



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Listening Hearts" - How to Pray Sermon Series

The Rev. Steve Peich

**1** **Kings 3:5-12** - <sup>5</sup>At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

<sup>6</sup> Solomon answered, "You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.

<sup>7</sup>"Now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties.

<sup>8</sup>Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. <sup>9</sup>So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between good and evil. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?"

<sup>10</sup> It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.

<sup>11</sup> God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself

*understanding to discern what is right, <sup>12</sup> I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning heart; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you.*

A few years ago I moved a two-drawer cabinet from my bedroom to my office area in the back of my house. I took out one drawer to lighten the load so I could carry the rest of the cabinet. As walked back to my office I put the cabinet in place. Unbeknownst to me, my wife followed behind me with the other drawer and put it about 18 inches behind me and said something like, "Here you go."

After I set the cabinet in place, and *not* listening to my wife, I started to walk back to my bedroom to get the other drawer. In fact, if you can believe this, I stepped right over the drawer in route to my room to get the very drawer I just stepped over!

Of course when I got to the room I was greatly puzzled. So I shouted to my wife, "Where is that drawer?" She said, "Right by the door of the office!" I said, "What are you talking about? I didn't see it!" I sheepishly walked back to my office and there it was as big as life. Could anyone be more obtuse

or imperceptive than that?

It makes you think, if I can be that clueless to what is right in front of me, can you imagine the difficulty I must have in seeing that which is not so "seeable", like God's leading and the movement of God in my life? Have you ever stepped over what God has laid before you, but because you were not paying attention, you missed it completely?

Today we continue in our series on prayer and what I want to zero in on is the issue of attentiveness and responsiveness to God and living with a listening heart, or what many Christians simply call "discernment".

There is much written on this issue, but let me give you a working definition of discernment. Discernment is all about living prayerfully, attentively, and responsively to God in the everyday issues life. Not just in the big issues or big moments of life, but even in the ordinary, mundane, gritty places of everyday life—God wants us to have discernment.

Make no mistake, discernment is a crucial thing for the Christian because the Christian life is not an exact science. In fact, it is often a walk through ambiguity, uncertainty, mystery and risk.

I don't care how many degrees you may have or the size of your IQ, to live is to live in ambiguity. And that means life is filled with issues that demand we be discerning people.

What job should I take? What school should I attend? Is this relationship good for me? Should I get a divorce? What are we supposed to do about our elderly parents? Do I need to speak up and confront my friend about this? Should I speak up in this meeting or should I remain quiet? All these kinds of things need discernment.

For example, in staff meetings, in elder meetings, in leadership meetings, or when I counsel people, I am praying *constantly* about what needs to be said or done *in the moment*. Trust me, after 30 plus years of ministry I have all kinds of things to say about a lot of things. But wisdom and discernment are not simply about spouting off my knowledge and experience, however right or deep it may be. It's always about what is God's best *for this moment* right now? I know what *I want* to say or what *I want* to do, but is it what God's wants said? Is it what God wants done, right now, right here?

So again discernment is all about a way of living prayerfully, attentively and responsively to God in the many ordinary issues of everyday life.

Let's look again at parts of our passage I just read to see what I mean. As I mentioned before, the passage is about King Solomon who is taking over the rule of Israel from his father David.

As he does this he makes an interesting statement that every parent or leader of a small group, church, business, etc., has felt.

1 Kings 3:5ff. <sup>7</sup>"Now, O Lord my God, You have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties."

Have you ever felt that in your leadership? In the workplace? In parenting? Marriage? Leading your small group? Leading a business?

<sup>8</sup>*Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. <sup>9</sup>So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between good and evil. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?"*

As we read before, the Lord then grants this request.

For me what is crucial in all of this for us today is found in verse 9. For starters, we have an interesting phrase in this verse. In English it reads, "*Discerning Heart or Understanding Heart*". But in Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, it is literally a "*Listening Heart*". Let me dig a little deeper into this interesting compound word.

Heart, in contemporary western society is the seat of emotions. But biblically, emotions are more associated with things like the spleen or the gut.

Heart in the Bible refers metaphorically to that faculty which we use to perceive things, to interpret things, and to think through things. (In the Old Testament people sometimes say, "I thought in my heart...").

The heart also is the faculty in which we weigh things and

understand things. It is that part of us that makes plans and decides on things. Bottom line, the heart is the source of thought and behavior.

And so the question becomes, are our hearts aware of and being formed by the presence and guidance and purposes and values of God? Because if our hearts are *not* being formed by such things, then it will be our *brokenness* that will interpret things. It will be our *fear of rejection* that will weigh things. It will be our *ego* that will think through things. It will be the *voices of our impossible to please parents* (who may now be deceased) that will plan things and decide on things.

