

CHAPTER ONE



Don't Talk So Much

*Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak,
and slow to become angry.*

James 1:19 NIV

AS I ROSE TO GREET BILL and Gail, I could tell Bill was not pleased to be in a counseling office. A freshly graduated and credentialed counselor, this was my first marriage counseling session on my own. Excited and somewhat terrified, I began to conduct an intake with them. They had been married over thirty years, and as I heard more about the details of their relationship, it was clear their relationship was in trouble.

Gail gave a thorough history of the marriage, which ran uninterrupted for the first forty minutes of the session. She had recently undergone radical surgery for breast cancer and was one year into a difficult but successful recovery. As her physical health improved, however, her emotions were radically changing. Gail's list of complaints about the marriage were really complaints about Bill. A life-threatening disease had given Gail the impetus to come to

grips with her unexpressed anger at the state of her marriage—in truth, her anger at Bill. Her eyes welled up with tears, and her voice shook with emotion as she expounded on her grievances, recounting memories of Bill’s failures carefully and critically.

Finally, it was Bill’s turn to speak. Like a thunderclap out of a blue sky, Bill spoke his first words since the session started. “I don’t know what her problem is! I don’t abuse her. I don’t drink too much. I earn a good living and support her.” Then after pausing for breath, he repeated, “I don’t know what her problem is.”

I was stunned. It seemed Bill hadn’t heard a thing Gail had said in the last forty minutes. She was nothing if not articulate, and I could have readily ticked off at least five issues she had with Bill. But lamentably, Bill had not heard anything she said, and these were the only words he uttered the entire fifty-minute session. Gail filled up the rest of the time with her genuine and heartfelt expressions of anger, grief, and disappointment.

The next appointment was a carbon copy of the first—Gail airing her complaints while Bill sat silent, save for his similarly timed protest of “I don’t know what her problem is!” This cycle continued for three more sessions until they decided to end their marriage counseling. At the time, I felt I was able to do some good for Gail but not for Bill. Bill never really understood; he was too defensive to address his personal and relational shortcomings.

About a decade later in a post-therapy analysis, I realized a simple truth that I had missed when counseling Gail and Bill: Gail talked too much, and I had failed her by not helping her understand just that.

While this might seem like a harsh thing to say about a woman who struggled for years with a dysfunctional marriage and a life-threatening illness, I did not help Gail learn to communicate in a way Bill could hear. In retrospect, I should never have allowed a second session to go as the first had, let alone five sessions of basically the same fare. It was not a good use of their time or money.

Communication Is the Foundation of Relationships

For several years, I spoke at weekend conferences to help couples improve and grow in their marriages. The first message on communication had two main points: listening and expressing. I used to view this message as a sort of “Communication for Dummies” presentation. But as years went by and I absorbed more and more of what I was presenting, the importance of the presentation began to sink in. It was my practice during that message to make a statement like this: “There is nothing as easy as talking but as difficult as communication.”

And if you're serious about communication, especially as a married couple, then you need to come to a place where you embrace what it means to be a good listener. I mean a really good listener. Are you hearing me? I mean a really, really good listener. Good. Thanks for listening!

Jack and Ellen came in to see me at their pastor's recommendation. Things were not going well at all. Jack had been unfaithful to his wife over several years of their marriage, and Ellen had discovered these infidelities a year before they started seeing me. Jack had, through his humiliation, come to a living faith in Christ and had seen his life transformed. For the first time, he realized the seriousness of his actions and the hurt they caused his wife. He was genuinely repentant and attempting to make better decisions as a man and as a husband. There was just one problem: Ellen was having none of it! She was still quite angry. All the hurt and frustrations she had stored up over their fifteen-year marriage bubbled to the surface with the regularity of a geyser at Yellowstone. And they were also, according to Ellen, quite uncontrollable. She was furious and hurt and wanted Jack to know.

The sessions became predictable. I would ask about the status of their marriage, and Ellen would shrug and say, “No better than before.” Jack would divert his eyes to me with a pained look—like he had just slugged down several swallows of sour milk. It was

a look that said, “Do you believe how difficult this woman is?” combined with “Can’t you do something to stop her? She’s hurting me!” I demurred. Ellen needed to express her anger and hurt in a safe environment so it could be heard, understood, and dealt with. Here was the second major problem: Jack was having none of it! Whenever Ellen began her recitations of the past, he became animated and angry, and he lashed out back at her. “I thought this was already dealt with!” he would howl. “Why are you bringing up things that are years in the past?” he would scream.

