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Good Communication

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Good Communication

The secret of getting along in marriage lies in two people applying the principle embodied in this verse from the Bible: “And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise” (Luke 6:31).

This is a workable formula! And amazingly, it is easier to carry out than to trying to figure out the other person.

Scott and Ann found this out. Like most people you know, each longed to be appreciated and have their viewpoint respected. They discovered that the rule Jesus gave is just as effective today as when He spoke it.

Scott sought counsel because he was puzzled over his unhappy marriage. He and Ann, his wife, never exchanged harsh words. He kept his complaints against her to himself. He had looked at her personality and her idiosyncrasies from all angles and tried to do what would bring a balance between them. They never argued. But with all their efforts at adjustment, there was little happiness. Their approach did not work because they simply could not figure each other out. To do unto others as you would have them do to you is the opposite of trying to figure each other out.

What is it that you would like others to do unto you?

- adjust to your likes and dislikes
- express appreciation for favors done
- praise you for your achievements
- forgive you for your failures
- pay attention when you talk
- not hold you accountable for your behavior
- let you set your own rules
- provide money to spend as you wish
- tell you the truth
- maintain a neat house

Such a list requires some serious self-examination. Perhaps you should eliminate some of them or add some others. As you put your desires into practice, you will discover some of them are not really in your best interest. Your list will keep

changing. When you have completed your list, then do just that toward others.

When Scott and Ann proceeded on the basis of doing to the other what each wanted done to themselves, their frustrations disappeared and they found a happy life together.

Try it! Such an attitude puts a high premium on communication. Communication means to overcome the desire to conceal feelings and thoughts and rise to the level of talking about money, fears, wishes, motivations, sexual feelings and responses, mistakes made, resentments, and misunderstandings with the intent to resolve them.

It is important to note that communication involves more than verbal declarations. There is a wife who has very little to say. It is her tender glance that speaks of her love. To cook the meals as her husband likes them is her way of expressing her devotion. Her husband recognizes these acts as her way of communicating. To seek to understand the meaning of each other's words and deeds and to accept them for what they mean is to be truly united.

Such communication is fundamental to a good marriage. What do you appreciate about your partner? Be sure that you know. Then let your partner know. What can you do for each other? Whatever it is, do it heartily, as unto the Lord.

Jerry is a fellow who makes such an effort. He married Alice fifteen years ago. Just as in courtship days, he still expresses continuously his appreciation of her cooking, the way she dresses and combs her hair, her manner with the children, her spirit of sacrifice in her church work, and her graciousness toward guests. She does not tire of hearing his praise. It is a pleasant part of life that contributes to maintaining good fellowship just as sleep, good air, and food sustain a healthy body.

These things are done day in and day out, not as a distasteful, boring, dull, meaningless chore, but as a pleasant, helpful routine eagerly looked forward to because they are pleasantly beneficial.

It is important to know that Jerry is expressing genuine appreciation. Knowing he is not just parroting empty, meaningless words, his wife insists that hearing praise is significant.

On the other hand, Jerry also must continuously remind his wife that she tends to neglect housekeeping, spends too much time over coffee which throws off the timing of meals, and leans toward extravagance. He does this most of the time in patience and long-suffering. How much patience and long-suffering? Fifteen years of it, so far.

Jerry is a kind man. He loves to be helpful to other people. Alice appreciates this about him and tells him so. She also keeps reminding him that she respects his faithfulness to his job and to his church, and his thriftiness and careful management of family finances.

On the other hand, she must keep after him because, in his zeal to serve others, he tends to neglect the children. He is careless, too, about shining his shoes and changing his shirt often enough. Alice reminds him most of the time in all patience and long-suffering. How much patience and long-suffering? Fifteen years of it, so far.

Why do these people not correct their ways permanently, you ask? It is a good question. I am not describing angels, but a couple who have their strengths and weaknesses and who need each other. By keeping the channels of communication open between them and with their relationship undergirded by deep love and a desire to please, each is a better person than he would be without the other. Yet there is the tendency for each to drift back into old ways.

You do not get very far seeking to conceal your negative reactions, making excuses, or seeking a scapegoat when differences arise. If the relationship is strained, you need to understand why and what can be done to improve it. When friction arises, it requires more than a description of the action that caused it. A careful sharing of how the act affected the quality of the relationship is necessary. The feelings, attitudes, and thoughts that the act aroused must be mutually understood. All this effort is useless without the intent to arrive at a mutually agreeable change.

The apostle Paul offered a beautiful definition of teamwork in writing to the Corinthians: *“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment”* (1 Corinthians 1:10).

