

# Being Understanding

RECOVERING SENSITIVITY



LARRY DEASON

*Loving Relationships That Last Series*

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*Recovering Sensitivity*



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*“Even when I  
don’t understand...  
I will be  
understanding!”*

To the *wife of my youth* Helen,  
Affectionately known to me as “Muffie,”  
Who, through the years, has stood by my side  
and has been  
*The wind beneath my wings.*



## **Being Understanding**

### *Recovering Sensitivity*

#### ***Must We Understand To Be Understanding?***

My primary ministry as a member of the body of Christ is teaching, which also entails a good deal of personal counseling. As a counselor, I was once of the persuasion that, before I could be of any practical help to a troubled person, I first had to understand; for every effect there had to be a knowable and explainable cause! If this chapter leaves you with any single lasting impression, I hope it is this: *Even when I don't understand, I can still be understanding.* This simple concept can be the decisive factor in determining whether we will suffer frustration and failure in personal relationships, or enjoy fulfillment and effectiveness in relating to other people. Although I may not understand, I will be an understanding person.

Nowhere is there a greater need for personal understanding than in family relationships, and particularly between husband and wife. Until recently, there was a tendency toward “uni-sex” in modern thought which all but obliterated the distinctive natures of mankind as male and female.

Differences between the sexes that had once been too obvious to deny were being minimized—even denied—in order to advance certain cultural transformations and trends. Among those downplayed differences was the distinctiveness of the male and female mentalities. Men and women seem to differ from one another in the way they think—that is, in the way their minds analyze, process, and utilize information. Recent studies in psychology and cerebral anatomy tend to confirm this difference between the sexes. Unless we understand and appreciate this difference between men and women, we will have certain problems in our relationships that might well have been avoided.

For example, men generally have a strong “cause and effect” orientation in their thought processes: for every effect, there must be an adequate cause. When a husband comes home and finds that his wife has been crying, he immediately wants to know “*what’s wrong*.” What is the cause of this emotional response? His almost instinctive reaction to the situation is to ask his spouse to explain the cause of her tears. And it often happens that the wife cannot give a logical, step-by-step analysis of the phenomenon. It may be one particular thing; it may be the cumulative effect of a number of things; it may simply be “that time of the month.” But whatever the true explanation for these tears, the husband will probably think: “It’s me.” He may

have good reason to suspect his own blame! But unless he is sensitive and aware of the differences between male and female human beings, communication and relationship will suffer—not only between husband and wife, but also between God and man:

*Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner [women are physiologically different from men-L.D.] and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life [the wife is the husband's personal equal-L.D.], so that nothing will hinder your prayers.<sup>1</sup>*

## ***Communication Breakdown***

Understanding is difficult because most people don't communicate well. Good communication takes time and effort. Often, communication barely begins before someone becomes indignant and storms out of the room. No understanding has been reached. Relationships break down when communication breaks down. If we will invest the time and effort necessary to learn good communication skills, we can avoid paying the high premiums that so many are now paying for failing in personal relationships: divorce; church divisions; estrangement between parents and their children; disputes between

labor and management, and so on. Norman Wright offers the following illustrations of communication breakdown:

*A wife was overheard saying to her husband, “I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I’m not sure you realize that what you think you heard is not what I meant.”*

*In the classified ad section of a small town newspaper, the following ad appeared on Monday: “FOR SALE: R.D. Jones has one sewing machine for sale. Phone 958 after 7 p.m. and ask for Mrs. Kelly who lives with him cheap.”*

*On Tuesday: “NOTICE: We regret having erred in R.D. Jones’ ad yesterday. It should have read: One sewing machine for sale. Cheap. Phone 958 and ask for Mrs. Kelly who lives with him after 7 p.m.”*

*On Wednesday: “R.D. Jones has informed us that he has received several annoying telephone calls because of the error we made in his classified ad yesterday. His ad stands corrected as follows: FOR SALE: R.D. Jones has one sewing machine for sale. Cheap. Phone 958 after 7 p.m. and ask for Mrs. Kelly who loves with him.”*

*Finally on Thursday: “NOTICE: I, R.D. Jones, have no sewing machine for sale. I smashed it. Don’t call 958 as the telephone has been taken out. I have not been carrying on with Mrs. Kelly. Until yesterday she was my housekeeper, but she quit.”<sup>2</sup>*

If written communication can become so confusing, how much greater caution must be taken in spoken communication, which is spontaneous and not subject to editorial revisions! Yet, most of us enter into life’s most crucial relationships without any formal training, or even serious reflection, regarding the art of communication.

In our naivety, we hope that love alone will automatically cause everything to fall into place in our relationships. Consequently, we go on being hurt and hurting one another. Good intentions are important, but the cause of our relational problems is not simply a matter of motives.

