

Family Matters 6: COMMUNICATION MATTERS
Proverbs 16:20-24 (6/12/16)

All through the month of May and into June, we've been focusing on "Family Matters." After a break so Pam and I can go take care of some family matters ourselves—namely, our son's wedding—we'll turn our attention to some more "Family Matters."

Our topic today affects every human relationship: marriage, parenting, friendships, along with our relationships in the church, at school, the workplace, and beyond. Every relationship in our lives is affected by communication. COMMUNICATION MATTERS!

To get started, let's hear some very wise words of instruction concerning how we should communicate with each other. In the Old Testament book of Proverbs, we find many teachings about speaking and listening—how we understand and respond to one another.

We'll take a look at several of these today, but I've chosen this passage as our text, **Proverbs 16:20-24**:

**20 Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers,
and blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD.**

**21 The wise in heart are called discerning,
and gracious words promote instruction.**

**22 Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it,
but folly brings punishment to fools.**

**23 The hearts of the wise guide their mouths,
and their lips promote instruction.**

**24 Pleasant words are a honeycomb,
sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.**

Proverbs speaks of "gracious words" and "pleasant words." It strikes me that these need to be placed on some kind of "endangered species" list—gracious, pleasant words—where have they all gone?!?

The process of communicating with one another is one of the most formidable challenges we face today. It's becoming increasingly difficult to hear...and to be heard.

We live in a noisy world—so much of the noise actually being of our own making. We seem to have a phobia about silence—something is always on: computers, smart phones, TV, whatever.

Even driving down the road in your luxury car--engineered to eliminate all outside noises--if the radio, CD, or navigation systems are not on, then there're likely to be billboards shouting out their messages as you pass by.

Something or someone is always trying to get our attention, attempting to communicate a message that we may or may not have any interest in—but that doesn't matter. We don't seem to be able to escape the noise.

The result is we increasingly tune out these messages. That's not a bad thing—we probably need to ignore most of them.

But here's the problem: like my computer that doesn't seem to be able to distinguish useful e-mail from junk, our brains also get confused—or maybe overwhelmed--and they start screening out messages that we really need to hear.

Nothing, not even the important stuff, gets through! Can you relate?

When I do pre-marital counseling with engaged couples or with those already married who are struggling with communication issues, I talk with them about two important communication skills: assertiveness, and something called "active listening."

1) Assertiveness is the ability to state clearly what we want and need. Some folks find this hard to do.

Rather than saying up front what it is they want or need, they "beat around the bush"...and hope the other person will be able to figure it out. When it comes to communication, being clear and forthcoming is better.

2) Assertiveness works best, though, when paired with what's called "**active listening**." Active listening is the ability to hear without interruption what the other person is saying and to restate what they've said in such a way that this person knows that he or she has indeed been heard.

So, is this the way communication usually happens at your house—or any other place, for that matter? Probably not.

It doesn't happen much *anywhere* today because it takes time and effort and concentration to do this well. At its best, it also involves love. We have to care about others to do this well.

Now, everything in life doesn't have to be communicated this way; but the really important stuff should be. In spite of the effort it takes, we should state clearly what needs to be said, and we should hear clearly what has been said.

This is Communication 101, and it's vital to any healthy relationship. The Biblical writers understood that relationships cannot thrive unless communication matters. Listening to each other is serious business.

Get this: the word "listen" is found in the Bible 185 times; the word "hear," 450 times; and other forms of these words appear an additional 600 times. Do you think, maybe, that God is trying to tell us something—I mean, if we would only LISTEN?

A fellow told me that his girlfriend was breaking up with him. He explained, "She said it was because I didn't listen to her...Well, I think that's what she said. I'm not sure."

Another man said he hadn't spoken to his wife in six months. When I expressed concern, he told me not to worry. He felt it would be rude to interrupt.

Effective communication is a two way street. It's how we listen; and it's also... how we speak.

Listen again to these two verses from Proverbs: **"The hearts of the wise guide their mouths, and their lips promote instruction. Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. (Proverbs 16:23-24)**

II. Do you hear what that's saying? Wise people exercise some control over what comes from their mouths. They also understand that pleasant words are received as a "sweet treat."

The point is that sometimes the problems we experience in communication have more to do with how we *speak* rather than how we *listen*. We don't get heard because we fail to speak in

ways that encourage others to listen to what we're saying.

The book of Proverbs tends to deal with very practical matters--things which, in many instances, could really be labeled "common sense"—except that common sense is not always as common as we would like it to be. Proverbs has much to say on the subject of communication, primarily from the "speaking side" of the issue.

In Proverbs 15:2, for instance, we read, "**The tongue of the wise commends knowledge...**" In other words, when we speak wisely, as we should, what we are trying to communicate becomes more attractive--and thus more likely to be heard. We know this is true, but we don't always practice what we know.

Proverbs provides much wisdom concerning the words we speak to each other. It describes how we should speak to each other, how to use the right words in the right way when we do, all of this designed to increase the likelihood that we will actually be heard!

1. The first good word about communication found in Proverbs is "timely." Our goal is to speak **TIMELY WORDS**. Proverbs 15:23: "**A man finds joy in giving an apt reply--and how good is a timely word.**" It's important, if we want to be heard, to say what we say at the right time.

Sometimes it isn't wise to initiate certain conversations. The timing's not right.

