

How Do We Listen to God?

Mark 4:1-25

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Last week, I was in Tulsa for my thirty year college reunion at Oral Roberts University. Now I know that people who have heard of Oral Roberts have a lot of opinions about him. Some people had problems with him. And, to be honest, he said and did some problematic things. But at ORU I got a great education, I grew spiritually and I made some lifelong friends. Oral believed God spoke to him and called him to found a university on "God's authority and the Holy Spirit." He cited what he believed God said to him in giving him this vision:

Raise up your students to hear My voice, to go where My light is seen dim, My voice is heard small, and My healing power is not known, even to the uttermost bounds of the earth. Their work will exceed yours, and in this I am well pleased.

Some people take the idea of God's speaking and guiding and, to hear them, you'd think God is always talking to them. Every idea that pops into their head is attributed to God. We need discernment to know when God is speaking and what God is really saying.

I admit I struggle with listening to God, hearing God's voice in the way some people seem to. We say that prayer is as much about listening as it is about talking. But what does that mean? Is Lily Tomlin on to something when she asks, "Why is it that when we speak to God we're said to be praying but when God speaks to us we're said to be schizophrenic?"

Dallas Willard wrote a book called *Hearing God*. He begins it by telling about his wife's grandmother, whom the family called "Mema." She was a woman of faith who had what Dallas calls "a richly interactive life with God." One Sunday after worship, the family was eating at Mema's house. Their church was making plans for a new sanctuary and that morning their pastor had shared the vision for increased ministry. He talked about how strongly he felt God's guidance in the way the congregation was going and

he testified that God had spoken to him about things that should be done. As the rest of the family chattered on, Mema seemed deep in thought. Finally she said quietly, "I wonder why God never speaks to me like that" (15-16).

Some of our ways of talking about God speaking and our hearing from God can shut out many sincere Christians and keep them from recognizing how God actually does speak to them. God speaks in many ways. If we give the impression that you can hear from God in only one way, we're limiting God and discouraging people.

And, hearing from God, in whatever way, is just one part of a life of loving fellowship with our Lord and his people. God's speaking to us is meant to become "an intelligent, freely cooperative relationship between mature people who love each other." Our goal is not just to hear God's voice, but to be mature people in a loving relationship with God (Willard, 31).

Scripture is one of the ways God speaks to us. And God speaks most fully and decisively in Jesus. So let's listen to some of Jesus' teaching.

Jesus' parables use objects, experiences, relationships and activities that were part of the everyday, ordinary life of the people listening to him. Through these familiar references, Jesus expressed truth about God and God's kingdom. One thing this tells us is that we can look for God's presence and listen for God's speaking in the everyday, ordinary and familiar stuff in our lives.

There is no chance thing through which God cannot speak—even the walk from the house to the garage that you have walked ten thousand times before, even the moments when you cannot believe there is a God who speaks at all anywhere. He speaks, I believe, and the words he speaks are incarnate in the flesh and blood of our selves and of our own footsore and sacred journeys. We cannot live our lives constantly looking back, listening back, lest we be turned into pillars of longing and regret, but to live without listening at all is to live deaf to the fullness of the music. Sometimes we avoid listening for fear of what we may hear, sometimes for fear that we may hear nothing at all

but the empty rattle of our own feet on the pavement. But ...“be not afraid ... for lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” He says he is with us on our journeys. He says he has been with us since our journeys began. Listen for him. Listen to the sweet and bitter airs of your present and your past for the sound of him. (Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* 77-78)

Like most of Jesus’ parables, this one about the sower and the soils tells us something about the kingdom of God—its nature, how it’s making its appearance in the world and how we are to live in it.

In his explanation to the disciples, Jesus says, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you.” They are insiders. They are in on the kingdom of God, God’s heavenly rule breaking through on earth in Jesus. They’re part of the kingdom’s mission and are entrusted with its message. That’s part of what discipleship is about. We need to be called and committed to follow Jesus, not just to interpret the parables but to be part of the mysterious working of God’s kingdom. We need faith to hear what God is saying.

As disciples are insiders, there are also outsiders who don’t see Jesus as the One bringing God’s kingdom. Jesus speaks to them in parables so that their blindness and deafness will be revealed. Jesus doesn’t intend to shut out certain people, but he knows that without careful, attentive listening people won’t perceive him correctly. He repeats, “Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention!” (vv. 9, 23 CEB). He says, “Take care what you listen to” (v. 24 NASB). And Mark concludes, “He spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it” (v. 33).

So the parables don’t always make the truth clear. Sometimes they wrap it up so you have to seek it and get further help from Jesus to understand it. The disciples needed Jesus to help them understand what he was saying. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus is present to teach us and help us understand and respond.

In the parable of the Sower and the Soils, Jesus is talking about what’s happening in his ministry. As he spreads the word, the message, the gospel of the kingdom, he finds people responding in various ways.

