

Family Functions STAYING CONNECTED

Proverbs 15:1-4

Today, we turn our attention to a topic that touches upon every human relationship: communication. If our families are to function well, then we must communicate with each other effectively. This is what keeps families connected--so let's see what we can learn from the Bible about the ways we speak and listen to one another.

A man was concerned that his wife wasn't hearing him when he spoke to her. He was pretty sure she needed a hearing aid, but he didn't know how to broach the subject with her.

He called their family doctor to discuss the problem. The doctor told him there was a simple test that the husband could perform to get a better idea about the extent of his wife's hearing loss.

"Here's what you do," said the doctor. "Stand about 40 feet away, and in a normal speaking voice, say something to her and see if she hears you. If not, get closer--about 30 feet away--and try again. Then 20 feet, and so on...until you get a response."

That evening, his wife was in the kitchen cooking dinner. He was in the den. He thinks to himself, "I'm about 40 feet away. Let's see what happens." In a normal tone of voice, he asks, "Honey, what's for dinner?" Just as he expected--there's no response.

So he moves closer to the kitchen, about 30 feet from his wife now, and asks, "Honey, what's for dinner?" Still no response.

He moves on into the dining room where he's only about 20 feet from his wife: "Honey, what's for dinner?" Again, no response.

So, he walks up to the kitchen door, not more than 10 feet away from her now. "Honey, what's for dinner?" He gets nothing back.

Finally, he walks right up behind her. "Honey, what's for dinner?" "RALPH," she says in a voice that all the neighbors could hear, "FOR THE FIFTH TIME, WE'RE HAVING CHICKEN!"

Well, these two were obviously having problems connecting. Sometimes, though, this happens even for people whose hearing, in the physical sense, is fine. The problem is the one Jesus addressed when He said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

To be fair, however, our communication problems aren't new. They actually go back to long before Jesus talked about them. It's amazing how we find concerns expressed about the way we communicate all the way back in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. For instance, I invite you to listen to our text for today:

¹ **A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.**

² **The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,
but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.**

³ **The eyes of the LORD are everywhere,
keeping watch on the wicked and the good.**

⁴ **The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life,
but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.
(Proverbs 15:1-4)**

So, it's not a new problem, is it? Communicating with others has been and continues to be one of the most formidable challenges we face. Open lines of communication are not easily maintained. It is becoming increasingly difficult to hear and to be heard.

I. The first thing I want us to think about, then, is our need to **CONNECT INTENTIONALLY**. We live in a noisy world. We have a phobia about silence—something must always be on: the computer, the MP-3 player, the big screen TV. Even driving down the road in cars engineered to eliminate all noise, the radio is blaring, while billboards shout to us silently as we drive by.

There is always somebody trying to get our attention to communicate their message, usually in an effort to sell us their product. We cannot escape the noise. And the result of this is that we increasingly tune out—we stop paying attention.

That's not always a bad thing—we need to ignore most of the messages anyway. But here's the problem: like a computer that cannot distinguish useful e-mail from junk, these computers (our brains) get confused and begin to screen out messages that we really need to hear.

We filter out the important stuff too. When I meet with couples to do pre-marital counseling, I talk with them about two important communication skills: 1) assertiveness, and 2) active listening.

Assertiveness is the ability to state very clearly what it is we want and need. That sounds simple enough, but lots of people find it hard to do. And sometimes, even though they've refused to tell you what they're after, they get angry at you for not knowing!

Listen—people who pull that know exactly what they are doing—playing little passive-aggressive games! It's so much better to state our need or concern clearly—instead of playing games!

Active listening is the ability to hear what the other person is saying, to hear what they have tried to communicate accurately enough that you can then restate what they said in a way that assures them that they have indeed been heard and understood.

So, is this the way communication usually happens at your house? Probably not—because it takes a lot of time, effort, and energy—all of which love should be willing to give. Bottom line, though, we have to be very intentional about how we speak and listen in order to connect closely to another person.

Everything doesn't have to be communicated this way. It's hard work—communicating this way all the time would wear us out!

But when someone we care about has had a really bad day at work or school, or something unusually happy or exciting happens in their lives, or when a major decision is being faced—big, important stuff, in other words—on these occasions, stating clearly what needs to be said, and hearing and understanding those words accurately are vital to a healthy relationship. When this is done right, the connection is powerful; and the persons involved feel trusted, needed, appreciated and loved.

God knows that we cannot stay connected unless we listen to each other. The word "listen" is in the Bible 185 times; the word "hear," 450 times; other forms of these words are in there an additional 600 times. Do you think God is trying to tell us something—that this is important, that we need to be intentional about this? I believe this is exactly what God is saying—if we're listening.

II. But communication isn't only about how we listen; it's also about how we speak—so, **CONNECT THOUGHTFULLY**. James talks about what we say and how we say it in—get this--4 out of the 5 chapters in his book. He knows how important this is. Listen to a few verses from James 3 (vs. 2, 7-10):

"We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check." This passage goes on to talk about bits in the mouths of horses and rudders on ships and how a small spark can set a whole forest on fire—remember? Now listen to how the passage concludes—it's tailor-made for the world we live in now:

"All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be."

Well, that's a pretty good example of assertiveness, I would say. James speaks the truth clearly. Of course, he couldn't be talking about us! And if he dared to do so, we'd give them a piece of our minds, wouldn't we? See, this is the problem we have with communicating today. There was a time when Christians took this seriously and were thoughtful in their speaking. And now?

We have a problem when we fail to speak in ways that we are likely to be heard and understood. Our text from Proverbs said "...a harsh word stirs up anger..." and "...a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit..." How true.

