

discipleship essentials

Essentials for Spiritual Leadership Leader's Guide

FAMILY LIFE

LESSON 5: BUILDING COMMUNICATION IN MARRIAGE

INTRODUCTION

This lesson is part of a Disciple Essentials module titled Family Life. This series of lessons looks at spiritual leadership in the home as it pertains to building a healthy Christian family. It begins with a framework for understanding the Biblical basis for family and moves on to some challenges faced by families such as preparation for marriage, managing finances, leading one's children, and building good communication with your spouse. This series of lessons takes the view that spiritual leadership begins in the home – and both men and women have specific roles in this regard. These lessons present God's best design for families, while recognizing that in today's world families can come in many forms. The lessons will benefit those who are married, those who have the role of a parent, as well as young people who desire healthy relationships in the future.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

The intended audience for these lessons is Christians who are maturing in their faith and desiring to serve God sincerely. The lessons will also benefit church leaders who teach the foundations for marriage and family, and how to develop strong relationships within them.

The Leader's Guide is intended to help you as a leader in your preparation. These lesson outlines may be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials found online at www.discipleshipessentials.org.

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FAMILY LIFE

LESSON 5: BUILDING COMMUNICATION IN MARRIAGE

PURPOSE

To explore the role of communication in strong marriages, and to learn good communication skills that can be used in any relationship.

LEADER'S NOTE

It is preferable to present this lesson to husbands and wives together. Both men and women bear God's Image, and when they do so in a loving marriage relationship, it is a beautiful image indeed! If you are conducting pre-marriage courses, this lesson will be particularly helpful, but it will also be beneficial to those who have been married for some time. The principles of effective listening are of utmost importance, and can also be applied to other areas of life. You may have to adapt some of this content to your particular situation. The activities at the end of the lesson are not just games, but intended to help participants see their own weaknesses. They also provide opportunity to rehearse communicating effectively for when it really matters! You can intersperse them within the lesson, or leave room for them at the end of the lesson time. Encourage students to discuss what they learned about themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Select two or three of the following questions to ask the group.

- ❖ What are some of the major personality differences between men and women? How do they approach problems differently? How do they communicate when a problem arises?
- ❖ What are some common areas in which men and women have difficulty agreeing? Consider time and money.
- ❖ Think about bad marriages you are aware of. What makes them 'bad'? What are some traits of people in those marriages? What is their communication like?
- ❖ Why does God care about how we communicate with our spouse? From what we've talked about in earlier lessons, what is hindered when we don't communicate well?



STUDY

Instruct the group on the following points.

TEACH:

- ❖ **Made to be Men and Women:** Sometimes we may wonder why God put men and women together to bear His Image, and pass the Gospel to the next generation through family. Men and Women are so different! In fact, sometimes it might seem that they are speaking different languages!
 - **Different For a Purpose:** Medicine, sociology, psychology and every other branch of learning confirms that men and women are different in more ways than just their physiological makeup. The way they think, socialize, process problems, and communicate is often quite different. In all societies and cultures this difference is unmistakable. But like all things God has designed, this difference is no accident. It was by God's design that each of us was assigned a gender and a purpose to fulfill (Genesis 1:27).
 - **Biblical Manhood:** Many men in the Bible did not sit around and wait for something good to happen. Instead they courageously moved forward in the direction God had for them, accepted responsibility for their calling, and worked toward that goal. Think about Noah, Moses and David. Sometimes they were afraid, but they were successful because they didn't let fear stop them. They led their family, protected others, and remained strong in their convictions. A man may be more physically powerful than his wife, but he must use that strength to work hard and protect, rather than harm. A man should lovingly provide what his family needs and humbly lead them, knowing his strength comes from God. Men often see the 'bigger picture', and are concerned with what is happening outside the home. They value strength, direction, wisdom, power and respect.
 - o 1 Corinthians 16:13-14
 - o Proverbs 16:9
 - o Exodus 4:20
 - o Ephesians 5:23-24
 - o Micah 6:8
 - **Biblical Womanhood:** The Bible says that an excellent wife is more precious than jewels! A woman who is following God's design for her life will be like the Biblical women Sarah, Ruth, Esther and Mary. Their strength comes from their compassion and desire to serve God. They focus on developing the beauty of a quiet spirit, and a life filled with good works and modesty. They live in obedience to God, and trust Him even when they have fears. A woman's role in the home is to provide what her children and husband need emotionally, as well as physically. She should consider their comforts delights before her own. A woman is often more concerned with small details of life and the relationships between family members. She should strive to



excel in communication as she values intimacy, faithfulness, security, fruitfulness and love.

