

Hear My Voice ... And Follow
(series: Making Maturing Disciples of Jesus)

¹“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. ²But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. ³To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand what those things were which He had been saying to them.

⁷So Jesus said to them again, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. ⁹I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

¹¹“I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. ¹²He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, ¹⁵even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. ¹⁸No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.”

²⁷My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; ²⁸and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰I and the Father are one.”

(John 10:1-18, 27-30)

“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (John 10:27).

Is this really possible in our time? It was clearly possible for the first group of disciples. They literally, audibly heard the voice of Jesus ... and literally followed Him down the road. Lucky bums! Is this possible for us? To hear the voice of Jesus? To know that it is His voice?

Yes it is. And we have heard His voice more than we know. It is just that we either did not recognize it, or, because of the ways the whole idea has been abused, we shied away from the possibility.

“My sheep,” My disciples, hear My voice... and they follow ...

When we began this current series of sermons on “Making Maturing Disciples of Jesus,” I suggested that we need not be afraid of the word disciple. Over the years people have said to me, “Oh, I am just a believer ... I could never be a disciple.” To which I responded, “Oh, yes you can be a disciple... for you already are... a disciple of someone, or some ideology, or some movement.” You have heard me say, “the question is never, ‘Will I be a disciple?’ The question is always, ‘Whose disciple will I be?’” Every one of us in this room is a disciple. Every person in this city is a disciple. Every person on this planet is a disciple – of someone.

Or, in light of what we grappled with the last two Sundays, every one yields to a spirit. The question is never, “Will I yield to a spirit?” We do it all the time! The question is always, “To what spirit will I yield?” “To whose spirit will I yield?”

Everyone is a disciple. That is, everyone is a “follower.” Every human being follows someone, or some spirit, or some ideology, or some cause. Which is why the Scriptures so often employ the imagery of sheep and shepherd. We are all sheep! We all need guidance. Like sheep, we all follow after someone.

Even the leaders among us are followers. Every Premier and Prime Minister, every King and Queen and President, every CEO of every corporation, every super-hero, every teacher and professor, every pollster, every newspaper editor, every hockey coach ... is a follower. The best leaders admit it – and tell us who they follow, or try to follow.

The question is never, “Will I follow?” The question is always “Who will I follow?” The question is never “Am I following?” The question is always “Who am I following?”

Or, in the language Jesus uses in John 10, the question is never, “Will I hear a voice and respond?” The question is always, “Of all the voices I hear, to which am I responding?”

The crucified, risen, and living Jesus, Lord of the Universe, Saviour of the world, says to us today: “I am the Good Shepherd; the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. ... I know My own, and My own know Me. ... I call My sheep by name. ... My sheep hear My voice, and they follow Me” (John 10:11, 14, 3, 27).

The first group of disciples who heard Jesus speak this way “got it” immediately. For they were well aware of the relationship that exists between Palestinian shepherds and their sheep. Sheep literally know the audible sound of their shepherd’s voice. In fact, they know the voice so well they will not respond to the voice of any other shepherd.

In his little commentary on the Gospel of John, William Barclay reminds us that in Palestine, sheep are raised primarily for their wool. This means that sheep stay with the shepherd for many years, which means the shepherd comes to know each sheep personally. So well that shepherds even give special names to each individual sheep. When called by name, each sheep responds by following wherever the shepherd goes!

Stories are told about what happens when two or more flocks get mixed up in a village or in an open field. One shepherd goes off to one side, stands some distance away, and sounds the peculiar call which only his sheep know. One by one, the sheep of his flock run to him. The other shepherd goes off to the other side, and sounds His peculiar call. And one by one, the sheep of his flock run to him.

“I am the Good Shepherd. I call my own by name.”

One of the most moving examples of this is the experience of Samuel, the first great prophet of Israel. The story is told in 1 Samuel 1-3. Some of you may remember working through this story with me at Family Camp two years ago.

While just a young child, Samuel lived in the house of the prophet Eli. One night he hears a voice calling, “Samuel!” Assuming it was the voice of Eli, he gets up, runs to Eli’s bedroom, and says, “here I am, for you called me.” Eli responds, “I did not call you ... go back to bed.” A while later it happens again. “Samuel!” So he gets up, and again goes to Eli’s room, saying, “Here I am, for you called me.” Again Eli says, “No, I did not ... go back to bed.” It happens a third time! “Samuel.” Again he gets up, and again he goes to Eli’s room. The text says “then Eli discerned that the LORD was calling the boy” (1 Samuel 3:8). How? How did he discern?

Eli tells Samuel to go back to his room. If he hears the voice again he is to say, “Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:9). I invite you to now be still for just a moment, and in your own way say, “Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening.”