### ***Communication: The Two-Way Street***

Communication is a process of sharing oneself. Sometimes this sharing is done through verbal means, and sometimes through nonverbal. Each person has two roles to play in the process: we must both give *and* take; transmit *and* receive; speak *and* listen. Being a good speaker is important, but it is

only half the discipline of good communication. The naturally self-centered attitude of mankind (apart from Christ) causes most of us to pay more attention to speaking than to listening. We tend to enjoy being the center of attention, but Jesus is in the business of cleansing and correction our self-centered characteristics. Repeatedly, Jesus urged both His disciples and the multitudes to *take heed*, to *listen* carefully:

*“He who has ears, let him hear.”<sup>3</sup>*

The apostles and prophets of the Lord also commanded that careful attention be given to both sides of the communication process:

*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.<sup>4</sup>*

*But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.<sup>5</sup>*

*My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.<sup>6</sup>*

John Drakeford wrote a book entitled *The Awesome Power of the Listening Ear*. But how few are using that power! An old cliche states that since God gave each of us two ears but only one mouth, we ought to do twice as much listening as talking! This is only another illustration of the fact that we are careless with our words, for we don't seem to mean what we say. If we did, we would quote only the cliches that we take to heart in our lives.

### ***The Origin Of Meaningful Communication***

Where there is love, there must be communication. Love refuses to remain inactive and anonymous. Love inevitably expresses itself, moving outward from subject to object, from lover to beloved.

*When communication breaks down, love is blocked and its energy will turn to resentment and hostility.<sup>7</sup>*

As human beings, we are made in the image of the communicating God. God (as Father, Son, and Spirit) has always been a God of love and communication, for within Himself there is an eternal relationship. Before the foundation of the world, love and communication among the Father, Son, and Spirit caused an eternal purpose of redemption in Christ to be expressed.<sup>8</sup> Through the Son who has always expressed the Being of the Father, God

spoke the universe into existence and commanded its chaos to become order.<sup>9</sup> Man is the crowning achievement of God's creative work: he is the verbalizer, the artist. Man is a compulsive self-expressionist. From the cave paintings of ancient man to the modern satellite broadcasting system, the uniqueness of man as the communicating creature is obvious.

Man is wonderful, because he is made in the image of God; but man is also terrible among all the creatures of the earth, for he has become twisted by sin (selfishness). Man has turned away from his Creator and attempts to center his existence around himself. He still bears the divine image, but it is marred. The brokenness of man in his relationship to God is evidenced by his brokenness in relationship to himself (psychological disintegration) and his fellow human beings (social alienation). But the bottom line explanation of man's brokenness, and the brokenness that occurs in his relationships and communication, is his own selfishness. Selfishness blocks and prohibits mutual understanding among human beings more than any other single factor.

### ***Selfishness Versus Communication***

*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something*

*but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*<sup>10</sup>

Among the rarest of biblical quotations are the words “I have sinned.” If my counting is correct, this direct confession (in its different forms) occurs no more than 14 times in the entire Bible! It is another paradox of the kingdom of God that those whose lives are most deeply enslaved to sin have the least sensitivity to their true condition, while those whose lives are closest to conformity with Christ have an acute awareness of their own sinfulness:

*But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, [John] said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to feel from the coming wrath?”...Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”<sup>11</sup>*

*When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”<sup>12</sup>*

*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.<sup>13</sup>*

It is extremely difficult to come to terms with the reality of one's own sinfulness. We wiggle and squirm, clear our throats, and instinctively offer excuses and rationalizations. We try to minimize our guilt by comparing ourselves with others. All of this is done to protect ego: King Self. I used to think that the essence of sin was pride, but that is not so. Have you ever noticed how strongly the Bible speaks about the urgency of putting “self” to death? Selfishness is the essence of sin:

*Then He said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.”<sup>14</sup>*

*I have been crucified with Christ and I [ego] no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”<sup>15</sup>*

Jesus said that being His disciple means self’s demands must be denied, both in daily practice and as a life commitment. Paul said, (translating the sense

of the Greek text): “My ego no longer lives”—that is, the master of Paul’s life was no longer ego (self) but the indwelling Christ.

Healthy self-respect and self-esteem are part of the birthright of every child of God. We cannot love our neighbor properly until we have learned from God how to love ourselves. But *self*-love and *selfish* love are two different things. I am to love other selves as much as my own particular self, because all selves are equally created in the image of God, and equally loved as sinners for whom Christ died. Selfish love prefers one’s own self to all others, on the false premise that the most important self in the universe is the self that one happens to be. In other words, self-love is God-centered; *selfish* love is ego-centered. Any love that centers on self instead of God is not really “love” at all; “*selfish love*” is a contradiction in terms:

*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.<sup>16</sup>*

*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.<sup>17</sup>*

Real love is outgoing toward others because it is centered in, and modeled after, the love that God has revealed in Jesus Christ. Much of what is called “love” today is only the manipulation of one’s fellow human beings in order to attain self-centered goals: power consolidation, property acquisition, personal prestige, and so on. There is no genuine interest in others because God’s point of view is ignored. Without love, there cannot be good communication. There can only be pretentious manipulation and self-centered indifference.

### ***Communication Is Life***

Communication is the transmission of meaning from one person to another by the use of signs and symbols. The sender encodes a message into various signs and symbols. The receiver decodes the signs into a meaning: hopefully, the meaning originally intended by the sender! If all communication on every level were to somehow cease throughout the universe, life itself would cease. In fact, communication *is* life.

