

Boxed in between his teaching on the relational and directive presence of God with us via the Holy Spirit (Jn. [14:15-31](#), [16:4-15](#)), Jesus says these most enlightening words in John 15:1-17,

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

[Last week](#) we began a series on developing both competency and confidence in “hearing what God the LORD will speak” ([Ps. 85:8-13](#)) as the psalm Chaz read to focus our attention. Hearing God is our focus, but with the caveat that Hearing God is not an end itself, but rather a vital component of life that can only be described as **a conversational companionship with God**. Conversational companionship is the kind of life God intends for us as humans and the kind of life that Jesus himself modeled for us. Our goal as disciples following Jesus’ “footsteps as a way” (Ps. 85:13), is to [become like Jesus](#), relating to God, ourselves, and others in the way God intends for us.

Because our goal is healthy, transformative, and eternal relationships, we should be aware of our motives and misunderstandings when it comes to seeking to Hear God. We must recognize in ourselves the tendencies to treat God like a divine parental ATM or the master of a house to whom we are indentured, rather than as a kind and generous father, and companion on a shared journey.

Relating to God as Father rather than “master,” and abiding with him as, using Jesus’ word, “friends,” does not mean that we treat God irreverently, nor that we consider ourselves equal. Yet it is a correct understanding of who God is (our Father in heaven), and his intent for us (companions and friends), which informs and shapes how we communicate with God.

But let’s be honest; when we talk about hearing God, guidance is the first thing that comes to mind. If we hear God speak, we assume he is speaking to direct us, which at times, he certainly is. Most of our prayers are for God to show us something, to give us a word to help us navigate circumstances, a word to help us understand what is happening in and around us, or a word to provide us with clarity on a decision. We want to know what to do and who better to ask than God?

For most of us, guidance is the starting point for both desiring to Hear God and understanding what we hear from God. And there is nothing wrong or abnormal about starting here. While our ultimate goal is a conversational life with God, an experience more than guidance, there is no need to skip over where we all begin. So, today we will look at three mistaken ideas about how God speaks and three corresponding guidelines for hearing God that will help us start to develop some competencies right where we all begin.

These mistaken ideas about how God communicates to us can inhibit us from receiving and experiencing the very thing we desire: clear direction. When used to light the way, these mistaken ideas cause us to misstep and stumble along or off the path entirely. And so, we abandon the pursuit of learning to hear God, or we cycle through program after program with only momentary success.

But conversely, these missteps can also help us recognize the guardrails we can use to keep us stable along the road. So, if we can acknowledge the missteps and where we fall into making them, then we can grab hold of the guardrails and more confidently walk the path of life with God. Make sense? Okay, let’s jump in.

1. **MISTAKEN IDEA TO LET GO OF: God Speaks a message a minute.**

Dallas Willard argues that according to this view of the daily path, “God is either telling you what to do at every turn of the road or he is at least willing and available to tell you if you would only ask him.”¹ As good as this mistaken idea sounds, the problem is, our biblical record and much of shared experiences simply do not back up this idea.

Quick remembering will suffice. In the beginning, God could have created robots to follow his commands. Still, it’s clear by chapter three that he didn’t—both positively in the responsibilities given to Adam and Eve, and negatively in the choices they make. Even when God gave details for life together in Exodus through “the law,” he did so only as a temporary measure until the maturing of time and his plan, [as we learned in Galatians](#). There is no indication in any of our New Testament writings either that even the most vocal and visual leaders were constantly receiving communications from God. Don’t mishear me, the women and men of our scriptures absolutely did receive communications from God. Yet, we have to remember that there is more silence in scripture than space. There are significant gaps in time between guiding conversations in the accounts of the early church in Acts, for example. While we read chapters one to twenty-eight as back-to-back-to-back

¹ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God*, 76.

evidence of God's constant speaking and working in and through his people, the story unfolds in-real-time over somewhere between 30 and 40 years! Finally, we do not see in the all-important life of Jesus either him hesitating in conversation or circumstance to ask, "Now what do I do Father?" or the Father directing every *detail* of Jesus' life and ministry.

What we do see, however, is that Jesus' words and actions were in-step with the will of the Father. Jesus knew the Father (spent time with him in quiet places and common worship), and so **Jesus' words and actions were not dictated movements but rather the free initiative of a loving Son who understands the Father.** As Jesus said in John 15, "I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."

You see, the first mistaken idea distorts our picture of Hearing God in two ways. First, it leaves us at best immature children always needing our helicopter parent to tell us what to do, or at worst, we reduce the life of faith to a robotic need to conform to programmed directives. Initiative and freedom are removed, **and so is the responsibility that matures us.** The idea that God will speak to us a message a minute gives us an image of God that assumes that all that God desires is mindless or naïve conformity to his wishes.

