
VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: BIBLICAL MARRIAGE

LECTURE 7: COMMUNICATION

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The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

BIBLICAL MARRIAGE

8 LECTURES

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2. The Unity in Marriage
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Lecture 7

COMMUNICATION

TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 7

Many of you often use a cell phone. What is the purpose of a phone? It's obviously for communicating with other people. You may carry it with you so that others can get in contact with you, or so that you can reach them when you need to do so. People use cell phones for texting, speaking, and listening, but they also use them to access Internet websites, or to get directions when traveling from one place to another. You may even be listening to these lectures on a phone. But for a cell phone to work properly, there must be a connection on both sides. If you're talking into the phone and there is no one on the other side, it will not be of much use to you; or, if you visit a website that does not exist, you will not receive any benefit. Connection is essential.

The same is true more generally in all human relationships, but especially in marriage. To pursue unity with your spouse, you must connect with them in order to share the same thoughts and ideas about what the Bible teaches. If this communication breaks down, well, everything else in the relationship will also crumble. There are as many threats to marital unity as there are types of sin. In both our relationship with the Lord and in our relationship with others, we see that sin repels, whereas grace draws. Sin separates, whereas the grace of the gospel actually unites.

In these last two lectures, we will cover four of the most common areas in which marital conflict arises. We'll cover two of them in this lecture and then two more in the final lecture. But the purpose of these sessions is to illustrate how the principles we have previously laid down are applied to these specific challenges. Each of these areas need to be more thoroughly studied than we'll have time and space to cover here, but these introductory points will assist you in the practical pursuit of oneness or unity within marriage. And, as I noted, we have selected four of the most common areas of difficulty when it comes to unity in marriage.

Well, how important is communication in a godly marriage? What problems often arise in this area of marriage, and how does God say to address them? If God gives a couple children, what does He say about raising those children? Why is it essential that spouses be united in their understanding of what the Bible teaches on these matters? In this lecture, we will consider cultivating marital unity through communication and in raising children. In the next lecture, we will consider two more areas that are potentially challenging, but also prime opportunities for strengthening your relationship with your spouse.

First of all, cultivating marital unity through godly communication. Godly communication is essential to a biblical marriage. In fact, breakdown in communication is one of the most common areas of marital dysfunction. Many other areas in marriage will suffer from a lack of clear, biblical, faithful communication. You'll remember, for example, in our opening two lectures where we dealt with unity and conflict resolution. We saw there how, in resolving conflict biblically, communication was indispensable. In Ephesians 4:29 we read, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers." You should note the context of verses 25-31, in which we find that particular passage. The Bible also teaches that the tongue is directly tied to the heart. Jesus said in Matthew 15:18, "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart." In other words, your mouth is actually a window

into your soul. We can see what's inside our souls by what comes out of our mouths. And so it's no wonder that James, in his epistle, James 1:26, says that our speech is actually a test of our spirituality, our godliness.

Consider some of the prerequisites to godly communication. What are the things that are necessary, that lie behind godly communication? I'll mention a handful of them. First of all, you need a desire to please Christ more than yourself and a desire to please Christ more than your spouse. You need to be cultivating a growing sense of gospel humility. Pride is actually one of the primary root causes of breakdowns in communication. You might find help and looking at a few passages in the New Testament, for example, Ephesians 4:1-3 or Philippians 2:1-4 or James 4:6-7 or 1 Peter 5:5-9. So there needs to be a cultivation of gospel humility. You also need a sense of accountability to the Lord for your words. Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 12:36-37, "That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." Another prerequisite is a commitment to taking the time to communicate. So, obviously, having a conversation requires that you set aside time for this priority. These are all prerequisites.

Well, in turning our attention to communication itself, it is helpful, first of all, to distinguish between verbal and nonverbal communication. That is, communication that uses words and ways of communicating without words.

First, we'll consider nonverbal communication. You realize, I'm sure, that you can say volumes without uttering a word. For example, people regularly communicate in the following nonverbal ways: they'll communicate love or happiness or fear or sadness, indifference, apathy, anger, physical attraction, irritation, discouragement, doubt, guilt, boredom. All of these things can be communicated without the use of words: through one's disposition, their attitude or the look that they have on their face or their body language. So, nonverbal communication includes how we say what we say, in other words, our attitude or our disposition. Think of the various ways that you can say, for example, "Could you please come here?" Well, you can use the words, "Could you please come here," with an attitude that communicates anger or desperation or maybe even sadness. It can communicate love; it can communicate cheerfulness; it can communicate apathy. It's not just what we say, but it's how we communicate what we're saying.

