

“What God’s Voice Is Not”

Dear friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

Today we're in week three of our series on hearing God's voice. We're calling it our Kairos Series. Kairos is a word (in the Bible) used to speak about times when something significant is happening, moments in time when something takes place in which or (through which) God is working to get our attention and to speak.

We started, two weeks ago, with a more (general approach), talking about how (in general) we can hear God's voice. In his Word (in the Bible), that's where we know he is speaking. He's promised to speak (and he does speak) when we spend time in his Word.

He also speaks at times (we said) in and through life events. Sometimes in the bigger things that happen, moments (in life) that stand out: a job change, an unexpected medical challenge, the loss of a loved one. Sometimes in those “big” life-moments, we sense God is trying to tell us something. More often, (we said), it's in the smaller things, the more normal and (every day) things in which we hear (in a variety of ways) God's “still small voice” speaking to us.

Whenever that happens (we said), we're left with a choice. (We need to decide.) We can either hear it and listen to it and take it in and (do nothing) with it, or we can respond to it and actually allow it to impact (and change) how we live.

That's what God wants. That's the reason God speaks. When he speaks, he calls us to listen. And when we listen (and act on what we've heard), our lives are changed. And as (our lives) are changed, God is at work (in what's happening) to shape and mold us into the image and likeness of Christ.

Last week, Pastor Jonna (took it a step further), talking about how God speaks not only through his Word, (through the Bible), and (sometimes) through life-events, but also (at times) through other people. Often times, it's in (and through) a community of faith (like this) and the individual voices or the (collective voice) that we hear God speaking most clearly.

Now, regardless of how it happens, it never happens in contrast to his Word, no matter what it is, how it comes to us. (We need to be clear.) His voice is never in opposition to what we find in the Bible.

But when the people around us (in our faith community) have a chance to speak (into us) and what's going on in our lives, and when (what they say) lines up with what (we are sensing) God is already (saying) to us in his Word (or through certain life-events), that's when we need to pay attention and listen. God uses the community of the church (and its voice), individually and collectively, to reinforce and (at times) to become the voice he wants us to hear. That's where we've been.

Today we come to a topic that (at least for this week) takes us in a different direction. Today it's not so much what God says and how we can hear it, but (rather) what we can be certain God's voice is not. No matter what happens (and when it happens) and where and how it happens, and what (we think) we might be hearing, there are certain things that we can know for certain are not God's voice.

Let's turn to our story. From the eighteen chapter of Luke's gospel, it's a story that comes near the end of Jesus' public ministry, not long before he is to go to the cross and pay the price for our sin. It's the story of a man, a rich man (Luke tells us), a ruler (he says), who comes to Jesus with a rather straightforward and honest question.

He said, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal?” What needs to happen (he asked), to ensure that when that day comes, whenever it comes, (when I leave this earth) that I can be certain that there's a place for me in heaven? What do I need to do?

Now, before getting too far into the story, it's worth noting that, at least to this (rich man's credit), if nothing else, he was asking the question. He was thinking ahead. He was planning. He wanted to know (in advance) what needed to be done to make sure that he was ready for when that day arrives...and so he came asking.

In contrast, a lot of people in our world never even ask. They just think (or assume) it's going to happen. They have (somehow) already concluded or decided, (for themselves), how it's going to all play out.

“When that day comes, I already know I’m in. When that day comes, I’ll figure it out when it happens. When that day comes, we don’t know what’s going to happen, so we’ll just have to wait and see what’s going to happen.”

A lot of people don’t even ask. This man wanted to know. And so he came asking. “Good Teacher, (he said), what do I need to do to inherit eternal life?” Do you remember what Jesus said? Instead of answering the question, Jesus asked him a question.

He said, “Why do you call me good?” (He said), “No one is good except God alone.” And then he just left it there. As if to say, “You’re right. I am good, because I am God.” I’ll bet it was quiet when Jesus said that, caught this rich ruler (of a man) off guard.

Then Jesus said. (Do you remember his answer?) He pointed to the commandments. He said, “You know the commandments.” He listed them. He listed five of them, five out of the ten. And then he stopped.

That’s when the man said, “All these I have kept since I was a boy.” I’ll bet Jesus smiled, when he heard that. In Mark’s gospel, his version of the same story, it says (when he said that), “Jesus looked at him and loved him.” That’s an interesting note.

