

**“Are Your Ears Open or Itchy?  
The Gift of Listening”  
Matthew 13:13-17; 2 Timothy 4:3-4  
2/7/10**

**If we want to grow in Christ, we must listen to Him, not the myriad of voices around us.  
The only problem? It’s inconvenient.**

We are in our second week of this message series, “Living in the World of Me” and how we live in that. Last week we heard about self-control, that it is much more than just behavior modification, it is about opening the door to Christ everyday and growing in Him.

This morning we hear from God’s Word about just that: How well do we hear God’s Word? To whom do we listen. Whose voice surrounds you?

Take a look around, and it does not take long to see that we are people who like having control—from the temperature of the room to who has the big guns in the world, we want to know we have things under control. I need to get my hands onto something.

**Life with God begins with asking yourself who is in control.**

We like to have control, or at least think we do. It’s the story from the beginning of time. When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, Satan tempted them by telling them what? “You will be like God.” Oh yeah, give me some of that fruit! How many times people ask me, “Why did Adam and Eve have to ruin it for us? If they didn’t eat that fruit we would still be in the garden.” Right! As if you or I would not have done that ourselves. “You will be like God.” Take a look around at our world today—we gorge ourselves on that fruit.

“Knowledge is power”, Francis Bacon said, and there is no shortage on knowledge these days.

But from whom we receive that knowledge is what we need to ask ourselves this morning. Just simply looking at news organizations these days makes it pretty clear how differently an event can be reported. We get online and read all kinds of information. But from whom?

We can make anything sound good. I mean, we have seen some tragic results of that, as with the Jim Jones community, or the Waco, TX community, or Hitler and the Nazi party.

We all have needs, we all want to feel accepted, we all want to know we have some kind of importance in this world, and so there are times we can surround ourselves with the wrong voices that feed what we want to hear.

**2 Timothy 4:3-4**

Itching ears. Or translated closer in the Greek: Tickle.

An itch: “A restless desire or craving for something.”

We want to hear what sounds good to us. Scratch the itch, no matter if it’s the truth, or if it’s good for us or not. Why? Because that is convenient.

Modern day movie director Andrew Niccol says, “It’s gotten to the point that our ability to manufacture fraud now exceeds our ability to detect it.”

**Matthew 13:13-17**

Jesus says you can hear, but not listen. I don’t know how many times I got in trouble for that as a kid. My parents would tell me something and I would hear them, but I was not listening because I was too enthralled in my own thoughts or whatever I was doing in the moment. Which

always turned out bad for me: “Didn’t I ask you to do this?” Yes. “Then why didn’t you?” I don’t know.

You see, here we are again at a common theme: Convenience. Truly listening and hearing what I need to hear is often inconvenient. It can get in the way of what I want to do or what I want to believe.

Listen. How quickly we can forget, leave out, or flat out ignore God’s voice in an effort to take control for ourselves.

John Piper, in “God Is an Important Person”, makes this point clear, showing our tendency even within the church to leave God out for sake of practicality—doing, control. He says, “What about evangelicals? I’ve been to church growth seminars where God is not once mentioned. I’ve been to lectures and talks on pastoral issues where He is not so much as alluded to. I have read strategies for every kind of recovery under the sun where God is not there. I have talked to students in seminaries who tell me of manifold, practical courses where God is peripheral at best. I have recently read mission statements of major evangelical organizations where neither Christ nor God is even mentioned.”

*(John Piper, "God Is an Important Person," Preaching Today, Tape No. 125.)*

But Jesus says we need to listen, truly listen. Why? So that we might be healed. We listen so we know the will of God for our lives. We listen so we hear the Word of God who says, “I love you and want to make you whole.”

**God’s Truth may not sound good to us, but is absolutely good for us.**

Timothy Keller, pastor and author, once said, “Properly understood, Christianity is by no means the opiate of the people. It’s more like the smelling salts.”

Why is this important?

**Who you listen to will form who you are.**

Think about a child. We learn more and more how tremendous an impact the voices in a child’s life has on who they become and how they see themselves in society.

In his book *Revolutionary Parenting*, George Barna says there are three dominant approaches to parenting in the United States.

Parenting by default is what Barna terms the path of least resistance. This approach is influenced by cultural norms and traditions. The objective is to keep everyone as happy as possible so the parents can still enjoy the other prioritized aspects of their lives.

Trial-and-error parenting is based on the notion that every parent is an amateur at raising children. There are no absolute guidelines to follow, so the best that parents can do is experiment, observe outcomes, and improve upon their successes and failures. In this incremental approach, the goals of parenting are to continually perform better than most other parents.

Barna found that a more revolutionary approach to parenting was the least common approach. Revolutionary parenting takes God’s words on life and family at face value and seeks to apply them faithfully and consistently.

Perhaps the most startling difference in these approaches to parenting has to do with the desired outcomes. “Parenting by default and trial-and-error are both approaches that enable parents to raise their children without the effort of defining their life,” Barna explained.

“Revolutionary parenting, which is based on one’s faith in God, makes parenting a life priority. Those who engage in revolutionary parenting define success as intentionally facilitating faith-based transformation in the lives of their children, rather than simply accepting the aging and survival of the child as a satisfactory result.”

*Barna Update, www.barna.org (4-9-07); submitted by Dave Bartlett, Rochester, Minnesota*

Certainly we parents must be intentional about raising our children by God defining who they are, and not the myriad of voices out there.

But this truth applies to all of us. God is our heavenly Father, our Creator, our heavenly Parent if you will. God has given us free will, and with that we can choose to live life in one of three ways:

**We can live by default.**

The path of least resistance, where we simply try to “be happy” in life while doing whatever we want in the moment. **This life is defined by the culture around us.**

**We can live by trial and error.**

We make our lives just a big experiment, just kind of figuring out what works along the way. **This life is defined by simply what I think is good or not.**

**We can live a revolutionary life.**

**This is life as God intended**—given over to His control, shaped by God’s values and love and grace. It is starting every day by seeking His will, stopping along our way to regularly listen, in the quiet, away from what everyone else, and even ourselves, are telling us.

Let me share a thought from the late Thomas Merton, a monk and spiritual writer:

“We put words between ourselves and things. Even God has become another conceptual unreality in a no-man’s land of language that no longer serves as a means of communion with reality.

“The solitary life, being silent, clears away the smoke-screen of words that man has laid down between his mind and things. In solitude we remain face to face with the naked being of things. And yet we find that the nakedness of reality which we have feared, is neither a matter for terror or for shame.”

It is where we encounter God.

For as the Apostle Paul says, as he preaches to a group of people in Athens, (this from Acts 17:26-28) *“From one man, God made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’”*

God is not far from each one of us. In fact, it is always in God’s very presence that we exist.

How’s your reception to the Holy Spirit? Maybe you have been victimized somehow and are hurting, building a two-foot-thick wall of protection from anyone getting in too close. Perhaps you feel lost in life, or worn down from life, or depressed from the routines.

Yes, there is a whole host of reasons why you might not be receptive to God, to His Holy Spirit working in your life. But that is when you must simply stop: stop moving, stop thinking, stop talking, stop naming the reasons why you are not receiving God’s Word and start listening to why you can.

[end sermon with this prayer—invite people to bow heads and listen]

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I

may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.” Amen.

*Thomas Merton, Thoughts in Solitude*