This picture of what God wants leads to the second distortion: the wrong idea of who God speaks to most consistently. While our scriptures are full of stories of God talking to all kinds of people at various levels of maturity and faith, what we notice most evidently, is that "God speaks ultimately to the mature Christian."² That doesn't mean that God won't speak to people "new" or "young" in the faith. What it means is that God desires us to grow up in our faith, to move beyond milk to solid food, as the writer of Hebrews contends ([Heb. 5:11-6:2](#)). **What God intends for his children is for them to know how to live with him and to know him so intimately that they act out of love.** What we know in scripture and faith history is that God speaks most often with "those mature people who know how to live [with one another] and who know how to live with God."³ Think about the people in scripture who have conversations with God, not just heard his voice once or twice. People like David, for example. While David would be a great king, it was as a forgotten son cast-off to tend the sheep alone in which he developed a "heart after God," a heart that sought to know and love God, which would be the source of his conversational faith.

GUIDELINE TO HOLD ON TO: God speaks from love to love, so if you want to hear, seek to love.

Developing a heart for God is how we mature. Jesus described this development in John 15 tells us abiding in God's love, God's word abiding in us that bears fruit in our loving obedience. **God speaks from love to love** (to the maturing or love and those who love him). Willard describes the guardrail this way,

² Ibid., 77.

³ Ibid.

“When we love people, we want to please them. We don’t want this only to avoid trouble or to gain favor; it is our way of being with them, of sharing their life and their person...[We] get a sense of the larger power and larger life when [we] enjoy [reciprocated] love. When, in the manner appropriate to the people involved, two become one, they identify with one another, expanding their selves and their world. **The beloved, who both loves and is loved, does not want to order the lover about; instead, the beloved desires that the lover understands what is needed so that no orders are necessary. Love is designed to be our primary way of ‘being with’ others.**

In this union of souls—in the conscious delight and rest in one another that is the highest and most exalted relationship possible between two persons—it is not right for one person to always tell the other what to do. **And so it is in our union with God, a person both loving and beloved. He does not delight in always having to explain what his will is; he enjoys it when we understand and act upon his will. Our highest calling and opportunity in life is to love him with all our being.”⁴**

God desires us to take the initiative, freely speak, and act, to take responsibility for ourselves and one another because we know him. Because we know his heart, having made our home in his love and his words.

“God’s speaking to us is intended to develop into an intelligent, freely cooperative relationship between mature people who love each other.”⁵ If at every turn, he is telling us what to do, we will not mature into the people he intends us to be. So, if we are to hear God consistently and confidently, then we must grab hold of this truth. We must seek to love him with all of our being. And we must hold on to the guideline that because he loves us and desires we return that love, then he wants us to freely take initiative and responsibility in what we know of him.

Mistaken Idea to Let Go Of: God speaks a message a minute.

Guideline to Hold To: God speaks from love to love, so if you want to hear, seek to love.

2. MISTAKEN IDEA TO LET GO OF: All I need is the Bible.

The second mistaken idea we have about how we hear God is that **all that we need is in the Bible.** Again, don’t mishear, I am not saying the Bible is not required, nor that the word of God is not sufficient to make us wise for salvation and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and training in righteousness ([2 Tim. 3:16-17](#)). The Bible contains instructions that are clear and universal. It also provides wisdom and insights which are necessary for us to know and love God, which is why Jesus tells us that when we live in his love, his words, God’s words, abide in us. **What I am saying is the Bible**

⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁵ Ibid., 39.

will not tell you what to do for most of the *daily details* in your life. To claim that all we need is in the Bible is often an excuse to keep us from actually having to learn to talk to God ourselves. In taking this misstep, we either live by “generalities” of God’s truth, distilling the principles from scripture that if we hold to them will ensure our successful or righteous living, all-the-while keeping us from taking personal responsibility in an intimate relationship. Or, we go to the other end of the spectrum.

Many who have the mistaken idea that the words in the Bible will speak—individually and specifically—to every situation that they find themselves, go searching for a particular word, playing what one author calls “Bible roulette.” We flip open a page, thinking God will guide our act of chance in an attempt to force God to give us a message. But conversation cannot be forced; it requires waiting and listening.

The irony is that a view that all that we need is in the Bible (as a general guide to life or through biblical roulette payoffs) is that we actually fail to take the Bible seriously and thus experience what the Bible tells us can be true for us: a conversational life with God. The guideline we hold to which keep our steps steady is to **read the Bible realistically. God speaks to real people, so read the Bible realistically.**

GUIDELINE TO HOLD ON TO: God speaks to real people, so read the Bible realistically.

