

INTRODUCTION

This is the second message in the series entitled, “Family: An Endangered Species?” Last week I shared six common characteristics strong families share. One of them was the ability to communicate well as a family. Whether you are a single parent, a retired couple, or a blended family with a household of kids, you do communicate with some family members. The question I want you ask is: How well does my family communicate with each other?

The book of James has some great wisdom to improve your family communication. “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” (James 1:19) There are **three laws of personal communication** in this verse. These three rules of personal communication apply to communication between husbands and wives and between parents and children. If you don’t qualify in those categories, pay attention, because these laws rule at work as well as in your friendships. These three laws of personal communication are extremely important. If you violate these three rules, you will suffer in many ways. But if you follow these three simple rules, you will be effective in communicating to your family members or to your co-workers. The first one is:

I. LISTEN INTENTLY

When the Bible says, “quick to listen” it means you must pay close attention when someone is speaking to you. Just because you are listening to words doesn’t mean you really *hear* what is being said. All of us can be sitting on the couch reading the newspaper when the television is on. The sound waves of the words are reaching our ears, but we aren’t paying attention. We aren’t really hearing and understanding what is being said. We can do the same thing in family communication.

When you discover a word or phrase Jesus used over and over again, pay attention. On repeated occasions when Jesus was teaching, He stopped and said, “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Mark 4:23) The Message paraphrases it: “Are you listening to this? REALLY listening?” The reason Jesus said that was because He knew not only do we have the *ability* to tune someone out; we have a *tendency* to do it.

Good listening is basically a matter of concentration. The more important you consider the message, the more you will concentrate on it. I’ve been with families when a surgeon entered the waiting room after surgery. Family members are listening fast—they are concentrating on what the doctor has to say. By the way, I’ve discovered people who say they can’t remember names usually remember the name of a new doctor—even if he’s named Dr. Kapaloupsky. It’s simply a matter of importance and concentration. Conversely, we tend to be lazy listeners when we consider a message to be unimportant. The title of this message is “Do you read me? ... over” It comes from my experience of talking on the radio as a private pilot. I’ve been flying airplanes now for 27 years, and good radio communication is an absolute necessity. In fact, it’s the law. Even if you talk on a CB or other two-way radio, sometimes you have to say, “Do you read me? ... over” and you wait for a response.

I believe we need to apply that principle to family communication as well. I think husbands and wives need to stop sometimes in the middle of a conversation and say, "Do you read me? ... over" Parents and kids ought to stop sometime and say, "Do you read me? ... over."

Let me teach you a little about air traffic communication so we can learn an important lesson about communication in general. For instance, I flew down to Galveston on Saturday a week ago, and my radio communication went something like this: As I sat in the airplane out at Pounds Field, before I taxied, I listened to the Automatic Terminal Information System which is a recorded statement that gives the weather, barometric pressure, and which runways are in use. After listening and writing down the information I called the tower and said:

"Tyler Pounds Ground Control, Cherokee 9497W."

"Cherokee 9497W, go ahead," The tower responded.

"97W is at Johnson Aviation with Victor, IFR to Galveston, ready to copy my clearance." The tower said, "97W is cleared as filed to the Galveston airport, maintain 3,000 feet expect 7,000 feet one zero minutes after departure. Departure frequency is 128.75. Squawk 2756," I said. Before I can take off, I am required by Federal Aviation Regulations to repeat that information back to him, so I say:

"97W is cleared as filed to the Galveston airport, maintain 3,000 expect 7,000 one zero minutes after departure. Departure frequency is 128.75 Squawk 2756. Ready to taxi."

We aren't finished yet.

He says, "Read back correct. Taxi to runway 13."

I have to respond, "Roger, 97W taxi to runway 13." When I get ready to takeoff, I say, "97W is ready to go runway 13." He says, "Roger, 97W cleared for takeoff." I must acknowledge that message: "Roger 97W cleared for takeoff." That's effective communication!

