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HEARING GOD

I believe that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, but it is, at times, confusing and perplexing. Dallas Willard has a very wise teaching in his book, Hearing God, that I would like to share:

“The Principles Are What Count

“In order to qualify as the voice of God, a thought, perception or other experience must conform to the principles – the fundamental truths – of Scripture. It is the *principles*, not the incidentals, of Scripture that count here. Study of the Scriptures makes clear that certain things are fundamental, absolute, without exception.

“If the Bible says something once, notice it but don’t count it as a fundamental principle. If it says it twice, think about it twice. If it is repeated many times, then dwell on it and seek to understand it.

“What you want to believe from the Bible is its message on the whole and use it as a standard for interpreting the peripheral passages. The principles show up with stunning clarity as we become familiar with the overall content of Scripture. You must distinguish between the peripheral messages of Scripture and the essential messages. Keep to the principles in interpreting the voice of God.

- “For example, in 1 Corinthians 11, we find women being advised not to have short hair and men being informed that on them long hair is shameful. Such things are clearly *incidental*.
- “On more serious matters, in Mark 10 Jesus tells the fine young man who had come to him that he must sell all he has and give the proceeds to the poor. This, too, contrary to what many have thought, *is incidental to people generally*, for Jesus did not ask this of everyone he met. Because it is not a teaching emerging from the whole of Scripture, it should not, without further guidance to you personally, be taken as God’s word to you or anyone else.
- “We are discovering principles when we hear Jesus saying that the most basic of all commandments is *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength*, and *Love your neighbor as yourself* (Mark 12:30); and *Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it* (Mk 8:35); and *Strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well* (Lk 12:31). No specific word that is from God will ever contradict such principles.
- “Beware the Spiritual Panacea. Any voice that promises total exemption from suffering and failure is most certainly not God’s voice. Many spokesmen for God have offered God and his Bible as guarantees of health, success and wealth; as a guarantee that you will not get cancer or even a cold and that your church will never split. To the question from the old hymn: ‘Shall I be carried to the skies, on flowery beds of ease; While others fought to win the prize, And sailed through bloody seas?’ These people shout, ‘Yes, most certainly!’ We must not be misled by wishful thinking. We are going to go through the mill of life like everyone else. We who are disciples are different because we also have a higher life – a different quality of life, a spiritual, eternal life – not because we are spared the ordinary troubles that befall ordinary human beings. *Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues from them all.*”

In considering these insights from Dallas Willard, I thought of some other “peripheral” teachings in the Bible that have caused endless problems for believers who thought they must be obeyed without reflection:

- Jesus’ great commission in the book of Mark, Mk 16:15-18, repeats the commission found in many places in the New Testament: (a) *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature* (b) *Baptize those who believe* (c) *Cast out demons* (d) *Speak with new tongues* (e) *Lay hands on the sick and they will recover.* But Mark mysteriously includes the charge: *They will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly it will by no means hurt them.* Where in the world did that come from? We don’t know, but since it is not found elsewhere in the Bible it is a teaching that we may consider to be

figurative but not literal. *I give you authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you.* (Lk 10:19)

