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COMMUNICATION: THE KEY TO BUILDING BIBLICAL RELATIONSHIPS

We often hear that we live in the age of communication. Western culture is founded upon the rapid and broad dissemination of information. The telephone,

radio, television, computers, and other technological advances link individuals, homes, and businesses. The advent of the Internet, fiber optics, and satellites, have made it possible to access information from around the world in microseconds. However, all these advances in technology have not made us better communicators. At times technology impedes communication because individuals hold a false view of what genuine communication is. Communication is not the relaying of data from one machine to another. While we might borrow terminology from the communication industry, we must realize that, without human responsibility expressed through relationships, there is no genuine communication. The inverse is also true. Relationships are not possible without effective communication.

The term, communication, is derived from a Latin root meaning to impart, share, or to make common. In our day, with the advancement of technology, the definition of communication has evolved to where it merely refers to the transfer of 1's and 0's—the binary language of computers. While computers can transfer a phenomenal amount of data, they are only tools and cannot communicate in the true sense of the word. From here on, when we refer to communication, we mean the transfer of a message from one individual or group of individuals to another individual or group of individuals and that there has been a response

and a corresponding change in the relationship between these two individuals or group of individuals because of the message transmitted and received.

In the first chapter of this book, we identified three levels of relationships: relationships of circumstance, relationships of purpose, and relationships of fulfillment. To move from relationships of circumstance and purpose to relationships of fulfillment we must identify and carry out our God-given responsibilities. To do this, we must be able to communicate with others in these relationships whether we are seeking to fulfill our responsibilities to them or they are seeking to fulfill theirs to us.

What is the Message and Who is Responsible for it?

Our goal should be to build healthy relationships, relationships of fulfillment. This can be accomplished by learning how to communicate effectively. Communication is not simply talking. Communication involves transmitting and receiving a message in a way that allows an appropriate response from the one receiving the message. This message is not necessarily couched in audible sounds. In fact, it is possible to say one thing but communicate an entirely different message than what was said. Many messages are transferred visually through body language. Communication has not taken place until there is a change in attitude and/or behavior.

Telling is not communicating.

Often young people are blamed for bad behavior and reminded that they have been told over and over not to engage in such behavior. However, telling is not communicating. They may in fact have received the true message behind the telling. That message might have been, “Do as I say, not as I do” or some other message which annulled or altered the message of the spoken words.

We see several examples of saying one thing but doing another in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew Chapter 5, Jesus presents five topics that were popular teaching points of the religious leaders of His day. A careful overview of these five topics demonstrates that the reason so many were not getting the message was because the religious leaders were saying one thing but doing another. The section begins with Jesus denouncing the scribes and Pharisees:

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others {to do} the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches {them} he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses {that} of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”¹

The scribes were experts in the Law of Moses. Like many lawyers today, they were experts in how to get around the law instead of how to obey it. The Pharisees were the moralists who took it upon themselves to judge everyone else’s behavior but made excuses for their own behavior. What follows are five

examples of how these religious lawyers and moralists taught the law but found ways to avoid the moral requirements themselves.

The five topics included the law against committing murder, the law against adultery, the law against making false promises, the law requiring restitution, and a supposed law teaching the sons Israel to hate their enemies. In each area, the scribes and Pharisees found ways to get around the moral underpinnings of these laws to make themselves look righteous in the eyes of men at the same time they were violating these laws.

Jesus confronted them on each issue. What good is a law against murder if we destroy others with our angry tempers? What good is a law against adultery if we slobber all over pornography, laugh at dirty jokes, and destroy the sacred bond of marriage by divorcing our marriage partner? What good is a law against making false promises if we cheat on our income taxes and steal from our employers through failing to do honest work and through pilfering? What good is the law of restitution if we become angry when someone else steps on our personal rights and yet we have no regard for the rights of others or for laws meant to protect us from each other? Many religious zealots ascribe to false teachings of hate toward others, often toward those whose only fault is they have a different color of skin, are of a different race, speak a different language, are of a different religion, or are in a different economic bracket. Where in God's

Word does He ever teach us to hate those who are different from us or those who are our enemies?

The problems in society will not be overcome until we adults—we parents—stop trying to teach one thing with our mouths but teach another by our attitudes and actions. Our children are watching us. We are teaching them even when we do not mean to. Children do not mirror the attitude and behavior of their parents—they magnify them, especially their faults. The messages we teach by our attitude and behavior come through loud and clear to our children and often drown out the message we think we are conveying with our mouth.