Consider the genetic code, the biochemical basis of heredity in all known life forms: the language of life spoken into existence by the Creator. Without the transmission of genetic messages through this amazing alphabet of nucleic acid molecules, life as we know it could not exist. Yet, we fail to take

communication seriously as a vital factor in life's relationships. Until we do, we are going to have serious problems.

### ***Basic Conditions For Good Communication***

One of the world's most extensive communications industries chose a slogan that clearly proclaims the close relationship between love and understanding in personal relationships: "Reach out and touch someone." In other words, care enough about others to communicate effectively. To reap an intimate and understanding personal relationship with another person, one must be willing to invest time and effort cultivating the soil of good communication. Any good book on the subject of person-to-person communication will touch on at least a few of the following basic conditions for good spoken communication.<sup>18</sup>

1. *Persons:* A genuine speaker and listener are essential. Conversing in cliches and mechanical "answering machine" responses will not do. Ladies, when your husband is reading the newspaper at the breakfast table while you are trying to speak to him about something that concerns you, how do you feel as he nods and grunts behind his paper? Do you feel like pursuing deeper communication on this level, or would you rather continue the conversation *after* turning his newspaper into a pile of shredded breakfast cereal?

2. *Message*: Even Mr. Ed (the talking horse of televisions “golden age”) would never speak unless he had something to say.
3. *Desire for response*: Lecture, platitudes, and rhetorical questions can kill good communication.
4. *Attentiveness*: The speaker is responsible to secure attention; the listener is responsible to give it.
5. *Audibility*: The speaker use a volume level appropriate to both the environment and the listener’s needs. Clear pronunciation is also important; avoid muttering or murmuring.
6. *Common meanings*: There must be mutual agreement in understanding linguistic signs and symbols (words). Insist on clear definitions when someone uses a word you don’t understand. If we care enough to understand, we will not let pride stand in the way of reality and honesty: “What do you mean by that word? It is not in my vocabulary.”
7. *Mutual experience*: Closely related to common understanding of words is a shared field of experience. This is particularly important where communicators are coming from diverse cultural backgrounds. It is necessary to establish common ground from which to build mutual understanding.

Obviously, the closer the cultural ties between two people, the fewer obstacles there will be to clear communication. On the other hand, the most important bond of experience that exists between any two people is that of humanness: being created in the image of God.

8. *Sequence:* Logic, organization, and proper priorities are important in communication. I must return to my earlier observations about the differences between the male and female mentalities.

I do a lot of communicating with women in various relationships that God has entrusted to me: my wife, my daughters and granddaughters, my secretary, my sisters in the Lord.

I have found that most women think in colorful imagery. In their minds they see beautiful, vivid pictures which they often expect the listener to immediately recognize and fill in. In describing what is in her mind, the female often seems to leave out details which she assumes the hearer can see as clearly as she does. And, whereas male communicators tend to progress logically through a sequence of steps in conveying their thoughts, the female seems much less restricted to chronology and sequence. She may suddenly sift from first to fifth without so much as a passing nod to gears two, three, and four. This makes her communication much less dry and

boring than that of the typical male, but also much more challenging to understand.

Her male counterpart is absolutely lost concerning the relationship of “fifth” to “first” in the development of her thoughts. To be complete, mankind needs both the predictable stability of the male rationale and the unfettered sensitivity of the female mentality, communicating together in mutual understanding and harmonious balance.

9. *Vocal elements*: These include proper emphasis, pause, pitch, and tone of voice.

### ***Essentials Of Good Communication***

There are two basic elements that can make or break the quality of human communication.

First, there is *intellectual content* (verbal): This is the literal, grammatical message that is communicated by words only.

Second, there is *mechanical-psychological content* (non-verbal): This includes such factors as tone of voice, facial expressions, and “body language.” We may send mixed signals that require extremely careful interpretation. Word cannot always be taken at face value. We may say one thing with our words, but simultaneously convey an entirely

different (even opposite) meaning through non-verbal means.

Consider the different messages that can be inferred by the same seven words when the emphasis is shifted in each case:

“Will you please take out the trash?”  
(A simple request is made.)

“Will you **please** take out the trash?”  
(A tense reminder is given.)

“**Will you please take out the trash!**”  
(An exasperated ultimatum is issued.)

Body language can also affect the intended meaning of words, as is seen when identical sentences are read in the light of different narrative contexts:

“I really don’t care if you go fishing.” (The wife looks lovingly into her husband’s eyes, smiles broadly, and hands him a cup of coffee.)

“I really don’t care if you go fishing.” (The wife scowls, throws down the dish towel, and storms out of the room.)

Again, it is obvious that verbal content is only half of the communication process, and often not even the decisive half in determining the speaker's meaning. At face value, the wife's words in the illustration above would probably be taken as her consent to the husband's fishing plans. Unless he is a careful interpreter of the nonverbal side of communication, he will most likely grab his fishing tackle, bait box, and pole—whether or not his wife really would prefer that he grab the paint brush or the lawn mower instead. It should be understood that my illustrations are given from the perspective of the husband as the receiver of communication, since this is my realm of personal experience.

But communication works the same way when the wife is the receiver: "I really don't care if you're going out" could mean that the husband is happy to give Mom a break from chores and children; or it could mean that he is sulking about playing the role of the house husband. Sensitivity to both verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication is essential for husbands, wives, and everyone who desires strong relationships in an environment of mutual understanding.