- “Turn the other cheek.” This teaching of Jesus is referenced twice, in Matthew 5 and in Luke 6, and Jesus followed its dictum when it served the purpose of God. But when his neighbors in Nazareth tried to throw him off the precipice he did not permit them to do so but walked through them untouched (Luke 4), and when an officer struck Jesus as he stood before the High Priest, Jesus did not turn the other cheek but rebuked the officer by questioning his right to do such a thing (John 18). Our problem comes when we take Jesus’ teachings as laws or rules that must be applied without thought or prayer.
- “Judge not, lest you be judged.” This is another commonly misused teaching of Jesus. To ‘judge not’ is defined in Luke 6:37 as to ‘Condemn not,’ and to ‘forgive.’ It is also defined in James as ‘to not speak evil against anyone.’ But in Matthew 7, after Jesus says to judge not, he goes on to explain that we should first take the log out of our own eye, and then we will see clearly to remove the speck (which necessitates judging) from our brother’s eye. Then Jesus says that we should not cast our pearls before swine, and it surely requires that we do some judging in order to decide who is a swine. And in Matthew 18:15, Jesus has a detailed teaching about how to deal with a brother who sins against you: not by turning the other cheek, and not by ‘not judging,’ but by going to your brother, in love, and confronting him with his sin. Jesus even says that if he refuses to repent and be reconciled to you, you should treat him as a tax collector; i.e., have nothing more to do with him. Finally, Paul has a clear teaching in 1 Corinthians 5 that we believers are not to judge unbelievers who are outside the church, but that we have an obligation to judge believers, brothers, members, of the church. (This is one of the most difficult admonitions in the Bible, but just as parents must exercise loving discipline when one of their children becomes rebellious and disobedient, so must the church.)
- All of this leads to a very important point: God commands us to worship Him with our minds, and we cannot treat Jesus’ teachings as a list of laws. Yes, there are lists of sins that are forbidden – and lists of things we should do and attitudes we should have (See Mt. 5-7; Romans 12-15; 1 Cor 6; Gal 5; Eph 4-6; Col 2; Jas 3-4). But note that the grace of God is always given to us to enable us to do what the law simply forbade us to do.
- Consider the time when Jesus said to his disciples, *Now.....for him who has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one. His disciples said, Lord, look, here are two swords. And he said to them, It is enough.* (Lk 22:36) Later, in the garden, when Peter cuts off the ear of the High Priest’s servant, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, *Him who lives by the sword will die by the sword.* What is going on? For three years, everything that Jesus did and everything He taught demonstrated a life of love and a life that ran counter to hatred, violence, rebellion, and murder. Furthermore, if Jesus has suddenly changed directions and decided to rebel against the occupying army of Rome and the soldiers of the High Priest, two swords for 11 guys are hardly enough armament to do the trick. I will leave it to you to search the commentaries and the footnotes in your Study Bibles to figure out Jesus’ possible motive for saying this.
- The point is, for the above bullet, God really expects us to use our minds as well as our hearts in serving Him! Peter and the others were not exactly Einsteins. Even during Jesus’ last week with them, the disciples thought He was going to raise a big army and drive the Romans out and set Himself up as King. They just wanted to be sure they were sitting close to the throne. And even though I have the benefit of the Bible, I have done some things as a Christian and as a pastor that were so dumb they still make me blush when I think of them. If being dumb and spiritually insensitive were a crime, I’m sure I would be in an isolation cell in the Federal prison in Florence. (Please tell me that you can relate to this a little bit so I don’t feel like the only one.) God have mercy! And He has and He does.

So the next time you hear a new teaching, or have a weird dream or vision, or read a particular verse in Ecclesiastes - - and think that God has just told you to (a) start a new denomination with right doctrine (b) divorce your wife and marry Jennifer Lopez (c) assassinate someone you consider to be a political threat (d) commit suicide - - - - stop and reflect and pray and ask: Is this really something that Jesus would ask me to do? And maybe seek counsel from a mature Christian.

THE CALL OF THE WILD

Jack London published a book in 1903, when I was just a kid, named The Call of the Wild. It was about a boy’s dog that was stolen and became a sled dog during the Yukon gold rush.

When I was a pastor in Loveland, Doris and I bought a little cabin in South Park at an altitude of about 10,000 feet. Our cabin was near the little town of Fairplay, which was founded in 1859 during the Pikes Peak Gold Rush. The early miners said that merchants in nearby towns cheated them, but that they could get fair play at this little town.

One day, Doris and I, along with our big dog and little dog, Sonny and T. J., went in our pickup across the Continental Divide on a gravel road between Como (near Fairplay) and Breckenridge. At a high point on the road, near timberline, a man in a Jeep stopped us and asked if we had seen his dog, a beautiful Alaskan Husky. Several hours earlier he had stopped the Jeep to look at the scenery and let his dog run around. He said when the Husky smelled the mountain air and saw the grand vista it seemed to become energized and took off running down the mountain until it was quickly out of sight. It never occurred to him that his dog would do that since it had never run away from him before. Three or four hours later, as we were returning from Breckenridge, the man was still driving up and down the road calling out to his dog. It is not uncommon for dogs in such a setting to sense the call of the wild and run off into the wilderness where they are not prepared to survive.

During our years in Loveland, Colorado, the newspaper there ran a series of interviews with local members of the Rotary Club. One of the interviews was with the owner of a music store who was very involved in service projects with young people. The reporter asked him if there was a defining moment in his life. He said that moment came for him as a young man when he attended that social phenomenon called "Woodstock." He said that during those days something seemed to call to him or speak to him about his life, and he felt an exhilarating sense of freedom that became his lodestar.

