

LOOK WHO'S TALKING

Jesus described the essence of eternal life as an intimate relationship with God: *"Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus, whom you have sent."* John 17v3. If the essence of eternal life is this intimacy with our maker, then this must mean communication with him. And if it's true relationship it cannot simply mean us speaking to God, he must also want to speak to us.

However, if we're ever honest enough and still enough to listen, then we'll find that God is not the only one who speaks to us. We have a spiritual enemy in the devil who is forever trying to get our attention. In the Garden of Eden we see him lying to Adam and Eve trying to deceive them and seduce them away from God. We see exactly the same thing happening to Jesus, the second Adam, as he fasts in the Judean wilderness.

There are other voices that speak to us as well. The expectations of other people tug at our heart. The culture around us is trying to seduce or intimidate us, normally to part us from our money. We're shaped by our education, the media and the church. And then there's our own inner voice. We play a great shot in badminton and tell ourselves that we're amazing and can conquer the world. We say something stupid in public, feel the hot flush of embarrassment and berate ourselves.

The Bible tells us that none of these voices are spiritually neutral. The voices we listen to will either draw us towards God or pull us away from him. Since the devil's primary weapons against us are lies and deception, this presents us with a challenge which we must win if we're to develop a deep and intimate relationship with our heavenly father. How do we tell God's voice from all the other voices we hear? *"My sheep listen to my voice" said Jesus, "I know them and they follow me."* John 10v27

If the devil can get a foothold in our life, he can subtly begin to distort our picture of God and our understanding of what it means to follow him. He slowly and relentlessly tries to convince us that God isn't as good or as faithful as we thought and that we can't really trust him. At the same time he tries to get us believing half truths and downright lies about ourselves.

If he succeeds then before long we daren't listen for God's voice. Because we're avoiding the God who defines truth, we're a helpless victim to every other lie that comes along. We begin to live on the basis of what's not real and not true. As we cannot listen to the Spirit any more we have to try and make up for his role in our lives.

We try to examine ourselves to find our sin but the more we look within the more reasons we find to condemn ourselves. We're forced towards depression or denial. We try and convince ourselves of spiritual truths about God and become more and more aware of the distance between what we profess to believe and our inner experience. We're forced to fake faith and are progressively undermined by doubt. We begin to look for the security, love and significance we should enjoy from God from other things. We're on a slippery slope to misery, denial, guilt and unbelief.

Fortunately, God in his graciousness has not left us helpless before our enemy. He give us a number of clear truths in the Bible that teach us to recognise his voice.

+ LIGHT V. DARKNESS

The first step is to live in the light. Here's how Jesus puts it in John 3v19-20: *"This is the verdict: Light [i.e. Jesus] has come into the world but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed."*

Jesus is using the metaphor of light and darkness to illustrate whether we're living openly and honestly before him or trying to conceal our lives from him, from others and from ourselves. If we're living in the darkness (i.e. hiding ourselves from God) then we'll not be able to see the truth. If we can't see the truth, we can't recognise who's speaking to us. To discern God's voice, we have to live openly before him.

If we've been living in the darkness, we'll be afraid to come into the light because it's inevitable that the devil will have told us lots of total rubbish about God. He'll try and convince us that God's angry with us, that he'll make us confess the most shameful things in our lives to large numbers of people, that he doesn't really want us back and that it would be best to keep away from him.

The Bible restores a true perspective, 1 John 1v5-9: *"God is light, in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus, his son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

Walking in the darkness cuts us off from God, from one another and leads us to deceive ourselves. However, Jesus promises forgiveness for everything that's exposed by the light. Whenever we step into the light, we receive the reception of the prodigal son in Luke 15v11f. Our heavenly father runs to us, throws his arms around us and kisses us. If you believe you'll receive any other reception from God, you've been deceived by the devil. Living in the light allows us to see the ways the world, the flesh and the devil are trying to trick us.

