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The Living Room: A Place to Talk

Ephesians 4:25–32

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series: Building a Home: One Room at a Time

Sherry Turkle, a professor at M.I.T. and author of *Alone Together* spent 15 years studying how our “plugged-in lives” have changed who we are. She says all our technological devices have produced a world where we’re always communicating but seldom having real conversations. She says, “We’re tempted to think our little sips of online connection add up to a big gulp of real conversation. But they don’t. E-mail, Twitter, Facebook, all of these have their places. But no matter how valuable, they don’t substitute for conversation. Connecting in sips may work for gathering discrete bits of information or for saying, ‘I’m thinking about you,’ but connecting in sips doesn’t work as well when it comes to understanding and knowing one another. We expect more from technology and less from one another and seem increasingly drawn to technologies that provide the illusion of companionship without the demands of relationship.”

Today we’re continuing our series on the family called, “Building a Home: One Room at a Time.” Today we’re in the living room. We chose to use that room to talk about the importance of communication in family life. In the house I grew up in the living room wasn’t a place we spent much time. It was a room where the nice furniture was put and stuff we didn’t want broken. But it was also a place we went when we had something important to talk about. There was no TV in that room. It was kind of set apart from the rest of the house and you could go in there with another family member and look them in the eyes and have a real conversation.

Communication is important in a family. Words are important. If your home is made of bricks, your words are the mortar that holds those bricks together. But communication can be a challenge. Whether it’s a husband and a wife, or a teenage daughter and a dad, communication can be a struggle. George Bernard Shaw once wrote, “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it’s taken place.” The ironic thing is with technology we have so many ways of communicating these days, but are we really connecting in deeper relationships because of it?

Foundational Truths about Communication

I want to begin with some foundational truths about communication. One truth is words are powerful. This goes back to God. He created the universe through the power of the spoken word. In the same way, our lives, our marriages, our children are shaped and formed by the words we speak. This can be for good or bad. Words can do great damage but they can also do

good. Proverbs 18:21 says, “*The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.*” Words have the power to wound or heal, to tear down or build up. I can think back on my own past and recall words that have done both to me. In many ways, we’re shaped by the words spoken to us. Etched in our memory are moments when we’ve been deeply wounded or deeply encouraged simply by something someone in our family said.

Another truth is communication is essential to connection. It’s like the San Mateo Bridge that connects the Peninsula to the East Bay. Apart from communication we’re just two land masses that never connect. Paul had this problem with the Corinthians. He pleaded with them to open up to him, “*We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also*” (1 Cor. 6:11-13). I know husbands and wives who’ve said as much to one another. There are couples who’ve been married for decades and yet still really don’t know each other very well. You can share a house, children, a bed and a checkbook but still remain distant if you’re not sharing what’s really in your heart. Deep and heartfelt communication is the glue in a marriage and a family. And it’s a two-way street. It requires both talking and listening. For genuine connection to take place, not only must we be willing to share our feelings and opinions, but we also have to be willing to listen. Proverbs 18:13 says, “*To answer before listening—that is folly and shame.*”

When we’re always thinking of the next thing to say, we don’t hear what’s being said to us and that can get us into trouble. A few months ago on a special occasion I came home with an orchid plant for Lynn. I was feeling kind of proud of myself for being such a sensitive husband, but she didn’t seem too impressed. She reminded me of another time I’d brought her an orchid and how she’d specifically told me orchids are her least favorite plant. That’s the kind of thing that as a husband you want to listen to and remember but I failed to do that.

And it’s not even enough to listen; you have to understand and the people you’re listening to have to understand you understand. A skillful listener will draw out what’s in a person’s heart. Proverbs says, “*The purposes of a person’s heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out*” (20:5). This is a struggle

for many men because we tend to want to fix the problem before we really listen and really understand.

