

Can You Hear Me Now?

How to recognize God's voice and respond in obedience.

I was driving down a busy street when my cell phone rang. Fumbling for my phone, I snatched it up and pushed it against my ear.

"Hello?" I was greeted with loud static. Through the electronic interference I could barely make out the muffled sounds of a woman's voice. I strained to hear her words.

"Hello? Who is this?"

Suddenly, the static evaporated and the loud, ominous tone of an irritated voice came through crystal clear.

"It's your MOTHER!"

Certain sins and failures are all but unforgivable: Near the top of the list is not recognizing your mother's voice when she calls. It took awhile to redeem myself for that faux pas!

The experience I had reminds me of most Christians. They heartily identify God as the most important person in their lives. Yet, when asked about the last time He spoke to them, their faces register distant gazes, and they reminisce about their conversion experiences. The sad truth is, many Christians struggle to recognize the voice of their Savior.

Jesus said, "'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me'" (John 10:27, NIV). We should know our Shepherd's voice. How else can we follow Him to green pastures and still waters? (see Ps. 23:2). Yet, even Christ's closest disciples could be disoriented to His voice.

After one particularly disappointing encounter with the disciples, Jesus lamented: “‘Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? ... Do you still not understand?’” (Mark 8:17-18, 21)

What prevents us from hearing what God is saying? We can be distracted by Satan, by worldly thinking and even by our own desires. All three of these compete for our attention and threaten our allegiance to God’s voice. That’s why it’s crucial for every Christian to know the difference between God’s voice and these counterfeits.

Satan’s Voice

Can you imagine a soldier in combat who could not tell if the voice on his radio belonged to his commanding officer or his enemy? The Christian’s life has too much at stake for him to be fooled by Satan’s lies.

Whether you are working on your marriage, choosing a new job or guiding your kids through adolescence, you must know the difference between a word from God and a lie from the forces of darkness. Understanding some basic truths can help you differentiate between the two.

God’s voice and Satan’s are fundamentally different. Certainly, the father of lies is cunningly deceptive, but there will be a qualitative difference between what he says and what God says.

First, the Bible will always verify what God tells you. On the contrary, Satan will subtly undermine and throw into question what God has said in Scripture.

Second, following God’s voice will bring Him glory. Satan will promise to bring you glory.

Third, God’s voice will lead you to deny yourself, take up

your cross and follow Him (see Matt. 16:24). Satan will encourage you to affirm yourself, to avoid a cross and to follow your own desires.

Fourth, God will guide you to build up the church. Satan will lead you to sow seeds of discord among God's people.

Fifth, God's voice will be absolutely true. Satan will taint his message with untruth (see John 8:44). He is the master of half-truths.

Sixth, God's voice fosters humility. Satan's voice produces pride.

Finally, God's voice exposes sin, bringing a sense of conviction. Satan tempts you to justify sin and to make excuses for your behavior.

The World's Voice

The world embraces sinful, selfish values that are opposed to God's ways. Jesus said of His disciples: "' ... the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world'" (John 17:14).

Christians are to live by a different standard than unbelievers. But if we are careless, we will inadvertently succumb to secular values without even recognizing what has happened.

Sometimes we accept the world's voice because it seems like common sense. For example, society recognizes career promotions, fame, wealth and material possessions as marks of success. God measures our success by our obedience (see Matt. 6:19-20).

The world admires those who fight for their rights and don't get pushed around. Jesus emphasizes loving our enemies, not overpowering them (see Matt. 5:38-41). He urges us to surrender our rights, not cling to them. Our generation

expends great effort to avoid suffering. Jesus said His disciples would suffer as He had (see John 15:20).

The world elevates physical beauty to the point of idolatry. The Bible says those who share the gospel with others are beautiful (see Rom. 10:15).

The world says be strong and finish first. Jesus said be meek and the last will be first (see Matt. 5:5; 20:16).

The world says God helps those who help themselves. Jesus said, without God, we can do nothing (see John 15:5).

The world says look to our strengths. God wants to magnify Himself through our weaknesses (see 2 Cor. 12:9-10).

The world concedes that everyone has enemies. Jesus instructs us to set everything aside and to be reconciled with anyone we have offended (see Matt. 5:23-24).

As Christians, we recoil at blatantly sinful practices such as sexual immorality and crime. But we are far too casual about the subtle, ungodly messages that saturate the world we live in. We deceive ourselves to think we can fill our minds with ungodly movies, TV programs and magazines and yet remain untainted by the world's viewpoint.

We are fools to think we can walk unscathed in the middle of a sinful world without clear direction from our Shepherd's voice.

