

“From Ask to Listen”

Soul Shift – part #6. Based on the book by Steve DeNeff and David Drury

Acts 8:26-40

[63] VIDEO ILLUSTRATION – PRAYER – RNM

[64-65] (Welcome, prayer, where we are in Soul Shift, etc.)

[66] Our current parsonage is the first tri-level house our family has ever lived in. I mention this fact because, for most of our lives, we’ve been able to yell from one floor to another and the kids could hear us. Whether they responded or not is another matter. But now we are finding that sometimes they are too far away to listen. Especially when they’re not home, which seems to be happening more often since they got driver’s licenses.

[67] When I was a youth minister, I had a game that illustrated how hard it is to listen to God’s voice. I set up some obstacles in the center aisle of the sanctuary and then asked for volunteers to navigate the course blindfolded. However, after we sent both kids out of the room, we secretly removed the obstacles. I told the rest of the youth group to give “helpful” noises as the first volunteer returned and walked up the aisle, gingerly stepping around chairs that weren’t actually there. However, when the second volunteer walked in, I asked the group to be quiet while one adult stood up front and simply said, “Just walk towards me. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

When we cut out the noise, we are much better at hearing God’s voice.

[68] Today’s shift is about going from “Ask” to “Listen.” Today I want us to consider whom we ask for advice and why. So let’s poll the audience for a moment. Who gives you advice? To whom do you listen?

I have some trusted sources, like my dad, my District Superintendent, my clergy friends, my wife. Yet sometimes I get conflicting advice from different people I trust. I believe all of them are wise, but when I hear differing opinions, it’s much harder to decide.

Proverbs 13:20 says, “Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.” (NIV) It certainly is good to surround yourself with wise, trustworthy friends. Yet even our friends can drown out God’s voice.

I am an information junkie. If there is anything I want to know, I'll look for it on a website somewhere. Today, google is a verb, as in, “I'll just google it.” We search the internet for practically everything. Yet rarely do we go to the scriptures first.

How often do we listen to God's voice? Or specifically, how often do we go to God first?

[70] Steve DeNeff from Soul Shift notes, “Throughout the Gospels, Jesus frequently spoke about the disciple's learned ability to hear the voice of God.” He cites these scriptures as examples:

- John 10:27 - “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”
- Mark 4:23 - “If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.”
- Revelation 3:20 - “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me.”

[71] At the transfiguration, God the Father spoke from a cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” (Mark 9:7) Even the disciples who literally walked with Jesus had to learn to listen to God's voice.

We live in a culture inundated with asking. There are petitions, polls, customer surveys. There are radio shows, blogs, YouTube channels, late night talk show hosts. Everybody has an opinion.

The only way we will learn to listen for God's voice is to be still. And I think we are afraid of silence. We would rather drown in sound.

[72] To move from Asking others to Listening for God's voice, we need to find the in-between spaces in life where we pause, reflect, meditate, and simply sit in silence. It's OK to use other sources to make an informed decision, but there should be an order we follow. Instead of asking others and then praying about it, we should ask God first, then go to others we trust to confirm and pray over the decision together.

Sometimes another pastor says it better than I can, so let me share some more quotes from DeNeff on the difference between Asking and Listening:

- When we ask, we are always talking, so our minds are...busy. But when we listen, we are not talking, so our minds are...open to new directions.
- When we ask, ...our interests are confined to the things we want to know. But when we listen, ...we learn to ask according to the answer God gives us at the time. That becomes our subject of interest.
- When we ask, we expect an answer and want it to be clear and practical. We grow impatient with prolonged waiting. But when we listen, we are not in control of the One talking (God), so we are more patient and open to ambiguity.
- When we ask, the relationship with the One speaking (God) is peripheral. We value it only so far as it helps us to know God’s will. But when we listen, our relationship with God is the reason we are talking to him.¹

If we want to move from Ask to Listen, the question we may need to answer is, what does God’s voice sound like?