### ***Barriers To Good Communication***

Certain attitudes and habits can be deadly to effective communication, whether in the home, class-

room, marketplace, workplace, or elsewhere. Here are some of the most common barriers to good communication.

1. *Materialism*: I am not primarily referring to atheistic philosophy, but to the practice of putting *things* before people in our daily lives. In affluent societies such as our own, material blessings can become a curse when we forget to be thankful to our Creator. Discontentment leads to envy, greed, and covetousness. Personal relationships take a back seat to the acquisition of “stuff,” and security is sought in the things of this world rather than in God.

Historically, fathers have been the chief offenders in this area, sacrificing their marriages and children on the altar of worldly “success.” With the arrival of the age of two income economics and day-care centers, mothers are also susceptible to guilt in this area. Children make up the biggest percentage of materialism’s casualty list. The late Harry Chapin brilliantly exposed the materialism monster in all its true ugliness in his song, “Cat’s in the Cradle”:

“...*When ya comin’ home, Dad?*” “*I don’t know when; but we’ll get together then, son. You know we’ll have a good time then.*”

The trouble is, “someday” never comes, and the child grows up “just like Dad (and/or Mom).” The

lesson is thoroughly taught and learned, passed from generation to generation: “*Things* matter more than people.” Unless this monster is confronted head-on, it will continue to devour our families, and eventually our whole society!

As a missionary to New Zealand, I helped in establishing a school of biblical studies to equip church members to serve the Lord more effectively. I was spending ninety hours weekly in preparation and teaching of classes. It finally dawned on me that I was sinning against my two pre-teenage daughters. At that point, I made a vow before the Lord that I would put aside the books (no matter how busy I was), and would give my time to my children whenever they might need me. Anything that claims to be “the Lord’s work,” but demands a place in our priorities above the needs of our spouses or children, is an idol.

Like Molech, the detestable god of the Ammonites, materialism and career-enslavement are gods to which many are deliberately sacrificing their sons and daughters, their marriages and families. The people of God are not beyond the possibility of seduction by this modern Molech.

Jesus came to bring abundant life, but the paradox here is that abundance means simplicity. Jesus wants to simplify our complicated lives:

*“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*<sup>19</sup>

*He said to another man, “Follow me.” But the man replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”*<sup>20</sup>

*“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one is needed.”*<sup>21</sup>

*“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”*<sup>22</sup>

God Himself is the central focus of the kingdom of God, and *human beings* are God’s main concern. If God has revealed that human beings are His main concern, then right relationships with people must be second only to fellowship with God on our list of priorities. The placing of higher priority

on “things” than on God destroys our incentive to communicate well with people.

2. *Critical, fault-finding attitude:* More attention is being given today to the debilitating effects of psychological abuse on the human personality and on social order. “You Always Hurt the One You Love,” proclaimed a popular song title of some years ago.

While we recognize that song writers have a flair for exaggeration and generalization, who would deny that people tend to place heavier demands and higher expectations on those closest to their hearts? We want our spouses, children, friends, employees, and co-workers to be the best around. The failings of other people’s associates are not our concern (we think). There is an element of truth here: we do indeed have a unique degree of personal responsibility for the people whom the Lord entrusts to our care. But all of us ultimately answer to one Judge, and He has not appointed any of us to act in His unique role:

*For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat.*

*It is written: “‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘Every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.’” So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.<sup>23</sup>*

Husband and wife, parent and child, slave and master are all under the same Lord.<sup>24</sup> Each of us must answer to Him concerning the way we treat one another. A practice of intimidation, “put downs,” threats, and disrespect toward our fellow human beings will not be ignored by the One to whom we will give account.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, such a posture toward other people renders one ineffective in one’s own stewardship. People will not approach one from whom they can expect only negative criticism, personal rejection, and psychological abuse. Such a person is unqualified to hold a position of responsibility in the household of God:

*Since an overseer is entrusted with God’s work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick tempered...<sup>26</sup>*

The Spirit, through Paul, also admonishes those to whom God has entrusted leadership in the home:

*Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them...Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.<sup>27</sup>*

God has entrusted the man of the family with responsibility for maintaining an atmosphere of love and openness in the home. His example and influence sets the tone for the whole family. Good communication and strong relationships in the home largely depend on the husband's attitude and response to his wife and children. This does not mean that he is accountable for their sins, but that he has a ministry before the Lord for which he is responsible, as a husband and a father.

3. *Fear:* Very closely related to the fault-finding attitude is the barrier of fear that results from being repeatedly rejected or intimidated by negative criticism. Many husbands and wives habitually avoid communication with one another for rear of the "usual response." The same could be said of parents and children, employees and their bosses, students and their teachers, and so on. The violent tempests that seem to explode "out of the clear blue," shattering our most precious relationships, are often easily predictable if we care enough to learn to read the signs. One of the most important signs in gauging the soundness of personal relationships is the

ease, intimacy, and openness with which communication flows. Fear paralyzes the process of good communication.