If this sounds all too abstract let me simplify things. If there was one question I could give you that you could pray in different moments to help you discern well it would be this, "What is *God's best for this moment* right here?" If you use this as a guiding question in the big and the small things it may help you out.

Later I will give examples of having a listening heart in the big issues of life, but for now let me a quick example of having a listening heart in the more mundane and immediate issues of daily life using this question.

For example, what happens when the mundane issue of eating is met with a Listening Heart? (That is, a God-centered, God-attentive, God-responsive heart). Would it change the kinds of food I eat in that moment or how many calories I take in? What if while staring at a buffet line and I'm prayerfully asking, in that seemingly mundane and in-significant situation, "What is God's best for me *in this very moment*?"

**D**o you think it would affect what would happen next? And what would be the lasting ripple effect if I *kept asking* that whenever I ate?

Or if I'm listening to a friend going through a tough time and instead of responding with what *I want* to say, I prayerfully ask what God's is best for *him or her* right now—in *this moment*? "Lord do You want me to speak? Ask something? Stay silent?"

How much better do you think the outcome would be for that person's soul if I asked that one simple discernment question: What is *God's best* for *this* moment right here?

Now let me go to another thing that strikes me about Solomon's request. He asks for a listening heart so that he can distinguish between evil and good? That may seem obvious, but it caused me to ask, "Why in the world would he need an extra special 'Listening Heart' to distinguish evil and good?" Isn't evil and good obvious? Didn't Solomon have the writings of Moses and some of the prophets? Wasn't that enough? Don't we have the Bible? Isn't that enough? Isn't right and wrong easy to deduce according to God-given logic and reason? Isn't that enough? What else does he need? What else do we need?"

You know what I think about what's going on here? I think Solomon realizes life is really complex and people are really complex. He knows that when he has to act as a leader there will be a swirling dynamic interplay of all kinds of issues, circumstances, people and pressures pressing in on him that will try to forge the next step. He knows that social solutions that leaders have to make about justice, poverty, politics, about foreigners, etc., are really complex.

And that can make discernment very blurry. And then on top of all this, I think Solomon knows that even though God's intentions are clearly given in the scriptures they are often mis-understandable—even if we have the Bible right at our fingertips.

I think he knows he will need more than the memorization of the Ten Commandments to decide well, to know the right, good, and godly thing to do for his people in the nitty-gritty of daily decision making. He knows that in the real world there is often chaos and distraction. Or even when there is a plethora of "good ideas," choosing well will still not be easy. And as Christian writer Gordon Smith put it: "If we cannot choose well, we cannot live well." But to choose well we need to live prayerfully, attentively and responsively to God with the disposition of a listening heart.

Okay, so that is some of what discernment is in the broad idea, but it may also help us to know what discernment is *not*.

Discernment is not, "Now I can see the whole picture." Most often discernment may be just knowing the next step. Martin Luther King famously said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." I would say the same about discernment. God may only let you see the first step and not give you the vision of the whole staircase.

Some of us get paralyzed in life because we demand to see the whole staircase *before* we act. Can you imagine if we held that standard before we got engaged? "Okay, God, show me the whole staircase if you want me to ask this woman to marry me?" No one does that. We take a step of faith

when we get married. We don't need to see the whole staircase.

To be honest, sometimes it feels like it's wiser to not take the *next step* because without knowledge of the *last step*, how do you know you are taking the *right step*? And who wants to waste time, money, energy, etc.? And I certainly don't want to look foolish.

But here is a tough reality: we will *only* know the will of God *to some extent*. I know those three words, "*to some extent*," frustrate us; they create anxiety, but they are a reality we cannot change and have to live with.

I remember when I first discerned that God wanted me to apply to seminary. I was blissfully working in a refugee camp in southeast Asia living out a dream. But through the interactions with older, wiser people and them seeing what my strong points and gifts were, they strongly encouraged me to apply to seminary.

However, I had no clear idea where it would lead to in the long haul. If I was accepted could I afford it? (I was only making \$300 per month as a missionary.) If I could afford it would I persevere? And if I persevered what would I specifically do in the long run? Would I be able to come back to this camp that I love?, etc.

The point is there were many, many things that I did not know about the staircase, but I still had to take the first step. The one step that I could see was simply to apply to seminary. As much as we would want otherwise, God often reveals more of His particular will *only as* we step onto the first step of the staircase and entrust the future to Him.

