material, less sacramental.'

But in this same talk Smith goes on to propose that the future of the church is actually to transition back into its ancient form—one full of sacrament, liturgy, mystery and meat. **It is a mystical and enchanted revelation that the cosmos is charged with the grandeur and glory of God.**

Now there is a vision of faith that speaks to the hunger in my soul—his words resonate with the deep longing I have to **be** with Jesus, not simply to gather information about Him.

QUESTION 2 – What hinders us from hearing Him? (Continued)

Sadly, in the West, we have glorified the cognitive to the exclusion of every other part of our beings. But we are not simply brains on sticks. We are emotional beings. We are creative, imaginative beings. We are instinctual and habitual beings. We are experiential and communal beings.

Your emotions are not any more or less fallen than your thoughts. They are just as corruptible, just as capable of being misused or deceived, and just as fertile ground for redemption through the Spirit's presence and power. The same is true of your dreams, your creativity, your gut... you get the idea.

Jesus wants every part of us, and He is able to redeem every part as a vehicle of intimacy and connection with Him.

Jesus speaks to us in many ways, but the Spirit is the one that reveals the truth and purpose of His words no matter how they are communicated. Which means that...**Communion with the Spirit of God is our most important means of truly hearing God's voice.**

The second barrier to hearing God's voice is...

2) Fear & Wounding

Often I meet people who are simply scared of getting it wrong—of believing God said something that He really didn't say. This fear can paralyze them from even engaging the Spirit or giving themselves permission to listen. And a corollary of this fear is those who have been wounded—people who have received 'a word from the Lord' delivered by someone else that was harmful, incorrect or simply shared in an unhealthy way. So listening to Jesus has become connected to past pain, and only the safest and most controlled forms of engaging with God are now allowable.

The way through both of these obstacles is community—the body of Christ. God has given us one to another to help each other examine and test what we hear from the Spirit and judge it by the Scriptures.

In genuine community we can share what we are hearing with an openness to receive questions, concerns or even correction. There is freedom to experiment, get things wrong, try again—we see this dynamic within the community of Jesus' twelve disciples as well as in the early church.

In fact, this posture of togetherness in listening honors the nature of what God often says—because He speaks to us for one another, not just for ourselves.

Finally the third obstacle to hearing God's voice is...

3) Passivity

I don't believe we can overestimate the importance of intentionality in listening to God. So often the Scriptures indicate it is our posture of pursuit that God responds to—seeking, listening, drawing near.

But it is when we sit idly waiting for divine inspiration, and then become frustrated and complacent in the absence of a voice from the clouds that there is danger. We become distracted or distraught because we expected God to speak on our terms or in the way we thought best.

But there is a better way, which bring us to the final question. Before we go there, let me share one example of what hearing from God can look like—how it can actually impact our lives in significant ways...

ILLUSTRATION

I wouldn't be standing here today if my wife, Christy, hadn't listened to the voice of the Spirit and shared what she heard with me.

Story of us joining Christ the Rock (2009/2010)

But if this isn't a familiar way of hearing from God, you're probably still wondering—how could I ever hear the Spirit's voice like that?

QUESTION 3 – How can we become better listeners to the Spirit?

I'm convinced hearing Jesus is more than just waiting. It also involves learning practices we can regularly use to intentionally listen to his voice. I call this **active listening**—this is where I hope to give you something practical and tangible that you can start trying this week...

Here are three simple practices anyone can use to actively listen to Jesus:

1) Clear the Space

Setting aside time and space to listen is the first and possibly most crucial step in hearing God's voice. Amidst the stress and craziness of our fast-paced, lives it can feel impossible to squeeze one more thing into an overbooked schedule. But giving ourselves permission to stop doing and start being with Jesus is vital—it settles our spirits and shifts the posture of our hearts toward receiving rather than producing.

Clearing space is all about creating margin. It establishes and protects the whitespace of life—the blank pages of our hearts where we give Jesus room to scribble questions, illustrate dreams, paint reflections, illuminate exhortations, and sketch his vision for the future. This sacred space is where we listen best—it's where our ears and eyes and hearts are attuned to his voice.

Margin is secured by three boundaries: time, place and permission.

Giving up our time is always an act of sacrifice, but we must reserve part of our schedule for sabbath and stillness if we long to hear God's voice. It is equally important to find a place where we can stop and listen free of the interruptions and distractions which often punctuate our regular cycles of work and play. Finally, we must give ourselves permission to stop and be with God—a weekend away in solitude does little good if our hearts are full of the anxieties and burdens of the days before or the week to come.

