

Hearing God – Part Two

Keys to Hearing God

In Psalm 32:6ff, God speaks through David to a very wide audience. The message is to all persons who consider themselves to be godly or who aspire to be godly. I reckon that takes in just about all of us here this morning. The message is that everyone who is godly should pray to the Lord while He may be found, for our God will instruct us and teach us in the way we should go through life; He will counsel us and watch over us.

This seems like a wonderful promise, but we are still left wondering *how* it will happen. Just *how* does God instruct, teach, and guide us? Is the Lord like a cosmic dictation machine on which are recorded endless instructions covering every facet of daily life right down to the most minute and mundane of details? Is it our role in life to simply press the power button, play the tape, and get our detailed instructions for the day? How easy it would be if we could “hear” God the same way one might hear a radio announcer, simply by turning on the radio? Is this what God wants from us? Is the kind of relationship He thinks is fulfilling one in which He barks endless commands to which we yield up unthinking obedience?

1

One of the problems many believers have with respect to hearing God is that they misconceive the very nature of our heavenly Father and his plans and purposes for us as His redeemed children and friends. One of the great truths that we simply must grasp is that we are not intended by God to be robots wired into His instrument panel. Neither are we to be puppets, dangling at the end of His string, or slaves dancing at the end of the whiplash of His every command. The relationship is not to be like that of a master and his dog. “Sit! Roll over! Play dead! Heal!” This might be the level of communication that is appropriate for the master/dog relationship, but it is entirely inappropriate and unfulfilling as a model of the relationship that God wants to enjoy with man, the creature made in the divine image.

There is a powerful clue in verse nine that gives insight into the kind of communication that God wants to enjoy with us. Please look at it with me:

“Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.”

E. Stanley Jones, one of the great Bible interpreters and preachers of the twentieth century, has something very relevant and helpful to say about this:

2

“Obviously God must guide us in a way that will develop spontaneity in us. The development of character, rather than direction in this, that, and the other matter, must be the primary purpose of the Father. He will guide us, but He won’t override us. That fact should make us use with caution the method of sitting down with a pencil and a blank sheet of paper to write down the instructions dictated by God for the day. Suppose a parent would dictate to the child minutely everything he is to do during the day. The child would be stunted under that regime. The parent must guide in such a manner, and to the degree, that autonomous character, capable of making right decisions for itself, is produced. God does the same.”

Jones has hit on something crucial here, and it involves the very design that our heavenly Father has in mind for us as developing human beings. The true test of a child's character and maturity is how they behave when they are not told what to do. During my early childhood years, I relied heavily on detailed instructions from my father on all manner of subjects, all the way from how to tie my shoelaces to how to fish or swing a baseball bat. As I progressed through the teenage years, however, the lessons were now on how to drive a car, or how to treat a young lady. I was gradually maturing and developing into a man. My father was trying to teach me the difference between merely being an adult male, which is one thing, and a real man, which is quite another thing.

3

The relationship was evolving and I was now expected to have more understanding of my father's character, his thinking, his values, morals and ethics. The older and more mature I became, the more I grew into a conversational relationship with my Father, the sort of relationship suited to friends who are mature personalities in a shared enterprise, the enterprise of how to really live. My father was still learning about it.

But the relationship was cut short when he died of cancer shortly after I graduated from high school. I'll never forget one of the last walks we took together, about a month before his death. We were walking along the banks of the Otonabee River, near Peterborough, when he picked up a single blade of grass and, holding it up to the light, expressed his boundless admiration for God's handiwork. So simple a thing, so small – just a blade of grass – and yet such divine genius had gone into its making!

My father didn't have to lecture me on that occasion. Although that last walk we took together was punctuated with periods of silence, I knew what he was thinking, for his thoughts had become my own. He was completely captivated by the intrinsic value, the worth and the beauty of the smallest thing that God does, whether it's a blade of grass or a butterfly or a heron sweeping low over the wind-rippled water.

4

He was profoundly grateful for the gift of life and the sheer grandeur that the Creator had invested in it. And in those fleeting moments, it was an appreciation beyond mere words that we shared. It was two people walking side by side in harmonious thought, our minds blended as it were in a way that defies definition.

That is the sort of relationship that our heavenly Father seeks with us. We are not like the lower order of animals, driven at times by mere instinct, and at other times by the whip held in the hand of the master. That is why the Lord says plainly to us:

“Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.”

God does not wish to relate to us on the level of a master to his horse or mule. These are mere beasts, having no insight into the mind of the Master, no understanding of the plans and purposes of their Creator. It is not possible for a horse or a mule to walk side by side with its master, sharing an appreciation for life that is beyond words; not possible for them to walk side by side in harmonious thought, their minds blended in a way that defies definition. It is only a horse or a mule, having no understanding and capable only of being controlled by bit and bridle.

