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Transcript

Making Life Easier – Part 8 – Communication Skills

November 4, 2022

I sponsored a church convention called *The Feast of Tabernacles* some years ago. It came to my attention that one of my friends had gotten into an argument with a workshop presenter during his presentation. This was, from the accounts of others who told me about it, more than just mildly acrimonious. I was so busy during that convention that I didn't get around to speaking to either of them right away, but when I did, it was with my friend first. When I enquired, he hung his head. He was clearly embarrassed, and he said, "We talked about it later and we found that we actually agreed. We were just saying the same thing in different terms."

Have you ever had that happen? I hear that a lot when working with couples in counseling therapy. Do you know that there is a simple solution for that – that miscommunication? I'm glad that my friend and the presenter were big enough to talk later and resolve their issue. But the whole episode was utterly unnecessary if either of them had employed a few simple principles, which we're going to review today. Don't think I'm taking a demeaning stance toward either one of these men, because it's very counter-intuitive of what we need to do to solve this problem.

This fits in our series of *Making Life Easier* because when we can successfully communicate with others, even when issues are charged with emotion, life gets a lot easier. The presenter and my friend were misunderstanding each other. In other words, they were talking, but not communicating. As a result, they got up upset and embarrassed themselves.

Besides avoiding embarrassment, there are some other important benefits to communicating well. Before we get into those, let's ask this question: Because God made us relational beings, God made us relational so we will desire and be able to connect with Him. He made us like He is in that way.

Look with me at a scripture. This is a clear *g* *God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

From this scripture, we can learn, first of all, that God, by nature, is a loving God. He desires a relationship with us because He loves us. Secondly, that primary proof of His love is Jesus coming down here and sacrificing Himself for us. And thirdly, He wants us to love Him in return and love all His other children. That's the fundamental theology behind human relationship and human communication. We're all relational beings, craving relationship, needing connection, needing to be successful at connection in this life with God.

So, that's a bit about why communication is necessary at its base. Now let's talk about *how* to communicate – the skills needed.

If we look past just talking and listening, we can learn that communication promotes relationship. It's true that actions often speak louder than words – loving actions are a way to communicate – for example, Jesus' sacrifice, or caring for someone when they're sick or injured. However, speaking and listening are also ways to connect to form relationships.

When Jesus came to the earth as human, He also communicated His love through words, as well as actions. Face-to-face truth communication is a way to connect with others. You may not realize it, but just knowing that the purpose of talking to others is a connection helps us to remember the goal of our communications. In fact, that really is the first skill. We could say: Seek to connect, not alienate, while we're communicating.

Attempts at communication in some relationships are like a tug of war. We have to keep pulling and resisting because it feels like we'll get pulled over the line if we don't. This happens when we're feeling attacked. It causes us to feel like we need to defend ourselves. Usually when we need to defend ourselves, we have to attack in return. When we attempt to communicate this way, we're actually eroding the relationship instead of strengthening it. It's doing more damage than it is good. If we don't know the goal of communication is relationship, we don't have any standard to judge or attempts at communication.

I told the story of the man who came to my office and told me that he was a terrible and stupid person. When I asked him why he said that, he said he had, the evening before, told his wife she was (you know, the B word). And then he said, "How stupid is that!" And I was quick to agree with him, but I also mentioned that at least he *knew* it was a stupid thing to do. And that meant he, at least, through communication, should promote relationship instead of degrading it. So that's something to build on. If we know that, and we still call someone a derogatory name, that's a different problem all together – one that usually requires deeper work. And that's why this man was in my office – for the deeper work. That man had called his wife a name and he had forgotten that. And because he did, his relationship with her was hindered.

When I have a couple in my office, and they start name-calling, or aggressively start pressing to get their way – to win the argument – I break and remind them that the goal in connection, not

alienation – not winning. I ask them, “Is what you’re doing now connecting or creating distance?” And then, “How can you change your communication so you can draw closer while you discuss this issue?” It’s not a fight. It’s a team seeking a solution to a problem that puts all the members on the same page. What can you do to cause that to happen? Well, if we don’t know, or forget it, our communications won’t promote relationships. They’ll tear them down.

So, that’s the first thing we need to know. In God’s realm, relationships are built through communication. What’s next?

In his first book, Stephen Covey – in his awesome book – *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey’s first habit was *seek first to understand, then to be understood*. When we think of communication, we usually think of talking and listening. And we all seek to be understood first, then to understand. So, we get these two inverted by nature. Think about it. When somebody talks to you, your natural response – before you try to understand what they’ve said completely – is to answer them.

