

**HOW CAN I HEAR GOD SPEAK?****LUKE 8:4-15**

Dan Rather, the news reporter, once asked the late Mother Teresa, “What do you say when you pray?” She answered quietly, “I listen.” Surprised by her answer, Rather asked her the inevitable follow up question, “Well, then, what does God say?” Mother Teresa smiled and replied, “He listens.” Most of us believe God listens to our prayers, but fewer of us have learned how to listen to God. Do you believe God speaks to people? Most people do. Understanding what God says depends on how we hear.

We’re in the midst of a message series I’m calling *Knowing God’s Will: Is It Like A GPS Or A Compass?* I’ve been saying it’s more like a compass. As much as we’d like to have a supernatural and verbal turn by turn guide – a God-provided global positioning system - for any and all decisions in life, that’s just not how it seems to work. Instead, it’s more like God points us in a certain direction – like using a spiritual compass – and says, “This is the right way. Walk this way. And as you do, trust Me and obey Me.”

Here's the question for today: How can I hear God speak? There’s some assumptions in that question, to be sure. First, we assume knowing God’s will depends on being able to communicate with God in some way. Discerning God’s will depends on the ability to develop some way of exchanging information with Him. Second, we assume God can and does speak to people. He speaks through the Bible, through leadings that come from the Holy Spirit who lives in us, through wise counselors, through painful experiences – just to name a few ways. I’ve never heard God speak to me in an audible voice, but, yes, I know He has spoken to me throughout my life in different ways about different things. Third, we assume being able to hear God is very important to knowing His will. The better I can hear God, the more I can be sure I am living in His will. The more deaf I am to God, the less sure I will be that I’m living in His will.

Now, I’m convinced hearing God speak has more to do with our heart attitude than any other single factor. That conviction is based on God’s Word. For example, let’s look at a story Jesus told that underlined the important relationship between your heart attitude and being able to hear God. Who’s the farmer in Jesus’ story? God. What does the seed thrown by the farmer represent? God’s message or God speaking to us. What do the four kinds of soil represent? Four different kinds of human responses to God’s message or God speaking. Here’s an interesting takeaway for me from Jesus’ story. He was making the point your heart attitude determines your ability to hear God speak. Your heart attitude has more to do with knowing God’s will than any other single factor. This story helps us answer our question – how can I hear God speak? First of all, if I’m to hear God speak...

**I MUST CULTIVATE AN OPEN MIND.**

Do you really want to hear from God? Good question. Are you actually eager and receptive to hear from God? Are you ready and willing to hear from God? Having a truly open mind to God means you accept the assumption God wants to communicate with and know you personally. What did Jesus say about the first kind of soil? “A

farmer went out to plant his seed. As he scattered it across his field, some seed fell on a footpath, where it was stepped on, and the birds ate it.” (Lk 8:5 NLT) And then later on, He provided an interpretation, “The seeds that fell on the footpath represent those who hear the message, only to have the devil come and take it away from their hearts and prevent them from believing and being saved.” (Lk 8:12 NLT)

On farms in Jesus’ day, little footpaths were made so the farmer could access his fields. At planting time he walked along and threw seed into the ground that he’d tilled up. Some of it fell onto those footpaths accidentally. Those paths became very hard and compacted with people walking on them frequently. The soil of the footpath itself wasn’t very fertile, and it was well nigh impossible for any seed to penetrate that hard ground much less sprout and grow. This kind of soil represented a hardened heart or mind to Jesus. It’s become closed and unreceptive to whatever God wants to say. God may continue to speak to such a person. But if your mind and heart is closed and hard, it’s unlikely you will ever hear what He has to say.

What causes a hardened heart or a closed mind? One cause is pride. “I don’t need to hear from God. I can make decisions without Him. I can relate to other people without His input. I can succeed in life without hearing from God.” Whenever we fail to pray about something of importance, we’re implying, “I don’t need God’s input for this. I can handle it on my own.” That’s pride and nothing will make you more deaf to God than pride. Another cause is fear. “What if God speaks to me and I don’t like what I hear? What if God tells me to do something I don’t want to do? I’m afraid I’ll lose my freedom or what I consider fun to do.” Fear will make us deaf when God. Still another cause of a hardened heart is bitterness. When we’ve been hurt in life and we hold on to that hurt it gradually turns into bitterness. We start saying, “Why did God allow this? If He loved me, He’d fix this situation. If He’s so powerful, why did He permit this awful thing to happen to me.” Bitterness blames God for what other people do to us. It can harden my heart and close my mind so I don’t hear God even when He speaks to me.

