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Presentation Transcript
God-Based Marriage, The Organizing Principle 7 – Marital Communication
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We're continuing on today with our series, *The God-Based Marriage*. This is the seventh one, plus an introduction. If you're just coming into the series, we hope you go to our Website, liferesource.org, to find the earlier presentations related to this. Just click on the button at the top of the Website, called *Presentations* – there's a button there. You can easily find your way from there. Remember that this series is about the organizing principles that underlie the institution of marriage. Each one is elemental.

Today, our topic is *Marital Communication*. Why communication training? Well, the Bible puts emphasis on it, for one thing. (This is the only scripture I'm going to quote today, because everything is skill training, but this is why we want to skill train.) In James 1:19, James said:

James 1:19 – *Know this, my beloved brothers: Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.*

Notice: Quick to hear. Everybody wants to talk and express, but the problem usually is in the hearing – not just because we want to talk, but because of differences between males and females.

Somebody sent this to my wife and I thought I'd read it to you. It explains, sort of, *why* communication between males and females is hard:

Let's say a guy named Fred is attracted to a woman named Martha. He asks her out to a movie. She accepts. They have a pretty good time. A few nights later, he asks her out to dinner. And again, they enjoy themselves. They continue to see each other regularly, and after a while, neither one of them is seeing anybody else. Then, one evening, when they're driving home, a thought occurs to Martha, and without really thinking, she says out loud, "Do you realize that, as of tonight, we've been seeing each other for exactly six months?" Then there's silence in the

car. To Martha it seems like a very loud silence. She thinks to herself, "I wonder if it bothers him that I said that? Maybe he's been feeling confined by our relationship. Maybe he thinks I'm trying to push him into some kind of obligation that he doesn't want or isn't sure of." Fred is thinking, "Wow! Six months!" And Martha is thinking, "But hey, I'm not so sure I want this kind of relationship either. Sometimes I wish I had a little more space so I'd have time think about whether I really want to keep going the way we are – moving steadily forward. I mean, where are we going? Are we just going to keep seeing each other at this level of intimacy? Are we headed toward marriage, toward children, toward a lifetime together? Am I ready for that level of commitment? Do I even want to know this person?" And Fred is thinking, "So that means it was...let's see, February is when we first started going out, which is right after I had the car at the dealer, which means...let me check the odometer. Whoa! I'm way overdue for an oil change here!" And Martha is thinking, "He's upset. I can see it on his face. Maybe I'm reading this completely wrong. Maybe he wants more out of our relationship – more intimacy, more commitment. Maybe he has sensed, even before I sensed it, that I was feeling some reservations. Yes, I bet that's it! That's why he's so reluctant to anything about his own feelings. He's afraid of being rejected." And Fred is thinking, "I'm going to have them look at that transmission again. I don't care what those morons say. It's still not shifting right. And they better not try to blame it on the cold weather this time. What cold weather? It's 87 degrees out. And this thing is shifting like a garbage truck. I paid those incompetent thieves \$600.00." And Martha is thinking, "He's angry. And I don't blame him. I'd be angry too. I feel so guilty putting him through this, but I can't help the way I feel. I'm just not sure." And Fred is thinking, "They'll probably say it's only a 90-day warranty, the scumballs!" And Martha is thinking, "Maybe I'm just too idealistic, waiting for knight to come riding up on his white horse, when I'm sitting right next to a perfectly good person – a person I enjoy being with, who seems to truly care about me – a person who is pain because of my self-centered, school-girl romantic fantasy." And Fred is thinking, "Warranty?? They want warranty? I'll give 'em warranty. I'll take the warranty and...." Martha says, "Fred!" out loud. "What?" says Fred, startled. "Please don't torture yourself like this," she says, her eyes beginning to brim with tears. "Maybe I should never have...oh dear! I feel so...." She breaks down, sobbing. "What?" says Fred. "I'm such a fool," Martha sobs. "I mean I know there's no knight. I really know that it's silly. There's no knight and there's no horse." "There's no horse?" says Fred. "You think I'm a fool, don't you?" Martha says. "No!" Fred says, glad to finally know the correct answer. "It's just that I need some time," Martha says. There's a fifteen second pause while Fred, thinking as fast as he can, tries to come up with a safe response. Finally, he comes up with one that he thinks might work. "Yes," he says. Martha, deeply moved, touches his hand. "Oh Fred, do you really feel that way?" she says. "What way?" says Fred. "That way about time," says Martha. "Oh," says Fred, "Yes." Martha turns to face him and gazes deeply into his eyes, causing him to become very nervous about what she might say next – especially if it involves a horse. At last she speaks. "Thank you, Fred," she says. "Thank you," says Fred.