Let me give you an example. When we go to a lecture or a class, what’s the reason we go there? Is it to understand? Or, to be understood? Which skill is expected of the presenter? Well, we hope we can understand him – that he can be understood – the point of presenting. And which skill is necessary for the student? To understand, right? Have you ever been to a lecture and heard a student ask a loaded question – one aimed at opening a door for him or her to express personal opinions and knowledge? It’s a time waster for everybody. They came to learn what the speaker knows, not what the audience knows. The person asking the question has allowed the desire to be understood to override the need to understand.

Why does this happen? Well, the person may not have many opportunities to express, which drives up the urge. They may be in a personal, unresolved crisis in which the topic of discussion may trigger their own issue. For example, someone who is in the midst of a terrible divorce attending a lecture on divorce. Another reason is that a person may be so self-centered that they believe their view is more important than that of the presenter and the time of the audience. And then, other people just don’t know that there’s a time to express and a time to listen, or how to tell the difference. There are probably as many reasons for this problem as there are people. Solomon said that there is a time for everything. So, there’s a time to be understood, but a lecture is not one of them, unless we’re the presenter.

When our mate is angry with us, for example, it’s time to listen before we talk. That points to Covey’s point, doesn’t it? There’s skill involved in seeking to understand *before* being understood. And that skill is to know that there are two parts to communication – expressing and listening. And then the skill come in knowing when to use each one.

Here’s one that’s good to express. Are you ready? Only after the person you’re talking to acknowledges that you understand when they said is helpful to start expressing. Why is that?

Well, you can't communicate effectively if you don't know what the other person means by what they just said. If we listen and then respond without making sure, we may not understand them yet. And so, we go off on a tangent, or sound uninformed to the other person.

I heard a parable once that explains the importance of this skill. A couple had only one lemon. They both wanted it. So an argument ensued. They both got angry and accused the other of being selfish. It was so intense that they brought it up in their next counseling session. Their therapist asked them why each one of them wanted the lemon. The man said he wanted it to make a couple of glasses of lemonade them. To which his wife exclaimed, "Well, I wanted to use the skin for lemon zest so that I could make a cake for us." "That's sort of a silly example," people would say. And yet, I've witnessed similar things like that – misunderstandings to that nature – dozens of times over other issues in my office. These people both assumed the other wanted the *whole* lemon. They thought they understood the other person. So, this is where seeking first to understand comes in.

None of us naturally has a problem seeking to be understood. The skill comes in when we know to seek to understand first, then to answer after gaining understanding. But how do we do that?

After we remember that communication is for relationship-building, instead of tearing down relationships, and after we remember that relational communication begins with listening – with understanding – rather than talking, *then* we can begin understanding by listening and making sure we understood what they meant by what they said. And how do we do that?

Well, let's say that someone has expressed an opinion, a situation, a need, an emotion. What we want to do is, we want to focus on understanding how the person feels while they're talking, and what choice of words they use. Are they sarcastic, or loving, or demeaning, or respectful? While listening we look for non-verbal cues from the other. Research tells us that 90% of communication is non-verbal. That's hard for us to believe, but I tend to think they're right about that.

So, how does the other person's facial expression, tone of voice, body position, posture, etcetera tells us about what's going on internally? I gave a talk once to a group of ministers. As I was up speaking, I noticed that most of them were slouching back in their seats, arms folded across their chests, legs fully extended with feet crossed, showing me the bottoms of their feet. What does that say about how they were receiving what I was saying?

We want to consciously try to understand how they're feeling as we talk to them. And then we want to seek to understand what they mean by what they have said. The most effective way to do this is to repeat back what you heard them say and how they seem to feel, and then ask them if you got it right. Do this in a summary if their expression is long and involved, hitting the high points. Only when they tell you that you've understood them do you begin answering them. And this may take some time.

When we hear our own words put into someone else's words, we may learn that we've left something out or we gave a wrong impression. And so, we allow these modifications to the original statement. We take the time to do it and it slows everything down, too, which is good, because it keeps us from getting so angry. If this happens, know that the process is deepening communication, remembering that talking is for the purpose of connection, instead of alienating. So, leave off insulting, judgmental or aggressive comments. Only repeat what they've said and not what *you* think. What *you* think comes later. Name calling and ascribing bad character and bad habits, just leave that off. "You said you wanted me to help you more around the house because you're a lazy drug addict" won't fly in this type of communication. Only after you have confirmed that you know what they mean by what they said, you go forward with your answer to what they've said. And, if you do that, they'll know that you listened.

