

Communication and Conflict

Part 1 Communication

During a recent phone call our son suddenly remarked “Why do retired people always argue?” I replied with all the possible reasons (and with just a hint of defensiveness) about the issues of transition and losses that occur at this time, but it made me start to think, is this just a sweeping generalization or is there some truth in it.

As we age and especially retire, do we become more easily irritated, more rigid, more judgmental or defensive, which then affects our communication and in particular our words and attitudes with those closest to us?

Retirement has its own challenges, but it may also be part of the aging process generally, as we sense our abilities and capacities reducing perhaps defending our ideas, opinions and rights becomes more important to us, since we feel that if someone rejects or ignores them, then we have nothing left to give.

It may be that aspects of our personality and temperament have been tempered by necessity in the workplace, but within the home or close friendships we move to the extremity of certain traits of our personality and temperament that make us more difficult to be around and result in conflict.

It is true that opposites attract in relationships, especially marriage, so that as well as resulting in a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, it also means that we are different and difference always takes good communication to function at its best.

Communication is often high on the agenda of marriage preparation sessions or seminars in the workplace, but perhaps we stop examining our communication as we get older and habits form that we are unaware of and we no longer notice how we speak to each other.

Communication is so fundamental to all human beings, as we shall see later, but never more so than when other capacities are reducing. As long as we can communicate with others we can have deep relationships, we are able to speak to and about God for his glory, and we are able to bless and encourage those around us. Communication is vital, our words are important, but that is not all the story!

God is a God of communication

The first words ever spoken were spoken by God at creation ‘And God said “Let there be light,” and there was light.’ (Genesis 1:3) God spoke and brought creation into being.

‘Then God said “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). God speaks as the Creator King announcing his crowning work to the court. We are speaking, communicating beings since we are made in the image of God and that ability sets us apart from all the rest of God’s creation. Man is the climax of God’s creative activity.

“The value of every piece of human communication is rooted in the fact that *God* speaks. Into the sights and sound of the newly created world came the voice of God, speaking words

of human language to Adam and Eve. When God chose to reveal himself that way, he raised talk to a place of highest significance as his primary vehicle for truth. Through words we would come to know the most important truths that could be known - truths that reveal God's existence and glory, truths that give life." (Tripp p8)

Tripp goes on to explain the staggering reality that God did not choose to be distant and aloof but that the sovereign creator and Lord of the universe used words, words that human beings could understand, so that we could know him and communicate with him.

In giving us this unique ability to communicate with words, God has also given us the ability to communicate with each other, to share our thoughts, desires and emotions. To reveal ourselves and to make ourselves knowable. "There is nothing that we depend on more than our ability to give and receive communication." (Tripp p13)

In the pages of scripture we can read about God's purposes, plans and his revealed will for us. We can also read about what God thinks and desires for us, how he loves and values us, his grace and mercy towards us in his plan of redemption. As we read these words we gain our sense of identity, of meaning and of purpose within God's creation.

"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at various times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son....." (Hebrews 1:1-2)

God's ultimate communication to us came through his Son, 'the Word' (John 1:1). Christ came to this world, and took on our flesh, to reveal the Father to us, to *be* the Word of God amongst us and to *speak* the Word of God to us.

"The God who created speech and spoke the world into existence, the God who used human words to reveal himself to his people throughout the ages, comes to his world as the Word, to the people who have forsaken him. He is not only the speaker of truth, he *is* Truth, and only in him is there hope for us.....The Word became flesh because there was no other way to fix what is broken in us." (Tripp p36)

The trouble with our talk

When did it all go so wrong? When did our speech and communication become the place where we most frequently sin and many of our struggles within ourselves and with others begin? The answer lies back in that same garden where God spoke to Adam and Eve, when another voice was listened to, when Satan spoke. Paul Tripp highlights four ways that our speech and communication has changed dramatically since the Fall (Genesis 3:1-13):-

- ***The authority of God is challenged*** - when Satan said "Did God really say?" for the first time God's authority was challenged and from that point the way we speak reflects that we had begun to usurp the authority of God. "We say what we want to say, when and how we want to say it. We speak as if we are in charge and as if we have the right to use words to advance *our* purpose, and to achieve what would make us happy. We speak as if we were God rather than his creatures, called to submit to his authority with every word we speak." ((Tripp p20)

