

SE050408
AFTER HAPPILY EVER
1. Communication

If you've ever read The Little Mermaid story or watched the Disney version, you might think this is every woman's fantasy. It's a wonderful, romantic fairy tale of a beautiful girl falling in love with a handsome, rich and dashing prince, overcoming insurmountable odds to be together with a story book wedding at the end. Ah, what bliss!

But looked at another way, the Disney story might be the quintessential man's fantasy. Think about the scenario: Woman falls in love with a man at first sight, SHE pursues HIM at great personal cost without him lifting a finger to romance her. Then she shows up on his doorstep half naked, and all she wants to do is make out – she doesn't even want to talk! I'm half expecting this woman to open up a brewsky, turn on a football game and do a chest bump – this is a dream woman!

See, men and women have different definitions and communication of love. What men and women can agree on is that love is a great thing. It's no wonder there's fairy tales told about it. There's magnetic attraction, wonder, chemistry, and fun. And all that energy is enough to get us hopelessly entangled into relationships and, eventually, promises of life long fidelity and faithfulness and togetherness.

A Wedding ensues. Which is the event that ends all Disney fairy tales. As if that were the END of the story and not the beginning. As if there was nothing interesting to report after that moment. It can all be summarized in 6 words: "And They Lived Happily Ever After."

But we do not live in a fairy tale. We have to keep on living and loving AFTER the credits role. What about AFTER happily ever? This series addresses the rest of the story – the marriage challenges and the victories we can have through God's plan, God's wisdom and God's power

Some of you may think the church's marital code is hopelessly outdated and irrelevant for today. Many believe the enduring myth that cohabitation works as a sort of trial marriage. The stats tell us that cohabitation actually becomes a trial divorce.

- Since 1960, America has witnessed a 12-fold increase in cohabitation and a 50 percent plunge in the marriage rate.
- About 45 percent of cohabitating couples undergo what is called a "premarital divorce," which can be every bit as painful as the real thing.
- The half who make it to the altar are about 50 percent more likely to divorce than those who lived apart prior to marrying.
- In the end, as few as 15 of every 100 couples who cohabit go on to create a lasting marriage.

So if our culture hasn't figured out the "love" question, the question you have to ask is if God's blueprints for love have an expiration date on them like your milk carton? Or are they enduring and effective because God created humans and created marriage and God has the right design specifications for it?

I invite you to stay throughout this series to find out.

COMMUNICATION DEGRADATION

So the first issue that couples deal with AFTER happily ever, is communication. A couple were in counseling one time and the counselor asked:

- Does your husband beat you up?
 - o No I beat him up by several hours every morning
- Do have a grudge?
 - o No we have a carport.
- What grounds do you have for your problems?
 - o We have about four acres.
- Why are you here?
 - o We can't seem to communicate!

Why is communication so difficult?

The Bible teaches that in creation, God's splits his image into a duality, male and female. And in marriage, he calls them back together into oneness to reflect God's one oneness in a Trinity. But the melding for us is hard because of the instruction of sin. When rebellion occurred we got bend and it affected relationships with a curse.

- Women would demand to have control over their husbands
- Husbands would try to dominate their wives.

So every marriage has two sinners living in it. That's a lot sin in one place. Add to the sin, the incredible differences and you have a situation rife for communication degradation. SO why would God make us so different? When you think about it, this is the main crucible where we learn to love. Love that is MOST loving is reaching, giving and self sacrificing. And so it's the duality that makes communication so difficult but also makes love worth something.

We have some friends here this week from Malawi, and the native language there is called Chichewa. And it made me think of how we react to a person who speaks a foreign language: initially it's quaint, and there's admiration and even wonder. How can they make those sounds come out of their mouth... and so fast!

But then, if you're stuck with this foreigner and you have to get somewhere together or do something together, it doesn't take long for that admiration to degrade into something else. Frustration sets in...

