Core Seminars—Marriage

Week 8

**Biblical Communication**

# The Importance of Communication in Marriage

# There are very few topics we could talk about that can either make or break a marriage. Communication is one of them… “If marriage is source of the union, sex is the picture of the union, family is the fruit of the union, then communication is the essence of the union: It is where the union will fail or succeed.”

# Think about it this way, if you are struggling with finances, having a hard time relating sexually, at a loss with your parenting, or don’t know how to deal with a problem, you’ve got to communicate about it. You’ve got to talk to each other in order to get through it and come out on the other side. Communication is the gas that makes the car run. Without it, you’re not going anywhere in your marriage. This week, biblical; next week, unbiblical. This won’t be comprehensive, but I hope it will be a good start.

**Four Goals in Biblical Communication**

(1) to know and be known; (2) to achieve a oneness of understanding; (3) building trust; (4) building one another up spiritually.

**#1. Use your words to know your spouse and to become known by your spouse.**

The husband and wife can use their words to reveal themselves to each other. The operative word here is *vulnerability*. As a husband and wife, are you choosing to open up your heart and your life to one another? And if so, do you use words that make yourselves more vulnerable? Do you use your words so that your spouse can get to know you and you can get to know him/her better?

Biblical basis for #1: The ideal set out in Gen 2 before sin entered the world was being “naked and not ashamed” (2:25). This is the picture of complete vulnerability and openness (quite literally, because there were no clothes yet!). Adam and Eve were able to be so open that even *physically* (but I presume also emotionally and relationally and verbally) they were able to expose everything without any shame. It is hard to understand this in our experiences today because sin has so tainted our post-Fall existence with one another.

**Application:** One of the ways that sin corrupts our relationships is that it makes us hide from each other. Yet, the trajectory of sanctification is to bring things out of the darkness and into the light. Practically speaking, some of you need to stop hiding in your marriage, and to take risks by using your words to reveal yourself to spouse. That vulnerability can be scarey, but it is necessary in building a good marriage.

**#2. Use your words to achieve a one-ness of understanding.**

The second goal is *to use your words to achieve a oneness of understanding*. Note, I didn’t say a oneness of *agreement*. The operative word here is *understanding*. In marriage, you are trying to understand your spouse, enter into his or her experience, and then (in the case of husbands) leading your wife from within that sympathetic viewpoint.

Biblical basis for #3: 1 Peter 3: 7, “Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way…” (ESV). NIV uses the word “considerate,” but a literal translation of v. 7 could be “Husbands, live together with them *according to knowledge*.” This is not an analytical knowledge or religious knowledge, but personal insight that leads to loving and considerate care for a wife. Synonyms are: Study your wife and know her well; be a good student of your wife’s heart.

As a husband, your joy should be to use your words and your ears in such a way that your wife knows that you get it, that you understand her, and that fundamentally, you are *for* her and her good.

This is what incarnational love is all about. Christ didn’t lecture us from heaven. He came down to earth; he took on human flesh; and he entered into our experience. Hebrews 4:15: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin.” Jesus entered into our experience and understood it. And then and only then he did something about it (cf. Heb 2:18).

**Application:** Do you take the time to connect emotionally with your wife, to notice and comment on your wife’s appearance, or the effort she’s taken on the house or some other project? Have you taken the initiative to study her, so that you know her preferences on gifts, restaurants, movies, books, etc? Do you take an interest in things she’s interested in, not because they interest you, but because they interest her, and you cherish her? [Tell the story of guy who said, “I’ve got a file on her.” In DC that can be a weird statement, aka it conjures up thoughts of the FBI has a file on you. It turns out he had 25 pages of typed notes on her. While I’m not advising the men in the room to start a file on your girlfriend, I think spirit of this idea is exactly right. He was working very hard to understand her. Interesting her comment: “At times, it seems like he knows me better than I know myself.”] Husbands, do you honor and delight in her emotional sensitivities, and take care to shelter them in the way you speak? Or do you wish she would just toughen up, or do you write her off as emotional? Do you have the difficult conversation with the teacher or the neighbor? Do you ask her what she’s thinking about, or what she’s studying in her Quiet Times? Do you ever initiate the question, “Can we pray about this?” or are you always responding to her request?

**#3. Use your words to build trust.**

The third goal is to use your words to build trust with one another. To trust someone means you have put a confidence and hope in their integrity, strength, and character. Trust is foundational for any relationship, and it is especially important in marriage.