This reminds me of one more foundational truth: when it comes to communication, people are different. Dr. Gary Chapman says some of us have a Dead Sea personality. We process things internally and sharing our feelings is like pulling teeth. That's me, by the way. Others have a babbling brook personality. Rarely does a thought cross your mind that doesn't also come out of your mouth. And yes, that's my wife. I heard about a little girl who was writing a paper on Abraham Lincoln. She asked her mother for help, and her mother, knowing her husband was a Civil War buff, said, "Ask your dad." The girl said, "I don't want to know **that** much." Understanding these differences can help us.

There are also differences in men and women when it comes to communication. Men have to learn to appreciate how important their words are to their wives. The words a man speaks to his wife creates the world she lives in. If these words are sincere, gentle and encouraging she'll flourish, but if they're harsh and critical, she'll wilt. Generally, men want to communicate with headlines while women want the details. Consider two different journal entries, one from a wife and the other from her husband as they both reflect on the same day's events: Her journal: "Tonight, my husband was acting weird. We had made plans to meet at a nice restaurant for dinner. Conversation wasn't flowing, so I suggested we go somewhere quiet so we could talk. He agreed, but he didn't say much. I asked him what was wrong. He said, 'Nothing.' I asked him if it was my fault that he was upset. He said he wasn't upset, that it had nothing to do with me, and not to worry about it. On the way home, I told him I loved him. He smiled slightly, and kept driving. When we got home, he just sat there quietly, and watched TV. He continued to seem distant and absent. Finally, with silence all around us, I decided to go to bed. About 15 minutes later, he came to bed. But I still felt he was distracted, and his thoughts were somewhere else. He fell asleep. I don't know what to do." That's what she wrote in her journal. Here's what he wrote: "Rough day. Boat wouldn't start, can't figure out why."

When we say people are different, this also applies to children at different stages of their life. Don't expect a teenage boy to come home every day after school and just share freely as if his life is an open book. When our son was growing up, we got a lot of one word answers and a few grunts, but we also found every once in a while he'd be in a mood to talk, and sometimes it was at a very inconvenient time for us to drop what we were doing and listen, but when we did, it paid off.

Four Practices that Cultivate Healthy Communication

I hope you can see how important communication is in a family. It's the mortar that holds your home together. But how do you

do this well? In Ephesians 4:25–32 we find four practices that cultivate healthy communication in a family. These apply to husbands and wives, parents and children, even siblings.

Cultivate honesty

Look at verse 25.

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

The first practice is to cultivate honesty. Paul says to put off falsehood and speak truthfully. Stop pretending. There are many reasons people hide their feelings and basically live a lie in their relationships with family. Maybe you've learned speaking the truth isn't safe. Your attempts to share what you really feel have been met by defensiveness, attack, blame or pulling away. Maybe you don't feel you have the skills to share. You're afraid it will just come out wrong. Maybe you've been taught your opinions, desires and feelings just aren't that important. But if you want to be close as a couple or as a family, you have to make the choice to tell the truth.

It starts with laying aside falsehood. Another translation says to stop lying. If you're lying to your spouse or your parents or your children or your siblings, stop it. You'll never experience true intimacy in a relationship with lies. Eventually, the people you're lying to will probably find out anyway, and then trust will be gone and where there's no trust there's no real relationship. I know husbands who aren't honest with their wives about the true state of their finances. Maybe he's afraid of her reaction. But when she finds out, he has a worse problem because she feels betrayed.

Most of us don't lie outright, but we do fudge the truth a little bit to keep the peace or not make things worse. We say things like, "I'm fine. Nothing's wrong." Or, "It doesn't matter to me where we eat tonight. Wherever you want is okay." Or, "No, it didn't bother me when you said that." Instead, in our families we should be direct. We should say what we think and feel; what we like and don't like. For some of us to do that, we'll have to face our fears—fears of rejection, fears of backlash, fears of looking stupid or being proven wrong. We have to let others in our family own their own reaction to what we say. We can't control that reaction and we're not responsible for it. Don't let your fear of another person's reaction turn you into a liar.