When I was growing up back on the farm, much of the work was performed by hired hands. Some of the work was seasonal so there was a constant stream of workers coming and going. One summer several workers were hired to help with the pea harvest. One day some military police came looking for a man who was AWOL. They arrested one of the workers. The car he was driving was impounded because it and much of its contents were stolen. They left the vehicle in the care of my father with instructions to turn it over to the county sheriff when he came for it. The car was towed to the barnyard behind our house and left there for more than a week.

During that time, I was looking for some tools in the tools shed and ran across some strange items among the tools: a Geiger counter, a large flashlight, and

other items I had not seen before. A few days after the sheriff retrieved the car, some investigators came back. I was working in a field near the road and my father was on the other side of the field near the river. The investigators stopped me and asked if I had seen a Geiger counter, and a large flashlight. Immediately I knew what had happened. I lied and told them I had not seen those items.

Later, after the officers left, my father came to where I was working and asked me what they wanted. I told him they were looking for items that had been removed from the stolen car. He asked me what I told them and I repeated to him the answer I gave them. He said, “Good boy,” and complimented me on the lie I had just told to the authorities to protect him. It was one of the few compliments I ever received from him. Later that day I went back to see if the items were still in the tool shed. They had been removed.

My adopted parents were pillars in the community, looked up to by many, and were generous when it came to helping individuals and families in need. However, this and similar incidents made it difficult for me to hear the message I am sure they tried to communicate to me that a good citizen of the community is honest and trustworthy.

The problem is not that we as adults make mistakes. Our children know when we make mistakes. The problem is when we refuse to acknowledge our mistakes. The problem is when we try to teach one thing to our children and do

another ourselves. It is then that we communicate loud and clear the wrong message.

One day Jesus was teaching His disciples regarding setting a good example.

Luke records:

He said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to him through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he would cause one of these little ones to stumble."²

Parenting is an awesome responsibility. It is complicated today by all the hype and hoopla of sports, entertainment, and the merchandising of toys and games. It is difficult to tell what is real and what is computer generated. Added to this are the lies and half-truths many government leaders tell and the propaganda of single-agenda political activists who overstate the truth of their position while denying the truth of their opponent's position. It is a wonder any moral truth ever filters down to the next generation. In fact, it is obvious from the behavior of many children today that moral truth is not being taught, and we are reaping the fruit of all this false communication.

The home and family should be the one place where a child can find genuine concern, safety, and truth. Yet with so many parents divorcing and then using their children as Ping-Pong balls in a personal vendetta against each other, there is little doubt why so many young people today have lost their way.

The message needs ready receptors.

Duplicity, saying one thing but meaning another, on the part of adults is not the only factor causing the downhill slide society has taken over the last several years. Children also bear some of the responsibility. There are parents who are doing their best with what they have. Many parents today did not have good role models themselves because their parents were caught up in war protests, free-speech, free-love, or substance abuse. Their parents did not have time to learn how to be good parents or to teach their children how to be parents. It is obvious that in the relay race of life, for the most part, those of generation-X who are now parents did not drop the baton of morality. It was dropped by the previous generation. Many of generation-X lost the race before they even entered it.

How does a generation without role models get turned around? Toward the end of His three and a half-year ministry, Jesus was exasperated by the moral teachers of Israel. In the twenty-third chapter of Matthew's gospel we read:

Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say {things} and do not do {them.} They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with {so much as} a finger. But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels {of their garments.} They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the marketplaces, and being called Rabbi by men"³ (Italics mine)

Here we see that the student is going to be held responsible for the lesson even if the teacher does not live by what he is teaching. When we see how far those religious leaders were from the truth they claimed to teach, we might wonder why Jesus did not attack their teaching. In fact, in some places He did. Yet here Jesus placed the burden of sorting out truth from error—message from action—upon the shoulders of the learner because it was almost too late to change the teachers.

In the previous chapter, we discussed the need for truth as the foundation for healthy relationships. Here we see that we are going to be held responsible for truth whether the behavior of our teachers is consistent with the truth they teach. The message that needs to be transmitted is truth. Truth must be communicated from one generation to the next for society to survive. When our actions are consistent with truth, the message of truth is more easily transmitted. However, whether the one transmitting the truth behaves in a manner consistent with that truth, the next generation still has a responsibility to receive the message of truth.

Many today who are blaming the previous generation for their failures have lived as adults long enough to be responsible for their own actions. As a 56-year-old adult, I cannot blame my biological parents for my failures in life. I cannot blame my adopted parents for my failures in life. My years from birth to

eight years seem like a lifetime. My years from the age of eight when I was adopted to the age of seventeen when I found myself on my own seem like another lifetime. However, all those years combined make up only about one third of my life. At some point I had to assume responsibility for my own behavior and accept the consequences when I was wrong.

