

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues

Topic 32 – Communication in Marriage

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Introduction

Many of the problems within marriages are the result of lacking or poor communication. Communication, just like every other facet of marriage, has been marred by mankind's sin which began with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. There is perhaps no other part of marriage that is so prevalent and necessary as communication. Without it, marriages dry up and fail. With it, marriages have the potential to either flourish or be destroyed.

Definitions:¹

1. The art of conveying information and meaning in order to come to a common understanding.
2. A process of sharing information with another person in such a way that the sender's message is understood in the way he intended it to be understood.
3. A process of sharing information with another person in such a way that the people involved are mutually strengthened, enriched, and encouraged, and they experience harmony, unity, and emotional closeness.

When married couples do not communicate well, there are many negative consequences: the relationship is superficial and shallow, boredom sets in, wise decision making is thwarted, disagreements turn into conflicts which remain unresolved, and sometimes those outside the marriage are sought out as a relational outlet. No married couple would say that these things describe where they want their marriage to be. Unfortunately though, this describes many Christian marriages. Those it does describe often feel as though they cannot get out of the cycle of poor communication. However, there is hope that is real because it is rooted in God's Word.

The Importance of Communication²

It is obvious from the beginning of time that communication and words were, and still are, important. We can know this by the fact that God chose to communicate with Adam using words. The first words Adam heard were not the words of another human, but the words of God. This was, and still is, how God revealed Himself to us, his creation.

Consider for a moment God's design in creating mankind: We have been created in His image. Therefore, we should seek to reflect that reality in our words. God's communication to man was intentional, powerful, true, gracious, and so many other things that not only took into consideration our needs, but more importantly revealed His glory. Too often, we convince ourselves that our words are not significant and therefore do not require much attention and/or care. This line of thinking could not be further from the truth! The truth is that we own nothing, not even our words. Communication, therefore, ought to be for His glory. We are stewards of the words we speak, just as we are stewards of our time, resources, or children. As Paul Tripp aptly put it in his book, *War of Words*, "Talk was created by God for *his* purpose. Our words belong to him."³

¹ Definition quoted from Wayne Mack in TMC Biblical Counseling Notes on Marriage and Family Counseling, 2007.

² Suggested resource for further study: Paul David Tripp, *War of Words* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 2000).

³ Tripp, *War of Words*, 15 [emphasis original].

The Origin of Sinful Communication

Reflecting back on the very origins of human history helps us to pinpoint the moment mankind began to have problems in communication. When Satan spoke through the serpent in the Garden of Eden, God was challenged for the first time in human history. He told the first lie and dramatically altered human communication (Gen. 3:4). Before this, Adam and Eve only communicated lovingly and in truth with perfect timing and tact. After this, sin entered the world and mankind either spoke according to lies or according to truth, instead of only communicating according to truth and in love. Adam very quickly began speaking in such a way that reflected his belief of the lie Satan had told. He blamed Eve for their sin.

¹²The man said, “**The woman** whom You gave *to be* with me, **she gave** me from the tree, and I ate.” (Gen. 3:12)

We still frequently and even habitually do this. Tripp provides some common statements that we say to shift blame for our own sin onto others:

1. “You make me so angry.”
2. “If you hadn’t _____ then I wouldn’t have _____.”
3. “I was never this way before I met you.”
4. “Whenever you do that, I just can’t control myself.”
5. “I was never this uptight before I had children.”
6. “If you weren’t such a good cook, I would have this weight problem.”⁴

When we make statements like these, we are not only trying to shift the blame to others, but to God as well. Adam did this as well in the garden when God confronted his sin.

¹²The man said, “The woman whom **You gave** *to be* with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.” (Gen. 3:12)

Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, but they exchanged that image in their speech when they spoke like Satan had. When we speak, we either reflect the image of our heavenly Father or we reflect the image of Satan. We must humbly admit that our words have, do, and will at times reflect the image of Satan. We must then realize that our struggle to communicate in a way that reflects the image of God is a matter of the heart. It is not simply an altering of a set of techniques or the implementation of crafty methods. Either our heart is controlled by God or our flesh (which has been influenced by Satan and this world system). We need to yield our will to the indwelling Holy Spirit, that we might honor God in our speech.

So, communication is vitally important and was devastatingly altered by Satan in the Garden of Eden. The Bible says much about godly communication and how to honor the Lord with our words.

