

## “The Heart & Art of Communication”

### Contemporary Contact

- **Healthy relationships** series (point to it) – today’s “*talk back*” = verbal...
- Brief review...We were created with four foundational relationships **SLIDE3**  
...God, Self, Others, Creation (*Connecting, Encouraging, Honouring, Praying*)
- Today’s Focus = The heart & art of **communicating**

**Q – Discuss with the person next to you:** On a scale of 1-10, how important is good communication to a healthy relationship? Why?

Relationship is interaction. Deep within our humanness is a profound need to know & be known, to be heard and understood. Opening the channels of hearing & being heard is crucial in clear communication and in growing healthy community.

### Biblical Contact – James 1<sup>19-20</sup>; Ephesians 4<sup>25</sup>

In the letter of James we find a lot of practical wisdom on a lot of topics (e.g. facing trials, handling poverty & wealth, temptation, favouritism). But the one nugget of wisdom that I want us to look at this morning from James is a gem of relational wisdom that, when understood and applied, will help nurture healthy interpersonal relationships even when the going gets tough. Turn with me to James 1<sup>19-20</sup>. “*My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: [= underlying and bolding it] Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, [why?] because our anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.*”

- Have people repeat the phrase: “quick to listen, slow to speak...”

### Structural Contact

This is the phrase, the proverb, the nugget of relational wisdom that we want to unpack and work into our lives in the first half of today’s message on the heart & art of communication. Seek first to understand, then to be understood. (“Listen up” = 1<sup>st</sup> half; “Speak up” = 2<sup>nd</sup> half)

## A) Seek First to Understand (“Listen Up”)

It is helpful to compare and contrast James’ guide to healthy communication, with what the natural human default is. **Calvin & Hobbes CARTOON**

- Quick to speak, slow to listen, and ~~slow~~ quick to become angry
- Our anger (impatience, reactivity, tone of voice, etc.) does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

So James’ Jesus-like wisdom in this area is designed to help us experience relational health and avoid the relational disasters that are so common, and create new possibilities and outcomes instead. “Seek first to understand” involves a very deep shift in our thinking. Typically we seek first to be understood. As author Stephen Covey has noted so well,

“Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. They’re either speaking or preparing to speak. They’re filtering everything through their [experience], reading their autobiography into other people’s lives....They’re constantly projecting their own home movies onto other people’s behavior.”<sup>1</sup> [e.g. “Oh, I know exactly how you feel! I went through the very same thing...Let me tell you about it...”]

Covey tells the story of a father who came to him and said, “I can’t understand my kid. He just won’t listen to me at all.”

“Let me restate what you just said,” replied Covey. “You don’t understand your son because he won’t listen to you?”

“That’s right,” he replied.

“Let me try again,” said Covey. “You don’t understand your son because *he* won’t listen to *you*?”

That’s what I said,” replied the father impatiently.

“I thought that to understand another person, *you* needed to listen to *him*,” Covey suggested.

“Oh!” said the father, and then after a long pause said “Oh!” again as a light of understanding began to dawn. “Oh, yeah! But I do understand him. I know what he’s going through. I went through the same thing myself. I guess what I don’t understand is why he won’t listen to me.”

Friends, did this man really know what was really going on inside his son’s head? NO! He looked into his own head and thought he was seeing what was

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, p. 239.

in his son's head. How often do we do this? When another person speaks, the kind of "listening" that often takes place is actually:

- 1) *Ignoring* ("Are you finished speaking yet?")
- 2) *Pretending* ("I've course I'm listening. Now what was that you said?")
- 3) *Selective listening* (we hear only certain parts of the conversation)
- 4) *Reflective listening* (reflect back the content of the words but miss the meaning)

Very seldom do we practice the kind of deep listening that James has in mind, the kind of listening where we seek to understand not only the person's words but their feelings, their concerns and their dreams. Communication experts estimate that only 10% of our communication is represented in the words we say. Another 30% is represented by our sounds, and 60% by our body language. (e.g. story of Hannah in Samuel 1 and how badly Eli misunderstood her)