Accepting responsibility for my own actions and asking for forgiveness for my failures were not learned from my adopted parents. Many times, I longed to hear them say one simple statement, “I was wrong, please forgive me.” But I never heard it. My children heard it from me frequently because I was determined not to make that mistake with them. A constant fear of mine when raising my own children was that I would be that proverbial pendulum swinging too far the other direction to become legalistic, authoritarian, and judgmental. I wanted them to know that I live with my own foibles daily, that I am not perfect, and that I am willing to confess to them my imperfections. Only they can say whether I was successful in conveying that truth.

Parenting is a partnership. It is a partnership between the parents and their children. No generation of parents has all the answers. No generation of children is totally irresponsible either. And yet what I hear while standing in checkout lines and in other places where parents and children gather is condescension from the parents toward their children and a sarcastic, rebellious attitude on the

part of children toward their parents. This has become the message communicated from one generation to the other. This is not healthy communication. In fact, it is a clear indication that in many situations communication has broken down almost totally between generations.

HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE?

In this section, we want to consider the various tools we use to communicate. Some of these items will be referred to under other headings as well. Here we are concerned about ways that society is beginning to destroy communication through critical and hypocritical attacks upon these basic tools. We do not have the time to examine each one in depth.

We communicate by attitude.

We communicate by our attitude. If our general attitude toward life is positive, the message we communicate is impacted positively by our attitude. If our general attitude toward life is negative, no matter how positive our words may be, they will be negatively impacted by our negative attitude. It is important that we listen to our inner thoughts to see what our general attitude is. If you are having difficulty conveying messages to others the way you intend for them to be conveyed, maybe your attitude is inconsistent with those messages.

The attitude of a man apart from Christ is limited to his own evaluation and opinion of information received through his five senses. The result is a strictly

human view based solely on his ability to perceive correctly that information. On the other hand, the attitude of a Christian should be made up of evaluation and opinion formed under the control of the Holy Spirit as He applies the knowledge of God's Word to the thought process. The result is what the Bible calls "the mind of Christ."⁴

It is easy to slip into a negative mindset today because most of what we hear in the media is negative. Bad news sells. Good news does not. Society has been negatively impacted by the false philosophy of Existentialism. Existentialism begins with the premise that the world is absurd and promotes a depressing view of life. This negative philosophy permeates every facet of society today and conditions us to think negatively. We will discuss Existentialism in the next section.

Paul warned the church at Philippi about negative thinking. Considering the fact that he was incarcerated in Rome at the time the letter to Philippi was written, it is amazing that he did not go into an extended diatribe against the unjust Roman system or some unethical politician that might have added to his burden. Instead, the letter to the church at Philippi is one of the most positive of Paul's letters.

In commenting regarding the conflict among church members he wrote, "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right,

whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”⁵ We need to be careful that negative things in life do not make us negative people. A person with a negative attitude will not help a situation and may even do great harm. A negative attitude hinders communication.

Several years ago I served as pastor of a church that was experiencing a lot of conflict. At this same time one of the families in the church was experiencing serious problems. One of the problems was that the father in the household had been arrested for possession of an illegal substance. Part of his penalty was to be sent out of town for a period of time for rehabilitation. Many of us in the church were concerned for him and his family and sought ways to support him and his family through this crisis.

I encouraged the members of the church to keep in touch with him by correspondence and some did. When I wrote, I was careful not to mention any of the problems in the church. However, A man in the church took it upon himself to send a material gift along with a letter in which he went into detail regarding all the problems in the church. When the man returned from rehabilitation, what he remembered and appreciated most was not the material goods given to him by this man. It was the positive letters sent by those who did not feel he needed to know all the negative things. The negative letter sent along with the material

gift nullified the good that could have otherwise been accomplished by the material gift.

We need to learn to adjust our thinking so that we can communicate with each other out of attitudes that build one another up. There are times when we are justified in having a negative thought. However, negative thinking tears down the relationships we are trying to build. We can only build healthy relationships when we have a positive attitude.

Twice in the New Testament Paul refers to a drink offering, once in the letter to the church at Philippi in Philippians 2:17 and once to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:6. In both contexts he refers to the possibility that he might be put to death. The concept of a drink offering is taken from the Old Testament sacrificial system.

In the Law of Moses, every sacrifice was to be accompanied by a drink offering except the sacrifice for sin carried into the Holy of Holies each year on the Day of Atonement. The drink offering was wine that was poured out around the main sacrifice. In the culture of the Old Testament, wine represented joy and merriment. Therefore, the drink offering was a symbol of the joyful heart with which every sacrifice was to be offered. Therefore, when sacrifice offered by the high priest for his sins and the sins of the people on the Day of Atonement did not accompany the sacrifice, was not accompanied by a drink offering, the

message was that the offering was being presented with a broken and contrite heart.