- ***The interpretation of life is different from God's*** – Satan took the facts of what God had said to Adam and Eve in the Garden and put a radically different spin on them (Genesis 1:4-5). Word problems are often interpretation problems. When Adam and Eve no longer believed the facts about what God had said but instead responded to Satan's interpretation it paved the way for their choice to sin. When we fail to respond to the facts of what someone has said or done but rather to our interpretation of those facts problems arise in our relationships.
- ***For the first time a lie is spoken*** – previously every word spoken was truthful and God's words were relied on perfectly and trusted implicitly. This meant that Adam and Eve's relationship was based on consistent truth and trust. "But Satan lies to advance his purposes.....Good, godly communication is always dependent on truth. Lies, falsehood, and deception always subvert it.....Most of our communication problems come because we deceive, distort, and manipulate with our words. We reshape facts to our advantage, we recast events, often to the point of convincing ourselves that our perspective is true." (Tripp p22)
- ***For the first time people spoke against each other*** – Up to this point there had been no critical, condemning, angry words. There had been no accusations, blaming or put downs. But not only had Adam and Eve's relationship with God dramatically changed, so had their relationship with each other. No longer does Adam protect and stand up for Eve, but instead points the finger of blame on her as the cause of the trouble. How much of our communication is about passing blame to others? It gets worse, since for the first time words of accusation are spoken against God (Genesis 3:12). Adam claimed that if God had not given him that woman (notice that she is now objectified as 'the woman' and no longer Eve, the love of his life) none of this would have happened. "Just like Adam, we blame people and situations for our problems, below the surface we are making accusations against God."(Tripp p24)

The power of our words

We have all experienced the difficulty of controlling our words and the serious consequences to our relationships when we get it wrong. How often we regret our thoughtless or unkind remarks, how we wish some things had remained unsaid, how regularly we need to ask forgiveness for our cutting or angry responses even to those that we say we love.

The passage in James 3:1-12 diagnoses our problem exactly. James helps us to understand the universality of the problem in verse 2 "If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man able to keep his whole body in check." And in verse 8 he expresses the immense power and consequences of our untamable tongues "but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

The awful result is that we use the same tongue to both worship the Lord then to curse our brother or sister in Christ. We know that this is wrong and yet we seem incapable of controlling our tongue. James' conclusion is that the problem lies at a much deeper level, that what comes out of our mouths is the natural result of what is going on in our hearts (James 3:11-12).

In Luke 6:43-45 Christ spoke to this issue recognizing that the problem of our words is really a problem of our hearts:-

“No good tree bears bad fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”

This is a devastating conclusion, perhaps we can only accept it because it is Christ speaking God’s word to us. How do we respond to these words? Paul Tripp suggests “We must begin by admitting that people and situations do not cause us to speak as we do. Our hearts control our words. People and situations simply provide the occasion for the heart to express itself. Humbly confessing this opens up to us the floodgates of God’s forgiveness and power. “He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9”

“Words kill, words give life; they’re either poison or fruit – you choose.” (The Message)

This may seem a somewhat brutal analysis of both the power and the consequences of the words that we use and how we use them. Carole Mayhall draws a similar conclusion in her book entitled “Words that hurt and words that heal”. Let’s look at our speech and seek to honestly identify where the problems and the positives may be found.

Words that kill, words that hurt:-

Careless words – Proverbs 10:11 says “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life” but as Carole Mayhall remarks instead of being a fountain of life we can be a babbling brook. The problem with many words is that they can become careless, lazy and inaccurate, we can slip into sharing confidences, exaggerating the truth, or just endlessly talking about ourselves and ignoring the needs of the listener. Carelessness can also show up when we spout surface answers to deep problems and hurts. How often has someone asked you how you are, then failed to listen to the answer! Proverbs 10:19 says “When words are many sin is not absent” But “He who guards his lips, guards his soul” Proverbs 13:3.

