

LAWS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Part 5: We must listen to God

We have been discussing laws of spiritual growth, that is what it takes in order to grow. I think most of us would agree that growth is a good thing. It's no fun to plant a garden and have nothing grow. It would be a sad thing to have a child who never grew physically, emotionally or mentally. The same is true for the spiritual life. We want to see growth. We must keep in mind the fact that spiritual growth doesn't come because of what I am doing. Spiritual growth takes place because of what I am becoming. One essential thing to becoming more like Christ is that we learn to listen to what God is saying to us.

Have you ever wished that you had lived in Biblical Times so that you could experience God speaking to you? Wouldn't it have been great to have God speak to you like he spoke to Abraham or Moses?

Psalm 103:7, "He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel.

The Israelites could point to many instances when God spoke to their forefathers. In the old testament, when there was very little bible written, God used angels, prophets, the casting of lots, a burning bush, miracles, handwriting on the wall. He even used a donkey. Wouldn't it have been great to have walked on the earth with Jesus and to have him direct your life? If you would have liked to have had that experience, I have good news for you. God is still speaking to his people.

Isaiah 50:4, "The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught."

According to that verse, God wants to talk with you. Can you imagine God saying to you every morning, "good morning! Can I have a little time to talk with you? I have some great things I want to share with you before you get started in your day."

Hearing from God is a normal thing. God is concerned about you every day of your life, and he wants to communicate his will to you so that you can have the very best kind of life possible. One of the keys to spiritual growth is to be able to hear and recognize God's voice in your life and then do what he says.

We must expect God to speak

1. GOD SPEAKS IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Sometimes he may lay it on the heart of another Christian to give you needed counsel. Sometimes God gives us the privilege of having a number of people around us who can help us to grow. At other times, God uses circumstances to direct us. The most important way God speaks is through his word. As we spend time reading and meditating on his word, the Holy Spirit who gave the word will take it and apply it to our spirits. A.W. Tozer has written, "I think a new world will arise out of the religious mists when we approach our Bible with the idea that it is not only a book which was once spoken, but a book which is now speaking." God is speaking, and listening to his voice and obeying is one of the keys of spiritual growth.

2. God speaks uniquely

God does not always speak to every person in the same way. He uses the method that he knows to be best for that person at the time. For example, Saul of Tarsus was a zealous, self righteous Pharisee who thought that he had it all down. It is not surprising that God revealed himself to Saul in a humbling way on the road to Damascus that left him blind for a while.

On the other hand, God's first words to a young Samuel were spoken in a quiet and gentle voice in the stillness of the night. God does not limit himself to a formula. He only spoke to someone through a donkey one time. There was no books written entitled donkey for dummies. God will speak to you in the way that is best for you, and it does not have to be the way He speaks to someone else.

3. God speaks progressively

It seems as though God's first encounters with a person are sometimes more dramatic than later encounters. The first talk between God and Moses was at the burning bush experience. It was a bright light that blinded Saul of Tarsus when Christ first confronted him. However, as each of these men grew up in his relationship with God, God did not always need to use such dramatic means to gain their attention. It seems as though God's communication became more intimate and personal as they grew to know him better. We tend to look for the extraordinary, the exciting. God wants our will to be so submitted to Him, so in tune with His heart that all we need to hear His voice is a gentle whisper. God also speaks progressively by building upon what he is already taught you. He guides people step by step, day by day with each new word building on what he is said before. The exciting thing is that He never stops leading us. Until the day we die, He will be working in our lives directing us to that next level of trust in Him.

4. God speaks specifically

God does not speak in generalities. When he commanded Noah to build the ark, he did not leave it up to Noah's imagination to figure out what to do. He didn't say, "Noah, it is going to rain for 40 days and nights. You'd better take whatever action seems appropriate to you."

Genesis 6:13-16, "So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. 14 So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. 15 This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high. 16 Make a roof for it and finish the ark to within 18 inches of the top. Put a door in the side of the ark and make lower, middle and upper decks."

God gave Noah some very specific instructions, and the same was true for the temple building. God didn't say, "I want you to build me a temple. Get together and brain storm and build it the best way you know how." Sometimes God may put something in your heart that is as clear as it can be by faith. God speaks, and you know what he is telling you to do.

After I completed school, I waited for a while for a church to call me. One night, the pastor of the church I was attending: told me about a church in a nearby city that needed a pastor and set me up to preach there. I couldn't wait, so one night before I was scheduled to preach, I drove to the town and located the church building. When I saw it, my heart sank because it was a new building, and I felt that those people would want someone who had more experience than I had. At that moment, God put a verse of scripture in my heart and applied it to my situation assuring me that I would in fact become the pastor of the church. And around two weeks from that time, I became the pastor. No one will ever tell me that it was not God speaking to me. I know that it was.

So, god may sometimes speak to your spirit and give you guidance. Or he may speak to as you're meditating on his word. The next day, you may speak to you through a sermon you hear on the radio going to work. A few days later, he may bring some circumstance into your life. All of those things are like sandpaper sanding down his message to you until it takes the specific form that he wants. The key is to not miss any of the messages that God gives you in the process. Listen closely until you get the complete picture.

5. God speaks faithfully

How many things are there in life that you know beyond any doubt that they will happen? Can you be absolutely sure that you will have a job next week? Can you be sure that you will even be alive next week? We live in a very uncertain world, but there is one thing you can always be sure of. God will always do what He has said.

Isaiah 14:24, "The LORD Almighty has sworn, "Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand."