And he takes her home, and she lies on her bed, a conflicted tortured soul, weeping until dawn, whereas when Fred gets back to his place, he opens a bag of Doritos, turns on the TV, and

immediately becomes deeply involved in a rerun of a college basketball game between two South Dakota junior colleges that he's never heard of. A tiny voice, in the far recesses of his mind, tells him that something major was going on back there in the car, but he's pretty sure there's no way he would ever understand what. So he figures it's better if he just doesn't think about it. The next day Martha will call her closest friend – or perhaps two of them – and they will talk about the situation for six straight hours. In painstaking detail, they will analyze everything she said and everything he said, going over it time and time again, exploring every word, expression and gesture for nuances of meaning, considering every possible ramification. They will continue to discuss this subject off and on for weeks – maybe months, never reaching any definite conclusions, but never getting bored with it either.

Meanwhile, Fred, while playing racquetball one day with a mutual friend of his and Martha's, will pause just before serving, frown, and say, "Norm, did Martha ever own a horse?"

And that's the difference between men and women. So what chance do either one of them have? (Chuckling) Well, there *is* a way. And we're going to learn *how* to do that. I don't know that what we're going to learn today would solve the discussion in the car, but it's designed to help people get past difficulties they're having with each other – things that would normally become an argument.

Let's think about an argument. When people argue, they're both trying to make their point, but they're not on the same page usually. Frustration builds as each one feels like they are not heard or understood. Sometimes it gets angry, because of the frustration level as it goes up. This causes both of them to become defensive. It feels like they're being attacked. So, in an argument, the best defense – the way most people defend themselves in an argument – is they attack. Name-calling can be a part of that. If both feel attacked, they attack more vigorously. Nothing is solved. Both are angry. Sometimes one will withdraw, which frustrates the other. But both dig in, not wanting to give way for fear of losing. It's like a tug of war at a picnic. You have to pull with all your might just to stay even. If you don't, you're going to get dragged over the line and you're going to lose the argument. You're going to lose ground. Some of the things you worked so hard to accomplish in the relationship may be lost.

So how do we resolve differences? There's a better way than just arguing about it – a way that eliminates defensiveness – so there's no name-calling, no anger and not very much frustration. It's a way that helps couples work together to solve problems and get back to the emotional connection they once had when they first began their relationship. It's an approach, a technique, a tool couples can use.

Now, you know, my wife and I have used this, and we don't talk this way to each other every day all the time. We only talk this way when there's a need to. But, because it's a tool, one has to be willing to learn how to use it and do it. So the old expression... "It only works if you work it." The alternative, however, is more of the same – unhappiness, disconnect, resentment. So what

does a person do to learn this? Well, there's three steps – and they're simple. They're simple to learn and understand, but they're hard to do, because they're not – at least the first one – is not intuitive.

In this new way, the thing to do first is to try *to understand exactly what the other person meant by what they said*. This is done by reflecting. You just repeat back what you think the other person meant by what they said. Then ask them if you got it right. Okay? So, instead of answering, you reflect back what you heard to make sure you understood them. That's the part that's counterintuitive. It's natural, when somebody says something to us, to just answer. But you have to *not* answer. You have to reflect back to make sure that when you answer, you're answering what they actually meant by what they said. See, with males and females, the problem is that, if a woman says something to a man, the man thinks he understands it because he knows what he would mean had he said that. But that *isn't* what she means, because she's a woman. And, if you think about the discussion in the car, it kind of helps paint that picture. So you repeat back what you think the other person meant by what they said. And then you ask them if you got it right. And, if you did, then it's your turn to answer what they said, but armed with the information that you now are sure that you know what they meant by what they said. Now, if you get it right, then they feel understood, and if you don't get it right, then they're going to correct you, which means they're going to put their feelings into words again and take another run at it. So you get another chance to correctly respond. Not getting it right is the time when you're going to learn something about the other person that you didn't know. This is where it's important to know that we didn't get it right, so we get them to explain it again, and keep repeating it until we understand exactly how they meant what they said.

One way that I've heard – and I think is a good thing – is to try to become the other person in the moment while you're reflecting. What would it be like to be them? How does it make them feel? What are the emotions that are underlying the words. Try to experience what the other person means and wants and feels at that time.

Now, remember when you reflect, you're not trying to win a war. You're trying to understand the other person. And you're also trying to them to say, "Yes, you understand what I meant." Your reflection should be easy for them to agree to. For example, if you say, "You think I always do the wrong thing when it comes to the kids," you will probably get a "No," because you don't always get it wrong – the way they think about it. Sometimes you get it right.

