

Hearing God: Learning to Listen to the Spirit of God
A Four Week Summer Session for All
 By Brad Bailey

Session Three
Discerning God's Voice

Welcome / OPENNING PRAYER

Introduction

This evening we are going to begin with **recapturing a couple of the central truths in understanding** how we hear from God...and **then explore the role of discernment** in hearing God's voice.

God is Spirit, and as such, God "speaks" both through and beyond the boundaries of our physical and rational nature. Hearing God involves developing an inner dialogue between our spirit and the Spirit of God.

Let's take a moment to consider more about what this implies about hearing God. When we speak of understanding that is beyond our rational nature...we are speaking about that which transcends our complete understanding. And some of us really like understanding.

Some of us are very rational oriented. Some of us **like the objective reality... $2 + 2 = 4$.** This can make the nature of what is not material and measurable less comfortable to know how to relate to. We may feel we are in conflict with relating to spiritual truth... or to the nature of faith.

But we do well to **stand back and realize...what is true and real is never defined by just a physical measurement.**

Our entire lives are lived out of what we understand physically as well as relationally and intuitively and spiritually. As such, knowing someone involves relating on a personal level. If you ask me to tell you about my wife...listing the names of the chemical compounds that she is made of would be a limited level of knowing her to say the least. The truth is that there is a dimension of reality that is not simply material in nature. And there is a dimension of knowing that is relational in nature.

We are relating to that which is not less than material...but more than material.

As it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"-- but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. - 1 Corinthians 2:9-10

So it can be important to recognize....

Our faith in God embraces the gift of rational understanding... but also that reality is larger than our understanding.

God inhabits a larger reality ... a vastly larger reality. As such, what I am embracing is that I am a finite creature... and what is revealed from the Infinite to my finite nature will often be beyond my understanding. Embracing that we are finite creatures ... and the limits of our rational understanding ...is actually a very rational belief.

I would add that there can be a tendency to presume that if our human nature is involved in a process ...then it can't then it cannot possibly bear the nature of God. We presume that the infinite cannot be heard in the finite.

But that is precisely what I both believe and experience. I believe that God has come and engaged humanity.... He has spoken the truth that is needed through human history and language... while not being bound and contained by them.

And all of this can help us appreciate that there is an element of that which is not bound within the confines of what we can fully understand...or what we often consider simple objective truth.

As I expressed from the start of this class....I believe that...we all hear God. The basis of this class is my confidence in that belief.

And I **also said** that I believe that the nature of hearing God is one in which we can tend to be **too definitive** or **too dismissive**.

When it comes to "hearing God"...some of us may embrace everything they hear as God inspired.... while others may feel stuck in uncertainty. This is often a reflection of the "the way we are wired"... whether we're more left-brain or right-brain oriented ... more intuitive or analytical.

If hearing God involves listening to what is outside of our natural thoughts and ideas...then it may be natural that those who are more intuitive may be too open to their own intuition...and those who are more analytical may find their thoughts too crowded in the analysis of thoughts...and too closed to trusting what God is actually imparting. And for many of us... we may experience both parts of that conflict at different times.

The point is that

We need discernment.

The idea of **discernment might sound like a word of concern... of caution**. It may sound **even negative...** but in truth is a gift in hearing God. But discernment is **a word of guidance... helping guide us to an end**. So I want to **briefly consider** the **SPIRIT of discernment...**and then some **PROVISIONS for discernment**.

1. Discernment does not reflect a need that arises from God's limitations... but rather from our limitations.

As Paul describes in the Biblical Book of First Corinthians...

"...we know in part and we prophecy in part..." - 1 Cor 13:9

That's a rather simple truth....but it's not always easy to live out of that truth. It affirms that we do know some part of the larger truth around us...God makes a lot known to us. But it also understands that we don't presume to know more than we do.

We may have to accept that God speaks on a "need to know" basis.

2. Discernment develops as we mature in knowing God and His will.

We are also not yet fully redeemed from a fallen state ... we and the world are not operating in full harmony yet with all that is true and good. We grow as we develop more understanding about God and his will and purposes.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.