Fellowship, which amounts to comfortable relationships, springs from mutual faith, viewpoints agreed on, and approved activities. Opposite these terms are such words as division, contention, strife, disagreement, and selfishness. Governments,

churches, and families seek to eliminate such conditions from their midst. To be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same thought—is there a more wholesome endeavor to give yourself to? This is the challenge for the Christian family.

But in your effort to maintain congeniality in your family, one factor in human relations must be consciously and deliberately guarded against: We tend to grow apart.

Carl walked into my office and slumped into a chair, a dejected soul. He was a success financially. But after 22 years of marriage, he was ready to quit, thoroughly disgusted with his wife. He had given up hunting and fishing because she did not like him doing them. They had no social life because she did not like to go out. They never fought. They just did not talk, but the silence was driving him mad. He wanted to go out, but felt guilty if he did.

Rhea, his wife, shared his attitude. She was a very bitter woman and looked it.

“I can hardly stand the sight of him,” she said. “We have nothing to talk about. We used to visit his friends, but he did not like the way I talked to them. He did not say much, just gave me that withering look. So I quit talking. What is the use of just sitting? I quit going out. I do not like fishing and hunting. I do not care if he goes, but he thinks I do not want him to go, I guess. He has never asked me how I feel.”

These two people, intelligent, polished, and successful separately, were strangers to each other, isolated mentally and separated by an invisible, but real, barrier of resentment.

Now, however, they are rebuilding their relationship with communication. This has required a dismantling of the wall made out of bitterness and selfishness. They’ve instead built a bridge between them that has enabled them to define their difficulties and work them out by mutually agreeable solutions, rather than turning away from each other when signs of discord appear.

Each had been sure that to be honest with the other about feelings and opinions would blow the marriage sky high. Instead, each found that repentance before God and drawing on His love gave them the grace necessary to begin building a mutual life.

A happy marriage is not possible without communication that reveals, with reasonable certainty, how the other feels and thinks about a given action or situation. Conversing on any subject, airing any problem that might arise, and sharing with the other the private fears, worries, and desires is the bedrock of marriage. And it is not always verbal. Attitudes are expressed by a smile, a frown, or a shrug of the shoulders. We sense disapproval even though the spoken words are reassuring.

Communication ceases when the need to conceal becomes stronger than the desire for unity. There is the husband who will not speak of his financial worries, so he hides his insecurity behind what he calls a “manly” silence. The wife conceals her spur-of-the-moment purchase or keeps to herself the concern that her husband no longer finds her attractive. Slowly, couples who once were excellent companions learn to rope off areas of their lives and live in a kind of marital “no man’s land.” Conversation declines to “truce” subjects. How do you mend the broken lines of communication between husbands and wives and among members of a family?

Let us look just a little further at the elements that cause our communication to break down. There is the tendency to hide. Why is it that we try to protect ourselves from disapproval, that we hesitate to reveal our own selfish desires and tend to conceal our negative feelings? True, we have a strong desire for fellowship, but the human heart with its deceitfulness drives us apart, making our own way a stronger attraction than a mutual way.

Suppose you do communicate your true feelings, attitudes, and desires. Communication itself will not necessarily produce unity. The desire for unity must be present. You may clarify your desires to your partner in order to get your own way. Your objective is to advance your own selfish ends, not to achieve unity. As a husband, you may be firmly set against your wife’s idea. Communication, then, simply clarifies the issue. It does not provide a mutual solution. Undergirding this process of communication must be a firm foundation of love and unselfishness.

The time comes in a marriage when differences arise. The conversation, action, or attitude of your partner is not appreciated. Your partner will be grateful to know about this if the basic relationship between you is a healthy one. Paul wrote to the Romans, *“Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another”* (Romans 15:14).

Partners dedicated to building a united marriage can each assume that the other will appreciate an admonition and will be willing to consider revising his behavior in a way that is mutually acceptable. There is a great difference between peace and the kind of cold, brittle silence that develops when partners have unspoken, unrevealed differences between them. The “silent treatment” is a far cry from unity and peace. Take the initiative!

The Lord Jesus gave us the basis for maintaining good relations in Matthew 5:23-24: *“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”*

If your partner has anything against you, it is your move to be reconciled. It is inconceivable to think of quarreling and divisions as a part of the lives of a Christian couple. Christianity and quarreling do not go together. If you are conscious of doing something that is offensive to your partner, it is your responsibility to go to him or her and be reconciled.

Jesus gave us another guideline for maintaining unity between two people in Matthew 18:15-17: *“Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.”*

Here the shoe is on the other foot. Now, your partner is at fault. It is still your move. A Christian ought to be so desirous of achieving unity that, failing to find a basis of reconciliation alone, an attempt will be made to seek help from one or two others. Failing this, the Christian ought to turn to the church. This is going a long, long way to be reconciled.

