

Marriage Enrichment (9) Communication (3)

Marriage Enrichment

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Dear friends, welcome again to our lecture series on marriage. Today I'd like to once more draw your attention to the communication within marriage and with this also round off this series that we have done together in developing some thoughts on the relationship between us husbands and wives. So today I want to conclude our talk on communication and conflict resolution by sharing with you some common sense guidelines that will help you and should help you as you deal with the contentious issues sometimes that arise within our marriage settings.

So I have a number of commitments that I'd like to share with you. The first one is that in our communications as we are facing conflict, we are to commit to give rather than to take and the attitude in which we deal with conflict will often determine how you go through a conflict. Don't come to a conflict with a decision predetermined in your mind that you're going to win this conflict in your way. Often a conflict, for example between us and our children, doesn't come from disagreement on the issue but comes when our child comes to us and doesn't ask for permission, they ask us to agree with him or her on the decision he or she already has taken. So they don't come ask, "What do you think," they come ask, "Will you approve what I have decided?"

Now the same is happening oftentimes in our marriage life. We come to a conflict situation with our minds already predetermined what is right or what is going to happen. Over and over must I emphasize to ourselves that in marriage life decisions are not made individually. You have agreed to become one with the other person that you married. You are to remember that by marrying, we leave in order to cleave in order to finally weave our lives together with our spouse. You commit to serve and to love and to sacrifice yourself for the other. Everything of his becomes yours and everything of hers becomes yours.

So therefore, friends, be prepared to give up rather than to force down. That's especially true to us who are the heads of our homes as men, the husband. You and I are the leaders and what does that mean to be a leader? That means that we are to engage our family to be followers and to follow us enthusiastically, trusting us and committing themselves to be led by us. Now let's remind ourselves as leaders we're not the owners, we're the one who forced down our will upon our dependence disregarding their feelings. That's

dictate, that's not leader, and if we come in that regard with our minds in a conflict situation, we guarantee to lose or to become more distant from each other.

So that's the first commitment, come to give rather than to take. Second, commit to handle anger instead of letting anger handle you. We all know that when we have a conflict situation, our feelings are stirred. I know how my anger can rise to a feverish pitch in a very short moment, even though you ought to control it. Anger is a typical human emotion and in our fallen condition, very easily triggered in a sinful way. Anger fuels disrespect. We say things to each other we never would say, we never think we would say. Put-downs, name-calling, we make demands, we put on a voice, looks, forcefulness, sometimes even resort to violence in which we hit or push or shove, how that happens in any conflict resolution and if that takes over you have already lost. So handle your anger and prepare each other how to handle when anger rises to a destructive level. Yeah, walk away. Obviously there are very biblical and common sense rules count to 10 or count to 100 really, but take control of it and mutually agree as husband and wife and even as parents with children, mutually agree ahead of time on a strategy when anger takes over.

I have often suggested to couples who often tangle and entangle in anger situations, that they come up with a predetermined sign that when one of them is beginning to lose it, that he or she can raise their hand and that means, "Look, we both stop talking right now. We must give ourselves some space. Let's get control of ourselves and let's come back." Yeah? Let anger not take control of you or of your situation and after taking control, let's begin with an apology, "Sorry that I kind of lost it again. Let's start over again and let's continue on to solve the problem."

Third commitment is commit to listen long and to speak slow and softly. It's amazing how much the Bible has to say about the subject of money and the subject of the tongue. Proverbs 18:13, "He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is a shame to him, it is folly and shame." So be committed to listen. Now listening is very hard. It's not the same as hearing. I hear you, that's one thing, I'm listening to you is a totally different thing. Listening is trying to understand the other person's feelings and struggles. Listening is you try to understand the problem from his or her side as she sees it or as he experiences it. Now if you don't understand that, there will be miscommunication, there will be misjudging, you overreact. Most of us go into a marital conflict because we misunderstand each other. Isn't that true? I can look back over my marriage life and I have the conflicts as well and most of my conflicts, I'd say 90% of them, are basically due to a miscommunication. I haven't listened well to my wife or to my child and I jumped way ahead. We can think 10 times faster than we can speak so we do that in our communications. We're way ahead of the person and we're not even listening to what they're saying.

So how do you really effectively listen? Let me give you five statements on that. Don't think about what you are going to say when he or she stops talking. Yeah? We often do that. As a matter of fact, they've done research on that, why do we forget people's names when the person introduces himself? It's because we're not listening to their name at all

when they are saying it, we're thinking about what we're going to say next after they stop talking. So we don't listen. We do the same as we talk to each other. So concentrate on what is being said.

