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GOD'S Rx FOR HEALTHY COMMUNICATION

1 Peter 3:8-12

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Two old ladies who shared a home were sitting on their front porch one warm summer evening. One was listening to the sound of the crickets chirping. The other was listening to a choir singing in a church just down the road. The woman listening to the choir said to the other woman, "My, isn't that heavenly music?" "Yes," replied the first. "And I understand they do it by rubbing their legs together."

These ladies had a problem in communication. The words they used were understandable enough. But the meaning behind those words was misunderstood. They approached the words from totally different perspectives, and thus did not communicate.

While the communication breakdown between these two old ladies is humorous, it's not always so funny when it occurs in marriage. Communication problems are always a major factor in marital breakups.

How can we learn to communicate in our families? In 1 Peter 3:8-12, God offers a prescription for healthy communication. In the context, Peter is dealing with how Christians are to live as pilgrims in an alien, difficult world: how slaves should relate to abusive masters (2:18-25); how wives should live with disobedient husbands (3:1-6); and, how a persecuted church should relate to those wronging them (3:13-22, plus the entire epistle). Peter is especially concerned about how believers can bear witness in this hostile territory. In each setting, Peter shows how our obedience to God and submission to proper authority will mark us as distinct and will provide powerful witness to the rebellious who live for self and personal rights. Peter's words are not ivory tower platitudes! What he says relates to the difficult relationships we all contend with in this troubled world.

Peter (3:10-11) quotes from Psalm 34 which says that if we want to love life and see good days, then we must do some things with our walk (3:11, which relates to 3:8) and our words (3:10,

which relates to 3:9) that result in healthy relationships. Then Scripture promises that God's blessing will be on us (3:12). If we don't live like that, the contrary is true: The face of the Lord will be against us.

God's prescription for healthy communication is that we turn from evil and do good in our walk and in our words.

1. God's prescription for healthy communication is that we turn from evil and do good in our walk.

Verse 11, "Let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it" (a quote from Psalm 34) supports verse 8: "To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kind-hearted, and humble in spirit." It shows the *behavior* behind healthy relationships: We must turn from evil; and we must pursue seeking peace and doing good.

- A. Healthy communication requires turning from evil in our walk.

You may wonder what behavior has to do with communication. But words alone account for only a small part of communication. After a decade of research, Albert Mehrabian suggested that words alone account for only seven percent of the communication process; tone of voice and inflection account for 38 percent; the remaining 55 percent is found in facial expressions, posture, and gestures (cited by David Augsburger, *Cherishable: Love and Marriage* [Herald Press], p. 53-54). Even if we question his percentages, it's clear that communication is not just words; it involves our behavior and attitudes.

Peter says that we are to turn away from evil (3:11; the word "evil" is used 5 times in 3:8-12), which includes such sins as anger, violence, sexual immorality, greed, drunkenness, and drug abuse, which all hinder good communication. But evil goes deeper than these things. At the root of all evil is living for self in disregard of God and others, except as they can serve us. Living for self, seeking self-fulfillment, thinking first about ourselves and not about others--all selfish behavior builds barriers to healthy communication which seeks to understand the other person's point-of-view. Because of the fall, we're all selfish by nature, as seen by the fact that we're all sitting here thinking, "I hope my wife and kids are

listening, so they will stop being so selfish (so that I can get my way)!" We must turn from evil which means, selfishness. We have to practice denying self on a daily basis.

B. Healthy communication requires doing good in our walk.

It's not enough just to deny self or turn from evil. Also, we must actively do good and pursue peace with others. The Apostle Paul put it, "Let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another" (Rom. 14:19). And, "If possible, so far as it depends upon you, be at peace with all men" (Rom. 12:18). In other words, peace won't just happen as we're indifferent or passive. We've got to make an effort to pursue it.

I read about a mother with a scout troop who said to her son, "I will not take any of you to the zoo if you don't forgive Billy for stealing your candy bar." "But Billy doesn't want to be forgiven," her son complained. He won't even listen." "Then make him," his mother said angrily. Suddenly, her son chased Billy, knocked him to the ground, sat on him, and yelled, "I forgive you for stealing my candy bar, but I'd sure find it easier to forget if you'd wipe the chocolate off your mouth!" (Told by Josephine Ligon, "Your Daffodils Are Pretty," *Christianity Today* [3/2/79], p. 18).

We're not supposed to be *that* aggressive in pursuing peace! But you get the idea. We can't be indifferent or passive about it. Jesus said that if you're worshipping God and suddenly remember that your brother has something against you, leave the worship service, go be reconciled to your brother, and then come back and worship God (see Matt. 5:23-24). We are to take the initiative to do all we can to restore strained relationships.