In Jack’s defense, the issues were old and had been dealt with—sort of. During one session without his wife, Jack looked at me and expressed what was most on his heart: “Make her stop! This hurts too much!” I said that I couldn’t and added that even if I could, I wouldn’t. This made him angry . . . with me! Even though I understood his pain and anger, I told him he sorely lacked one skill in his role as a husband: the ability to listen. He had never actually *heard* his wife. He refused to listen.

Concentrate on Listening

I am uncomfortable with books with lists. Maybe it’s because I become overwhelmed by all there is to do, and lists instantly make me feel guilty. I worry I won’t do everything well—if at all. With that disclaimer, I’ll now give you a list. But let’s not look at it like a list (I am trying to reframe this—typical for a therapist!) but as a collection of touchpoints—places you can go to evaluate and then correct your communication.

Remember, we are concentrating on listening. If I could give you a gift as a couple, it would be the ability to view times of communication as experiencing the privilege of hearing what is going on with your spouse, what he or she is thinking, feeling, hoping for, struggling with, etc. It is not primarily a time where you have a chance to finally tell that insensitive husband or that demanding wife what you *really* think and feel. Listening is vital to all good

communication. I am challenging you to begin to develop your listening abilities to the next level.

Touchpoint # 1: Environment

There are places where I listen well and others where I barely listen at all. Frankly, the place where I listen best is the office where I do my counseling. First, it is conducive for me to listen. I sit in my chair, my client sits on the sofa (I sort of like that cliché), and they are at a comfortable distance—not too close but not too far away. This also gives my clients a choice. On one end of the sofa, they are a bit closer to me; on the other, they are a bit further away. They can choose which they are comfortable with.

Second, my office is quiet. There are no distractions that will interrupt the time. The office phone does not ring, and I turn my mobile phone off (unless I forget), so there will be no interruptions. If I anticipate one, I'll inform my client so he or she is aware of what will happen.

Third, it is safe, in three ways: First, no one will listen in. We have a sound masker in the waiting room that ensures no listening ears will accidentally hear what is being said. Second, it is safe in terms of confidentiality. The state where I live regulates all therapists and requires that in almost every case, we must keep what is said in session strictly between client and therapist. Every good therapist takes this boundary seriously. Third, it is safe in terms of no adverse reaction on my part as the listener. My clients often test me by introducing a shocking revelation with a comment like: "You're really not going to believe this." Or, "You won't think very highly of me when I tell you that . . ." And then, when they drop the bomb (and I have to say that some of those bombs have been quite explosive), they pause, look at me, and measure my reaction. My clients want to know they are in a safe place where they won't be instantly categorized or judged, no matter what they say or have done.

Jack and Ellen were having difficulty finding the right environment in which to communicate. Initially, we decided that it would be my office and that they should *not* try to deal with their issues on their own. Believe me, they had tried—and concluded there was no safe place except my office. So that’s what we initially decided to do, but we set a goal to determine a safe, relatively quiet location in their home conducive for listening. With two young children, this was no easy problem to solve.

Touchpoint #2: Time

If you were to come in with your spouse for marriage therapy, I most likely would give you an exercise to do as homework. It is straightforward and borders on the simplistic, but I believe couples have found it helpful in their communication process. I ask them to set aside fifteen minutes every day to sit down and talk with each other. I also ask that each spouse take seven and a half minutes to talk uninterrupted while the other person focuses on listening to what their spouse is saying.

Couples almost always ask two follow-up questions when I give this assignment: “What should we talk about, and when should we do this?” My answers are: “Talk about anything you want to, as long as it does not purposely hurt your spouse.” When it comes to what time is best, I tell them that it is up to them. As simple as this directive might seem, in my decades as a marriage therapist, only one couple has been able to maintain this commitment for three weeks in a row. It’s a lot harder than it sounds! And the chief complaint is that they couldn’t find the time.

