

“Improving Household Communication”

Ephesians 4:25, 26, ; Mt. 5:21-26;18:15-20

2/18/2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Our three passages were drawn from the words of Jesus and from the writer of the letter to the church at Ephesus. All of the verses were basically trying to deal with the question: “What do we do, as Christians, when we find ourselves in a conflict?”

In **Matthew 5**, Jesus is saying that before we go off to worship, we ought to straighten out any existing conflict with others. He suggested we should try to settle disputes out of court. His point was that human relationships are the most important part of our lives. In a case where *we* might have offended someone else, no matter what our motives were, it is better to take the initiative and work on the conflict – rather than let others do (or not get around to doing) the work of solving the conflict.

On another occasion, found in **Matthew 18**, Jesus talked about the case when *we* are the offended party. Step one, He says, is to go and talk with the person alone. If he or she listens, you have bridged the separation. But if the offender refuses to listen, take one or two others along so that witnesses can substantiate the conversation.

But imagine answering your front door and finding your neighbor accompanied by two six foot-three weight lifters. And your neighbor says: “Now about that can of car wax you keep saying is yours.”

Jesus was actually talking about larger disputes. In Jewish small claims courts, you needed at least two witnesses. And Jesus continued, “If no success is made in that endeavor, one should just forget trying to reconcile them. In so many words, chalk that broken relationship up as virtually hopeless. The principle, once again, is to deal with conflict – not wait for someone else to handle it.

Ephesians 4 has similar teaching. We should speak the truth to one another, since we are all in this world together. And even if we’re angry and frustrated, we shouldn’t worsen it by doing something improper with our anger – instead, we shouldn’t let the sun go down on our wrath. We should work it out. These suggestions are in a section of Ephesians describing one’s new life in the Spirit of Christ.

This advice might sound well and good but the problem with life is that conflicts are not predictably the same through the years. No matter what our perceptions are (of how things should be), there are usually others around in our space who disagree with us in theory and practice. Conflict and change are inevitable.

Conflicts are inevitable because of the differences between people, but even these differences change in the passing of time. Cultures change because values change. Our lives are complicated by changes in beliefs, definitions and the myths that prevail.

For instance, there have been **myths about the American family**. Sometimes we see these myths continued in the media and these myths show up our conversations. Government agencies are always collecting and news magazines are often publishing statistics on the various kinds of households in our country. So it is difficult to establish a clear definition of the family.

But take the **myth about households that claims that at one time, the stereotypical “family” was stable but at some later point, it fell apart**. The myth is that once, all people lived in harmony, without single parent situations or latchkey children. The image is of children playing under unpolluted blue skies and behind white-picket-fenced backyards – always having access to kindly adults to care for them. Children supposedly grew up learning the basics in neighborhood schools and existed in relative harmony in the shadow of their kindly parents.

When these mythic children grew up, they moved down the street, (or possibly into the next county), so they could always come home for the holidays or whenever there was something to celebrate – always being nearby to help if there was trouble. The whole family, at one time, supposedly went to church together and obeyed God’s laws. So in this myth, everyone had a family in those ‘good old days’ and ‘it worked.’

Believing this myth, some then try to speculate as to when this mythic family fell apart. Some say it was the Industrial Revolution when people started working away from the family property. Others suggest it happened in the 1920's when women began to cut their hair and drink gin. And still others guess the changes took place when the Beatles landed and the kids started telling their elders what to do.¹

So believing in this idealistic family myth, some then claimed that if we could just get back before the Sexual Revolution or Prohibition or the assembly line, we might rediscover the ideal family – free of conflict. But if we really look at the past, we would soon discover that there never was a conflict-free family. Domestic values have always been changing and developing along with the social and technological changes of society. The private sphere has always changed right along with the transitions brought by business, war or the politics of the time. **It may feel comforting to believe that there was a time when personal lives and family relationships were stable. The fact is that we can not locate such a time in history, any more than we can in the present.**

For example, during the long centuries of the **Middle Ages**, Christians thought that **celibacy** was the most spiritual state for humans. When the **Reformation** took hold, people like Martin Luther were saying that the monastic vows were the most obnoxious of all the Church pronouncements. So that in the span of only a half generation, ex-priests, nuns and monks got married, after hearing all their lives that celibacy was the highest calling from God. What a radical change in values.