We have all heard His voice more than we know. Our children are hearing His voice more than they, or we, know. It is just that, like Eli, they, we, did not immediately discern what was going on.

“I am the Good Shepherd. My sheep hear My voice, and they follow Me.”

Now, as we have already noted, for the first group of disciples, Jesus’ words were literally true. They heard an audible voice coming from a visible mouth. Jesus spoke like I am speaking to you. And Peter and Mary, John, and Matthew heard like you are hearing right now. What about us?

Although Jesus is not present to us in a visible way, He is present. Is He not? He really is present. Everywhere we go, any time, day or night. Right? And although He may not speak in the same audible way, He does speak. He calls us His disciples. More than that, He calls us His friends (John 15:15). More than that, He calls us His sisters and brothers. More than that, He calls us His bride! He loves us. He really loves us. He wants us to enter into the fullness of life with Him. He really wants us to enter into and enjoy the inner life of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As He says in John 10: “I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

In His love for us He does not leave us out in the fields, or on the streets and alleys of the city, to grope and guess our way home. Yes, He calls us to use the highest of human faculties – our intellect and intuition. But He does not leave us to roam around the fields, or through the streets and alleys, groping and guessing. He speaks! Warning us of danger. Wooing us to His side. Guiding us through the obstacles in the way. Leading us into places of nurturing. “I am the Good Shepherd” – so very good.

As we learn from reading the First Testament, our Lord's greatest criticism of his people is not that we sheep wander off and fall into ditches. Getting lost is what sheep do best!! No, our Lord's greatest criticism is that we do not listen for and to His voice.

"Hear, O my People, and I will admonish you.
O Israel, if you would just listen to Me.
I, Yahweh, am your God
Who brought you up from the land of Egypt;
Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.
But My people did not listen to Me ...
So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their own hearts,
to follow their own devices.
Oh that My people would listen to Me!"

(Psalm 81:8, 10, 11-12a)

It sounds like the Little League coach our daughter Marissa had when she was a young girl, Dan Olson. The best softball coach I ever met! Before every game he would gather the girls together and say: "watch me for the signs, and listen to my voice. Do not listen to your parents' voices. Do not listen to the other players' voices. Ignore the other coach's voice. Listen to my voice."

I remember a really close game. Parents and grandparents in the bleachers screaming and yelling; girls – both dugouts – were screaming and yelling. It was delightfully noisy! But I could hear Marissa's coach's voice above it all. Not because he spoke louder – he did not. But because I, like Marissa, had become attuned to it and was attending to Dan Olson's voice.

"I am the Good Shepherd. My sheep hear My voice and they follow Me."

We all hear voices. We all follow. The question is never, "Will I listen and follow?" The question is always, "Who will I listen to and follow?"

Two questions are begging for an answer. First, how does the Good Shepherd speak to us? What means does He use in the twenty-first century? To what frequency do I tune the dial? Or, since most of you do not know what that means, since radio is "so yesterday," what apps do I need to install on my iPhone or Blackberry so I can hear His voice?

And second, how can we discern His voice from all the others we hear in our minds and spirits? Are there objective safeguards to ensure that the voice I am hearing is Jesus' voice?

[A] First question: How does the Lord of Life speak to us in our day? I can think of 12 different ways! Let me quickly list the first 11, with all too brief comment, and then focus on the twelfth. If you are not already doing so, I encourage you to take notes simply to help listen better. Here we go!

(1) The first and foremost means is Jesus' written voice, His word, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. The Good Shepherd speaks in and through the Bible. The writer of the book of Hebrews quotes texts from the Old Testament and constantly introduces the quotes with the phrase, "As the Holy Spirit says" (Hebrews 1:7, 3:7, etc.) Not, "As the Holy Spirit said," past tense, but "As the Holy Spirit says," present tense. The author quotes Psalm 95, and introduces the quote, "the Spirit says, 'Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts'" (Hebrews 3:7, 15, 4:7). The word of God is not

something which when spoken or written then evaporates into thin air. No, God's word lives ... and continues to speak.

How many of us can tell of times when we have been reading the Bible, and came across a line or sentence and sensed that the words were being spoken personally to us? That is what is supposed to happen.

The Living Jesus chooses to meet us in His written voice. It is where He Skypes His presence to us. His word is, as the writer of Hebrews says, "living and active" (Hebrews 4:12). He, the Living Word, spoke it and still speaks it.

That doesn't mean that we can pick up a Bible, throw up a quick prayer – "Speak to me" – and open it just anywhere and expect to hear the voice. No, the words of the Bible must be read and heard in their contexts. And in context, the words, written long ago, speak as though written today.