To read the Bible realistically, is to believe that what God did then, how he spoke, how people heard, how they interacted, communed, and communicated, is true still today. When we read the stories of David and Ruth and Moses and Elijah and Mary and Paul and Peter, we should read them believing that they were **real people who lived through those experiences feeling very much the same as we would have if we had been in their place.**

We can search the scriptures all day for the right principles, the Pharisees did that, but Jesus said that though they knew their Bible back and worth, ‘you do not have God’s word abiding in you,’ ([Jn. 5:38](#)). How can people understand the Bible but not have a relationship with God? Well, Willard argues that this happens when “they did not know and were not taught how to understand the experience of biblical characters in terms of how they experience life.”⁶ What we see in the Bible is God speaking to real people, in ways that they could recognize God’s voice and leading. The practice of *Lectio Divina* is meant to help you, and I read the Bible realistically, to immerse ourselves in the text and conversation with God *as humans who assume that God spoke and still speaks.*

Mistaken Idea to Let Go Of: All I need is in the Bible.

Guideline to Hold To: God speaks to real humans, so read the Bible realistically.

3. MISTAKEN IDEA TO LET GO OF: Whatever happens is God’s will.

⁶ Ibid., 45.

The third mistaken idea of how God speaks is the assumption that **whatever happens is God's will**. To put it differently, everything that happens must be God's guidance for us. The illogic of this idea is easy to see once pointed out. Think about it,

"If you wish to know what God would have you do, it is no help at all to be told that whatever comes is his will. For you are at that moment in the position of deciding what *is* to come [by your action or inaction]. Does it mean whatever you do will be God's will? [Let's] hope not.

Many things that happen are not the will of God, although he obviously does not act to stop them. For example, [Peter tells his faith family and friends in his second letter,] 'the Lord is not slow to fulfill his promises as some count slowness, but patient *on your account*, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.' (2 Pet. 3:9) Nevertheless, countless people do perish and fail to come to repentance.

God's world is an arena in which we have an indispensable role to play. The issue is not simply what God wants, but also what we want and will [, as Peter said, 'on your account']. With respect to many events in our future, God's will is that we should determine what will happen.

What a child does [says Willard,] when not told what to do is the final indicator of what and who the child is. And so it is for us and our heavenly Father."⁷

To live by the assumption that "what will be, will be" denies the very intention of our Father, who desires for us to take responsibility and act in a way that aligns with his heart for us and our neighbors.

Accepting that we have an indispensable role to play in salvation history can lead us to seek God's guidance even more fervently, and in seeking, as our Father told us through Jeremiah ([29:13](#)) and Jesus ([Matt. 7:7](#)), we will find that for which we search.

GUIDELINE TO HOLD ON TO: Hearing God speak doesn't make us right or righteous. Humility is required.

When we begin to take our responsibility seriously in our relationship with God, we must remember the final guideline to which we hold. The last guardrail to keep a grip on to help stable in our steps after Jesus is: **Hearing God speak to us does not make us right or righteous. Humility is required.** First, our scriptures are replete with God talking to people whose character is less than ideal and whose faith in him is even absent. So a claim to hearing God is not an indicator of godliness. Secondly, we know through scripture, history, and experience that "The infallibility of the messenger and the message does not guarantee the infallibility of our reception."⁸ We mishear, misunderstand, misapply. "God told me," has been the justification for many mistakes and atrocities in human history. We should not think ourselves absolved from the possibility of repeating history.

⁷ Ibid., 81-82.

⁸ Ibid., 53.

What is required in a life of hearing God is humility. **Courageous humility** that accepts our responsibility and our limitations. A secure meekness which allows us to act and speak with boldness clothed in kindness that treats others with dignity, trusting in the Father's desires and plans, not in our receptions and perceptions.

Mistaken Idea to Let Go Of: Whatever happens, is God's will.

Guideline to Hold To: Hearing God speak, doesn't make me right or righteous. Humility is required.

To sum up:

THREE MISTAKEN IDEAS THAT LEAD TO MISSTEPS

1. A message a minute.
2. All I need is the Bible.
3. Whatever happens, is God's will.

THREE GUIDELINES FOR GUARDRAILS

1. Seek to love.
2. Read the Bible realistically.
3. Humility is required.

What we need is not mere knowledge to play our role in God's story, for, as Paul says, "knowledge puffs up," fills us with air, makes our acting hollow, and our ground on which we tread, vaporous. What we need is, as Paul says in the same breath, is "love that builds up" ([1 Cor. 8:1-2](#)). And so, we return to the start, to abiding with Jesus in the love the Father. From this place, we will be able to receive guidance to live and obey unto the fullness of joy.

Let's pray.

COMMUNION

We receive this morning the symbols of a body broken, and blood poured out for the love of friends. Remembering and proclaiming together...

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. We are Jesus' friends if we do what He commands us. No longer does He call us servants, for the servant does not know what the master is doing; but Jesus has called us friends, for all that Jesus heard from His Father He made known to us. We did not choose Jesus, but Jesus chose us and appointed us that we should go and bear fruit and that our fruit should abide, so that whatever we ask the Father in Jesus' name, He may give it to us. These things Jesus commands us so that we will love one another.

In Jesus' name, we rest and live. Amen.