One of the privileges of my job is helping those are struggling in marriage. In fairly difficult marriages, couples have lost their trust and respect for one another. We all tend to take trust for granted until it is lost. Sadly, in struggling marriage, words are used in ways that builds distrust, not trust. Spouses make promises and consistently do not live up to them. If a husband says he’ll do something, the wife no longer believes that he will really do it. For such a long time, his words have not matched up with his actions, so she has very little hope that he will follow through with his words.

Biblical basis for #3: One of the phrases that has always caught my attention is Paul’s words in 1 Cor 13:7, Love “believes all things” (ESV) or “always trust” (NIV). In marriage, you need to be able to trust your spouse, or else the marriage cannot work. So what does Paul mean by this curious phrase? Does Paul literally mean you should believe everything your spouse tells you? In a fallen world, we recognize that it is not realistic to believe the best about everything and everyone all of the time. That creates utopia, or heaven this side of death; and it doesn’t realistically deal with the way sin effects how we communicate. Our spouses are sinners, and they are bound to make mistakes. So how do we build trust in a marriage and at the same time be realistic about the sin of our spouse? A wife can have trust in her husband, despite his sin, because she knows that his sin does not characterize his life. “*Always* trust” or “believes *all things*” can sometimes feel like an impossible standard for anyone to live up to in marriage. Yet, God supernaturally gives the Christian wife an ability to trust her husband; to trust what he says; to trust that he will do what he says and live up to his promises. This is not something she can do on her own. God helps her to trust his daily character and integrity such that she realizes that his sins are not the dominate theme in their marriage. He will most certainly sin, but that sin is put in the context of her overall trust for his character and integrity. She knows that the sin does not characterize him; he will sin his whole life, but his character makes him trustworthy. Hence, God gives her a daily disposition towards him that she trust him. Her default position is to trust what he says, not to distrust him. In contrast, in struggling marriages, sin has become so dominant in the marriage that the spouse has lost trust in her spouse, and respect is quickly thrown out the window. So much of what I do in marital counseling is help the couple to rebuild trust in one another. I try to help them build trust in each other’s words and in each other’s character.

Trust in a marriage not only happens in the larger decisions in life, but also through the thousands of day-to-day mundane moments that make up your marriage. Trust is not just for the big things, but should be for everything.

And you don’t have to be a bad marriage to break promises and build distrust with your words. We all do this on a daily basis. Because we are all sinners, to one degree or another we are all careless and unrealistic with our words, which hurts our relationship with our friends or our spouse.

*STORY: In my first year of ministry of CHBC, I was leaving for work one day, and I said (as I usually did heading out the door), “See you tonight at 5:30.” Sarah responded: “You’ve got to stop it.” “Whooh,” I thought, “(it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know) something is wrong here.” I came to find out my wife was frustrated with me because every day I would promise to be home at 5:30, and yet I would never walk in until 545 or 6. In my saying, “See you tonight at 530” I was making a promise to my wife, and by arriving every day after 530, I was breaking it. I quickly apologized to my wife, and changed what I said every morning when I left for work.*

Jesus tells us in Matthew 12:36-37, “But I tell you that men will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

The very scary thought of having to give an account to God on judgment day for our careless words should motivate us to be more careful. Jesus does not say you will have to give an account for *most* words, or the *really important* words, but for every *careless* word spoken. Every word matters in marriage. To build trust, we need to use loving and self-sacrificial words, but we also need to use *careful* and *deliberate* words to build trust in your marriage.

**#4. Use your words to build one another up spiritually.**

The fourth goal is to use our words to build one another up spiritually. To demonstrate this, let’s look at Eph 4:29.

Context – Eph 4:17 to 5:1: 2 negatives and 2 positives / 1st negative: v. 17 – you must no longer live as the Gentiles do; and Paul spells this out in vs. 18 – 19 (darkened in the understanding; separated from the life of God; etc.). / 1st positive: vs. 20-21 – they came to know Christ through the truth that was taught them / 2nd negative: v. 22 – put off the old self / 2nd positive: v. 23-24 – be made new in the attitudes of your minds and put on the new self. / What’s the end goal of the put off – put on sanctification scheme that Paul describes? 4:24 “to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” and 5:1 “Be imitators of God”. The goal is to grow in the character of God; to become more like Christ. 4:24 and 5:1 are book-ends, and everything in between ends up being specific examples of how we can do this. (Though this is not a comprehensive list.)