All of us need to learn and take seriously the emotional energy cycles of those closest to us. As the Scripture says, 'There is a time and season for everything under heaven. There is a time to talk and a time to shut up!' (Loose translation--you get the point.)

Granted, there never is a good time to talk about some issues; but most conversations have their right time, and even their right place. Care enough about the person with whom you need to communicate to find a timely moment for your discussion.

2. The next good communication word is pleasant: we should aim to use **PLEASANT WORDS**. From our text again (**Proverbs 16:21b**): "**...pleasant words promote instruction.**"

You know, your mom was right when she said, "**It's not just what you say, but how you say it that counts.**" But listen to

some of the talk shows, or even the recent Presidential debates before the primaries, and they'll poison your spirit! I felt I needed to listen, but I promise you, it wasn't pleasant--it felt dirty!

Pleasantness--common courtesy when speaking--is becoming a thing of the past! We need to rediscover it, friends. We can't do relationships well, we can't do life well, without it.

Someone handed me this short piece called "A Prayer for the Day." It reads:

"So far today, God, I've done all right. I haven't gossiped; I haven't lost my temper. Haven't been grumpy, nasty or selfish--I'm really glad of that. But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed; and from then on, I'm probably going to need a lot of help."

Communication experts tell us that only a small portion of what gets communicated is due to the actual content of what we say. A larger share of communication is the result of how we say it.

The person to whom we're speaking may well love us, but that doesn't mean they appreciate the abrasive tone in our voices. We are seldom persuasive... by being abrasive.

When we speak, we should watch the sarcasm, the whining, blaming, and complaining. Try to find a way to positively express your thoughts and feelings. This will greatly enhance the results of your communication because... a pleasant voice... is much more likely to be heard.

3. Now, a third word: **LIMITED WORDS**. Listen to **Proverbs 10:19**: "**When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.**" Have you ever thought to yourself, "Why didn't I hush while I was still ahead"? We all have.

Know what it is you need to say, say it, and then be quiet and give the other person the opportunity to respond--and when they do, listen.

It's often been pointed out that God gave us one mouth and two ears, and this is intended to be instructive for us.

4. Word number four is **INTELLIGENT WORDS** (or persuasive words--the two are connected). Listen to Proverbs 16:23:

“A wise man’s heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction.” The Good News translation says, **“Intelligent people think before they speak; what they say is more persuasive.”**

It’s one of those unfortunate quirks of nature that our mouths can work faster than our brains! This quote is sometimes attributed to **Abraham Lincoln: “Tis better to remain silent and be thought a fool... than to speak and remove all doubt!”**

Seriously, if there is something you need to communicate to someone, it deserves some thoughtful consideration as to what will be said, how it will be said, and even when and where it will be said.

God intends for our brain and our mouth to be connected before, during, and after we speak. How many times have we said, “If I had only thought—before I spoke—if I had only thought...” Intelligent words are more persuasive, and much less harmful.

5. Word number five: **ACCURATE WORDS**. Consider this statement from Proverbs 21:28: **“A false witness will perish...”** The principle here is ACCURACY.

Going back to those recent political debates. I got so tired of hearing the word “liar.” Sometimes it came in pairs: “Liar, liar, pants on fire.” Made me feel young—like, five years old!

One of the many ways in which we fail to speak accurately is by using exaggeration. We all know how easy it is to exaggerate during the heat of an argument: “I’ve told you a million times; you never help me; but you always do that...or say that...”

“Always” and “never” are usually exaggerations and should be avoided—or only used when giving compliments. If we want others to treat our words seriously, we must speak as truthfully--as accurately--as we can.

6. There’s just one more word I want to mention--a close cousin to accuracy and, yet, different--and that is HONEST. Number six is **HONEST WORDS**. Honesty goes deeper than accuracy. It gets all the way down to what we really feel inside.

Proverbs 24:26 is a wonderful verse--listen: **“An honest answer**

is like a kiss on the lips.” Now, a kiss on the lips is reserved for those to whom we feel close. It’s an expression of intimacy.

That deep-down, intimate, honest expression of our thoughts and feelings is not for everyone. Fact of the matter is, most people don’t want to hear it.

But the people who really care about us do. That person to whom we’re married does. Our parents do. Our closest friends do. And, yes, God wants to hear this too—honest to God!

Is there anyone in your life with whom you are truly honest, and before whom you can bare your soul? If our conversations with those closest to us consist only of clichés or reports about other people or something we saw on Facebook or the tube, then we’re not communicating on a very deep, personal level.

To open up and share our deep thoughts, feelings, and concerns—along with our hopes and dreams--is to truly communicate.

To speak that honestly invites the other person also to open up themselves with us. That’s when relationships begin to grow and mature and bear fruit.

Now, one other verse from **Proverbs 25:11: “A word spoken aptly is like apples of gold in settings of silver.”** When we’re able to speak in such a way that the other person is able to hear us--and really understand us--well, the Bible says that’s like a priceless work of art!

But fine art requires time, patience, perseverance, and love. Words that are carefully chosen and shared in the right way at the right time are usually well-received--and often, they’re cherished. They certainly add staying power to any relationship.

We can communicate with the important people in our lives in ways that make them want to hear what we have to say. And we, in turn, will really listen and seek to understand what they are saying to us.

God knows how important this is, so He’s shared with us some clear guidelines on how to do it. Friends, I just hope we’re listening.