The image Jesus uses here was very common in ancient Israel. A farmer planted by walking through the field, scattering seed by hand. And some seed fell on the path where the birds snatched it up. Some fell on rocky soil where it sprouted quickly, but when the sun came up, the plants withered because they didn't have roots. Some fell among thorns that choked the young plants. And some seed fell on good ground where it grew and yielded a crop—30, 60 or 100 times what was sown. A harvest ten times what was planted was considered great at that time. Jesus is indicating an abundant harvest.

Jesus explains to his disciples that the sower sows the word. That's what Jesus was doing. He was spreading the message of God's kingdom. He still is. And some people's hearts are hard. The message doesn't get into them and Satan quickly snatches it away.

Some people hear the word gladly, but they're shallow. They quickly fall away or stumble (are scandalized) when trouble or persecution comes.

Others hear the word, but the message and their living it out get choked by the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and desires for other things.

Finally, some hearts are like good soil. These people hear and respond. The word grows in them. They become people of the kingdom and bear the kingdom's fruit, helping sow more seed and making more disciples.

We all experience these various ways of hearing in our lives. We sometimes listen only with our ears, like in much polite conversation. But we don't remember much of what was said. It goes in one ear and out the other. Sometimes we listen with our minds only. Maybe we hear a great speaker and we're impressed with what is said, but we don't act on it. It's just something to think about or talk about. Sometimes we hear with intentions of following up. Maybe we hear an appeal on TV to feed hungry children or something. We intend to write a check, but then the phone rings or we see our overdraft or any of a number of things distracts us.

But there are times when we hear with all we've got and we respond, we act. A tornado warning on TV—it's coming right through town. A phone call telling us we'd better come to the emergency room. You are suddenly

listening intently. Everything about you is involved in hearing and responding.

When I was in grade school I listened to KCMO radio out of Kansas City. They once had a "Famous Person Contest." You sent in your name and address and if you heard your name on the air, you had a certain number of minutes to call in. As a now famous person you won some prizes and got your name in a drawing to win a trip or something.

I entered the contest. And one morning as I was getting up (it was summer so I didn't have to go to school), I heard the Famous Person jingle on the radio. I was listening. And then I heard this line in the jingle: "Get it on, John Breon in Appleton City." I rushed to the phone and dialed the number. It was busy. While I was waiting to call again, a friend down the street called to say they'd heard my name and wanted to make sure I'd heard. About that time, the doorbell rang and another friend stopped by to make sure I'd heard.

I had heard and I responded. I finally got through and told the DJ who I was. He told me what I had won: a poster, a tee-shirt and some gift certificates.

A few days later, I heard the same jingle with my name in it again. So I called again. The DJ explained that they did three names at a time and kept playing it till everyone called in. Over the next few days I heard the jingle some more, but practically ignored it. I have no idea what the other two names were that were called along with mine. I wasn't listening for them.

When Jesus talks about hearing the word, accepting it and producing a crop, he's talking about listening like when your name is on the radio and you need to call in to win. Listening like you would to a tornado warning. Listening like you would in a conversation with someone who means the world to you. We listen to Jesus with all we have. We respond to Jesus with all we are.

Lloyd Ogilvie has been a mentor of mine, though I never met him. I've been mentored by his books. In *You Can Pray with Power*, he writes that we don't measure success in prayer by how much we get from God, but how much of God gets into our daily circumstances and relationships. Prayer is not trying to convince God to give us what we want, but allowing the Lord

to convince us of what we need and he is ready to give. What we desire directs our energy and sets our priorities. So God wants to shape our desires as he guides our prayers. Prolonged time with the Lord reorients our desires around God's desires for us.

"If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me" (Robert Murray M'Cheyne). Profound prayer is listening in on our Lord's prayers for us and then praying after Him what He has modeled for us to pray. Prayer is not getting the Lord's attention, but allowing Him to lead us in praying for what He is more ready to give than we may be to ask. (25-26)

So, how do we listen? We listen in prayer of course. We ask God to speak and we get quiet and listen. Maybe ideas will come or nudges in a certain direction. Whatever we believe God speaks to us is conditioned by our experience and ways of thinking. It's relative, it's not on a par with Scripture, and it's always subject to evaluation by Scripture. So we listen to Scripture and believe God speaks to us there. We read big chunks of it and memorize parts of it. Reading devotional or theological works is another way to hear from God. I think I sometimes hear from God in an ongoing way. As I go through daily activities, ideas come or I believe God speaks in what we sometimes call "self-talk"—that running commentary going on in my mind. Bob Tuttle says God speaks to him by giving "insights that are bigger than I am." That is, thinking of things we couldn't have come up with on our own. We also hear from God through other Christians. The Body of Christ has greater resources for understanding the mind of Christ than an individual has. We don't pick and choose from these ways of hearing. We put them all together as part of our relationship with God, part of our "richly interactive life with God."

This grows like any healthy relationship grows. We are getting to know a friend.

There will be beginning days when you think that perhaps it is just the gardener you hear. But the longer you walk together the more certain you are that the whisper you hear is His voice, that the touch on your shoulder is His touch, that the footsteps beside you are the coming of His feet. (Bob Benson, *Something's Going on Here* 140).

God is speaking. God is calling and inviting you into a relationship and to grow in that relationship with God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.