

ASK TO LISTEN

INTRODUCTION

A popular cell phone service advertised its nationwide coverage by showing a man in different places talking on his cell phone, saying, “Can you hear me now?”

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus frequently spoke about the disciple’s learned ability to hear the voice of God.

- “My sheep *listen to my voice*; I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27, emphasis added).
- “If anyone has ears to hear, *let him hear*” (Mark 3:23, emphasis added).
- “A time is coming and has now come when the dead will *hear the voice* of the Son of God and *those who hear* will live” (John 5:25, emphasis added). Perhaps he was not speaking here, only of death, for he said, “the time . . . has now come.”
- “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone *hears my voice* and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20, emphasis added).

It is as if Jesus was saying, “Can you hear me now?” And so there is a fifth SoulShift we must consider as we grow into the image of Christ: the shift from Ask to Listen.

TEXTUAL WORK: LISTEN TO HIM

Let’s start at the beginning of Mark’s gospel and notice the emphasis Jesus placed on listening.

Jesus began the parable of the sower in a peculiar way: “Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path” (4:3–4). After describing the four kinds of soil he added, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (v. 9). Later, when the

disciples came to him and asked what the parable meant, he explained each kind of soil to them (vv. 13–20) and then added the same peculiar phrase one more time: “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear” (v. 23). So the first and last words of this great parable are *listen* and *hear*. The whole parable is about how people listen to the voice and word of God. Spoken early in Jesus’ ministry, it became a frame around the entire gospel of Mark. It is as if Mark said, “What follows in this gospel will help you only so far as you know how to listen.”

A few chapters later, we join the disciples as they were walking with Jesus along the way. Just after Jesus told Peter that he was minded not like God but like men, Jesus took him and his friends up the mountain and was transfigured before them (see 9:1–8). Peter, James, and John watched in disbelief while Jesus’ clothing was changed (v. 3), and his face shone like the sun. Moses and Elijah appeared out of thin air and started talking with Jesus (v. 4). Soon after, a dense cloud formed over the mountain and settled on the disciples and their heroes. The disciples heard a voice from heaven say, “This is my Son, whom I love. *Listen to him!*” (v. 7, emphasis added). When the disciples looked up, “They no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus” (v. 8).

The implication is clear: There is no one who is God’s Son, no one who is chosen, no one to whom you should pay attention except Jesus! Listen to him. Suddenly, it is not the only message, but the man we should hear. Oddly enough, the disciples had been following Jesus for two years, doing everything he asked of them, and yet they had to be told to listen to him.

IMPLICATIONS: WE ASK BUT DO WE LISTEN?

Are you a follower of Jesus? Do you consider yourself a disciple? Then all of your life is learning how to listen. From the moment you were saved, God had this in mind for you: Learn how to come toward my voice. Learn how to hear what I am saying.

Our culture is too easily satisfied with asking. We have Google, Wikipedia, Answers.com, and reference books. We have learned a kind of sovereignty over the information coming at us. We even read our Bible like this. We pick the parts that are interesting and consider the rest irrelevant. It does not occur to us that God may have interests outside of ours, that he might want to speak to us from another part of the Bible. We are immature. We have not learned that part of growing up is learning a new set of interests and not simply increasing what few interests we already have.

We have mastered the art of asking—we ask preachers, authors, friends, and therapists what God wants us to do—but have we learned to listen? Here are some of the differences:

- When we ask, we are always talking, so our minds are active and busy. But when we listen, we are not talking, so our minds are passive and open to new directions.
- When we ask, we want to know something, so our interests are confined to the things we want to know. But when we listen, we want to know what God tells us. 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.

By now, it should be clear that we are a society of asking, not listening. So how do we move from one to the other?

APPLICATION: MOVE FROM ASK TO LISTEN

Get alone. Practice the art of contemplation, of thinking slowly. Schedule a day alone with God at least once per month, and go somewhere without technology. Bring only your Bible and something to write with. Read silently or out loud to yourself, and listen for God to speak to you. Write down what you hear him saying.

Listen to the Bible. Don't just read it; hear it. Read it with long pauses in between. Read a phrase and meditate on it for a while. Interrupt with a question or protest. Think aloud. Imagine the writer actually saying the words to you. Then write your discussion in a journal. Tell someone else what you think you heard God say.

Be open to other ways God speaks. God may speak through your impulses, other people, or your circumstances. *Note: You may include a couple of personal stories from your own life when God used other means to speak to you. Be sure to explain how you knew it was God's voice and not your own.*

CONCLUSION

From the hour you first believed, God has been trying to speak to you: "Can you hear me now?" The mark of a mature Christian is learning how to listen to God before running to ask someone else.

Take a few moments now—before the end of the service—to listen for the voice of God.