

"Too Busy To Listen"

A 17 year-old boy, in and out of trouble with the law, wrote this letter to his parents:

“Dear Folks: Thank you for everything but I am going to Chicago and try and start some new kind of life. You asked me why...I gave you so much trouble, and the answer is easy for me to give you, but I am wondering if you will understand.

“Remember when I was about six or seven and I used to want you just to listen to me? I remember all the nice things you gave me ... and I was really happy with the things – for about a week ... but the rest of the time ... I really didn’t want presents. I just wanted all the time for you to listen to me like I was somebody who felt things too, because I remember even when I was young I felt things. But you said you were busy. Mom, you are a wonderful cook, and you had everything so clean and you were tired so much from doing all those things that made you busy; but you know something, Mom? I would have liked crackers and peanut butter just as well if you had only sat down with me awhile during the day and said to me: ‘Tell me all about it so I can maybe help you understand.’

“And when Donna came I couldn’t understand why everyone made so much fuss because I didn’t think it was my fault that her hair is curly and her skin so white, and she doesn’t have to wear glasses with such thick lenses. Her grades were better too, weren’t they? If Donna ever has children, I hope you will tell her to just pay some attention to the one who doesn’t smile very much because that one may really be crying inside.

“I think that all the kids who are doing so many things that grown-ups are tearing out their hair worrying about are really looking for somebody that will have time to listen a few minutes and who really and truly will treat them as they would a grown-up who might be useful to them, you know – polite to them. If you folks had ever said to me: ‘Pardon me’ when you interrupted me, I’d have dropped dead! If anyone asks you where I am, tell them I’ve gone looking for somebody with time because I’ve got a lot of things I want to talk about. Your son.”

Sad, isn't it. A boy's deep longing for someone to *listen* to him, to care enough to try to *understand* him. Apparently his mom was so busy doing what she thought a "good mother" should do, she never took the time to listen to the hopes and hurts, the dreams and disappointments of her son.

This is a selection from a book by Robert Raines entitled *Creative Brooding*, and this meditation is called "Too Busy To Listen".

Too busy to listen! There is a Scripture verse that fits in here. It's in the Book of James. James 1:19 says, "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." That's pretty straightforward, isn't it. No hidden nuances. Not hard to interpret. *Quick* to listen. *Slow* to speak. A lot of us seem to have our own translation of that verse! It is: Be quick to speak. Slow to listen!

Listening is difficult for a lot of us! Know any people like this: They always want to talk about

themselves. Somehow the conversation always gets back to them. They rarely, if ever, ask "How are things with you?" or seem interested in what's going on in your life?

We've all had the experience of talking to someone, and before we've finished they may have walked away, or turned to someone else. Or, we're talking to someone and we can tell their mind is on something else, or that they're not really listening to us. We've all probably been guilty of appearing interested when someone is talking to us, but our mind is wandering, or we're focusing on what *we* want to say and we can hardly wait until they're finished so we can say what we want to say. When you think about it, how many people do you know who really, really listen to you?

We hear, but yet we don't hear. There's a difference between hearing sounds and words when someone's talking, and, on the other hand, catching the *meaning* behind the words. Not just hearing *what* they're saying, but *how they're saying it*, and the *feelings* underneath the words.

Now we all know that it's hard for some people to hear! Those of us who are older (especially us men) know this all too well! There were these three old men, hard of hearing (sorry, "hearing impaired"). It's a cold, blustery day, and they're waiting at a bus stop. The first man, as he's shivering, says, "Brrrr, it's windy"! The second one responds "It's not Wednesday, it's Thursday". And the third man says "I'm thirsty too, let's go grab a beer"!

But it's not just the guys. This elderly lady who had difficulty hearing was talking to a friend. She told her friend that she had just gotten this new hearing aid: "It's wonderful," she said. They told me there's this little computer in it! Hi tech, I guess they all it. I can hear just great!" Smiling, her friend replied, "That's great! What kind is it?" The lady with the new hearing aid looked at her watch and said, "It's 1:30."

Some of us are hearing impaired *physically*. But a lot of us are hearing impaired *in that we don't really listen to people*. This inability to truly listen to one another is common.