A word of caution here. This doesn't mean we have license to say whatever we want whenever we want. This doesn't mean we can obliterate people if that's really how we feel. There are appropriate times, places and even ways to communicate what's on our heart. Earlier in verse 15, Paul said we should speak the truth in love. There's a balance there. Say what you really mean, but say it with love. And when you say it, make the problem the problem, not the person. Talk about the issue without smearing

the personhood of your family member in the process. Maybe you're frustrated your husband never seems to unplug from his phone. You say something like this, "You're always preoccupied. You think we like listening to you talk on the phone all day? You never engage with us." It would be much better to say, "When you spend so much time at home on the phone it makes us feel like we're not that important. Would you mind not take calls during our family time?"

Deal appropriately with anger

The second practice is to deal appropriately with anger. This comes out of verses 26–27.

"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

This is part of healthy communication. Families need to learn to express anger in appropriate ways. Notice Paul doesn't condemn anger. Some of you may have been taught anger is sinful. It's not. We should get angry at things like injustice. Jesus got angry people were misusing God's house. But so often our anger doesn't arise from a concern for righteousness but from our self-centered hearts. Someone has rubbed us the wrong way, or we didn't get our way. Anger can easily lead us to say sinful things. When that happens we give the devil a foothold in our life and in our family. And, I'll tell you what, uncontrolled anger can damage the relationships in a family. We say things to our spouse or our kids that are never forgotten. So be careful. But, at the same time, don't avoid the issues, and let the members of your family express their anger. How do you react when someone is angry at you? The quickest way to calm an angry child or spouse or sibling is to listen. Try to understand where they're coming from.

A few verses down Paul says not to grieve the Holy Spirit (v. 30). With God's Spirit in our lives we **can** control our anger. Don't just go around saying, "I'm just a passionate guy. I get angry and lose my temper and say things I shouldn't say and do things I shouldn't do, but you know I don't mean it." No! That's not going to work in a family. With Christ in your life, you can control your temper. Two things can help you. One is to keep short accounts. That's why Paul says not to let the sun go down while you're still angry. Don't let your anger build up and fester until you blow your top. Another thing that can help is to take a time out when you feel yourself getting overwhelmed with anger. This isn't avoiding the issue; it's getting control of yourself so you can re-engage in the process in a healthy way. Time outs last for about a minute in the NBA. You may need more than a minute, but you don't need days. Use that time out to evaluate your thoughts, actions and feelings in the presence of God. "Lord, why am I so upset about this? How can I express this in a constructive way? Forgive me for my selfish motives or rash behavior."

Closely guard your speech

This goes with the next practice. Look down at verses 29–31.

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.

This third practice is to closely guard your speech. Notice all the inappropriate expressions of anger listed here: bitterness, rage, anger, brawling and slander, and all forms of malice. Those are things that tear people down. Washington Irving once said, "The tongue is the only tool that grows sharper with constant use." He says, "Let no unwholesome word..." That's too mild of a translation. The word "unwholesome" is a Greek term used to describe rotting vegetables or rancid fish. The way Paul puts this assumes the words already exist but we have a choice what we'll do with them. He says don't let them out of your mouth.

Look at it this way: unwholesome words are conversation stoppers. Let me give you some examples. Threats are conversation stoppers. "If you do that, I'm walking out of here." Harsh and critical words are conversation stoppers. Extreme statements are conversation stoppers. "You're always late!" Sarcasm can be a conversation stopper. Minimizing what a person says is a conversation stopper. "Oh, it's not that bad" or, "You really shouldn't feel that way." Blame shifting is a conversation stopper. Defensiveness can be a conversation stopper. Pouting, withdrawing, playing the martyr are all conversation stoppers. Shutdown statements are also conversation stoppers. They're the verbal equivalent of slamming the door in someone's face. "Fine" or "Nothing" or "It doesn't matter" are all shutdown statements.

