



Communication

Welcome back! So far we have talked about marriage as a covenant relationship and the specific roles and responsibilities we have as husbands and wives. Today we are going to chase down another little fox that has the ability to completely derail our marriages. This week we will be working to improve our communication with each other.

Have you ever wondered why it is that people don't seem to hear what you've just said to them? Sometimes it seems like they just don't get it, no matter how hard you try. You can explain the same thing over and over, but never get the intended response.

The problem is that we all filter information through a screen we developed through our life experiences. We don't always realize we have these filters, or we assume that everyone else has the same ones. To us it makes absolute sense to process information the way we do, the problem is that the other person most likely doesn't have those same filters in place.

That happened in our marriage a lot during the first year. The problem is that we didn't realize what was happening until things came to a pretty dramatic head. We thought the other person knew what was being said, when the truth was that each of us was completely clueless.

Sometimes life has a way of sneaking up behind you and smacking you in the back of the head when you least expect it. That happened to us early on in our marriage. We were having something of a communication crisis, and we didn't know why things were the way they were or even how they got there in the first place. See if any of this sounds familiar to you.

We met in February, had something of a whirlwind courtship, and we were married 5 months later. We both knew it was God's direction for us, but sometimes God has an odd sense of humor. Since we had known each other such a short time, we spent the first year figuring out a lot about how the other worked. This particular breakdown in communication

happened during that first year.

One of the things Peggy and her mom did well together was shop. They had it down to a science complete with their own code language for determining the other's opinions about clothing, knickknacks, and the like. It was always a good time that often lasted a full day for them. They were relaxed and absolutely knew the strategy of the hunt for the perfect items. It was because of that strategic hunt that our downfall came. I didn't even realize that we were engaged in a hunt while shopping, much less what the perfected strategy was. Because of my lack of knowledge about Peggy's shopping style, we had a serious lack of communication.

One of the codes that she and her mom used was to start by simply mentioning that an item was there. For instance, "Oh look! There are green sweaters over there." Which was code for "Do you think we should go and look closer?" A slight variation would be "Oh look! There are green sweaters over there and they are only \$9.99!" That would translate, "I'd really like to go and take a closer look; what do you think?" One of those two phrases would usually pull them into whatever section of the store the other wanted to look at.

I'm guessing that most ladies are laughing right now because you can see exactly how this works. I'm also guessing that most men are scratching their heads thinking, "Why not just say I want to look over there?"

For the first year of our marriage Peggy spotted lots of opportunities to investigate further and was becoming increasingly desperate in her pleas for me to look at the products displayed around us. I thought she must have been thinking that either I was the most unobservant person in the world or that I was blind – why else would she be pointing out the obvious. I say this because my response to her "Oh look! There are green sweaters and they are only \$10!!" was usually along the lines of "Yep." She was expecting to hear, "Oh we should look at those!" or at least, "Do you want to look at those?" All she got for a full year was "Yep." She was becoming desperate.

Going along with the "subtle suggestion" communication style for shopping was an equally obscure behavior correction style. When Peggy was growing up, if her mom wanted to make a change in her behavior she would do it by sharing instructional information. For example, she wouldn't just come out and say something along the lines of, "We need to cut down on fried foods." Instead she would provide her with information either through a TV

show or news article that would address the issue; from this Peggy was to infer that they needed to make a change so she should stop asking to go places that highlighted burgers and fries as their main menu items.

This communication style was her “normal” and Peggy was very good at it. She had 39 years to perfect reading between the lines, and life went pretty smoothly in her childhood home as long as she read between the lines the right way. The problem came in when the uninitiated entered that circle, and that was where I found myself.

This all came to a near-disastrous head one evening. Peggy was feeling absolutely defeated about life. We had been shopping so often, and that Macy’s and Jones girl couldn’t even get me to agree to look at discounted tops at Walmart. She was resigning herself that she very well might die naked with no make-up or jewelry. You see, on top of not responding to her, in her opinion, very clear efforts to request personal items, I had been playing a lot of Dave Ramsey tapes on financial responsibility. The only thing she felt she could spend money on was food – and not restaurants or prepared food items, she bought things like eggs, bread, rice, and pasta. My playing the Dave Ramsey tapes communicated to her that I thought she was spending money foolishly. Remember that other part of the communicating where her mom wouldn’t come right out and say it, but would hope she “got” the idea from the material she shared?

