

June 3-7, 2024 Edition

Following The Year_(s) Of ^ Jesus Part 127

Can You Hear Me Now? Recognizing God's Voice

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: So this week we'll be looking at how to listen for the leading/direction/guidance of God in our lives. Because when it comes to God's guidance in our lives discerning His voice is not always easy. So He asks us to do some due diligence before we move ahead:

Don't believe everything you hear just because someone says it is a message from God; Test it first to see if it really is! 1 John 4:1 (LB)

Anyone who wants to do God's will can test this teaching and know whether it's from God or whether I'm making it up. John 7:17 (MES)

So how do I "test" a message to see whether it truly is a message from God or not? This week I'd like to focus on a 5 part filtering process that you can put any message through to determine if you're hearing God's voice or someone/something else. So if I get an impression or in some other way receive what I am wondering is the leading of God the first filter I'm going to put the impression through is this one: Does It Agree With The Bible?

So many of the problems humans have had that were caused by doing something that we (or someone else) thought was what God wanted them to do could have been avoided if said message was sifted through this filter first. How many times in human history has someone done something horrific in the Name of God thinking they were serving Him? In case you aren't sure let just tell you- it's a lot. If only there was some ultimate guide to human life and interaction that could warn us when we're heading into dangerous territory. There is? Yup. It's called the Bible and it's a book that is unique among all the other books of this world. God tells Joshua that studying this book, reflecting on what it teaches him and then obeying it are the keys to a successful life:

Be careful to obey all the instructions Moses gave you. Do not deviate from them, turning either to the right or to the left. Then you will be successful in everything you do. Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do. Joshua 1:7-8 (NLT)

Those are pretty lofty promises from God. This book as it turns out can hold you back from sin and it can "save you" which are both pretty crazy when you think about it:

I have thought much about your words and stored them in my heart so that they would hold me back from sin. Psalm 119:11 (TLB)

In gentleness accept God's teaching that is planted in your hearts, which can save you. James 1:21 (NCV)

So the first and probably clearest filter in testing an impression as to whether it's from God or not is simply to ask yourself if the Bible agrees or disagrees with what I think I am hearing. Why? Because it's pretty simple- if the Bible says something is wrong then it's wrong. For instance let's say your neighbor really gets to you. For whatever reason this person gets under your skin like nobody else you've ever known. One day the thought comes to your mind, " if I killed my neighbor then he/she wouldn't be around to bug me anymore." Let me just say it for all of us who might be bugging our neighbors without even recognizing it- if you go to the Bible and run that impression through the first filter of testing an impression

(does the Bible agree or disagree) it won't take long to recognize that the Bible teaches us that God frowns on such an action.

That may be a pretty obvious and easy impression to test but you get what I'm saying, right? If telling a lie will get me ahead at work or keep me from getting into trouble at home then we are all tempted to tell that lie. We will start doing mental and spiritual gymnastics that will convince us that God would really want us to tell the lie to get what we want or stay out of trouble. But lying is always wrong. It's one of God's top 10 "don'ts" (thou shalt not lie). And while I know that you're thinking "what if I lived in Nazi Germany and I was hiding Jews and the Gestapo came to my door and asked if I had seen any Jews..." Yes. In that case I think you're pretty safe lying (not safe from the Nazis if they find out but safe believing God would want you to lie to the Gestapo). But our mental and spiritual gymnastics that tempt us to rationalize a lie are rarely that kind of lie. They are almost always lies we would tell to keep us out of trouble or get us something we want.

This is why Bible knowledge is so important. All of us come across multiple situations every day that the Bible has spoken quite clearly on. If we don't know what the Bible says about a situation we're shooting in the dark (so ask someone who has some Bible knowledge if you're not sure). This is the first and most obvious filter to put any impression you have through to test whether the voice you're hearing is God's voice or not. So what happens if that filter leaves me unsure? What if the impression I'm getting doesn't really seem to have a clear answer to the question, "does this agree with the Bible?" Then we go on to the second filter which we'll talk about tomorrow.