Flattery – Flattery is saying something to someone’s face that you would never say behind their back. This can result from careless speech. The real problem with flattery is the motivation behind it. “To flatter means to praise too much, untruthfully, or insincerely in order to gain favour. When we flatter we may be trying to place someone in debt to us by commending an action, an ability, or a physical or character trait. It differs from genuine praise or compliment by its motive.” (Mayhall p48)

Gossip – Gossip is saying something behind someone’s back that you would never say to their face. To gossip is extremely tempting but it is an ugly sin with huge consequences for those who indulge in it. Proverbs 16:28 warns us that “...a gossip separates close friends.” Also “A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.” Proverbs 11:13. So to gossip is serious since it results in quarrels, jealousy, factions; it destroys relationships and shows us to be untrustworthy.

Slander – Whereas gossip can be careless, slander is purposeful, “Slander is a false statement made about someone with malicious intent.....the open, intentional sharing of damaging information and is characterized by bad reports that blemish or defame a person’s reputation *whether they are true or not!*” (Mayhall p54) It is often driven by anger and the desire for revenge.

“Slander begins in the mind. Is born in the sinful nature and nourished by relishing resentment and feeding envy. It grows until it erupts as a disfigured monster hiding under a mask of respectability.” (Mayhall p60)

Criticism - How easy we find it to endlessly find fault with others or to stand in judgement on their actions or their motives. The great danger with this is that it usurps the place of God as the only true and righteous judge and brings us under his judgement. The Lord Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount “Do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”(Matthew 7:1-2)

Bragging – “One way that we continually contaminate the well of speech is by bragging or boasting. Most of us are adept at both by subtle or not-so-subtle ways.....name-dropping, place-dropping, event-dropping. Even successful-ministry-dropping. We may need to share information but the difference with that and boasting is in *who gets the glory.*” (Mayhall p31)

Proverbs 27:2 says “Let another praise you and not your own mouth; someone else and not your own lips.”

Reckless, unrestrained words – Proverbs 12:18 says “Reckless words pierce like a sword”. These are so often the words that we wish could be unsaid because like the wound of a sword they not only injure but they scar for life. They are usually the product of anger that is unrestrained and in the heat of the moment calculated to hurt “Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming.....A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control” (Proverbs 27:4 and 29:11).

We can so easily find excuses for our uncontrolled words and feel ourselves in the right, but James reminds us “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” Why? “For man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.” (James 1:19-20)

Words that give life, words that heal:-

Truthful words - “Good, godly communication is always dependent on truth. Lies, falsehood and deception always subvert it. Lies not only distort facts, but they destroy the trust necessary for people to talk to one another. Every word we speak is either rooted in the truth or in a lie.” (Tripp p23)

Ephesians 4:25 speaks of this close linkage between truth and trust in our relationships “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we

are all members of one body.” Truth was the first casualty of the Fall that led to broken relationships but must become the foundation for all our words.

Discretion – this means to be prudent, tactful, judicious, cautious, diplomatic and polite. It also implies the ability to think before speaking and to know when to speak. Another aspect of discretion is the aptness of what we say. There are several references to this in the book of Proverbs:-

“The heart of the righteous weighs its answers” 15:28

“A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.” 25:11

“The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life” 10:11

“The lips of the righteous nourish many...” 10:21

“The tongue of the wise brings healing.” 12:18

“Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and healing to the bones.” 16:24

“An anxious heart weighs a man down but a kind word cheers him up.” 12:25

Encouragement – encouragement may take different forms; it may be to urge forward to exhort or it may require coming along side with wise counsel, advice or to bring comfort and consolation. In Ephesians 4:29 Paul describes this use of our words as building others up, i.e. building others up in their faith and trust in God and helping them to fix their hope in him. Paul Tripp points out three things that we need to consider to be effective in this:-

1. I must consider the *person* (“only what is helpful for building others up”). What do I know about this individual that would shape what I say?
2. I must consider the *problem* (“according to their needs”). What is this person’s real need in this situation, and how should it guide what I say?
3. I must consider the *process* (“that it may benefit those who listen”). I am not just spouting off. My communication should have a redemptive purpose; it should benefit the listener.