TRUTH V. LIES

The bottom line in discerning God's voice from other voices is that God unfailingly speaks truth. Indeed, God defines truth. Anything that disagrees with what God says is wrong or lying. The devil is described as the father of lies. It follows that the better we know what God says in the Bible, the better we're equipped to discern whether what we're hearing is true, and therefore of God, or not true and therefore not of God.

We'll be more vulnerable where our understanding is weak. We'll be especially vulnerable in areas where what we profess to believe is masking an area of our life that we're holding back from God. We must see that it's not enough to understand the truth, we have to be in right relationship with the truth. Understanding the truth is only helpful if it's coupled with submission to what God says and trust in him.

The two absolutely critical areas of Biblical truth to understand in order to recognise the devil's lies are God's character and our identity in Christ. As long as we hold onto these truths we'll be well defended against the enemy's most potent lies.

However, the devil is subtle and rarely uses obvious, blatant lies. Much more common is for him to take a truth and very slightly twist it. This is clear both in the serpent seducing Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and in the temptation of Jesus in the desert. However, the devil can't get us if we don't let him. If we're growing in our understand of the Bible, if we keep our heart open to God and if we live our life in the light, then God will keep us from the devil's lies.

INTROSPECTION V. REVELATION

One of the areas we're most vulnerable to deception is in our awareness of our sin. We're called to walk in the light, to seek God and to work out how to obey him. However, we're not called to identify our sin by introspection. Our perspective is far too limited and flawed to accurately diagnose ourselves and we'll only find endless ammunition to condemn ourselves. Rather we're to open ourselves to God and he will point out our



sin by his Spirit.



Psalm 139v23-24: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting."

CONVICTION V. CONDEMNATION

When the Spirit points out sin it's called conviction, it highlights sin and invites us to turn back to God. Conviction is like a compass that points us to life. However, a favourite trick of the devil is to fake conviction, this is condemnation. Because it's based on a lie, it points us towards death. One of the titles of the devil in scripture is the accuser of the brothers and Revelation 12v10 makes it clear that he never lets up.

Zechariah 3 illustrates how the devil works: "Then he showed me the Joshua the high priest standing before the Lord and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?"

Now Joshua was dressed in filthy rags as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." Then he said to Joshua, "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you." Then I said, "Put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the Lord stood by."

In this picture we see several key things. Firstly we see Satan accusing Joshua, and in one sense there's truth, Joshua is a mess. The devil is very keen to repeatedly point this out and heap on scorn and judgement. Joshua is like us and his filthy rags like our own best efforts to be righteous. In this sense, Satan is right and if that was the end of the story, we'd be stuffed. But of course, it's not the end of the story.

There is real sin, but our sin has been dealt with by the intervention of God in Christ. Joshua's new robes represent our life in Christ, not that we have achieved this by our own hard work, but as the gift of Christ to us. However aware Joshua was of his own sin, his right standing with God did not depend on his effort but on Christ. Whatever mess Joshua was in, he was put right because God cleansed him.

Because God had cleansed Joshua, then Satan's charge was not true and Satan experienced the ultimate rebuke: the rebuke of God himself. Conviction is when the spirit shows us in a specific act, attitude or omission where we're living inconsistently with our identity as new creations in Christ. Condemnation is when Satan attempts to deny our forgiveness or tell us that we're not new creations in Christ.

When the Spirit convicts us we deal with our sin by confessing it, trusting God's forgiveness and trusting him to empower us as we walk away from that sin. Repentance and faith always resolves conviction. However, no amount of confession and repentance will shift condemnation. It's based on a lie and we cannot repent of something that doesn't exist in the first place. The only way to deal with condemnation is to name it as a lie and to throw it out of our head and heart.

Very often Satan will make us nervous about throwing out condemnation. He'll try and convince us that it could have really been conviction and that to throw it out would be to reject the voice of the Spirit. Failing that, he may try and convince us that we need a bit of condemnation to deal with pride in our lives, without fear and threat we'll go off the rails. Either lie will trap us if we believe it. There are several tell tale signs of condemnation.

