

What every Christian needs to grow: Learning to listen; how God speaks to you

Message for April 17, 2016 by Bruce Fraser

Children's Message: Mark 4:1-10, disciples need Jesus to explain the parable to them.

Play *Charades* with the children. I can act out, or one of them can, the title of some nursery rhymes. Have fun!

The point: sometimes it's hard to figure out what the person is trying to tell us. God can seem like that at times, too. That's why we need to make time to be with God, to read the Bible, to pray, and to be open to whatever God may be telling us.

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1) Prayer means both talking and listening

Galatians 4:4-6, New Living Translation:

When the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. And because you ... have become his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, and now you can call God your dear Father.

God adopts us as his own children; we call God our Father. This is the key of our relationship with God.

About twenty years ago, back in Prince Edward County where we used to live, there was some controversy about the deer hunt. The farmers were concerned about the deer eating so much of the harvest, plus trampling down what plants they didn't eat. On the other side, some people were concerned that the deer population was going to be wiped out. Plus there was the usual argument that it's inhumane to kill such dear little creatures.

There was a flurry of letters to the editor in the newspaper. Speeches were made. Motions were made at Town Council. One afternoon a woman phoned me to ask for my support in this campaign. She was passionate over this issue. She went on talking about how horrible hunting was, how the deer were part of God's creation, how the churches must speak out on this issue. She went on and on like this. About five minutes into the phone call, our daughter Agnes came into the study (I worked at home) to ask me something. She saw that I was on

the phone and sat and waited patiently. After a couple of minutes, she could see that I wasn't talking, so she said, "What are you doing?"

"I'm listening to someone on the phone," I replied. She looked at me funny and said, "No you're not; there's no one there." So I gave her the phone and we traded places. Agnes listened to this woman talk for a minute, believed me, and gave the phone back. I asked her what it was she had come to see me about. She told me, and we talked about it for a bit. She left, and I picked up the phone again. The woman was still talking a mile a minute, totally unaware that no one had been listening to her.

I put her on the speaker phone so that I could work while she talked. Finally at the 30 minute mark, I interrupted her, "Excuse me; I have to go now."

During that entire time, she never once asked what I thought; in fact, she never even paused to let me speak. That woman did not have a relationship with me. She wasn't interested in me at all.

I think it's fair to say that when our prayers are like that, when it's just "I, I, I," that it's not really prayer at all. Sometimes when I pray I feel like I'm talking to a brick wall. Maybe that's because I've been treating God like a brick wall; never letting him get a chance to respond, never stopping to listen.

2) How does God speak?

One of the basic principles of the Bible is that God communicates with people. Over and over again — *hundreds* of times — we read phrases like:

- "God said..."
- "The angel said..."
- "The Holy Spirit told them..."
- "The Lord appeared to him in a dream..."
- "The Lord gave me a vision..."

Does God still communicate with people today? I believe the answer is a definite "Yes!"

Why do I say this? Very simple. God hasn't changed since then.

Hebrews 13:8, New Revised Standard Version:
Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

God's love for people hasn't changed. God still loves you and me just as much as he loved the

people in Bible times. God wants to have a relationship with you just as much as he did with the people of the Bible.

So how *does* God communicate with people today?

a) **The Bible**

I can hear someone saying, “What? The Bible was God’s message a couple of thousand years ago. I thought you were talking about God communicating *today*.”

You’re exactly right. But the Bible *is* God’s message for us still today. It is timeless in its truth and principles, in its description of God’s character and works.

But the Bible is even more than a textbook on God. Because it is God’s message to us, it has power unlike any other book.

Hebrews 4:12, New Living Translation:
For the word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are.

If you’re thinking of getting married, see what the Bible says about what marriage should be like, and the kind of person who will make a good partner. If you’re deciding what to do with your money, check first to see what the Word of God says about treasures.

Let God’s Word cut through your reasons and excuses, and let it speak directly to your heart. You will find that God still communicates powerfully today through the Bible.

b) **The Holy Spirit**

Jesus promised the disciples (and us too, I believe),

John 14:26, Today’s English Version:
“The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you.”

When we ask Jesus Christ to come into our lives, he does that in the person of the Holy Spirit. God communicates to us through the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would teach us. God is leading us by the Holy Spirit. How?

