

NO VOICES, JUST OBEDIENCE

As they say, “talk is cheap.” Rather than “just talking a good game, “saying the right words,” I need to “walk my talk” living out in daily life what I say I believe, and so do you.

Our text for today makes this very clear. These are meddlesome and very scary words that teach us that it is not those who profess a commitment to Jesus ONLY in words who will enter the kingdom of heaven. But, rather, it is those who “walk the talk,” those who obey the commandments of God.

Matthew 7: 21: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

But how does one know the “will of God?” Does God actually reveal His will by speaking in audible voices?

The Bible actually contains some incredible stories where God spoke to human beings in an audible voice. One of those amazing stories is about God speaking to Moses in the burning bush, as recorded in chapter 3 of the book of Exodus.

Although I will soon suggest that Christians should not sit around waiting for God to speak to them in audible voices, there is a very important lesson to be gleaned from what God said to Moses

Exodus 3: 7, 8, 10: Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters, I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . . So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

Note that God appears to be saying two different things. God first says “I HAVE come down” to deliver the Israelites from the Egyptians.” But God then goes on to say that “I WILL SEND YOU [Moses] to bring them out of that land.”

So, this is ultimately God’s work. But God has chosen Moses to do that work on God’s behalf. This points to the truth that God has chosen to accomplish his redemptive purposes on earth by “partnering” with his followers who have responded to God’s call to be “God’s hands and feet in our world.” That is an important lesson for all of us.

My second observation about this experience that Moses had is that there was no uncertainty or ambiguity about what God was calling Moses to do. For those who may have questioned this personal calling of Moses, Moses could have replied “But I received this calling right from the mouth of God, no ifs, ands, or buts about it; it was from God’s lips to my ears,” so to speak.

Now, I have never heard an audible voice from God. And I suspect that if I told you that I had, you might send for the people in the white coats to take me away.

Without denying that God could still speak to us audible voices, if God chose to do so, I believe that the way God speaks to us nowadays is not as direct as hearing an audible voice. And a corollary of that belief is that it is not always clear and unambiguous as to what God may be saying to us by means other than an audible voice. These assertions on my part will require a bit of unpacking.

First and Foremost, Jesus Has spoken

The problem with sitting around waiting to hear an audible voice from God is that Jesus has already spoken. The Gospels are replete with commands as to how we should live if we aspire to be followers of Jesus. Here is just a sample.

Starting with Matthew 25:

- We should give food to the hungry
- We should give drink to the thirsty
- We should welcome the stranger in our midst
- We should give clothing to the naked
- We should care for the sick
- We should visit those in prison

The common thread in these commandments is that Jesus calls us to care for the marginalized in our society, those often considered to be the “least among us.”

Consider also the “Great Commission” recorded in Matthew 28: 19 – 20, which commands us to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

And the Apostle Paul expands even further on these commands of Jesus when in Colossians 1:20 he asserts that “through him [i. e., Jesus] God was pleased **to reconcile to himself all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of Jesus Christ.”

This powerful teaching from the pen of Paul states that God’s redemptive purpose, made possible through Jesus, extends to all of creation, not just to individual persons. It includes the redemption of societal structures like the political realm, the redemption of the environment, the fostering of peace among persons, groups and nations in conflict, the redemption of educational systems. Despite the apparently insurmountable obstacles, it is through Jesus that this breath of redemption will one day be fully realized. And, in the meantime, we who aspire to follow Jesus are called, like Moses to “partner with God” in this great redemptive work that God will ultimately accomplish.

So, please don't sit around waiting for God to tell you what to do in an audible voice. God has already spoken through Jesus Christ. Our calling is to obey His commands.

And as our text for this morning suggests, how we respond to these commands is a serious matter; a matter of spiritual life or death.

By now, you should feel overwhelmed as I do. I can't do all of that. Be of good cheer, you are not called to do all of that. The commands I have noted are "big-picture" commands. No one Christian is called to do all of that. So, the big question remains as to what I, or you, should be specifically doing in light of these "big-picture" commands. I will make two suggestions for your consideration

Discern and Exercise your Particular Gifts

These "big-picture" commands are commands to the full body of Christ. As taught in I Corinthians 12, the body of Christ will partner with God in God's broad purposes for redemption by each Christian contributing according to his/her particular gifts and abilities.

- Do you have a gift for caring for the poor and sick? – Then exercise that gift
- Do you have a gift for welcoming the stranger – Then exercise that gift
- Do you have a gift for peacemaking – Then exercise that gift
- Do you have the gift for being an educator? – Then exercise that gift
- Do you have the gift for nurturing others, in your family and beyond, to become agents for God's redemptive purposes? – Then exercise that gift
- Do you have a gift for political engagement? – Then exercise that gift

But where do I start?

Start with the Persons Right around You

The Parable of the Good Samaritan points us to this starting point. The Priest and Levite no doubt had busy schedules. They may have been on their way to important appointments later in the day. So, they had no time to minister to the wounded man lying by the side of the road. Or possibly they had an attitude of indifference, which is the opposite of love.

In stark contrast, the Samaritan, motivated by an attitude of compassion, welcomed the interruption in his day. Whatever he had planned for his day could wait. He ministered to the needy person right in front of his eyes.

As you aspire to partner with God by obeying the commands of Jesus, start with the persons right in front of your eyes; in your own home, your roommate, persons in your immediate neighborhood or town.

There is a deep rationale for this word of advice based on a dynamic view of Christian living rather than a static view. Let me explain.