The most reliable channel on which to hear the voice of Jesus, the most reliable app, is Scripture, properly read and interpreted.

(2) A second means is the preached word. The Good Shepherd chooses to speak through the exposition and proclamation of His written word. This is one of the fundamental convictions of the Protestant Reformation. Preaching is an event, an event in which the Living Word Himself addresses His people. This is not to say that the preacher is always speaking God's word; that every word the preacher speaks is God's word.

Rather, it is to say that to the degree that the sermon is rooted in, flowing from, faithful to, the Scriptures, the One to Whom Scripture witnesses speaks. So after reading the text to be preached, my friend Gordon Smith says, "thus far God's Word..." for the exposition of God's written word is also God's word. After the reading of the text to be preached, you hear me saying something like "Living God, we believe You inspired the words we just read. Will You now make them come alive in us like never before."

I love it how after the service, one of you comes to me and says, "You preached that sermon just for me!" Well, yes, I had you and everyone else in the room (the whole world!) in mind as I prepared it and spoke it. But, no, I did not preach it just for you. But Jesus did! He is the Preacher in the service. As the preacher preaches, The Preacher preaches. I love it when visitors say afterwards, "How did you know me so well?" I do not! But the Good Shepherd does. He knows us all by name. And He speaks to each of us in the context of the exposition of His word!

(3) He speaks, third, through special gifts of the Holy Spirit. I am thinking particularly of the gifts the apostle Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 12. The gifts of "prophecy" and the gifts of "the word of knowledge" and the "word of wisdom."

The gift of prophecy is, as Michael Green explains it, the Spirit-enabled capacity to speak a particular word from God to a particular people at a particular time for a particular purpose. The gifts of the word of knowledge and word of wisdom are the Spirit-enabled capacity to speak a word of insight which the speaker would have never been able to know apart from the work of the Spirit.

In His mercy toward Me, Jesus has spoke to me through such gifts at a number of turning points in my life. For about twenty years a woman who lives in Los Angeles regularly prayed for me. And she would periodically call me on the phone with “a word” for me which could only have come from the Lord. She would, at the time of “receiving” the word, not know what I was wrestling with. Yet she would call with an insight about my circumstances that went right to the heart of the matter! The word often came in the form of a picture, for which she was usually given an interpretation, with specific Scriptural references. A number of you have been used by the Shepherd to speak such words to me.

(4) A fourth means Jesus uses is books. This has been a major way He has spoken to me. He has spoken to me through authors like E. Stanley Jones, J.I. Packer, Jim Houston, John Piper, Dallas Willard, C.S. Lewis, Lesslie Newbigin, Thomas Kelly, Parker Palmer, ... on it goes. Most recently He has spoken to me in powerful ways through Ann Voskamp, in her book *A Thousand Gifts*. I would love to list all the ways I heard the Voice of Jesus through Ann’s voice ... but we have to keep going!

(5) Fifth, He speaks through trusted friends and counselors. As we open our hearts to other believers, they are led to respond with just the right question or suggestion. The word comes out of their minds and mouth, but also from the mind and mouth of the Saviour. The words have the quality of a straight arrow, or surgeon’s scalpel. I would love to share some recent examples of how a number of you have been the voice to me lately. But I do not want to embarrass you by naming you in public.

(6) Another means of communication I will simply mention, for it would take a whole sermon (or series of sermons) to unpack. He employs angels. The Saviour spoke through angels. Look at the Christmas story: look how the Lord brought His word to Zachariah, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, through angels. Read the book of Acts to see how often Jesus sent His word via His heavenly Fed-X corps. Many of us can tell of experiences that seem to have involved angels.

(7) Seventh, the Good Shepherd speaks through dreams. This is a more dicey means, as the source of dreams is complex. But our Lord, nevertheless, speaks in and through dreams. We see Him doing this throughout the Bible: In the lives of Abraham and Sarah. In the life of Joseph, son of Jacob. In the life of King David. In the lives of the apostles Peter and Paul. We see this in the life of Joseph the carpenter, the adoptive father of Jesus: four times the Lord speaks to him in a dream. According to the prophet Daniel, God even spoke to Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon through a disturbing dream, the interpretation of which God gave to Daniel.

How many of our provincial, national, and world leaders have recurring dreams about what is going on in the political and economic realms but no one with whom to process them? We are hearing stories, hundreds of them, of how Jesus is meeting our Muslim friends in dreams.

We need to listen to our dreams. Yes, they often emerge out of our fears and longings. But they can, at times, be of God, especially if they have to do with the advancement of the kingdom of God.