- o [1 Timothy 2:9-12](#)
- o [1 Peter 3:6](#)
- o [Ephesians 5:22-24](#)
- o [Proverbs 31:10-31](#)

➤ **Learning from Differences:** In these differences, we can learn from one another. Neither men nor women can see the complete picture of life on their own, but benefit from seeing the other's perspective. God calls us all to try to understand one another, not be harsh but show respect. To do so, we must acknowledge their different priorities, different perspectives and different desires!

- o [1 Peter 3:7](#)
- o [Colossians 3:19](#)

TASK:

This activity will poll your participants about the different interests of men and women. Read the following list to all your participants. After each topic, ask them to raise their hand if it is a primary concern of men, women, or both equally. Select some, add some of your own, or change some to be more relevant to your participants if necessary. Count how many hands are raised for each and keep track. There might be differences of opinion; there are no right or wrong answers!

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Sports</i> | <i>Politics</i> | <i>Shopping</i> | <i>Money</i> |
| <i>Fashion</i> | <i>Child Care</i> | <i>Business</i> | <i>Entertainment</i> |
| <i>Celebrities</i> | <i>Relationships</i> | <i>Vehicles</i> | <i>Friendships</i> |
| <i>Household Chores</i> | <i>Sex</i> | <i>Food</i> | <i>Gardening/Agriculture</i> |
| <i>Education</i> | <i>Careers</i> | <i>Celebrations</i> | <i>Hopes and Dreams</i> |

Topics of Interest		
Primarily to Men	To Both Genders Equally	Primarily to Women

It is interesting to consider the priorities that men and women have in life. These priorities or interests will influence how we communicate! Ask:

- o Do you agree with the assessment of the group for these topics?
- o Are there other topics that are of varied interests to men and women?
- o Why might our differences of interest and focus be good for a marriage?



TEACH:

- ❖ **The Importance of Communication:** Without good communication men and women cannot accomplish their dreams and goals. They feel isolated instead of intimate, and end up working against one another rather than alongside one another.
 - **God's Commitment to Communication:** Consider how God communicates with us! God's Word tells us that married couples are a picture of Christ and the Church. Certainly this symbolizes how important communication is (Ephesians 5:28-32)!
 - He has given us His Word (the Bible), and communicates to us through it (2 Timothy 3:16).
 - He created the world to communicate His glory (Psalm 19:1-2).
 - He communicates personally to us through Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-2).
 - He encourages us to pray, and He responds to our prayers (John 15:7, 1 John 5:14).
 - **Jesus models a Commitment to Communication:** Consider the example of Jesus in communication.
 - Jesus asked questions, and listened (Mark 8:27, Mark 9:21).
 - Jesus talked about what was important (Mark 10:21, Matthew 14:27).
 - Jesus expressed how He felt (Mark 8:2, Mark 10:14).
 - Jesus used physical touch as well as words (Matthew 17:7, Mark 10:16).
 - Jesus explained what He meant when there was confusion (Mark 4:34).
 - When He was hurt, He did not retaliate or use words to harm others (1 Peter 2:21-25).
 - **How and What we Communicate:** The way we speak to one another has very powerful effects! We can destroy people with the words we say, or we can build them up and encourage them. We honour and love our spouse well when we are careful with our words. Using harmful words to communicate to a person we should love and respect is not just bad and unkind, it is sinful.

TASK:

Divide participants into small groups. Assign each group one set of verses to read. Once they have read them, they should summarize the principles about the way we use words. Present these principles to the remaining participants.

Set 1	Set 2	Set 3	Set 4
James 3:2-12 Proverbs 15:28	Proverbs 10:19-21 Proverbs 11:13 Proverbs 27:15-16 Proverbs 21:23	Proverbs 12:18 Proverbs 12:25 Proverbs 15:1 Ephesians 4:1-3	Proverbs 18:21 Ephesians 4:29-32 James 1:19-20

Ask participants: How would you summarize the Biblical advice on speaking to others?

