

Discerning The Call

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I don't really have a text, which is what I'm going to tell you to do later—always have a text—but since I'm just doing a little pep-talk lecture on how to know you're called of God, I thought I would start with Ephesians 4:9. I'm going to read this a couple times that we're together. In verse 9 it says, "(Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) Verse 11, "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers,"—not pastors and teachers, but pastor-teachers. It should be hyphenated. A pastor is to be a teacher of the Word. Verse 12, "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: 13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." Paul says God has given as a gift to the church, pastor-teachers.

You maybe aren't thinking in terms of pastoral ministry. Maybe you're just thinking of preaching. Maybe you're going to be doing a job and preaching on the side, or vice versa, but you need to be certain that God has called you. Someone said that preachers are not made, they are born. I love that. Preachers are not made, they are born. You might be saying, "Well, if they're not made, then why am I in this class?" Because you want to discern that you're called. You want to discern that God has called you because preaching the Word is not a choice of your own. It's not a profession that you choose. Pastoral ministry isn't a profession that you choose, you're chosen for that call. So, you want to discern the call of God.

God's given gifts, in Ephesians 4:7, that He gives gifts of grace by His Spirit, and every one of us are given gifts. But when you get to Ephesians 4:11, we find that God has given gifted men. There's a difference between God giving you a *chárisma*, a gift, that every believer has been given a gift, and the difference between that and God calling you to be a pastor-teacher—you are a gift to the church. God gives men as gifts to the church.

After I began to preach and teach in what's clearly certain that God had called me to be a pastor, my mom actually told me a story that when I was born in the hospital, I was born in Los Angeles, that when I was in the nursery there, one of the nurses saw me there, saw my name, John Paul, and started to pray over me as a baby in the nursery. Evidently, the Lord spoke to her heart and said that that little boy is going to be a preacher, and went into my mom's room and told my mom, "The Lord just spoke to me and said your son is going to be a preacher." She never told me that until I was a preacher. She didn't tell me that story until I was in the ministry and it was confirmation of many ways that God confirmed that God had called me to be a pastor-teacher. I believe that God calls certain men into ministry of being a pastor-teacher.

The concept of God calling men into a ministry is clearly seen throughout Scripture. We won't take the time to look at all of them, but as an example, Moses. Was ever there a man called of God more clearly, more powerfully, and more wonderfully than Moses—the burning bush of

Moses. God said, "Take your shoes off. The place you are standing is holy ground." And God began to speak through the burning bush and called Moses to go to Pharaoh and command the release of God's people. This is just a clear example of God calling Moses, and then God had to prepare Moses. I think that who God calls, God prepares, and God providentially works in their life the circumstances, so that His call on their life will be fulfilled.

Then, Isaiah, what a great classic example that is. R. Kent Hughes does a teaching on Isaiah 6 in his book, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome* on the call of God of Isaiah, how he saw the Lord, ". . . high and lifted up." He saw the Lord in His glory, and that vision of the Lord—that's what we want, we want to be able to see the Lord—and then he heard the Lord's voice. He said, "Whom shall I send?" He was forgiven, he was cleansed. His mouth was touched, and he said, "Here am I; send me." All the elements of the call of God in Isaiah's life. Jeremiah, mightily called of God, "Before I formed you in the womb,"—He called him. And then I love the story of the boy Samuel when he was in the temple, and God called Samuel. He actually called his name, "Samuel, Samuel." He got out of bed and ran to Eli, "Yeah? You called me?" "No, I didn't call you. Go to bed, kid. Go away, kid. You bother me." Finally, he said, "When you hear that voice, say, 'Lord, speak. Thy servant is listening.'" Just that whole concept that God calls.