Our actions, of course, also communicate. If you say that you want to spend some time with your spouse, but instead you waste lots of time on the computer, your actions will actually speak louder than your words. We need to keep our word, keep our promises.

Well, in thinking about verbal communication, the first part of verbal communication is actually listening. The first part of verbal communication is listening. You have to commit to listening first, before speaking. James 1:19 says, "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak." We could avoid problems half of the time if we would simply stop and concentrate on what our spouse is saying. Consider Proverbs 10:19. God says that jumping ahead to what we think our spouse is thinking before we actually hear what they say is utter folly. God says in Proverbs 18:13, "He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him."

So, let me provide some practical commitments and some practical guidelines with regards to listening. Some of them are rather simple. First of all, you should concentrate on what your spouse is saying. You have to actually focus your mind on what they're saying. You should not interrupt until they're finished saying what they're saying. You also need to be careful not to formulate in your mind your answer while the other person is talking. You'll be thinking about one thing rather than thinking about what they're communicating to you. You also need to give each other time to process information and to respond. It's especially helpful to ask questions in order to clarify what your spouse means by the words that they're using. And perhaps most importantly - and this is one that I hope you'll really hold on to - do not assume that you understand what your spouse is saying until you can restate what your spouse has said to their satisfaction. And, this is of enormous help. It will solve many problems. Your spouse can finish telling you something that they think is very important. The best thing to do is to start by saying, "This is what I understand you to be saying," and to actually repeat it, and to not move on until they are satisfied that you actually are understanding them. This is a big help.

The second part of verbal communication is speaking. So we begin with listening, and then we turn to speaking. Bridling the tongue comes with great difficulty; you'll know the passage in James 3:2. James is saying this is one of the most difficult things, to actually bridle the tongue. It means that the believer should be praying for

help because of the difficulty. In fact, we sing of this in Psalm 141:3 where it says, “Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the doors of my lips.” Failure to bridle the tongue creates great havoc and damage. In fact, that passage in James 3:5 and following describes it as a little fire; it begins as a little fire, and it ends up consuming everything all around it. It can be very destructive. Conversely, guarding the mouth saves you from trouble. Proverbs 21:23 says, “Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue keepeth his soul from troubles.” This means that if you can discipline your tongue, then much marital grief will be avoided.

Another point that is important with regards to speaking is a commitment to be open and honest. Do not tell a partial truth, and do not be evasive in your conversation with your wife. Be straightforward in what you are saying. Let your yes be yes and your no, no. You’ll remember, in the first session, the importance of openness and how that cultivates trust. Now this, of course, has to be balanced with another point, a complementary point. Proverbs 15:1 tells us, “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.” We need to know how to answer and how to ensure that our speech is gracious and seasoned with salt, as we read in Colossians 4:6. So, you need to guard how you say what you say. Consider Proverbs 16:32, Colossians 4:6 which we’ve mentioned, and Ephesians 4:29-32. For example, this includes avoiding a sharp or harsh tone, avoiding outbursts or yelling or name-calling or belittling, which are better known in the Bible as bitterness, anger, slander, malice, and so forth. You’re not to respond in like kind if your spouse is sinning with their tongue, Proverbs 26:4-5.

Another factor that’s easy to overlook is, you should remember that the timing of what you say can have just as big of an impact as what you say. In other words, ask yourself the question, “Is this the best time to say this?” Now, do not needlessly delay. You need to be prompt in dealing with issues, but always think about what to say before you say it. Proverbs 15:28, “The heart of the righteous studieth to answer: but the mouth of the wicked poureth out evil things.” There’s reflection and consideration; “What should I say, and what is the best timing for saying it?” Some areas, of course, will be easier to talk about than others, and that means you need to work on those areas that are most challenging.

Let me give you some examples. That could include your spiritual walk before the Lord or your opinions about certain things or concerns, your interests, your emotions, your goals and plans, perhaps your expectations. Sometimes talking about finances is difficult, or about biblical convictions or about your work. Oftentimes, talking about parenting can be difficult, or dreams that you have for the future or physical intimacy in marriage, talking about friends or problems, failures, victories, current events, even what you read. Some of these are far easier to discuss than others, but it gives us an example of the kind of things that we can consider.

Now, there are two opposite errors when it comes to communication. On the one hand, you can be tempted to blow up; there is an explosion; you’re very upset. On the other hand, you can be tempted to clam up, to actually kind of pull inward and to stop talking. But not speaking is also a sin. If you tend to clam up or to shut down, to stop speaking, then you need to work on getting what is on the inside to the outside in a godly spirit. We also need to be able to communicate reproof with a gentle spirit when that is needed. Think of how it’s described in Galatians 6:1 or, as we saw in a previous lecture, Matthew 18:15 and following, or Proverbs 25:12.

Above and beyond some of these practical manners, this includes cultivating spiritual conversation. Just as we are to speak with our children all day about spiritual things, as we see in Deuteronomy 6:6 and following, so married couples should cultivate spiritual conversation. There’s a beautiful illustration of this in the prophet Malachi 3:16-18. Spiritual-mindedness produces spiritual conversation. Notice how these are tied together in Romans 8:5-6, as well as the opening verses of Colossians 3. What you think about most is what you will talk about most. Like an overflowing glass, if you continue to fill the mind with good things, it will eventually spill out your mouth. We are to study one another so that we know how to best stir one another up to love and to good deeds as we see in Hebrews 10:24. So, self-consciously plan and employ your mouth to build up your spouse and to minister grace unto them.

Let me provide some further practical suggestions. First of all, you need to be willing to admit that you are part of the problem (Proverbs 20:6), and you need to be willing to change. You need also to avoid using emotionally-charged words. Be responsible for your own emotions, as well as your words and actions, without blaming your sin on your spouse. Think of James 1:13-15, which may provide some help. Do not rehearse old arguments. Remember that where forgiveness has been granted, those things are to be forgotten; they’re to be buried and put

out of our thoughts. In other words, you are to deal with the present needs and circumstances and not focus so much on the past.

As we noted earlier, you need to learn to communicate nonverbally in your attitude and actions, and you need to apply your mind to understanding why your spouse is saying what they're saying. So, for example, if they say, "You don't love me," then you need to think about what is behind that. What do they mean? What prompted that? What is their real concern? And this is a big part of growing to know your spouse. And, as Jesus says in Matthew 7:12, we're to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. You should always be more angry about your own sin than you are about your spouse's sin. There's that language of Job in Job 40:3-5, also that same book, Job 42:6, or you think of the expression of sorrow for sin in Ezra 9:6. Another practical suggestion would be to major on humbling yourself and admitting wrong. Make this one of your chief goals, that you want to uncover and acknowledge whatever you've done that is wrong. As noted above, pride is the primary culprit in communication breakdowns. I would encourage you to make a point of doing a thorough study of what the Bible teaches about the tongue and speech. Then seek the Lord's grace in applying these truths to your marriage relationship.

Secondly, we need to consider cultivating marital unity in child rearing. It is possible that a significant portion of your life will be devoted to raising children, and young couples should not make the mistake of thinking that they have time before they need to think about this topic. It is better to have talked through how you will raise your children before they arrive. You must be unified in your perspective and plan. Consider the biblical view of covenant children. The Bible teaches us that our children belong to the Lord: Genesis 17:7, 'I will be a God to you and to your children.' Our goal is to raise up "a godly seed" for the Lord, as we read in Malachi 2:15. Children are intended to be a blessing and a reward from the Lord. We sing about this in Psalm 127:3-5. On the other hand, foolish, ungodly children are a curse to their parents. Proverbs has a great deal to say about this [in] Proverbs 10:1, 15:20, 17:25, 19:13, 21:20, and others. Remember that parenting is a temporary stewardship. The husband-wife relationship is characterized by oneness, and the parent-child relationship is one of fruitfulness. The former, husband-wife, relationship is the first priority and the latter, parent-child, is secondary.

You need to learn how to biblically pursue proactive training. So first of all, discussion of spiritual matters in the home should be all day long. You should teach your children everywhere and all the time about God's Word. We saw that in Deuteronomy 6. You also see it in Deuteronomy 11:19 and following. Your own and your children's spiritual well-being is dependent on everyday exhortation. Hebrews 3:13 says, "Exhort one another daily." And so, the Christian's prayer is to see biblical faithfulness passed down through your children to your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren after you, if the Lord wills. Think of that language in Psalm 78:5-6 or Deuteronomy 4:9. As we noted in a previous lecture, Christian education is non-optional for a Christian home, and family worship is also non-optional for a Christian home, but godliness and child rearing will also include the practice of discipline.

