

LESSON ESSENTIALS

FAMILY LIFE

LESSON 5: BUILDING COMMUNICATION IN MARRIAGE

Children often play games in which one person has to guess what another person is saying. They confuse their partner by whispering, or hiding their mouths, or covering their partner's ears; all of this is to make communication challenging and fun! But in a marriage, challenging conversation is not much of a game at all. There is much at stake – a healthy marriage is made up of two people willing and able to do all it takes to successfully communicate with one another.

Our Lord Jesus is given the name “the Word of God” and scripture is full of descriptions of our God as a communicating God. By looking into His Word we should find strategies and expectations to help us in how we communicate in our marriages.

True communication is never a one-way path. Communication ought to have four aspects to it: one person speaks; the second person listens; the second person speaks; the first person listens

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Humans are social creatures. We talk. We relate. We communicate. We share stories. Given how much of our day is taken up in conversation, one would think that it would come easily to us. And indeed, while simple speech may be second nature, healthy conversation is not always. It is one thing to talk to your spouse. It is another thing entirely to communicate well – respectfully, lovingly, patiently, understandingly, and helpfully.

A pervasive message in the world is that each of us needs to look out for ourselves, making sure that our needs are met and that we can express ourselves. We are told to be true to ourselves and to follow our hearts and to fight for what we need. Having a mindset like this taints every part of our relationships, but certainly it also impacts how we communicate to those whom we love.

True communication is never a one-way path. Communication ought to have four aspects to it: one person speaks; the second person listens; the second person speaks; the first person listens. It is not enough to say that we take turns talking. No; there has to also be active, intentional listening from both parties to make a true conversation. If we are holding to the world's mindset of looking out for ourselves and our needs, then we will stop listening and will only talk to make sure that we are heard. This approach to communication in a marriage is deadly.

The Bible instructs us differently with regards to communication. These principles hold true for every relationship and every conversation, but so much more so in a marriage. The Word of God says that we ought to be "quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (James 1:19). This holds a very different tone than the advice to make yourself heard, and to fight to have your opinion aired! In a marriage, it is crucial that both spouses take care to truly hear each other and to give lots of time for patient listening.

And then when it is our time to speak, the Bible warns us about the root of our speech, too. Many of the gospel accounts warn us that our words flow from whatever is in our hearts. If we are holding bitterness, anger, sadness, jealousy, or the like in our hearts, then the words that come out to our spouse will also be bitter, angry, sad, jealous, and so on. Furthermore, we are instructed to ensure that our speech is always gracious (Colossians 4:6), and to treat others as we would want them to treat us (Matthew 7:12). If we are only seeking our own good in our relationships, then our communication style will show it. Clearly, the Biblical expectation is not that we would seek our own good, but that we would be gracious and kind and careful about how we speak, and what we choose to say, once it is our time to talk.

Obviously, men and women are very different in many ways. The Lord has uniquely designed and created men and women to complement each other's strengths and weaknesses. These differences can make

communication a little difficult at times as we may not understand why our spouse is reacting a certain way, or talking a certain way. However, we ought not to try and undo these differences. We should not view our differences as problems to solve, but rather tools to use. Having more than one perspective in a relationship is so very helpful in solving problems or creating exciting plans for the future. Learning how to communicate, despite the difference between men and women, is a gift and a blessing to the health of your marriage.

In fact, the differences between how men and women communicate is often used as an excuse to not even try to communicate well. A wife may say, “He just doesn’t understand me, so why should I bother talking to him.” She may then turn to her female friends exclusively for advice and counsel, undermining her marriage. Or a husband may say, “She gets so emotional and easily offended when I try to express my point of view. I’m not going to bother trying to explain my side of things. It’s just easier to let her do it her own way.” He may then resort to ending every conversation with a resigned indifference, surrendering his headship over the home.

Instead of devaluing the differences between the genders, we need to embrace them as sovereignly designed gifts from the Lord, and to use them for His glory and for our sanctification. By pursuing patience, loving hearts, consideration for others, and a desire for God’s glory, we will find that communication difficulties in our marriages can be drastically reduced. And when we come to a place of peaceful, respectful conversation, the world take notice and sees the glory of God shining from our home.

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IN REVIEW

- The Bible gives us clear expectations and instructions for our communication that differs greatly from the counsel of the world. We need to be diligent to follow God's ways in this area.
- Men and women do communicate very differently, but this is not an excuse for not obeying God's ways and striving for His standards of proper speech.
- How we speak, and what we say, comes out of the attitudes of our hearts, so we must be diligent to pray for, and to foster, patient, loving, others-centered attitudes.

HAVE YOUR SAY

- Think of conversations that you've had with people that have hurt you. Now think of conversations that have built you up and encouraged you. What are some of the differences? Do you see ways that you are imitating one or the other in your communication style? Evaluate your speech and your attitudes honestly, and pray for the Lord to help you.

- If you are married, ask your spouse if you have hurt them with your speech. Humbly seek their forgiveness and ask for their perspective on how you can change how you communicate to avoid further hurt.

- Whom do you find it difficult to communicate with? What is getting in the way of effective communication between the two of you? Write down some ideas for the next time you have a difficult conversation.

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