Affirmation – This is the habit of seeing and affirming what is good in others. For some of us this is something that we are quick to do with children and comparative strangers but often slow to do with those close to us. William R. Miller suggests that “An antidote to this negativity bias is to develop a habit of noticing and appreciating what is good, consciously and conscientiously to catch people doing something well. Affirming can involve recognizing and commenting on someone’s strengths, efforts, steps in the right direction, or best intentions. It need not be something large or grand and it should always be genuine, not manufactured or exaggerated.” (Miller p42)

Humble, gentle and patient – Ephesians 4:2 says “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another with love.” Paul is advising how believers should behave towards each other in order to walk worthy of their calling in Christ. This is probably true both in what we say but also in *how* we speak – the volume, tone and attitude. This is

especially important in avoiding or dealing with potential conflicts. “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (Proverbs 15:1)

Words of reconciliation – 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 in this wonderful passage Paul explains that as those who have been forgiven, and reconciled to God through Christ, we have been given the ministry of reconciliation. That God has committed to us the message of reconciliation, and that as Christ’s ambassadors, God is making his appeal through us to be reconciled to God.

This is a high calling, but it plays out daily, when we as forgiven sinners are faced with the choice of offering words of forgiveness to those who hurt or offend us, or of extracting the debt owed like the unmerciful servant in the parable in Matthew 18:21-35.

“We are called to speak for the King. God has put us just where he wants us in order to make his appeal through us. We need to be committed to his higher agenda, living and speaking out of self-sacrificing love, humble forgiveness, and a commitment to reconciliation.” (Tripp p119)

Root and fruit

How do we make good choices and change the pattern of our speech? We saw earlier that Jesus diagnosed the fruit of our mouths comes from the root of our heart. Our words are controlled by the thoughts and motives of our hearts. Whatever controls our hearts will control our words. James 4:1-10 describes this battle for control of our hearts:-

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.....”

Paul Tripp suggests that we need to examine our own hearts since the words we speak are directly related to what we want and are used to get what is important to us. He would say that there is a battle for control of our hearts. It is not that our desires are necessarily wrong or for bad things, but the problem is when those desires compete with our love for God and his rightful place in our heart.

“When a desire becomes a demand, at that moment it effectively replaces God as the controller of my heart. Scripture calls this an idol. Idolatry is when my heart is controlled or ruled by anything other than God.....Rather than being motivated by a love for God and my neighbour, I am motivated by a pursuit for what will bring me pleasure, and I am angry at anyone who stands in the way.” (Tripp p59)

Tripp explains that it is only when God has his rightful place as King in our lives, when we understand his sovereignty and submit to his rule will we live and speak as he designed. We will then be able to relinquish *our* control and *our* plan for *our* own glory and be committed to an agenda of speaking to accomplish God’s will, to the praise of his glory. It is in this

sense that we truly become God's (the King's) ambassadors, representing him and helping to fulfil his mission.

Communication and our relationships

"We are profoundly social creatures. Our language, customs, values, attitudes, beliefs and even our self-understanding develop from interacting with others. If someone asks 'who are you?' much of the answer is likely to be framed in terms of relationships." (Miller p1)

"Good communication is essential for any effective relationship, and one of the most important ingredients in it. If we are to succeed in marriage and family, in friendship, in sharing a flat, in a business or sports team, or working together in Christian service, we must learn to communicate openly and clearly with one another. Some of us are better communicators than others but for all of us it is of vital importance to work at it, to make it a real priority." (Gordon and Rosemary Jones p54)

Levels of communication:-

- The formal, polite greetings and superficial conversation e.g. small talk
- The exchange of third party, non-personal facts and information
- The owning of personally held ideas, views and opinions (the head)
- The sharing of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, i.e. who I am (the heart)

To communicate at this deeper level, is not just to exchange information but to share your thoughts and feelings, to reveal yourself, and to allow yourself to be known. This level of communication is appropriate in a few close personal relationships and is vital in the marriage relationship. It takes commitment, time and courage.

Some of us fail in our ability to listen well, others fail in our ability to express our feelings. We need to become good at talking and listening in order to develop meaningful relationships. Although hugely important in developing and maintaining relationships, for whatever reason, it may be possible to spend all our time and effort on listening and avoiding revealing ourselves. Everyone loves a good listener!