Discipline is corrective; it is to train children, not primarily to punish them. Notice how the Lord brings this out in Hebrews 12:9-11. So, it is to train and to redirect the child rather than to exact justice on them. We're to use chastening during childhood "while there is hope," as Proverbs 19:18 says. Discipline is certainly not an excuse to satisfy the parent's unrighteous desires for control - "I'll show you who is bigger and better" -, nor is it an excuse to express vengeance - being angry and making the child pay for it. You cannot use discipline to vent your sinful response to a child who causes you some embarrassment or irritation or inconvenience or [is] wasting your time or perhaps even accidentally damaging your possessions. No. Disciplining our children is a matter of serving the Lord and obeying the Lord. This is why a failure to chasten them is actually rebellion on the parent's part against God. The Lord says, "Withhold not correction from the child" (Proverbs 23:13-14). Furthermore, a failure to chasten children is actually hateful to the child. Proverbs 13:24 says, "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes." You'll see the same point in 19:18. So, a failure to chasten them is miserable. It's miserable, of course, for the parent. The Bible says, "A child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame," Proverbs 29:15,17. A failure to chasten or discipline a child is a means of honoring our children above God. You have the example of Eli with his sons. Go back and read 1 Samuel 2:29 and 3:13; the Lord actually chastened Eli because he refused to restrain his sons in their ungodliness.

God has ordained the use of the rod in the family. You see that throughout the Proverbs. You see it as well in the New Testament, like Hebrews 12. So, in the family God has ordained the rod; in the state or government,

God has ordained the sword, as we see in Romans 13:4; and within the church, the Lord has ordained the use of the keys, the keys of the kingdom (Matthew 16:19): the rod for the family, the sword for the state, and keys for the church. We should follow the wisdom of God in using an implement, a rod, for disciplining children. This, of course, requires faith in God's Word, because we may be hesitant to do so. But Proverbs 22:15 says, "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him." We need to believe the Word of God and to act upon it. And that rod should be coupled with rebuke, so with words. The children need both instruction and chastening. Proverbs 29:15 says, "The rod and reproof give wisdom." A rod is necessary because children are foolish and devoid of understanding (Proverbs 10:13, 22:15, 26:3). And the use of the rod is to be motivated by love, again, Proverbs 13:24 and Proverbs 19:18. Contrary to what the child thinks, maybe even what the parent thinks, the child will not die from the use of the rod when it's administered lovingly, but it may be a means of saving his soul from eternal death, as Proverbs 23:13-14 teach.

Now we're not restricted, of course, to the use of the rod as the only form of parental discipline. There are other ways in which children can be trained and taught, but our discipline is to serve as a model of God's discipline of us. Again, Hebrews 12:9-11 is crucial here, where the Lord actually draws the parallel between a parent and a child and God's dealings in His chastening of His children. This is, of course, never enjoyable, but it is fruitful as that passage in Hebrews says. It can bring forth "the peaceable fruit of righteousness" to those who are trained by it. Discipline is to be directed to the heart as well as to the actions. Therefore, parents must learn to discipline for attitude and not just the child's actions. And of course, it is important to discipline promptly (Proverbs 13:24). Otherwise, there's a disconnect between what the child is done and the discipline if there's a lapse of time that transpires in the meantime.

But consistency is the absolute number one most fundamentally crucial element in discipline. Without consistency, all will fail. With it, discipline will be more effective, in fact, less frequent. So if there is a consistency in discipline, which is difficult, it'll be far more effective. It'll actually reduce the amount of discipline, rather than those who, through laziness or ignorance or self-centeredness or even sinful anger, end up disciplining sometimes and then not disciplining many other times. This brings confusion to the children. Discipline, of course, should not be in anger. Disciplining consistently and immediately actually prevents built-up frustration. The Bible tells us we are not to "provoke" our children (Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:21). And there are a few ways, for example, of provoking them to discouragement. It would include, as we've just noted, inconsistent discipline for the same kinds of offenses. The child will actually be provoked, discouraged, if sometimes they're disciplined [and] sometimes they're not disciplined for the same thing. They can be provoked by disciplining out of selfish frustration on the parent's part or by misjudging the child's motives or falsely accusing them or failing to admit our own wrongs and to ask them for forgiveness. These are examples of ways in which we can provoke our children.

Well, in this lecture, we considered two potential threats to unity in marriage, both communication and childrearing. In the next lecture, we will consider two more areas that require an accurate understanding of biblical teaching.