

FROM HURTFUL TO HELPFUL COMMUNICATION IN MARRIAGE

Joel James

Grace Fellowship-Pretoria

One of the primary goals in marriage counselling is to teach a couple to communicate helpfully rather than hurtfully. Here are some of the hurtful communication tactics that you'll need to be on the lookout for when married couples come to you for help.

- 1) *Hurtful nonverbal communication.* This includes intense, angry facial expressions, exaggerated or violent hand gestures, and giving the "cold shoulder."

Sometimes tension arises between a husband and wife because nonverbal communication is easy to misinterpret. For example, when a husband looks serious, his wife will inevitably assume that he is upset at *her*. However, rather than leap to a conclusion by misinterpreting his furrowed brow and silence, she should clarify. From his side, he should learn that when he has a work-related problem on his mind, he should tell his wife so that she knows that he is not upset at her.

- 2) *Lying in all its various form.*

- barefaced lies (Prov 12:22): *I don't know how that pornography site got in my web browser.*
- promises not intended to be kept (Prov 12:19; 20:17): *I know I'm busy now, but I'll spend next weekend with you.*
- exaggeration: *You always ... You never ...*
- minimisation: *I was just teasing when I called you a "fat whale." I'm not angry; I'm just frustrated.*
- distortion: Intentionally twisting the other person's words or intentionally withholding information that puts you in a bad light.

- 3) *Evasion.* The person intentionally changes the subject or focuses attention on some insignificant aspect of the discussion in order to avoid a painful subject or to avoid admitting that he was wrong: Wife: *Can we talk about the big argument we had this morning before you left for work?* Husband: *Big? How can you call that a big argument?*

- 4) *Insults* (1 Peter 3:8-9; Matt 5:21-22). Harsh words meant to cut until they bleed. Sometimes these insults are disguised as "jokes" that are clearly intended to slice, not to amuse.

- 5) *Teasing and sarcasm* (Prov 26:18-19). Everything from uncomplimentary nicknames to open mocking. While the friendship of marriage may include good-natured teasing from time to time, sometimes one spouse (usually the husband) maliciously refuses to stop, though it is clear that he is hurting his wife.

- 6) *Cancellation. That was a nice supper ... for once.* Some couples need to be taught to stop their sentences two-thirds of the way through, saying just the nice part, rather than adding an unkind insult or accusation.
- 7) *Goading* (Prov 26:21; Phil 2:14; Prov 26:4). Intentionally prodding the other person into an argument. For some couples, arguing is a game, and sadly, it might be their only form of shared entertainment. But arguing is not a game; it's a sin that Jesus died for.
- 8) *Gossip* (Prov 17:9; 16:28; 26:22). Often the most hurtful occurrences of gossip are when one partner speaks critically about his husband or wife to his or her parents, tempting the parents to be bitter and critical.
- 9) *Corrupt words* (Eph 4:29; 5:3-4). Making sexually impure jokes or using curse words. These should be replaced by spiritually edifying conversation.
- 10) *Interrupting or answering for the other person* (Prov 18:2, 13). Interrupting reveals a heart of impatience and disrespect. Regularly answering for one's spouse when he or she was the one spoken to is also a form of disrespect.
- 11) *Pontificating. Some speakers project the attitude that once they have spoken on a subject, nothing more can be added.* (Wayne Mack, *Your Family God's Way*, 124). This tends to shut down communication, rather than encourage it.
- 12) *Relentless fault-finding.* God has designed people to respond better to praise than to criticism (Prov 31:29). Constant criticism is not a sign of love, but of a proud, unkind, and ungrateful heart.
- 13) *Steamrolling* (Prov 16:21; 25:15). When one spouse tries to dominate the other either by a torrent of words or by employing arguments intended not just to convince, but to crush and humiliate the other person.
- 14) *Mind-reading: I know what you were thinking when you said that!* This always discourages open discussion: why say anything if your spouse is going to misjudge or misinterpret every word?
- 15) *Thoughtless words* (Prov 29:20; 15:28; Matt 12:36). This person lets his mouth drive off before he shifts his mind into gear, often leading him to say hurtful or inconsiderate things that he has to ask forgiveness for later.
- 16) *Testing.* A wife will sometimes intentionally offer her husband an option that she *doesn't* want him to take, in order to test his love for her. *Why don't you go play golf with your friends today?* really means, *Are you going to leave me home alone by myself again all day like you did the last two Saturdays?*
- 17) *Defensiveness or self-justification.* Defensiveness makes resolving conflict much harder, like an army trying to advance through barbed wire and minefields. *I know I shouldn't have spoken to you like that, but I had a hard day at work.* Self-justification needs to be

replaced with a transparent admission of fault and a request for forgiveness: *I shouldn't have spoken to you like that. Please forgive me.*

18) *Accusations. You didn't pay the phone bill again? You don't care about anything I ask you to do.* The untrue accusation *You don't care...* is a grenade tossed into the middle of that couple's conversation. It attacks the *person*, not the *problem*. Gentle questions replace harsh accusations: *You must have had a chaotic day. What happened that kept you from paying the phone bill?*

- Gentle questions believe the best, not the worst (Prov 31:11).
- Gentle questions allow the other person to make a gentle explanation: accusations do not easily allow this.
- Gentle questions encourage the other person to ask forgiveness quickly, rather than to react defensively, if sin was done.

Resources

Your Family God's Way, Wayne Mack (chaps. 4-11)
The Peacemaker, Ken Sande