"In fact it is possible to hide behind good listening without revealing much about yourself, and others may happily go along with this. Close relationships, however, should involve two way communication, with each partner having the opportunity to understand and be understood. This means not just listening but also expressing yourself, making yourself known." (Miller p45)

Verbal communication

Verbal communication needs the two way process of both speaking and listening. We need to aim for clarity in our speech as much as accuracy in listening. To be clear means to be precise and specific, using words that are direct and concise not rambling and ambiguous. This is important in passing on information, but is vital when handling sensitive issues or areas of conflict, when it is essential to be clearly understood. With this in mind, it may be a good idea to ask for feedback to know that we have been understood correctly.

It has been said that in communication 55% is attitude, 38% is non-verbal communication and only 7% is verbal communication. What are some of the clues that can help us with picking up non-verbal communication?

Non-verbal communication

- What is the person's demeanor? Are they upright, engaged, interested, eager to get involved in conversation or are they downcast, hunched and dejected looking?
- Do they look happy, sad, tired, confused, worried, bored or angry?
- Do they avoid eye contact, look evasive, guilty or ashamed?
- Does their body language show relaxation, control, tension, lack of involvement, aggression or fear?
- Do they change the subject when the conversation gets too close to certain issues?
- Do they withdraw emotionally, become silent or walk away for fear of facing confrontation?

The environment for communication

Communication at any level is more likely to be effective where there is a climate of warmth, trust and respect for one another. If there is mistrust, coldness and even hostility, it is much more difficult to establish good communication.

"If barriers have built up, the risk of not hearing or of not being heard, is much greater. Where there are lots of unresolved issues, communication is clouded by old disagreements, conflicts and hurts. New disagreements are seen in light of these old hurts. Unresolved issues need to be resolved so that a trusting environment can be built and good communication can take place." (Jones p58)

To build an environment of trust we should be genuinely encouraging, affirming, kind and caring; avoiding harsh, critical or judgmental language. Demonstrating warmth, concern, openness and honesty helps to build the trust that allows even the difficult things to be said, since the person feels that you are on their side and for them not against them. This in turn allows the barriers to come down and communication to move to a deeper level.

Communication in developing relationships

Our goal in communicating is to build a relationship of mutual trust and respect. As we have said already, trust and respect opens the door for us to communicate at a deeper level, to take the barriers down, to be ourselves and to be known.

Conversation is important – that seems a redundant statement, and yet in this era of digital communication, the exchange of emails, texts, tweets and posts on social media are not the same as face to face conversations in which we give and receive all those clues to non-verbal communication and in which we can communicate value and worth to each other by giving our time, effort and attention.

Our relationships grow when we ask questions, show interest in someone and find out just how interesting they are. Ask about their interests, their hopes, plans and dreams, about

their concerns and worries. Don't be content with the superficial, the factual stuff or just talking about what they do – the favourite topic in our culture.

It helps to show an interest in what they are interested in. Discover their opinions and views on everyday issues as well as the more significant issues. Hospitality, sharing a meal or even a cup of coffee can oil the flow of the extended sharing of conversation and to deepen friendship.

Reaching those deeper levels of communication means being willing to share our feelings not just our ideas and opinions. This area of communication is overlaid with gender, culture and temperament differences. Traditionally men were not encouraged to show or to talk about feelings. In some western cultures this has changed a little so that it is now more acceptable, but still may not be easy, especially for those of the older generation.

For certain temperament types to share deep feelings is difficult, because it is too self-revelatory and therefore risks rejection. For example someone may think "If I tell you who I am and you don't like it, I have nothing left to give."

For some there is not just the risk of rejection but the fear that some of their feelings are rooted in deep hurts or losses of their past, or childhood even, and to speak about them is almost impossible without tears or anger. Consequently some of the most formative parts of their lives, those that have influenced and conditioned much of who they are, may remain 'off limits' even in the closest relationships.

Learning to express our feelings, when things are going well may help to be able to express them in the difficult times. It is as if having tested the bridge of acceptance with that person with the relatively easy stuff, we gain the trust and confidence to communicate the harder things; to be open and honest and to make ourselves vulnerable.