One of the best examples in the Bible of an open mind and a soft heart towards God was Solomon when he was a young man. Now, Solomon did not finish well, but he started out great. He was one of King David’s sons and succeeded his father on the throne of Israel. Right at the beginning of his reign, Solomon went away for a few days to seek the face of God. He wanted to hear God speak. God came to him in a dream and asked Solomon what he wanted. The young king could have asked for a bigger kingdom, greater wealth, or more possessions. Instead, he asked God for wisdom. This is part of what Solomon said to God, “Give me an understanding heart so that I can govern your people well and know the difference between right and wrong.” (1 Kgs 3:9 NLT) The Lord was very pleased with Solomon and his request. Solomon wanted an understanding heart - a heart that could hear God speak. He never lacked for wealth, power, or possessions. More importantly, God gave him the ability to discern God’s will and ways. Why? Solomon cultivated an open mind and maintained a soft heart toward God for at least a portion of his life. Secondly, if I’m to hear God speak...

**I MUST SET ASIDE TIME TO LISTEN.**

In other words, I must make time to hear Him. I need to slow down, be quiet, and plan it into my schedule. We schedule everything else in life – vacations, homework, dentist appointments, our kids' sports activities – just to name a few. Do you schedule time to be with God? Or does God just get the leftovers of your time and energy? That's one reason some people never hear God speak and never discover His will. They're always in too much of a hurry. Some years ago, researchers discovered that juice sold in jars outsold frozen concentrated juice. Why? Because for some Americans it takes too long to thaw out the frozen juice! We don't even want to wait for stuff to thaw out! If you live a perpetually frantic, hurried life, God will get shortchanged. I guarantee it. The best He'll ever get of your time are the leftovers. You may want God to speak, but the message of your lifestyle is this: "God, I'm a bit in a hurry here. If You've got something to say to me, now's the best time or maybe Tuesday between 4:00 and 4:30." Don't expect God to cooperate with that mentality!

What did Jesus say about the second kind of soil? "Other seed fell among rocks. It began to grow, but the plant soon wilted and died for lack of moisture." (Lk 8:6 NLT) Later, Jesus explained, "The seeds on the rocky soil represent those who hear the message and receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they believe for a while, then they fall away when they face temptation." (Lk 8:13 NLT) Much of the soil in Israel covers a bedrock of limestone with only about three or four inches of topsoil covering it. Plants can put roots down about two or three inches, but's all. When summer comes and the heat gets intense, most of those plants wither away because they're planted in shallow soil. So for Jesus this kind of soil reminded him of people who have shallow hearts towards God. This person only hears God superficially. He might get all excited about God and doing God's will, but when the problems of life bear down on him with their intense heat, he withers and falls away. She might be very enthusiastic about God and His will for a season – like the verse said they receive God's messages with joy – but before long she's dropped out of church, she no longer reads her Bible, and she no longer tries to discern how God might be speaking to her.

One big reason for a shallow heart towards God is the failure to provide a time or a place to hear Him speak. If you're sincerely interested in knowing God's will, do you spend even five minutes a day in a quiet place and ask Him to show you His will? The urgent things of life crowd out the important. We give our time and attention to perfectly good things in life, but they aren't the best things. Imagine taking a two week vacation with no advance planning or preparation. You just get up one day and say, "Hey, let's go on vacation today!" You haven't picked a location. You haven't booked an Airbnb. You haven't purchased an airline ticket or gassed up your car. Chances are you'll just stay home and end up watching a lot of TV instead. Too often that's how we treat hearing from God. We can live with this nagging notion we ought to spend some intentional, quiet time with God so we can hear Him speak, but we never get around to actually doing it. No time is set aside. No place is set aside. No intentional effort is made. Why is it a surprise we rarely hear God speak and why our prayers lack vitality? Now, third, if I am to hear from God...