In the New Testament, Christians offer sacrifices as well. These sacrifices are the testimonies we give regarding God's goodness to us and the good works we do for others in His name.⁶ If we have a negative attitude toward life, no matter how many good deeds we do in the name of Christ and no matter how often we testify to His goodness to us, these sacrifices will be unacceptable to God because of our negative attitude. We must keep our eyes of Christ and learn to give thanks to God for everything because God causes all things to work together for good.

As society continues to be polarized by various factions and the dissemination of false philosophies, we must study God's Word to help cleanse our minds of the garbage that the world serves up constantly. In fact, we may even need to turn off the television and other forms of media occasionally so that we can hear the voice of God through His Word. Young people need to turn off and tune out the negative fare served up as entertainment. It is not entertainment if it conveys an attitude of contempt for others and promotes a negative attitude toward life. Constant feeding on the husks of the world will result in negativism and despair. These kinds of attitudes prevent us from forming successful relationships. The only effective way to keep from

**developing a negative attitude is to fill our minds with the positive truths of
Scripture.**

We communicate by words.

James writes:

Let not many {of you} become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many {ways.} If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and {yet} it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the {very} world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of {our} life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; {it is} a restless evil {and} full of deadly poison. With it we bless {our} Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come {both} blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. Does a fountain send out from the same opening {both} fresh and bitter {water?} Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor {can} salt water produce fresh.⁷

Words are powerful tools in the hands of those who learn to use them skillfully. They can be used to convey every positive emotion known to man. They can also be used as brickbats to hurl at people. We need to be careful of the words we use, and we need to teach our children to be careful of the words they use. As James tells us, much damage is caused by carelessly speaking. Often, we find ourselves opening our mouths and inserting our feet. There is no good time for unguarded speech. Therefore listening to dirty jokes is such a

problem. They tend to stick in one's mind, and are too easily conveyed in an undisciplined moment.

Paul wrote, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such {a word} as is good for edification according to the need {of the} moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear."⁸ In another place he wrote, "Let your speech always be with grace, {as though} seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person."⁹

We must accept the responsibility for our words and their meaning and we must accept the responsibility for the contexts in which the words are conveyed. Simply saying something by words may not convey the message at all or may communicate a distorted message if the context is not right. We also must accept the responsibility to try to understand the context of the person for whom the message is intended or, if we are the receivers of the message, we must accept the responsibility to understand the context of the person sending the message to us. Effective communication cannot take place if we are insensitive to the circumstances in which we find the person with whom we are trying to communicate.

A pastor was called to the home of a woman whose husband had died suddenly. The pastor was there to comfort her and to assist in planning the funeral service. As the widow related her sorrow to the pastor, his response was,

“I understand.” This is a common response in this type of situation. However, this time the woman replied, “You don’t understand. You can’t understand.” Clearly this trite statement did not comfort this woman. The truth is we usually do not understand what the other person is thinking or feeling. Saying we do could be taken as insensitivity or a lack of sincerity on our part. Since hearing this illustration many years ago, I have tried to discipline myself in such situations to say, “I can appreciate that,” rather than, “I understand.”

Children need to be taught the consequences of what they say. I am not a fisherman. My son, David, and I wanted to fish but I lacked the ability to teach him. We decided to ask a friend who is a good fisherman to take us on one of his fishing trips. He and his wife arrived at the fishing area early and set up camp. He provided all the fishing tackle, boat, and gas. We set out early in the morning around sunup.

As the day wore on even our friend was having difficulty snagging anything. The fish were just not biting. After hours of sitting in the boat and catching nothing, I heard David let out a big sigh and complained, “This is boring!” My thoughts went immediately to our friend who had gone to great expense and was trying so hard to make our fishing trip successful. I shot back, “Boring is an unappreciative term. You should say, it is slow.” David knew immediately he said

the wrong thing. He has never forgotten that lesson regarding using inappropriate words.

It is interesting how free speech has come full circle in society. Thirty-years ago, many were demanding the right to say anything they wanted to say no matter how vulgar and offensive. Today, many put themselves in the role of political-correctness police whose purpose is to stamp out any words they determine view as offensive no matter what is said or the meaning behind it.

Political correctness is a tool of what has become known as postmodernism. Postmodernists, among other things, believe that “words don’t describe reality, they create reality.”¹⁰ Space does not allow a full discussion regarding postmodernism. However, the full context of the above quote will help us understand some of the thinking today regarding the use of words to convey a message.