This all reminds me of an African Proverb that goes like this: “Pray with your feet moving,” (take that step and keep praying).

Now let me share some other things that help or hinder our Listening Hearts or Discernment.

### **Make Prayer Less Special.**

I know that sounds heretical, but what I mean by that is this. If we want to live well and be a discerning person then prayer needs to move from the category of being “an important activity” done in a special part of our day to being life as we live it moment to moment throughout the day.

In other words, we need to cultivate the attitude that to live is to be in prayer because, as I said before, to live is to live with ambiguity. So we need to be a person in prayer—all day. When I am counseling someone I don’t always know what to say or do. When I am leading a meeting there arises all kinds of things I didn’t see coming. When my wife’s upset and hurt, I’m not always sure how to respond. You get the idea, ambiguity is everywhere. So if I only make prayer something I do at special times of the day (like in my early morning only) then my counseling, my leadership, and my family life will be stunted.

Which leads me to the next essential ingredient for good discernment.

### **Know well the Word of God.**

If you want the passions, purposes, values, and plans of God permeating your heart, then know His word on a deep level because when you know it deeper you will live wiser.

The Bible may not always give us the particulars of where God is

leading us, but it sure does inform us of the larger vision and it provides the guard rails so we don’t fly off the track as we get anxious about what to do in life.

Now that being said, there is a very big potential problem here. Very often people see what they want to see in the scriptures. I think we have to realize that even the best of us can easily fall into to what some folks call *confirmation bias*.

Confirmation Bias is that tendency to interpret words or events as a confirmation of ones’ *existing* beliefs, ideas, plans or actions. It’s like when you are praying about buying a new Camry. You really want it and ask the Lord if you should buy it. Then suddenly you notice that the island is full of them! This must be a confirmation from God that I have to buy a Camry because they are everywhere!

But the problem is two-fold: Camry’s have always been there. It’s not like suddenly God added more of them. It’s just that you now see things you never saw because your mind is prompted to see them so it can confirm the thing that you want in life. Moreover, there are all kinds of cars out there that are not Camry’s. But we never think that God is showing us the other cars so He can redirect our steps.

We can do that as we read the Bible. We can read things all over the place that confirm our desire to do what we want to do.

And we can ignore those things that God may want us to think about even though they are counterintuitive and may contradict our current actions—not to make you miserable, but so that you may have the abundant life.

Remember I said to live, is to live in ambiguity. But there is something else that is also true: when there is ambiguity we tend to see what we *want* to see. Why? Because ambiguity causes anxiety and when we see that which affirms my present course of action anxiety tends to disappear. And that may be why we ignore things we don’t want to see, because those things make us more anxious.

Bottom line, it is a general human tendency to pay attention to the information that *upholds* our current ideas or plans of action and *ignore* the information that challenges our existing thoughts and plans of actions.

That is why we need a *listening* heart. Because a *listening* heart is by definition an open stance; an open stance toward listening for information that may challenge or redirect my present course of action. And this ties in to my next suggestion for what might help you discern.

**It helps to have an accurate knowledge of yourself.** What are your tendencies? Proclivities? Personality? Do they influence the answers you seek in prayer? Do they influence the decisions you attribute to God’s guidance?

Let me explain with an example of my early dating life. When I was a teenager I was a man of shifting passions. I “fell in love” every two weeks with someone *different*. This of course led to really bad relational choices and actions. So when I finally realized that my personality and proclivities led me to have a major crush every other week I would purposely wait at least two weeks after I felt another crush coming on before I ever asked someone out.

**S**ure enough it tended to cut down my mistakes and pain.

As an older married man I can still be a man of shifting passions, but nowadays I have crushes on ideas or the next new thing. What I mean by that is this: I can have great excitement about something new when it comes down the pike about ministry or counseling or some sort of tool to use around the house. And every new thing is a call from God, right? So when I pray for discernment I pray with the full knowledge that I have the tendency to have runaway passions about new ideas, that I have the deep need to achieve, and that I'm easily bored. I can't ignore that stuff and think that I will discern well or else my adult ADHD will be making decisions for me!

So maybe in your situation you have a tendency to avoid conflict. And if you do, then when you have a conflict at your job and you start to feel very, very anxious. You may start to feel a sense of dread about speaking up. So in prayer you pray about leaving your job. Suddenly you feel more peaceful. You then may conclude, it must mean that God wants me to leave this job because He wants me to live a life of peace. But the truth is you are just falling into the same old tendency of conflict avoidance.

Here's a news flash: conflict avoidance will always give you peace. But it may not be the peace of God—and that is what we seek in discernment, the peace of God.