- You'd never say it but, you start to look at that person as dumber than you are because you have to dumb down your own communication to get anything across to them.

- You start to look down on that person.
- And finally you start to avoid this person because even the simplest interactions are just too much work.

That same degradation happens in marriage. At first, there's admiration for the different ways men and women communicate – wonder even. * It's quaint and odd and entertaining. But not forever! Soon it's frustrating, and judgment settles in. That person is defective! They're insane even!

Well against this instinct the Bible commands husbands and wives to fight the uphill battle for the sake of love. For true love is never so much love as when it is serving and stooping and submitting and saving and seeking and sharing. God says:

- 1 Peter 3:7 Husbands, in the same way be **considerate** as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect.
- Eph 5:22 You wives will **submit** to your husbands as you do to the Lord.

You see there's mutual giving that God requires in marriage that calls us to sacrifice. In fact, if any of you are disturbed that the specific instruction is for submission for wives, you need to realize that the level of sacrifice called for from husbands is even higher. In the same passage it says husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

You can't get a higher calling to self sacrifice and submerging your own will for the good of the other, than that! Next week, we'll get into how words like submission and respect and love and consideration are keys to unlock male and female communication... but for now, I want us to realize that the road of communication is opened by God first calling us to reach out.

- ***to bridge a communication gap, someone has to reach across a divide.***

Saint Francis of Assisi was a great Christian thinker who wrote a prayer that encapsulates the starting point for great communication in marriage:

- *O Divine Master,*
- *grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;*
- *to be understood, as to understand;*
- *to be loved, as to love;*
- *for it is in giving that we receive,*
- *it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,*
- *and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.*

I'm afraid that most marriage manuals today are an exercise in trying to extract self fulfillment out of the person you're with, without making that person go away. You can see right away that God's instruction is opposite. But you may say, Rick, what about me and my needs? Listen to the words of Assisi, they come straight from the teaching of the Master:

In giving you receive
In losing your life you will find it

I'm not of course condoning spousal abuse or neglect. But in most cases our mates will respond to self giving with awe and life change. And even if they don't, God will. In most cases if we guard our hearts, if we preemptively withhold our affection until we get some, and ask what have you done for me lately – we will find ourselves protected but alone and miserable. We will find our lives and lose them at the same time.

So with this idea of self-sacrificing love as the foundation for good communication, lets turn to reasons for miscommunication.

MEN AND WOMEN ARE DIFFERENT

This was laid out for me in a very simple way by a book some marriage small groups have used here at AC3. The title of the book says it all:

- Men are like waffles, Women are like Spaghetti

What “waffle thinking” means is that men tend to be compartmental thinkers, like a waffle has different boxes. Men think in boxes. They have rigid walls between different emotions and different responsibilities in their lives. And when they're in one box, it's tough for them to change gears and get into a different box.

How many women have been wanting to say something to your man as he's watching TV. How's that working for you? See, he's in the TV box. If you're lucky and he's actually looking at your face as you're talking, don't let that fool you. He's not listening. The lights are on but nobody's home. Don't expect that anything you say in this moment will be remembered. Why not?

It's not that he doesn't love you, it's not that he doesn't want to be helpful, or listen it's just that right now, he's trapped in the TV box! He can't get out!

Now, compare this to a woman. My wife is watching TV and I could read her a shopping list, what the kids want for supper, the plan for Friday night AND 5 stanzas of Shakespeare and she'd have it all in her mental rolodex without batting an eyelash.

That's because women are like Spaghetti. With a plateful of Spaghetti, every strand of spaghetti touches all the others. So everything in a woman's life touches. She's constantly processing everything about her life. I'm not an expert in women, I got insight from a book, for MEN ONLY, Jeff and Shaunti Felltham – based on a survey of 500 women. They point out that men and women THINK they know each other in areas of communication habits.

But what they found out is that men and women only have a very superficial understanding.