"We have a responsibility to communicate to others how we feel and what we think. Failure to do so is dishonest and is letting them down. This is particularly so in the case of close relationships, such as marriage, family, close friends and indeed for members of a small team, who should have a high degree of commitment to the other members." (Jones p61)

Although great thought and prayer should go into choosing the right time to communicate negative feelings, it is always a good time to express appreciation, gratitude and genuine affirmation towards others.

Just as we need to be willing to take the risk of being misunderstood in sharing our feelings, we also need to be sensitive to others and to show a real desire to understand and to empathise with them, to allow them to be transparent with us. In order to do this we need to grow in our ability to listen effectively and empathetically.

Listening well

"The gift of being a good listener, a gift that requires constant practice, is perhaps the most healing gift anyone can possess, for it allows the other to *be*, enfolds them in a safe place, does not judge or advise them, and communicates support at a level deeper than words." (Gerard Hughes)

It is easy to think that the most important part of communication is talking. The bible strongly challenges this view, placing much greater emphasis on the need to listen.

“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,” James 1:19

“He who answers before listening – that is his folly and shame.” Proverbs 18:13

When we are quick to listen and slow to speak our relationships function better. But instead of really listening we find ourselves formulating what we want to say while the other person is still speaking.

As human beings one of our greatest longings is to be listened to, taken seriously and understood. (Paul Tournier)

Listening is a powerful way of showing that we value each other. But it is also costly since it takes effort and self-sacrifice to listen while others express their feelings and opinions.

“In true listening we reach behind the words, see through them, to find the person who is being revealed. Listening is a search to find the treasure of the true person as revealed verbally and non-verbally. There is the semantic problem, or course, the words bear a different connotation for you than they do for me. Consequently, I can never tell you what you said, but only what I heard. I will have to rephrase what you have said, and check it out with you to make sure that what left your mind and heart arrived in my mind and heart intact and without distortion.” Dr. J. Powell

Before looking at what makes for effective listening it may be helpful to identify where we can go wrong as a listener:-

Five profiles of a poor listener

Referenced from “The Marriage Book” by Nicky and Sila Lee.

1. **The Advice giver** – Instead of aiming to empathise with the person, the ‘advice giver’ wants to sort out the problem. The person does not want advice, they want to be listened to, given attention and understood.
2. **The Interrupter** – Instead of listening when someone else is speaking, ‘the interrupter’ is working out what to say next. They may not even wait for the other person to finish their sentence before finishing it off for them. It has been estimated that the average person listens for seventeen seconds before interrupting. Some people work out what they think as they are speaking, while others are thought through before they speak. If we don’t listen and wait to give the person time to think, they will be discouraged from expressing themselves at all.
3. **The Reassurer** – This is the person who jumps in prematurely, before the sentence is finished with some vague reassuring comment like “It probably isn’t as bad as you think” or “It will work out alright in the end”. ‘The reassurer’ stops any real expression of feelings, whether anxiety, disappointment or hurt. It also minimizes the person’s feelings or their sense of worth.

4. **The Rationaliser** – Rather than seeking to listen, this person focuses on explaining *why* we feel as we do. This again has the effect of diminishing the person and their problem and lacks the empathy and understanding they are needing
5. **The Deflector** – Instead of commenting on the issue raised, ‘the deflector’ takes the conversation off at a tangent, usually on to something that interests them. They are listening more to their own thoughts and memories than to the other person. It may also be a way of avoiding a difficult issue.

Learning to be a good listener:-

Giving our full attention – This is important because it communicates love and value to the person. Eye contact demonstrates undivided attention, along with proximity and body language. – “I am all here and ready to listen to you, because you are important to me.”

Avoiding distractions – It is hard to listen when there is a lot of background noise or when one or both of you is distracted. Switch off the T.V., put down the book, newspaper, phone etc. stop working on your laptop, tablet or whatever task is before you, in order to give yourself to listening with all your heart and mind.

Filters – sometimes our own thoughts or memories obstruct our listening. They can also create a filter as to how we hear and understand what is being said. We interpret the situation through past experiences and meanings which we overlay on the present.

Show interest – make an effort to listen carefully to what others find interesting, it is a compelling way to show love. Ask questions that the other person will enjoy answering. This is especially important when trying to identify with a person with whom there is a gap in age or culture.