I think we should apply some of the skills and principles of aviation communication to personal communication. That doesn't mean you have to say, "Roger" to your wife, but you must realize effective communication completes what I call a **verbal communication loop**. There are six specific steps that occur in a communication loop. In every good experience where two people are communicating, these six things happen almost instantaneously. If the loop is broken or incomplete at any step, communication breaks down:

(1) **Speak**. A person says something to someone else. (2) **Listen**. The one to whom the speaker projects the message has those auditory waves enter his ears. But that doesn't mean they've gotten the message, they may be ignoring the speaker, or tuned in to something else. (3) **Hear and respond**. The listener translates the speaker's words into thoughts and feeds it to their brain. They have ears to hear and they are hearing, as they hear, they prepare to respond. When this response is directed back to the speaker it's called (4) **Feedback**. The feedback may be non-verbal. It could be a look of understanding, or a nod of the head, or it could be a verbal response. Feedback lets the speaker know the message has been received. It's like saying, "roger" and repeating the statement in aviation. As the feedback reaches the eyes or ears of the speaker, the next step is to (5) **Process the feedback**. At this point the speaker determines if the listener has understood the message. At this point, the communication can go in two directions: (6) **Correct or continue**. If the feedback tells the speaker the listener has gotten the message, the speaker will continue to communicate. If the feedback shows the speaker the message hasn't been received, the speaker must correct the feedback and start the loop over again.

Now, let's apply these six steps to an imaginary conversation between a husband and a wife: (1) She says, "I'm really concerned about our finances." (2) He listens. The sound waves reach his ears. (3) In this case, he is not "quick to listen." So this is what he hears, "She thinks we're broke." He feels intimidated by that, so he is going to respond in that way. (4) His feedback is, "So you don't think I make enough money?" (5) If the wife understands the communication loop she will simply think, "He didn't understand me." If she doesn't understand the loop, she may launch into an angry response and the race is on! (6) If she understands the cycle, she can simply correct his feedback by saying, "That's not what I said." And she can start over. If you can recognize and follow this loop, it can keep your communication on track, without letting emotional statements disrupt the cycle. For instance, if the air traffic controller in Fort Worth Center tells me to change my frequency to 132.8 and I say, "Roger, 132.2 (which is not what he said)" back, he doesn't get emotional and say, "No, that's not right, you never listen to me!" He simply says, "Make that 132.8" and I say, "Correction: 132.8" and everything's okay.

Let's follow the loop again to see how it works. (1) The wife says: "I'm really worried about our finances." (2) The sound waves reach the ear of the husband as he listens. (3) This time he is quick to listen, he is concentrating, he has ears to hear and he processes her message correctly. He thinks, "She is concerned about our finances" so he gives a different response. (4) His feedback is: "What is it you're concerned about, dear?" (5) She processes his feedback and determines he has correctly understood her message so she (6) continues by saying, "I'm afraid because we aren't following a budget." And the loop begins again.

If husbands and wives and parents and children started "listening hard" and concentrating on what their family members say, communication would improve dramatically. But anytime this loop is broken, or violated, there will be communication problems.

The key to good communication is to *listen and listen hard*. That is, you must concentrate on what is being said to you. A mark of love is the desire to listen to what your family members say, even if they are saying it casually. Listening hard can be illustrated by one of my favorite stories in the Old Testament. In 2 Samuel 23, King David is an old man and he is out fighting against the Philistines. He is camped out in a cave, and the Philistines captured Bethlehem, David's home. David was weary and he said to no one in particular, "Oh, that someone would bring me a drink of water from the well in Bethlehem." He was just wishing out loud. But three of his mighty men loved David so much that they were listening hard. They heard his statement and decided to do something about it. That very night, they fought their way into Bethlehem and went to the well and got David some water. They brought it to him in the cave. They were quick to listen. David was so moved by their devotion and bravery he couldn't even drink it—instead he used it as an offering to the Lord. Their devotion was so strong, all he had to do was mention what he wanted and they did it for him.

When you really love someone, you listen hard to what they say, even if they aren't talking to you, and you're willing to move heaven and earth to do what you can to make them happy. That's being quick to listen. The next law of personal communication is:

II. SPEAK CAREFULLY BUT HONESTLY

We should be quick to listen, but we should be very slow when speaking. God gave you two ears and one mouth for a purpose: you should listen more than you talk. Few people ever got into trouble from saying too little, but people talking too much have caused multitudes of miseries. Some people put their mouths in motion before their brains are in gear. I like the saying that goes, "Measure your words carefully. If you think by the inch and speak by the yard you'll soon be kicked by the foot."