In the New Testament we have the story of John the Baptist. What a great man, called and filled with the Spirit in the womb. Then, Jesus, called to preach. He entered into the synagogue in Nazareth, unrolled the scroll, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,"—He's called—"me to preach the gospel to the poor." It's kind of a cool thought that God has only one Son, and He was a preacher. Then, the Apostle Paul, what an amazing call he had on the road to Damascus, and the bright light shining on Saul, and "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? 5 And he said, Who art thou, Lord?"—that I might serve Thee—"And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest," and then He directed Paul, directed him into ministry. What an amazing man of God he is. I think that Paul could easily be said to be the greatest Christian that ever lived.

How can we discern God's call? What should we look for to discover that God has called us? I'm going to give you these points. As we go through them, you can write them down. First, I believe that you will have a strong, inescapable passion to preach, a strong inescapable passion to preach. I realize that you might say, "Well, this is kind of subjective. How do you know it's you? How do you know it's God?" I think the other points that I bring out will help to reinforce that or clarify that. But, without a doubt in my mind, if God has called you to preach, the important point there is "inescapable," you will not be able to get away from the call of God.

In Psalm 37:4, it says, "Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart," right? I don't think that means that you delight in the Lord, and then He gives you a Porsche and a Ferrari and a house overlooking the ocean or whatever it might be. I believe that you delight in the Lord—that He is your joy, He is your passion—and that He puts His desires on your heart so that those things that are on your heart are God-given desires, and those God-given desires are inescapable. You won't be able to escape those desires.

In Jeremiah 20:9, Jeremiah said, “But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing”—holding back—“and I could not.” Charles Haddon Spurgeon, I have a great quote by Spurgeon on this point, said, “If a man be truly called of God to the ministry, I will defy him to withhold himself from it.” That’s great, huh? If a man be truly called to ministry, I defy him to hold himself back from it. “A man who has really within him the inspiration of the Holy Ghost calling him to preach, cannot help it—he must preach. As fire within the bones, so will that influence be until it blazes forth. Friends may check him, foes criticize him, despisers sneer at him, the man is indomitable; he must preach if he has the call of Heaven.” Amen, and amen. Certainly, Charles Spurgeon was a man called of God and clear that call.

I love 1 Timothy 3:1. Yesterday morning, I’m preaching right now through Titus, I took a break from Luke, I’m preaching through Titus. It’s kind of rare on a Sunday morning to preach the qualifications for an elder from the pulpit. Have you ever done that? It’s quite a challenge. You’re the elder, and you’re talking about the qualifications that you must meet there in the text, but this is what we have in 1 Timothy 3:1, “Whoever aspires,”—that’s the key right there, aspires, desires—“to be an overseer”—which is a pastor or an elder—“desires a noble task.” So, you aspire, you desire, but it’s not self-generated. It’s not something you psych yourself up.

Now, it’s easy to maybe be in church and see the pastor on the stage getting all the platitudes and the attention and think, I want to do that. I want to be God’s man of the hour. But you have to be sure of your call. The thing that will keep you going in times of trials and testings and difficulties and hardships will be the call of God behind you, not the need in front of you. The thing that keeps you going in ministry, if you don’t have certainty of God’s call, you won’t survive the ministry. You must be certain of God’s call. That, in my life, is what has helped me get through many difficult times over the years of preaching God’s Word.

Here’s the second point, that is, you have a marked gift and ability. So, you have an inescapable passion and desire, and again, you have a marked gift and ability. In 1 Timothy 3 again, when we look at the qualifications for an elder, in 1 Timothy 3:2 it says that he must be, “. . . apt to teach”—able to teach. Remember, Ephesians 4:11 we just read? Pastor-teacher, not just a pastor, pastor-teacher. I’ve had people say, “Well, we got a pastor. He’s really a nice guy. He’s a jolly fellow. He is real positive, and he comes to our potlucks and hangs out with us. He’s just a real neat guy.” Now, that’s great, but does he preach the Word? “No, he’s a horrible teacher. He can’t preach a lick, but he’s a real jolly fellow.” You need a pastor-teacher. You need a pastor who will feed the sheep, who will lead the sheep, and who will protect the sheep. So, you have an apt gift of preaching. The gift to teach will always be accompanied by the desire to study God’s Word. Make a note of that.