**TEACH:**

- ❖ **Overflow of the Heart:** Sometimes those closest to us experience our worst behaviour. We can be irritable, argumentative and display our worst self in the heat of an argument. Whatever is in our heart will come out in our speech eventually. A large part of building a good marriage is evaluating our own weaknesses and working to improve them. That should precede pointing out the faults of our spouse.
 - **Our Speech Reflects our Heart:** When we use unkind words that harm someone, it is because we don't trust them or we harbour hatred toward them. We should carefully examine our heart if we find ourselves using words that hurt people. This may require much prayer and confession. Our words matter. They show people what we are like inside, and we will have to give an account to God for words spoken.
 - [Luke 6:45](#)
 - [Matthew 12:36-37](#)
 - [Proverbs 4:23](#)
 - **Taking Every Thought Captive:** When we have an evil or hateful thought towards someone, the Bible tells us to capture that thought and put it out of our minds. This involves wilfully refusing that thought and stopping it when it returns. We are not at the mercy of our thoughts and feelings! With God's help we can practise thinking good things and loving thoughts about others.
 - [2 Corinthians 10:5](#)
 - [Ephesians 4:31](#)
 - [Philippians 4:8](#)
- ❖ **Communication and Bearing the Image of God:** Everyone wants to be heard and listened to. How we listen to others communicates our love for them, along with the words we speak. When we put aside anger and selfishness in order to better communicate with our spouse, we bear His image well and also find increased intimacy and peace within our marriage. Let us consider what [James 1:19](#) and [Colossians 3:13](#) advise us about everyday communication.
 - **Quick to Hear:** Learning to listen well and really hear another person is a skill. It is more than simply waiting for another to finish speaking so we have our turn! It helps us understand the other person, what their point of view is, and what they are trying to communicate. When someone is communicating with us, we should give them our full attention ([Proverbs 18:2](#), [Proverbs 18:13](#)). When you listen:
 - Look at the other person and make natural eye contact.
 - Position your body so they know you are interested in them.
 - Ask questions to clarify communication,
 - Acknowledge their feelings and point of view.
 - Focus on what they are saying and how they are saying it.



- **Slow to Speak:** Our words can be dangerous weapons or powerful tools. We may want to share our heart and thoughts with others, and defend our position with confidence; however, we don't need to attack another person to make our position stronger. We must be careful and considerate. When we think before we speak we can often avoid hurting the other person. Words spoken out of anger, fear or shame can especially be regretful. Consider the kinds of things we ought to speak about:
 - [Colossians 4:6](#)
 - [Romans 12:14-15](#)
 - [Proverbs 15:1-33](#)

- **Slow to Anger:** Anger and other strong emotions can cause us to say or do things we later regret. When we belittle someone or bring up something we know will cause them pain, we might later say 'it was the anger speaking'. While it takes practice and is in no way easy to do, we must learn to control our anger before it destroys relationships. We do not have a right to use our anger to harm others regardless of the cause. Acting out of anger could cause us to say and do things we would later regret. The same thing applies to fear, worry, guilt and hate.
 - [Psalm 37:8](#)
 - [James 1:20](#)
 - [Proverbs 14:29](#)
 - [Proverbs 19:11](#)

- **Quick to Forgive:** When others anger us, we must learn to forgive quickly. When we recall the offences we have made against God and how He forgives us so quickly, we can do the same to others. It will take practice. When we feel rage against another, we must remember they are weak and sinful as we are. We must forgive instead of venting our anger on them. We did not deserve God's forgiveness and yet He forgave us. When we are quick to forgive our spouse it does not mean accepting or encouraging their sinful behaviour. We can still express hurt without anger, but with much forgiveness.
 - [Ephesians 4:32](#)
 - [Matthew 6:14-15](#)
 - [Proverbs 10:12](#)

- ❖ **Building Intimacy and Trust:** Good communication with your spouse requires that you lovingly listen to them. Marriages should be places of trust, acceptance and intimacy, not a competition or combat zone! It may take years of practice as we surrender our sense of being 'right' and allow for differences.
 - **The Communication Cycle:** Communication is more than words flying in one or more directions! In order for communication to be successful, there must be one person who delivers a message and another person who receives and understands it. Simply talking does not count as communication! In order to ensure communication happens:
 - Ask questions to ensure understanding.