## **I MUST ELIMINATE DISTRACTIONS.**

Many times God wants to speak to us but our hearts and minds are just too crowded and full of other stuff. What did Jesus say about the third kind of soil in His story? “Other seed fell among thorns that grew up with it and choked out the tender plants.” (Lk 8:7 NLT) What did that represent? Jesus explained, “The seeds that fell among the thorns represent those who hear the message, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life. And so they never grow into maturity.” (Lk 8:14 NLT) What adjective describes this kind of heart attitude toward God? How about preoccupied? This is the person whose heart and mind is so consumed by everything else in life that he or she ends up being permanently distracted. As a result, they can’t hear God speak.

I’m not sure there’s a bigger distraction in our lives currently than a rather recent invention. The smartphone. In fact, you may suffer from nomophobia, the fear of being without a working cellphone. The term, which is derived from “no mobile” phone, was first coined in 2008. A research firm recruited 94 Android device users and installed special software on their smartphones. The tool tracked each user's interaction over five days, all day. Every tap, type, swipe and click. The heaviest smartphone users click, tap, or swipe on their phone 5,427 times a day, according to researchers. That's the top 10 percent of phone users, so one would expect it to be excessive. However, the rest of us still touch our smartphones 2,617 times a day on average. That’s almost a million times in one year. Some of you even check out your smartphone when I’m speaking. Imagine that! No, it’s not all that important to listen to me. But one wonders if you’re also too distracted to listen to God. Just a thought!

Jesus compared distractions to thorny weeds. He provided three examples. First, the cares of life which produce worry or anxiety. The Greek word used right there means being pulled in different directions at the same time. Cares or worries are the problems and pressures of everyday life. They rob us of peace of mind. And because they dominate our thoughts, it becomes impossible to hear God speak. A second thorny weed is wealth. You can get so busy trying to make a living, you conclude you don’t have time for God. Many people work hard every day to pay the bills, to catch up with expenses, to get out of debt, and to try and keep up with the family next door economically. Then they fall into bed exhausted and do it all again the next day. God ends up getting crowded out and forgotten. Hearing God speak into your life feels increasingly irrelevant. A third thorny weed are life’s pleasures. There’s nothing inherently wrong with good, fun activities. God is the One who invented fun after all. God made you in such a way as to enjoy certain things and get pleasure out of them. But if you get so busy pursuing fun stuff or enjoying recreational activities that you don’t set aside time to worship, to pray, to meditate on God’s Word, to reach out to a spiritually lost person, to be involved in a ministry here at church or out in the community, now you’ve got a problem. You’re too distracted to hear God speak.

Here's a question. How much effort does it take to grow weeds? They happen to grow in my yard with absolutely no effort on my part whatsoever. Now good looking grass

takes effort. Flowers take effort. Cheryl's tomatoes and herbs take effort. You've got to mow, or weed, or water, or fertilize. But weeds just happily grow in my yard with no help from me! But you know as well as I do that too many weeds in a yard are a sign of neglect. When you start to neglect meditating on God's Word, being regular in worship, prayer, involvement in a ministry, being a part of a discipleship triad or a Sunday Bible class, these thorny spiritual weeds just appear from nowhere and start to choke out your spiritual life. You end up losing your joy, your peace, your compassion for spiritually lost people, and even your sense of purpose. And to make it even sadder, your ability to hear God speak becomes less and less. And your ability to know God's will and do it will become less and less as well. Fourth, if I am to hear God speak...