Second, accept what is being said without judging what is being said. We take out of our scale, true/not true, false/not false. We weigh it. Important/non-important. No, that's what we must not do. What the person is sharing with us is important to him or her so don't weigh it. Listen. Show acceptance.

Thirdly, concentrate on being able to repeat what was said and what you think he or she is saying or was feeling or is feeling while you're speaking. Yeah? It's difficult but as you talk to a person, listen and try to repeat in your own words what the other person said. Now, now you are communicating listening. Now you are telling the other person, "I have listened to what you said and trying to understand, is this what I heard? Did I hear this right?" You get affirmation or you get, "No, no, I didn't quite mean it that way. This is what I meant." So we get a further explanation and in the meantime you are learning to listen and understand where the other person is coming from.

So verbalize, therefore, fourthly what you have heard and understood. That's important from both sides, that you say to the speaker and the speaker says to you, "Yes, you understood that well. So let me add this to it," and so the conversation goes.

Now lastly in communication and listening, look at the non-verbal communication: the tone of voice, the flighty eyes, the posture of the body, the tapping of the feet. You know, all of these are part of the communication. So yeah, put your paper down. Switch the phone off. Put everything away. Look in the eyes, look at the person. Listen to all the non-verbal cues that are added to his conversation.

So therefore be committed to listen long and to speak slow and how we're speaking? Well, go back to the former session when we spoke a little bit about the way we are to speak. So the fourth common sense guidelines is commit to total honesty. Speak the truth in love, Ephesians 4 speaks. Total honesty, something that we are having a hard time doing, but when we are communicating and trying to resolve a conflict and if we do not share all the feelings that come along or that we struggle with, how is the other person going to know what really is the ultimate bottom line problem? Listen to 1 Corinthians 2:11, Paul writes, "For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him?" You know, people cannot read our minds entirely and our feelings, of course. After we've been married for a while, we get to feel each other out, we know what the other person's like, we know how he or she thinks, but when it comes to a conflict issue, we need to be far more open with each other, honestly speaking our feelings, our deep feelings.

May I speak to you especially to my fellow creatures called males? We are having a hard time doing deep feeling sharing. Yeah? We men aren't generally comfortable sharing our failures, our anxieties, our need for help, our disappointments and our fears. Somehow we don't think that's a manly thing to do. We are trained to think, men, that feelings are

weaknesses and that is not true. Please, let these feelings also be shared with your dear soulmate, especially when it deals with a conflict situation.

So then the fifth common sense guideline, commit to problem-focused instead of person-focused communication. In dealing with issues, focus on resolving the problem while we are sensitive to the person's feelings. Yeah, I see people walking away proudly after having stated their case that won the argument, they have gotten their way but what do they leave behind is a wounded heart and trampled spirit, or to say it very truthfully, an assassinated spouse. Yeah, they won the case but they lost the relationship, the closeness. So please, friends, recognize that feelings are easily stirred, hurt, wounded, and yet they sometimes have very little to do with the problem that we're trying to resolve. Let feelings not guide us in our discussions but let feelings be sensitively dealt with in our discussions.

Remember earlier in one of the previous sessions I made the comment that usually some men and women are the most excellent communicators in business dealings, who fail totally in their communication in marital conflict? Why was that again? That's because usually at work or in our business dealings, we don't let our feelings guide us. We end up to be very good negotiators when we're at the business table in bridging and uniting and coming up with compromise. So we need to do the same thing when we are dealing with our discussions. Let's be business-like. Let our feelings take a back stage.

Let me just give you an example. Take the old rusty mixer problem. After again a flop in the baking process because the beater fell out in the middle of beating this dough and besides the thing takes forever to clean, imagine the wife coming to her husband saying, "Peter, I want a new mixer no matter how much it costs! I am so sick of this thing! It's time for you to give me a new tool instead of buying your own tools that you are really saying you always need for your work!" Now coming across like that is setting up conflict. It's having a personal element to it, he is buying tools and he is having money, he's spending it, you are neglected. So you see the personal feelings that are coming into this discussion has nothing to do with the mixer. So let's approach it this way, say, "Peter, we have a problem. I keep flopping those muffins you like because the mixer really needs to be retired. I realize the budget on tools for the garage and for our kitchen is quite tight, so when can we talk about this, how to upgrade that kitchen tool so that we really can get this baking done properly?" Now you notice that here the problem is stated without all the overload of feelings. We are needing a new mixer. We've got a budget crunch. How can we deal with this together? And if that is the way you approach in conflict, you notice the problem gets solved without all the feelings being stirred.

