



FAITH FAITH IN FOCUS

5 signs you are hearing God's voice (and not your ego) in prayer

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Words and phrases can sometimes arise in our prayer. Not every word or phrase that pops into your head while you are praying is coming from God, however. To be clear: I'm not talking about *hearing* words in a physical way but rather intuiting them, having them enter your consciousness. This has happened enough times in my life, the lives of friends and the lives of those who see me for spiritual direction that I trust it as authentic.

But it is rarer than experiencing the other fruits of prayer, for example, emotions, insights, memories, desires, physical feelings and images.

It may be rare, but perhaps not surprising. If we are thinking about God's communicating with us in prayer, why wouldn't God use words from time to time? Perhaps it does not happen frequently because even during prayer most of us are too self-aware to allow something as concrete as words to freely enter our heads.

We are usually not free enough to allow God to speak to us in words. Our desire for an answer usually gets in the way.

Also, if we open ourselves to words, we can end up talking to ourselves. If we are seeking an answer to a specific question, like "Should I move to a new job?" we might be tempted to manufacture an answer ("Did I hear a yes?"), which would be incorrect to attribute to God. Overall, we are usually not free enough to allow God to speak to us in that way. Our desire for an answer usually gets in the way.

But occasionally we are free enough that God enters our consciousness with words or phrases that startle in their immediacy. To be clear, it is not that God can only do this when we are open. God can do this whenever God wants, but we are not always open enough to hear God so directly.

Many years ago, my mother told me that she was looking out the window of her house and asked God, "Do you love me?" Into her mind came the words "More than you can know."

Likewise, once on a group pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I was struggling with a difficult problem. One morning, I rose early to watch the sun rise over the Sea of Galilee. I decided to bring my cares to Jesus directly, as I gazed upon the ruins of Capernaum on the shoreline beneath me. Within just a few seconds of bringing Jesus to mind and thinking about this problem, these words came to me: "What is that to me?"

God's voice, Vinita Hampton Wright once wrote, has the "ring of truth." It sounds like something God or Jesus would say.

It was completely unexpected. Maybe because I was just starting my prayer, I was still free and unself-conscious. The words seemed blunt and direct, like many of Jesus' words in the Gospels.

Those words seemed to invite me to ask this question: "What is that problem when compared to your relationship with Jesus?" Likewise, what is that small problem compared to my vocation, which seemed spread before me, like the view of the Sea of Galilee, flushed in soft pink tones as the sun rose? What indeed was any problem compared to what Jesus offers?

The next day, on the bus another pilgrim told me that he had "heard" words in his prayer while our group was praying silently in the Garden of Gethsemane. Again, that "hearing" is not audible, but akin to recalling a line from a song or poem; the words just arrive and are felt or intuited.

After we returned to the United States, when asked, my fellow pilgrim wrote me about that experience:

In the Garden of Gethsemane, I was aware of Jesus' suffering and told him that I was often asking for things from him. What did he want from me? And I heard him succinctly answer, "Your prayers and attention." "Hearing" is problematic in such instances, as you know. I do recognize a voice other than my own, but it doesn't come through my ears.

To me, that sounded authentic. When speaking to my friend, I mentioned an observation by Vinita Hampton Wright, author of several books on spirituality: God's voice, she once wrote, has the "ring of truth." It sounds like something God or Jesus would say.

How can we be sure that these words are coming from God and are not simply something we have manufactured?

How can we be sure that these words are coming from God and are not simply something we have manufactured? Well, we can never be 100 percent sure. But in my experience as a spiritual director these words or phrases often share certain characteristics. Think of these more as guidelines than as rules:

First, they are short. The words are not usually a series of long sentences, but rather are aphoristic: "More than you know." "What is that to me?" "Your prayers and attention." My unprovable theory is that, since we are so hardwired to embellish and question, if these experiences were longer than a few words, we'd start to overthink them. Also, our openness to this kind of communication usually lasts only briefly. Once we become conscious of our thinking, our ego usually starts to get in the way.

Second, they are surprising. They nearly always catch us unawares. When I was standing before the Sea of Galilee, I wasn't expecting anything. I did not say in my prayer, "Jesus, talk to me." These moments surprise not only in timing, but in content.

Perhaps the most noticeable attribute is that these words do not seem to come from us. "There is no way," people often say, "that I could have come up with something like that." There is a sense that they come from outside of you; there is an otherness about them.

If the words are authentic, they strike your soul in such a way as to make an indelible impression.

Third, they make sense. The words fit your situation, the question that you have been asking God, or your needs at the moment. If someone else had heard the words I heard, "What is that to me?", they would have said, "Huh?" Granted, sometimes prayer is mysterious, but in the case of "felt" words, they usually make sense. And they are also true. My problems are nothing compared to my vocation. God *does* love my mother more than she knows. And God *does* want my friend's prayer and attention. They are both tailored to the situation and true. In short, they make sense.

Fourth, they get to the point. A few years ago, I was praying with the passage in which Jesus is reading from the Scriptures in the synagogue at Nazareth. In essence, Jesus tells all who are assembled that he is the Messiah. In response, the infuriated townspeople boot him out of the synagogue, drive him to the brow of a nearby hill and try to throw him off.

In my prayer, I was wondering how Jesus could proclaim his words so boldly to all the people in his hometown, when he could probably anticipate that they would find his words offensive. Were it me, I would be worried about what people might think. So how was Jesus able to be so free?

Suddenly, I felt him say, clearly, “Must everyone like you?”

Generally, words that come in prayer go to the heart of the matter. In fact, in their directness, you could say that these words sound like Jesus. Now, the way Jesus “sounds” varies considerably throughout the Gospels. In the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, Jesus often speaks in punchy sayings or simple parables, while in John’s Gospel he often talks in long-winded, oracular and sometimes repetitive sentences. But often the directness of the words intuited in prayer puts one in mind of Jesus’ short, pithy responses.

Fifth, they leave their mark. If they are authentic, they strike your soul in such a way as to make an indelible impression. I have been thinking about the words “Must everyone like you?” for the last few years. It was probably the same with the disciples around Jesus, who never would have forgotten his words.

When hearing or feeling or intuiting words, these characteristics are helpful ways to discern if they are coming from God, or from you.



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