(8) Eighth, the Good Shepherd speaks through circumstances. The problem, of course, is circumstances are so flexible – things can change overnight. But He does often warn us by putting obstacles in the way. He does often woo us by opening doors we could have never opened ourselves.

I have to keep moving!

(9) Nine, He speaks by giving us peace. As we stand at the fork in the road, deciding which way we are to go, He works a deep sense of assurance that one of the ways is of Him. "A peace that passes understanding," as Paul called it. A peace we could never have worked up ourselves. A peace that seems to say, "Here is my path ... walk in it."

(10) Tenth, He sometimes speaks by creating in us a "restlessness", or better, a "holy discontent." He creates in us a sense that something is off, or something is missing, or that there is more, and we are restless. We need to especially listen to prolonged restlessness. It may be the Shepherd's loosening us up for a new chapter in the adventure!

(11) Eleventh, the Master speaks to us through our consciences. Conscience is the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong. Huckleberry Finn once said, "Conscience takes up more room than all the rest of a fellow's insides" (E. Stanley Jones, *The Way*, 304). Now, conscience does not always know right from wrong. It has to develop the capacity for discernment through training, by being trained by an authority greater than itself -- by God's Word. But once trained, conscience can be a channel for the Shepherd's voice.

(12) And twelfth, the Good Shepherd speaks to us through what the church throughout the centuries has called "the Inner Voice." He speaks in that deep place in our souls. He speaks from within us. "Abide in Me, and I in you." He speaks from deep within us. Using pictures, sentences, phrases that have the "ring of truth."

Now, here is where things can get tricky. For there are other possible sources for "inner" voices. One of course is all the noise around us, from radio to TV to video games to computers. Another is our fears. Still another is our longings, especially those deep, deep longings which often have a feel of homesickness. Yet another is Jesus' enemy, Satan, the "father of lies", the "accuser of the brethren," the power of evil bent on destroying Jesus and all He creates and redeems.

And there is the Shepherd Himself. Dwelling with us, and in us, through His Spirit, speaking to us from deep within.

So we come to the second question begging for an answer.

[B] How can we discern Jesus' voice from all the other voices? "Samuel." How can we discern it is Jesus' voice calling? Are there some objective safeguards around the "inner voice"?

Yes there are! Many. Let me point to just five that are helping me the most right now.

(1) The inner voice always speaks in concert with Scripture. Always. The shepherd does not speak with a forked tongue; telling one group of people in one period of history one thing, and telling another group of people in another period another thing. He has already definitely revealed Himself and His will for human well-being in Scripture. Any new leading will always square with what we have already received in His Word.

So, for example, the inner voice will never call us to do something that goes against or around the Ten Commandments. Nor will the inner voice call us to set aside His Sermon on the Mount. "Test the spirits," says the apostle John.

So, the authors of the Theological Declaration of Barman, written during the rise of Naziism, says:

If you find that we are speaking contrary to Scripture, then do not listen to us! But if you find we are taking our stand upon Scripture, then let no fear or temptation keep you from treading with us the path of faith and obedience.

The inner voice always speaks in concert with the Bible understood on its own terms. This says to me that I need to saturate my mind and heart in all Scripture. You likely know that when FBI agents are trained to look for counterfeit money, they are not shown a counterfeit bill. Rather, they so master the real thing, that when the counterfeit passes by them they instantly recognize something is off. If we soak our minds and hearts in and with the living Word, we will be able to more easily hear Jesus' voice above all others.

(2) The Inner voice always speaks in concert with the character of Jesus. Always. So basic. The inner voice never speaks out of character.

This was driven home to me while we were living in Manila, the Philippines. Every Sunday morning for about six weeks in a row, while I was home getting ready to go to worship, I kept hearing in my mind a voice saying, "Are you really going to preach that sermon? Everybody already knows that stuff. You are going to bore them. Besides, it is all so naïve."

I could not shake off the words. As I made my way to the church building, they kept walloping me. I even heard them during the time of singing before the sermon. Six weeks! Finally I shared the turmoil with Sharon, my most trusted spiritual partner. I will forever be grateful for her response. She asked, "Darrell, is that the kind of thing Jesus would say? Is that the way He would speak?"

And I came to realize that if Jesus thought the sermon was bad, He would say so, straight out! And He would tell me how to fix it or re-do it. He is infinitely more concerned about the quality and integrity of the preached word than I am. He wants His sheep to be fed well. And He would not wait to tell me two hours before that start of worship that I am off the mark! He would tell me when I had enough time to do something about it, time to cook a different meal.