One reason you should be slow to speak is that once you have spoken words, you can never "unspeak" them. Oh, you can say you're sorry and that you didn't mean it, but those words are already released into the heart and mind of your family member. I often quote a poem by Will Carleton called "The First Settler's Story," a story about a husband who literally kills his wife with his words. As he is looking at his wife's dead body, one line says, "There 'mid the heart-ruins of my home among; not far from where I'd killed her with my tongue." I won't quote the entire poem because it takes ten minutes, but the last few lines are worth repeating. They say, "Boys flying their kites haul in their white-winged birds: but you can't do that way when you're flying words; careful with fire is good advice we know; but careful with words is ten times doubly so; words unspoken may fall back dead; but even God can't kill them once they're said."

The Bible is full of warnings about how your mouth can get you into trouble. Proverbs says, "He who guards his lips, mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity." (Proverbs 13:3) That's why God gave you teeth; they are to be like a fence to keep your tongue under control. You'd be much better off to bite your tongue sometimes than to use it quickly. Proverbs also says, "An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips." (Proverbs 24:26) You may think a kiss of the lips is pretty good, but I guess it depends on who's kissing you! In Bible times a kiss on the lips was not romantic. It was a way of greeting only your very closest family members and friends. Others were greeted with a kiss on the cheek, but very special people were kissed on the lips. This means you owe absolute and total honesty to those within your family. When you are honest with your family members, it's like greeting them with a kiss; you are demonstrating that you love them deeply enough to trust them. We don't share our secrets with strangers, but we should feel free to share anything we need to with our family members.

A very important element in family communications is the willingness to be honest and address problems. It's easy to ignore issues that need to be discussed. There's a great poem written by Terry Kettering called "The Elephant in the Room." It addresses the importance of dealing with grief. But the idea could apply to any topic families sometimes ignore:

There's an elephant in the room.
It is large and squatting, so it is hard to get around it.
Yet we squeeze by with "How are you?" and "I'm fine" ...
And a thousand other forms of trivial chatter.
We talk about the weather.
We talk about work.
We talk about everything else—except the elephant in the room.

There’s an elephant in the room.
We all know it is there.
We are thinking about the elephant as we talk together.
It is constantly on our minds.
For, you see, it is a very big elephant.
It has hurt us all.
But we do not talk about the elephant in the room.

Oh, please, say (her/his) name.
Oh, please, say (her/his name) again.
Oh, please, let’s talk about the elephant in the room.
For if we talk about (his/her) death,
Perhaps we can talk about (his/her) life.
Can I say (his/her name) to you and not have you look away?
For if I cannot, then you are leaving me
Alone...In a room...
With an elephant.

In your family, is there an elephant in your room? Is there some issue that needs to be talked about, but is too painful to discuss? Part of good family communication involves honesty and openness. In Ephesians 4:15, the Bible says we should “speak the truth in love.” Every word in that phrase is important. We must speak to one another and we must speak the truth. Some people use truth as a club to beat on others. Their favorite phrase is, “The truth hurts, huh?” When someone says that, what they are really saying is, “I’m trying my best to hurt you with truth.” But we must speak the truth in LOVE. It must be done in a loving way. But love is not some sniveling sentimentality that refuses to confront the truth. Some people think love requires them to keep the peace at all costs, even if it means sacrificing the truth. Go ahead. Be honest with your family members.

Use your words carefully but honestly. The third law of personal communication is:

III. AVOID ANGRY WORDS

The Bible says we must be “slow to anger.” Anger and rage have destroyed more homes than tornados and termites combined. Some people have a hair-trigger temper and can fire off at the least provocation. A kid was studying history one night and asked his dad how World War II began. His dad said, “Well, the Japanese attacked us at Pearl Harbor.” His wife jumped in and said, “No, that’s not right. It was when Hitler started invading Europe.” The husband scowled at the wife and said, “He didn’t ask you, he asked me, would you just butt out?” The wife stormed out of the room and just before she slammed the door she said, “Well, if you are going to teach him, you’d better know the facts yourself!” The father turned back to his son to continue the conversation, but the boy said, “That’s okay, dad, now I know how wars get started.”