- For example, every man knows that women are emotional.
- Another example, every woman knows that men are insecure, unromantic clods

If that's all you think, you're going to not only be unsuccessful in communicating, you're going to think there's nothing to be done. The situation is hopeless. Your man or your

woman will be like a black box to you with no way out, you just throw up your hands. But if we invite God's self sacrificing love into our relationships, we'll press through superficial understandings to get through and communicate LOVE.

WOMEN: WINDOWS OPEN

Well, the key to de-swamping women is to realize that women are not just emotional:

- They are dealing with multiple thoughts and emotions from their past and present all the time, at the **same** time and these can't be easily dismissed.

Try this out sometime. At a random moment in your day, ask your wife what she's thinking about. Make sure you've cleared a few minutes in your schedule because it might take a while! One husband did this and his wife said, "right now? Well let's see,

- I'm thinking about this article that I'm writing
- I'm thinking I need to check the pizza in the oven pretty soon
- I'm hoping the kids are doing OK out on the trampoline
- I'm wondering if I should go check on them
- I'm wondering if we're going to hear back tonight about that business deal
- And if you really want to know, I'm wondering about that argument we had this morning and if you're still upset at me
 - o There's probably more, you want me to keep going?

A guy thinks: How do you get anything done? Just turn the extra stuff off! But here's the truth: they can't. And this affects how your wife communicates with you every single day.

Picture this. You're working on your computer and

- you have two Word documents you're working on,
- an excel spread sheet and
- your home budgeting program running. And in addition,
- your email program and internet browser are running.

Now add something else:

- imagine some of the old files have been open for weeks and there's also some spyware running and keeps some annoying pop ups popping up.
- You try to install anti-spyware, but those pesky things keep coming back
 - o the best you can do is try to ignore them and focus on the other half dozen tasks you're juggling at the same time.

Welcome to a woman's mind. It is not a normal instrument! If we define normal but us men. For women it's windows open, all the time. On a survey of 500 women, 8 out of ten said this is what their mental world is like. Now maybe this explains some things:

- Why your woman jumps topics. You think she's muddled, but women are like spaghetti, it all connects.
- Why your woman gives you more information than you need. You think you're being lectured, but she's just trying to close a window or two. If she gives you all the info she has, she can close one of her hundred or so pop ups.

- Why your woman has perhaps more to talk about at the end of the day than you do.
- Why your woman never forgets that time you screwed up.

Women were asked, how often do you experience emotions from past experiences in the recent or distant past rise up in your mind. 89% said this happens to them, 50% said often or very often. So that's why you've felt

- blindsided by her bringing up something that happened two years ago. You know how you can get an unwanted sexual image pop up in your head? Can you always help that? No, and neither can she.
- Surprised by a sudden flare up of emotion attached to a memory
- Stung by the unexpected heat that turns something you think is little into an argument

Now, Husband... these moments happen because God has made your woman wonderfully complex. Who hasn't sat in wonder at the marvelous female mind, that can be cooking dinner, comforting a friend, coaching a homework assignment and scheduling tomorrow's activities ALL AT THE SAME TIME!

However, the challenge to communicate with your wife is simply this: a considerate husband realizes windows are open all the time. Men, it's been a challenge for me to be less defensive when I think that an open window is somehow a reflection on me. OK, actually sometimes, it is... but often, it's just a nagging thought that she wants to close out but she can't.

So a considerate husband is called to what?

- First to stop saying, "just stop thinking about it!" That's not going to work. You might as well try to feed spaghetti to your kid one noodle at a time. It can't be done. But here's what you can do. You can help her close her windows.
- So often my wife's open windows are just an annoyance to me. I think she's being petty or anxious or even combative because she won't close them. But in truth, she WANTS to close them, but can't. So a huge key in this is listening.

Now almost all of us dumb men have heard about the fact that women don't want you to fix the problem, they want you to listen. But here's what this means in practice:

- Her feelings about the problem ARE the problem and you need to fix your need to fix.