Another example of cultural change was how our **Puritan** ancestors believed that the family (itself) was a little church or commonwealth. It was thought to be a base from which to learn and interact with the larger society. But in the **19th century**, family values transformed again. Households were viewed as a separate entity, apart from (and perhaps against) the world outside. In the 19th century, **Americans** began to think of the outside world of offices, railroads and

¹ These ideas are taken from Charles Atkinson, "The Myth of the American family" A.D. May, 1982, pp.17-28.

mills as harsh and unscrupulous – even alien to the values of Christianity.

To be a success in the world and to acquire its goods, it required the **breadwinner to be physically away from the household and morally apart from the ethics discussed in the home and church**. So there was a **split**. Most often, the **man** worked in one world (with its own set of values and rules) and the **woman** worked domestically – her tasks tending to be more moral and cultural. But all those images of family values changed once again.

Now that the woman and man are both involved in the working world outside of the home, the roles are shared and religion expects people to engage their ethics in the work environment as well as in the home. All these changes are much more complex and more demanding than ever before.

In addition to family structures changing along with the shifts in the culture, there is a **new and difficult circumstance** that did not exist in the agrarian societies prior to the Industrial Revolution. **What is new is adolescence**. Adolescence is the state where economic independence and possibly marriage is delayed beyond the age of puberty.

Now most of us have thought that the problems associated with teens have been around for thousands of years. Surprisingly, **the phenomenon of adolescence has come about only during the last century** and here is why.

Before the Industrial Revolution, previous cultures had treated persons in their early teens as adults. For instance, at age 12, youths were welcomed into adulthood in the ancient Hebrew and Greek cultures and married within the next two years.

As late as the **Middle Ages**, youths were freed from their parent's authority about 12-15 years of age. In **Rome** and in **England**, later in the Middle Ages, betrothal was in childhood and the ceremony was in the early teens. Even during the **Renaissance** and in the later **Puritan** cultures, marriage was encouraged in the early teens as well.

But along came the **19th century Industrial Revolution** and many of the workers were children. Child labor was approved and **entire families were often employed in industry**. But soon came new laws prohibiting children and teens from working around

the dangerous machinery. Teens, all of a sudden, could no longer become economically independent and take on added responsibilities like adults.

There were **new laws about compulsory education** so that most teens had to stay in school until they were sixteen. **Other laws came along restricting many types of work before age 16 or even 18.** So even though teens could mow lawns, do childcare or deliver newspapers, they were now restricted from the working world because of their age.

Society raised the educational level for skills for the working world. A 12 year old boy (in a primitive culture) may have known about farming or gathering wild grains or fruits so that he could support a family. However, a similar youth in our culture (who wanted to market his or her skills in the modern working world) just wouldn't make it at that age.

Not only did society raise the age for one to enter the working world, it **delayed formal adulthood by postponing one's right to vote, one's treatment as an adult in a legal trial and the right to marriage without parental permission.** Because of the Industrial Revolution and the increasing complexity of our culture, **society legally and socially (officially) delayed entrance into adulthood until late in the teens or even until one's early twenties.** But something else happened that our culture never anticipated. **The biological age of puberty dramatically dropped.**

Although the earlier cultures treated teens as adults, the age of puberty occurred later in the teens. Historical data from at least 7 nations reveals a remarkably consistent **drop in the age of the onset of puberty.** Back in **1840**, the average age of puberty was **17**. By **1960**, that age had dropped to about **12 or 13** years of age. It is **now** anywhere between **8 and 11**.

Why has the age of puberty dropped since the Industrial Revolution? Better diets and health care. Even the amount of light is supposed to have been a factor (*although I wouldn't recommend you parents raising your children in a dark room*). So the difficulty is that our culture prohibits our young

people from entering the adult world until 5 to 7 years after they have adult bodies.