2) Build a Canvas

Once we are finally alone with God—still, quiet and attentive—listening can feel somewhat daunting. If an audible voice from heaven doesn’t immediately emerge, the silence can quickly lead to discouragement or even despair. In these moments, many of us have heard our inner voice half-whisper, half-shout in disappointment and frustration, “Why doesn’t he say something?!”

“Building a canvas” is the key to remaining actively engaged in this part of the listening process. **It means giving Jesus a specific opportunity or vehicle through which to speak.** Much like a projector requires a screen upon which to cast a clearly defined image, certain practices can serve as a canvas upon which the words of Jesus take shape. These activities are simple yet proactive exercises we can practice to demonstrate our willingness to receive from God, and invite his voice or leading to be expressed through a specific medium.

We begin building a canvas for the words of Jesus through the simple act of invitation—asking the Holy Spirit to rest upon us, declaring the time and space we’ve set apart as sacred, and inviting Jesus to speak into those specific areas of our life or circumstances where we need clarity and direction. We can even invite Jesus to identify his voice through specific signs or manifestations—a tangible sense of peace, an unprompted confirmation from a friend, an unexpected provision, or a supernatural clearing of obstacles.

Canvas building continues through intentional exercises of reflection, declaration and imagination. Reflection is the process of looking backward or inward and simply acknowledging what we see. This can be done through journaling, recording timelines of important events and milestones, or meditating on past encounters with God. Declaration is repeating to ourselves and to God the truths and promises he has spoken to us in the past. We see this often in the book of Psalms—where the psalmist invites God to speak into a present situation by declaring aloud what he already knows to be true. Imagination involves exercising our God-given creativity and inviting the

Spirit to speak through our dreams, visions and creations. This is often the most challenging for those who rely heavily on their intellect or reason to connect with God. It's often necessary to remind ourselves that Jesus created every aspect of our minds and spirits—he is just as capable of shaping our dreams and imaginations as he is at directing our cognitive understanding of scripture. Imagination can be exercised through many different forms—intentionally inviting Jesus to speak through our dreams one night right before going to sleep, picturing images or visions that we invite Jesus to shape in our mind's eye, or even by creating artwork, music or poetry that we ask Jesus to direct before beginning the creative process.

The most important aspect of canvas building is the simple posture of intentionality—inviting and expecting the Spirit to speak through whatever exercise we engage in. It is this prayerful submission to his leading that attunes our ears and aligns our hearts to receive from God.

As we move through and complete an exercise, we can ask ourselves, "Where was God's presence or leading evident during this time? Does anything specific stand out to me? What new awareness or insights do I have now?" These simple questions give us a clear means of identifying and processing the things we have just heard from Jesus.

3) Becoming an Echo Chamber

Often when coaching I use a simple technique while listening where I repeat back to the person across from me the exact statement I just heard them say. I might slightly change the word order or swap out a synonym, but the meaning of their words remains the same. Inevitably, their facial expression shifts to a look of amazement and profound realization—it's as if I've just uncovered a shocking revelation previously hidden from them. I can't help but chuckle to myself each time this happens. It's uncanny but true—the simple act of repeating back what we hear brings new awareness. It deepens our understanding and helps us to process the nuance of what was said.

Becoming an echo chamber simply means reflecting back everything we hear from God. We speak it back to God. We repeat it back to ourselves. We declare it aloud. We examine it in light of scripture. We share it with others and invite them to contribute thoughts and reflections. We become resonant with the reverberating sound of Jesus's words—and in that posture of reflection, our connection to Jesus and our confidence in what he has said deepens, strengthens, and expands.

We can process the things we hear from Jesus, even when we still feel uncertain or confused about them. When Jesus speaks, he rarely says exactly what we are hoping to hear in the exact way we expect to hear it. Many times we might hear just the first part of what we're seeking, or maybe we receive direction about something completely unrelated. Then we're left feeling unsure of what to do next. Especially at these times, echoing what we've heard from the Spirit is an easy and helpful way forward.

In fact, sometimes Jesus speaks clearly enough that we can go ahead and take action in response. Action may sound counterintuitive to listening well, but obeying what we've already heard from Jesus often places us in perfect position to hear what he wants to say next. Repeating and then responding to the things we've received from God empowers us to stay connected and attentive to his voice.

CONCLUSION

The more I experiment with these three simple practices, the more often I feel keenly aware of what God is saying and where God is leading in my day-to-day life. And even when specific answers to questions remain unclear, the intimacy that flows out of an active pursuit of the Spirit produces within me a renewed sense of peace, reframing the uncertainty within a Kingdom perspective. Anxiety shifts to curiosity and fear becomes anticipation as I wait at the feet of One who has proven faithful time and time again.

And when we pursue the words of Jesus, we not only gain understanding and insight, but intimacy with him as well.

COMMUNION