SPECIFIC V. GENERAL

Firstly, conviction is specific. The Spirit may show us that in this situation we acted with a lustful motivation, when we made that joke we had bitterness in our heart, when we ignored that need, it was out of fear. Conviction wants us to correct a specific attitude, action or omission.

On the other hand, condemnation is often more general: "You're a selfish person, you're full of lust, you're a failure". Rather than pointing out our need to alter a specific detail our life, it attacks us personally. Condemnation doesn't encourage us to turn back to God, it tries to convince us we cannot possibly return to him. Rather than reaching out to us with love, grace, forgiveness and the power to change, it tries to lock us into a place of guilt,



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fear, shame and paralysis. Romans 8v1 couldn't be clearer: "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"

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CONSISTENT WITH OUR IDENTITY IN CHRIST V. INCONSISTENT

Another indicator of condemnation is that it's inconsistent with our identity in Christ. Our identity in Christ is what's true about us in view of the fact that Jesus has completely forgiven us, taken away our sin, made us new and given us access to God. This is set out in 2 Corinthians 5v21: "God made him who had no sin [Jesus] to become sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

As we understand and believe this, it gives us something with which we can test what we hear inwardly. If we hear a voice telling us that we're greedy or lustful or lazy, we can ask 'is that consistent with having been made a new creation in Christ?' Whilst it may be true of our old nature, we're not defined by our old nature any more.

Again, the voice may suggest that God is frustrated or disappointed or angry with us and that we cannot go back to him again. We can test that against the truth that God has completely forgiven us and taken away our sin. We can see that they're lies. Perhaps the voice may suggest we should try to sort ourselves out a bit before we go back to God. A little reflection will show us that the voice is exhorting us to self righteousness and so cannot be God speaking as we're saved by grace.

Another give away is that condemnation is nearly always associated with legalism. Our awareness of God's standards, will always reveal the inadequacy of our own efforts. As Paul explains in Romans 5v20: "The law was added so that trespass might increase". So far from helping us to live the life God calls us to, the law confronts us with our wretchedness and actually provokes us to sin. Part of God's rescue plan for us is to set us free from having to try by our own effort to live up to our perception of his standards.

We're free to follow God not because we're obliged to keep the rules but because we love him, trust him and are convinced that following him is the best thing we can do. However, if the devil can convince us that we really ought to at least to try and keep a bit of the law, even for the best sounding reasons, he knows that we'll be dragged down by our flesh and sin more.

Here's another test for God's voice. God invites us to submit to him, to trust him and to follow him. This doesn't mean following him will be easy, but it does mean that he will not put a gun to our head, bullying us into following him. Is the voice speaking to us the gracious voice of a loving father who is seeking to lead us into the joy, love, freedom and humility of Christ or is it trying to hound us back under the law?

Again, so long as we stay in the light, we'll be safe from the devil's schemes. Falling back under the law is always related to some root of pride. Our old nature loves to think it can find some piece of goodness of our own apart from God. If we'll relinquish this deception, we're free to receive all we could ever want as a gift from God and won't be drawn into the futile cycle of failure that comes with the law.

LOVE V. HATE

Another key to discerning God's voice from the other voices is that of the tone in which it speaks. Our heavenly father loves us and wants the best for us. He delights in us. He rejoices over us with singing. He wants to keep us from sin in the same way a parent wants to keep a child away from a pan of boiling water.

The devil by contrast hates us with a fixed, unwavering desire for our destruction. He wants to rob us of everything that is good and tie us up in fear, shame and guilt. He'll threaten, seduce, suggest, deceive, question, undermine, insult and intimidate. Even when he flatters, he's incapable of love and will betray himself.

LIFE V. DEATH

A final test we can use, particularly for voices, ideas and ideals we've held for a while is to ask what fruit they produce in our lives. Here are two tests, one from Paul and one from James. Galatians 5v19-23: "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits

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+ *of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 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.*

James 3v14-17: *"...if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."*

God leads us in love down the path of love, freedom, joy and peace. The devil is seeking to bring destruction, confusion, frustration, division, hatred, shame and death.