A clear example of constructivism is the political-correctness movement thriving on college campuses. Behind this movement is the supposition that the way we speak of others perpetrates a cultural climate of race and gender bias mythologies. The key to doing away with these mythologies is not challenging attitudes, but talking differently. Words do not describe reality; they create reality. We will never form a society free from such prejudice, they believe, unless we control the words and language upon which that prejudice is based. The political-correctness movement is not just an attempt to keep from hurting people’s feelings, but an attempt to create different kinds of people by changing the cultural environment.¹¹

We will be discussing the use of words in another context later. Here it is important to note that words are the first and perhaps most important aspect of communication. If the political-correctness police or anyone else succeeds in undermining the importance of words to the communication process, not only will communication be more difficult but relationships that depend upon effective communication will be undermined.

We communicate by body language and environmental circumstances.

It has been known for a long time that the context in which communication takes place has a lot to do with the effectiveness of that communication. When governments enter into negotiations with other governments, often the debate over the shape of the conference table becomes a stumbling block to the negotiations. The reason for this is because it is possible to control the course of the meeting simply by where one sits at the table.

I was chairing a very contentious congregational meeting a few years ago. Since I had no advanced warning that the meeting was taking place much less the contentious matters to be discussed, I did not have an opportunity to arrange the meeting hall in advance. Consequently I found myself chairing the meeting from behind a large podium about three feet above the main floor of the meeting hall and several feet away from the front row. The meeting was a disaster. I could sense that every time I ruled from the chair, the ruling came

down as an edict from on high. Without intending to convey it, many felt that I was being dictatorial. This was largely because of the configuration of the room in which the meeting took place.

Sometimes we need to accommodate the person with whom we are seeking to communicate by entering into their world. When my son, David, entered kindergarten, we visited the school and classroom and spoke at length with the person who was to be his teacher. We chose that particular teacher because she had a reputation for working well with that age group.

As the school year progressed, I noticed a distinct decline in my son's attitude toward school. At the beginning of the school year in the fall he looked forward to going to school. However, by December he moped around and was short tempered toward anything having to do with school. I could see that David was beginning to withdraw and to shut everyone out of his life. After several attempts to find out what was wrong, I finally went into his bedroom, sat down on his bed with him and asked him what was wrong. He said he hated school. This was not like David. When I asked him why he no longer liked school he said, "Because the teacher thinks I'm stupid." This startled me because of all the glowing things we had heard about the teacher so I asked him why he believed she thought he was a dunce. He answered, "Because she makes me sit in the dunce chair."

I contacted the teacher to find out what this meant. At first she indicated that she did not know what he meant by it. Upon careful examination of the situation however, I discovered what had happened. Sometime during the first week of school, she moved David from one part of the room to another for disciplinary reasons. However, she never moved him back. For three months he sat in the same chair thinking he was being disciplined. Environmental factors had become a big issue with him in a way he could not understand. When I was willing to get into his world to talk about it with him, he was finally able to express his hurt in a way that help me find out what was hurting him.

We need to be aware of environmental circumstances and body language when we are trying to communicate with each other. With a little attention to these details, we can enhance communication with one another immensely.

The Use of Feedback in Communication

A way to develop effective communication in any relationship is through feedback. Feedback is a technique by which we learn to listen to each other. Simply saying the message audibly does not mean that the one who hears the words spoken has received the message or that communication has taken place. Through feedback the one who is to receive that message and the one sending the message work together to be sure that the message is clearly transmitted and received.

Chris and I began to develop the practice of feedback early in our marriage. When we sensed that we needed to do some serious communicating because of a misunderstanding between us, one of us would offer to be the receiver and the other would offer to be the transmitter. The one who was the designated transmitter in the feedback session was allowed to choose the topic of discussion. We would find a neutral location and a time when there would be as few interruptions as possible. We then agreed to not react to each other by raising our voices, disagreeing, going on the defense, using inflammatory words, or resorting to any of the other things that hinder communication. We limited the discussion to only one topic per feedback session.

When I volunteered to be the receiver and Chris was the transmitter, I would begin the session by asking, “Honey, if there was one thing that could be changed that would make you happy, what would it be?” Chris would then state her most pressing concern at the moment. Next I would restate what she said in my own words stating what I thought I heard. If that were not what Chris meant by her initial statement, she would then restate her message in different words. I would again restate what she said in my own words.

We would continue the process of sending and receiving the message back and forth until we both agreed on the wording of the message and believed that we understood what the message was. In the early days this may have taken

three or four cycles of repeating the message in our own words until we fully understood what the other person was trying to say. The more proficient at feedback we became the fewer times we had to restate the original message. The goal was to agree upon the issue of concern and to see it from each other's point of view. It is amazing how often, once we understood our partner's concern, the differences between us would disappear and a solution was quickly agreed upon.

