

Communication — Family Crises #3

Social scientists conducted an interesting study to determine how much time middle-class fathers spend with their young children. The fathers estimated fifteen to twenty minutes per day. Microphones were attached to their children and actual interaction time was measured. It averaged thirty-seven seconds per day.

Family communication is not easy. Our lives are busy. We are often poorly prepared in communication skills. We operate with false assumptions. Often poor communications are not diagnosed until a marriage or family is in very serious difficulty - - perhaps so serious that it isn't ever resolved.

The question is not "if" there is family communication. The issue is the quality because even when people are not speaking to each other there is communication. Some experts estimate that 80% of all communication is non-verbal. We communicate most with facial expressions, silence, body gestures and, when we do speak, inflections. Much of family communication isn't factual, it's emotional — we're communicating how we feel. So our focus must be on what we do with the inevitable communication that takes place.

This has always been the problem between us and God. God has communicated to humankind for all of history. But we have not listened.

Again and again in the Bible God told his people to listen to him, but they refused. There is a sense in which all of the Bible can be seen as God's attempt to initiate quality communication between us and him. When good communication takes place it is wonderful. Spiritually, our salvation enables us to talk to God in prayer knowing that he will listen. We may hear from him through the Bible and through the inner witness of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The same goes for a family.

One husband tells of what happened to him in his marriage. It's worth a direct quote:

I grew up in a large family. Nobody had much time to listen to anybody else. When I was married, I was astonished that when I said something my wife looked directly at me, listened to me, even encouraged me with a question, a smile, or a comment. You have

no idea what a feeling of importance that gave me! She tells me without putting it in words that she's interested in what I have to say.

Let's look at some causes of broken family communication from authors Wade and Jodi Rowatt who list four "Causes of Broken Communication":

1. **UNRESOLVED ANGER.** The issue is not anger but how we handle it. Some is deep-rooted and long lived. Other is brief but troublesome. When the anger is not resolved it crops out in spoken and unspoken communications that damage relationships. Often others in the family have no idea what is really behind what was said or done.
2. **CHRONIC BUSYNESS.** Family members become so engrossed with their jobs, hobbies and even church that they really don't have time to care for family

relationships. You can't grow a garden with neglect and you can't maintain a relationship with neglect. It takes time. It must be a priority. Families may get by in a crisis of busyness but chronic busyness

destroys communication.

3. **EMOTIONAL OVERLOAD.** When one or more persons in the family is struggling with depression, anxiety, fear, hurt or another major emotional issue that person can be turned inward to the point that outward communication ends. We can be so preoccupied with ourselves and our needs that we fail to adequately communicate with the others in our family.

4. **DEVELOPING ENTIRELY DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES AND FRIENDS.** Lives go into different directions. Homes become places to sleep and eat. Common ground disappears. There is little basis for communication.

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But right now we are more interested in what we can do to prevent or to resolve the crisis of broken family communication. And first on the list ought to be respect. I am absolutely convinced that this is a major factor in all good family communication. We must exhibit respect for the other person — who he or she is, what is said and what is communicated.

That is particularly evident in Ephesians 5 and 6. In Ephesians 5:21 we are told, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” We show our respect for Jesus Christ when we choose to obey him and respect those who are created in his image.

Ephesians 5:25 is directed specifically to husbands and tells them, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. . . .” Respect generates love. In fact, I don’t think we can separate respect and love.

In verse 22 we read, “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.” Submission requires respect.

Maybe it shows up even more in Ephesians 6:1-2 where we’re told, “Children . . . Honor your father and mother” What other notion is that but respect? We, as children of our parents, are told to show honor or respect for our parents, even though our parents may do things that are not good and are out of line.

Or in Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” In other words, always treat children with respect, whether they are grown children or very young children. Exasperating them is the fruit of treating children with disrespect as persons.

We communicate differently with those whom we respect. I can tell immediately by a person’s tone of voice, body language and actual words whether he or she respects me as a person. They may disagree with my ideas, but if they treat me with respect they trigger in me a responsiveness and openness to them and even to their criticisms.