So, just as a general principle, whether you're reflecting or talking in this model, *never* use always and never, because they will usually not be accepted, because they are *never* true. So I used the word *never* twice there, but I'm not in the model with you. So, instead of saying *always* and *never*, you can say, "It seems to me that most of the time..." or "...a good amount of time..." or "sometimes." So you soften it, so that it's easier for them to accept the point that you're trying to make.

Also, when you you're reflecting, your reflection should completely leave you out of the equation. Don't talk about yourself at all. Only talk about what you think they want, what they think, and what they feel. You're trying to reflect them, right? So that's what you talk about. Don't even say, "I think you..." Just say, "You feel this way...you want this...you believe that." There's something magical about doing it that way. Don't ask questions. Just reflect what you get. Take a shot at it. Lay it out there. It's easier for them to recognize that you're right or wrong that way. Leave yourself out of it. Try to make the reflection something they can agree with. And try to make it something that's easy for them to say, "Yes," to by taking out all the *always* and *nevers*. So, okay. Once they say, "Yes, you understand me," then it's your time to talk about what they said – your opinion about it – how it makes *you* feel, what *you* want.

So, how could a person learn to reflect? Well, start by reflecting simple things. If your mate says, "I'd like to watch *X* TV show, because *Y* actor is so funny." And we're just practicing here, right? Start with simple things. Don't start with an argument that you're having. But, if your mate expresses an opinion about something that is not related to you, you can practice reflecting it. What I recommend people do is, sit down for about twenty minutes and just reflect whatever the person says for ten, then switch. You could say, "*X* TV show is entertaining you. You especially like *Y* actor because he's so hilarious. Did I understand you correctly?" So that's sort of a no-brainer, right? Well, that's what we want. We just want to get in the habit of, instead of answering the person, reflecting first. Pick things to reflect that have nothing with the two of you just to practice, so that you can get the hang of it. Don't do it all day long. Just do it for practice at first. And you'll notice that, if you get it right, they feel understood, even in these simple things. If you get it wrong, then they get to put their feelings into words once again, which is always helpful. So there's no way to lose with that, except by dropping out of the model because people get frustrated and angry, and that's what they tend to do. They go back to fall back mode. You have to *stay* in the model. You have to keep reflecting, and you have to leave out all dogmatic terms, like *always* and *never*. No name-calling.

So once you get the reflection right, then it's your time to talk. So they call that part *expressing*. Okay, so here's what to remember when you're answering. When you reflected, you only about what the other person said, not what you think, want or feel. So now it's time to stop talking about them and talk only about what *you* think, want or feel. Now, if you're only talking about what you want, you can't call the other person a name, can you? Or insinuate anything, or blame them. So you're just talking about what you want. Just tell them what you want. It's very simple. Instead of name-calling or imputing motives, or judging, just talk about how what's going on makes you feel, what you want, what you think.

Another good think about that is, if you're talking about what you think, what you want and what you feel, there's no way to argue with those things, is there? See, you preface everything that you want, say or feel with, "I would like..." "I want..." "I think..." "It makes me feel this way..." In that way, they have to acknowledge that that's what you want, think and feel. So, if you're giving them information about you with the hope of them understanding you, instead of causing

an argument, that's what we're after. You might say, "You stupid idiot, you never listen to me." But using this method, you would talk about what your mate thinks and does, or make a judgment about their attitude or their motives. You just say, "It seems to me that often you don't listen to me and that you just spout your own opinions without understanding how I feel. That's how it affects me. When we talk, it seems to me that you're not listening. Instead it seems like you're thinking about what you're going to say next. When I get that vibe, it makes me feel unimportant. What I want you to do is pay attention to me." So, can he argue with any of that? Well, he might, but it wouldn't be realistic and you could hold his feet to the fire on that one in a gentle way. If you say that to him, after he reflects and gets it right, his comment might be, "Well, I *do* pay attention." And after *you* reflect, then you can ask, "What can you do so that it doesn't feel to me like you're not paying attention?" To which he's going to reflect, "I don't know." To which you can say, after you reflect, "You could, instead of ignoring or answering, you could first reflect like we're learning to do right now."