WATCHFULNESS, RUTHLESSNESS AND FAITHFULNESS

We've looked at a number of different ways of discerning God's voice. There are several challenges to applying this to our relationship with God. The first is to be aware of the messages and voices speaking inwardly to us. If our lives become over-busy or distracted we'll start to lose touch with what's going on in our inner life. We'll increasingly act unthinkingly. It's not that those inner voices have fallen silent, it is simply that we're not consciously aware of how they're shaping us.

If we're not aware and intentional in managing our inner life, then we're driven blindly by those voices. Our inner world can be a bit like those snow-scene toys which when you shake them look like a blizzard. As you set the scene down, the snow settles to the bottom and the picture becomes clear. We must learn to be still and aware of both of ourselves and of the presence, love and affection of Jesus if our inner world is to be shaped by him. We must also immerse ourselves in God's word if we're to learn to understand how we're to interact with him and the world as he intends.

Once we've heard what God's saying and rejected what the devil is saying, the next step is to believe what God says rather than what the devil says. Hearing God speak opens up the possibility of faith, resting the weight of our lives on what he says. However, we need to take another step as well. When we speak to ourselves, we need to say to ourselves things that agree with what God says to us.

This is a huge area of sin for most Christians. We're very prone to read off the devil's script for our life. A good example is forgiveness. One of the biggest challenges of forgiveness is to forgive ourselves. This is a battle against pride but if we'll not forgive ourselves, we align ourselves with the devil and deny what God says.

God says that he created us, that we're fearfully and wonderfully made. He says he's forgiven all of our sins, past present and future. He says he's made us righteous in Christ. He says he's given us a place in his body and a part in his purposes. He says he loves us, delights in us and will never leave or forsake us. He says we're totally secure in his sovereignty. Our choice is to agree with him and trust him, or unbelief. Will we align what we say to ourselves with what he says to us, or will we side with the devil?

The final application is to ruthlessly throw out what the devil says to us. We need to keep asking God to give us soft hearts that respond immediately to him in repentance and faith. However, we need to develop a ruthlessness in dealing with whatever the devil says to us. We need to totally and decisively reject guilt, lies and condemnation.

The devil has strategies to keep us from decisively rejecting what he says. One is to make us afraid that we'll mistakenly reject the conviction of the Spirit. If we're living in the light we can be confident that a gracious, loving father is very able to help us become clear about what he wants to say to us. If we get ourselves in a tangle, then it's a good plan to find a mature Christian friend with whom we can talk things through.

Another of his tricks is to persuade us that if we throw off condemnation, we'll become proud and arrogant. Using condemnation is not only utterly ineffective at killing pride, it also adds unbelief into the mixer. The answer to pride is to practice thankfulness, acknowledging that God is the source of everything good in our lives.



SUMMARY

As we learn to recognise the lies of the enemy and ruthlessly reject them, we're free to grow in intimacy with our heavenly father. Here's a summary of what we've said:

GOD'S VOICE NOT GOD'S VOICE

A loving father	An enemy full of hate
Consistent with the Bible	Only partially consistent with the Bible
Clear authority	Threat and intimidation
Reveals God to be good and loving	Makes God look bad and unloving
Encourages us to come to God	Makes us afraid to come to God
Leads us into love and joy	Leads us into guilt and fear
Clear, firm, loving, non-manipulative	Sneers and seduces
Gracious, gives freedom	Legalistic, brings burden and resentment
Emphasises God's sufficiency	Emphasises our inadequacy
Invites	Tries to force
Allows us to ignore it	Will not allow us to ignore it

CONVICTION CONDEMNATION

Specific action, attitude or omission	General slight on character
When heeded leads to freedom and life	When heeded leads to confusion and guilt
Affirms our identity in Christ	Contradicts our identity in Christ
Does not come back once resolved	Won't go away unless decisively rejected
Confronts our self pity	Encourages our self pity
Does not need to justify itself	Is endlessly justifying itself
Points us to God	Points us to our self