

## God's Voice in the Midst of Confusion

James 3:13-18

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When Jesus was crucified, James sense of loss might have been more intense than any other Biblical writer. For James had not only leaned toward the voice of Jesus for three years like the apostles, Mary Magdalene and other disciples, James had quickened to Jesus' voice his entire life. He had heard it in the crib as his older brother played with him as a baby. The voice had been part of his childhood and adolescence as he and Jesus went to school together, played outside together, learned a trade side by side. Maybe it was because of his lifetime association with Jesus voice, that James, more than any other New Testament writer focused on helping believers continue to hear the voice of Christ even after the Lord's earthly life had ended.

In the book bearing his name, James teaches us that to hear Christ's voice after his earthly ministry, we have to seek His guidance with an undivided mind. James' advice, however, is hard to fully obey. For the Lord's voice is merely one of a chorus of voices, impulses and ideas that flood our minds every second. One writer says the world has a billion wicked thoughts with every breath.

Five time academy award winner Katharine Hepburn allowed Dick Cavett to interview her toward the end of her career. After discussing a dozen lesser topics, Cavett asked her about her religious beliefs. Ms Hepburn responded that she did not believe in religion although she did believe in Christ. She said that she did not need religion to guide her because her conscience was entirely reliable and her moral sensitivity fully formed. "I know" Hepburn said "right from wrong. I feel awful when I do the wrong thing and absolutely blissful when I act rightly. That is all the guidance I need."

I don't share Ms. Hepburn's clarity. My brain's too jumbled. In his book **Incognito**, neuroscientist David Eagleman writes that there are as many connections in a single cubic centimeter of brain tissue as there are stars in the Milky Way galaxy. That is why, the expert says, there is always a struggle going on inside our brains over the decisions and actions we contemplate. Eagleman writes, "the issue is that we're always cussing at ourselves or getting angry at ourselves or cajoling ourselves to do one thing or another. What we're seeing here is that there are different parts of the brain that are battling it out. And the way that battle tips, determines our behavior." As a simple example, Eagleman notes that when we are told to keep a secret, immediately at least two desires start up in our brains. The desire to be loyal to the one who trusted us with the secret and a competing impulse to tell others the personal information we have received. That battle will continue, the good doctors says, while our brain offers a variety of persuasive observations on both sides of the issue, to tell or not to tell. Our minds will not rest until we fully resolve to be closed mouth or until we let the secret out or until it is no longer necessary for us to keep the confidence.

Contemplative Christian, Martin Laird approaches the same phenomenon from a more spiritual direction and says that there is a cocktail party going on in all of our minds all the time. Our mother's voice is in there as is our father's. A recent article that we've read or possibly an interview we heard on the radio might also speak up. Maybe a portion of sermon will weigh in or a smattering of Scripture, but also the ideas of our friends, the words of a song, the model of someone we admire or secretly envy, an image we saw in a magazine, our own human lusts, fears and anxieties, patriotism, prejudice, self preservation, desire for vengeance, ego and dozens of other influences all join the voice of Christ in the great debate raging inside our intricate brains.

So how do we distinguish Jesus' voice from all the rest? James writes there are some key characteristics that can help us differentiate the Lord's wise guidance from the other participants in the cocktail party in our brains. Before he names those characteristics, however, he lists the hallmarks of the ideas in our brain which are not from God. Advice that has a source other than God, James says, is rooted in bitter envy and selfish ambition. Dr. James Adamson, in his commentary on James, says the phrase "bitter envy" is better translated as "fanatical ardor." It refers to a frame of mind that decides first what we want to do or believe and then gathers information to support our already made-up minds. We often call this process the art of rationalizing our behavior or pre-conceived notions.

If my desire is to be financially wealthy, then bitter envy and selfish ambition creates a fervor that causes my brain to gravitate toward voices that say lying, cheating, cooking the books etc is okay because it will help me get out of debt, provide me with more to share with others, get my kids a good education, keep my mother in a decent nursing home, allow my family to take a much-needed vacation. In a more deceptive manner, our brains might reject outright illegal or professionally unethical behavior but yield to the desire to drink too much because of the stress, repeatedly work an unhealthy number of hours or develop a hatred for competitors in our field.

If we desire to have a romantic or sexual relationship with someone outside our marriage, then our brains amplify those impulses that say "my spouse doesn't understand me," "I deserve a little pleasure for all the sacrifices I've made" "Its nobody's business but mine what I do." "If it looks like someone is really going to get hurt, I'll stop."

We see this process of fanatical ardor and selfish ambition all the time in politics. The process begins with a political notion: it will be better for me, my kind, even my country if my candidate is elected. Once that is decided, all manner of slimy deeds can be excused because we see the ballot stuffing, name calling, character slandering, deceptive robo-calling, under the table payments necessary to get our candidate, who is better for me, my kind, my country, in office.

Most of us can recognize this evil when it gets played out in horrible ways such as last week when D.C. police officer Richmond Phillips killed a woman who said she had given birth to his baby and then left that infant to die. What evil could make a man act that way? Somewhere in his brain, the demands of fanatical ardor to his own desires and his own ambition overwhelmed every other voice and he justified in his own mind, a despicable act.