- o Pause, and watch body language.
 - o Use examples when necessary.
 - o Ask your listener to summarize what has been said.
- **Escalation:** When anger and frustration heat up a discussion, here are some ways a couple can continue the communication:
- o **Find out the Facts:** Often angry words and disagreements stem from misunderstanding. When you find yourself in an argument, take a step back and ask for more clarification of the facts. What happened? What exactly is causing the disagreement?
 - o **Consider the Motives:** When a disagreement arises, there are often deeper issues behind it. What might be causing frustration and anger? Are there fears, guilt or resentment causing this argument to erupt?
 - o **Share Feelings:** Instead of accusing your spouse and saying “you never...” or “you always...” which will only aggravate anger, share how their words or actions make you feel. Use words such as “When this happens I feel...” and “I would like...”. No one can disagree with how you feel.
 - o **Play on the Same Team:** Remember that you and your spouse are on the same team, working toward the same goals. Marriage is not a competition – your focus should not be on winning arguments!
 - o **Focus on the Future:** When difficulty arises, focus together on how you both will change patterns of behaviour for the future, rather than on what has happened in the past. It is easy to blame one another and recall bad decisions. Concentrate on making good decisions together.
- **Building Intimacy:** Good communication with one another also contributes to improving our relationship and developing intimacy. These are some of the most important words used in strong marriages:
- o **I love you.**
 - o **Please forgive me.**
 - o **I am sorry.**
 - o **I will take responsibility.**
 - o **What do you think?**
- Consider how your marriage would improve if you and your spouse regularly asked one another questions like these:
- o **How can I love you this week?**
 - o **What do you need from me today?**
 - o **What's on your mind?**
 - o **What would you like to do right now?**



- ❖ **Conclusion:** Though different from each other, both men and women can learn to be better communicators! Instead of fighting against one another for power, we can actively love one another by listening, loving and learning from each other. When we do this, God is glorified.

TASK:

If participants are present with their marriage partner, have each set of spouses attempt several of the communication exercises attached to this lesson. If individuals are here without spouses, they can practise these exercises with anyone present, and apply what they have learned to relationships in their life. Ask participants:

What did you learn about your own listening skills?

What did you learn about your partner? What could you learn if you practised this regularly?

DISCUSSION

- ❖ Can you remember the rules of communication laid out in James 1:19? Memorize that verse, and post it somewhere in your home so you will always remember it.
- ❖ How do you feel when someone has really heard what you had to say, and has listened well? How do you know? How can they show you?
- ❖ What are some topics that are difficult to communicate about?
- ❖ How can you demonstrate what you have learned in this lesson with your spouse, family members or others?
- ❖ What is one thing you want to do differently next time you get into a difficult discussion or argument?

PRAYER

Close the lesson in prayer. Pray that all married participants will work on having strong marriages. Pray that God would be glorified through these marriages and that intimacy would be strengthened. Pray that all of us will be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, and quick to forgive just as God has forgiven us. Pray that we would learn to put others before ourselves and truly listen to what they have to say.



COMMUNICATION EXERCISES

Complete these exercises with a partner – spouse, friend or classmate.

Active Listening

Active listening provides feedback to our partner so they know we have received what they are trying to communicate. The best listening is active in every situation and can help when someone needs to feel listened to. This exercise helps promote deliberate, concentrated listening, and can be very difficult for some!

When we use active listening we:

1. Listen with our Whole Body

- Look at the speaker directly.
- Mirror the speaker's body language, but use inviting body posture (not crossed arms, or leaning away).
- Show our understanding with our facial expressions (concern, delight, surprise, etc.).
- Nod or use small verbal responses such as 'I see', 'yes', 'hmm', 'okay'.

2. Verbally Confirm what we Hear:

- Periodically, rephrase and repeat to the speaker what you are hearing: "So what you are saying is..." or "If I understand you correctly...". Summarize the speaker's main points.
- Ask questions to clarify points such as "How did that make you feel?", or "What did you mean when...?".
- Sympathize and draw connections. Say things like: "That must be very difficult, I hear you are frustrated".