So when couples talk to each other in this way – not blaming, not judging, not name-calling, not in anger, but staying in the thinking part of their brains – because they have to reflect – they both begin to understand how the other person feels. And when this happens, they automatically begin to think of ways to solve the problem, which is why we're having the discussion to begin with. Right? It's not about winning. It's about working out a solution that works for everybody. So that's what the next step is – the final step – *solution finding*. Once energy is shifted away from defensiveness, from name-calling, from attacking, from feeling attacked, then there's energy to resolve differences. And not just compromises, but what Steven Covey called *the third alternative*. If you want to read more about that, you can read his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

What is the third alternative? Well, it's a solution that works for both of them and is better than any compromise they might think of. Remember, any solution a couple comes up with has to work for *both* of them, or in the end, it won't work for either one. So can you think of a Bible principle that fits that? Well, love your neighbor as yourself. This is a way to get to that in discussion – to take care of each other while you take care of yourself in solution finding.

So let's talk about application now. When this type of having each other's backs – that what this is, because you get down to solution finding, where you're looking for a solution that works for both of you – when that happens, then the relationship begins to go back toward an emotional connection. And remember, that's what love is.

When couples come to my office, I ask them why they come, and they usually tell me all the problems. And I ask it again until they tell me they want to resolve their problems. Then I tell them I always wanted to play the piano, but not enough to practice. And they look at me, and I say, "I'm going to teach you a skill – like playing the piano – but you have to be willing to practice. And if you say you want to learn it, but you don't really, unless you're willing to practice it – just like I didn't really want to learn to play the piano, because I wasn't willing to

put in the work. So this principle, as I said earlier, only works if you work it. You can expect different results by doing the same things you've always done, but that is the definition of crazy! Right? You have to do something different to get different results. And this is the way to talk to each other *differently* than you've talked before that leads you to solutions instead of more arguments – instead of hurting each other. It leads to emotional connection and support. It's something that's built into every human to need, because God wants us to need Him.

I used to think that things should just come easy in relationship, but you have to work at it. So here it is: a simple, but counterintuitive skill that you can acquire. And, if you learn to use it, it'll change your marriage and all your relationships, for that matter. Now all your relationships...you can talk to your kids like this.

When I was an elementary school counselor, the teachers were complaining about how many fights were going on out on the playground. So I got my big briefcase full of stuff, and I went out. I was a visible presence out there in the yard. One day I heard the bell ring. Everybody ran for the door, except for this one kindergartner, who was sitting out in the sand. The duty teacher walked up to him, and she said, "The bell rang. It's time to go in." And he says, "I don't want to go." So here's her opportunity, right? She said, "It feels so good to play in the sand after sitting in class all day long, you just don't want to go in. It just seems too hard. But the bell rang and we all have to go." And he just got up and went in. He felt heard. At least she understood what was going on in his little head. Right? So you can use it with children. You can use it with employees/employers – anybody – anytime there's any kind of difference.

I remember I was talking to a state trooper one time who had seen some really bad stuff at work and had a little PTSD. After we'd gotten most of that taken care of, he was telling me that his ten-year-old daughter had just been diagnosed with bi-polar disorder – which was *not* the case, but aside from the point – he was telling how hard it was to get her to do anything and talk to her. So I started teaching him this. And after a few minutes, when he realized what I was teaching him, he stopped me, and he said, "Well, I already know how to do that." That's one of the first things they taught us at the academy. Never thought about using it with her." See, that's how it is. And it's true. This method that I'm teaching you is mainly for couples, but the basic principle of reflecting can be used anytime – anytime there's an issue.

So, as I said, if you learn to use it, it'll change your marriage and all your relationships. And you'd be one step closer to being a better Christian, because you're going to be quick to hear and slow to speak. One of the things that people tell me about this that's so good is, when they're talking to somebody that's doing this with them, they know that the person has to listen in order to make a decent reflection. So they're not thinking about what they're going to say next. They can't think about that until *after* they have listened completely to what you're saying. I mean, it works right from the get go – to help people feel understood.

All right. There you have it – marital communication. I’ve talked about this in a lot of other messages – anything else on marriage, I’m almost certain I talk about it. So you can get on the same page with your mate this way. And you can learn more about it on our Website under series where other marital seminars and parenting things are discussed.

So now that we have a tool, we can get on the same page. Let’s remember the three points:

Reflect – where you only talk about the other person

Speak – where you only talk about yourself – no judgment, no name-calling, no criticisms – only what you want – and then,

Solution finding – where you figure out a way to break bad habits that irritating each other, or resolve differences of opinion about just about everything, from what to watch on TV to where you’re going to go on vacation.

And it all just falls together after a while. When you first start learning how to do this, it feels clumsy – like if you’ve ever played tennis, racquetball, or baseball, where you have a club – golf, especially – that club – that implement – seems totally clumsy. But after you play a while, it feels like an extension of your arm. And that’s the way this will become, too, if you practice it. But it won’t feel that way unless you practice it. It only works if you work it!

Don’t forget to check out the Website, liferesource.org, to keep up with the series, too.