Biblical Wisdom Regarding Communication

Wisdom from Jesus

Christ reiterated the point that our communication problems come from the heart in Matthew’s gospel. In response to the Pharisees’ accusation that He was serving Satan in his miracles, Jesus communicates the fact that peoples’ hearts are known by their outward actions.

⁴⁴ Tripp, *War of Words*, 24.

³³Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. ³⁴You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? **For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.** ³⁵The good man brings out of *his* good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of *his* evil treasure what is evil. (Matt. 12:33-35)

It is here that we get an incredibly insightful truth: that our words reflect what is in our hearts. If we fill our hearts with bitterness and anger, then our words will eventually spew forth that bitterness and anger. If we fill our hearts with grace and forgiveness, we will be marked by that when we engage in conversation with others. Just as with every aspect of our faith and walk, God wants our hearts to be totally His. One of the most effective ways to check to see where our hearts are is by examining our words. Jesus then follows this up with an incredible challenge.

³⁶But I tell you that **every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment.** ³⁷For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. (Matt. 12:36-37)

Often we do not place as much weight on our words because we convince ourselves that they are “just a joke” or “don’t mean anything.” Jesus confronts that thinking and shows us reality: We will give an account for *every* careless word we speak! In marriages, there are many words spoken that are not given the proper care and spiritual filter necessary to glorify God.

Wisdom from Solomon

In the book of Proverbs, Solomon (the wisest man other than Jesus), wrote profusely on the topic of communication. There are well over 100 verses in Proverbs pertaining in some way to speech. Here is a short treatment of the vast treasury of wisdom regarding words in the Proverbs.

¹⁹When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise. (Prov. 10:19)

¹⁸There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Prov. 12:19)

¹A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Prov. 15:1)

¹⁴The beginning of strife is *like* letting out water, so abandon the quarrel before it breaks out. (Prov. 17:14)

²⁰Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him. (Prov. 29:20)

¹He who separates himself seeks *his own* desire, he quarrels against all sound wisdom. A fool does not delight in understanding, but only in revealing his own mind. ... ¹³He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him. ... ²¹Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits. ²²He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord. (Prov. 18:1-2, 13, 21-22)

Interestingly, the proverb following this strand regarding our speech is about marriage.

Wisdom from James

James' style of writing is very similar to the book of Proverbs in that there is little organization to the flow of thought, yet wisdom statements and instructions on practical living abound. Among these "life gems" can be found several insights into biblical communication that can be applied directly to marriage.

¹⁹*This* you know my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak *and* slow to anger; ²⁰for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. (Jas. 1:19-20)

James 3:1-12

¹What is the source of quarrels and conflicts about you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? ²You lust and do not have; *so* you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; *so* you fight and quarrel. You have because you do not ask. (Jas. 4:1-2)

Wisdom from Paul

Our words can make us stand out from the world. Christian marriages should be much different from marriages amongst non-believers. Paul pointed this out to the Colossian church when he implored them to speak with grace at all times. Their words were to bring healing, they were to preserve those who heard them, and they were to be pleasant like the effects of salt.

⁵Conduct yourselves with wisdom towards outsiders, making the most of the opportunity.

⁶Let your speech always be with grace, *as though* seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person. (Col. 4:5-6)

If this was how they were to speak towards "outsiders" how much more should their speech towards other believers and their spouses be God-honoring?

Principles of Godly Communication⁵

Principle #1 – Walk in the Spirit – Foundational to any principles of godliness of any kind is the fact that we must walk in the Spirit and be at a place where God is on the throne of our hearts. If this is not the case, none of the following principles will have any lasting effect on our communication.

¹⁶But I say, **walk by the Spirit**, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. (Gal 5:16-17)

Principle #2 – Speak the Truth in Love – First off, we need to speak the truth and not lie. It goes without saying that lying has no place in a God-honoring marriage. Where married couples go wrong typically is when they do not speak the truth in love. They qualify or justify the hurtful things they say with statements such as: "What?! I'm just being honest!" Much consideration needs to be given to how to lovingly speak the truth to your spouse.

²⁵Therefore, laying aside falsehood, **SPEAK THE TRUTH** EACH ONE *of you* WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another. (Eph. 4:25, quoted from Zechariah 8:16)

⁵ Principles taken from © TMC Biblical Counseling Notes on Marriage and Family Counseling, 2007.