You can count on the fact that God will be true to what he tells you. If he said it, it will be done. For that reason, when you make decisions, nothing could be any more important than knowing that God is directing your decision. In his early years as his ministry accelerated, Billy Graham said, "I did not want numerical success to become our standard for discerning the will of God. We did not dare go forward without his direction." Seeking God's direction is no doubt one of the key factors in the success of Graham's Ministry, and so it is with our lives. If you want blessing, follow God's will because He always blesses what He orders.

We must be willing to listen

The issue is not and never will be whether God is speaking. The issue will always be are we listening. One of the most well known parables Jesus spoke was that of the soils, and this particular parable speaks to the issue of our listening.

There are three important elements in this story. There's the farmer, who represents God. There is the seed, which represents God's word. And then there is the soil, which represents our hearts and receptivity to the word. In the parable, two things stay the same. The one who sows the seed does not change, and the seed that he sows does not change. The reason for the different results is found in the soil. What the lord is telling us is that 100 people can listen to the same sermon, and some will receive it and be blessed. On the other hand, some may refuse it and remain unchanged.

1. Cultivate an open heart

Luke 8:4-5, "While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: 5"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up."

This is the picture of a path running through the garden that has been trampled on so many times that it is become hard. When the seed falls on that hard ground, it cannot penetrate, and the birds fly down and take it away. Some people's hearts are like that—they are so hard that the word of God cannot penetrate them. A hard heart is a barren heart—it does not grow. How do people's hearts become hard?

Some become hard because of fear of what God may say if they listened. Some harden their heart through pride. They don't think they need God. They have it all under control themselves. Others have a hard heart because of bitterness. Life is tough, and sometimes people build a shell around their lives so that no one, not even God has the chance of burning them.

One day, two monks were walking through the countryside. As they walked, they saw an old woman sitting at the edge of a river. She was upset because there was no bridge, and she could not get across on her own. The first monk said, "We will carry you across if you would like." She thanked the two men, and they joined hands, lifted her between

them and carried her across the river. When they got to the other side, they set her down, and she went on her way.

After they had walked another mile or so, the second monk began to complain. "Look at my clothes," he said. "They are filthy from carrying that woman across the river. And my back still hurts from lifting her. I can feel it getting stiff." The first monk just smiled and nodded his head.

A few more miles up the road, the second monk griped again, "My back is hurting me so badly, and it is all because we had to carry that silly woman across the river! I cannot go any farther because of the pain." The first monk looked down at his partner, now lying on the ground, moaning. "Have you wondered why I am not complaining?" he asked. "Your back hurts because you are still carrying the woman. But I set her down five miles ago."

Like that second monk, many of us are still carrying problems that should have been set down years ago. We are still bitter. When you become bitter, you build a wall around yourself so that you can't hear God.

Hebrews 3:7-9, "So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, 8do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, 9where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did."

2. Allocate time to listen

Luke 8:6, "Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture."

Luke 8:13, "Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away."

I understand that in that part of the world, there are giant sheets of limestone covered over with a shallow surface of topsoil. This ground looks good and productive, and seed cast here will germinate and quickly spring up into a promising plant. But, because there is no depth of soil, as soon as the sun beats down on the tender plant, it withers and dies without producing any fruit.

This person receives the Word and for a while he may live the Christian life. The problem is he has no root, and he will eventually fall away. Every Christian should have a deep root system that has been developed over a period of time as he spends time before God.

The psalm writer said, "For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation" (Ps. 62:1, NRSV).

Jeremiah said, "It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young. Let him sit alone in silence, for the Lord has laid it on him (Lam. 3:26-28)."

Sometimes, when we try to sit quietly, we begin to realize how dependent we are on noise—such as music, television, or conversation. Those things can be used to distract us from what is really going on inside. They often numb our pain or loneliness and keep us from recognizing the true state of our souls. Taking the time to go deep with God develops a relationship with him that will allow you to hear his voice when he speaks.

3. Eliminate distractions

*Luke 8:7, "Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants."
Luke 8:14, "The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature."*

The first soil was too barren. This soil is too crowded. This soil is not a desert; it is a jungle. This particular soil may be one of our biggest problems—our lives are too crowded. How many of you just don't have enough to do in your life?

This is the ground occupied by weeds and thorns. How much effort does it take to grow weeds in your yard? Have you ever planted weeds in your yard? Have you ever removed the weeds and said, "I'm glad it's over. I will never have to do that again." It is the same in the spiritual life. You will never have a time when you don't have plenty of things to distract you from God's best. At times, it will seem like you are fighting through a jungle of weeds in thorns just to get to church on Sunday. And like the weeds, distractions never go away permanently. They just start growing in another area of your life. If you are not regularly eliminating distractions, you will find that your spiritual life is being choked. God is speaking to you, but you don't hear him because you're listening to other things.

That reminds me of the story of a man who came to the big city from the jungle. He was walking down the street with another man. Cars and buses were whizzing by. People were talking, and the whole city was filled with noise. Suddenly, the man from the jungle stopped. He heard something. When the other man asked him what he was stopping for, he picked up a grasshopper. Thousands of people would have passed by the grasshopper that day and never known it was there because their attention was being distracted by so many other things. In the midst of so many distractions of life, we need to be focused enough on God that we can hear him in the midst of all that is going on.

4. Cooperate with what God says to you

Luke 8:15, "But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop."

Being good soil doesn't mean that you're always perfect or that you never fail. It means that when you do fall, you get back up. Good soil perseveres. God says if the soil of your heart is right, your life will eventually produce a harvest. Listening to God is the greatest privilege in life. Don't miss it!