And the next common sense guideline, F in my outline, is the commitment to refuse to use negative control. What's negative control in a conflict resolution? Well, there's three. The excuse control. Excusing ill behavior is a negative control element. You know, when somebody is confronted and he says, "Oh, you know I have a short fuse and I get angry quickly but I do get over it quickly too." Or, "Well, I believe calling a spade a spade and at least you know what I mean. I speak my mind but mostly I don't mean anything of it.

You know that's true." Now that's negative control. That's excusing the problem that the spouse wants to speak about.

The second negative control is retreating into silence. There are times that silence is golden but in maintaining good and deep relationship, openness is more than gold. Honesty, openness, communicating in love is the key to keep a relationship clean and functioning and there are sometimes people who go into the retreat mode and for days don't talk and I call the retreat mode the mistreat mode. It's not a healthy way of communicating. It's actually very negative, painful and can break down the other person's security or self-confidence.

Now the third negative control we need to refuse to take out is to work on emotions. Crocodile tears and they are manipulative tears. Please, if there is genuine sorrow let the tears flow, but let it be genuine. Don't use tears to manipulate. Some men, some women are really good at that.

Also don't use emotional blackmail. "I'm going to die! You've ruined my life! Ever since you've raised this issue, I can't sleep well." Yeah? That's negative control. In parenting, let's never use that, "Oh child, you make my life so miserable!" That's negative control. That's emotional blackmail. It can be very hurtful in parenting, it can also be very damaging in your marriage relationship.

That brings me to G, the commitment to find the right times to deal with the conflict. This is a really important one that I've seen very well functioning in my own life. It's not only what we say, but also when we bring up the conflict. There's a right time, there's a right place, there is to be right preparation. So what I mean the right time, obviously don't start a conversation about an explosive issue when one or both of you aren't in control of your own feelings. Yeah? You need to have plenty of time to discuss a problem thoroughly but you need to also be in an emotional, calm and collected attitude. So if that is not the moment, you have to delay.

The right place. Yeah, private, controlled. I have, indeed, sometimes suggested to couples to have their conversation about a conflict in a restaurant. Go out to eat and discuss this. Now what's going to happen there, they're gonna keep their voices down obviously. So it can be very helpful.

Thirdly, the right preparation. I'll come back to that a little later as well, but or perhaps I covered that earlier, but right preparation means share ahead of time what you'd like to discuss without discussing. It's like you give a person an agenda with the points on it. "This is what we're going to discuss." And without discussing it, you give that and you ask for the time, "When can we have a talk about this?" And of course, in between this moment and the real talk moment, a lot of it is already going to take place in terms of resolving.

The next commitment is to brainstorm with creativity to come to an agreement. If you recall your last session, we talked about the enthusiastic mutual agreement when we

come to decision making. That's also with conflict resolutions. We need to find solutions that will honor each other's emotional needs. Yes, there are occasions when we sometimes have to sacrifice with the understanding that the other will do so later for you. Yeah, there's a give and take in marriage life in our relationships but that must not be the pattern that the one always sacrifices to accommodate the other. Yeah? Please, make a compromise or say to each other, "Look, I let you do this tonight because I know it's really special to you and I will really really enjoy thinking about you doing that, but could you then also come my way and say, 'Look, how about you allow me to go away that night and just spend some time with my friend or some shopping without all other kind of kids with me,' or something like that?" Come out with an enthusiastic agreement how you resolve your conflict. Yeah, and so keep looking, keep working on solutions that make both of you an enthusiastic participator.

Then the last one, come to a win/win solution. It kind of deals with the former one already. Except in emergencies, in a healthy way of dealing with a conflict is that you come to a solution where both of you walk away with very satisfied feelings that you have arrived at a solution. Yeah?

If I may review now for a moment the five basic ways of dealing with a conflict, some are not good, one is good. The first one is withdraw from the problem, let it be. That's a lot of how families work, stuff them under the carpet. Yeah, eventually this will end up to be an unmanageable living room. J. Adams compares unresolved conflicts to suitcases in which we keep stuffing stones and we throw the suitcases filled with stones in the marriage bed. Now picture that, marriage bed with all these suitcases. That's not a place to make love and that's what a lot of people do, they do not have a win/win solution, they don't even have any solution.