Listen intelligently – To relive and describe in detail some hurt or long standing problem can be costly. It is easy to skirt around the subject or to allude to it through humour. It is sometimes necessary to listen behind the words to detect the hidden agenda. Give the person time to articulate their thoughts. Don’t be afraid of silences.

Listen uncritically – communication flourishes with acceptance of each other and is crushed by criticism. We need to be able to listen without becoming defensive or butting in. The objective of listening is to understand and accept someone else’s views, opinions, ideas and feelings, not to judge whether they are right or wrong.

Acknowledge their feelings – to repeat back in your own words what the person has been telling you can be helpful, especially when deep feelings have been expressed. It helps us to know that we have properly heard and understood what the person has said. But be careful not to interpret or to put your own spin on their words.

Give advice only if asked – we need to guard against the desire to *fix* the situation. Giving advice is counter-productive and giving a *quick fix* isn’t what is required. The process of exploring our feelings and meeting with acceptance and empathy is the solution. They will ask for advice if that is what they are looking for.

Listening with empathy

“You never really understand another person until you consider things from his point of view – until you climb inside his skin and walk around in it.”

Harper Lee, *To kill a mocking bird*

Apathy is the absence of feeling and caring for another person and may also involve a lack of emotional connectedness, concern or interest.

Sympathy involves feeling *for* or pitying someone, but implies a certain amount of distance, feeling bad *for* someone else. Although motivated by genuine compassion it does not require what Harper Lee suggests, that you climb inside their skin and walk around in it.

Empathy involves not only attention to, but connecting with the other person, an active interest in understanding what he or she is experiencing. Miller would say that this is not the same as identifying with someone. It does not require having a similar experience or feeling, which can sometimes interfere with the ability to listen without reference to, or comparison with, one's own experience.

Miller would say that to listen with empathy is a gift, since it conveys care and respect, it says “You matter to me. I want to understand what you mean and am willing to take the time to know you better. What you say and mean is important to me.”

When someone feels heard and understood they don't need to keep on repeating themselves over and over again, since the listener 'gets it' and ultimately it can head off misunderstandings and deepen the relationship.

Three attitudes that help us to listen with empathy:-

Based on Miller p12-13

1. That it is valuable to see through another's eyes, 'to walk in their shoes', to understand what they perceive and experience, not just to guess or make assumptions which may well be wrong.
2. To be willing not to be the centre of attention. To be empathetic is to step away from self-centredness, to temporarily suspend your own 'stuff' in the service of understanding, to genuinely be interested and curious about the experiences of others.
3. To discover that other people have much to teach us, that we can gain from their wisdom, especially from those who are different from us. Respecting and valuing differences and learning from them should engender not just understanding but a compassion for their well-being and a desire for the relief from their suffering.

Roadblocks to listening

These are ways that we may respond reflexively when seeking to listen well, which tend to divert people from the natural flow of expressing themselves and their experience. The speaker must then go round the roadblock in order to keep on exploring in the same

direction. They get in the way of understanding and could communicate to the speaker a kind of one-up man ship i.e. "I know best, listen to me."

William Miller borrowed and revised these from the writings of Thomas Gordon. They are listed below in heading form but fuller examples are on pp14-17 of Miller's book:-

1. *Directing* is telling someone what to do, as if giving an order or command.
E.g. Stop complaining and do something about it!
2. *Warning* involves pointing out the risks or dangers of what a person is doing. This can also be a threat.
E.g. If you do, you will be sorry.
3. *Advising* includes making suggestions and providing solutions, usually with the intention of being helpful.
E.g. Here is what I would do if I were you.....
4. *Persuading* can be lecturing, arguing, giving reasons, or trying to convince with logic.
E.g. Now let's think it through. The facts are....
5. *Moralizing* is telling people what they should do.
E.g. I think you ought to....
6. *Judging* can take the form of blaming, criticizing, or simply disagreeing.
E.g. Well it's your own fault!
7. *Agreeing* sounds like taking sides with the person, perhaps approving or praising.
E.g. Yes, your absolutely right. Good for you!
8. *Shaming* or ridiculing can include attaching a name or stereotype to what the person is saying or doing.
E.g. You really ought to be ashamed of yourself.
9. *Analysing* offers a reinterpretation or explanation of what the person is saying or doing.
E.g. Do you know what your real problem is?
10. *Probing* asks questions to gather facts or press for more information.
E.g. What makes you feel that way? Why?
11. *Reassuring* can sound like sympathising or consoling.
E.g. Oh you poor thing. I'm sorry for you. I'm sure this will all work out.
12. *Distracting* tries to draw people away from what they are experiencing by humouring, changing the subject or withdrawing.
E.g. Oh, aren't you the gloomy one! Lighten up.

