

What's the Rudest Thing People Do in Church?

It doesn't bother me anymore when I hear a phone ringing during a church service. Welcome to life in the 21st century. But I was shocked recently when I heard a blaring ringtone while I was preaching—and a woman on the second row pulled her phone out of her purse and began a conversation as if she were in the waiting room of a hair salon.

That incident prompted me to ask my friends to share their own stories of rudeness in church. My question triggered an avalanche of pent-up frustration about crinkly candy wrappers, smelly feet (yes, someone took off their shoes during the service), unruly children, coffee-sipping saints and parishioners who try to finish their pastors' sentences during sermons.

When I tallied the responses, I came up with this list of the rudest things people do in church:

1. Talking during a service.
2. Texting, surfing the web or playing video games.
3. Sleeping—or snoring!—during a sermon.
4. Clipping fingernails or toenails during church. (I was amazed at how many people listed this offense. One person said his church's sound technician clipped his nails routinely during the sermon, and it was amplified over the loud speaker.)
5. Answering a ringing phone in church.
6. Painting fingernails during a service. Three coats, in fact!
7. Eating potato chips during the sermon.
8. Playing Words With Friends during worship.
9. Letting babies cry incessantly.
10. Selling Avon products in the sanctuary.

11. Chewing gum noisily. (One friend from Puerto Rico said he is particularly annoyed when people “chew gum like a goat.”)
12. Public display of affection. (One person complained about a man and wife who enjoy giving each other back rubs during worship.)

Those were the most common replies. Other infractions included 1) “Pushing people to the floor while praying for them”; 2) “Eating fried chicken in the pews and leaving the bones”; 3) “Taking change from the offering plate”; 4) “Swearing in church” (I didn’t ask for the details on that!); and 5) “Flossing teeth during the sermon.”

But as I mused over these replies, I couldn’t help but wonder: What does God consider rude?

I don’t think crying babies annoy God. Nor do I think He is offended if a husband and wife get cozy in church. And surely He has compassion for a person whose tiny bladder forces them to go to the restroom more often than everyone else.

Some of us need to lighten up and extend grace to latecomers, fidgety kids, teeth-grinders, Millennials who enjoy good coffee, young mothers with infants and people who have to report to work promptly at 1 p.m.

But when I look at the Bible, it’s obvious God doesn’t like it when people refuse to focus their attention when He’s talking. He calls us to listen. Moses told the Hebrews they would be blessed if they listened to God’s commandments (see Deut. 11:27). Solomon said when we come to God’s house we should “draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools” (Eccl. 5:1). Ouch!

Isaiah said God awakened him “to *listen* as a disciple” (Isa. 50:4c, NASB, emphasis mine), while Jeremiah rebuked Israel because they “did not *listen* or incline their ears” (Jer. 17:23). And when Jesus was glorified in His transfiguration,

the Father declared, “*Listen* to Him!” (Luke 9:35b, MEV, emphasis mine). We can’t please God or be His faithful followers if we don’t listen.

Yet today we live in a distracted culture. We are sleep-deprived multitaskers. We surf the web while we watch TV; we text while we drive; we tweet while we work; we take calls when we are meeting friends for conversation. Some people even crash into each other on the sidewalk because they are so busy Googling they didn’t see another distracted Googler headed straight toward them.

We are so focused on everything that we can’t focus on anything. I sometimes wonder if the proliferation of fast food, sugary drinks, movies on demand, “smart” phones and 24-hour news isn’t rewiring our brains so we can no longer pay attention to anything.

I’m not bashing technology. But we could lose the art of discipleship if we don’t reclaim the habit of careful listening. That means when we come to church, especially, we should not just turn off our phones but also tune out all other distractions so we can focus on what God is saying to us—through the preacher, the worship songs, the prayers and the Holy Spirit’s still, small voice.

Please don’t be rude to God. Don’t just go to church. Go and hear the word of the Lord. Don’t talk, text, sleep or take calls when He is speaking. Listen as if your life depended on it.