Tuesday Reflection: So this week we're talking about how to test an impression we may have to see if what we're hearing/thinking is from God or not. The first filter we should put any impression through is the Bible filter- does what I'm thinking agree with what God has already said in black and white in His Word? But what happens when the Bible doesn't necessarily speak one way or the other to the situation I'm in (which happens all the time by the way)? Then you put the impression through the second filter of testing an impression: will what I'm thinking about doing make me more like Jesus or less like Jesus? Because today when you woke up if you are a follower of Jesus then your single most important goal is to become more like Him:

Instead, we will lovingly follow the truth at all times-speaking truly, dealing truly, living truly-and so become more and more in every way like Christ. Ephesians 4:15 (TLB)

But what does that mean to become "more and more" like Jesus? What we would like it to mean is to grow in the power and knowledge of Jesus. We want to be able to do the kinds of impressive stuff Jesus did (walking on water, healing the sick, casting out demons, turning water into the best wine anybody has ever tasted...) but that's not what Paul is inviting us to in this scripture. The "omnis" are off the table when it comes to becoming more like Jesus (omnipotent or all powerful; omniscient or all knowing; omnipresent or the ability to be everywhere at the same time). God is never going to give any human "omni" anything and you should be glad about that really. Because humans can have bad days and if I was omnipotent who knows what kind of destruction I would have wrought in my own life and the lives of those I claim to love.

Did you ever see the Twilight Zone where the little boy could wish the people that made him mad "into the cornfield"? Sure, it got rid of a momentary irritation but left him with nobody to love him or for him to love. It made him miserable. The same thing would happen if we acquired the power of Jesus. No, the invitation to become more and more like Jesus is an invitation to develop the character of Jesus:

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT)

The fruit of the Spirit is more than just a catalog of nice things we should be striving to attain in our lives. The fruit of the Spirit is also a pretty comprehensive catalog of the character of Jesus. Look that list over again please. Can you think of any quality or character trait that Jesus demonstrated in His life that is missing from the list? This is God's plan for your life. Not that you'd be perfect in all of those traits (Jesus is the only human Who was a perfect 10 in every virtue in that list- the rest of us will fall woefully short in many categories) but that you would be making progress in those areas every day as you cultivate a life designed to make you more and more like Jesus. We all have areas of strength in that list (joy and patience and kindness come fairly naturally for me) and we all have areas of weakness in that list (self control? What's that??? And that whole "goodness" thing is a constant struggle for me [I know... you're SHOCKED, right? Not you, Pastor Ed?!?! Yes... me ;o])

So that brings us back to this second filter in the process of testing an impression to see if it's from God- will it make me more like Jesus if I do it or will it make me less like Jesus if I do it? And often you are the only one who can honestly and accurately answer that question. There are lots of things I can choose to do in my life and lots of places I could choose to go but some of them will make me more like Jesus if I go and some of them will make me less like if I do them. I'm not one to say all drinking is always wrong (remember Jesus turned water into wine...) but there are some of us who shouldn't go anywhere near a bar because we have a specific weakness when it comes to alcohol or the people we might find ourselves hanging out with at the bar that will cause us to do things that will make us less and less like Jesus rather than more and more like Him. There are those of us who struggle with certain websites on the internet that make us less and less like Jesus when we visit them. Those of us who struggle with those sites probably should be careful going to other sites online that in and of themselves won't make us less like Jesus but may trigger us to go to another site that will. I could go on and on. It's what leads churches to start making rules about what anyone who attends there church is allowed to do and what they aren't. Christians shouldn't dance is one rule many of us heard growing up. Why not? Is there a scripture that says "thou shalt not dance?" No... but think of what it might lead to. A few people get themselves into all kinds of trouble at dances (or after the dance) so let's just make a rule to make sure that won't happen to anyone. You've probably heard quite a few of these rules if you've spent much time around church. No playing cards (there might be nothing wrong with playing "Go Fish" but what if playing with cards leads someone to gamble? No going to movies? Why not? No telling what kind of immoral trash you might see and like the dances who knows what kind of tom foolery you might get up to at the theater or after you leave the theater.

No playing pool? Why not? HAVEN'T YOU EVER SEEN THE MUSIC MAN?!?!? Ohhhh... we've got trouble!

