

“The Many Voices We Hear”

Dr. Les Hardin

Professor of New Testament

Johnson University Florida

We’re focusing our attention this week on the way God speaks to us. I’m working from two implicit assumptions—two fundamental beliefs that I’ll simply state here. First, God still speaks. Second, you are wired for sound. I was reading in Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* this morning and came across this quote, which I hadn’t seen before. “Jesus Christ has promised to be our ever-present Teacher and Guide. His voice is not hard to hear” (p. 10). Those of us in the Spirit are wired for sound. God is speaking, and it’s possible for us to listen and understand.

If God is speaking, then, how come so many people hear so many wildly different things from Him? I can say that I heard God’s call for me to go into ministry, and David Berkowitz (the “Son of Sam” killer) can say that he heard voices from God telling him to commit murder, but how do we know whether either one is telling the truth, that he’s *actually* hearing from God? God can’t be giving two distinctly different messages, can He? Perhaps that’s a bit ridiculous. A more common example might be a preacher who says to the congregation, “I hear God telling me that *this* is the direction the congregation should go.” But the Elders of the congregation (Biblically-approved leadership) is decidedly ready to go another direction. How do we know which of them is hearing God’s voice, headed in God’s direction? How is it that one TV preacher says that God spoke to him and prophesied that I would send him \$100, and on another channel, another preacher is claiming the same thing?

How is it that God—with all of his omniscience, majesty, and sovereignty—can give such wildly divergent messages? If God is speaking to us still, how did we get here? How did we wind up in this mess?

I’m not sure that God is speaking in all of these circumstances. I think there’s something fundamentally wrong with the way we go about “listening” to the voice of God. Make no mistake—I think God is speaking, and that I can hear what He has to say. But the way that many people (I included) are taught about this very subject leads to confusion, mainly because it’s lacking in one critical area, which I’d like to explore for a few moments. Here it is:

God is not the only one speaking.

That’s a hard statement to swallow. Because it implies that there are deceptive voices ready to lead me astray. But this is a naturally corollary to one of our original assumptions: it is possible to *hear the voice of God*. If our ears are open to hear, then it’s possible that God is not the only one we’re hearing. There’s a reason Jesus told us, “Take care what you listen to” (Mark 4:24). There’s a reason John told us to “test the spirits” ... for they not all be from God (1 John 4:1).

So in this essay I want to explore the many voices that are vying for our attention. If you can root these concepts in your mind, I think it will help guard you from a multitude of errors.

Who Is Speaking?

So, if I am wired for sound, what are the possible “voices” that I’ll hear? In any given “discernment” situation, it’s possible that you’ll hear one of these five voices.

1. *The Holy Spirit*

Let’s start with the positive. Yes, the Holy Spirit does speak to us. Exactly HOW and WHAT HE SAYS will become clearer as this unit progresses, and I don’t want to spoil the fun just yet! For now, it’s enough to say that the Spirit speaks. “Today, *if you hear his voice*, do not harden your hearts as our forefathers did in the desert” (Heb. 3:7, 15, 4:7). The author of Hebrews is clear that the God who spoke to his forefathers is still speaking, and that the only thing separating us from the fate of those we read about in the OT is whether we will respond well. As you listen for the voice of God, you just might hear Him. His Spirit may begin to speak to you.

2. *The Un-holy Spirit*

The Spirit of God isn’t the only one speaking, though. I don’t get very far into the first book before it becomes very clear that the Serpent also speaks (Gen. 3:1). He spoke to Eve. He spoke to God directly in Job 1. He spoke to Jesus during his desert temptation (Matt. 4). He even quoted Scripture there (Matt. 4:6). The demons speak to Jesus throughout the Gospels, and John tells me that the Dragon empowers the beast to utter blasphemies and lies on his behalf (Rev. 13:5). Jesus tells me that “when he [the Devil] lies, he speaks his native tongue” (John 8:44), which implies that he speaks well enough to have a primary language.

Satan’s purpose is deception—to accuse the saints (Rev. 12:10), to lead the whole world astray (Rev. 12:9) and to devour those who are weak (1 Peter 5:8). If his purpose is destruction, and he does this primarily by speaking, why are we not more cognizant that the voice we’re hearing may just be the voice of the Adversary?

Scarecrow: “You can’t do very much talking if you haven’t got a brain.”