There is a caution, however, stated by Paul in Galatians 6:1: *“Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.”*

Who is it that is to go to a person taken in fault? You who are spiritual, a person who has the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23)—operating in your life. If you do not, you

need to correct your response before you approach the other person. If you qualify, you need to rebuke the other person—that is, you need to point out the offensive or unacceptable behavior.

This principle also applies to the marriage relationship. Why must this be so? You may have the best intentions in approaching your partner about some fault. However, it is possible that your partner will be sensitive about it, resent your approach, try to argue, or say things that are not complimentary. If your response is in anger, then your good intentions result in your becoming embroiled in an argument. No progress has been made toward unity if you match malice with malice, satisfying the sinful nature yourself, if you are faced by a partner who is not in the best of spirits. It is the spiritual person who can take a tongue lashing in the right way. An individual with faults of his own should look after his own faults and not after those his partner may have. You must approach your partner while watching yourself, or you also may be tempted.

Suppose someone is repentant and still repeats undesirable behavior over and over. The Scripture says to rebuke and forgive.

Julie could bring herself to tears about a disagreement with her husband Steve and claim she was sorry about her sinful behavior toward her husband. But they both knew her tears were an expression of anger and frustration, not shame and true repentance. She was only adding deception to her list of sins.

Julie had to humble herself to the point of repenting of her unloving and judgmental attitudes. She was irritated at Steve's moodiness and outbursts of anger and condemned him for it. She finally asked Steve and God for forgiveness. "I won't give a meaningless apology. I hate this about myself, and I don't want to be this way anymore."

At the same time, I confronted Steve about his anger toward Julie. He did not much care for the idea that anger was a sin. "Doesn't a man have a right to be mad when he is mistreated? Any man would be angry when his wife shows him disrespect," he said. Anger was how he expressed himself. It was how he won arguments and how he kept Julie from running over him. Anger was a tool. Anger was power for him.

I asked Steve whether his tool of anger was working. "Are your arguments being resolved?" All Steve and Julie could do was look at each other with blank stares. They saw that, after five years of marriage, Steve was still angry and moody and

Julie was still irritated and condemning. No, the tool of anger was not solving anything. Recurring arguments in the marriage always wound up being about the same thing.

Steve and Julie needed a better way and opted to try God's way. But could they let go of their sin? Steve knew he had been out of line after an argument. He was even sorry and asked for forgiveness. But he was never cleansed of his sin. He had never let go.

Could it be true? Could disagreements be without anger? Could they end in a solution acceptable to both of them? In prayer, God convicted Steve of his anger. Soon he repented and found out that God's forgiveness and cleansing are always available. When he feels anger and confesses it, God immediately provides forgiveness and cleansing.

Five years later, Steve and Julie report that they have had no more blow-ups. What a difference God has made through their repentance! They can make the constant adjustments marriage demands because they let God replace their sinful reactions with His fruitful responses. Julie is less apt to hide her irritation with Steve, which she describes as "walking on eggshells." She is free to speak the truth in love. And when she does go her own way and condemns, God's love in Steve covers it with a simple smile. If Steve's heart is right with God, love spills out. If he has a fleshly response, Julie asks him how his spirit is. That is his cue to do a soul checkup. God's way works so much better than our own!

When differences come, there is the tendency to leave your first love for God, to forsake prayer, and to turn to the sinful nature for a solution. To win your point becomes the important goal. The effort at reconciliation, carried out in the sinful nature, will result in failure to adjust to change. Partners may turn away from making an adjustment. Or they may try and fail.

When couples realize that an adjustment cannot be made, this is a red light. If neglected, this will destroy the marriage. It is at this point that the partners ought to turn to someone qualified to give counsel. Otherwise, they will attempt to evade or forget the area of conflict. They may try to insulate it by ignoring it. They may treat the conflict as a sensitive spot that they try not to touch. Conflicts or differences may not arise over such matters as extreme cruelty or immorality. They can be differences over such things as neatness, cleanliness, clothing, and friends. One

young couple agreed to buy an expensive BMW, but disagreed violently over keeping candy or peanuts in a dish in the living room. This is not a happy marriage. Both husband and wife feel hostility that cannot be released.

Your marriage will become a happy, mutually satisfactory one if both of you set your sights on unity, ministering to each other and communicating with each other in the proper spirit. As Christians, you will find strength to do this as you pray and as you remember the exhortation: *“And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you”* (Ephesians 4:32).