How much time it will take to communicate is one of those philosophical questions that are without an answer. Usually, the husband asks this question in the same way he would ask, “How long will it take me to recover from my knee surgery?” My rote answer is, “As long as it takes,” but that isn’t necessarily what husbands want to hear. Instead of arguing the exact time, let me say

that communication is a process that takes a lifetime. I've been married long enough to be able to complete Renee's sentences, but I still have to take time to communicate. If I don't, it doesn't happen.

Years ago, Renee would say to me with some regularity, "Jim Keller, we haven't talked lately." Now, I learned at an early age that whenever someone addresses you with both your first and last name, there was usually trouble a-brewin'. If my mother was the one using both my first and last name, she had typically discovered some egregious act that I had committed within the previous twenty-four hours. If—heaven forbid—she addressed me as "James Mark Keller," I started packing for foster care.

So somehow my wife caught on to that communication strategy, and it works (but don't tell her that!). And even though she might be right concerning our communication, I would always protest by saying that we talk all the time. Of course, that talk was of the "What are you doing today?" variety and hardly would even get on the communication radar screen. All my protests were roundly discredited and denied the philosophical attention they deserved. Frankly, they deserved none.

Some thirty years ago, when I was in the throes of graduate school while trying to hold down a full-time job, I had to complete a twenty-page paper for one of my classes. I had been on a business trip and was arriving home at noon and planned to use the rest of the day and the wee hours of the morning to get that paper off my back. Renee knew and was sensitive to the fact that I was under this pressure. And I knew that she and the kids would be doing their own thing, at least through the afternoon and into the early evening. It was the window I needed so I could have a good start on my project. I had just sat down to work when I heard our back door opening and shutting. I went upstairs from my basement office and saw my wife standing in our back hallway. I can still see her in my mind's eye, smiling beautifully at me and giving me a hug, a kiss, and a welcome home. Then, in the middle of our

embrace, she leaned back, cocked her head to one side, and said the dreaded words: “Jim Keller, we haven’t talked lately.” I confess that I inwardly groaned.

“Honey, you know I have to get this paper done!” Anyone who knows my wife knows she is not easily dissuaded from something she’s set her mind to do. This day was no exception. My protests had the effect of love bugs in Florida hitting the front of my car on a late May day—messy, but it doesn’t slow the car down one bit. I paused, and she said, “Let’s at least do lunch.” I relented, and out to lunch we went.

It was a good lunch, and it afforded us a conversation long overdue. I, in the howling distractions of my busyness, hadn’t taken the time to hear my wife. The conversation was so good that at the end of lunch, we decided to extend the time and go for a walk to look at the fall colors. The time became magical, and the communication became a banquet to two people who had been on a limited diet for far too long. The afternoon stretched into evening, we went out to dinner once we arranged care for the kids, and we had the best time of communication we’d had in months—maybe even a year or two. And my paper? I honestly cannot remember anything about it except that I finished it, somehow, some way. I tell you this because we are all much too busy to take the time to listen appropriately. Our schedules are packed, our crises are many, and our commitments are legion. But all of us are far too busy *not* to take the time to listen to each other—time is of the essence indeed!

Touchpoint #3: Focus

As a general rule, I don’t have difficulty focusing on the significant things in life. All sports fans will understand what I mean when I say that it’s very, *very* important that my favorite sports team wins. I am convinced that my undivided attention in some way influences each of their victories. I am positive that my shouted criticism to the television broadcasts of my favorite teams is in

some mysterious manner transported to the minds of the athletes, coaches, and especially the officials to enable them to grasp victory from the jaws of defeat. And when they are defeated, it's because they ignored my astute advice, much to their chagrin and my utter disappointment.

Yes, sir! My teams deserve my undivided attention. Years ago, Renee rushed into the room where I was raptly watching the tail end of a Celtics–76ers game back when Larry Bird and Julius Erving played. I was a Celtics fan (“was” being the operative word—I’m an admitted fair-weather fan) and was anticipating a last-second shot by my team to defeat their conference rival. The urgency in Renee’s voice demanded my eye contact, but not my brain engagement. As I looked at her beautiful eyes, all I heard was, “Bird has the ball, he’s in the corner, he shoots, he scores!” After concluding her thoughts, she asked the classic question as to whether she was heard: “Okay, what did I just say?” Busted!