I'm going on and on now and I may just be confusing you more than you were when I got started. I thought this was all about asking if an impression will make me more or less like Jesus and that's true- it is. But beware. Sometimes by making blanket rules like the ones I talked about we end up becoming more and more like the Pharisees while we're trying to help others become more and more like Jesus. So that's the second filter- will what I'm thinking about doing make me more or less like Jesus. It may be dangerous for you to make that decision for someone else and make lots of rules to "help" them out but it's dangerous for you to not make that decision for yourself. That's the problem- the Pharisees aren't always wrong- they go wrong when they take a rule they've made for themselves so they can continue becoming more and more like Jesus and then tell others that the same rule now applies to them too. Confused? Yeah. Me too. So tomorrow we'll talk about what to do when we've run an impression through the first two filters (does the Bible agree/disagree & will this make me more or less like Jesus?) and we are no closer to a clear answer (and maybe you'll feel like you're further away than ever from a clear answer...).

Wednesday Reflection: This week we are talking about how to learn to recognize God's guidance, leading and direction in our lives. The Bible makes a pretty impressive promise when it comes to receiving wisdom (practical guidance for every day living according to the Bible) from God:

If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. James 1:5 (NLT)

I've spent a lot of time asking for God's wisdom to be sent to me via instant download in my life but rarely does the wisdom I'm looking for come like a lightning bolt. Most of the time it's more like trying to find a path in the dark on a foggy night. It's not that it's impossible to find the path- it's just not as clear or easy as I'd like. So we've been talking about some filters or questions to put any message through to make sure what we are hearing from God (or think we are hearing from God) is really from Him and that we are really interpreting what we're hearing correctly. Wisdom after all is nothing more than learning to discern the will of God for my life and then doing my best to put into practice what I've heard from Him. So the first filter when it comes to filtering any message I may receive is, does the Bible agree or disagree with the message I think I'm receiving? If the Bible disagrees then you can be pretty confident the message isn't from God or you're hearing from Him but then translating what you hear over to what you should do is where you're going wrong. So then what do I do if I'm just not sure? Talk to people of wisdom.

The third filter we should put any message we think we may be receiving from God is this: do people I admire and trust agree with what I believe I'm hearing? God gave us the church and put us in a community (Jesus' family) for a reason:

God's intent is that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known. Ephesians 3:10 (NIV)

How does Paul say God's manifold wisdom (manifold just means the whole enchilada- all of it) is made known? Through the church. Through all of us- not just one or two people but

through all of us. I don't have the entirety of God's wisdom within me. Neither do you. But together every single bit of God's wisdom is known. So what does that mean practically speaking? That even if you think you are hearing from God and you think you're accurately interpreting what that means you should do you should run it past others that you trust and admire who also have some of God's wisdom (often much more than you or I possess on our own) to make sure you're not making a **HUGE** mistake (any Arrested Development fans out there? If you don't know what I'm talking about go to YouTube and search for Arrested Development I think I may have made a huge mistake- you're welcome!).

As I look back on my life I can identify **MANY** times when I would have saved myself a ton of headaches and/or heartaches by checking with other people before I acted on what I thought was a message from God Himself. If I had just paid attention to what the Bible says about advice I would have been much better off:

The wisdom of the righteous can save you. Proverbs 11:9 (GN)

And then there's this:

With many counselors, there is safety. Proverbs 11:14 (NLT)

So even if you believe you are hearing from God. And even if you believe you are accurately interpreting what you're hearing into what that means you should do- save yourself (and often the rest of us as well) a whole heapin' helpin' of trouble by seeking the advice of other godly, mature folks who demonstrate the wisdom of God in their own lives. You'll thank me later for that advice (or maybe you won't because if you follow this advice which isn't really from me but from Solomon and other writers of the Bible you won't get yourself into some of the situations that you are likely to get yourself into if you don't seek advice- how's that for a run-on sentence? Maybe I should ask the advice of wise people about the wisdom of using run-on sentences in devotionals... or maybe not ;o)

Thursday Reflection: This week we're looking at a four step filtering process through which we can learn to recognize God's voice/leading/guidance/direction in our lives. The first 3 filters were: 1) Does the Bible agree or disagree with what I think I'm hearing? 2) Will doing what I believe God is asking me to do make me more and more or less and less like Jesus? And 3) Do people whose wisdom I trust and admire agree with what I think I'm hearing?