As we continued to practice feedback in our marriage and as I was involved in marriage counseling, I detected a pattern of concern. In the early years, I often was concerned about my image as a successful husband, father, and pastor. Chris was concerned about such issues as financial security, the management of the home, and care of the children. I settled on two words each one describing the general communication of a husband and a wife. For a husband, the word is ego and for a wife the word is security. For the husband, his general message is "feed my ego." For the wife, the general message is "meet my needs."

My goal as a husband is to try to turn my basic message around to "I will meet your needs." My wife, on the other hand, seeks to turn her basic message around to "I will feed your ego." Feedback will not work for individuals who are selfishly seeking to dominate each other. It only works when a couple genuinely

desires to communicate effectively with each other and desires God's best for their marriage.

This same approach works with other relationships as well. As our children reached the age when they could understand and participate, we included them in the feedback sessions. If the pastor of a church can learn to communicate to his congregation, "I will meet your needs," and the congregation communicates back to the pastor, "We will meet your needs," good communication takes place. However, when the communication is negative, critical, and self-centered, the relationship is in deep trouble whether it is husbands and wives, parents and children, pastors and churches, employers and employees.

Many times what we say is meant to drive us apart rather than to unite us. By careless and faulty communication we are actually making matters worse. We must not wait until we are in a conflict or crises situation to begin developing effective patterns of communication. These must be learned and in place well before conflicts arise. When parents and their children learn to communicate before the stress of adolescence, good communication can go a long way to lessening those stresses.

On one occasion when my daughter was first beginning to date, she did something I considered to be a violation of her dating privileges. It was late at night when I confronted her in anger and then stomped off to bed. Before I got to

the top of the stairs, I heard Tamara stamp her foot and say in a firm voice, “Dad, we have to talk this out now.” She was relaying back to me a principle her mother and I sought to teach our children early, “BE ANGRY, AND YET DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.”¹² She was right. I was wrong. What followed was a great time of communication and coming to a better understanding of the situation. I was thankful that we had taught her how to communicate before that night.

It is essential that we develop effective patterns of communication in any relationship and at every level whether it is merely a relationship of circumstance or of purpose. No relationship will reach the level of fulfillment without effective communication. The good news is that anyone who sincerely desires to form healthy relationships can develop effective communication skills. Without effective communication, there can be no healthy relationships.

Avoid “I Am Right/You Are Wrong” Thinking

James instructs his readers, “{This} you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak {and} slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.”¹³ The act of hearing in this verse does not refer simply to hearing audibly. It includes hearing with understanding. When we care more about what we are thinking than listening to

what others are saying, there is little possibility of making any progress toward resolving the conflicts between us.

Good communication requires both sending and receiving messages. We need to accept responsibility both for the messages we send and for the messages we receive. As we do not want others to distort the message we send, we should not distort the message others are trying to send to us. Yet often we do distort the message by the way we think. Years ago I heard a sermon with the theme: “You are what you think even more than you think.” More recently I have found the book, *Telling Yourself the Truth*, by William Backus and Marie Chapian¹⁴ to be helpful in identifying and correcting my self-talk and in counseling others regarding theirs.

A major part of our communication with each other depends upon our thought life. Self-talk is the basis for all interpersonal relationships including our communication with God. Many, if not all of us, spend too much time rehearsing negative thoughts in our minds especially when we are in conflict situations. We think about how wrong the other person is and how right we are. Before long we begin to minimize our own faults and maximize the faults of others. Gradually there is a shift in our perceived reality. We do not recognize that we have crossed over the line from truth to falsehood. We become obsessed with our own perception and lose sight of what really matters. We become prisoners of

our own minds. Those who study human behavior often refer to this process of thinking as cognitive dissonance thinking.

Cognitive dissonance is a method of dealing with the tension between conflicting cognitive elements in our thinking. By cognitive element we mean “any knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, about one’s self, or about one's behavior.”¹⁵ Cognitive dissonance then is:

The mental conflict that occurs when beliefs or assumptions are contradicted by new information. The unease or tension that the conflict arouses in a person is relieved by one of several defensive maneuvers: the person rejects, explains away, or avoids the new information, persuades himself that no conflict really exists, reconciles the difference, or resorts to any other defensive means of preserving stability or order in his conception of the world and of himself.¹⁶

In other words, our faulty thought process takes over and we are no longer able to correctly receive the other person’s message. When we resort to cognitive dissonance as a way of dealing with the difficult problems in our lives, we make recovering from those problems more difficult, and we prolong the healing process. We do not have to become budding psychologists to observe when someone else is resorting to cognitive dissonance thinking. The difficulty is recognizing when we are doing it.