Two or three years later, that man's name was again in the paper. He had been accused by several young men of pedophilia. He had used his involvement with the service club and with music as a way to get to know young men, etc. After a trial which was much in the news, he was sentenced to a long prison term.

There is a voice that speaks to every boy and girl as they grow into adulthood and sometimes even into middle age. It is the call of the wild. It is a seductive call to which our fallen, rebellious, human nature is particularly attuned. It tells us that any kind of boundaries on our impulses have been designed by legalistic religion, and by a mean old God who wants to rob us of fun, and by parents who are so old (some are even 40 or 50 years old!) that they don't know anything about modern life - - and that if we will throw off all restraint then we will enter into "freedom" and experience fulfillment in our life. Of course, it is a lie. *There is a way that seems right to a man, but it is the way to death.*

You probably have friends, acquaintances, family members, who have for many years surrendered to the call of the wild and now find themselves deeply lost in a wilderness where they are not prepared to survive. They are deeply enmeshed in their love affair with money, sex, alcohol, street drugs, prescription drugs, gambling, or a variety of other addictions, and it has pulled them away from God and from loved ones, but they still think they are "free." The first time I tasted alcohol, when I was 18 years old and in the Navy, I can remember thinking: "Oh, my gosh, this is wonderful! I am free! Free of fear, guilt, inhibitions, self-condemnation. This is what I have been yearning for." It was, of course, none of those things. It was the way to other addictions, to isolation, and to a deeper and deeper slavery. It was a way to death.

Listen to Jesus' conversation in John 8 with some people who apparently thought they were Christians, disciples, but were totally deceived:

- *Jesus said to people who believed in Him (John 8:31). (They had a head belief but not a heart belief.)*
- *You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. (That is, if you do the things I am teaching.)*
- *And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*
- *We are descendants of Abraham, they said. We have never been slaves to anyone....*
- *Jesus replied, I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave of sin, and you are not truly free.*
- *You are not children of God, you are children of the devil.*
- *I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I Am!*
- *At that point they picked up stones to throw at Him.*

This passage is certainly sobering. It tells us that people can believe they are free, that they are Christians, that they are sons and daughters of God, but they can be completely deceived.

The call of the wild speaks to us and offers us freedom without restraint.

The voice of the Lord and of our conscience speaks to us and invites us to a life of surrender, love, discipline, and boundaries, which leads to true freedom.

Which voice will we listen to?

QUOTES

The following quotes are from Bill Johnson and Francis Frangipane.

- (a) Jesus is not interested in raising up followers that only obey Him when they understand.
- (b) When Paul tells us to examine ourselves before taking Communion, it is not to see if we are worthy. We are not! It is to see if we are repentant, surrendered, thankful.
- (c) There is no revelation except by personal experience: salvation, presence of God, healing, baptism of the Holy Spirit, demonic deliverance, etc. You can have knowledge about these things by studying the Scripture, but without personal experience they are merely abstractions, without power to change your life.
- (d) The church is so accustomed to powerlessness that when God shows up people think it is the devil.
- (e) Human reasoning is the god of this nation.
- (f) Any part of your life that is hopeless shows that you are living in that area in deception.

THE FEAR (AWE, REVERENCE) OF GOD

A grandfather told about taking his one and a half year old granddaughter Avis to the zoo. He said it is a small zoo and he was totally blasé about seeing the monkeys and lions and bears. But when Avis saw them for the first time, her eyes got big and she started clapping and saying, “Ooooh! Ooooh!”, and he got tears in his eyes as he saw afresh the miracle of those strange animals.

Remember when your heart was awakened to the reality of God? Following that awakening in my life, I can remember arising early on a winter morning and going quietly into our kitchen, and as the wonder of knowing God and seeing the world through new eyes struck me, I fell on my knees onto the cold linoleum and tears flowed down my face in a stream.

God has a purpose for each of our lives, and that purpose starts with discovering Him. If you don’t know Him, you must search for Him with all your heart and choose, as an act of your will, to believe in Him. We can only know God through the humble path of faith. He is not a tame little household god that we can mold to our own desires, He is awesome and wild. He is the pearl of great price, for which a man should be willing to sell everything he has in order to possess that pearl.

God Bless Glenn

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