Then Jesus said, “One thing you lack.” (After all of that, there’s one thing you still need.) “Sell what you have, give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, and follow me.”

Luke tells us, “When (the man) heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy.” (Mark says), “His face fell...and he walked away.” And that’s when Jesus said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”

Hearing the voice of God? What God’s voice is not? There are a number of things in our story that stand out. There are a number of stand outs in our story we don’t want to miss. I’ll focus (today) on just three.

Let’s start with the most obvious, starting with the man’s question. “What must I do to inherit eternal?” What needs to happen to ensure that when that day comes, (when I go to heaven) that there’s a place for me in heaven? What do I need to do?

Do you know what you need to do? Do you know what God’s Word is not? God’s Word is not “something you need to do” to get yourself into heaven? (We’ve talked about this many times.) It’s not a heavenly-designed moral code to follow so that your life (and efforts) will lead you into the kingdom. That’s not what it is.

Now, a lot of people think it is. They live their life as if it is. (It’s their understanding of the Christian faith.) They work hard. They do their best. They love their family. (You know how it works.) It’s all good.

They’re honest, they take the high road (whenever they can), and that’s where it lands. (That’s where it leads.) That’s where it ends. That’s what they do and they think they’re in. But it doesn’t work, because it’s not what God’s Word is. It’s not some kind of moral-code-ticket (to get your way) into heaven. It’s not.

You know what’s interesting (in this story) about this whole “moral code” question? To the man’s question, “What do I need to do?” that’s exactly where Jesus points. He points to the commandments. He lists (as we said) five out of the ten.

Do you know what’s interesting about the five Jesus lists? Did you notice which five (out of the ten) he calls out? The five he lists – do not commit adultery, don’t murder, don’t steal or give false testimony, honor your father and mother. Do you know what’s interesting about those five? All five of those commandments come from the (seven of the ten) that have to do with how we treat each other. They’re all part of the moral code (God provides) for how we (as people) are to get along.

They have to do with our relationship with our neighbor. They have to do with what works (and what’s needed) in a society like ours. They’re there for our protection. They’re there for our common good.

Jesus says, “Yes, you need to keep them. Yes, all of them, you need to do...but not as a way of getting into heaven; not as a way of becoming right with God.”

“One thing you still lack,” (Jesus said). “There’s one thing you still need to do. Sell it all (he said), give it away...and then come and follow.”

There was one thing the man lacked, and it was not a moral code. What it was, was a willingness to let go of control (in his life) and to place his life (and its control) in the hands of God.

My friends, this isn’t meant to be hard to follow, to understand. This isn’t rocket science. What do you need to do to get into heaven? Stop trying and start trusting. What do you need to do to ensure (when the time

comes) that there's a place (in the kingdom) for you? Let go of your need to control (what you can't control), and to give control to the one who can.

How many times do we try to control things (in life) that are beyond our control? How many ways do we try to make ourselves "good enough" (in the sight of God) so that somehow and in some way God might choose to love us?

It's a subtle thing, but it's a real thing...for all of us. Don't turn this around and make it into something it's not. God already loves you, in spite of what you've done. And there's nothing you can do to make him love you more. (You can't.) What you can do is to let go (of your need to control) and to give control of your life to him.

It's interesting (in the story). This rich man came to Jesus wanting to know what to do. He walked away from Jesus realizing what he was unable to do.

What's standing in the way for you? What are you hanging on to that you can't let go? You need to let it go (and to trust). God's Word is not a moral code, one more thing (for us) to do to get to heaven. It's a trust and a faith in the one thing God has already done (on the cross) in Jesus.

That's the first thing God's Word is not. Let me give you a second. God's Word is not an assurance that (on our own) we have what we need. It's not a confirmation (in any way) that (in ourselves) it's all good. These are related ideas, but they're different.

Just think about the challenge Jesus was presenting to this rich ruler who wanted to make sure he was right with God. Just think about the life-change Jesus was asking of this man who seemed (in so many ways) to have it all.

It seemed like he had it all. One, he was a rich man. Jesus said, "Let go of your riches and give them away." Two, he was a ruler. Jesus said, "Stop what you're doing and follow me." And three, (Luke doesn't call it out), but from the other gospels that do, we know that this rich ruler was still young.