It's always time consuming and more of a hassle to do that than it is to let it slide. We'd rather not expend the emotional energy and time involved in getting things straightened out. We figure that time will heal. Besides, it's always humbling to admit I was wrong! So we don't actively pursue peace. Of course, love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8); we aren't supposed to confront a person for every minor offense. We should absorb a lot. But if I've offended someone or if his offense is such that I can't relate to him without clearing it up, then I need to attempt to seek peace.

Say to the one you wronged, "God has shown me how wrong I was to [name the offense]. I want to live in a way that pleases Him. I've come to ask, 'Will you forgive me?'" If someone else has wronged you, be careful not to accuse or attack him, but seek to restore him in a spirit of gentleness, remembering that you, too, are a sinner (Gal. 6:1). Thus, we must turn from evil (selfishness) and do good by pursuing peace. If our behavior is oriented toward peace, it provides a foundation for our verbal communication.

What kind of behavior is conducive to peaceful, healthy communication? Verse 8 gives us five character qualities that enhance relationships and communication:

(1) *Harmonious*--The Greek word means "of the same mind or attitude." That mind-set is a desire to please God and to grow in obedience to His Word. If two people share that desire, they still may have some serious differences to work through (as with Paul and Barnabas). But it provides a common ground to work toward resolution of conflicts. A harmonious person is not self-willed, demanding his own way, and judging those who don't go along with him. He accepts people as Christ accepts them. He knows the difference between biblical absolutes, which must not be compromised, and areas where there is room for difference. He gives people time to grow, realizing that it's a process.

We all have different backgrounds, personalities, and ways of thinking. The only way for a harmonious marriage is for both partners to be committed to please God and obey His Word. That's one reason why it's crucial for people entering into marriage never to consider marriage to a person living for self, even if that person professes to be a Christian. If a person is not committed to the daily, lifelong process of dying to self and learning to please God, then he will not be growing in this character quality of being harmonious. You will have constant conflict.

(2) *Sympathetic*--"affected by like feelings." Our Savior is one who sympathizes with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15) and so we are to enter into what others are feeling. We are to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15). We are to allow the sufferings of others to touch our emotions. We are to be sensitive to how we would feel if we were in the other person's place. We should do all we can to make him or her feel accepted

and loved. While we are to live by faith and obedience, not by feelings, we should not ignore or deny our feelings. Part of biblical communication is learning to listen not just to words, but to feelings, and to convey that you understand and care.

(3) *Brotherly*--The Greek word is *philadelphoi*, brotherly love. It points to the fact that as believers we are members of the same family. Your wife is not just your wife; she is your sister in Christ. Your children are also your brothers and sisters in Christ. Someone has wisely observed that we should treat our family members like we treat guests, and treat our guests like family. The comment is based on the fact that we're often rude and inconsiderate toward those we live with. The behavior of brotherly love opens the doors for wholesome verbal communication.

(4) *Kindhearted*--"tenderhearted, compassionate" (see also, Eph. 4:32). The root word means "bowels." The idea is to have deep, "gut" feelings for the other person. I don't know if there is any nuance of difference between it and "sympathetic." But both words have an emotional element; Christian behavior must go beyond cold duty. Others should sense that we genuinely care for them from our hearts. If family members feel our tender concern, it opens the way for healthy verbal communication.

(5) *Humble in spirit*--(lit., "lowliness of mind"). Jesus described Himself as "humble in heart" (Matt. 11:29, using a cognate word). This quality was not seen as a virtue by pagan writers in Bible times. It was Christians who elevated it as a virtue. In our day, many Christians have reverted to the pagan ways, since almost every book dealing with relationships says that you need proper self-esteem so that you can love others. But the Bible clearly teaches that esteeming ourselves more than we esteem others is at the root of our conflicts. Rather, we must lower our estimate of ourselves if we want harmonious relationships (see Phil. 2:1-5; James 4:1-3; 1 Pet. 5:5). It is regard for self that causes me to react in anger when my way is challenged, to refuse to admit my wrongs, to reject instruction or correction. So the Bible never says, "Work on your self-esteem." It says, "Work on your humility."

Thus, God's prescription for healthy communication is that we turn from evil and do good in our walk. Godly behavior is the basis for healthy communication. But, also,

2. God's prescription for healthy communication is that we turn from evil and do good in our words.

Do you want a good life? Peter says (3:10b), "Refrain [lit., "stop"] your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile [deception]." Godly words built on a godly walk will yield healthy communication and relationships. Peter shows that we must turn from evil words and pursue good words.