- Romans 12:2

What is the clear assumption? That maturity of understanding takes time to develop. Our old natural way of thinking needs to be transformed in alignment with God's will.

Now, the Apostle Paul spoke of our need to value the gifts of the Spirit... but for the right reasons and in the right ways. He said we should seek the spiritual gifts but with a priority of serving the good of others...of building up the whole body of Christ.

And he said we should seek the gifts of prophecy...but with discernment.

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil. - 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22

This speaks something vital into the spirit of discernment.

Discernment **doesn't flow from contempt**... from simply being a **sideline critic**... but **rather it flows from those who are focused on what is good.**

We are to be watchmen... not watchdogs.

3. Discernment is not about becoming watchdogs... but rather watchmen... whose larger perspective serves to assess what we perceive.

Watchdogs are sitting behind fences... growling... to keep people from even trying to come close.

If you explore the internet...you can discover that there are **some little corners** that may **think they are watchmen... but they're watchdogs**... who clearly **think they are being faithful** because their job is to just **bark at everything**. They seem to embrace barking as if it's a virtue in itself. And they often reflect the type of contempt Paul says we should NOT have.

They find an error in something someone wrote or said... then play "**guilty by association**" first they denounce the person... everything they believe... everyone who has ever referred to them... then ultimately everyone who could be categorically associated with them. [1a]

They flow from a **spirit of contempt** that simply keeps everything out of the fence.

Watchmen... by contrast... have a position of perspective. They are not on the offensive against anything... but rather understand the value of having a higher perspective from which to see best.

Discernment is the gift of having a larger perspective of assessing what we perceive.

We all know that we tend to have thoughts that reflect what we already think is true,,, what we want to believe....so we need to get outside our own bias. We need to embrace a wider perspective.

"In the Vineyard, we deeply value hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit for ourselves — it's even one of our core values. We're not about blindly following the "anointed man of God", we're committed to empowering everyone to hear for themselves and to testing what we hear. We do not blindly accept prophecy, prediction, and critique without seeking the wisdom of Jesus for ourselves." - Parker Frey [1b]

4. Discernment is not a "checklist" but rather a natural process of staying aligned with familiar reference points.

So as we consider discernment...I don't want to presume there is a checklist....but rather that there are internal points if familiarity.

Spiritual reference points are like buoys or lights that guide an ocean vessel by identifying what is "outside" the path.

One needs to be sure they avoid hitting land... and when they approach shorelines and enter harbors... there are markers. There are buoys or lights that guide an ocean vessel by identifying what is "outside" the path. When there's plenty of daylight and visibility ...they don't have to give much attention... it's easy to steer. But amidst foggy conditions, or at night, they need to look for the lights affixed to reference point... the lighthouse. the lights attached to the buoys for the very purpose of guidance. And they use those points of reference. The more familiar they become with the reference points... the more relaxed they can be. In the same way, we don't need to run every thought through a checklist.... but we do need to become familiar with the reference points and be sure they serve as a guide.

So let me quickly identify what those reference points are. They are already familiar to most ...but worth quickly acknowledging.

Reference Points for Discerning God's Voice

Jesus was clear, that the Spirit.... who would now live with us and in us...would be a source of confirming his identity and continuing his work. [2]

Jesus explained to his disciples...

"When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me." - John 15:26

The Holy Spirit comes to affirm and fulfill what Christ began.

1. The Character of Christ (The manifesting of Christ's love and purpose)

One of the New Testament passage that speaks of testing spiritual sources as to whether they are from God... we discover the verse that sums up the whole book is this....

And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. - 1 John 3:23

To believe in Christ... as we noted... but also to love one another.

The work of Christ had the profound goal of bringing unity in Christ... not simply avoiding all conflict... but calling us to transcend the secondary differences that try to define us and divide us...by embracing our ultimate unity in Christ. We are to find the love that is uniquely centered in Christ.