There are other benefits too. You won't appear like you're just waiting for them to stop so you can say what you want to say. It appears that you are making a serious effort to understand them. That puts you in a very small minority of people in this life. You respect them enough to listen. So, that's a major benefit.

Another benefit is that, when people know that we're interested in what they have to say, they tend to become interested in what we think also. By the way, the longer it takes for this to begin happening is an indication of the lack of trust in the relationship. It's going to be harder to build it back.

The next benefit is that you know for sure you understand them and can talk effectively, then, to them, instead of being off in left field, or someone who doesn't get them. So, this kind of misunderstanding happens all the time between the young and the old, and between males and females. Old people forget what it's like to be young, and young people don't know what it's like to be old. Males and females, when they talk, they know what they would mean by what they said, but that's not what the opposite sex means – that they have a different way of communicating. So, the communication is always *by* each other, instead of *to*. So, it's good to clarify things. He's sure he knows what she meant because he knows what he would have meant if he'd have said what she just said. But he *doesn't* know because he's a male and males think differently than females. Although there is a myth that women understand men better, it's my experience that women are just as much in the dark as men are when it comes to understanding the opposite sex.

So, let's move forward to talking after we've listened and confirmed. We speak to express ourselves *after* we have made certain we understand the other person by seeking clarification and reflecting what we hear so the person can correct our understanding to match theirs. This is extremely hard to do. We have to break that habit of answering immediately. We do that by knowing that, at least, half the time we don't understand things the way other people meant them. Why do I use that statistic? Well, one of the best therapists I know told me he gets it wrong half

the time. And he's the professional that reflects all day for a living. And he also told me – and this is really encouraging – that right or wrong, it's still helpful because it helps the other person, when he reflects – even if it's not correct – that he's trying to understand, and he is listening, and that, when they correct him, they're putting their feelings into words again, which is always helpful.

Okay, so here comes the next point. It's now time to respond to what we have correctly understood from the other person. Before we do that, we remember that the point of our answer is to express only our own thoughts on the matter and not go back to what they said. It's now *our* time to talk. Also, in our expression, we remember that the whole point of it is to seek connection, agreement, a unity of approach, rather than self-defense, attack, winning an argument. We're not having an argument. We're communicating to find mutual ground. That means we leave off all judgment, ridicule, sarcasm, name-calling or talking down. Just tell them what you want, or what you might plan to do in response to what they said.

I once heard a couple talking about how to take care of the dog. They were both really upset about it. She thought that he should do most of the work, because he was the one who wanted the dog. And after he heard her and reflected successfully, his answer was that she should be more willing to help him with the dog if she were not such a lazy, selfish person. So, I think you can see how that would scuttle any attempt to get any help from her. If he had said something like, "I know that I wanted the dog and you didn't, and I know that I agreed to take care of the dog, and I know that you help me sometimes, and I'm trying to do everything I can, but sometimes when I come home late from work, the dog needs to be fed before I get home. And, in those few cases, could you please help me do that?" See, no imputing of bad motives or character, no name-calling – only talking about what he needs, asking for help in that special circumstance.

So, stick to the issue, work to find common ground, keep expressing what you want, and listening carefully for what the other person wants. If she listened to him say that, then it would be her turn to reflect until she was sure that she understood him. Then she could answer his request with a yes or a suggestion of her own. This usually goes around a few times, until both people realize they understand each other's position, and then they just naturally start looking for a solution that works for both of them. It doesn't feel like a tug of war. It feels like teamwork, which is a part of all successful relationships.

Doesn't that feel so much easier than fighting, resisting, attacking and being attacked? When relationships are easier and happier and more fulfilling, everything gets easier, which is the point of this presentation. Life is easier when we communicate to repair or deepen relationships, when we make sure we understood the other person before we talk to their comment.

We've talked a lot about this set of skills in our parenting series – both of them – and in our marriage series – I think we've got two of them – and you can find all of them on our Series page at liferesource.org. In addition, if you need help in this area, I hope you will check in on our Website. Or, if it's really desperate, or if what we've talked about doesn't seem to be working for

you, you can always seek professional help. To do that, you can find my phone number on my professional Website, billjacobs@pcc.com. I can help you find somebody in your area, or I might be able to help you myself. And, in addition to that, the next presentation in this series is the most beneficial of all. It deals with how we see ourselves – our self-view. We know this is vital because God spends a good bit of effort telling us how He sees us and what He is hoping for us. And, if we get that wrong, life is much harder. An incorrect view of ourselves, if it's negative, it's going to impact our relationships and everything else we do. If we get it right, life is not only going to be easier, but we will become a much more effective servant of God. We hope you'll check it out. If you're on our mailing list, you'll be notified when it's published.