You see, there are basically two types of guidance commonly found in life. The first is *mechanical*. This is the kind involved in driving a car or in the remote electronic control of a model airplane or space probe. I turn the steering wheel, step on the gas, or apply the brakes, and the car responds mechanically to my actions. Or I transmit electronic signals to a remotely controlled model airplane – or even a probe on Mars – and the device responds to my pre-programmed instructions. The device, whatever it is, has no more understanding than the horse or the mule. The animal responds to instinct; the machine responds to pre-programmed instructions.

But, then, there is a higher form of guidance. It is *personal* guidance. The Guide may still want to cause events to proceed in a certain way, but now he is dealing with people. They have a *mind* with which to consider matters on their own, and a *will* concerning what is to be done. The ideal for personal guidance is to bring things to the desired outcome, but at the same time to allow the mind being guided its widest and fullest possible scope and the will its uncoerced initiative. When that happens, the result is a shared outcome, because it is also the work of the individual being guided, not merely the work of the one who is doing the guiding.

So you see, God generally deals with His non-human or non-personal creation as one guides an automobile or a mule; that is, by causal influence using instinct or the physical laws governing the cosmos. The stars and the planets are kept in their courses according to the laws of astro-physics, gravity, entropy, thermo-dynamics; it is all so mechanical and impersonal. But we are not automobiles or mules, not stars or planets, we are human beings made in the image of our Creator. He guides us by communicating His thoughts and intentions. We are to be led by – guided by – reasonable, intelligent communication, not by blind impulse, force, instinct or sensation alone. And the primary method that God uses in sharing His thoughts and intentions is the *written Word of God interpreted to us by the Spirit of God*. This Book is nothing less than excerpts from the mind of God, and every time we pick it up and read it, the Holy Spirit acts upon our minds to communicate, to clarify, to correlate, to make comprehensible to us the values and virtues, the plans and purposes, the thoughts and intents of the Living God.

Now, let me take this to one more level, for it is eminently possible and it's our great privilege to discern God's voice in *shared activity*. Those who are most mature in God's family, in His kingdom, come to understand more and more the heart and mind of God through their immersion with Him in His work.

They begin to understand what the Lord is doing so well that they often know exactly what His is thinking and intending to do. Here is Psalm 32:8 God says, "*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.*" In the Hebrew it literally says, "I will counsel you *with my eye upon you.*" The word eye (Heb. ayin (ah'yin)) can literally mean a physical eye. But it can also connote mental and spiritual faculties. Our heavenly Father is virtually saying to us:

"Come along side Me. Join me in what I am doing and I will counsel you from the storehouse of my own Divine mental and spiritual faculties. You will receive wisdom and knowledge from the mind of God."

Working alongside the Lord can be likened to an apprentice working alongside a master craftsman. The longer the apprentice works at the master's side the more he is able to know his mentor's thoughts and intentions without having to be told every detail explicitly. Model employees, for example, are not those who stand idly by waiting for someone to tell them what to do at every stage. They are those who have come to understand the plans and purposes of their employer and who through immersion in the work of the employer now know what to do.

8

So it is in the kingdom of God. When we enter into a conversational relationship with God, and when we become deeply engaged as a friend and co-laborer in the affairs of the Kingdom of God, then we learn to hear the voice of the Lord and to generally know the mind of God. What I have described is life on a whole different level than that of a horse or a mule. It is the unique privilege of the human being who has opened him/herself to the Spirit of the Living God.

Bob Mumford, in *Take Another Look at Guidance*, compares discovering God's will with a sea captain's docking procedure:

A certain harbor in Italy can be reached only by sailing up a narrow channel between dangerous rocks and shoals. Over the years, many ships have been wrecked, and navigation is hazardous.

To guide the ships safely into port, three lights have been mounted on three huge poles in the harbor. When the three lights are perfectly lined up and seen as one, the ship can safely proceed up the narrow channel. If the pilot sees two or three lights, he knows he's off course and in danger.

God has also provided three beacons to guide us. The same rules of navigation apply – the three lights must be lined up before it is safe for us to proceed. The three harbor lights of guidance are:

- 1. The Word of God**
- 2. The Holy Spirit**
- 3. Circumstances as we immerse ourselves in God's work**

9

When we line up these three divine beacons of light, the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and our circumstances as we immerse ourselves in the midst of God's work, we can be sure that we will receive guidance from God that will lead us unflinchingly along His way.

It was Martin Luther who said, "I know not the way He leads me, but well do I know my Guide." John Wesley expressed it this way, "God generally guides me by presenting reasons to my mind for acting in a certain way." J.I. Packer says, "Belief that divine guidance is real rests upon two foundational facts: the first is the reality of God's plan for us; the second is the ability of God to communicate with us. On both these facts the Bible has much to say."

So, if you want to hear God, if you hunger and thirst for His guidance in your life, if you desire that blending of hearts and minds with the Lord, then do two things: (1) Immerse yourself in His *Word*, and (2) Immerse yourself in His *work*. And do it all in an attitude of prayer.

"Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you." We are human beings, created for a conversational relationship with our God and our Guide. His guiding hand will steer us clear of the jagged rocks and shoals of life on which many a soul has been dashed to pieces.

10