He is not speaking of a feeling...but a way of relating. This is what is made so clear in what Paul writes about the fruit of the Spirit.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. - Galatians 5:22-23

Whatever we sense from God will generally reflect these qualities...and if not...we should be cautious. [3]

As spiritual beings, we will develop our own our own thoughts.... which may reflect good sense or may be distorted. We can be influenced by the spiritual enemy who has held rule over human life and creation. That enemy operates by deception (John 8:44) for the sake of destruction of all which glorifies God.

We know that the central difference between what God is doing and what the enemy seeks to do

Satan always condemns. As Jesus said,

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." - John 10:10

The enemy's purpose is to "steal, to kill, and to destroy." So if we hear that which seeks to dissuade and divert and destroy... we shouldn't be entirely surprised...and we should denounce it. God will speak that which may **convict...but never condemn**. Conviction is an invitation to overcome what lies between us. Condemnation is that which declares that we are sentenced and condemned to separation... placed behind bars.

So we do well to become familiar with the nature of the Spirit's fruit... what we hear... the fruit of what you

2. The Word of Christ (Consistency with the Scriptures... as Christ attested to.)

The Spirit has spoken in the inspiring process by which the Scriptures.. the Bible...has come to be. As we read from the Apostle Paul...

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. - 2 Timothy 3:16-17

They are to serve as the objective source for guiding and governing our lives.

Christ himself turned to the Scriptures to affirm that who he was and what he was doing was actually from God.

- To Satan who contended for his identity and allegiance in the Wilderness.
- To those who challenged his fulfillment of the Law.
- To those confused by his death and resurrection

What becomes clear...is that in every case... those he is engaging are also familiar with Scripture... but they were wrong in their understanding. So the point about being "consistent with Scripture" is one which goes beyond someone just throwing a passage that appears to conflict with what we may hear. Being consistent with the Word of Christ involves a healthy understanding of what they intend... of what they are actually intending to communicate.

3. The Community of Christ (Confirmation from others)

When some of the first leaders of the church were seeking to know what religious requirements to place upon the Gentiles... they spoke of their collective conscious.

"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements..." - Acts 15:28

They sensed God's leading.... but also say "And good to us"... referring to their collective wisdom and discernment. Now... we can assume that they all shared a very solid commitment to the mission of God. We may not always have people who share the same general commitment ...but to the degree we do...we should expect and seek collective discernment. [4]

4. Our Spirit: We will sense it is true and fitting in our spirit.

Romans 8:16 - "The Spirit Himself testifies and confirms together with our spirit [assuring us] that we [believers] are children of God." (AMP)

Some refer to this as a "convincing inner witness" ... your spirit will know that the Holy Spirit is at work upon your own spirit... with an inner testimony of God's truth.

5. Fulfillment (if applicable): If what we “hear” involves a potential word to another or circumstances to unfold... we should welcome the potential confirmation.

If we sense God may be speaking a word to another person... we can freely share it and allow them to discern it's merits or meaning.

Embrace the freedom to test what we sense ...knowing that we ourselves are only being tested to be faithful in listening and sharing.

Time to Listen

God's Speaking Against the Enemy of Our Souls

The Bible is quite clear that there is a real spiritual enemy. Quite different from the cartoon character we might easily dismiss r... it speaks of evil as embodied in the unseen spiritual realm ...with very real and personal intent to redirect us from God ...or destroy us. [5]

Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.- 1 Peter 5:8 (NLT2)

When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” - John 8:44

“The key to overcoming the activity and influence of evil in your life and your world, of course, is to recognize it. When you expose it to the light of Christ, evil loses its power.”- Carey Nieuwhof [6]

As Jesus launched into his ministry... that enemy came to tempt him in the wilderness. As his disciple Peter became vain in his claims of loyalty, Jesus said that Satan was coming to sift him. (Luke 22:31)

Let me share a few things that Satan wants to do to your life. As I share them, I want each of us to identify one that stands out... one that we sense vulnerability to. And then we will have some time to seek how God may speak to that.