- A. God's prescription for healthy communication is that we turn from evil words.

Peter mentions two aspects of turning from evil words:

(1) Turning from evil words means not retaliating when we are verbally abused. "Refrain his tongue from evil" (3:10, from Psalm 34) supports verse 9, that we are not to retaliate when we are insulted, but rather to give a blessing instead. This principle runs counter to the world which says, "If someone abuses you verbally, you don't have to take it! Stand up for your rights! Assert yourself! Let them know that you have more self-respect than that!" But God says, "If someone insults you, bless them. Say something kind to them in return." Jesus said, "Bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:28). It's not easy, but it's what God commands.

We're not talking here about clarifying misunderstandings or offering correction through proper conversation. There are proper times to state your point-of-view and speak the truth in a calm manner. What's in view here is when a person is being purposely abusive toward you. He's trying to pick a fight or bait you. Peter says, "Don't answer such abuse with more abuse. Don't top his put down of you with a better put down of him. Don't counter his name-calling by calling him names. Don't rebut his sarcasm with more sarcasm. Don't react to his attack by attacking him. Instead, respond with kind words."

(2) Turning from evil words means refraining from deception. "Refrain ... his lips from speaking guile" (3:10b). The word was used by Homer to mean "bait" or "snare." It refers to anything calculated to manipulate, deceive, mislead, or distort the facts. Deception is a barrier to healthy communication, since it is self-seeking and it destroys trust. It may be a deliberate attempt to bend the facts to suit

your side of the story. Or perhaps you don't mention certain facts so that the other person gets a skewed view of what really happened. It may be telling a person one thing to his face, but saying something else behind his back. That way, people side with you against him. It may be exaggeration: "You *always* ..." "You *never* ..."

I realize that there are difficult situations where it is hard to be honest. Do you tell a dying relative the truth about his condition? Or, in a not so serious, but just as tough situation, what do you tell your wife when she asks, "Do you like my new hairdo?" You pray for tact and wisdom at such moments. But I argue that speaking the truth in love is always God's way. Deception hurts healthy relationships and doesn't please God.

God's prescription for healthy communication is that we turn from evil words by not retaliating and not deceiving.

B. God's prescription for healthy communication is that we do good by blessing others with words that build up.

It's not enough to hold your tongue. We are to "give a blessing instead." We are to speak words which build up, not which tear down: "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, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Eph. 4:29).

If we would apply this in our homes--not trading insults, not deceiving, not clamming up, but speaking words that build up the other person--we would put family counselors out of business. Think about your speech in your family this past week. How much of it was sarcastic, critical, angry, accusatory? And how much was aimed at blessing and building up your family members?

You may protest, "We just kid each other with humorous gibes back and forth!" But I contend that trading put-downs, no matter how much in jest, does not build up the other person. When I was in college, I met each week for dinner and a discipleship time with a group of guys. Much of our time was spent bantering back and forth with funny put-downs. One night a new Christian in the group confronted us by saying, "Hey, guys, this chopping each other down is sin!" We all protested at first, but he stuck to his guns until we realized that he was right. We weren't blessing and building each other up. We had to repent.

Conclusion

Some might be thinking, "Now wait a minute. You've been talking about denying myself, laying down my rights, not retaliating, blessing those who insult me, being harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble. But it's a dog-eat-dog world! If you knew my husband (or wife or boss or roommates), you'd know that if I really did that, I'd get trampled! Who's going to look out for my rights? Who's going to protect me if I act like that?"

Verse 12 shows you: God will! His eyes are on the righteous. His ears attend to their prayer. But His face is against those who do evil. Do you want God on your side? Then, please Him by turning from evil and doing good in your walk and your words. Even if you suffer for the sake of righteousness, you'll be blessed (v. 14).

I know of no Scripture that would do more good for our relationships in our families and in our church than 1 Peter 3:8-12. I ask you to commit it to memory and take whatever steps necessary to apply it to your relationships. To turn from evil behavior and speech and to pursue godly behavior and speech, no matter how you are treated--that's God's prescription for healthy communication.

Discussion Questions

1. Is excessive verbal abuse grounds for marital separation or divorce? Defend your answer biblically.
2. Is there a place in Christian communication for "a good argument"? Why/why not?
3. Agree/disagree: Selfishness is the root of most communication problems?
4. How should a godly wife deal with her husband's abusive speech to their children?

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