Here are some tips I give my clients to help them focus.

Physical Distractions

Is there anything in this room that is distracting you from listening 100 percent? Television, music, phones, computers, cooking meals . . . all of these and more can prevent you from being able to listen the way you need to.

Relational Distractions

Is there anyone in the room or nearby who will distract you from the person to whom you are giving your attention? Children by far are the biggest challenges here, but they can also include extended family members, friends, and others who might divert your attention.

Mental Distractions

Is your mind clear of “agenda items,” which could include solving some problems, carrying others’ burdens, or any concern over issues that don’t directly deal with the person you should be focused on?

Emotional Distractions

Are you capable of doing what you need to do as a listener in terms of the emotional energy you need to fully engage? If you are not in a good place emotionally, then you will probably not be a good listener. This point is the one I most frequently struggle with, especially after an intense day of counseling.

Spiritual Distractions

My ability to center on God is directly related to my ability to hear my wife. If you struggle with focusing on God, then you may also find it difficult to listen to your spouse.

Touchpoint #4: Body Language

Much of the time, being in a good marriage means doing things in a reverse (or upside-down) manner. Proper body language is probably one of the most neglected areas.

Several years ago, I began speaking at a local church about once a month. Each weekend I spoke, it was a minimum of three times—sometimes four. When we started doing services on Saturday, someone had the bright idea of giving me a DVD of my message so I could review it late Saturday night and make any appropriate changes for the Sunday-morning messages. I knew before I put that DVD in the DVD player that it was probably a bad idea, and I was not mistaken. I cannot tell you how shocked and embarrassed I was to see myself speaking. I looked so—weird! I mumbled at times, had poorly timed hand gestures, was occasionally lethargic, and sometimes looked like I had too much coffee.

And to top it all off, a Mickey Mouse/Eddie Haskell voice spewed out of my silly-looking mouth! Argh! I don't want to recount how awful and self-conscious I was the next day as I spoke. I have never, to this day, watched another DVD of myself speaking. It is just too—honest!

I was trained to do marriage and family therapy and therefore trained to try to observe everything I possibly can about my clients when they speak. I watch how they introduce themselves to me, where they sit in my office, and if they come in with someone else, how they sit in relation to that person. For example, I counsel a couple that could both be excellent mimes. I'm convinced of it. I have never in my life seen such clear and effective nonverbal communication! The problem is that almost all of it is negative. They have all the classic defensive gestures: arms that fold across their chests, sighs that are the seedlings for hurricanes, eyes that roll like slot machines, and finally, an assortment of snorts and grunts that would make a pig proud.

Jack and Ellen were a textbook case on how body language can sabotage communication. Both were doing their best to deliver their heartfelt emotions to the other, but their body language got in the way. Ellen would purse her lips and shake her head whenever Jack spoke. And Jack, upon seeing this, would roll his eyes. Finally, in an attempt to help, I began pursing my lips and shaking my head when Ellen spoke and rolling my eyes when Jack responded. I did this for no more than two minutes when they both stopped speaking to each other, and they looked at me as if I had just beamed in from Mars.

“Are we doing something wrong?” Ellen asked.

“No, I'm just responding to each of you like you're responding to each other,” I said.

Jack was a champion that day. He not only took it but he also began to *feel* it. His weapon had turned back against him. He had dripped with anger and disgust, probably far more than he was aware he was projecting, but he began to soften his responses and

not roll his eyes. Ellen was also a champion and burst out laughing. “Am I really that bad?” she asked. I smiled and responded, “Both of you are awful, and I can’t stand it anymore.” We went on to our most productive session, not because of a stellar therapeutic technique, but because both Jack and Ellen began to see that they needed to listen with their body language.

Touchpoint #5: Like Them

When I attended graduate school, I took a course on professional ethics. I don’t remember the name of my instructor, but she was a wise woman. At the beginning of one of our classes, I remember sitting around a table and hearing her ask one of the most interesting questions I had heard in all of my grad school experience: “What do you think clients want most from their therapists?” It certainly caught the class’s attention, and one by one we took turns at surmising what the answer might be. I thought our answers were quite profound:

“They want to know they have a competent therapist.”