Some time ago our local newspaper carried an article entitled “How Do You Talk To Your Teenager?” It quotes Pauline Laybourn, a social worker at Anthony Junior High School in Minneapolis, as saying:

One thing is necessary: absolute respect for the teenager’s feelings, whatever the issue is. Whether it is drugs, sex, the world of academics, without that respect there is no building on any relationship or any impact

on your child’s attitude.

If you want to see this in real life, go to any shopping center and listen to the way families talk to each other. Hear whether the same respect is given to children, husband or wife as is given to clerks and strangers. Some treat strangers with far more dignity and respect than members of their own family. Or better yet, let’s listen to ourselves! If anything, we ought to give greater respect to those closest of all!

I know a potential objection to this: “How am I supposed to respect a husband who drinks, a wife who is unfaithful in the marriage, a teenager who skips school, a preschooler who is defiant? When they earn my respect, then I will treat them with respect!”

The Christian way is different. God treats us with respect while we’re sinners. Even when we defy him, he speaks to us and communicates to us in a way that gives us dignity and acknowledges personhood, whether we behave accordingly or not.

This is a real burden on my heart. Our homes need to be places where we will see the image of God, even for those who do not behave as they should. Our homes need to be places where we treat people with respect, even if they are toddlers and we are adults or when we are parents and they are teenagers or whether we’ve been married for a day or a lifetime. Respect!

Second on our list is to listen. It seems to be such a simple thing. II Kings 21:7-8 tells the story of God’s great communication to the people of Judah. In it God said:

“In this temple and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my Name forever. I will not again make the feet of the Israelites wander from the land which I gave their forefathers, if only they will be careful to do everything I commanded them and will keep the whole Law that my servant Moses gave them.”

In other words, God is offering them wonderful blessings. But this is followed by the tragic words of II Kings 21:9 where it says, “But the people did not listen. Manasseh led them astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed before the Israelites.”

It was on the Mount of Transfiguration that the glory of Jesus Christ was spectacularly revealed. God the Father said, “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” God was concerned about communication. So he sensationally called for Jesus to be

listened to.

In Bruce Larson's book entitled ASK ME TO DANCE, he tells the story of a church secretary who had a sign on her desk that read: "I love you enough to listen." What a wonderful principle for all of our family communication. Without a sign and maybe without even saying it, we ought to be communicating to one each other, "I love you enough to listen."

"Listening" often means more than listening to words. It's a commitment to be sensitive to whatever is being communicated. A husband comes home from work and immediately complains about what his wife did or didn't do. "You were supposed to call Smith Realty. Did you do it?" His tone is argumentative. It is like the hook on the end of a fishing line. She bites. She becomes defensive. She explains that the day has included enough other problems (mostly caused by him) to fill a week. Argument begins and communication crumbles.

There is no excusing his poor approach. However, she may not have listened to what he was communicating. That day was awful at the office. He fumbled a major account and probably lost it for the company. His boss was angry and the husband may be fired. He is humiliated and angry with himself but doesn't know how to articulate it.

In a family we need to be regularly asking: why is he or she so irritable? Is the unacceptable behavior due to some unspoken problem or concern? Such serious listening is hard, hard work, but it may be the key to better communication.

There are some things we can do to become better listeners. We can ask questions before fully forming responses, such as: "I'm not sure I understand; can you explain more?" Or, "Can you give me an example of what you mean?" Maybe, "Tell me how you feel about this." Or, "What do you suggest we do about this situation?"

Give some feedback. Say, "Let me tell you what I hear you saying." Many times we are amazed at how we haven't adequately communicated.

Show interest in non-verbal ways. Put down the newspaper or turn off the television set. Look the other person in the eye. Avoid prior judgment or a condescending tone of voice or negative facial expressions. Listen with your whole body.

I doubt that it's possible to overestimate the power of listening! You can revolutionize a marriage, improve a friendship, alter a parent-child relationship — all just by listening. But not just once. And not just in the crisis. It's listening and listening and listening and listening.

All of Christianity is based on forgiveness. It is central to our relationship to God and to our relationship to one another. God has forgiven us so we should forgive each other.