But what if I've put an impression I think I'm receiving from God through those filters and I still don't know what to do? Maybe the Bible doesn't say anything about my situation. Maybe the question of whether it will make me more or less like Jesus doesn't really apply and maybe the wise people I've talked to aren't sure what to tell me (or I get conflicting advice from people). What do I do then?

Check your heart. Your heart is what makes you feel like you're alive. It's the things that you like and the things that you dislike. It's your passions. Your heart will lead you to things that make you feel satisfaction, purpose and joy. And God gave you that heart- those likes and dislikes so you could play your part in His plan for all of human history. The Bible says your heart is pretty important:

*Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life.
Proverbs 4:23 (NLT)*

Your heart determines the very course of your life. This shouldn't be the first filter you put impressions through to test whether you're hearing from God or not (our hearts can also influence us to do some pretty stupid stuff and get us into all kinds of trouble- who wants to go first with the testimonies of foolish places your heart led you because you didn't filter your decisions through the first 3 filters we talked about this week? Nobody? Anybody? Beuller... Beuller... Beuller- that's a Ferris Beuller reference for anyone that didn't see it and is completely confused right now). But if you've put your decisions and impressions through the first three filters of testing a message to see if it's from God or not then your heart can really help lead you into God's will for your life:

Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart's desires. Psalm 37:4 (NLT)

The Bible teaches us that when we "take delight in the Lord" then He will give us the "desires of our hearts". So how do I delight in the Lord? By asking Him for wisdom to guide my life and then doing my best to follow that direction. By asking Him to set the pace, direction, pit stops and destination of my life and then getting in step with Him. But putting all the messages I receive in response to my asking God for wisdom and guidance through the filtering process by asking does this agree or disagree with the Bible, will it make me more or less like Jesus and what do other godly, wise followers of Jesus think about what I believe I'm hearing and what I think that means I am supposed to do? If you do that I guarantee you that God will feel like you are "delighting in Him." And when we do that God promises to give us the our heart's desire. But what I've learned is that doesn't always mean He gives me what I always thought would make me happy- often if means He shows me what my heart's desire truly is.

When I first decided to go into ministry I made what I thought was a binding deal with God. I'd go into ministry (I felt like I was being "led" into ministry because it was what made my heart beat faster and what made me feel like I was really living and not just existing) and I'd do any job EXCEPT preach. I. Did. Not. Want. To. Be. The. Full. Time. Preaching. Pastor.

Period.

I thought God and I had a deal. Boy was I surprised when I ended up the full time preaching pastor up here in Eagle River Alaska when I thought I had come to be the youth pastor working with a pastor that I admired as much as any man I've even known. But he was gone 8 months later and I was the preacher and here I am 18 years later and who would have thought that this would be my heart's desire? I sure wouldn't have. I guess God knows what He's doing, huh (yes He does... that was me being sort of facetious ;o)

Let me give you another example: When I went to Bible college I had recovered my life about a year and a half earlier and now at 21 years of age I was ready to make up for lost time. I came to Columbia Christian College with one goal- get my Bible degree and start working for Jesus. I wasn't interested in friends and I wasn't even looking for a girl. I was laser focused. The day before classes started I was sitting in a classroom to take placement tests when a girl walked in to the room. She had an entourage with her and she was explaining to them about what to do and not to do during a test.

Don't sit to close to the windows or you might get distracted. Don't sit under a vent because you might get cold. Don't sit close to anyone you like because you might want to talk to

them. She sat behind me. Greeeeaaaatttt I thought. This is all I need. Then a piece of paper hit me in the shoulder and bounced onto my desk. I turned and looked at this girl and she explained that she didn't mean to hit me but the guy in front of me- could I please hit him with the paper for her. I didn't say a word (maybe I said "no") but placed the wadded up paper back on her desk and turned around thinking, "what is with this girl?" (and now I know that girl was thinking "what is with this guy?").