There are many tools in the arsenal of cognitive dissonance that forms a part of our faulty thinking. We minimize our faults and maximize the faults of others. We expand the importance of our views and trivialize the views of others. We

project blame on to others when we are the one to blame. We deny the truth of others and the falsehood of our own view. It has been said that many individuals on death row who are genuinely guilty of murder have come to believe they are not guilty because they have rehearsed the matter over and over again, year after year, until they themselves believe the big lie—that they are not guilty. Through cognitive dissonance thinking, we turn truth into lies and lies into truth.

God, speaking through Jeremiah the prophet, described the conditions in Jeremiah's day:

“They bend their tongue {like} their bow; lies and not truth prevail in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me,” declares the LORD. “Let everyone be on guard against his neighbor, and do not trust any brother; because every brother deals craftily, and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer. Everyone deceives his neighbor and does not speak the truth, they have taught their tongue to speak lies; they weary themselves committing iniquity. Your dwelling is in the midst of deceit; through deceit they refuse to know me,” declares the LORD.”¹⁷

We live in a society that is becoming more and more polarized every day because of cognitive dissonance thinking. Politicians running for office are masters at creating cognitive dissonance to win elections. They build up their own worth while tearing down their opponents. The media finds they can captivate the public by enhancing their story line with cognitive dissonance. Talk shows on television and radio peddle cognitive dissonance to gain an audience. They often pit opposing views against each other and belittle one view while

embellishing the other. In the same way the entertainment and advertising industries thrive on cognitive dissonance.

The concept of cognitive dissonance thinking has even been touted as a method of helping young people learn in school. Studies have been conducted by educational psychologists whereby students are confronted with conflicting cognitive elements. Then an attempt is made to measure the amount of cognitive dissonance created by these conflicting elements to see how much dissonance is displayed. A little cognitive dissonance thinking can promote healthy introspection of one's beliefs on the part of the student. However, it can very easily breakdown some of the fundamental values parents want to instill in their child.

As a parent, I was always watchful of what my children were learning in school. When a teacher attempted to stir up one of my children through cognitive dissonance, I was there to confront that teacher. Stirring up turmoil in the minds of the students under the guise of teaching them to think for themselves can very easily become a way of manipulating the child and causing the child to question some basic beliefs of the child and his or her family.

One example in our family occurred when our son was attending a junior high school civics class. The teacher held the political view that the Vietnam War was an immoral war and expressed this frequently in the class. When David said he

did not believe this, the teacher gave him an assignment in which he was required to debate the issue against his stated view. Had this been a class on debate or forensics in high school, this would have been an appropriate assignment. However, it appeared to David and to me that the teacher was merely seeking to humiliate him in front of his classmates because he disagreed with her. She was trying to create cognitive dissonance in him so he would change his views. I waited for a period of time to see if David could handle the situation without my intervention. When he indicated to me that he could not, I confronted the teacher and she backed down. Creating cognitive dissonance was clearly not a proper method of teaching in that situation.

Holding a firm conviction regarding matters of this life is not the same as resorting to cognitive dissonance thinking. We need to teach and model to our children correct thinking. Leon Festinger, considered to be the first to formulate cognitive dissonance theory, presented an interesting observation about human behavior when he wrote:

A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point.

We have all experienced the futility of trying to change a strong conviction, especially if the convinced person has some investment in his belief. We are familiar with the variety of ingenious defenses with which people protect their convictions, managing to keep them unscathed through the most devastating attacks.

But man's resourcefulness goes beyond simply protecting a belief. Suppose an individual believes something with his whole heart; suppose further that he has a commitment to his belief, that he has taken irrevocable actions because of it; finally, suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that this belief is wrong: what will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before. Indeed, he may even show a new fervor about convincing and converting other people to his view.¹⁸

Festinger was writing about a religious person. Both Christians and non-Christians engage in cognitive dissonance thinking. It has become a way of life inside and outside the church. Many times, we resort to this kind of thinking in order to win arguments, get our way, or win elections. When adults—parents, teachers, politicians, and religious leaders—resort to this kind of thinking is it any wonder that our children learn it also? As was stated earlier, children do not mirror the mistakes of adults. They magnify them. One of the tools we teach them is cognitive dissonance thinking.

If we are ever going to find answers to the problems of society, we are going to have to look at our own thought processes and inner reasoning. Are we telling ourselves the truth or are we resorting to cognitive dissonance thinking? When we dialogue with others who disagree with us, do we embellish our point of view and depreciate theirs? Do we blame others and fail to acknowledge our own weaknesses?

Jesus instructed His disciples:

“Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? "Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.”¹⁹

The speck in our own eye is held there by cognitive dissonance thinking.