The second basic way of dealing with a conflict is be out to win at the expense of the other. Well, you may achieve your goal but you sacrifice growing beautiful relationships.

The third way is yielding to protect yourself from more hurt, giving in, sacrificing. The one, of course, party is doing it all the time and just to protect herself or himself, we give in. Now in the long term this builds resentments, it builds the martyrdom feeling, it does nothing to increase the joy of the relationship.

The fourth one is a compromise where you give a little to get a little, and I think sometimes that is a very healthy way of resolving issues that obviously are not involving anything ethical or moral. But yes, there are concessions we give to each other like we trade sometimes the one for the other thing. It's better than nothing yet it can, again, leave us dissatisfied or uneasy, especially when this is constantly the approach.

So really the fifth one is the one we need to always strive for, is resolve. Reach a solution in which both are very satisfied with the solution they have arrived at. It's gonna take work. It's gonna take a lot of practice but please, friends, let that be your goal to do.

Now lastly, just a few thoughts on giving and receiving of criticism. I was asked a question about that, "Could you speak on criticism," so let's conclude this session and the sessions on communication on the subject of criticism. That's a word that nobody really likes but a basic premise for anyone who is in leadership, expect scrutiny and criticism. I call criticism the permanent price tag for leaders. As a husband, as a father, as a mother, count on it. Your family, your spouse, whoever you lead if it's in a different setting, you will receive criticism. It's a well-known statement, if you can't stand the heat, you'd better stay out of the kitchen. So be prepared for criticism.

There will be all kinds of reasons, of course, why people are criticized, particularly if you're a leader, and maybe the first reason that people criticize sometimes is out of an unease for change. If you're a good leader, you're always thinking of growth, you're thinking of moving forward, you are proactive, you think, "How can we become better functioning, more effective in our life together?" And that sometimes means change that encourages growth. Now that makes people uncomfortable and so what they do, they begin to criticize. Yeah? Don't be afraid of that. That's just the price tag of good leadership.

The second reason why leaders get criticized and let's just think about us fathers, is because simply we simply overlook the facts on the ground. Yeah, if we're trying to make changes in the family life, sorry, mom knows what really goes on at the home level, that is sometimes what we dads do. Mom knows what the kids are like, when they are hangry. Mom knows that the responses of child A are different when dad is at home than when he's not at home. So men, be open for the fact that sometimes we are ineffective leaders because we take too many things for granted on the ground level and therefore if we get criticized, it's then a correction. I have learned over my life that criticism is one of my best aids to grow in leadership, so embrace criticism therefore, rather than resist it.

So there are six things that I want to share with you how to handle criticism. The first is be ahead of it. What I mean by that, the best thing is to seek criticism before you get it. Yeah? If you are a genuine leader or if you want as father and as mother or husband and wife to grow, invite your better half to make you as good as him or her. I say that word "better half" with a little wink in my eye. We think, we always say he or she is our better half. Now treat them, then, as the better half and seek his or her counsel, criticism, feedback. Invite it. Say, "What can I do to be a better husband for you? What can I do to be a better wife? How can I grow?" Ask for this feedback and seek feedback so you won't be arrogant, you make the adjustments, you become more effective in loving and in leading and, remember, the first aspect of husband's at least was learning. So be a learner by asking for criticism.

Secondly, when you get criticized, don't be discouraged by exaggerating it. I know my own tendency that way, that I inflate a critical remark which holds an element of truth and I magnify it, and depending on what state of mind I am, I make it bigger than it is. Yeah? And then I begin to say to myself, "Oh, I'm no good. I'm a total failure. I can't do anything. How could I fail like this?" Do you know what? It was only a minor thing that he or she said to me and all of a sudden nothing is good. Yeah, as a pastor when someone

criticizes my sermon, gives me some critical remarks as feedback, yeah, you go through this mental game again, "Oh, the whole sermon was no good. I mean, all my ministry is failing. Oh man, how could I say things like that? Well, what is going to come of this?" No, that's magnifying it. That's silly, useless. Don't be discouraged by exaggerating criticism.

Thirdly, don't be demoralized by it. That means don't let criticism lead you to unethical or ungodly responses. Anger, bitterness, revenge, digging in to maintain yourself, those are all faulty reactions that harden and worsen the situation that you have just been confronted with. Yeah? That's what I mean with being demoralized by it.