Our Own Voice

One of the most harmful voices we hear is, in fact, our own. If we really crave something, it's easy to convince ourselves God wants us to have it too. After all, it's the desire of our hearts! (see Ps. 37:4)

When a commitment becomes more costly than we anticipated, we conclude that God wants us to free ourselves from our burdens.

After all, we are weak and heavy-laden! (see Matt. 11:28)

Modern Christians are rationalizing themselves right out of their marriages. They argue that God never wanted them in that marriage in the first place and now He is “releasing them from their errors.”

If some people are to be believed, God changes His mind at a dizzying pace. He tells them to take the “perfect job,” then quit it a month later for a better one! He directs them to enroll in college, then determines they can’t bear the workload, and He leads them to drop out. He calls them into ministry, then decides a less demanding occupation would suit them better.

Christians can be tempted to view God as someone who sees life the way they do. They try to fashion God into their image rather than listening to what He is saying.

One of the most common practices of well-meaning but misguided Christians involves the idea of open doors. Of course God does open some doors to us and close others. But we err in our focus. The door is not the important thing; God’s voice is.

For example, if a door of opportunity opens, such as an attractive job offer, some conclude that it must be an invitation from God. If a promotion, transfer, leadership position or even a marriage proposal presents itself, some assume God must be behind it. They will pray, “Lord, close the door if this isn’t Your will!”

The truth is that not every open or closed door is a sign from God. The Word bears this out. Sometimes an open door leads to disaster and God does not close it. Read about Adam and Eve or David. Each of them paid a steep price for walking through a “door of opportunity.”

Likewise, if a door appears tightly shut, it doesn’t mean God does not want you to proceed. Consider the Israelites at the

edge of the promised land. We need to take our focus off the doors and put it back on God. We need to be experts at recognizing God's voice, not watching for open doors.

It can be easier to enter an open door than to develop a relationship with God. Some Christians seize whatever opportunities come along and wonder why God doesn't bless their choices. It is far wiser to listen to God.

Hearing God's Voice

There is no easy formula for recognizing God's voice. The key is the relationship. If you are married, think back to when you first married your wife. You loved her but you probably didn't know her very well.

But through the years, as you shared hardships and successes, you learned to understand each other. In the early days of your marriage, you probably missed many cues she sent your way—her tone of voice, her expression, her silence, her nervous manner. All of these clues might have been shouting volumes, but you missed them!

In time, though, your relationship with each other deepened. Now you know what every tone of voice means! Now you recognize the signs that she is hurt or frustrated. Now a sideways glance or a raised eyebrow tells you exactly what she is thinking.

All good relationships require both quality and quantity time. Your relationship with God is no different. Casual, careless time spent with God will produce a shallow Christian life. However, investing the effort to walk closely with God will lead to a deep and satisfying relationship.

How do you cultivate an intimate walk with God?

The first step is obvious: spend time in His Word. You have at your fingertips the sacred record of how God has related to

people throughout history. Read your Bible! Study it! Memorize it! Meditate on it by prayerfully pondering a scripture passage until God clarifies its meaning and applies it to your life. The best way to safeguard yourself from Satan's lies, the world's temptations or your own faulty logic is with God's revealed truth.

The second thing is as obvious as the first—pray. There is a world of difference, however, between saying prayers and communing with God.

Don't be satisfied with surface praying. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you talk with God at a deep level. Learn to listen when you pray. After all, prayer is meant to be a conversation, not a monologue.

Keep in mind that what God has to say is infinitely more important than what you have to say—and He already knows what you are going to say anyway. Yes, He wants to hear your heart cry, but His voice is your life. Listen for it and pay attention to what you hear.

Third, learn to recognize God's activity in your circumstances. He often speaks to us through the ordinary day's events, while we are driving or eating, but we tend to miss His message.

Recently, my 18-year-old son, Mike, discovered he has diabetes. I was shocked! As I sat next to his hospital bed seeking to comfort him, he excitedly shared with me all the ways God had been preparing him for that fateful announcement.

He told me God had been gently getting him ready all that week. He exclaimed, "Isn't it cool the way God works!" Certainly my son heard a plethora of voices during that tumultuous time, but I am so grateful he has learned to recognize God's voice in the midst of the commotion. In a moment of crisis, it made the difference.

The fourth way He guides us is through fellow believers. Wise Christians don't isolate themselves.

They trust God to speak to them through others. Tragically, some people have reacted in anger when God used a fellow church member to communicate His truth. I have seen men weep as they confessed that God spoke to them through their wives, but they refused to listen.

It is critical to develop meaningful relationships with other believers so we can hear what God is saying through them.

God has been speaking. He wants you to listen. Take time this week to pay close attention. You may be amazed at what you hear!

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