- "The art of dialogue is openness to the other side, a willingness to enter the other's turf and to explore it until it is familiar territory."<sup>2</sup> **SLIDE**
- "Human communication revolves chiefly around two kinds of speech: silent speech (listening) and overt speech (talking). Silent speech is the necessary preliminary to overt speech, and the quality of overt speech cannot be better than the quality of silent speech from which it springs...One's expressive powers can never exceed one's silent powers."<sup>3</sup>

Deep sensitive listening is often very rewarding, but it is also risky. "It takes a great deal of security to go into a deep listening experience because you open yourself up to be influenced. You become vulnerable. It's a paradox, in a sense, because in order to have influence, you have to be influenced. That means you have to really understand."<sup>4</sup>

- E.g. Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4; 4<sup>39</sup> "He told me everything I ever did." = how deeply she felt known by him & knew him)
- E.g. Jesus' conversation with the Syrophoenician<sup>Canaanite</sup> woman (Mt. 15<sup>21-28</sup>//Mk. 7<sup>24-30</sup>) "Not right"<sup>v.26</sup> ...becomes... "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted."<sup>v.28</sup>

## **B) Seek 1<sup>st</sup> to be Understood, Then to Be Understood (Speaking Up)**

Generally speaking, passivity and silence on the part of husbands is most

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<sup>2</sup> David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Hear and Be Heard*, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Keller & Charles Brown quoted by David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Hear & Be Heard*, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, p. 243.

often mentioned by wives as the major problem in their marriage.<sup>Curran,45</sup> As a pastoral marriage counsellor put it, “The most familiar complaint I hear from wives I counsel is ‘He won’t talk to me,’ and ‘He doesn’t listen to me.’<sup>5</sup>

For some of us, at least in certain settings, the greatest challenge in nurturing healthy communication is that of learning to speak up, to making ourselves understood. When we communicate we have the responsibility to speak clearly so that the message we are needing or trying to send will be the message that is actually received.<sup>6</sup> Sound simple? **Shrek CLIP<sup>7</sup>** (pos. or neg.)<sup>8</sup>

If a person is married, it is toward one’s spouse that the need to express oneself is the greatest, and at times, the most difficult. Now I’m not talking primarily about functional communication (e.g. keeping one another in the loop of our calendar of activities), though that should not be neglected. I’m talking about the kind of communication is both deep and wide. A willingness to talk about all the stuff of life<sup>breadth</sup> as well as the personal significance and weigh<sup>depth</sup> of particular things for us and on us (how we think & feel, our fears & longings). Turn to **Eph. 4<sup>25</sup>**

Honest communication, what Paul describes in Eph. 4<sup>25</sup> as “speaking truthfully to one another” calls for integrity and courage, the courage of letting ourselves be known, of sharing our convictions and “who we really are underneath all our layers of societal musts, should, and oughts.”

“The negative antisocial pattern of lying must be ‘laid aside’ and replaced with the positive practice of speaking the truth to one another.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus summarized the importance of integrity in our speech as letting our “yes” be “yes” and our “no” be “no”. Cover up, deception and lying are disruptive and destructive to healthy relationships. Hiding our disappointment or dismay behind

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<sup>5</sup> Curran, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> David Augsburg, *Caring Enough to Hear & Be Heard*, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZpcwKEIRCI> (start at 23 seconds)

<sup>8</sup> Prov. 20:5 “The purposes of the human heart are like deep waters, but those who have insight draw them out.” “It is foreign to the thought of Proverbs to gather from this that every man has an inner reservoir of wisdom, and the wise man is simply the man who can draw upon it (see, against the idea, 14<sup>12</sup>; 16<sup>2,22</sup>). Rather, the proverb concerns that insight into human nature which Proverbs aims to impart, whereby a discerning person can bring to light the deepest intentions of another.” Kidner, *Proverbs*, p. 137. (e.g. Ps. 62<sup>4</sup>; Jesus in Jn.2<sup>24</sup>; Mt.9<sup>4</sup>; Lk. 9<sup>47</sup>)

<sup>9</sup> Erwin Penner, *The Power of God in a Broken World: Studies in Ephesians*, p. 110.

a smile can be a type of falsehood that undermines and obstructs the development of open and honest communication. Now there is of course a great difference between using truth or even scripture as a verbal club<sup>10</sup> and using it as a caring<sup>11</sup> corrective (e.g. Paul care-fronting Peter in Gal. 2<sup>14</sup>; cf. Eph. 4<sup>29</sup>).