And this leads me to my last point about what helps with discernment.

**Allow wise and trusted people to ask you the hard questions.** Intentionally seeking out the input of others is crucial for discernment because as writer

Martin Thornton has said, "The self-guided soul is always prey to delusions." Have you known the sting of such a reality?

Now the kind of trusted people I'm talking about consists of people who are *more* committed to your soulful well-being and God's Kingdom agenda than they are to your personal happiness.

Let me try to bring all these threads together through one final story from my own life.

I mentioned before that when I was a young guy (24 years old) I went to work overseas as a missionary in a refugee camp. At that time I thought I would never come back to America. As I alluded to before, while there people kept telling me my gifts were in teaching and preaching, but I needed to get some tools for my tool box (e.g., Bible, theology, etc.). So I decided to leave the mission field *specifically* to study in seminary. That was the only reason I left the mission field. You already heard me speak some about this juncture in my life, so let me fast forward a bit.

As I was going to seminary, I was getting tired. I was getting tired of living constantly below the poverty line, tired that on many days I could only afford to eat one meal. I couldn't afford health insurance.

In fact, ironically, I lived in the basement of a house owned by the refugees I once ministered to. Now they were taking care of me after I used to take care of them. It was a very humbling time.

I worked odd jobs to pay for school (scrubbing toilets, working on sewers, etc.) but in the end school was just too darn

expensive. By the end of one year I could not see how getting a degree was even remotely possible.

Moreover, I was deeply passionate about returning to work overseas. Remember the *only* reason I left was to go to school, and now that was not looking like it was going to happen.

So in June after that first year, I called up my old boss and asked if there was something I could do back overseas. Wouldn't you know there was this great opportunity to go back to the refugee camp I knew and loved and serve as the "Spiritual Ministries Coordinator." I thought to myself that just had to be God's will.

So I went down to her office to finalize things. She liked me a great deal, but she also was more concerned about what God was doing in the long term in my life than just appeasing my desires in the short term. So just as we were ending our time she asked me a question that cracked my soul open and changed my life for good.

She asked, "Steve, before you leave, let me just ask you this. Would you limit the way God can use you in the *future* if you say, 'yes' to this opportunity *now* and leave your education behind? Yes, God will use you if you go back now, but would you limit the way God can use you in the future?"

What a great, wise, and hard question for me to deal with. It was exactly the right question to ask me at that point in my journey. She could have made it easy for me. Even *her* job would have been easier if I just went. But she was more interested in God's best for me, and God's Kingdom agenda, than what was easy.

Looking back I realize that wasn't just a good question, or even an important question, but it was *the* question that would give me the greatest discernment for my life in that moment and would help to change my life in countless ways. I know that sounds melodramatic but let me tell you the rest of the story.

So I gave it the summer to trust God to provide for school. Again, I picked up odd jobs to meet my expenses and save for school. I *prayed every day* for opportunities for more money. Finally, in September, on the first day school and on the last day of registration, I prayed again in the basement of that house. But there was not enough money to be found. So I went to school to drop out for good.

As I stood on the drop out line a guy I knew only briefly in my first year, came up to me. He said he was praying back in June about who he could help with the costs of seminary. He said my name came to mind.

I thought, "Thanks pal, but you're a seminarian. You can't possibly have enough money to spare to help me make it." He then showed me his check with my name on it and asked, "Would this help?" I said, "That will do it!" I then slid over from the drop out line to the registration line about four feet away. That may have been the most life changing four feet I have ever moved.

As amazing as this story is, there is another part of the story. A few weeks later in one of my classes I met this Japanese girl from Hawaii. Fourteen months later I married her.

Think about how significant that whole moment was. What would life be like if I didn't let the

hard questions of that woman penetrate my discernment process? What would my life in ministry be like? Who would I be married to? Would I even be here?

Let me be straight up, there was nothing to keep me in seminary but that lady's question to me. I didn't have money and it didn't look like I was ever going to get the money. And I really wanted to get back to the mission field. In other words, there was *nothing* that said seminary is exactly where I needed to be for God. But it was only that hard penetrating question that anchored me to stay in the discernment process and to keep praying with my feet moving and to keep living into the question of, "What is God's best for me in this moment right now?"

It's in keeping the question of God's best at the center of our lives, the center of our thoughts and actions, that will lead us into a wise, vibrant, and impactful life in the *biggest* of things and in the *smallest* of things—so that in *all things* God is glorified.

What is God saying to you this morning? How is He speaking to you about having a Listening Heart?

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*Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org) The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)*