Looking at Eph 4:29, let’s break down the verses phrases….

1. **Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth.** The word for “unwholesome” in the Greek conveys the idea of “rotten” fruit (Matt 7:17-18) or fish (Matt 12:33-34). The word picture conveys the harm that is done with your words. Think of what you do to the other person if you give them a rotten piece of fruit and you make them eat it.
2. **But only what is helpful in building others up.** We want to use our words in marriage to build the union and one-ness, not to break it down.
3. **As fits the occasion (ESV) or according to their needs (NIV).** We want our type of words to be appropriate for occasion. There are some moments in life that require encouragement; some that require exhortation; some that require comfort; etc. We demonstrate wisdom when we choose the right word for the right occasion.
4. **That it might benefit those who listen (NIV) or that it might give grace to those who hear (ESV).** The immediate end goal of your words is that it helps the other person. Your words can be a means of grace to build up the other person.

The larger goal we can gather from the context of this passage: You want to consistently use your words to spiritually build up your spouse. The point of your communication in marriage is to help your spouse look more like Christ. This becomes an excellent standard whereby you can measure our communication in marriage. You can ask the question, “Has what I said to my spouse helped him or her to look more or less like Christ?”

**Husbands take Initiative in Marital Communication (Romans 5:6-8; Ephesians 2:4-7)**

Remember that we talked (early in the class) how there is to be *a shape* and *structure* to every marital relationship. The husband leads, the wife responds and follows.

Husbands, communication begins with your initiative. Biblical communication doesn’t sit back and wait to be asked; it doesn’t content itself with not giving trouble; doesn’t protect itself or stand on its rights. Rather, it takes the initiative. *Christ is your example.* Jesus didn’t wait for us to ask him to come down. Nor did he stay up in heaven and offer us advice or give us instructions. No, he came down, freely and of his own accord, he initiated with us, in order to love us.

Now husbands, this has *implications for everything*—from how you make love to how you spend your day off or evenings, to how you order your workday. But it especially has implications for your verbal communication. Whether it’s a normal conversation about your day, or a heated argument about family finances, *our responsibility as husbands is to take the initiative, moving toward*our wives,*not away*from them,pursuing them in love, just as Christ pursued us!

And husbands, let me just make clear that the temptation here is *abdication*. And there are lots of ways to do this. It’s possible to abdicate by checking out and just being unengaged. It’s also possible to abdicate by simply never really having an opinion, by being a nice guy who basically goes along with whatever his wife and kids seem to want but never really entering into their lives, their desires, their dreams and leading them. Finally it’s possible to abdicate by reducing our communication to mere response to our wives’ initiative. Husbands, your model is Christ, who didn’t wait around for us to ask, but who took the initiative.

**Wives Lovingly Respond (Ephesians 5:22-24; 1 Peter 3:1-6)**

So what shape does biblical communication take for wives? *The wife invites and responds to a husband’s leadership.* Much like the Beloved in the Song of Songs, a wife actively invites and even calls out of her husband his initiative and leadership through the attractive power of her beauty—the beauty of a pure and reverent life; the beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.

What that means for a wife’s speech is that it is not directed primarily toward getting her husband to be the kind of man she wants him to be, but toward inviting him into her life. It means communicating an openness and softness to his leadership and initiative, and then responding to it when he provides it. It means cultivating an attractive attitude that elicits his leadership, rather than manipulates it. It means persevering in opening and sharing your life with him. And the primary way you’re going to do that is with your words. As you share with him, not his failings, but your fears; not his responsibilities, but your dreams; not his shortcomings, but your struggles. The temptation will be to protect yourself in precisely these areas, lest he hurt you. But Biblical love, modeled on the church’s attitude toward Christ, invites and then responds to a husband’s initiative.

Let’s head off one typical question: Does a wife’s responsiveness to her husband’s leadership mean she can never start a conversation; never take initiative in their day-to-day communication? No, not at all. What we are looking at is a pattern of leading and following. There are lots of areas in marriage, whether it is small mundane logistical moments, or explicit areas of sin in the husband’s life, where the wife needs to speak up and take initiative. Her willingness to speak into her husband’s life, especially about his sin, is a gift to him; and husbands who are unwilling to accept the wife’s thoughts are fools.

[PAUSE FOR QUESTIONS]