3. Respond Appropriately:

- Wait until the speaker is finished with an idea before asking further questions – never interrupt.
- When the first person has finished speaking, respond appropriately with your ideas or opinion.
- If asked for advice, you may provide it.

For this exercise, have the first partner pick something in their life they find frustrating or unfair. The second partner will listen to them speak about this problem using active listening skills. This should take no more than 3 minutes. Then reverse roles. After both have had a chance to be active listeners, evaluate this experience.

- Did you find active listening difficult to do?
- What was it like to have someone listen to you in this way?

Body Language

Body language sometimes communicates as much as our words! We often communicate how we feel through our bodies. When we communicate we should pay attention to the body language of the other person.

Closed body language includes crossed arms, crossed legs, leaning away from, lack of eye contact, and tight body posture. This demonstrates negative feelings and lack of desire to talk.

Open body language includes looking around and at the speaker, parallel legs, open arms, friendly gestures, and relaxed body posture. This demonstrates an openness to communicate.

For this exercise, the first partner will pick an emotion or a state of mind to display through their body language. Then they should say, "Today will be a great day!" The other partner must mirror that body language and then suggest what feeling they are trying to display. Did their words match their body language? Was their statement believable? Then they reverse roles. Try these two or three times.

Consider body language for grief, joy, boredom, fear, frustration, anger, hope, worry, guilt, sadness, love.



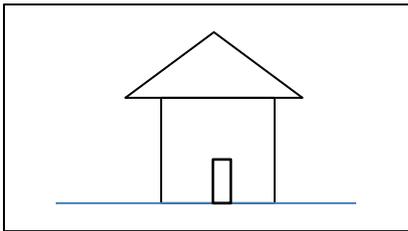
Write Right

For this exercise, partners will each need a pencil and a piece of paper. They should sit back-to-back. This can be a fun game, there is always laughing involved, but it demonstrates the need for accurate communication and careful listening.

1. The first person will draw a simple picture on the paper, made up of simple lines and shapes.
2. They will *describe* to the other person the picture on the paper. They should not tell the other *what* they have drawn, rather *how* it is drawn.
3. The second person should try to replicate the picture as best as they can.
4. The partners compare pictures, and then switch roles.

A description may sound something like this:

First draw a medium sized square in the middle of your paper. At the bottom of the square, draw a horizontal line. In the center of that line draw a small rectangle, which will be inside the larger square. At the top of the square, draw a triangle. Would you have guessed they had drawn a simple house? Partners can attempt the activity again with more complex pictures.



High and Low

This is a great activity for a husband and wife to participate in at a meal or end of the day. Each person should share their high for the day (the best or most special part), and the low (the most difficult or frustrating). While one person is sharing, the other person should practise active listening. This can be a good way for two people to understand what the other person goes through in a day, what delights them, and what brings them sadness. It can become a regular part of daily life for a couple, without being a formal communication exercise!

This activity encourages each other with active listening sympathy.



Perfect Listening

This is a more advanced form of active listening, and it is called perfect listening. It is more of an extreme example of the listening habits we should all develop. It can produce good results!

Each couple should choose a topic on which they disagree. For this activity, choose something that is mostly frivolous or will not cause much anger. Some examples may include:

- Which sports team is the best?
- How should a person take their coffee or tea?
- Is it better to stay up late or get up early?
- Is it more important for students to study literature and history, or science and math?
- Is it better to live in the countryside or a big city?
- Should people keep pets? What is the best pet?
- Etc.

The first person should state his or her opinion, a few sentences at a time. Then the other person must repeat every point accurately back to the first person. When they can do so, the first person will tell them 'perfect!'. Then the second person will share a few points about their opinion, and the first person will repeat until they have got it perfect. Use as many as the exact words and phrases as you can! Remember to say 'perfect' once the other person has successfully repeated all the points you made. Carry on in this manner three or four times. Then discuss what it was like having your points repeated back to you by someone else, and if you changed your position at all during the course of this exercise.

Many people find that after this exercise, they can more clearly see the other person's point of view. Some people will change their opinion entirely, or at least hold to it less forcefully!