Even though teens may not be emotionally ready for "adulthood," they are in a circumstance where their bodies are. Only now, in our present culture, **for the first time in history, teens are prohibited from taking responsibility in society and yet they are sexually mature individuals.** Because of this, there is a lot of complexity in the conflicts in the home – all because of this relatively new state we call "adolescence."²

Let's take this description of today's situation one step further.

Most of us have grown up under the traditional rules about sex. We heard all about the rights and wrongs, the shoulds and shouldn'ts, the dos and the don'ts. And as adults, we have lived through a time when these rules have been questioned.

We have seen the whole society (around us) abandon tradition to discover new definitions of sexual values and morality. So with a lot of ambivalence and confusion, adults thirty and over have been the new crop of parents and grandparents who have found themselves in the position of dealing with this new state of adolescence – this new restrained and limited "junior adulthood."

Our parenting tasks have become more complicated because we did not want to be hypocritically Victorian, (repressing human sexuality). Yet we are not willing to abandon the values of our Judeo-Christian heritage. We want to be able to talk to our kids about *anything* but we find ourselves saying very little to our children (in this area) perhaps because of our own uneasiness.³

The point of all this, so far, is to describe the complex and difficult work that is involved in working through conflicts in our household relationships today. We are seeing that there is some

² For a discussion about the social changes and the biological changes regarding adolescence, see Ronald L.

Koteskey, "Growing Up Too Late, Too Soon, The Invention of Adolescence," *Christianity Today*, March 13, 1981, pp.24-27.

³ Ellen Goodman, "The Turmoil of Teenage Sexuality, Parent's Mixed Signals", *Ms.* July 1983, pp.37-41. Also see Michael Colin MacPherson, *The Family Years, A Guide To Positive Parenting* (Minneapolis: Winsdon, 1981).

help in public education networks locally and in the media. Our church can also be a highly important resource as well.

Some of the tasks we are trying to learn include the work, for instance, of **becoming aware of ourselves as adults, as parents or as adults in relation to careers and romance**. We are having to **learn how to set limits and rules that are reasonable and yet open to evaluation**. We are finding that in raising children, **there are some absolutes**.

1. Your children have to go to school.
2. They must do their homework.
3. They must do their homework every day.
and
4. (Even more specifically), they must do their homework and chores before television or computer time.

And so on.

But as we begin to deal with the social experiences outside of the home, the dating and the teen years, **we enter an area of work that is new and we have little experience in doing that work**. We face new situations and conflicts that create circumstances that don't fit into the previously prescribed rules. **New contracts have to be formed between the family members**. You have rights but your children have rights. You have experiences and wisdom but your children have less experiences and often less wisdom. There are arguments, stress and confrontations.

So how can we better handle family conflicts? How can we more ably handle difficulties that arise between adults who happen to be living under the same roof?

Perhaps the first thing we could remind ourselves is that **conflicts** (just as we previously said about the feelings of anger) **can be healthy signals** to us. Conflict can be one way of expressing individuality. A conflict could be someone saying that a need is not being met but not all conflict is healthy.

It is interesting to keep in mind that counselors, in the last few decades, have discovered that what we used to call the "problem child" is now considered (by many) to be a child who is sometimes trying, in their own way, to fix a more severe problem in the

adult relationship of the house. Believe that? It is interesting to consider but we'll move on.

I have been reading books, listening to tapes and attending conferences for the last 20 years on topics related to marriage and parenting tasks. It seems that they all end up with a common suggestion. It sounds simple but it is not.

The suggestion is for people to hold household conferences. The concept behind that apparently simple suggestion is, as you know, communication. The attempt at regular, quality communication between household members is one which has been applied to almost every social circumstance.

We have seen, in our places of work, where they have had a consultant come in and evaluate the work-climate for all the employees. From the measurements used, a few of the needs the employees had were not being met. The suggestion, that the consultant often gives, is for the management to have regular staff meetings where open and honest sharing can - be done in a safe non-critical atmosphere.

In a church, for its leaders to be effective, there must be a climate where people can feel safe in sharing different ideas and talk freely about needed change. The people who haven't experienced safe conversations in their homes have trouble doing this in church meetings.