Five Things the Devil Wants for Your Life

1. For you to doubt God (by unresolved expectation or disappointment)
2. For you to be controlled by fear (of failure, rejection, shame, etc)
3. For you to avoid your family in God (by conflict, disappointment, self-isolation)
4. For you to be led away from Jesus (by quiet allegiance to someone or something else)
5. For you to quit (whether overtly or in quiet disengagement)

Seeking God's Heart and Light

The Book of James invites us to make a request to God for the wisdom we need.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you” - James 1:5

God wants us to ask for his wisdom and will generously give it to us.

Following a guided time of slowing down and centering ourselves in God's presence, time is given to simply ask: “God what do you want me to seek you about? What do you want to show me?” Then wait and listen for what God may bring to your mind and heart. When God brings something to your mind and heart, begin asking him to show you more...to speak to you.

Once the time of prayer is completed, write down on paper or in your smartphone... what He showed you.

Between sessions as able and led:

- Begin to create daily time of stopping and becoming present to God. See Him alongside you (He is Immanuel, God with you), and staying tuned to spontaneity all day long. The Bible calls this abiding in Christ (see John 15:4) or “praying without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17).
- Review and reflect on the points from Session One.
- Explore more from potential “Additional Resources.”

Additional Resources:

To speak about how we relate to and hear from God involves some degree of diversity in experience and style. As such, each of the following offer some valuable but different insights.

Dallas Willard - [Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God](#)

Dallas was a Professor of Philosophy at USC whose writing on Christian spirituality have had perhaps the widest and deepest impact in the past century. (He passed onwards from this life in 2013.) His book *The Divine Conspiracy* restored an understanding of what it meant to follow the way of Jesus in spiritual life and practice. He also became a partner in the Vineyard movement and personal influence. This earlier work on “Hearing God” shares the qualities of thinking deeply about what life with God involves. If one can set aside expectations of a simple “three step” manual for hearing God...and welcome a voice that speaks from deep relationship, this will serve your soul.

Mark Virkler - [4 Keys to Hearing God - You Can Hear God's Voice!](#)

Mark Virkler has been teaching at large for decades and helped multitudes in hearing God. I have personally valued his insights and general encouragement but would also note that his “process” may be over-simplified / over-stated, some use of Scripture is “bent” in making a point, and I would not endorse some of the “prophetic” ministries he aligns with. However, he has a valuable journey and process to share. This particular resource is the most succinct and is available for free across downloadable videos. His parallel work “Dialogue with God” is described as the more “right brain” (less informational) version of similar material.

Getting to Know God's Voice: Discover the Holy Spirit in Your Everyday Life (A 31-Day Interactive Journey) by Jenny Randle

I have not read this work but from what I have read of it, it would appear to be among the most practical and helpful works on hearing God, that is developed into a 31 day journey... combining short studies and experiences.

Notes:

1a. Some threads within western church have become so afraid of the subjective...that they denounce all that is "spiritual" in nature... and often by a rather foolish "guilty by association" judgment. Some have said that there are other religious groups or "New Age" groups that practice certain forms of spiritual life...and therefore any similar practices must be denounced. There are two problems I want us to recognize in that process. First, almost every aspect has some common human parallel... we have beliefs, we study Scriptures, we gather, we seek to love other people, we pray, and seek to center ourselves in God. This kind of guilt by association just isn't logical. Logically, we should understand there will always be some common elements of practice. Centering or quieting our souls before the Lord is clearly taught and demonstrated by King David in the Psalms as he states, "My soul waits in silence for God only" (Ps. 62:1,5). We don't avoid such practice just because others counterfeit it. Our acceptance of a truth is not based on whether or not a counterfeit group has yet picked it up. Our concerns on being distinct SHOULD lie in the identity and nature of who we seek to worship and draw upon. In this, it is vital that we stay centered in the one true God...revealed in the living testimony of Scripture. ...and we accept what is there.