Parents and children often cannot communicate. I opened with the letter written by a teenaged boy who felt his mom was too busy to listen, but children often don't really hear what parents are trying to communicate. One mother said, "I never feel that my children hear what I am really saying. Their hearing seems to be influenced by what they expect me to say."

Husbands and wives often are unable to hear what their partner is saying. Lack of communication is one of the prime causes of marital problems. Many couples may *talk* to each other – but at the surface level – talking about work, or the kids, or their schedules for the day or week. But they never get underneath to the *feelings*. They have trouble expressing their *feelings* to their partner, and when they do, often their partner doesn't hear and pick up on the feelings expressed.

It's easy not to really listen to the people we interact with day by day. The person at work...the next door neighbor...the person at church who sits in the next pew or sits next to us at the Bible study or Sunday School class. We never get beyond "small talk" – surface chit-chat.

Certainly, in the area of politics, we don't do a very good job of listening to each other! Whether it's the person we know who has a different political view, or whether it's the members of state government or our political leaders in Washington. Not much genuine listening going on! Add to that all of the "talk radio" and biased news programs coming at us, and there's a whole lotta talking going on – but very little *listening*.

But Scripture says, "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak..." (James 1:19).

Being a good listener doesn't come naturally to most people, but it can be learned. Most of us, by nature, aren't good at listening. But *we can learn and develop that skill.*

I put together a course I call "How To Help People", and I've offered this a number of times in different churches. It's a seminar that teaches us some very basic counseling skills. The first session or so I spend going over the qualities of effective listening and how to develop and practice them. I try to make the point that we're not going to be able to help people very much unless we learn to be good listeners. That's the first step in being able to counsel or help people. And so we spend some time pointing out what's involved in what's called "Active Listening."

Often this is tedious and frustrating to class members, because it takes concentrated effort to really listen. But I try to emphasize that God brings many people across our paths that we could bless or help – but we miss the opportunity, because we don't listen.

What's involved in being a good listener? *First of all, get out of yourself, and truly care about other people.* Some of us are so self-focused, immersed in our own agenda, our own wants and needs, our own busy schedules, our own opinions and views. Life is all about us! To get out of that self-centered mode, and begin to truly care about other people's hurts and hopes, their dreams and disappointments, their thoughts and feelings – this is all part of what the Bible calls *love* – loving our neighbor.

Being a good listener includes a number of other things. Listening to what people are saying without responding by judging them, or instructing them, or correcting them, or giving advice. This doesn't mean we agree with them or like what they may be saying. It just means that we give them permission to say what's on their mind or heart.

Practicing good listening skills involves paying attention not just to *what* people are saying, but *how* they're saying it, and the *feelings* underneath. Are they angry, hurt, afraid, sad? What are they saying through their facial expressions or body language? Then, try to communicate back to that person what we heard them say and what we think they're feeling. An example of this kind of response might be, "Your son didn't even call you on your birthday, and you're feeling hurt and angry." This is called "active listening" because the listener is active in the process. It takes work and effort to truly listen to people. But it's amazing how responding in this way, without making any judgments or giving advice, can help people feel that they are valued and that they've been heard.

"My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak..." (James 1:19).

Some teenage prostitutes, during interviews in a San Francisco study, were asked: "Is there anything you needed most and couldn't get?" Their response, invariably preceded by sadness and tears, was unanimous: "What I needed most was someone to listen to me. Someone who cared enough to listen to me."

Christian author and Bible teacher Chuck Swindoll once found himself with too many commitments in too few days. He got nervous and tense about it. He relates, "I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down my food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at those unexpected interruptions through the day...before long, things around our home started reflecting the pattern of my hurry-up style. It was becoming unbearable. I distinctly remember after supper one evening, the words of our younger daughter, Colleen. She wanted to tell me something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly, 'Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin' and I'll tell you really fast.' Suddenly realizing her frustration, I answered, 'Honey, you can tell me -- and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly. Then Chuck Swindoll writes: "I'll never forget her answer: (she said) 'Then listen slowly.'"

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