Introducing forgiveness to the dynamics of family communication has powerful potential. It can be one of our greatest opportunities to demonstrate Christ-likeness on an everyday basis. It begins by asking for forgiveness. We must create a forgiving atmosphere by seeking forgiveness ourselves. Often other family mem-

bers don't forgive and don't seek forgiveness because they have never seen it modeled. How many times have you said, "I'm sorry; I was wrong; please forgive me" to your young child, your teenager, your parents or your spouse?

Ask forgiveness without adding an explanation. Don't say, "I'm sorry I yelled at you, but if you hadn't started this I wouldn't have yelled." Take responsibility. Don't make excuses like, "I treated you rotten because I had a rotten day." Just admit being wrong and seek forgiveness.

Give forgiveness, too. Charleen and I play a communication game that we really should quit. We ask each other's forgiveness and the answer is often, "There's really nothing to forgive!" We need to forgive those who seek it.

And don't carry on the consequences. One of my most memorable teenage experiences is the day I wrecked my father's new red convertible. I really was sorry! I said I was sorry, and he let me take the other family car and never said anything about it again. When he forgave me, he really forgave me! Some families tend to bring back the incident every time a similar circumstance arises. "Are you going to wreck this car, too, if I let you take it?" If it is forgiven, let it be forgotten.

Lack of forgiveness is primarily hanging on to anger. That is destructive to families. But it is also displeasing to God. James 1:20 says that "man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that

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God desires.” It’s not that anger is always inappropriate, but holding on to it to the point that we do not forgive and forget does not work the righteousness of God.

Respect. Listen. Forgive. And initiate. Someone has to get things going. Let it be you. Don’t expect your wife or husband or parents or children to take the initiative. You take it.

One wife felt she couldn’t get enough time with her husband so she applied for a job at his office so she could talk to him. Other wives have made appointments with their husbands.

Margaret Campbell has some practical ideas in *MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIVING*. She suggests setting aside a special time. Go out for dinner as a couple. Have breakfast or lunch with the children. If your calendar is always full, schedule time together in the same way you schedule everything else.

Think up conversation leaders. When reading the paper, share the article with your husband or wife or parents or children, and ask, “Did anything like that ever happen to you?”

Mrs. Campbell tells about watching a TV commercial on “things that go bump in the night” and asking her husband, “Were you ever afraid of something that happened in the dark?” Although they had been married a long time, that question opened up a chapter of childhood memories and of present communication that would never have otherwise occurred.

Ask questions such as:

Have you ever been punished for something that you didn’t do?

Did you ever play hooky or get lost or get caught in a blizzard or have an unusual pet or run away from home or forget your part in a play?

What was your most embarrassing moment?

What was your favorite toy?

Give affirmation. Seek to give positive reinforcement such as: “I love the twinkle in your eye!” or “You are a marvelous cook!” or “It feels so good to have you around!” or “You handled that situation so well!” No one ever gets bored when being affirmed!

You may think all this is rather shallow. Your family needs communication about deeper, more serious things. Perhaps. Perhaps not. Often the channels are so clogged that serious communication can never take place until they are opened up. Often we

need to begin by communicating as persons rather than trying to resolve the issues that have emerged from poor communication.

Good communication is like riding a bike. It can be hard to do at first. You may begin with wobbly attempts and repeated falls. But once you get your balance you’re ready for longer rides. You can’t start with a cross-country tour. Begin simply and slowly. Take the initiative.

My first computer was a CPT 8000 word processor. It was a dear old friend (a service man once told me its serial number was “6”! I think he thought it should be in the Smithsonian.) When something went wrong with it, messages came across the screen. For example, I would finish a page, transfer it to a disc, punch in the instruction for printing, hit the return key to start the printer and a message would come with a beep: **PRINTER SEEMS TO BE OFF; PRINTER NEEDS MORE PAPER; PRINTER NEEDS A NEW RIBBON; PRINTER IS REPORTING PROBLEMS; PRINTER DOES NOT RESPOND; PRINTER IS WAITING.** All of this is a matter of communication. What I had to do was learn to read the message and then take the initiative to change the situation. If I couldn’t fix it I would have to call in outside help.

It’s quite the same with family communication. System messages are being sent out all the time. We must make the effort to learn to read them, to respond and, if we need outside help, to call it in to meet the need.

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
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