Second, we should recognize that it is not honoring to God to simply denounce what is "spiritual" in nature simply because it is spiritual. When the "guilty by association" simply says that the Bible teaches us that Satan can deceive us... of course that is true ...but to that truth does not lead to dismissing what is spiritual in nature but rather the process of discerning what is of God.

1b. Parker Frey, Oxford Vineyard - A Dangerous Approach To Prayer - ([here](#))

2. Arguably, one could consider that the very first point of discernment is that of honoring that Christ has come in the flesh. We should note that the Apostle John wrote...

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, -1 John 4:1-2

I believe that John did not mean what we hear must have an overt reference to Christ at all but rather that we should not listen to those who claim God is stating that Christ did not come in the flesh.

3. Today, in western Christian culture, there is often an unspoken message that knowledge equals maturity, To this the Apostle Paul, himself highly educated, warns us that "knowledge puffs up; love builds up." (1 Cor, 8:1 leading into discussion about food sacrificed to idols.)

If we want to define spiritual maturity, it can help to consider what the enemy seeks to develop in us.... and what the Spirit of God seeks to develop in us.

In Galatians 5:19-21, Paul lists the characteristics of people whose lives are under the influence of evil: "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like."

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. - Galatians 5:22-23

These two lists provide a great opportunity to discerning the various influences in our life. They provide several dynamics to pray against....and several to pray for.

4. This idea of confirmation is also noted in 1 Corinthians 14:29, "Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said."

5. There is nothing God may not speak to... if it serves what is good and glorifying. However, we are wise to know that He will contend for our hearts above all....and as such... contend with the powers that seek to deceive, define and dominate us.

As C.S. Lewis says in the Screwtape Letters, “the safest road to hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”

Two good books on the strategies of evil:

C.S. Lewis - The [Screwtape Letters](#)

Thomas Brook’s [Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices](#)

6. From Satan’s 5 Favorite Strategies: Church Leader Edition - By Carey Nieuwhof [here](#)

Some Different Forms of Prayer for Seeking to Hear God

Valuing Space From the Urgent for the Center

Slow down... dial down. There will likely be responsibilities or worries that may vie for importance and immediacy. Recognize that they are not the center of who you are and what life is.... and allow yourself to sense the value of being still from the usual swirl in order to gain perspective on what matters most...and your presence apart from your productivity.

Renounce the false power that is at work in urgency.... pride....hate... greed....and lust

General life discerning listening questions:

- What are we noticing... of God's movement at this difficult time?
- What are we learning... as we reflect on how God seems to be moving?
- What might let go of or allow to die... so that we may enter a new future with God?.

Getting started sharing with God....

- Tell God about your day, what went well, what didn't
- Tell God something that makes you feel worried and why
- Show or tell God something you are proud of
- Tell or show God something you are thankful for
- Tell God about a time when you felt really alone
- Tell God about something that makes you feel loved
- Jesus is there anything today that we could thank you for? Why?
- Is there anything that we need to say sorry for?
- Is there anyone you want us to pray for?
- Are there any burdens or sadness we are carrying that you want to lift for us? Ask Jesus
- where it came from, what it is, and if he would please remove it.
- Jesus, do you have any promises or blessings for me before I go to sleep?

How He Sees You - Ask the Lord to tell you what He calls you or how He sees you. Then wait on Him to answer. It can come in an immediate response or days or weeks of time with God. It will come.

Seek a focus for praying throughout the coming week.

There are multiple occasions in Scripture when “David inquired of the Lord” and “the Lord answered him.” This happened a lot when David was contemplating going to war against his enemies. He consistently asked

God if he should, then waited for God to tell him how to do it. And it wasn't always the same way every time. God would give different instructions depending on the situation.

Ask the Lord to help you choose something or someone during the coming week. Listen for what or who comes to mind. When it seems clear and fitting. Write it down....and make it a reminder in whatever form of calendar or reminders you may have. Then seek to pray every day for that thing or person... asking God to show you anything He may desire...and write down anything you sense he may be communicating. By praying for a week... it is an opportunity to slow down and listen... to get beyond the usual "quick" approach to prayer... and to write / journal...