Turned out that girl was also a Bible major so that meant we had multiple classes together. In fact she was in 4 of my classes that first semester. She didn't really notice though because her life was so crazy she wasn't noticing much that first semester (she was taking 19 credit hours and she was in choir and she was one of the freshman class senators and...). One day about 3 weeks into classes starting she turned to me in one of our classes (there were about 13 other students in that class and our Ancient New Testament Greek class only had about 10 students total) and said, "I think you're in one of my other classes..." Yes. Yes I was. Actually 3 other classes but who counts the "blessings" of God?

We didn't particularly care much for one another. Then one day she failed a test in Greek. She was struggling with the language and I was doing really well. My brain just seemed to soak up languages and hers struggled with concrete stuff like that but thrived on abstract stuff like philosophy and theology- concepts I struggled with. She asked the professor if she could retake the test. He said sure. If she asked Ed to help her study. She refused and he said then she couldn't retake the test. The F would stand.

So that evening she approached me in the library with two of her friends for moral support and asked if I'd tutor her in Greek. I REALLY didn't want to but I wanted to help out the professor who I really liked and admired so I reluctantly said yes. But both of us hated that we were going to have to spend time together. Until we started spending time together. Who knew that she would become my heart's desire? I'm guessing if you know me well then you already knew the girl would become my wife, Judy.

All that to say this- if you put a message or decision through the 3 step filtering process we've been talking about this week and still aren't sure what to do then check your heart and God will lead you into your heart's desires.

Friday Reflection: So I guess we need to talk about one more "filter" today. What happens if I've run my decision or impression I received (presumably from God) through the filters we've talked about this week (does it agree/disagree with the Bible? Will it make me more or less like Jesus? Do people of wisdom that I admire & trust agree with what I'm hearing? & What does my heart tell me?) and I'm still not sure what to do? It happens. There are decisions that the Bible doesn't really have a lot to say about. There are decisions that either way you could continue on your journey to become more and more like Jesus. There are decisions that wise people that you admire and trust won't have a strong idea about. And there are decisions that your heart doesn't settle the debate because neither one seems great or you feel strongly both ways. What do we do then? Well, the Bible might suggest at that point we flip a coin.

Seriously. I'm not kidding. You might be thinking, "wait just a minute Pastor Ed- are you telling me to leave important decisions to the chance of the flipping of a coin?!?!" No.

Because with God a coin flip isn't necessarily leaving the decision to chance. The Bible says God can control the outcome of what we consider to a "chancy" coin flip or rolling of the dice:

We may throw the dice, but the Lord determines how they fall. Proverbs 16:33 (NLT)

Have you ever read that particular proverb before? I know it doesn't say "coin flip" but it's the same principle. If you would feel more comfortable then get out a die and roll it. God can control the outcome of things we would consider to be "chance". And there is Biblical precedent for it. When the apostles were trying to figure out who would replace Judas they chose between two equally qualified (in their eyes at least) followers of Jesus by drawing straws:

And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles. Acts 1:23-26 (NLT)

Now we don't know exactly what the "lots" were. They might have been straws or they might have been stones or the equivalence of dice but we do know it was seeking the will of God through what might seem like random chance. The casting of lots to discern the will of God is mentioned 70 times in the Old Testament and about a half a dozen in the New Testament.

But just because the apostles used the casting of lots as one filter for making their decisions it wasn't the first filter they used. They went through their due diligence trying to figure out what God would have them do. They narrowed God's will down to two candidates and when they couldn't whittle down the field to just one they let God decide by casting lots.

So if you've got a decision to make and you have run your choices through the filters we've been talking about this week and still haven't narrowed things down to a single decision then maybe this is a good way to follow the Bible's example and let God show you by what we would consider pure chance. Take the choices left to you, pray about it and then roll the dice/ flip the coin/cast the lots. I've made decisions like this and they've worked out pretty well. It's just one more way to take a step of faith doing our best to figure out what God wants for our lives and then doing what we believe He's asking us to do.

So- heads or tails?