Dorothy: “I know an awful lot of people without brains who do an awful lot of talking.”

3. *The Spirit of My Fears and Desires*

Sometimes the voices we hear are nothing more than the spirit of *what we want*. I’ve had more than one Christian young man come to me and tell me, “I think God is telling me that I’m supposed to marry Suzy.” (Recognize a pattern here? I mentioned a similar situation in the Discussion Starter for this week.) My next question is usually, “Has God told her yet?” (Usually some version of “I don’t know” is followed by a stern warning from me not to confuse testosterone with the voice of God!). I say all of this for the obvious reason: sometimes what we call “the voice of God” is nothing more than something we want *really, really bad!*

On the other end of this spectrum is the spirit of my fears. It’s the opposite side of the same coin. Perhaps God could be speaking, leading me to consider a particular area of ministry, or taking me in a new direction. If I step in and say, “I don’t think God is telling me to do that,” then it could be that I’m too afraid to take a risk, too scared to step out on faith and let God have His way. Sometimes these fears are good. They keep us safe, protected, and holy. But other times our fears get in the way and prevent us from hearing what God is trying to get across to us.

4. *The Spirit of My Wife's Meatloaf*

My wife can't make meatloaf. I'm not being rude or condescending here. She'll agree with me 100%. The first time she made meatloaf, she got the part of beef and the parts of oatmeal mixed up (I think it was something like two-thirds oats, one-third *other ingredients!*). We had a two-year-old Doberman-Rotweiler mix who wouldn't touch it. We've had to put a moratorium on meatloaf in our house. Kara doesn't fix meatloaf. Everyone is agreed. Everyone is happy.

How does that relate to hearing the voice of God? If you ate my wife's meatloaf, you'd hear voices too!

Cheeky, I suppose. What I'm really trying to get at is our *physiology*. Sometimes our physiology affects our ability to listen well. If you're feeling bad, it's very possible that you're not thinking clearly, and clear-headedness is one of the primary criteria for listening well. As we're training ministers, we tell them *never* to resign on Monday. Why? Because you're exhausted on Monday. Sunday's a high-stress work day, and Monday's not the day to resign. Usually some rest, and a day or so to reflect and think (and get more rest) will cure a preacher of the "voices" calling him to quit on Monday morning. It's the same reason we never let a widow make a decision to sell the house 48 hours after her husband's death. She feels bad, and that affects her decision. Just this past week, I got an e-mail around midnight that set me off in a tailspin of rage. I was angry at God for what He was doing to me, scared and nervous about what was going to happen. When I finally got to sleep, I woke up thinking differently ... because the day before I'd worked 16 straight hours. Turns out, I just needed some rest. Sometimes the voices we hear are the by-product of how we feel.

5. *The Spirit of the Times*

Each of us lives in a particular time and a particular place, and our upbringing and our environmental conditioning play a role in influencing our decisions. The voices that I hear, the decisions that I think are from God may, in fact, be the conditioning of my culture. It may be that I "hear" God calling me to another job, when in fact, the job I "feel" God is leading to pays more money and affords me a better lifestyle. I may be "hearing" God telling me that it's okay to have an abortion, but only because I grew up in a strongly Democratic, pro-choice home and that's the way I was conditioned to think. I may be hearing God say, "Go ahead and smoke, it's no big deal," but only because I grew up on a tobacco farm where I became comfortable with it. I met a lady at a national convention this past year who was surveying young women (grilling them, actually) on who they planned to vote for during the upcoming election and why. Women who indicated that they were planning to vote for Barack Obama were then berated by her, as she called them un-Christian and uncommitted to "what the Bible says." Frankly, it sickened me and made me sad. She's a product of her (Republican) culture, and she's convinced that God is calling her to do this. My North-American, democratic, self-involved cultural conditioning tells me that God will speak to me as an individual (because I have rights!) and that I need no confirmation from outside sources. But that's just not true. So we have to watch the influence that our culture has on our decision-making and our "listening" to the voice of God. (I know of many Nazi churchmen who thought they were doing God's will in places like Ravensbruck, Dachau, and Auschwitz.)

Conclusion:

God is speaking. But God isn't the *only* one speaking. Understanding the kinds of voices that are vying for our attention can help us be alert to the ones that aren't Godly, and help us tune in to the One that is.