Years ago, I struggled with rage. I even got thrown out of a high school basketball game once. During college, I asked God to take away my tendency toward anger. I had a couple of verses from Proverbs written on an index card taped to the mirror in my dorm room. I quoted them over

and over again every day. “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger... A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel.” (Proverbs 15:1,18)

A person who explodes with anger thinks they are doing themselves a favor by “letting off steam.” But, like any explosion, they wound people. A person who constantly loses their temper reminds me on some of those suicide bombers in Israel. They explode and kill themselves in the process. Your uncontrolled anger not only wounds those around you, it hurts you, too. “Of all the sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you. “ (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: Transformed by Thorns*, p. 117.)

In my two trips to the city in Asia where we are working, I have been impressed with the personalities of our Asian friends. It is extremely rare to see anyone raise their voice or lose their temper. If Americans had to drive in their crowded streets, you’d see a hundred cases of road rage a day, but I’ve not seen one incident in the time I’ve been over there. People don’t raise their voices or lose their tempers because to do so would cause them to “lose face.” I think we need to adopt that portion of their culture.

The hotel we stay in is 18 stories tall and behind it is a beautiful Oriental garden and a mountain. Many people exercise there every morning. My first morning there, I awoke early and heard someone yelling. I thought they were in danger and were calling for help. Then I heard another shout, this time from a woman. It sounded like she was in trouble, so I rushed to my window and opened it to listen. It was before sunrise, so I couldn’t see anyone. But there it was again, someone was yelling, and then there was another and another. I was a little frightened. Later that day I asked one of our translators what was going on. She smiled and explained when people exercise they yell as loud as they can—it releases bad energy. I was fascinated, so the next morning I got up when it was dark and walked up the mountain myself. There were dozens of folks and most of them were yelling. I got in step beside an old man who had to be at least 80, and he was walking at a pace I could hardly match. And every third step he yelled. I started thinking of him as “old yeller.” So you know what I did? I started yelling, too. And it DID feel good. On this past trip I took some of the guys up the mountain and we yelled, Jim Clark even barked like a dog. I mean if you tried that on Rose Rudman trail, somebody would call the police, but you ought to try it. Every morning as we walked down the mountain, you could see the entire city, and I would yell, “JESUS IS LORD OVER (city name)!” Nobody there understood English, so I was just declaring it. It felt pretty good, actually.

Now, I have a theory. I believe because these people yell and release bad energy when they exercise, they are less prone to yell and shout at their family members and friends. It’s like they get rid of all their aggression and hostility when they shout. In America, we exercise silently and then yell and shout in the faces of our family members. I like their way better. That may be one reason why the Bible says we are to “shout unto the Lord.” Maybe if we actually shouted praises to the Lord more, we wouldn’t shout at our family members.

If you have a problem with rage and anger, you should look for ways to express that anger in a way that it doesn't hurt those with whom you live—even if you have to shout while you are exercising.

CONCLUSION

When Dwight Eisenhower was a child, he had a terrible temper. He wrote about a life-changing experience when he was a boy. Once when his father told him he couldn't go with his older brothers to do something, he flew into a rage and ran out into the yard. He began to pound his fists into a tree until his hands bled. He was literally blinded by anger, and was almost unconscious until his father grabbed him and took him inside and spanked him. Later, as he was crying in his room, his godly mother came into his room to clean his wounds. She quoted Proverbs 16:32, "Better a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city." From that point on, Dwight Eisenhower began to ask God to control his temper. He later wrote if he had not learned to surrender his anger, and control his temper, he would never have been the supreme commander and led our forces in World War II, and he would never have become President. Be careful to avoid angry words in your conversations.

Communication in your family is not a luxury it is a *necessity*. Try these three simple laws to improve it: listen intently; speak carefully but honestly and avoid angry words.

OUTLINE

THREE LAWS OF PERSONAL COMMUNICATION:

I. LISTEN INTENTLY

“If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.” *Mark 4:23*

“Are you listening to this? REALLY listening?” *The Message*

Verbal communication loop:

1. Speak
2. Listen
3. Hear and respond
4. Feedback
5. Process feedback
6. Correct or continue

II. SPEAK CAREFULLY BUT HONESTLY

“He who guards his lips, mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity.” *Proverbs 13:3*

“An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips.” *Proverbs 24:26*

III. AVOID ANGRY WORDS

“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger ... A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel.” *Proverbs 15:1, 18*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes