

5 Communication Tools That Saved My Marriage

Early in our marriage, these simple principles changed our hearts and transformed our relationship.

By Rob Flood

We were blissfully in love and thrilled to be on our honeymoon. Then came day five—we had our first argument. That put us on a slippery slope moving swiftly toward desperation. Within the first nine months of our marriage, Gina and I were both convinced that we not only married the wrong person, but also were condemned to a loveless marriage.

One very tangible side effect of our difficulties was poor communication. I would ask, "What's for dinner?" She would hear, "I can't believe you haven't prepared dinner again tonight!"

She would say, "What time are you coming home?" I would hear, "You better get here and help me because you're never here."

We could not express anything we wanted to. We resorted to hurting each other with our words. We did not build each other up ... we tore each other down and caused deep, emotional pain. Quite honestly, we had endured so much hurt that we could not see any hope for ever communicating well. Our despair was overwhelming.

In counseling we began learning about intentional communication. I remember thinking, "That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard. This stuff is so simple ... I can't believe I'm paying this guy for this."

But, once I got off of my high horse, I realized something very simple yet profound: If communication was really that simple, everyone would be doing it and all of our communication would glorify God and reflect His image (1 Peter 4:11; Ephesians 4:29). Glorifying God did not describe my communication, and it may not describe yours either. In fact, many of us struggle to communicate well even with those we love the most: our siblings, our parents, our children, our spouse.

The road I took to learn about communication was a tough one. Here are some of the tools that helped transform my marriage and change my heart.

1. The Principle of First Response: *The course of a conflict is not determined by the person who initiates, but by the person who responds.*

You may feel it's okay to strike at someone verbally because, "He is picking a fight with me." You may be correct, but that person does not have the power to decide whether a fight actually occurs. That power rests with the responder. As Proverbs 15:1 says, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

Jesus has a well-worn track record with the Principle of First Response. Recall the times that the Scribes and the Pharisees came to question Him. They were the initiators in nearly all of their communication. Their intention was to defraud Jesus and

corner Him. In how many cases were they successful? None. They failed because the power to decide the direction of each conflict rested with Jesus, the responder (Luke 20:19-26).

The implications of following Jesus' example were huge. My wife's sin did not give me free license to sin in return. And conversely, my sin did not give Gina free license either. By following the principle of first response, we were being called to take a poorly spoken comment and redirect it.

2. The Principle of Physical Touch: *It is difficult to sin against someone while you are tenderly touching him or her.*

A difficult time to apply this principle is after an argument has begun. However, a perfect time is when you know you are about to sit down and have a discussion about something that might lead to tension.

You know what those topics are in your marriage. Maybe it's a conversation about a specific child. Maybe it's your in-laws or your finances. For us, as you might imagine, it was when we sat down to talk about our communication. Those were tough conversations.

During these times, we would sit down and pray together ... and touch. Usually we were at opposite ends of the couch with Gina's legs stretched out across mine while I held them. (You may prefer holding hands or sitting close enough that you naturally touch.)

As we talked, we would inevitably notice something. When our conversation began to drift toward conflict, we stopped touching. We found what I'm certain you'll find: It is very difficult to fight with someone you are tenderly touching. So, we had a choice at that point: to stop fighting so we could keep touching or to stop touching so we could keep fighting.

This type of tender touching has served us in two ways. First, it is a deterrent from arguing. Second, when we do drift into an argument, our physical separation is a visual and physical cue that our conversation is no longer glorifying God. We notice it, correct it, and get back on the right track.

3. The Principle of Proper Timing: *The success of a conversation can be maximized if the timing of the conversation is carefully chosen.*

The book of Proverbs tells us, "A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!" (15:23).

Typically, the first opportunity Gina and I have to talk about the day is at dinner. We often take time then to catch up. With four young children, our dinner table is an active and busy one. Consequently, we cannot practically have an extended and meaningful conversation.

So, if something has occurred that I must discuss with Gina, I will wait until the children are asleep. To bring it up during dinner is to invite frustration and ineffectiveness.

Let's look at a couple of scenarios where we're more likely to fail.

Gina is a very intentional homemaker and often has wonderful ideas on how to better serve our family. Let's say she is contemplating a new approach to family dining. She's been thinking through this for weeks and she's now ready to get my input. This is a very good thing—but probably not at 1:30 on a Sunday afternoon when I'm watching a football game.

I'm also prone to fall into the poor timing trap. For example, Gina and I could be downstairs enjoying normal conversation. We head upstairs at 11:30 p.m. and Gina is ready for bed. As the lights go out, I ask, "What do you think God is doing with the children?" This is a question Gina would love for me to ask ... about three hours earlier. When 11:30 comes, she's ready for bed—not an extensive discussion.

There are times when a conversation is critical to have at that very moment. In those cases, of course, the football game goes off and we talk. Or, the lights go back on and we're up until 2 a.m. However, those should be the exceptions rather than the rule. The majority of the time, we should be more strategic in the timing of our conversations.

4. The Principle of Mirroring: *Understanding can be enhanced if we measure it often throughout a conversation.*

The Scriptures inform us that, if we are to understand and become wise, we must be sure to incline our ears. Proverbs 22:17 states, "Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, and apply your mind to my knowledge."

Have you ever meant one thing by what you said but the person you were talking to heard something else? It can make for very frustrating communication. If you're not sure if your spouse is getting what you're talking about, check to see if you hear this phrase a lot: "What do you mean by *that*?"

Mirroring can help you test whether you are hearing your spouse properly. Once your spouse makes a point ... repeat it to him or her. Say something like this: "So, what I hear you saying is ..." or, "Are you saying ... ?" Then, in your own words, tell your spouse what you understand to have been said. Then, the most important part of mirroring comes. You must allow your spouse to either affirm or correct what you've said.

As we learned this principle, I often didn't like Gina's negative or inaccurate summaries of my statements. So, I defended them and failed to allow her the freedom to speak honestly. In time, I learned that her summaries actually were quite accurate; my reactions were negative because I didn't like how they exposed me.

The point of mirroring is not to be right, not to defend yourself, but to know that you are hearing accurately. If you seek to understand rather than to make yourself understood, then you are primed for success with the principle of mirroring.

5. The Principle of Prayer: *Success in communication is more likely when we invite God to be an active participant and guide.*

This principle is not complicated, but it requires our close attention. We've become so accustomed to hearing about prayer that its importance often passes us by.

No matter what principle you might be using at the time or what subject you might be talking about, no scenario is beyond prayer. I have tended to overestimate my own

ability to communicate well and righteously. That was evidenced in our first year of marriage.

We will eventually and inevitably sin in our communication with each other. When it begins to drift away from God's intended purpose for it, we have a choice: Will we be puffed up with pride or will we have the humility to stop right where we are and ask God to help redeem our conversation?

I wish someone would have shared with me what late 19th and early 20th century evangelist R.A. Torrey said on prayer:

The reason why many fail in battle is because they wait until the hour of battle. The reason why others succeed is because they have gained their victory on their knees long before the battle came ... Anticipate your battles; fight them on your knees before temptation comes, and you will always have victory.

One of the greatest difficulties that couples face with this principle is awkwardness. They are not used to praying together. So, as they begin to like each other less in the midst of unconstructive communication, the thought of praying together is not very appealing.

We learned an easy fix to this ... start praying together. Begin with 30 seconds of prayer as you go to bed each night. Pray regularly as a family prior to eating. Pick one night a week to pray for your children, your pastor, and your marriage. Among the enormous benefits that you'll see in your family, the regularity of prayer will make praying in the midst of communication breakdown more probable.

The transformation never ends

As a result of God's grace intersecting with these principles, communication is now among the greatest strengths of our marriage. It's not that we don't still mess up—we do. Thankfully, God continues to work on me. He'll continue to work on you, too.

At one time, I was convinced that I married the wrong woman. She was convinced she married the wrong man. Now, we cannot imagine knowing, loving, or enjoying anyone more than we do each other.

Your relationship with your spouse may differ from ours, but this much is true: Your spouse should be the single most important person you have in your life. Like it or not, communication is the tool that God has given us to knit our hearts and our minds together. Success is possible if we're willing to apply some intentional principles. We've all been called to God-honoring communication. Step forward in humility and faith and watch Him transform you.