If you are called to preach, you will have a desire that’s inescapable, you will have a God-given ability that is clear, and you will have a hunger and a desire to study God’s Word. If I meet a pastor that says, “Oh, I hate to study. I don’t like to read. I don’t like books. I don’t like to get into theology,” then, what are you doing in the ministry? One of the evident signs to me was I barely got through high school. They had to give me credits to get me out of high school and

graduate me. When I got saved right out of graduating from high school, I learned to read by reading the Bible and studying the Word of God. I couldn't believe it. I'm like, This can't be me. I'm sitting at a desk reading, studying the Word. This is just unbelievable. To me it was like not just having evidence that I'd been saved, but that God was giving me a desire to teach His Word, and what I was learning, I was passing on and sharing with others. What a blessing that is. But you will have a marked gift and ability.

Now, that leads me to the third, which segues from that second point, that is, you will have a strong confirmation from others. You'll have a strong confirmation from others. You may think you have a gift, but if no one else does, then you need to reconsider that. I've had people, "God's called me to sing." "On really? Sing." "Ahhhhhh." "No, He hasn't. God has not called you to sing. If He would, He'd given you a voice," right? So, "God's called me to preach." "Uh, no He hasn't." If God's called you...it doesn't mean you'll be fully developed. I actually believe that you spend your entire lifetime learning and growing and developing and sharpening your gift of teaching. You'll never arrive. All of the great preachers that I've known about and read about, all felt a sense of inadequacy, all felt they fall short.

I heard John MacArthur a while back talk about preaching, and he would finish preaching a sermon, he always said when he was finished feel like he could've been better—it could've been more clear; it could've been more organized. I mean, who leaves the pulpit thinking, That was awesome! You don't want to be there. You always want to say, "Lord, help me to improve." But, the point I want to make is that there will be strong confirmation from others. Others will see God's calling and gifting in your life. Now, you want to make sure that that confirmation is not just from your mother, that it's from respected spiritual leaders in your church.

I remember when I was doing the Shepherd's School back in the early '70s, and it was put on in a room that they rented at a hotel near the church in Costa Mesa. I was actually sleeping on the floor of a dorm room at Vanguard University that a friend of mine was down at college, and I remember struggling and saying, "I don't know if I'm called to pastor. I don't know if I'm called to preach." I'll never forget it. He looked at me and said, "John, it is evidently clear to me from God's hand on your life that God has called you to preach." Just hearing that was like God speaking to my own heart that this is your direction, this is your path. So, you want confirmation from others.

I understand that John Knox, the great Scottish Reformer was very, very reluctant to go into full-time preaching ministry, but as he was preaching, God was anointing, God was using, God was blessing, and he was being told, "God's called you." Finally, he struggled all through the night praying, and then God finally confirmed to his own heart through others that God wanted him to preach the Word. So, a strong confirmation from others.

But, you've got to be careful, too, that you don't put too much stock in what others say about you, that you keep your focus on the Lord. When I was first beginning to teach, it was always one of my big struggles—I would teach, and I'm looking around like, "Who's going to pat me on the back. Who's going to tell me, 'That's wonderful.'" You go up and down, and you don't want

to do that. You know, the human body is quite sensitive, if you pat it on the back, the head swells, so you want to be careful that you're not looking for pats on the back. After you preach, you want to just commit it to God and entrust it to Him.

Here's the fourth, an evident growth in godliness through your study of God's Word, an evident growth in godliness through the study of God's Word. It's so very important. In 1 Timothy 3:2, it says, "A bishop then must be blameless,"—again, I preached on this yesterday morning, which means above reproach. So, if you're going to preach the Word, you need to be growing in godliness. You need to see that your sanctification is growing. You're not backsliding, you're not living a carnal Christian life. "Well, God's called me." Well, God's called you, first of all, to just walk with Him, and walk in holiness, and walk in obedience. So, there should be an evident sign in your life that I'm growing, and God's changing me, and I don't do the things I used to—I'm not the same person—that you're growing in godliness and developing as a leader. It's so very, very important.