Instead, Paul says we should speak words that build up or edify and are in keeping with the need of the moment. These kinds of words keep the conversation going. Words that build up are words of affirmation and encouragement and even gratitude. Words that build can sometimes be framed as good questions that draw a person out to share what's on their heart. Words that build are words that empathize with how a person feels. When done in the right way, words of correction build up as well. A wife can render a unique service to her husband by telling him what no one else dares to, but they need to do it in the right way. My own wife has done this for me like no one else. I don't always react like I should, but I need her input. I ran across a letter recently written by Clementine Churchill to her husband, Winston, who was the Prime Minister of England. It gives a good example of what I'm talking about.

My Darling,

I hope you will forgive me if I tell you something I feel you ought to know. One of the men in your entourage (a devoted friend) has been to me and told me that there is a danger of your being generally disliked by your colleagues and subordinates because of your rough, sarcastic and overbearing manner...if an idea is suggested, say at a conference, you are supposed to be so contemptuous that presently no ideas, good or bad, will be forthcoming. I was astonished and upset because in all these years I have been accustomed to all those who have worked with and under you, loving you – I said this, and I was told “No doubt it is the strain.” My Darling Winston, I must confess that I have noticed deterioration in your manner; and you are not as kind as you used to be. It is for you to give the Orders...with this terrific power you must combine urbanity, kindness, and if possible Olympic calm...I cannot bear that those who serve the Country and yourself should not love you as well as admire and respect you...Besides you won't get the best results by irascibility and rudeness... Please forgive your loving devoted and watchful... Clemmie

What a great example of how to correct someone in your family in a gracious way! I love that line, “My Darling Winston, I must confess that I have noticed deterioration in your manner...” Today we'd just say, “Would you stop being such a jerk!”

Show grace

The last practice to cultivate healthy communication is to show grace. Paul mentioned grace at the end of verse 29, but then in verse 32 he says,

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

This says nothing directly about communication, but it focuses on our hearts. Jesus said, *“For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of”* (Matthew 12:34b). When our hearts are right, that will show up in the way we talk to one another. For us to show grace in our words we have to first understand deep in our hearts our own need for grace, and not only our own need for grace, but our own receiving of grace. That's why Paul says, *“...just as in Christ God forgave you.”* When we understand how much we've been forgiven, we'll be able to forgive those we love, and that will bring a new freedom into our lives. Grace-filled words flow from grace-filled hearts; hearts that know how much grace they've been given.

Every home has a culture. We must create a culture of forgiveness in our home. It begins with a gracious tongue. Parents

should be quick to speak grace into every corner of family life. Those words “I'm sorry, or “I was wrong” or “I forgive you” should be heard often. A theology of forgiveness should permeate the home. Our kids should know the story of sin entering the human race and the greater story of God stepping into human history and choosing to forgive and redeem. Children should be firmly rooted in the assurance that the blood of Christ covers all sin. Every family has brokenness and sin, but every family can experience God's grace. In view of God's incomprehensible generosity, how can we remain locked up in the prison of resentment? We're free to forgive each other freely and generously because we've been freely and generously forgiven.

This reminds me of something that undergirds everything I've said about communication, and I'll close with this: God himself is a communicator. Have you ever thought about that? This is foundational to who God is; he's a connector. He's existed in an eternal relationship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I spent this past week studying the book of Job with 40 other pastors from around the United States. Throughout that book Job pleads with God to come and explain why all these terrible things have happened to him. God remained silent for a long time, but finally he spoke, and when he did Job repented in dust and ashes. God is a communicator. Even the sending of his Son into the world to be our Savior is rooted in God's nature as a connector. Hebrews 1:1-2 says, *“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...”* That's why Jesus is called the Word made flesh. He's the ultimate expression of what's on God's heart. God is a communicator.

That's how important communication is. When he created humans in his image he gave us the same capacity for communication. So every time we open our mouths we reflect something of the nature of God. There's great power in that. We all want to build a home and a family that's strong and close and reflects the goodness of God. That starts with your words. If your home is made of bricks, your words are the mortar that holds those bricks together. What kind of mortar are you using? Will you spend some time this week talking with your family about this? Ask each other, How can we do this better?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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