The Holy Spirit lives and works inside of us. What we experience may be an internal impression or nudge. Yes, sometimes God does speak through an audible voice; but that seems to be less common. Sometimes it’s a sense that we ought to do something we would not normally do. Or it may be a conviction that we must stop what we had in mind, because there is something wrong.

Obviously, this is much less clear than the written Word. It’s easy to get confused: when is something my own idea, the Holy Spirit prompting me, or a temptation from the devil?

3) **Four ways to test whether the urge is from God**

a) **Will it produce good fruit or bad?**

Galatians 5:22-25, New Living Translation:
When the Holy Spirit controls our lives, he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Here there is no conflict with the law.

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. If we are living now by the Holy Spirit, let us follow the Holy Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives.

Will this make me a more loving person? More joyful? Will it lead to peace and reconciliation, or just make conflict even worse? You can go through each of the fruit of the Spirit like that. The overall question is: am I becoming more like Jesus?

b) **We can be sure that God will not contradict himself**

The Holy Spirit will never tell you to do something that the Bible clearly tells you is wrong. Example: another beautiful woman becomes one of the people I rub shoulders with from week to week. I conclude, “God brought this woman and me together so that I can have an affair with her. Thank-you, Lord!” The Bible plainly says that adultery is wrong, and that’s that.

c) **The Holy Spirit may convict, but never condemn**

The Holy Spirit may make you feel uncomfortable by bringing to your attention parts of your life

where you have been disobeying the Lord. Maybe you figured it was “just a little thing, nothing important.” The Bible calls this “convicting you of sin” [John 16:8]. Remember: God is holy, and now that God is living in you, anything that is sinful must be cleaned out.

But “convict” is not the same as “condemn.” There is a difference between “What you did is wrong” and “Therefore you are a loser, and God is disgusted with you.” The first is conviction, and the second in condemnation. The Holy Spirit pulls us back to God; but if you feel like hiding from God, that’s condemnation, and that’s *not* from the Holy Spirit.

d) Seek confirmation from other mature believers

Proverbs 12:15, New Living Translation:
Fools think they need no advice, but the wise listen to others.

This simple step can save a lot of heartache from following rash impulses.

4) Listen Obediently

Some people go through religious rituals like reading the Bible, but have no intention of applying what was said or of changing their behaviour. I had an experience of this one time when I preached on what Jesus says about worry. Afterwards one woman laughed as she said to me, “You sure had the right topic for me. I always worry about everything.” But I could tell by the way she made a joke out of it, that nothing was going to change for her. It had been an entertaining talk, nothing more.

When God is speaking to you—whether through the Bible, through the Holy Spirit, or some other way—and you know this message is coming from God, you need to make a choice: “Am I going to listen and obey? Or will I ignore God and hope this feeling will go away and leave me in peace?”

But rejecting God never brings peace in our lives. The only way is to listen, to trust, and to obey. That’s what prayer is all about — living out our relationship with God.

Let me give you an example of someone obediently following God’s direction. John Wesley was the

leader of the Methodist movement within the Church of England (it didn’t become a separate denomination until after his death). His unorthodox methods were considered disgraceful by the church leaders, however, and most churches refused to let him speak. Nevertheless, he believed God was calling him to tell the good news of Jesus Christ to the world, and nothing would stop him.

A page in John Wesley’s journal reads thus:

May 5, Sunday A.M. —Preached in St. Ann’s; was asked not to come back anymore.

May 5, Sunday P.M. —Preached at St. John’s; deacons said, “Get out and stay out.”

May 12, Sunday A.M. —Preached at St. Jude’s; can’t go back there either.

May 12, Sunday P.M. —Preached at St. George’s; kicked out again.

May 19, Sunday A.M. — Preached at St. Somebody Else’s; deacons called special meeting and said I couldn’t return.

May 19, Sunday P.M. —Preached on the street; kicked off the street.

May 26, Sunday A.M. —Preached out in a meadow; chased out of meadow when a bull was turned loose during the service.

June 2, Sunday A.M. —Preached out at the edge of town; kicked off the highway.

June 2, Sunday P.M. —Afternoon service, preached in the pasture; 10,000 people came.

Wesley would rather face rejection from others, than he himself reject God. His relationship with God gave him the strength to keep going.

Next Steps:

- When you read the Bible, ask yourself “What is God saying to me through this? How can I live out the truth I find here?”
- When you pray, include time to be quiet, to allow God to have input into your life.
- When you believe God has given you an idea, follow and obey. (Although you might go through the checklist first.)