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Listening in the Bible: The Do’s, the Don’ts, and the Anecdotes

In the course of a lifetime, there are many individuals who have the power to affect change in our lives. They have the ability to help create, inspire, guide, and motivate goals. They care not only for the knowledge imparted to, but also the personhood and soul of the individual. In my life, several of these individuals have been teachers. These educators have helped to shape the person that I am, and the person I am striving to become. What has motivated the attention that I have given to them? Why have I listened to these individuals? What have I gained through listening to these mentors? Reflecting on these questions, I have become increasingly aware of the profound influence and impact that these select few earthly individuals have had on my life. How much more can this be said of our Heavenly Teacher? What can we learn by listening to Him wholeheartedly? The answer to this question is provided in nearly every book of the Bible, nine of which will be considered in this paper. The Bible compels us to pay attention to our Lord that we may be privy to the do’s, don’ts, and anecdotes of Scripture.

One of the first lessons the Lord imparts to us is in the first book of His inspired Word. In Genesis 3:17, Adam is reprimanded not because he failed to listen, but because he failed to listen critically. “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life” (Gen. 3:17) Critical listening assumes that we listen to “evaluate the merits of the message” (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001, p. 154). In failing to critically listen, Adam sinned in allowing Eve to assume a role of leadership above him (Jeske, 2001). Eve also had sinned because she took the role. Because neither had listened critically, both were punished appropriately.

A second lesson takes place in Exodus. Here we find Moses, an individual who was
presented with some difficult listening situations. Moses, after receiving instructions to lead the people out of Egypt, questioned the likelihood of the Israelites to listen to what he had been compelled by the Lord to say. “Moses answered, “What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you’?” (Exo. 4:1). In this passage, Moses demonstrates a fear of the Israelites deciding to be selectively attentive (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). In other words, why would they choose to listen to him? Why should the Israelites believe Moses as opposed to any other individual? We are not so different than Moses. According to Ernst Wendland, author of Exodus: The People’s Bible, “Moses was no different than any of us when it comes to being faced with the responsibility of carrying out certain duties which we know the Lord wants us to do. The closer we come to the time when action is required, we begin to doubt that anyone will listen to us. Surely we can all think of times when we knew it was our duty to bear witness to our faith before some unbeliever, and how these “what ifs” entered our mind (Wendland, 1984, p. 29).

These “what ifs” plagued Moses for two good reasons. The first of these was the sheer number of Israelites he was responsible to lead. The second reason was Pharaoh. Why would Pharaoh listen to him? The truth is he would not listen. Because of Pharaoh’s selective attention, and his inability to listen critically, the people of Egypt suffered immensely by the plagues (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). There seems to be no indication that Pharaoh did not understand the message that Moses proclaimed to him, only that he failed to truly evaluate the consequences in not heeding the message. Therefore, “because of his own persistent hardening of his heart in the face of God’s repeated warnings, it eventually led to this that God himself would harden Pharaoh’s heart” (Wendland, 1984, p. 46). This can also happen if we refuse to listen to and heed God’s warnings. It is important to remember that all are born into original sin and are enemies of God, lest Christians think they are better than another individual. “People today act in defiance just as Pharaoh did. In time of crisis, they cry to the Lord for help, and are
willing to promise anything if only the threat of trouble is taken away. As soon as the crisis has passed, they quickly forget whatever promises they may have made to mend their ways.

Warnings against persistent indifference are clear. Through repeated hardening of hearts, they can no longer hear God’s call to repentance” (Wendland, 1984, p. 53).