Well, I came home one night to find Peggy sitting in the tub with tears streaming down her face. First off, in my favor, I did what any good husband would do. I immediately knelt down by the tub to find out what in the world was wrong with her. I had no idea what was going to hit me when she started talking.

You can imagine how stunned I was as words started coming out of her mouth. I had no idea what she had been trying to say for the past year, and I had no thought that she was spending money inappropriately. I honestly believed that she was simply pointing out what she was seeing, I didn’t really get why she would do that, but was chalking it up to one of her idiosyncrasies. As for the Dave Ramsey tapes, I am a big fan of his financial advice and simply wanted to share it with Peggy. I thought I was reaffirming the decisions she was making and that she would feel good about the choices we were making financially. I had no intention of trying to communicate that her spending habits were not appropriate.

The whole discussion lasted about 2 hours and left Peggy shivering in a freezing-cold tub

of water, but it brought us to a whole new understanding of each other and how old communication styles can affect how we hear and internalize current situations. I am sharing this because of how prevalent this problem is in marriages. The good news is that there are tools you can learn to use to help prevent this type of misunderstanding in your own marriage.

Dr. Eggerton, in his book *Love and Respect*, talks about the problems of pink and blue glasses and hearing aids. What he is pointing out with that visual is that men and women tend to process and react to information in completely different ways. It's important to understand these general principles and to know how they apply to your specific relationships.

The idea goes back to how male and female brains are "wired". Some people refer to the difference as waffle brains for men and spaghetti brains for women. What they are referring to is the male tendency to compartmentalize things; when a new problem or piece of information comes into play the relating "file" is brought out of the brain and the information is viewed in light of that topic alone. Women, on the other hand, tend to dump everything on the table and try to fit this new thing into the mix in light of all the other pre-existing pieces they have.

Here's the problem: men see the problem in isolation and women see it in relation to everything else. For a man, a drain may be clogged and it isn't a big deal because it's in the downstairs bathroom that is seldom used anyway. For men it's one small item that is assigned priority based on similar issues. For a woman, the drain being clogged suddenly becomes about how supportive or non-supportive the man is in any and every aspect of life. That's how they connect the dots from the drain, to the trash not being taken out, to not helping enough with the children, to being disengaged with her family. For women, everything is connected, like spaghetti twisted together on a plate, and suddenly the clogged drain is a reflection on her husband's opinion of her family.

The other part of this is that since everything is connected for women, if anything is wrong then everything is effected. Simply put, if the drain is clogged (or whatever other problem is being dealt with) then everything will be tainted. That's really hard for men to understand because they are wired to see things as separate. Neither way is better than the other, they are just different; if you think about it, it really makes sense that God designed us

this way.

Men are designed to be the providers for their families. They have to be able to turn off the “other stuff” so they can focus on the task at hand. That holds true from the hunter mentality to the business world. If their job performance were affected by emotions and thoughts not related to the task at hand, their productivity would fail. Women are designed to be caretakers, not that they can’t hold jobs or be successful in the business world, but they were created to be the glue of the home. It makes sense that they would have their experiences tied together because they are created to be the ones that keep track of where all the children are physically and emotionally, so they can move them forward in their growth. Because of how families and the people in them are put together, it would be impossible to do this well while compartmentalizing everything - the family is one unit functioning together, not a bunch of individuals living side-by-side.

To use this information to promote communication, you have to remember those natural tendencies for processing information. Men, you have to remember that for your wives everything really is connected - that’s how she sees things. She can’t just “turn off” the other stuff and focus on the exact issue at hand, especially if something is having a high emotional call to her. Women, you have to remember that your husbands see one thing at a time and he doesn’t naturally see things connecting the way that you do. It isn’t that he’s being intentionally unaware; he is just designed to see each issue separately. Simply being armed with and remembering these tendencies can go far in offering grace to each other when conflicts arise.