^{15c}but **speaking the truth in love**, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ. (Eph. 4:15)

The battle to speak the truth to one another begins with the battle to speak the truth to ourselves. The Psalmist spoke of the one who was worthy to dwell in the presence of the Lord as the one who speaks truth in their heart. Many sins are avoided when one speaks truth in their heart: bitterness, “bitterness” (pride), depression, anger, anxiety...etc.

¹O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy hill? ²He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, and **speaks truth in his heart**. (Ps. 15:1-2)

Paul urged the believers at Philippi to dwell on whatever was true, thus echoing the Psalmist’s encouragement to speak truth in one’s heart.

⁸...whatever is **true**...dwell on these things. (Phil. 4:8)

Principle #3 – Keep Current – All believers have the responsibility to pursue peace as far as it depends on them. This could not be more true and foundational for God-honoring communication in marriage. We need to ensure that our communication is used to pursue peace quickly so that bitterness does not take root.

¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with **all** men. (Rom. 12:18)

Principle #4 – Build Up, Don’t Tear Down – Marriages are not strengthened through harsh, critical statements intended to correct our spouse’s behavior. How much more practical and biblical it is to strengthen a marriage through edifying words that are fitting and gracious.

²⁹Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is **good for edification according to the need of the moment**, so that it will **give grace to those who hear**.

³⁰Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. (Eph. 4:29-30)

Principle #5 – Be Selflessly Sensitive – The opposite of bitterness, anger, and slander is a kind and tender heart that is always ready to forgive. This takes an incredible amount of selflessness. Christ modeled this for us (Phil. 2:3-4), and we need to be vigilant to speak in these ways. Once again, the key to doing so begins in the heart.

³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be **kind** to one another, **tender-hearted, forgiving** each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. (Eph. 4:31-32)

Real Life Scenarios

Yourself: You don’t talk much, but that’s just who you are. Your spouse knew this when they married you, but now it has become an irritant and a source of conflicts in the marriage. What needs to change in your self-perception? How can this occur?

Someone Else: Someone in your small group at your weekly bible study has shared several times about the problems of anger and bitterness in their marriage. They share at length often, taking up much of the small group time. As the small group leader, how would you handle this situation during small group? How would you handle it outside of small group in a one-on-one situation?

Concluding Thoughts

As we have seen, communication is critically important to all Christians due to the place of it established by God Himself from the beginning. Unfortunately, Satan and sin have disturbed God's perfect design for communication. However, this disturbance is not too much for the changing and purifying power of the Word of God. Jesus, Solomon, James, and Paul all offered the keys necessary to live out God-glorifying communication in marriages. Additionally, there are several keys of godly communication from other places in God's Word that have the power to do the same thing. The bottom line remains though that godly communication pours forth from a heart that is bowed before the Spirit of God and His Word.

Topic 32 – Communication – Additional Study

Consider the following self-evaluation to see where you are in your communication:

1. Does your talk with others lead to biblical problem solving?
2. Does your talk have a “stand together” or a “me against him/her/them” posture?
3. Do your words encourage others to be open and honest about their thoughts and feelings?
4. Are you approachable and teachable or defensive and self-protective when talking with others?
5. Is your communication healthy in the principal relationships in your life? (parent-child, husband-wife, siblings, employer-employee, friend-friend, body of Christ, neighbor-neighbor)
6. Does your talk encourage faith and personal spiritual growth in those around you?
7. Do you talk with others to develop relationships with them, or do you talk only to solve problems in times of trouble?
8. Do you speak humble and honest words of confession when you sin and words of sincere forgiveness when others sin against you?
9. Do your words reflect a willingness to serve others or a demand that they serve you?
10. As you face the struggles of talk, do you do so with a recognition of the gospel—God’s forgiveness, his enabling grace, and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit?

List of Sins of the Tongue:

regularly occasionally never

	<i>regularly</i>	<i>occasionally</i>	<i>never</i>
Cussing			
Lewd jokes			
Slander			
Factiousness			
Arguing			
Hateful speech (name-calling)			
Complaining			
Lying, bearing false witness			
Gossip			
Sinful boasting			
Cursing others			
Exaggeration (lying)			
Flattery			
Foolish speech			

We can sin in many ways with our tongue. Check how often you sin in these ways in your marriage.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words... It must be a decisive rule of every Christian [to be] prohibited from saying much that occurs to him.” Do you ever vent to your spouse? How is it possible to be selfless in communication while venting?