

Communication in Marriage

By Patrick Doyle, Founder of Veritas Counseling

Often in marriage, people don't know how to communicate. You don't get a course in it at school. Unless your parents were good at it, they taught you bad habits and so you come to this marriage with all of these things behind you. And if you don't have the Spirit of God, it's easy to build big mountains of distance between you and your spouse, because you can't seem to get past it. A lot of times, I don't think it is intentional but couples keep ramming into the wall. They think they are incapable or maybe they think their spouse is brain-damaged! They don't see any hope that anything will ever change. But there is hope. Sometimes, the misery level goes way down when one spouse starts to work on themselves rather than focusing on the problems of the other spouse.

Our culture has a huge problem with intimate communication. We are good at masked-communication. We can throw out a lot of information, but in terms of intimately and openly communicating about our feelings, particularly our emotions, we are in a big vacuum. That is what I deal with on a regular basis.

I see all the time in marriages people who are angry or frustrated. I believe that beneath anger is hurt and beneath hurt is injustice, whether perceived or real. People have lenses on. Whether or not you intend injustice, people may perceive it based on their filter system. We try to help folks remove some of those filters. Otherwise, they will never really be able to get out of the looping arguments. If I

say to somebody, "Hey, I love you," and that goes through their filter, and by the time it gets into their mind they are thinking, "Hey, what do you want?" How do you communicate when you are translating stuff that I don't even know about?

One way to improve communication in marriage is to motivate your spouse through encouragement, not browbeat, degrade or talk down to them. God's Spirit is the only one capable of pulling out the heart of stone and putting in the heart of flesh. And I have seen God do it in an instant with hard-hearted people. Generally, underneath that hardness is always a fear. They don't know what to do with soft feelings or tears, especially husbands. They think, "I don't know what to do. I feel inadequate." One of the worst things that can happen to a man is for him to feel inadequate. And when the wife is unhappy, generally men start to feel inadequate because they feel responsible for their wife's happiness. That is a big mistake in itself to feel responsible for your wife's happiness.

When women think men should be responsible for their happiness they are believing a cultural lie that creates a lot of misery. Men struggle with this feeling of adequacy and it's compounded by the great demands put on men. You go to work and face performance demands. You work hard to have a successful job, so that you can bring home a paycheck and keep up with all the bills. You come home and there is this woman who wants to relate to you, and you think, "I have no training in this. I have no skills in this." Most men never get any education about how to do this. We only get training in how to avoid feelings, how to stuff

them, how to compartmentalize, how to use anger as the only feeling that we have.

I highly recommend the book *When People are Big and God Is Small*. Author Ed Welch encourages us not to be concerned about the outcome. If we are concerned about outcomes, we have the wrong person in view – self instead of God. The outcome of my life is not my responsibility. God is. So when I hold tight to the outcome and I force and I cram, and I am intense about trying to get something that I want, I need to look at what God wants. The words of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane ring here, “*Nonetheless, not my will but thy will be done.*” This is Christ, Himself, saying that. I ought to be saying the same thing. I don’t know what is going to happen today. I am going to do my best to obey what God says and I am going to trust Him for the outcome. When we try to get into control and try to sure that our outcome comes to pass, it’s a very frustrating way to live. We cannot control this world. Things happen beyond our control all of the time. If we can’t get comfortable with uncertainty, we are going to be in a miserable place.

The scripture says, “*It is impossible to please God without faith.*” If you are committed to the outcome, and you are not allowing God to be in control, you are not going to be pleasing God, because He requires you to have faith. “*Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*” You have to allow Him to be in control of things and obey Him now. The outcome will be all right, because it is His anyway, whether you want it to be this or that. God is

God; He is not going to be swayed by anything. When I have intimacy with God, I can turn around and look at the damage, or at the pain, or at the problems that exist in my life. I know I will never be overmatched or undone because God is with me. If I don't have that confidence, there are problems that I will never, ever, ever take a look at. I will deny them, and I will rationalize them, and I will compulsively behave around them. But I won't deal with them. Conflict that is not dealt with will destroy a relationship. It is a rule of the world.

What impact do busy work schedules have on marriage? They are symptomatic; work schedules become a problem because there is no intimacy. If I really love somebody, I will prioritize my world around that. Time equals importance. Kids understand this. You don't have to tell them; they just know that. If a dad is involved with his kids, the kid intuitively knows, "I am important to my father because my dad prioritizes his world. My dad is always gone away, always for work." It might be for good reasons. He is providing a great income. He is doing important work. The kid still understands, "Hey, that is more important than me." The kid is not conscious of it. He is not able to intellectualize it, but he gets it. That creates a tremendous amount of damage. In my estimation, those boys grow up feeling inadequate from the get go.

Kids have a God-given desire to be the center of their parents' universe. When that doesn't happen, kids wonder, "What is wrong with me? Why doesn't my mom or dad love me?" They think it is their fault. "I am not good enough. I am

not smart enough. I am not pretty enough.” If the kid has that belief system in their mind, when they grow up, guess what is still there? It reveals itself in marriage all of the time. In your mind you may never consciously think, “I am no good, or I don’t measure up, or I am not good enough, or I am defective, or whatever.” But I would see it if I watched your consistent, self-destructive behavior. You can be self-destructive in a positive way such as being a productive worker. Or it could be through addiction such as food, alcohol, drugs - - you could fill in the blank. Eventually you will sabotage yourself. You will bring down good things. People come in and ask me, “Why do I do this? I know better,” When we get to the bottom, what is revealed is that they have never felt like anybody really cared. Or they felt they were defective in some way because of the way that they were treated. What the beautiful thing about being a believer is that we have a God who will not leave or forsake us. He will provide for all our needs, even emotionally in terms of who we are and what we are.

There is a difference between the operational view of God and your intellectual view of God. If your operational view is saturated with, “I don’t matter,” it is going to translate to God, which means that you will never have intimacy with Him either, because you don’t feel adequate or worthy.

How do you know if you are struggling with communication in marriage? You know by your level of frustration, your hopelessness, your misery. I commonly hear, “You know, we can’t talk about anything. Every time we start to talk about

something, it ends up in the same old place. I don't like it. I don't want to be here. I hate this. It is horrible. It is not what marriage is meant to be." If that is how you feel, I implore you, hit your knees. Ask God for help. Reach out to someone who you can trust, who won't use your problems as a way to go out and gossip or make themselves feel better, someone who is truly going to be used of God to help you get insight.

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