Fourth, don't be ruled by criticism. Yeah? A critical remark is not a call for you to abdicate your position or to thrash your direction. It mostly is calling you for an adjustment. If you embrace criticism well, it will make you a far more effective person in leading and sharing. So don't be ruled by it but use it as a tool to become a better person.

The hardest thing is don't personalize it. Too often we see criticism by our spouse as an attack on our personality or integrity, for our capability. Now that is not true. They may love you and esteem you highly but there is a little element here that needed to be corrected and that is what they criticize you about.

And lastly, don't dismiss it. Learn from it. If the criticism isn't clear, ask. Seek further clarification and discover the real reasons that lie behind the critical comment.

So that's with receiving criticism, let's then conclude with how do you give criticism. Well, that begins with going through a discussion on criticism that I have just given you. Educate each other about the good of criticism. Often couples have never never discussed strategies, how to deal with disappointment and frustration that occurs in any relationship. So if you haven't done that, how about you begin with that? Begin to educate each other on the good and the intent of criticism, how we handle it, how we give it. Yeah? Let that be part of your strategy. I have used the example in parenting sometimes, friends, when we are parenting children, we do that when the current of their hormones are still fairly placid. You don't begin to talk to a teenager about sex when he is in the rage of his hormone effects. Talk about them far, long before that begins. We don't build a bridge in the middle of a river that is whitewater. Yeah, try to build it when it is calm and then when the whitewaters roar through, at least the bridge is there. So therefore, please, educate yourself also on how to give criticism as a strategy.

Secondly, how to give criticism, don't begin with criticism. My wife always says the sandwich approach, sweet on both ends and the sour in the middle. So begin with something positive, grace, acknowledge, recognize what is good, what's pleasant, what's effective, what you admire, what you respect, then deal with the issue that needs adjustment, and try to end again with something that is sweet of praising or acknowledging what is good.

So focus your criticism with a suggested path to a solution. Yeah? You could say, let's say that your relationship has been not too great lately, so consider saying to the person after you've done some acknowledging and praising, finding something good, something like this, "The way our relationship has been lately really really bothers me. Yeah? We've hardly had a decent conversation. Our sex life has lost its spark. The negativity between you and me is spilling over in the kids and I experience an increasing feeling of resentment. Yeah, okay, I take part of the problem in the way I have been reacting but often I feel it is sparked by your tone of voice and your very curt manners and your abrupt comments in which you basically cut off all talk, and after that the problem just festers within and I feel more and more withdrawn from you and, you know, I just long to reverse that. I don't want to go on like this. So I have a few suggestions that I've thought about that I want to share with you and so can we set a time and a place when we can do this? Yeah, I want to change and I look forward to you being a different husband or a different wife so that our relationship can move forward instead of backwards so here are the things that I'd like us to talk about." And you come up with whatever suggestions you have. Now that is focusing criticism with a positive pathway of a solution. Yeah, and you set the whole discussion through an approach like this into the positive direction already. You took some ownership of the problem, you identify some of the problems, and you come along and you make a few suggestions about where to go from there.

So that much on the subject of criticism and that brings us to a close. I want to recall to you the actual wheel bearing way way back in the earlier section as the picture of the husband and the wife relationship. Then I attached to that actual, the wheel, and I think there's a drive shaft attached to it and that's about where my mechanical knowledge comes to a screeching halt, but think about that wheel, I likened a wheel on the axle to communication. Friends, nothing is more vital for a quiet joyful ride in any relationship than the constructive functional communication. So remember that every wheel has five lug nuts that holds it into place and I call them the five C's: connection, there needs to be a connection, we must seek that often; conflict resolution; the choices that we make; compromises we come to; and above all charity, love. Love needs to rule and propel everything in our communication.

So I give thanks to God but also to you for your encouragement and your feedback. If you have any more specific topics you'd like me to cover, text me or email me or find at least the information on our church website which is nrcwaupun.org and from there you can undoubtedly find my cellphone number, but I can give it to you now as well, it is 920-791-1327. I prefer emails at atvergunst@charter.net.

So thank you much. It's been a joy to go through these number of sessions we've done on marriage life, and from the feedback I have received I think it's been a real blessing for many of you. As one more subject, I've been requested to speak about that it's really somewhat related to marriage, of course, very much related to marriage but not so much in the relationship, but the subject of family planning. So I've been looking at that subject and I hope in the near future to just give my thoughts from the biblical viewpoint on family planning. In the meantime, may God bless you and thanks for your wonderful support and feedback.