Therapeutic listening, or lack thereof, is demoned in the case of our next example. Job had been a wealthy man. He was influential, had much in the way of resources, was blessed with many children, and a wife. The Lord allowed Satan to test Job, and suddenly, all of this was taken away. “Listen carefully to my words; let your ears take in what I say” (Job 13:17). Because of his vast trials, Job is sorely in need for someone who will just listen to him. “Job pleaded with his friends to let him speak. He had to get things off his chest. He also anxiously hoped to speak to God” (Honesy, 1992, p. 94). The purpose of therapeutic listening is to offer help to someone who needs to share a concern, to talk through a problem (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). Of Job’s three friends, none of them allowed his to do this. Instead, they engaged in many behaviors that would have facilitated a defensive communication climate (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). All of Job’s friend evaluated him. In other words, Job’s friends used their own frame of reference to try to explain why all these awful events took place (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). Attempts were made, not only by Job’s friends, but also by his wife, to control his beliefs. “His wife said to him, “Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!” He replied, “You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” (Job 2:9-10). Job’s friends also express a kind of certainty or “preconceived notions about what ideas are true without considering the ideas of others” (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001, p. 275). They assume that God is punishing Job for some wrong he must have committed.

Psalms is another key area in the Bible where there are multitudes of lessons to be taught about therapeutic listening. “Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray”
“You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry” (Ps. 10:17). Though God does not give us visual therapeutic expressives, such as head nods, facial expressions, bodily positioning, or tone of voice, we are aware of his love and concern for us through his inspired Word (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened, but God surely listened and heard my voice in prayer” (Ps. 66:18-19). God serves as a sounding board for his children. His effective listening skills go far beyond that of any human. His willingness to listen, capacity to care, and ability and desire to understand far surpasses anything that we will ever find on earth (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001).

Isaiah is a book full of God’s promises for his people. Yet, it also provides many different listening examples, highlighted with the rewards of giving attention to God, and the consequences that come when we ignore Him. Isaiah 32:3 makes evident the rewards of those who listen. “Then the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed, and the ears of those who hear will listen” (Is. 32:3). In our sin, our eyes and ears had been closed to the Lord. “When humans depend upon their own knowledge, they are blind and fail to understand the truths of God. But when God’s promised Messiah rules in human hearts, people will hear and understand the revelation of God” (Braun, 2000, p. 345). As human beings, we fail to listen comprehensively, or understand the information the Lord is presenting to us (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). It may be for lack of trying, as humans overall are not highly motivated creatures, but more likely it is because we lack the framework of understanding needed to comprehend the Lord’s message. Our earthly minds are imperfect, and it is only when the Lord chooses to reveal this information to us in a humanly comprehensible way that we will understand it.

Isaiah also makes plain the consequences of ignoring the words of God. “Now then,
listen, you wanton creature, lounging in your security and saying to yourself, ‘I am, and there is none beside me. I will never be a widow or suffer the loss of children.’ Both of these will overtake you in a moment, on a single day: loss of children and widowhood” (Is. 47:8-9). In other words, listen to the warnings and will of the Lord. Pride goes before the fall, and the bigger you are, the harder you will fall. When we are overconfident in what we have and know, it is very easy to fail to listen critically, or to be selectively perceptive, seeing only what we want to see, and hearing only what we want to hear (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). In our overconfidence, it is easy to forget that God controls everything, and that in a split-second, our lives can be changed forever.

Sometimes the lesson that must be learned are lessons that individuals do not wish to hear. Jeremiah had the foreboding task of warning the people of Judah that their lives would be changed forever. Babylon would soon destroy Jerusalem and force all those living there into exile. “To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed so they cannot hear. The word of the Lord is offensive to them; they find no pleasure in it” (Jer. 6:10). In this example, we see a lack of discriminative listening in the people of Judah (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). One purpose of discriminative listening is to distinguish aural stimuli (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). Jeremiah, with the inspired words of the Lord, provided the people with a plentiful amount of aural stimuli. The problem? Judah failed to refused to attend to and assign meaning to the messages and warnings of Jeremiah (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). “But they did not listen or pay attention; instead they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward” (Jer. 7:24). The result? “If the people of Judah did not repent, the temple would suffer the same end as the worship center at Shiloh. If they repented, the Lord would not carry out his judgment” (Gosdeck, 1994, p. 163-164).
Thus far, all of the listening lessons cited in this paper have been from the Old Testament. Much listening was required on the part of the believers in the Old Testament, as time and time again God emphasized his promises to deliver or to punish. To this end, that does not mean there is lack of listening examples in the New Testament as well. Might it have been easier to listen in the New Testament because of a visual example of salvation rather than simply reading words off a page? It might have been easier to hear Jesus, but that does not mean that more individuals listened to what he had to say.