In 1 Timothy 3:6, it says that you should "Not"—be—"a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil." That "novice" there means newly planted. You don't want to be newly planted, so you want to grow. That doesn't mean that you have to be perfect, but it does mean that you should be beyond reproach, that you should be living a life exemplary to the church.

Fifthly, is your life and teaching having a positive influence on the spiritual life of others? If you're teaching the Bible, and God's called you to teach the Bible, someone else will be blessed, encouraged, and growing. I got the coolest—I don't get many of them—email sent to me, came through the church, from Pakistan. A pastor in Pakistan is listening to my teaching and was being blessed by that. If you're teaching the Bible, someone's going to be growing, someone's going to be changing, someone's going to be blessed, and it's going to be evident in your life. So, an evident growth in godliness, and your life and teaching will have a positive influence on the spiritual life of others. Is there spiritual fruit in the lives of others from your ministry? Your ministry will just have an impact on other people loving the Lord, getting saved, and you can ask yourself that, too, not that you're an evangelist, but has anyone gotten saved under your preaching? Has anyone come to Christ? Is anyone growing in the Lord? Is anybody getting stronger in their walk with the Lord because of your preaching and teaching? It's so very important. So, your life will have a positive impact on others, people saved.

Charles Spurgeon obviously in his Lectures to My Students has great points on these when he talked about a passion for souls, and when he got his first convert, a confirmation to his own heart God had called him to preach, seeing people come to Christ through his preaching and through his teaching.

Here's the sixth, a pressing urgency in the heart. Now, that's very similar to a passion that will be inescapable, but you'll also have a sense of urgency that you don't want to waste your time, that it's time to cut ties with the secular job or with the direction of your life and pursue ministry or pursue preaching God's Word—a pressing urgency in your heart. Again, R. Kent Hughes in

his book *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome* in his section on there about the call of God has a great little story illustration about D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and his struggle he went through. He was with a group of friends and went out to the theater one night in London. He was watching all the people going in and out of the theater, and the cars going by, just how God spoke to him about the vanity and the emptiness of that life and how he wanted to just consecrate and dedicate his life to serving the Lord, and that it was a God-given desire that God gave him that desire to break away from being a doctor to being a preacher of the Word. Actually, part of it was he saw Salvation Army people on the street preaching and playing their instruments and boldly preaching Christ, and he just in his heart said, These are my people. This is who I want to identify with. That passion, just the urgency it's time to preach the Word.

Last but not least, the seventh, that is, an open door of providence. I love this, an open door of providence. I believe with all my heart that if God has called you to preach, He will speak to you, make it clear, and open the door. God opens doors that no one can open; God shuts doors that no one can shut. God will open the door, and you must trust Him. Part of that is, I think, you need to also if you're feeling called to preach, you need to seize every opportunity that you can to preach the Word, to teach the Word. If you're invited to preach, "Yes, I will preach." If you're given opportunity or there's a need to preach, "I will preach." You'll go to a rest home.

I used to go every Sunday to a couple rest homes with my dad, and that's where I first began to experience opening my Bible, reading a verse, and preaching or doing a short little devotional or homily or sharing or teaching in a rest home. Then, we also went to a sanatorium. You want to find out whether you're called to preach the Word or not? Try visiting a sanatorium—people walking around the room, you're trying to preach the Word. I did that for a couple of years. It's a great experience. Or, starting with the youth, starting in Sunday school. If you're just waiting for Billy Graham to call you, or Greg Laurie says, "I can't make the Harvest Crusade, would you preach for me this weekend?" You know, it's not going to happen. God providentially will open the doors, but you need to be ready to step through them in obedience. God opens those doors and you begin to step through them, it's so very important. So, God opens the doors.