### **I MUST DO WHAT HE SAYS.**

God speaks to people who decided in advance they're actually going to follow through and do whatever He tells them to do. Unfortunately, most of the time we want to hear God speak, yes, but we also reserve the "right" to accept or decline His instructions. What did Jesus say about the fourth kind of soil? "Still other seed fell on fertile soil. This seed grew and produced a crop that was a hundred times as much as had been planted!" When he had said this, he called out, 'Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.'" (Lk 8:8 NLT) Then he provided this interpretation, "And the seeds that fell on the good soil represent honest, good-hearted people who hear God's word, cling to it, and patiently produce a huge harvest." (Lk 8:15 NLT) Jesus wanted to convey the idea this soil represented an obedient heart. This is the person who is willing to do whatever God tells them to do before He even tells them. Without a doubt, those who maintain this kind of heart attitude towards God know God's will and do it more often than anyone else. These are the people who have made James 1:22 a normal part of their relationship with God, "But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves." (NLT)

If you make it a habit not just to hear what God says to you, but actually to do what He tells you to do, the will of God will become clearer to you. It's been my experience that God will most often speak to me about one of four issues. First, He assures me of His love for me. It might be a Scripture verse like Jeremiah 31:3 (NLT), "I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself," an answer to prayer, or even a message through another person. We all need to know we are loved, accepted, and cherished. God will assure us of His love when we need it. Second, He speaks to me about sin I need to abandon. Have you ever begun a time of prayer to God with words of praise and then quite suddenly the Holy Spirit reminds you of an ungodly attitude, a selfish act, an unkind word, or a lack of compassion that needs to be confessed and renounced? That's most definitely happened to me! It's as if the Holy Spirit says, "Hold the praise stuff, Rick. Get the dirt swept out of your life first."

Third, He speaks to me about relationships I need to mend. Have you ever started to pray and some person's face pops into your mind – a person with whom you have a broken relationship? It's happened to me! No, not every relationship can be fixed this side of Heaven, but the Bible's guidance here is very clear, "If it is possible, as far as it

depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (Rom 12:18 NLT) God wants reconciliation whenever and with whomever possible. The ability to hear God speak clearly is somehow tied or connected to my willingness to take the initiative to fix damaged relationships wherever possible.

Fourth, God speaks to me about commands I need to obey. There’s only one purpose for God to reveal His will to us. Obedience. Most followers of Jesus know far more about God and His will than we want to obey. The purpose of knowing God’s will isn’t to get information that makes me feel good or which I can veto if I don’t like it. The purpose of knowing God’s will is to do what God says to do. Is doing God’s will always easy? Of course not. Do you remember what Jesus said to His Father on the night before His crucifixion? “My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.” (Matt 26:39 NLT) Jesus wasn’t praying to know God’s will. He already knew full well what His Father wanted Him to do. Jesus was praying for the willingness to do God’s will fully. That’s the crux of the matter. We need to pray less that we’ll discover or get enlightened about God’s will and pray more that we’ll just do – obey – what we already know is God’s will.

Back when the telegraph was the fastest means of long-distance communication, there’s a story about a young man who applied for a job as a Morse code operator. When he arrived for the interview, he found a large, noisy office. A sign on the receptionist’s desk instructed job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned for an interview. In the background, the young man could hear a telegraph clacking away. He completed the form and sat down next to seven other men applying for the same job. After a few minutes, he stood up, crossed the room, and walked right into the office where the interviews were taking place. The other seven men were perplexed. They hadn’t heard anyone call him into the office. Who did he think he was? They’d come for the interview before him. They smiled knowingly at each other just waiting for the young man to get tossed out on his ear.

But within a few minutes the young man emerged escorted by the interviewer who said to the seven other applicants, “Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming, but the job has been filled by this young man.” The other applicants were shocked and dismayed. One of them grumbled, “Wait a minute – I don’t understand. He was the last one to come in, and we never even got a chance to be interviewed. Yet he gets the job. That’s not fair!” The employer responded, “All this time you’ve been sitting out here while the telegraph has been ticking out the following message in Morse code: ‘If you understand this message, then come right in. The job is yours.’ None of you heard it or understood it. But this young man did. So the job is his.”

That story reminds me of something Jesus said,. “Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.” (Lk 8:8 NLT) Literal heart monitors tell a person the physical condition of their heart. If we could get our hands on a spiritual heart monitor, what would it reveal about your heart and mine? Do you have a hardened heart, a shallow heart, a preoccupied heart, or an obedient heart? Your heart attitude - more than any other single factor – determines how much you hear when God speaks.