4. *Manipulation*: This is the diabolical art of getting others to think and act according to one's own wishes without letting them know they are being controlled. It involves a total depersonalization of the manipulated individual in absolute contradiction to the teaching of Jesus, who based His entire approach to relationships on love and respect for every human being. Obviously, there can be no communication between persons when one insists on regarding the other as an object to be manipulated for egocentric reasons.

5. *Preoccupation*: The pace of life in the twenty-first century causes us to forget that some things are even more important than *urgent* things. Every matter seems to be so vital and crucial in this day of instant communication and data processing. There are few things more important, however, than a husband's relationship to his wife, or a mother's relationship to her growing children. The Word of God reflects this view of proper priorities.

*If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married.<sup>28</sup>*

In my opinion, society should be as supportive as possible to the traditional family structure. Children need mothers and fathers, and a society that gears its economy and lifestyle in such a way as to isolate children from their parents can expect problems. The relationships of marriage and parenthood are too important to be preempted by what is merely “urgent.” We simply cannot “put them on hold” while we pursue our private agendas. The price is too high!

6. *Dullness*: Boredom in a relationship is a barrier to good communication. Doing and talking about the “same old thing” will stifle a growing relationship. Fresh communication can be stimulated by sharing new experiences and discussing new ideas. Absolute predictability is poison to a healthy relationship.

We cheat ourselves and one another out of living life to the fullest because we lack a spirit of adventure. We must dare to learn new things, see new things, and do new things—not to satisfy a self-centered craving for novelty and innovation, but so that *we can talk about new things together*.

7. *Dishonesty*: There can be no trust apart from a commitment to honesty. The only thing worse than no communication is the hypocrisy of dishonest communication.

## ***How To Kill Quality Communication***

In addition to the aforementioned attitudes that block effective communication, there are several sure-fire technique for nipping good communication in the bud.<sup>29</sup> Among them are the following practices:

1. *Explosive Words*: These are words and phrases that consistently arouse hurt feelings and angry responses in their “target.”

Sometimes, they are detonated accidentally by those who are innocently unaware of the impact these words will have on a particular person. More often, they are loaded and aimed with malicious intent and careful precision. They are often cruel and calculated attempts to actually “blow someone away!” Or they may represent only thoughtless inconsideration and insensitivity. Such words are usually associated with some painful past experience, unflattering personal characteristic, or persistent pattern of behavior:

“You still can’t keep a job, can you?”

“So when are you going to lose some weight?”

“If I couldn’t do that any better than you do, I wouldn’t bother to do it at all.”

Such “explosive words” often involve gross exaggerations and sweeping generalizations that would be instantly recognized and rejected as overstatements by any objective person. Unfortunately, the target of these inflammatory remarks is rarely in a position to be objective. It is difficult to remain coolly neutral in the face of what appears to be a direct personal attack?

“You’re *always* late.”

“You *never* do *anything* right.”

It is highly ironic that a famous comedienne, known for her stinging sarcasm and stabbing insults, should also open her monologue with the quip, “Can we talk?”

2. *Silence:* Perhaps the most confusing of the communication killers, silence can be interpreted a number of different ways. Is she angry? Is he embarrassed, timid, or shy? Is this “the silent treatment” (a tactical maneuver in the clash of egos), or is it a mood of depression? Whatever it may mean, silence is frustrating and creates tension in relationships.

3. *Discouraging Words:* These include all indiscriminate negative remarks, fault-finding criticism, character assassination, profanity, pessimistic pronouncements, gossip, and so on.

*4. Indirect Hits:* People sometimes try to be subtle, discreet, even diplomatic in their attacks on one another. Things are said indirectly and ambiguously.

This approach is cautious at best and cowardly at worst, attempting to inflict injury on another person without taking responsibility or risking injury to oneself in a direct frontal attack. One could think of a sniper taking verbal potshots at a sitting duck from a position of comfort and safety. Norman Wright suggests the picture of one automobile sideswiping another: the indirect, glancing blow rather than the head-on collision. Damage is done deliberately, but a total wreck is avoided.

“Some wives wouldn’t put up with a husband who was late for supper every evening.”

“Other husbands don’t have to search through the whole closet to find an ironed shirt.”

“I’d like to get some work done in this office, but I guess you just can’t get good help anymore.”

*5. Defensive Counter-Complaining:* This is a kind of one-upsmanship in grouchiness:

(He) “What a day I put in at the office today! I’m exhausted!”

(She) “*You* had a bad day? Ha! Do you think I’ve had a picnic here all day with these kids? You don’t know what exhaustion is! Let me tell you...”

(He) “Oh no, you don’t! Let *me* tell you...”

Communication never really gets off the ground in a situation like this. The only way off this treadmill is to deliberately kill one’s own sense of self-centered desire to get attention, sympathy, and/or revenge. We must release resentments, and refuse to bring up past sufferings and offenses.

In my counseling, I sometimes give people a “grace period” if they are having trouble burying resentments. I tell them, “Don’t bring up anything that hasn’t happened within the past thirty days.” From there, we remove a week at a time, until even what happened yesterday is off limits, as far as sulking and complaining are concerned.