It seems to me that many Christians who know how to speak to others thoughtfully are finding it easier today to just drop out of the conversation. Connecting thoughtfully to another person doesn't work if it's not a two way street.

Granted, there are times when it just isn't wise to initiate certain conversations. As the Scripture says, 'There is a time and season for everything under heaven. There is a time to talk and a time to hush up!' (That's a loose translation, but you get the point.)

There may never be a good time to talk about some issues, but most conversations have a right time, and a right place; and they can be carried out in a thoughtful, respectful manner. I would encourage us to care enough about the person with whom we need to communicate to find the right moment, and the right spirit and tone, for that important discussion to happen.

Our mothers were right: "It's not just what you say, but how you say it that counts." One of you gave me this "Prayer for the Day."

"So far today, God, I've done all right. I haven't gossiped, I haven't lost my temper. Haven't been grumpy, nasty or selfish-- I'm really glad of that. But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed; and I'm probably going to need a lot of help then."

Communication experts tell us that only a small portion of what others hear us saying is the result of the words we speak. A much larger portion is dependent on how we say those words.

Sure there are times when we get angry, and moments when we just have to get the other person's attention—still, we are seldom being persuasive when we are being abrasive. Let's make it our aim to positively and thoughtfully express ourselves.

III. Now consider this: **CONNECT CONCISELY**. Preachers are exempt from this one, of course—but if there is something you really want to get communicated, find a way to say it simply, and with as few words as practical.

When James told us to "be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry," he must have had something like this in mind. The writer of Proverbs says the same thing, just a bit differently. **"When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise." (Proverbs 10:19)**

I think he's telling us that it's a sin to talk too much. Have you ever thought to yourself, "Why didn't I shut up while I was still ahead?" I guess every preacher has--myself included--but in all likelihood, we've all felt this way sometime—and for good reason!

Know what it is you need to say, say it, then be quiet and give the other person a chance to respond--and listen when they do. Better yet, let them speak first! That just may earn you the right to be heard. It has often been pointed out that God gave us one mouth and two ears for a reason. You figure it out!

IV. Now this: **CONNECT PERSUASIVELY**. In our text, we read, "The tongue of the wise commends knowledge..." (v. 2). Over in the next chapter of Proverbs, we find: **"A wise man's heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction." (Proverbs 16:23)** Now listen to how The Good News paraphrases this verse: **"Intelligent people think before they speak; what they say is more persuasive."**

It's one of those unfortunate quirks of nature that our mouths can

work faster than our brains! This quote is attributed to Abraham Lincoln: "Tis better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt!"

If there is something you need to communicate to someone, it deserves thoughtful consideration as to what to say, how to say it, and even when and where to say it. God intends for our brains and our mouths to stay connected before, during, and after we connect with others!

How many times have you said, "If I had only thought—before I spoke—if I had only thought..." Intelligent words, carefully considered words, are more persuasive, and much less harmful.

V. CONNECT TRUTHFULLY. Consider this statement from Proverbs 21:28: "**A false witness will perish...**" The principle here is TRUTHFULNESS.

One of the many ways in which we fail to speak the truth is by exaggerating. We all know how easy it is to exaggerate during the heat of an argument: "I've told you a million times; you never do this, but you always do that..."

"Always" and "never" are usually exaggerations, and should be avoided—or used only when giving compliments. If you want others to treat your words seriously, you must speak as truthfully--as accurately--as you can.

VI. And now, just one more thought about staying connected: **CONNECT INTIMATELY.** This is about an honesty that goes deeper than accuracy. It gets down to what we really feel inside.

Proverbs 24:26 is such a wonderful verse--listen: "**An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips.**" A kiss on the lips is for those we love the most. It's an expression of intimacy. Deep-down, honest expressions of our thoughts and feelings are not for everyone. Most people don't want to hear them anyway. But the people who really care about you do. Our spouse does. Our parents do. Your dearest friends want to know, and so does God.

Is there anyone in your life with whom you are truly honest, and before whom you can bare your soul? If your conversations with those closest to you consist only of clichés or gossip, e-mails or tweets, then you are not communicating on a personal level.

A sergeant in a parachute regiment was seated next to a young lieutenant fresh from jump school. They were participating in night time exercises. The young soldier was quiet and looked a bit pale, so the sarge struck up a conversation. "Scared, lieutenant?"

"No," he replied, "just a bit apprehensive." "What's the difference?" the sergeant asked. The lieutenant replied, "That means I'm scared, but I have a college education."

Sometimes it's hard to just be honest—but to open up and share your deep thoughts and feelings with another human being is to truly communicate. To speak that honestly invites the other person to open up themselves in return. And that's when relationships begin to grow and mature and bear fruit.

Here's one more jewel from the book of Proverbs: **"A word spoken aptly is like apples of gold in settings of silver."** (25:11) When we are able to speak in ways that the other person can hear and really understand what we are saying--well, the Bible calls that a priceless work of art!

An 80-year-old grandfather went to his daughter's house for Sunday dinner. When the meal was over, he announced that he was going to take a walk. "I'll be back in twenty minutes," he said--but two hours passed before he finally returned.

"Sorry I'm late," he told his daughter, seeing her concern, "but I saw an old friend while I was out. We got to talking...and he just wouldn't stop listening."

What a gift to bestow upon another—the gift of "staying connected." But it's such an easy thing to do, you say. Oh no, it's not. If it were easy, we'd be better at it than we are.

It takes some effort, but we all can do this. We can communicate with the important people in our lives in such a way that they will want to hear what we have to say. And we, in turn, can really listen to them and seek to understand.

God knows how important this is—it's why He's shared with us so many words of wisdom on how to do it. I just hope we're listening!