I remember well how my teenage Christian friends and I were attracted by sermon topics like “How to find the Will of God for Your Life.” We listened intently, hoping to find easy formulas (no more than five steps) for determining who we should marry someday or that special vocation to which we should devote our lives. The premise behind all of this seemed to be that there was some predetermined, static plan that God had for each of our lives, and our job was to find out what it was as quickly as possible. This led some of us to adopt a very static view of Christian living – I sit around, not doing much of anything, waiting for God to grant me some special revelation of that unique blueprint for my entire life. As soon as I know that blueprint, then I’ll get busy on behalf of God’s purposes for Creation.

Now I do believe in the possibility of such a special revelation. But I have never had that experience. I no longer believe that there is in the “mind of God” a static predetermined plan for my life, and that God must reveal that plan to me in an extraordinary manner.

Rather, I believe that my Christian pilgrimage is a dynamic process: *As I walk, faithful to my present level of understanding of how I should contribute to the realization of God’s redemptive purposes, that very process of walking will lead to further insights about how I should continue walking.*

A number of biblical passages point to this dynamic view of Christian living. Consider, for example, Isaiah 58:10-11. As you will soon see, this passage is a conditional statement. It doesn’t make an outright assertion; there is a condition attached.

Before showing this to you, let me give you a simple everyday example of such a conditional statement: *If* the weather is nice this afternoon, *then* I will take a walk. I don’t want to take a walk if the weather is lousy. So, I attach the condition “*if* the weather is nice,” and if that condition is met, *then* I will take a walk.

With that simple example in the back of your minds, Isaiah 58: 10-11 seems to say, at first glance, that “God will guide us.” But a close look reveals that there is a condition attached. Here is the passage (listen for the “if” and “then” words):

If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, *then* your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. And **the Lord will guide you continually.**

It is in the very process of attending right now to the needs of those right around us that we gain greater understanding of how we should continue to address the needs of others in the future.

And this process does not yield the clarity and certainty that could come from hearing a direct audible voice from God. You will sometimes misread the needs of those around you. Or there may be unintended negative consequences of an action that you take. So, as in any dynamic process, you pay close attention to the results of your efforts on behalf of others and adjust accordingly.

Let me now summarize what I have said up to this point in the context the theme of our present sermon series, which is “listening to God.”

I am not listening for an audible voice, telling me how I should live as a Christian. Jesus has already painted a “big picture” of how I should live by means of his commandments to the body of Christian believers, which call us to be agents for God’s redemptive purposes. I find my particular niche in that great redemptive work by discerning and exercising my particular gifts, engaged in a dynamic process of Christian living wherein I start by responding to the needs right around me in my daily life, and it is in this very process of “walking with God” that I gain insight as to how I should continue walking with God.

Now I will add the provocative suggestion that an important part of this process can be called “listening to God,” an “inner kind of listening” precipitated by very ordinary circumstances, rather than a listening for an audible voice.

I can best illustrate this assertion by telling you a story from my own experience; my “sunset story.”

The year was about 1973. We were living in Westchester County, New York, where I was teaching mathematics at The King’s College. I had just sold my car to my boyhood friend Ken, who was a New York City fireman living in Huntington Station on Long Island.

It was a terrible car, a huge 1972 Ford Grand Torino station wagon that got 8 miles per gallon, providing I was driving downhill: “Not to Worry Harold” Ken, said to me, “I’m a good mechanic.” That reduced my feeling of guilt for unloading this awful car on a friend.

After I drove my car to Ken’s home, he drove me back to Grand Central Station in Manhattan, where I boarded a New York Central train that headed up the east side of the Hudson River to Briarcliff Manor where I lived.

At this time in my work at The King’s College I was providing leadership for a huge curriculum revision project that seemed to be stalled. I believed I was being an agent for God’s redemptive purposes for Christian higher education at my college, but I was getting nowhere.

It was late afternoon as I rode the train and the sun was setting over the New Jersey Palisades on the west side of the Hudson River. I can’t find words to describe how beautiful a sight that was.

In ways that I cannot explain in human terms, that sunset inspired me to pray, praying about my stalled curriculum project, committing it once again into God's hands and praying that God would help bring about a good redemptive result.

The thing about that prayer is that it seemed like the most natural thing in the world for me to do. I felt like I could do nothing else, not because it was particular time of the day set aside for prayer, but because God spoke to my inner being by means of a beautiful sunset, and I listened and responded.

I didn't hear an audible voice. I don't believe God performed a "cerebral miracle," causing my brain to think something I would not otherwise have thought. No! Rather, the sight of a beautiful sunset caused me to remember that God created that beauty and the God who created that beauty could also bring about a good redemptive result from the modest work in Christian higher education that he had entrusted to me. Nothing was too small or too big for God to accomplish.

The British philosopher John Macmurray has a beautiful phrase that eloquently captures the experience that I had. In his two books *The Self as Agent* and *Persons in Relation*, he refers to such an experience as:

The Unity of Persons in Fellowship

Macmurray's work suggests an analogy in the nature of personal relationships between human beings. When you know a person well you don't always need words to communicate. For example, I can often sense when my wife Pat would like me to do something without her having to tell me so (even if I helped to clean out the garage a few years ago).

Analogously, Macmurray suggests that it is possible for a Christian to be so attuned to what God is doing in this world and her role in partnering with God that she "thinks God's thoughts after God" (so to speak). She is able to align her will with God's will through an "inner listening and responding." That is an amazing aspiration, to be so attuned to what God is doing in our world, that you are able to align your will with God's redemptive will.

Macmurray calls this congruence of your will with God's will a "unity of persons in fellowship." It is my prayer for myself and for each of you that we may experience such a deep level of communion with God, where no audible voices are needed; just obedience.