- “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.” Prov. 27<sup>6</sup>
- “Life giving correction” (Prov. 15<sup>31</sup>)
- “Better is open rebuke than hidden love.” (Prov. 27<sup>5</sup>)

Integrity in speech is crucial to a healthy relationship and a healthy society. As commentator John Stott notes, “Fellowship is built on trust, and trust is built on truth...falsehood undermines fellowship, while truth strengthens it.”<sup>12</sup>

The health of any relationship—friendship, partnership, marriage—begins in open two-way communication with some quality of equality within it. The more equal, level, mutual the conversation, the higher will be the satisfaction of both participants.<sup>13</sup>

In stress, in threatening situations, in strained relationships or in conversations between people we do not know, we are most likely to experience the lowest levels of communication (superficial). As trust and understanding deepen we move closer as though layer by layer to knowing and being known. We need to open up, to express what we are actually thinking and feeling because it’s foolish to expect others to be able to read our minds or somehow magically know how we feel, yet we’re hesitant and afraid to say such simple things as “I don’t feel appreciated around here,” or “I don’t think you love me.”

- **CARTOON** “With our current hard feelings, would anyone object to my praying with my eyes open?”

Physical and emotional safety and security is needed for self-disclosure. The capacity of people to share deep feelings, is strongly correlated with safety, mutuality and shared power. For example, rather than dominating one another, healthy spouses complement one another. Researchers (like Dr. Jerry Lewis)

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<sup>10</sup> See the scene in “12 Years a Slave” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZZ74rKtbcs>

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 141<sup>5</sup> calls a disciplinary blow or “striking rebuke” from a righteous person a “kindness”.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Erwin Penner in *The Power of God in a Broken World*, p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> See David Augsburg, *Caring Enough to Hear and Be Heard*, pp. 63-64.

have found that in unhealthy families, the dominant spouse hides his/her feelings of weakness while the submissive spouse fears being put down if he/she exposes a weakness or fear. But in healthy families, husbands & wives share power. Either could be leader, *depending on the circumstances*. Yet Dr. Lewis also found that children in healthy families had no question about which parent is boss. Both parents are.<sup>14</sup> (no “divide & conquer”)

But parents need to keep in mind that children aren’t going to risk sharing their fears, hopes, and dreams if they’re fearful of criticism or condemnation or humiliation (recall Eph. 6<sup>4</sup>). An atmosphere of safety needs to be nurtured if healthy open communication is to be realized.

“It is a paradox that healthy families tend to be alike in their differences, that is, their similarity lies in their ability to encourage and accept the emergence of individual personalities via open sharing of thoughts and feelings. Unhealthy families tend to be less open, less accepting of differences of opinion among members, more interested in thought control...The healthier the family, the better able it is to accept differing opinions in its midst...Members [can] freely say ‘I don’t agree with you’ without risking ridicule or rebuke. They say ‘I think it’s wrong...’ immediately after Dad says ‘I think it’s right...’ and Dad listens and responds [not reacts, e.g. “Why do you say/think that?” vs. “How dare you!”].”<sup>15</sup>

Learning how to disagree respectfully is a difficult task, but healthy families and churches and communities work at it.<sup>16</sup> They develop sensitivity to turn-off words and put-down phrases and red-flag comments (Eph. 4<sup>29</sup>). (e.g. “how many times do I have to tell you...”) It’s not that healthy families don’t fight. They do. Everybody does. It’s a way that things get out into the open. But healthy families learn to have “fair fight” & how to make up (May 29 = “Constructive Conflict”).  
**Homework** = Make the time & effort to “**Listen Up**” & “**Speak Up**” (e.g. supper time, walk time, night time, after school time...)

- “Brightest/best part of my day... Difficult or darkest part...”
- Short prayers of “please” and “thanks”

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<sup>14</sup> Cites by Dolores Curran, *Traits of a Healthy Family*, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> Dolores Curran, *Traits of a Healthy Family*, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> Dr. John Meeks claims that argument is a way of life with normally-developing adolescents, something they need to do to test out their own beliefs and feelings. “*In early adolescence they’ll argue with parents loud and long about anything at all; as they grow older the quantity of argument decreases but the quality increases.*” Curran, p. 48.