[73] I love the story about Philipp and the Ethiopian eunuch. For one thing, the voice of God was audibly speaking to Philipp. “See that chariot? Go over there.” But notice what God did not say. God did not say, “Help that eunuch understand my Word. Baptize him.” Philipp did not even suggest those things. The eunuch was doing the asking, and because Philipp was listening for God’s voice, he knew what to do without hesitating.

When God speaks, it’s often a strange request, something slightly uncomfortable. “Go up and talk to a stranger. Go sit with someone different from you. Be their friend.” Our conscience tells us that’s a good thing, but our resolve is weak. If you find yourself making excuses against what your conscience is telling you, you’re probably hearing God’s voice. Learn to listen and learn to obey.

The eunuch was hearing God’s voice as well. He was reading the scripture out loud. Did you know this is the best way to audibly hear God’s voice? To read the Bible? Friends, every Sunday we hear God’s voice in this place, when we read the scripture aloud. That is a wonderful gift.

¹ Steve DeNeff, Soul Shift sermon notes, 22.

[74] Of course, when we listen for God’s voice and read the scripture, we have to wrestle with biblical interpretation. How do I know that what I read is what God wants me to do? Let me give you a few ideas.

First, God’s voice will never violate God’s will. If what you think you’re hearing is not true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy (Phil 4:8), it’s not God’s voice.

Second, remember that just because something seems hard to do doesn’t mean it’s not God’s will. Listening to God takes time. You have to build up trust and understanding, and the more you try to listen to God, the more confident you will become.

If you want to know the difference between hearing God’s voice and hearing your own, ask this simple question: who initiated the conversation? Maybe the best way to know God is speaking is when the idea actually doesn’t originate in your own desires.

[75] We need to learn to listen. This world is not great at teaching us how to slow down. If anything, we are encouraged to go at breakneck speed, respond to every little impulse immediately, send an email, send a text, send a tweet, and do it now. God rarely works on our time scale. So we have to cultivate a spirit of listening. We can practice contemplative exercises, deep breathing, meditation. We can carve out silent times in our schedule, real silence, not silence while you’re on your device. My favorite way to talk with God is to go outside. Others find journaling helpful. Read Sarah Young’s Jesus Calling. It’s a fascinating book she wrote as she listened to God’s voice.

Most importantly, listen to the Bible. Don’t just read it. Let the Bible read you. Imagine the author is writing to you personally. What would you write back?

The year I most needed to hear God’s voice was 2003, the year I not only got married, I finished graduate school and was looking for work. It was that year I left engineering and entered the ministry.

How did I know that God wanted me to go into ministry? There was no shining light from heaven nor a loud voice. That would have been easy. Actually, the invitation came to me without asking. It was a message on the answering

machine, asking if I would consider working with youth and playing music for a church. I prayed about it, then I went to others I trusted. I asked them specifically (and yes, this included my wife): Do you think this is of God? Would this be a good idea for us? Finally, after praying about it, I trusted God was doing something in my life that I didn't see completely. If it was God's will, I believed God would bless it. And with the benefit of time, I can now see the wisdom of that decision.

[76] I want to take a risk right now with you. I want to intentionally build some time into our service to listen for God's voice. This might be a little awkward at first, especially if you've never done it. As I said, our culture doesn't like silence very much. So let's start small. Let's take two minutes together and contemplate this single prayer slide. Let this one thought settle with you for a moment, and think on this question: What are you saying to me, right now, God?

[76-Prayer slide. Show for two minutes of silence.]

(Continue with Prayers of the People.)

Memory Verse: Jeremiah 33:3 (NIV)

[The Lord says,] “Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.”

Reflection Questions

1. Whom do you often ask for advice?
2. What piece of advice have you heard that was unwise? Did you follow it?
3. Why is our world so filled with noise, literally and spiritually? What would it take for us to slow down and be still?
4. How often do you ask God for help? How often do you just sit quietly and listen or meditate?
5. How can you shift from Ask to Listen?