The Good Shepherd always speaks in concert with His character, which says I need to immerse myself in the four Gospels more so I know His character! The word "disciple," after all, means student, learner. I need to "learn Christ" as Paul tells the Ephesians (Ephesians 4:20).

(3) A third safeguard: The inner voice always tells us to do the "Jesus-like" thing. The inner voice always calls us to do what He does.

I could have said that the inner voice tells us to do the loving thing, but love means different things to different people, and is, therefore, too subjective a guide. I could have also said that the inner voice tells us to do the truthful thing. But that tends to be a justification for our own opinion! The "Jesus-like thing" always involves both love and truth; a delicate, but powerful blend of love and truth, truth and love. Jesus' love never plays games with truth. And His truth is always spoken in love. The inner voice never side-steps truth in order to love, and always loves when doing the truth.

(4) Number four safeguard: The inner voice draws us closer to Himself. When He addresses particular issues in our lives, He always does so for the greater good of drawing us closer to Himself. His words may sting. His words may make us uncomfortable. But they always draw us to Himself.

Satan's voice does the opposite. That voice is full of accusation and condemnation. His voice seeks to make us feel badly; to make us feel so badly that we want to withdraw from communion with Jesus. Jesus' voice always calls us to Himself, even when correcting us.

(5) And number five: the inner voice does not argue. Conscience will argue. The inner voice does not. As E. Stanley Jones puts it: "The Inner Voice is authoritative, quietly so. It does not argue. It commands, and its commands are self-authenticating." The Good Shepherd just says it.

I hesitate to share yet another person experience, but my experience is the only one I know from the inside. I shared it with those of you who were with me at Family Camp two years ago.

January 1996. Four growing children, all active in extra-curricular programs. It was an especially tight month financially. As I prayed about it, I thought I heard, "sell the tent-trailer."

Two summers before we had bought a Coleman tent-trailer to use on our vacations. Sharon and the children loved to camp. I enjoyed it, but I am not so crazy about all the dust and dirt. My ideal campsite is one with big trees all around – clean trees, with grass all the way to the edge of the lake or stream. Short of that, I would always try to mitigate the dust and dirt by covering the campsite with leaves or pine needles. So to make our vacations more enjoyable for all of us, we bought a used tent-trailer. Hard top, slide out sides, screen door, sink and stove. Really cute!

"Sell the tent-trailer."

I told Sharon what I thought I was hearing. Thankfully, she did not respond positively. I say "thankfully" because, although I could see the benefits of selling it, I had become attached to it. Especially because in the early morning and late evenings I could spread out my books and notebook on the table dirt free! Sharon felt we out to wait awhile. Phew!

February. Another tight month. I pray, and hear again, "sell the tent-trailer." I begin to see some benefits of doing so, like being able to pay off the car loan faster. But I resist: I was in love with my fantasy of camping dirt-free.

March. Another tight month. I pray, and hear again, "sell the tent-trailer." I share with Sharon, and this time she concurs this is probably the Lord's direction. But, thankfully, she concurs that we will wait a bit longer to see how things go.

April. Ah, April. Tax month. We owe more than we had expected. Tight. Really tight. A bit depressing. At least Easter was in April that year! I pray. I hear, "sell the tent-trailer." I share with Sharon again. She tells me she can let it go. Our older son's football practice left us only a two week window in the summer anyways, so she said she could let go of our "little cottage." I too say I can let go ... but not just yet. "Let me think it through a little more." Typical of me.

May. You guessed it. Tight again. We pray. I hear ... again ... "sell the tent-trailer." The next day I took out an ad. Two days later, the trailer was gone.

Throughout the five months of wrestling, the Voice never once argued with me. Just, “sell the tent-trailer.”

That has been the pattern when wrestling with even consequential matters. I have prayed, sought input from others, thought, prayed, thought, wrote in my journal.... but kept hearing the same thing, usually very short. But I keep wrestling with Him: “But what about this? What about that? What about the implications for this group? What about the implications for that group?” And I kept hearing the same thing. He does not argue. He just says it. Until we do what He says to us.

“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep. I know My own. I call them by name. My sheep hear My voice. And they follow Me.”

He speaks ...

in and through Scripture,
in and through the preached Word,
in and through the unique gifts of the Spirit,
through trusted friends and counselors,
through recurring dreams,
through open and closed doors,
through inner peace,
through prolonged restlessness,
through trained conscience.

And through a voice from within,
that always speaks in concert with Scripture,
that always speaks in concert with the character of Jesus,
that always tells us to do “Jesus-like” things,
that always draws us to himself,
and that never argues.

So, once more I invite you to be still. And to say: “Here I am, Lord. Speak, Your servant is listening.”