As well as avoiding 'road blocks' we also need to be careful of asking too many questions. In an attempt to be a good listener, we may just ask far too many questions, which makes the speaker feel like they are being interrogated. It also draws the conversation in the way that you want to go, which is possibly not the direction that is important to the speaker. But there is definitely a place for questions, especially well asked open questions, that invite the person to express what they want to say or that help to clarify what you do not understand.

"A peculiar thing often happens in conflict situations: people just stop listening to each other." (Miller p84), but that is our subject for next time.

Communication self-evaluation

1. Does your talk with others lead to biblical problem solving?
2. Does your talk have a “stand together” or a “me against him/her/them” posture?
3. Do your words encourage others to be open and honest about their thoughts and feelings?
4. Are you approachable and teachable or defensive and self-protective when talking to others?
5. Is your communication healthy in the principal relationships in your life e.g. spouse, children, siblings, extended family, friends, colleagues, neighbours, body of Christ?
6. Does your talk encourage faith and personal spiritual growth in those around you?
7. Do you talk with others to develop relationships with them, or do you only talk to solve problems during times of trouble?
8. Do you speak humble and honest words of confession when you sin and words of sincere forgiveness when others sin against you?
9. Do your words reflect a willingness to serve others or a demand that they serve you?
10. As you face the struggles of talk, do you do so with a recognition of the gospel – God’s forgiveness, his enabling grace, and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit?

Referenced from “War of words” by Paul David Tripp p 16.

How am I listening? (From a seminar given by Global Connections)

1. I am patient with those who have difficulty putting their feelings into words.
2. When someone wants to talk with me, I make sure he/she is physically comfortable.
3. I am concerned and empathetic when someone expresses very deep feelings.
4. If I need uninterrupted time to listen, I do whatever I can to provide privacy.
5. When others share with me, I encourage them to continue as long as they need to, without changing the subject.
6. I give appropriate eye contact, looking at the person enough but not too much.
7. My body posture and other non-verbal behavior communicates interest in the person.
8. I hold in strict confidence what is shared with me, unless I have permission to share.
9. I respect other’s privacy, by encouraging them, without force or manipulation, to share from the heart.
10. I withhold making judgments until I have heard the whole story.
11. My facial expression shows that I am feeling with the person.
12. I try to learn and apply culturally relevant ways to listen to those from different cultures. (could include different gender, social background or age)
13. If someone comes to talk about a serious matter, I let them know up front if my time is limited by another commitment.
14. When I am listening I keep interruptions, such as telephone calls, to a minimum.
15. I gladly stop what I am doing when someone comes to talk with me.

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Points to Ponder:-

1. From the “words that kill and words that give life” section and the self-evaluation questions are there any specific areas of speech that you have become aware of that you need to avoid or need to strengthen?
2. Relationships are strengthened by sharing deeply and listening well. Do you think that this has been an area of growth for you as you have got older or has time resulted in taking relationships for granted or building up ‘no go’ areas?
3. How has the increase in digital forms of communication over the last 20 years affected the depth of your communication and the quality of your relationships?
4. What, for you, are barriers to good communication and what is conducive to good communication?
5. Check out the ‘How am I at listening’ statements. The idea is that you are supposed to rate yourself from 1-5 i.e. from hardly ever to nearly always. How do you rate?
6. Do you identify yourself in any of the poor listener profiles? Why do you think that you have that tendency?
7. Listening well is a gift we can give others demonstrating to them respect, care and value, how can you improve your listening skills and listen with genuine empathy?