And because we are humans, conflicts will arise, but before you even begin trying to talk about something potentially explosive, it’s important to think through a couple of factors. First of all, check to be sure that you are in an appropriate place for the conversation to happen. Are you alone, or in front of a crowd? If you are trying to have a serious discussion that affects the two of you, it should happen with just the two of you present, not in front of your friends, neighbors, or kids. Next, check to be sure that the timing makes sense. Do you have time to have a full discussion right now? Will both of you get a chance to make yourself understood or will you be rushed? Are both of you calm, or is either of you starting to get upset? If either of you is experiencing the beginnings of anger or impatience, you need to choose another time for the discussion. If it is a good time and place to talk, and if your

emotions are under control, then you are off to a good start, but there are a couple more things to keep in mind.

Speaking with love and respect is very important to your success in being heard. The words that you say aren't as important as the words that your spouse hears. You've already seen how speaking and hearing don't necessarily match up. Communication often has less to do with word choice and more to do with attitude, tone, volume, and expression.

When you are communicating, it is important to remember that your non-verbal communication says just as much, if not more, than your verbal communication does. When you are talking it is important to open your body up. Relax your arms, don't cross them over your chest; when you cross them it closes your body up and puts a wall between you. Face each other and lean in to show interest and attention. Turn off the TV and turn away from the computer. Give one another your total and complete attention. Look each other in the eye and don't do that middle-schooler eye roll - that just shouts to the other person, "You are so stupid!"

It is important to take turns when speaking and to do constant checks for understanding. There is a technique called reflective listening. In this method you say back to the other person what you heard, not necessarily word for word what they said, but what you understood them to mean. But it doesn't stop there, along with what you thought was being said, you include what you believe to be the emotional state of the speaker. The emotional part is really important because so many emotions can imitate others, but the way to address them is very different. Worry, anger, and hurt can all look the same on the outside, but you want to know which feeling you're really dealing with to be able to approach it correctly. It is important that we understand exactly what our spouse is trying to communicate and it's just as important that we understand the emotions attached to it.

Let me give you an example that came up recently when we were experiencing cell phone problems. Peggy was really visibly upset that her phone wasn't working right. Remember for women everything is connected, so it was important for me to be sure that I understood exactly what the true heart of the issue was. After she had expressed her extreme frustration over not being able to make or receive calls on her phone, I restated to her what I thought she was trying to say. I said something along the lines of, "I understand that you are saying that we need to fix the phone problem right now so that the kids can get ahold of you. You

sound really worried about them not being able to reach you.” Do you see how that is different from, “Wow, your really ticked off that the phones aren’t working,” or “You think it’s my fault that the phone isn’t working.” It is also different from her just wanting to get a different phone. It would have been really easy for me to think that Peggy was mad at me over the whole phone issue, when in fact she was being a mom and worrying that her kids would need her and not be able to get in touch with her.

Reflective listening takes some time to do, and it takes some time to get right. You have to use some common sense here. I’m not saying that you should be rechecking everything that’s said. If you’re having a discussion about lunch or what to watch on TV, just talk about it. Reflective listening should be used when you are having a conversation about something that is very important to the other person. Check out this video link of one couple’s attempt to practice reflective listening. After a couple of misfires, the husband finally hits on what the wife is trying to communicate: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4EDhdAHrOg&sns=em>

Because you are committed to making your relationship work according to God’s plan and you know that your spouse has your best interests at heart, it is worth the effort to improve your communication. You are working to have the marriage that God designed; and you know that clear communication is going to bring you closer together. Remember that you each process information differently and that communication includes verbal and nonverbal pieces. You want to be sure that the time and place is appropriate for the conversation and that you are accurately hearing what is being said and know the emotions attached to it. Communication may not be easy, but it’s important that you do the work necessary to catch the real meaning and emotions behind your spouse’s words.

Would you join me in prayer? Father, we come to you now asking that you help us to hear each other’s hearts. You created us to react differently to things; we thank you for designing us that way. Fill us with Your wisdom as we work to communicate clearly with each other. In Your Son’s name we pray. Amen.

Next week we will move deeper into the art of communication and discuss how to have healthy conflict. Until then, have a wonderful week.