James advises us to test the voices in our brain to see if they are rooted in our own selfish desires and ambitions. If they are, he says, they are not from God. Instead they are rooted in what he calls human, subhuman and demonic forces that will cause us and others nothing but heartache, chaos and destruction.

In fact, the presence of chaos is another way to gauge whether we are truly tuned into God or yielding to one of the many other noisemakers in our brains instead. Let's tell the truth, sometimes we don't learn the right path until we take the wrong path. God is the author of order, harmony, rest, not chaos. Therefore, when our lives, our marriages, our inner minds, our families, our careers are awash in turmoil, it is a pretty good indication that we are marching to the step of the wrong drummer. It is time to quit listening to old voices and tune in to God.

In contrast, James promises, God's voice is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. I could preach a whole sermon on each of these words, but we'll probably get the essence of the truth simply by reflecting on the words pure and peaceable. Pure refers to a sincere, single minded purpose. In this case, the purpose is to bring us into peace with God and those who share our devotion to Christ. God's guidance, it should be emphasized, does not always make us the most popular kid in school, the darling of the office or the winning candidate on the ticket. In fact, folks who follow the voice of ambition, fanaticism, destructive desires, selfishness, power or a hundred other forces may become angrier at us the more completely we tune into the voice of Christ. Some of those folks might be among our closest friends or even our

family. James is not promising that God's voice will make us feel at home in this world, he is saying that we can identify the voice of Jesus in our brains because He has only one intention to bring us peace with God and with the people who share our devotion to Christ.

So it's simple. To sort through the gobbledygook in our brains and discern the guidance of God, we merely have to test the voices. If the advice is rooted in ambition, jealousy, fanatical ardor or selfishness, it is not God's. If following the advice leads to general chaos inside our hearts and in every relationship we have including those who share our devotion to Christ, it is not God's. On the other hand, if the voice is rooted in bringing us peace with God and with all those who share our devotion to Christ, if it works to restore harmony and tranquillity in our souls, then we can be sure the guidance comes from God and can obey.

But there is the rub, isn't it? Even when we have identified Christ's voice among the cacophony banging around in our brains, that doesn't mean we will choose to do what Jesus tells us to do. Lets be honest, the trouble we get into is not usually due to our confusion, its due to our stubborn defiance. We know what the voice of God is telling us to do, we just don't want to do it. What can we do to strengthen our will to follow God?

James sheds light on this question with verse 18 in this passage. He says, "a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace." Righteousness means to be in a peaceful relationship with God and those who share our devotion to Jesus. To experience a harvest, a farmer must plant seed, cultivate, fertilize, water and wait. The same is true when we are trying to retrain our brains to do what God tells us to do. We want a pill, experience or insight that will change all of our feelings and patterns in one moment in time, but that is not the way it works. A harvest of living in peace with God and our brothers and sisters in Christ comes about after a considerable time of practicing new habits.

The good news is that by God's grace, these new habits can be formed in each one of us. In his book **How God Changes Your Brain**, neuroscientist Andrew Newberg gives us the benefit of years of research on how spiritual disciplines actually reprogram the brain to follow the guidance of God. Newberg studied the brain activity of Pentecostals as they spoke in tongues, Suffi Muslims as they danced before God, contemplative Jews as they pondered the Torah, Catholics as they prayed the rosary and Bhuddist as they chanted and found that when people reached out to a benevolent and loving God, their brains actually reprogrammed themselves to be more loving, trusting and peaceful. The same research revealed that when people commit to a vindictive, punitive, violent God, they suffer a special kind of brain damage that deprives them of the ability to be loving, tolerant, understanding, compassionate or at peace.

Newberg's findings teach us what we already know. When we practice regular prayer, contemplation, reflection on the loving, grace-filled goodness of God, our desire and ability to obey the voice of the Spirit is amplified. In like manner, if we brood, steep ourselves, mentally rehearse beliefs in a mean, vengeful, hateful God, chaos, confusion and horror take root in our lives.

This is why no lesser mind than Albert Einstein said the following: "Our time is distinguished by wonderful achievements in the fields of scientific understanding and the technical application of those insights. Who would not be cheered by this? But let us not forget that human knowledge and skills alone cannot lead humanity to a happy and dignified life. Humanity has every reason to place the proclaimers of high moral standards and values above the discoverers of objective truth. What humanity owes to personalities like Buddha, Moses, and Jesus ranks for me higher than all the achievements of the enquiring and constructive mind. What these blessed men have given us we must guard and try to keep alive with all our strength if humanity is not to lose its dignity, the security of its existence, and its joy in living."

Pastor Brian Houston says that a single minded Christian is the direct opposite of a narrow minded Christian. A single minded believer focuses her mind on one goal, to receive and obey the pure, peaceable guidance of God. In pursuit of that goal, she practices the disciplines of prayer and meditation on Scripture to strengthen her capacity and desire, or as Dr. Newberg would say, to reprogram her brain, so that she chooses to do what God reveals to her. This single minded devotion to Christ's voice, Rev. Houston says, broadens the mind, not narrows it. It opens up the believer to amazing capacities of love, tolerance, compassion, truth and peace not narrows her to petty, selfish, fearful, chaotic, fearful living.

Through a single minded devotion to the voice of Jesus, may we move from the narrow confines of chaos and confusion to the broad places of freedom, order and peace. Amen.