In Christ, we have both the motive and the method for dealing with the problem of unforgiveness.<sup>30</sup> In Christ, God has provided forgiveness for all of our failures past, present, and future. He expects us to respond by forgiving one another, and by absorbing

in ourselves the pain of others' sins against us, as God in Christ forgave our sins against Himself.<sup>31</sup>

There is a way off the carousel of counter-complaint, a way out of the revolving door of resentment. It is the way of death to self-centeredness by living in continuous communication with God in Christ.

6. *Emotional Outbursts:* These must be distinguished from the natural and healthy experiences of emotion which should be felt and shared among human beings. Whining, whimpering, screaming, dramatic crying, and any other displays of emotion that are irresponsible, manipulative, dishonest, or in any way self-centered are detrimental to good communication. Intense displays of emotional theatrics, especially to “vent anger” or evoke sympathy, have nothing to do with a sincere desire to love and understand another person. Such eruptions are essentially self-indulgent.

7. *Duplex Disclosures:* Norman Wright calls them “double level messages.” The idea is that one message is spoken, while another is really intended. Often, the dichotomy of what is said and what is really meant becomes obvious by the behavior that accompanies or follows the words. Dishonesty is usually involved here, and sarcasm is frequently employed:

(He) “Could we postpone that visit to your mother’s so I could go hunting this weekend?”

(She) “Sure. Why should I care?”

Often, these duplex communications are a manipulative ploy, as when one “fishes” for compliments:

“What did you think of my presentation in class today?”

The rule here is, say what you mean and mean what you say.

8. *Evasive Eyes*: Eye contact is widely recognized as a reliable test of attentiveness and honesty. Husbands and wives, parents and children, lawyers and defendants, politicians and poker players have long relied upon the eyes as a gateway to knowing the soul—the unseen inner person. If you can say something to a person while looking him or her directly “in the eye,” you are either telling the truth, or you are an accomplished liar. All body language is important in communication, for our posture and facial expression can either compliment or contradict our words.

We must care enough to convey a sincere interest in others when we speak to them, and especially when we address someone whom we are tempted to take for granted. Christ does not allow our familiarity to

breed contempt. Put down your book or your newspaper and look at the person with whom you are supposed to be communicating. None of our spoken words are powerful enough to do without the support of eye contact—not even the words, “I love you.”

9. *Surrogate Speaking*: for others, rather than allowing others to speak for themselves, is a habit that conveys the impression of being an obnoxious, arrogant know-it-all whether or not that impression is true. Such a person seems to presume a better knowledge of what is in our minds than we ourselves have! Interrupting, finishing sentences for others, and other “mind reading” tactics are hazardous to healthy communication.

10. *Surplus Speaking*: Most people talk too much and listen too little. The desire to dominate the conversation may stem from personal insecurity. To compensate for this sense of inadequacy, power over others is exercised by monopolizing the situation and by refusing to “yield the floor.” Surplus speaking may also take the form of constant nagging, a fault which may occur in either husband or wife—or both! Often, the one who nags is unaware of this tendency in himself or herself, even while in the act of nagging. The victim however, is usually able to identify the offense almost immediately. Obviously, communication and mutual understanding suffer in any “surplus speaking” situation.

11. *Inconsiderate Speaking*: In wartime, we were told that “loose lips sink ships.” Lips that speak without first thinking of the impact of their words can also sink *relationships*! Carelessness and thoughtlessness in the use of words occurs most frequently in the context of close relationships (particularly family) and high emotions (especially anger):

“You’re just like your mother.”

Someone has said, “Choose your words tastefully; you may have to eat them someday!” If we will only think before we speak, we may never have to dine on our words. Once words have escaped our lips, they cannot really be taken back; they become a part of the history of our relationships, for better or worse. We can regret, confess, apologize, and recant. We can be forgiven and reconciled. But words change people and relationships in a permanent way. They can significantly influence future interaction and communication with others. One final thought: If need be, it is better to swallow our pride and eat our words than to starve for lack of loving relationships.

12. *Not Listening*: Here is the ultimate communication killer. As long as we believe that the other person is willing to take us seriously enough to hear us out, we will continue to try to communicate. But only the most compulsive talker will go on speaking after the yawns, sighs, wandering eyes, and folded arms have

clearly said, “Will you please hurry up and finish so that I can talk? I’m really not the least bit interested in what you have to say.”

### ***Wisdom And Understanding***

The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament offers us the keys to living fulfilled human lives in a world created and sustained by the Lord. How should life be lived to its fullest potential in His world? God has built certain laws into His world which a “wise” person will respect so that he or she may enjoy the most abundant life possible in this present world. The Book of Proverbs starts by telling us that true wisdom must begin by respecting God and His ways:

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.<sup>32</sup>*

To live life abundantly, we must live it *understandingly*. God is the Source and Giver of wisdom and understanding:

*By wisdom the LORD laid the earth’s foundation, by understanding he set the heavens in place...<sup>33</sup>*

Proverbs has much to say about living a life of understanding, especially as regards human relationships and good communication:

*He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame.*<sup>34</sup>

*The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.*<sup>35</sup>

*Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him.*<sup>36</sup>

*A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue.*<sup>37</sup>

*A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly.*<sup>38</sup>

The ultimate embodiment of the Wisdom of God was realized in the incarnation of the God-Man, Jesus Christ.<sup>39</sup> He and His inspired apostles and prophets gave even clearer, deeper insight into the meaning of being understanding in human relationships:

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I will tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will*

*you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”<sup>40</sup>*

*“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken, For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”<sup>41</sup>*

*You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.<sup>42</sup>*

*Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.<sup>43</sup>*

*Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body...Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building*

*others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*<sup>44</sup>

*...make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus....*<sup>45</sup>

*My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.*<sup>46</sup>

### ***Levels Of Communication***

Deep relationships cannot grow in the soil of shallow communication. John Powell, noted teacher and

author in the field of human relationships, identifies five levels of communication.<sup>47</sup> Listed in order of depth, from shallowest to deepest, the levels are as follows:

Level 5: *Cliche Conversation*: This is the most superficial level of communication. It consists of trivial, conventional word patterns to which no reply is necessary:

“How are you?”

“Have a nice day.”

No real personal sharing takes place. Both personalities remain hidden behind their ego defenses.

Level 4: *Factual Reporting*: In the words of “Dragnet’s” Sergeant Joe Friday, this level of communication offers “just the facts,” and “nothing but the facts.” No personal revelations are offered; no personal responses or commentaries are included. The content of the message is carefully restricted to “who, what, where, when, and how.” No personal disclosures are shared, and none are invited.

“There’s a sale on auto accessories going on at K-Mart.”

“It’s supposed to rain tomorrow.”

*Level 3: Personal Ideas and Judgments:* At this stage, real self disclosure begins to take place:

“I don’t think there’s much good music being made today.”

“If he wins this election, this state’s going to be in better shape.”

This is only the threshold of real personal sharing. At the first sign of disagreement or disinterest, the process will usually revert back into lower levels of communication, or (worse) the speaker will compromise his or her integrity.

*Level 2: Personal Feelings and Emotions:* A deeper level of self revelation occurs when an individual shares his or her highly personal feelings and emotions. These are the passions and sentiments that are uniquely our own, that set us apart from others as distinct individuals and that motivate our deepest convictions.

*Level 1: Complete Personal Openness and Emotional Honesty:* This is a consistent commitment to (though not a constant experience of) complete personal oneness. It is frequently enjoyed in genuine intimate friendships, and should be the normal state of every marriage relationship. It is a deep sharing in

the concerns and emotional life of another person. “Empathy” is the best single word to describe this level of communication. Because we are still living in a fallen world, this empathy will not be experienced perfectly in any relationship. It is, however, essential for us to experience this level of identification with others in some real way, in the context of our most intimate personal relationships.

*Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another.<sup>48</sup>*

*Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn...I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.<sup>49</sup>*

The essence of the mind of Christ is a readiness to freely share in the lives of others; to bear their burdens; to identify with their problems; to make their concerns one's own. It is a willingness to give up exclusive claims to oneself, to share oneself with others on whatever level is needed and appropriate.

### ***Is It Worth The Risk?***

Obviously, there is a risk factor involved in opening oneself up for deeper communication. We are no

longer seeking security in a cocoon of silent self-centeredness. We become vulnerable to the problems, pains, concerns, misunderstanding, and reactions of other people. At the same time, the relationships in our lives become rich with beauty and meaning. We escape from the prison of self-absorption. Losing our lives, we find them. We become like the One who deliberately made our predicament His very own, and whose life among us communicates the heart of God:

*Surely, he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.<sup>50</sup>*

To whatever extent we close the door of communication, to whatever degree we withdraw ourselves from God-ordained human relationships by shutting others out of our lives, we cheat ourselves out of the abundant life that God has revealed to us in Christ. God came to us in Christ to establish the basis and means for beautiful and truthful relationships

with Himself and fellow human beings. *His understanding love is the key.*

May we grow to fully appreciate the value of personal relationships: They are what life is really all about. If we do not come to this understanding, we will be doomed to lives of emptiness, superficiality, and loneliness—even in the midst of a bustling city or a busy family. Somewhere along the line, someone is going to have to risk being open, honest, and vulnerable. Someone is going to have to make the first move out of ego's protective shell and into the light of love.

In Christ, God has already risked full disclosure of Himself, thus opening the door to right relationships with God and our fellow human beings. He is waiting for each one of us to walk through the door that He has provided in Christ. He is not expecting us to exhaustively understand one another; much less does God expect that we will completely comprehend His love. But on the basis of what He has clearly revealed in Christ, He expects us to walk through the open door of right relationships and real communication that He has provided.

*We don't have to  
understand everything  
in order to  
be understanding.*

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>1 Peter 3:7.

<sup>2</sup>Norman Wright, *An Answer to Family Communication* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1977), pp. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup>Matt. 11:15. Compare Matt. 13:9, 13-17, 43; Luke 9:44; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.

<sup>4</sup>Col. 4:6. Compare Eph. 4:29, 5:4; 1 Peter 3:15.

<sup>5</sup>1 Cor. 14:19.

<sup>6</sup>James 1:19-20.

<sup>7</sup>Reuel Howe, *Herein Is Love* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1061), p. 99.