“They want someone to sympathize with them.”

“They want someone to solve their problems.”

Our instructor shook her head to each of these answers, and with a smile, said, “No, that’s not it.” Then it was my turn, and I thought I had it pegged. I said, triumphantly, “They want someone to listen to them!” But the response was again a smiling “No.”

I have to admit that I was totally stumped. What could it be? We had run the gamut of every educated guess we could think of. Save, of course, the right answer. She smiled and said that what clients want most in their therapists is someone who likes them.

“That’s it?” I asked. Her memorable response was “That’s everything.”

I must admit I was somewhat skeptical, but am now convinced of the veracity of whatever study was done to determine that particular fact. I have seen it throughout decades of counseling as I

have tried to come alongside thousands of hurting people, many of whom have done very hurtful things to others. At the end of the first session I have with a client, I often look them in the eye and say, “You know, I like you.”

Whenever I say it, I do my best to say it with sincerity. It is quite striking to me to see the response in almost every client to whom I've uttered these words: male and female, old and young, emotionally healthy to off-the-charts unhealthy, they all soften, look at me, and respond by saying thank you.

One of our biggest challenges in marriage is to communicate through conflict (another chapter) productively. But the key factor in making sure conflict stays on a positive path involves two people determined to hold on to *liking* each other, regardless of what hurtful thing they have just done. Being kind wins the day.

Touchpoint #6: Compassion

The word “compassion” literally means “to feel along with” someone else, usually as it pertains to their pain and struggles. When couples come to see me, I find that compassion is many times in short supply and sometimes nonexistent. There aren't many people who don't view themselves as capable of empathy. We tend to see ourselves in the most favorable light—we know feeling another person's pain is important to having successful relationships.

Years ago, my wife began having severe back and neck pain. I showed the requisite sensitivity and compassion to her for at least a month. But I have to say, with great regret, that I soon grew tired of her pain. This is a woman I love very much, but I found myself avoiding long conversations over her struggles, and really going out of my way to not ask questions that would lead to that subject. I'm not an insensitive man, just a selfish one—I didn't want to deal with the messiness of her pain.

That is until one day, while in a hurry to get to an appoint-

ment, I whipped my head around to look out the back window of my car while backing out of the garage. The sudden movement wrenched my neck, and I cried out in pain. It was excruciating. I struggled with that pain through the rest of the day until I returned home to tell Renee my tale of woe. She listened with patience and empathy and suggested some actions I could take to remedy my neck. Almost as an afterthought, I took her by the shoulders and said, “I’m sorry.” She didn’t even ask what I was sorry for—she knew, and gently said, “Now you can understand what I’m going through a bit more. Sorry for your pain.” It’s interesting to me that what we most want from others is sometimes not so easy to give in return. We all want someone to feel our pain, which is why compassion is essential to every strong marriage.

Jack and Ellen kept going around the same block emotionally. Jack wanted Ellen’s forgiveness, and Ellen wanted Jack’s compassion. Neither would give the other fully what they wanted. I felt that the key was in Jack’s ability to understand his wife’s pain and anger, not just intellectually, but emotionally. Every therapist hopes for a breakthrough, and they usually come as gifts given rather than planned interventions. This happened with Jack in a session with his wife. Instead of beginning with a list of his pains and grievances, he told her he was beginning to understand the pain he caused. He wanted her to know that from that point on, he would focus on getting better so he could be a better husband for her. Instead of focusing on his struggles, Jack chose to identify with Ellen’s pain. He chose compassion. I wish I could report that Ellen fell into his arms and they lived happily ever after, but life isn’t that neat and tidy. The remainder of the session was painful for Jack, as Ellen tested his newfound compassion. But that compassion, over time, helped him become a better listener. And the better he listened, the healthier their relationship became.

Conclusion

The next chance you have for a time of communication, instead of saying “Let’s go talk,” say instead, “Let’s go have a time of listening.” Anyone can talk, but it takes work to listen. And it’s that work that will pay dividends as your marriage matures. So the first step to an upside-down marriage is not to talk so much. Instead, take the time to listen . . . intently.