

April 25, 2010  
Dr. Bruce Spear, D. Min.  
Elizabeth Presbyterian Church  
"Quick to Listen/Slow to Speak"

*Prayer of Confession (from Rick Renner)*

*Lord, please forgive me for being so harsh and judgmental of other people when they make mistakes or behave in ways that upset me. I know I become judgmental when I forget the mercy and grace that you have extended to me time and again. Therefore, I ask you to help me walk in constant awareness of all the times I have been loved, forgiven, and accepted in spite of my behavior. Holy Spirit, help me now to be an extension of this same mercy and grace to others who need it from me. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Today we will continue to talk about how we communicate with each other. Last week we talked about four destructive patterns of communication. The first pattern was Negative Interpretation where a person hears what another person says in a much more negative light than was intended. For good communication to take place two people need to listen to each other, give each other the benefit of the doubt and seek to understand each other more clearly. The second pattern was Escalation where two people move from the issue at hand to other more complex and painful issues as the temperature rises in the conversation. The third pattern is Invalidation which can be called "painful putdowns." When we feel defensive and go on the attack, we use what we know about the other person to put them down and to cause them pain. This is destructive to trust and openness in the relationship. One thinks twice about being vulnerable with someone who might turn around and use it against them at some future point. The fourth destructive pattern was Avoidance and Withdrawal. When two people are frustrated in a conversation and hurt or angered by what has been said, they withdraw and avoid each other or at least talking about certain issues. Consequently walls go up and the relationship is strained and dysfunctional.

These four patterns are the result of research at the University of Denver which has been popularized in two books, *Fighting for Your Marriage* by Howard Markham, Scott Stanley, and Susan Blumberg and *A Lasting Promise* by Scott Stanley, Dan Trathen, Savanna McCain, and Milt Bryan. In these books, the first for a secular audience and the second for a Christian audience, the writers encourage couples to replace these four destructive patterns with the Speaker/Listener Technique which is a structure for conversation which insures safe and clear communication.

This structure is nothing more than a modern adaptation of the wisdom of James the apostle who wrote, "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." James 1:19-20

The Speaker/Listener Technique has three goals. The first goal is for the conversation to bring clarity. That is only possible when both people are "quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." When we truly listen to the other person, we will learn new things about them. It is never wise to say about a partner, a son, or a parent, "I know what they are going to say. They don't even need to open their mouth. I can tell you right now what they are going to say." That is a foolish statement to make. We always need to listen with open ears to make sure we are hearing what they are saying and not what we think they are going to say. God has made each of us in his own image, and we are complex, evolving personalities full of surprises to those nearest to us. We defy categorization. For a father to understand his son, he needs to listen well and with an open mind to learn how his son is growing, changing and developing.

The second goal of the Speaker/Listener Technique is safety. The apostle John says, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." 1 John 4:18. When a wife is afraid that a husband will put her down or bring up her vulnerabilities to shut her up, she does not feel safe. When a wife does not feel safe around her husband, the marriage has deteriorated and the husband no longer protects his wife. A more structured conversation can insure safe communication.

The third goal of the Speaker/Listener Technique is to understand each other's feelings and motivations. The apostle Paul prayed for the Philippians that their "love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight." It is important for us to understand the feelings and the thought process behind someone's choices. Once we understand why they are motivated in certain ways, we sometimes view their choices differently and see the person in a new light. That is why it is more important to understand each other than to solve the issue at hand. The reason two people often cannot even remember what specific issue they were arguing about is because the underlying feelings and motivations were more strongly at play than the issue at hand. Once two people understand each other and, more importantly, feel understood and heard by the other person, the issue at hand often becomes secondary.

This structure involves following rules that revolve around who has the floor. Before the sermon you received a small square of linoleum. That is the "floor." Whoever has the "floor" is the speaker and the other is the listener.

#### Rules for Both:

1. The speaker has the floor.
2. The other person listens.
3. Take turns with the floor.
4. Understanding each other is more valuable than problem solving.

#### Rules for the Speaker:

1. Speak for yourself, don't mind read.
2. Start sentences with "I" not "You. Starting with "I" helps you reveal; starting with "You" leads to accusation.
3. Reveal your feelings. Be vulnerable with each other.
4. Talk in small chunks. Don't go on and on until the listener can't remember everything you said.
5. Stop and let the listener paraphrase.
6. Pass the floor when you feel understood.

#### Rules for the Listener:

1. Listen well.
2. Listen for feelings and inward motivations.
3. Don't rebut or plan your rebuttal.
4. Paraphrase what you heard to the speaker's satisfaction.
5. Earn the floor with your listening.
6. Remember, you can understand without agreeing.

Regarding this last point, my wife and I experienced a breakthrough in our communication when I learned in the first or second year of marriage that she wanted me to listen and understand how she felt about various issues in her life and in our marriage even if I offered nothing in the way of advice and even if she was not sure whether or not she was justified in her statements. She just needed someone to express her feelings to. Up until that time, I felt it was my duty to offer solutions or to suggest a different way of thinking about an issue, rather than to just listen and understand. As a result, she has felt safe to share her inward thoughts and feelings, and I have joined her in being able to express the current state of my thoughts and feelings about my work, our marriage, and our family and receive her understanding and support. It is in the context of feeling understood and supported that we offer solutions and advice.

So let me encourage you to take the piece of linoleum home with you and put it to use in listening more closely to those closest to you so that as Paul prayed "your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight."

Benediction

*Christ, King of tenderness,*

*Christ, King of tenderness,*

*Bind our families with a bond  
that cannot be broken.*

*Bind our families with a bond of love  
that cannot be broken.*