When a window is open, to close it, she needs to process how she FEELS about the problem. The man is thinking, I need to filter out all this emotion and get at the facts. You don't get it. The emotion IS part of the facts that must be considered. To help her close a window, we need to do the exact opposite:

don't filter out the emotion to focus on the problem, filter out the problem to focus on the emotion.

Women are smart, they've probably thought of all your brilliant ideas already. What 8 out of 10 of them need most often, is acknowledgement or validation of their emotion. As in:

- I'm so sorry
- You must be really upset
- I can't believe that happened to you

This is in contradiction to what we WANT to do. Which is:

- Tell you your overreacting
- Question your version of the facts
- Tell you to quit crying (and here's the big winner!)
- Wonder aloud of it's "that time of the month"

Not helpful. But if we can be considerate as the Bible says, we can help communicate care and affection and love and help our wives close some windows on their busy, spaghetti brains.

Now let's turn to the men:

MEN: SINGLE MINDED

Men are like waffles. Now, in honor of the male brain, let's just take a time out and remember that only a single minded man could ever pour dozens of hours into every aspect of planning and executing a softball game or a hunting trip or a engine rebuild. My wife, is one of the most detailed people I know, and she starts to paint she can't hang with it... but I can focus on a project till it's conquered. A man can get lost in his garage, in his garden, in his study for hours and come out with something amazing.

But the communication downside of this is simple. Even women who work long hours outside the home may not be able to appreciate how tough it is for a man to switch from the fast-paced, high practical attitude of work, to the tenderness needed to communicate at home. You see your man come home from work and he **bulldozes the house!**

See, he's in the work box. He's still on the hunt. People are meeting goals and responding to orders and he's ordering his world, but home required a less frenetic touch. The Bible says to fathers:

"Father don't exasperate your children."

That is, don't frustrate them, or move your family into anger. It's so easy for men to do, because they bring their driven, focused, goal oriented bent into the home and promptly drive everyone loony. So often, when you see him come home, sit on the couch and surf all 365 channels, it's not a personal slight or uncaring. He's trying to change boxes. It's hard.

One woman I know, realizing this transition from work box to home box is so hard, stopped taking it personally and started a habit of allowing her husband to talk about

work after work. They called it couch time. It was an inviolable 20 minutes from the moment he walked in the door. The kids knew not to bother mom and dad during that time. She asked questions, he babbled for several minutes and before he knew it, he's in the home box because he was able to put work issues away in a safe environment. Plus it's a great way to build intimacy.

So, women, if your husband brings up a subject to talk about, he wants to stay in that box. Don't jump boxes on him because you see how it connects to everything else. You open up too many boxes and you man just feels defeated. He can't solve all that and if he can't solve it, he'll get overwhelmed. And then he will do one of two things: either shut down or get angry. If he feels there's no solution, no end game to the conversation then he can't win, he can't succeed and he loses motivation.

So stay focused on the box he opens or he is in and resist the urge to open up other boxes. You buy him some time.

CONCLUSION: LOVE LANGUAGE

The Bible says in Ephesians 4:29

*do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth but only what it is helpful for building others up **according to their needs** so that it may benefit those who listen.*

Communicate according to **their needs**. And the greatest need each of us has, is to feel loved. What does your spouse NEED in order to feel love? It might not be the same thing you need. If you're in a communication rut, chances are, the rut you're in is comfortable for you.

- you like to **serve** and do nice things for those you love. That's says it for you, so that's what you do.
- You like to **say** it, I LOVE YOU with words! That's easy, so that's what you do
- You like to **touch** the person you love. That communicates it to you just fine
- You like to **be** with your spouse, so you block out chunks of time to say I love you that way.
- You like to **give gifts** or opportunities to show affection.

See friends, these are 5 love pathways (Gary Chapman). Which is yours? Which is your spouses? We should become conversant and proficient in all of them.

We can learn another love language can't we? What do they NEED? Learn to communicate the Bible says, along that pathway. God has.