

SELECTIVE HEARING

Have you ever practiced “selective hearing?” Or maybe someone has practiced “selective hearing” on you.

You know what that is, right? You only hear what you want to hear. If you don’t want to hear it, you tune it out. You pretend you’re deaf.

That’s one of the good things about having to wear hearing aids like I do. If someone tells you something you don’t like; if you disagree with something that was said or you just don’t want to hear it, you can turn off your hearing aids and tune them out. Or if someone insists that they told you something the other day and you want to have plausible denial, you can say, “I’m sorry. I guess I didn’t hear you. The batteries in my hearing aids must have been getting low.”

Clever people learn to use selective hearing for their benefit.

The scene is a small farm in south Alabama in the late 1940s. The farm sits on a hill about 100 yards from the gravel road that runs through a small country village. Behind the farmhouse, below the hill, there’s a large field. It’s planting season, and the owner of the farm, Red Rucker, is doggedly working the field with a mule-drawn plow, getting it ready to receive the seeds that are stored in his barn.

Red’s patience is being sorely tested on this day. The weather is typically hot and humid, and a swarm of flies is relentlessly attacking Red’s mule. Red notices that his teenage son, Huey, is sitting comfortably in the shade of the back porch of the house. His feet are propped up on his mother’s rocking chair, and he’s holding a tall glass of lemonade. It seems obvious to Red that Huey, having finished his chore of cleaning the chicken coop, needs something else to do. Red pulls up the mule, ties off the reins, and calls to Huey to bring the fly spray to him.

“Huey,” yells Red, “bring me de fly spray.”

“What’d you say, Daddy?” hollers Huey.

“I said bring me de fly spray!”

“I can’t hear you, Daddy!”

At that Red’s face becomes redder than his hair as he gives forth a shout at the top of his lungs. “Bring me de fly spray now!”

“Huh?” Huey. shouts back.

Red throws up his hands in disgust and cries, “Oh, just forget it!”

“Okay, Daddy!” is Huey’s quick reply.

Huey was a grand master in the art of selective hearing. He heard and understood every word Red had shouted to him, but he chose to act only on what he wanted to hear.

A lot of Christians are pretty darn good at selective hearing, too. We hear and understand what Jesus says to us, but we choose to act only on what we want to hear. Take getting angry, for example. Jesus implies that anger is comparable to murder.

“Huh? What was that, Lord? I couldn’t hear you.”

Perhaps Jesus’ patience is being sorely tested by us the way Red’s patience was tested by Huey. So he hollers out to us again. “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. “Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘*Raca*,’ (which is an Aramaic term of contempt) is answerable to the court. “And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

I’ve gotten angry at other people and called them “fools”—and even much worse—on numerous occasions. Mostly I say it “on the inside,” in my heart where no one but God and I can hear; but I’ve also said it out loud, too. I’m familiar with this particular teaching of Jesus, that getting angry with someone is on a par with murdering them. But I’ll be darned if I can hear him when he tries to remind me of it. And it’s not because my hearing aid batteries are getting low.

No, I’m practicing “selective hearing” with Jesus. I’m only acting on what I want Jesus to say to me. The rest of the time I’m like, “Huh? What was that, Lord? I can’t hear you.”

Today Jesus speaks to us through the written word of Scripture. For hundreds and hundreds of years, Jesus’ teachings have been set down in black and white on the pages of our Bibles. Sometimes our Lord’s words are even printed in red ink. We’ve read or heard those words spoken at church and in our homes, and we’ve become familiar with many of Jesus’ teachings. But for some reason, we can’t seem to inscribe those words of Jesus on our hearts.

Jesus speaks to us on some very difficult, challenging subjects. Like divorce. Adultery. Lust. Jesus has told us that, as his followers, we’re to respond to hatred with love, to pray for our enemies and those who persecute us rather than fight with them, and resist violence by practicing the ways of peace.

But we don’t like what Jesus is saying, and most of us only act on the things we want Jesus to say to us. Things we can accept. Things that are easy to swallow.

Selective hearing. Christians have become experts at it.

I remember going to a workshop, a month or so after the 9/11 attacks on our country. The topic was about how Christians are called to respond to the attacks. I can tell you, in that crowd of probably one hundred or so people, very few of them wanted to hear what Jesus had to say about how to respond.

When one of the speakers talked about praying for our enemies, you could feel an intense, tangible anger in that auditorium.

Then a man stood up and offered what I thought was an enlightened idea that I believe Jesus himself would have agreed with and applauded. He said, "I wonder what would happen if, instead of waging war on the people who were responsible for the 9/11 attacks; instead of dropping bombs on them, what if we dropped care packages. "What if we dropped food and medical supplies on them? I wonder what would happen if we did that? I wonder what those people we consider to be our enemies would do if we responded to the attacks on our country, not with war and violence, but with acts of love, mercy, forgiveness, and gestures of peace?"

Man, you could cut the tension with a knife. You should have heard the angry reactions that ensued from that idea. And from Christians, mind you!

"Are you crazy? What's wrong with you? They don't deserve our mercy and forgiveness! If we respond with gestures of peace they're only going to attack us again!"

I have to admit, the idea that man had was breathtaking to me. It was extraordinarily courageous. It was incredibly . . . Christian. But no one wanted to hear from Jesus at that moment. They had totally closed their ears to his words. They didn't want to listen what our Lord might have to say. They had selective hearing,

I think it was because they were so frightened. The idea of actually putting into practice two of Christ's central teachings—love your enemy and turn the other cheek—in response to the 9/11 attacks terrified them. And I'll be honest, it terrified me, too. To actually respond to acts of poisonous hatred and incredible violence with acts of love and peace was such a risky, astonishing, unexpected but absolutely Christian idea that . . . who knows what would have happened if we had done it.

Of course, we do know what happened by not doing it.

A seemingly endless war began. A war we're still fighting, to this day.

Many thousands of people—including innocent men, women and children—have been, and still are being killed and injured. Money that could have been spent building up, healing and preserving life was instead spent

destroying, injuring and taking away life.

I think that most Christians live their faith “buffet-style. You know: I’ll take a little of this teaching of Jesus. Oooh, I love what Jesus said on this subject. Oh no, I don’t want any of that one.”

We practice selective hearing. We may hear and understand what Jesus says to us, but we chose to act only the ones we want to.

The other things Jesus has to say to us that we’re not listening to—well, they’re optional, right? If we don’t agree with something Christ tells us, that’s okay. We just tell ourselves the teachings of Jesus we disagree with are elective. They’re voluntary. They’re non-compulsory. We simply choose to follow only those teachings of Christ we happen to agree with.

But I wonder what would happen if we didn’t practice selective hearing. I wonder what the world would be like if we listened to and tried followed all of Jesus’ teachings. Every last one. Even the ones we disagree with. Even the seemingly unrealistic ones. What would happen if we did that? Amen.