Jesus gathered His disciples together, one afternoon, and asked them: "Who do the people say I am?"

Jesus knew perfectly well who people thought He was. What He was doing was engaging His disciples in a time of safe sharing because their initial talk (of what other people supposedly thought of Jesus) was non-threatening. But then Jesus turned the conversation into what *they* thought He and His mission was about. And what transpired was a family conference. It was not a briefing of a military general (dictating to his troops).

Members of our households, as well as others with whom we are trying to communicate, need to feel that their environment is a safe place in which they can really share themselves. *They* need to share their hurts, frustrations and disappointments, their triumphs and their defeats.

If we were to try to conduct times of sharing in our households, it would be better to **have regular**

meetings, rather than wait until a particular crisis evolves. If household members are used to conversations in a **safe atmosphere** to discuss how things are going, everyone will experience a **building of trust** which leads to a better handling of more intense issues.

Privacy is an important issue. How much should an individual parent, child or friend have to self disclose?

My experience seems to suggest that the more honest and vulnerable I am in my communication and the more risks I personally take, in my sharing, the quicker the trust levels build with others and the better the levels of sharing are with other people around me. This seems true for household conferences as well as communication elsewhere.

Take risks yourself but don't insist that the other person shares before you. Trust will build if *you* show the example.

For those of you who may want to try having household conferences, here are some suggestions.

1. **Everyone** in the household **should be included**.
2. These times should be **held during quiet and relaxed times** – not during dinner.
3. **Set a time limit** to your meeting. Forty-five minutes to an hour would work for most families.
4. **Don't designate the same person to always be the facilitator.** Try to make it everyone's job to see that the rules are followed. You do that and you'll be teaching your children leadership. (*Where else are they going to learn it if not from you?*)
5. **Think of the first few attempts at a family conference as purely experimental** and don't take it too seriously. The primary goal should be to have a nice talk about how things are going.
6. **Prepare yourself to hear things, particularly from younger members of the household, that are less thought out and perhaps critical.** You might discover things about yourself and even grow.

7. **No one should be forced to say anything he or she doesn't want to say.** There shouldn't be pressure.
8. **Everyone** who wants to say something **should have a chance.** No one should interrupt someone while they are speaking but no one should be permitted to monopolize the meeting either.
9. **No one should be allowed to verbally injure anyone else.** Great efforts should be made to use what is commonly known as "**I messages**" which consist of using the term "I" – expressing ❶ the specific behavior that is the dispute, ❷ the consequences and your feelings about that behavior and lastly, ❸ a specific suggestion for change of that behavior.

A bad way to communicate, as you're standing over a dried up and cold meal (you prepared), is this: "You know, it would be nice to be married to someone who was on time for dinner once in a while, instead of being married to a selfish-non-time-oriented oaf, don't you think so?"

A better way would be to say: "❶ When you are late for dinner" (the behavior)" and ❷ I have a meal done and getting cold, my efforts are ruined and I feel angry (the results of the behavior), so ❸ please be on time or call if you can't!

When we discipline ourselves to communicate that way, it frees everyone else up from being defensive. It also does an additional thing. It teaches our children how to handle conflict. Did your parents teach that to you by modeling this dynamic in their household? You can.

These nine guidelines for bettering our communication are actually accumulated advice from many specialists in relationship fields. But we should also **remember our Christian perspective about who we are.**

We all have good and bad days. **We all have faulty communication at one time or another.** And I think **we all forget what it was like to be younger and powerless.**

Perhaps the greatest help in times of conflicts, with those who are close to us, is **the ability to empathize with them.** And what better example of

empathy do we have than God becoming a person and living among us.

Notice how **Jesus** interacted with the variety of people. Notice how many times He tried to **draw people out of themselves**. Notice how He tried to **create a safe verbal climate** so people didn't feel threatened and could experience healing.

Do the people closest to us feel they can find healing from our presence? In conflict, is there a quest for healing in all the negotiations? These, I believe, are some of the tasks we have before the sun goes down on our frustration in our conflicts. May others see Christ in us because we are bringing healing to our relationships.

