

Whose Voice Is It?

"...His sheep follow Him because they know His voice."

- John 10:4

No matter the trial or period of suffering, one of the most common struggles I run into with devoted Christians is the question of how to determine His will for them in a particular decision. In other words, they want God (or by proxy, me) to tell them what choice to make. It is when we reach this point in a session that I am grateful I am myself a fairly indecisive person and not tempted to answer such a request. There is enough pressure in facing the repercussions of my own decisions without having to take on responsibility for those of all my clients. While in most cases I cannot speak for what God would say to them about their dilemma, I do enjoy helping them figure out how to come to a decision.

Imagine being in John's shoes. He has been out of a job for several months and his entire family is starting to feel the financial crunch. This has put an inordinate amount of pressure on an already shaky marriage. John and Karen were already in marriage counseling before the layoff and have been making some progress thanks to their counselor, some hard work and a great support system at their church. However, one of their most common arguments has been about how they are going to survive financially. When he finally gets a job offer, the decision gets even harder. It seems the job will help with the finances, but is going to force them to move away from the support system that has helped them to make so much progress. If he accepts the job, it could be setting their marriage and family up for failure as they flounder alone in an unfamiliar city. But does he dare turn it down and leave his family in danger of financial ruin? John desperately needs wisdom from God to help him in such a situation. Is this new offer God's way out of their financial hardship or a temptation to sacrifice his family's spiritual and emotional needs for the sake of financial security? Both decisions could be Biblically justified, and both could be traced back to sinful motives, depending on how he looks at it. So what does he do?

John can analyze his financial status and the details of the offer. He can look for churches and counselors in the area of the new job, and he can gauge his family's feelings about the opportunity. However, at the end of the day there is nothing definitive that answers the question with any certainty. It is an ambiguous situation that demands wisdom and discernment. I believe that discernment comes from an ability to hear God's voice in his situation. The truth is that in a situation like this, there are really only two voices that any of us has to distinguish between: the voice of God and the voice of our flesh. Any motivation we have is likely coming forth from one of those two sources. Either our desires are driven by the subtle forces of our own selfishness, fearfulness and need for approval, or they are driven by a faith

and trust in God's leading. The reason such decisions are difficult is because both voices are speaking at the same time. Often wisdom is being able to separate the two clearly enough to be able to follow the right voice.

Sometimes the voice of our flesh is not too subtle. We desire things that are clearly not God-honoring and the real trick is finding the power to resist. However, in the more difficult decisions, it may not be about lying, cheating or stealing. It is in these moments that the deceptions of our own hearts can be difficult to see through. It might sound like the lure of selfish entitlement that we heard repeatedly in a comfortable, suburban upbringing ("You deserve to have nice things..."). It might take the tone of an anxious, critical parent ("That will never work out..."). Whatever words our past has given to the voice of our flesh, we must know its manipulations well enough to recognize when it is calling us. We will never successfully resist its voice until we can pick it out from our own inner monologue. If you are unfamiliar with your own fleshly voice, then it is time to take a hard look inward. What sins tend to trip you up every time? What lies do you tend to always fall for when they are presented? If you still do not know, ask your closest friends and family members because they can likely see it more clearly. Perform a thorough search to get familiar with it and you will start to see how often it is driving your decisions.

While we may already be familiar with the voice of our flesh, tuning our ear to the voice of the Holy Spirit can seem a great deal more like a foreign language. Voices do not stick out to us unless we have built a relationship with a person. Imagine walking through a crowded mall during Christmas season. Retailers, salesmen, and advertisements battle for your attention. One person is trying to spray you with the latest fragrance and another is trying to get you to take part in a survey. Christmas music plays in the background as you weave in and out of the crowds. Suddenly, you hear the voice of your son calling out from behind you. It is not hard to distinguish his voice is it? You can often pick it out from a crowd of voices, particularly if you are listening intently for it. What makes that voice stand out is your familiarity with your son. You not only know the accent and the words he typically chooses, but you also can distinguish the meaning behind the tone you hear in his voice. Is he scared or excited to show you something? Most any parent can tell the difference. The same principle is true for God. The more familiar you become with His character and personality, the more clearly you will hear His voice in the midst of the crowd calling out for your attention. Become as familiar with His likes and dislikes as you are with those of your child. Seek to understand His priorities and the passions of His heart. To gain this kind of knowledge takes time and effort, just as it does in any relationship, but the payoff is phenomenal in terms of the discernment and wisdom that is gained. Soon His voice will begin to stand out from the crowd. His voice will become as familiar as that of an old friend, knowing just the right words to say in the midst of a struggle.

In John's case, he was able to recognize the difference between his fleshly voice and the voice of his Father because of the spiritual growth he had experienced. He had begun to recognize how often he operated out of a fear and insecurity that he would not be able to provide for his family. His fear-driven overcommitment to his career had been a big factor in his marital problems. The fleshly voice in him told him not to pass up on a job when it was being offered to him. Who knows when another one will come along? As he read Scripture and prayed, though, the quiet voice of the Holy Spirit began to become evident. He knew God did not want him to make this decision out of fear. He also began to see how accepting this job (which would require long hours) and moving away from their support system would be a setup for falling back into his old patterns in his marriage. He could have ignored that warning and justified the fear that was in his mind, but his relationship with God and with his wife had become far too important. John turned down the job offer, lucrative as it was. To his surprise, his wife agreed with him and his move to put their relationship first helped them take a huge step forward in their relationship. Soon he found another job locally that, while not as lucrative, worked well with his newfound commitment to his family. John's wise decision was not born out of any supernatural knowledge of the future, nor did he have any kind of mystical experience where a voice boomed from heaven. He knew the voice of his Father because he had come to know Him so well. He had learned the difficult art of saying no to his own selfish, fearful voice in order that his Father's strong, comforting voice could rise to the surface.

Like John, we all face situations and decisions where an extra level of discernment is needed. The choices in front of us leave us scratching our heads in despair, clueless as to which path we should choose. Whether it is a decision about a job, a relationship, a church or an activity for our children, wisdom is found in hearing the quiet, persistent voice of our Father. If you are having trouble distinguishing the voice of your flesh from the voice of the Holy Spirit, you are likely not familiar enough, either with your own weaknesses or with the passions and priorities of your Heavenly Father. Correcting that problem may be a lengthy process, but it will be well worth it in the end. If the decision is looming and you don't have time for it, engage someone who knows you and God well enough to help you discern the difference. Even if the crisis is not hanging over you, start the process of discovery immediately. You will never regret getting to know the God who loves you and guides you. Draw close to Him and don't be surprised when those decisions get a little bit easier to make.