In my life, it was amazing. I actually was teaching the Bible in a home Bible study on a weekly basis to a house full of people before I realized God had called me to do that. It was after weeks of teaching the Bible that I began to realize, "You know what? I think this is what God's called me to do." I went up to talk to Pastor Greg after a Wednesday night study, back in those days it was Calvary Chapel Riverside, and I assumed because I felt called of God that I would go to Bible college. My dad had gone to Life Bible College in Los Angeles, okay, I'll go to Bible college. I asked Greg, "Where did you go to Bible college? Where did you go to seminary?" He said, "I didn't." The minute he said that, I said, "Praise the Lord!"

But what God laid on my heart was not to give up teaching my Friday night home Bible study to go to Bible college and seminary, but to be faithful with that small group of young people in my living room, to faithfully study, prepare my teaching, and in those days I taught with almost no notes—and, that's good practice, by the way, too; start learning to preach without notes, without

any notes, just extemporaneously. It's good practice for you. I was doing that for several weeks before I kind of just realized, "You know what? I think this is what God's calling me to do." I didn't have to go find ministry, the ministry found me. I didn't choose myself, the Lord chose me. You just have to be faithful to that call, faithful to that call.

God's call is more important than theological education. I'm not anti-seminary. I think it's wonderful. I think it's great, and there's times I wish I had more formal education, but you can educate yourself, that's partly what we're going to do this week is recommend good books, you buy them, you discipline yourself to read them. You can put yourself through Bible college and seminary, if you are disciplined to do the homework and to study. But I began to realize that God had called me not to go that way, to begin to get my own books, build my own library, study the Word of God, and learn by doing it, just learn by doing it. So, don't just sit and wait for Billy Graham to call you on the phone, find out from your senior pastor, if you're not a senior pastor, find out from somebody, "Can I serve? Can I teach?" Any opportunities to do that, you jump at them and you do your best. God will lead you one step at a time.

I began to also evaluate that there were guys who went to Bible college, they went to seminary, they went into ministry, but they weren't called. They went, but they weren't sent. They didn't have the hand of God of blessing and anointing on their life. I'm not saying that education is not good or not important, it is. I'm going to urge you guys all week to study theology, study theology, study systematic theology is my preference, but also study biblical theology, historic theology. Study all the facets of theology so that it will deepen and strengthen and enrich your preaching—you'll have a well of information to draw from in your exposition of Scripture. I'm not saying you shouldn't be educated, but I'm saying more important than theological education is the call of God on your life. God's call is that which makes you a minister.

C.H. Spurgeon was not formally educated. D.L. Moody was not a seminary graduate. G. Campbell Morgan did not go to seminary. A.W. Tozer did not go to seminary. Billy Graham did not go to seminary. Some people say, "Well, Billy Graham is an evangelist. You don't have to study to be an evangelist." Yes, you do have to study to be an evangelist, and Billy Graham was also a very astute theologian. He knew his Bible. He knew the Word of God, so he was educated. But, it's not the seminary degrees, it's the call of God. God's calling is God's enabling. God's calling is God's enabling.

I realize there's degrees of ability given to different men. We don't all have the same personalities. We don't have the same gifting, but we all want to be our best for God. We want to be all that we can to be the sharpest tools in the shed with study and hard work, evidence from the calling of God on our life. God's calling is God's enabling.

Write down 2 Corinthians 4:7 where Paul says, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay," so we're just all a bunch of crackpots, clay pots, but the treasure and the wealth and glory is the treasure that God puts in us. We're just clay pots, and He fills us and uses us. Remember Isaiah 6, that I mentioned earlier, Isaiah saw God's holiness; Isaiah saw his sinfulness, Isaiah experienced God's forgiveness; and Isaiah surrendered to God with obedience. Write down

Romans 12:1-2, "I beseech"—beg—"you . . . by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable"—act of worship, that you may discern and know what is the—" . . . will of God,"—for your life. Amen?