<sup>8</sup>See Rom. 16:25-27; 1 Cor. 2:6-10; Eph. 1:3-14; 3:1-11, Col. 1:24-27; 2 Tim. 1:8-10; Titus 1:1-3; 1 Peter 1:10-12, 18-20.

<sup>9</sup>Read Gen. 1:1ff and compare John 1:1-3, 10; 17:5, 24; 1 Cor. 8:5-6; Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:1-3; 11:3; Rev. 4:11.

<sup>10</sup>James 4:1-3. Compare 2 Peter 1:4.

<sup>11</sup>Matt. 3:7, 13-14. Compare Matt. 21:23-32; 23:13ff; Luke 7:36-50; John 8:31ff; 9:39-41.

<sup>12</sup>Luke 5:8. Compare Isa. 6:5; Dan. 9:4; 10:12.

<sup>13</sup>1 Tim. 1:15. Compare Rom. 7:24; 1 Cor. 15:9-10; Eph. 3:8.

<sup>14</sup>Luke 9:23-24. Compare Matt. 10:37-39; 16:24-25; Mark 8:34-35; Luke 14:25-27; John 12:23-26.

<sup>15</sup>Gal. 2:20. Compare Rom. 6:1ff; Eph. 4:17-24; Phil. 3:7-11; Col. 3:1-11.

<sup>16</sup>1 John 4:7-8.

<sup>17</sup>1 John 3:16. Compare John 3:16; 1 John 4:9-11.

<sup>18</sup>One such book provided an outline of nine elements essential for effective communication, which I have here revised and adapted. I acknowledge my debt to George W. Fluharty and Harold R. Ross, authors of *Public Speaking: A Barnes and Noble Handbook* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1966), pp. 2-4.

<sup>19</sup>Matt. 6:31-33.

<sup>20</sup>Luke 9:59-60.

<sup>21</sup>Luke 10:41-42.

<sup>22</sup>Matt. 6:24.

<sup>23</sup>Rom. 14:9-13. Compare Matt. 7:1-5; 23:1-12; 2 Cor. 5:10; James 2:12-13; 4:11-12.

<sup>24</sup>See especially Eph. 5:21-6a:9; Col. 3:17-4:1; 1 Peter 2:13-3:12.

<sup>25</sup>See Luke 12:41-46.

<sup>26</sup>Titus 1:7.

<sup>27</sup>Col. 3:19, 21.

<sup>28</sup>Deut. 24:5.

<sup>29</sup>The author is indebted to Norman Wright for his formulation of these twelve points in his book, *An Answer to Family Communication* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1977), pp. 8-58. Wright calls these communication killers “the dirty dozen.”

<sup>30</sup>Read carefully Matt. 18:21-35; Luke 17:1-10; Eph. 4:32, 2 Cor. 5:14-17; Col. 3:13.

<sup>31</sup>Read 1 Peter 2:21-25.

<sup>32</sup>Prov. 1:7.

<sup>33</sup>Prov. 3:19. Compare James 1:5f.

<sup>34</sup>Prov. 18:13.

<sup>35</sup>Prov. 18:17.

<sup>36</sup>Prov. 29:20.

<sup>37</sup>Prov. 11:12.

<sup>38</sup>Prov. 14:29.

<sup>39</sup>See Col. 1:15-17. Compare Prov. 8:13-36; see also John

1:1-3, 14, 18; 1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 2:3; Matt. 12:42-43.

<sup>40</sup>Matt. 5:43-48. Compare Rom. 12:14, 17-21; 1 Thess. 5:15.

<sup>41</sup>Matt. 12:35-37.

<sup>42</sup>Rom. 2:1. Compare Matt. 7:1-5.

<sup>43</sup>Eph. 4:15.

<sup>44</sup>Eph. 4:25, 29-32. Compare Col. 3:8-17.

<sup>45</sup>Phil. 2:2-5.

<sup>46</sup>James 1:19-20. Compare James 3:9-10.

<sup>47</sup>John Powell, *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* (Valencia, CA: Tabor Publishing, © 1969), pp. 54-62. Used by permission.

<sup>48</sup>Rom. 12:15-16.

<sup>49</sup>Gal. 4:14-15. Compare Rom. 9:1-3; 10:1.

<sup>50</sup>Isa. 53:4-6. Compare Acts 8:26-35; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 2:9; I Peter 2:24.

How does it feel  
When people misunderstand  
What you're trying to say with all your heart?  
How do you feel  
When people don't take the time  
To be sensitive and really care?

Well, sometimes you feel lonely  
And that's understood  
And sometimes  
You might just have to cry.  
Oh, but you're not the only suffering soul  
I'm standing here hurting with you!

Oh, dear friend of mine  
You've come to be loved  
And I'll tell you the truth  
You've found the right place!  
I've walked in your shoes  
And I feel what you feel  
And you've given me your trust  
And I will not betray you.

You've got to lift up your eyes  
And look beyond this old world  
To the personal God that you love.

Gaze into His eyes and  
Lay back in His arms  
He cares for you  
More than you know.  
But sometimes, you feel lonely  
And that's understood  
And sometimes  
You might just have to cry.

Oh, but you're not the only suffering soul  
He's standing here hurting with you!  
Yes, He's standing here hurting with you!

Keith Luker, *Standin' Here Hurtin'* 1988





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