John provides our first New Testament example. “Then they asked him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” He answered, “I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?” Then they hurled insults at him and said, “You are this fellow’s disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don’t even know where he comes from” (John 9:26-28). Sarcasm in communication is not always recommended, but here it serves brilliantly. The Jews heard the message, but refused to assign meaning to it that was necessary. They knew this blind man had been healed, but refused to give Jesus credit. During this passage, it is evident also that the Jews refuse to engage in another part of discriminative listening: paying attention to visual cues (Wolvin & Coakley). They can visibly see that this blind man has received his sight. They have the books of the Old Testament to go back to read and see what Scripture says about Jesus and the miracles that he would perform. They have also heard some of the testimonies of those individuals that have been healed. Yet, they have decided to ignore the obvious, demonstrating selective perception, in order to place their spin on the day’s events (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). There may be, though, alternative explanations for this. Perhaps it was not ignoring the obvious. In the case of the Jews, perhaps it was just socicusus.
As with many aspects of life, some individuals choose to ignore what is placed before them, and some choose to embrace it. Lydia chose to embrace it. “One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message (Acts 16:14). Here is an example of a woman who listened wholeheartedly to what the Lord wanted to share with her, and then put it into practice. “She listened to the Lord and opened her heart to the gospel. She and her household were baptized. Her house became the headquarters for missionary work in Philippi” (Balge, 1988, p. 180). The Lord moved Lydia to receive and attend to the message wholeheartedly, to assign the proper meaning, and from there, take action on what the Lord had asked her to do (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). This is probably one of the better examples of energetic attention in the Bible (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). Lydia engaged in active listening, and then provided feedback to the disciples (Wolvin & Coakley, 2001). This feedback, in the form of a mission outpost, demonstrated that Lydia had listened to and understood the challenge that was laid before her.

The final book to receive attention in this paper is the book of James. In his book, James encourages us to be more than just listeners. “Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22). In other words, the individual who listens comprehensively and fully understands knows that actions speak louder than words. “Faith, if it is not accompanied by action is dead. As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (James 2:17, 26). If you have faith in and love for our Lord, actions will demonstrate this. R. V. G. Tasker, author of The General Epistle of James highlights this idea as well. “Do not be content with merely listening. This is passive. Christianity is essentially a life to be lived. We are indeed to be hearers, for nothing takes the place of regular listening to God’s
Word. But Jesus pronounced the benediction not upon hearers, but upon those who hear and keep it” (Tasker, 1957, p. 51-52).

Throughout the course of this paper, many lessons have been provided. I have highlighted the specific things according to the Bible that we, as listeners should do. **Do** listen critically. **Do** provide therapeutic listening for those who need to share personal concerns. **Do** open your eyes and pay attention to visual cues. **Do** listen to and embrace the Word of the Lord wholeheartedly. **Do** attend and assign meaning to messages given not only by God, but by his prophets. This paper has also given examples, according to the Bible, of things that should not be done. **Do not** practice selective attention or selective perception when God orders something to be done. **Do not** fail to listen to or ignore the words of the Lord. **Do not** fail to discriminate aural stimuli. You might end up in a bad neighborhood. Finally, the Bible presents us with several anecdotes. There is **no** better sounding board than our Heavenly Father. Failure to listen **may** result in heart failure. Sarcasm **can** be a good thing, but sociocusus is **definitely** a bad thing. Christianity is **not** a passive way of life! We need to listen to be sure that we are correct in our beliefs, but we also need to be out there proclaiming!

In sum, our Lord is basically eclectic. He uses all different types of presentations to get our attention. The best teachers do. They are aware that everyone has a different learning style. Perceptive teachers are aware that everyone has different “listening” needs. God knows we are all different. He created us to be that way. He also created us to be intelligent beings. Therefore listen! I guarantee you will learn something!
References