Just think about the challenge and the life-change this would require? A rich, young, ruler...in the eyes of the world, he had it all. Who wouldn't want that for themselves? Who wouldn't think (in themselves) it's all set.

Do you know what I think was happening (in this man) when he came to Jesus? I think that in his security (as a rich young ruler) he was insecure. I think that in his apparently self-sufficient (stature in life), he recognized that he wasn't as self-sufficient as everyone thought (and must have been) telling him he was.

I've known many people over the years who have, (in the eyes of the world), everything going for them. As far as the world can see, (externally) they have it all. But (internally), deep down inside, it's not there.

We don't (finally) know what was going on inside of that man when he came to Jesus with a question. All we know is that he was questioning, and all we know is that he ended up walking away.

God's word is not an assurance that (on our own) we have what we need. What it is, is a challenge (and a call for a life-change) to anyone who thinks they do.

A whole new identity, that's what Jesus was ready to give. A whole new approach and way of (thinking about) and coming at life. That's what Jesus is ready to do...and not just for the rich young ruler, but for you and for me.

But the calling (Jesus gives) always requires a response. The identity and life-change (he offers), only comes about when we're willing to acknowledge (and accept) that we do not (in and of ourselves) have what we need.

Bottom line: our self-sufficiency can easily become our greatest deficiency. Our reliance on the identity we have in (the eyes) of the world, can easily stand in the way of the identity God (in his eyes) and in his wisdom is ready to give.

Don't miss the calling. It's life-giving. And don't be afraid to respond to the challenge. It's life-changing, because (once you do) you'll never look back.

And that leads to the third thing God's Word is not. No matter where it's found, how you come at it, what you might hope and want and desire for it to be (and to say), it is never (in your life or in mine) an end run around the truth.

Do remember what Jesus said about the rich in this world? Do you remember his bottom line when it came to those who, in the eyes of the world (seemingly) had it all? His parting words to this rich young ruler,

before he left. Luke tells us, (Jesus looked at him) and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! (How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.)

I find it interesting, living where we do, in one of (if not) the richest valley in the entire world, (I find it interesting) that in one of the wealthiest places on the entire planet that we are surrounded by one of the greatest mission fields that exists.

There are more rich people in the Bay Area than in almost another place on earth. At the same time, there are more people living without Jesus than in almost anywhere else you could find. (Maybe Jesus was right?) “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel (he said) to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to end up in heaven.”

The disciples asked, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus said, “What’s impossible with man is possible with God.” He said, there is hope, even in this valley. There is hope, even for the rich. But if there is hope (which there is), it’s a hope found only in Christ.

My friends, don’t miss the power of what Jesus said. And don’t miss its application (and importance) in your life. The allures of this world are many. The more we are surrounded by them, the easier it is to get sucked in. (Every one of us is susceptible.)

Who doesn’t want money? Who doesn’t want riches? Who doesn’t want what this world, in its self-centered and self-serving (definition of success) is promising to give? There’s not one of us (here today) who is not faced (and tempted) with it all.

And you can have it all (Jesus says) and still have nothing. You can gain the whole world (and everything it has to offer), and still walk away as empty as can be. That’s what happened to that rich young ruler. (This isn’t some end run. The truth is right there.) Don’t let it happen to you. Whenever God speaks, you have a choice.

Let me close with this. We did this (same thing) two weeks ago, on the day of our annual meeting, and we said we would be doing it (again) for the ten weeks, until the day when we’re set to meet on April 7. For 70 days, we’re praying to hear God’s voice, individually (in our own lives) and collectively as a family of faith. During this Kairos series, we’re asking for God to speak and for ears to hear.

And so let’s close with a time a prayer. Just like two weeks ago, I’ll start it, and then we’ll have a time for silent prayer, and then I’ll offer one final prayer to close it out.

Listening for God’s voice. Let’s pray. Lord God, we thank you for speaking to us, in your Word, in and through life-experiences, and in this family of faith we call the church. Thank you for your voice and for the reminder (again today) of what your voice is not. Help us to listen (when you speak) to us, and when we speak to you, give us ears to hear...

Lord Jesus, thank you for being (and becoming) the one thing we lack. Help us to let go and give you control in all things, in your name we pray. Amen.