Cognitive dissonance begins with faulty communication with self and spills over into our communication with others. It is perhaps the greatest hindrance to healthy communication and prevents us from achieving healthy relationships. We need to learn the art of communicating truth, an art that has almost been lost in our day. Instead of shouting across the chasms that divide us, we must learn to communicate with each other by saying only what is true and no more.

For years there has been a chasm referred to as “the generation gap.” However, it is no longer a gap between generations. It is a gap between adults, between youth, between husbands and wives, between parents and their children, between races, between ethnic groups, between political parties, and between church people. It exists in every city, in small towns, and in rural areas. It seems like we all have agendas, and that we become so zealous for our own point of view that we fail to achieve the basic necessities for any society to exist—healthy relationships and good communication.

Like everyone else, I have had painful experiences in life that distorted my view of reality. I developed the bad habit of resorting to cognitive dissonance thinking way of dealing with these hurts. However, it was not until I was willing to change my own self-talk that true healing in my life began. I needed to stop blaming my adopted parents for my problems. Yes, they were the cause of many of my problems but not all of them. They taught me many good things, sometimes despite themselves. They were not all bad and I surely was not all good. The older I got, the more I needed to accept responsibility for my own behavior and stop blaming others in my past. Maybe if we adults start telling each other the truth without engaging in cognitive dissonance thinking, we will be able to help the next generation find a way out of the troubles they are facing today.

If the truth is negative, we need to say it is negative. However, there is a pattern of thinking that has slipped into the American psychic almost without notice. I first noticed this in a family member who frequently ended a statement, "...and I'm not the only one who feels this way." This habit became so noticeable that my wife and I began to listen to each other to see if we also had this habit. We were surprised at the number of times we ended our statements in the same way.

I began searching for the source of this phenomenon and found that it probably comes from the nightly news on television. Almost every news item is bolstered by, "...and he is not the only one who thinks this way." In our family we call it "awfulizing." We tend to stretch the truth a little to make the subject matter weightier. If we are not careful our conversation becomes steeped in negative thinking. When this happens, we tend to pull each other down by our conversation instead of lifting each other up. Young people seem to detect this type of thinking before adults do and are turned off by it.

Paul wrote:

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.²⁰

In another place he wrote: "Let your speech always be with grace, {as though} seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person."²¹

Before we can ever talk about philosophies or ever hope to change those philosophies that are harmful, we need to recognize the importance of relationships and communication to the process of change. The title of this book is CAN WE TALK: about matters of this life? We may never reach agreement on questions regarding when the universe came into being or about heaven and hell and things to come. We may not even agree as to how important these matters

are. Yet by acknowledging that we still are related to each other and that this relationship is worthwhile, we have taken the first step toward solving problems having to do with matters of this life. When we learn to communicate the truth about matters of this life, then we have taken a second step toward resolving conflicts in society, in our churches, and in our families.

One of the reasons we do not see ourselves as interrelated and do not communicate well with each other is because too often we believe it is more profitable to emphasize our differences. In fact, there are many organizations that exist solely to exploit these differences for the personal gain of the members of the organization. They see disagreement more profitable than agreement and, therefore, expend a lot of resources to fostering disagreement instead of seeking answers as to how we can work together to resolve the conflicts. When Christians act as if it is more profitable to disagree than to agree, we are no better than any other organization that exists for the purpose of fostering disagreement.

To find out our true purpose for refusing to see ourselves as interrelated and refusing to expend the effort to communicate, we need to examine some of the basic philosophies of life that we hold. These basic philosophies can be categorized into three groups: our philosophy regarding knowledge, our philosophy regarding existence, and our philosophy regarding behavior. Every

other philosophy falls under these three categories. It is through these philosophies that we deny our interrelatedness, and it is in defense of these philosophies that we error most in communicating with each other. In the next section, we will examine these three basic philosophies.

¹ Matthew 5:17-20.

² Luke 17:1-2.

³ Matthew 23:1-7.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:16.

⁵ Philippians 4:8.

⁶ Hebrews 13:15, 16.

⁷ James 3:1-12.

⁸ Ephesians 4:29.

⁹ Colossians 4:6.

¹⁰ Jerry Leffel, Contributor, *The Death of Truth*, ed., Dennis McCallum, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48, 49.

¹² Ephesians 4:26-27.

¹³ James 1:19-20.

¹⁴ William Backus and Marie Chapian, *Telling Yourself the Truth*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1980).

¹⁵ Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 3.

¹⁶ *The New Encyclopædia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1997), 434.

¹⁷ Jeremiah 9:3-6

¹⁸ Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riechen, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World*, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1956), 3.

¹⁹ Matt 7:3-5.

²⁰ Philippians 4:8.

²¹ Colossians 4:6.