

SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

LESSONS I'VE LEARNED ABOUT
FAMILY COMMUNICATION

BY STEVE DEMME

Speaking the Truth in Love

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This book is dedicated to my ever
supportive, always faithful, loving wife
and my patient, forgiving, teachable
sons, who learned along with me.

May it encourage all those families
whose hearts have been turned towards
God and towards each other.

“May the Lord make you increase
and abound in love for one another and
for all.” (1 Thessalonians 3:12)



SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

LESSONS I'VE LEARNED ABOUT FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Introduction to Speaking the Truth in Love.....	1
Overview by Chapter.....	5
Chapter 1: The Power of the Tongue.....	7
Chapter 2: The Heart.....	15
Chapter 3: A Quiet Spirit.....	27
Chapter 4: Esteem One Another Highly.....	37
Chapter 5: Create a Safe Place.....	45
Chapter 6: Speak The Truth In Love.....	51
Chapter 7: Quick to Hear and Slow to Speak.....	67
Chapter 8: Clarify for Understanding.....	77
Chapter 9: Process What You Have Learned.....	87
Chapter 10: Practice.....	99
Chapter 11: As a Family.....	105
Chapter 12: Ask for Help.....	115
Chapter 13: The Power to Bless.....	119
Chapter 14: Loving Relationships Take Effort.....	125
Chapter 15: Small Groups and Families.....	129

INTRODUCTION TO SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

Most of what I've learned about communication, I acquired in the past few years. My wife and I began Math-U-See in 1990. This is an education business which uses colorful blocks to teach math. Everyone in our family worked in some aspect of the business for the first several years. We assembled books and shipped them from our basement. Over the years, God prospered our enterprise. As it grew, we added employees and purchased a building to house the operation.

The years flew by. Our sons attended college and found godly spouses. One at a time, they chose to work for the company. By 2011, we were all working for the company with varying levels of involvement. Around this time, the thought began to form in our mind, "Why don't we make this a family-owned company?" We would all be joint owners, have regular board meetings, and make decisions together.

For over thirty years, I have been teaching, preaching, and writing about the importance of the family in the plan of God. I'm totally committed to the concept of family in general and my family in particular. I thought this would be an easy transition because it aligned with our values. I was never more mistaken.

Transitioning from a one-man entrepreneurship to a family corporation turned out to be one of the hardest things I ever had to do. “Entrepreneur” sounds noble and cutting edge. In reality it was a dictatorship. The business had become more than a way to provide for my family, it had become my baby and a source of my identity. I have written a book on how God helped me in this difficult season of my life, entitled *Crisis to Christ*.

In the process of transitioning to a family-owned corporation, one of the first things we did was hire a consultant who sat down with us and taught us about family businesses. We discovered there are benefits and advantages to working with other family members, and there is also tremendous potential to hurt a family.

Before the Demmes began meeting as a group to develop our bylaws, articulate a vision statement, and make other necessary decisions, our consultant, Mike, asked us to develop a communication code of conduct to be ground rules for how we were to communicate at our family meetings. Some of the ideas were obvious: “listen to each other without interrupting” and “watch your tone.” Other rules were very helpful, such as: “avoid ultimatums” and “try not to take information personally.” With Mike’s help, we came up with a dozen rules. We even appointed a sheriff to enforce them. Each board meeting of Demme Learning began with prayer and the reading of our code of conduct.

As we began learning how to communicate under the quiet, steady influence of our consultant Mike, I discovered I was the one who struggled the most with this transition. After several months of painful reflection, I sought the help of a therapist. Steve was extremely helpful to me as I began to work through my issues. I learned he was a published author in the field of family therapy and taught a class on the same topic. I had learned so much from him, but I wanted to learn more. The next fall, I bought a backpack and took the train from Lancaster, Pennsylvania to Philadelphia and became a student at the Council for Relationships.

I drank in the lectures. One of the key takeaways for me was what I learned about the importance of communication in healthy relationships. During one lecture, Steve encouraged each of us to create an outline for teaching the basic principles of communication. After years of counseling couples, one of the primary skills he tries to teach them is how to talk to one another. I took this assignment seriously, and what you are about to read is the result of my own study, the experience of our family board meetings, and the skills I have acquired as my wife and I have learned how to hear each other.

Learning and applying these principles transformed our marriage and family. We went through a challenging season for a few years and are now in a much better place. My wife and I have set aside times which we have termed our weekly “chair chat.”

I hope the principles we have learned and applied to such benefit in our own home and business will be a help to your family. May God continue to teach and help us each to speak the truth in love.

If you are interested, there is a one-hour talk on the this subject online as a video and as an audio. You may find them here at buildingfaithfamilies.org/speakingthetruth/. Other resources will continue to be added here in the future.

Steve

OVERVIEW BY CHAPTER

Chapter 1 reminds us that death and life are in the power of the tongue. We have the power to hurt and the opportunity to bless by how we speak.

In **Chapter 2**, we acknowledge our tongue is connected to our heart. When our heart is rooted and grounded in the gospel, we are prepared to have healthy, loving communication.

Chapter 3 addresses another essential component for healthy relationships—a quiet spirit. We each have a daily conflict within us between our carnal nature and our new, redeemed nature.

We are encouraged in **Chapter 4** to think well of the person to whom we are speaking. For when we value them as a child of God and believe they are created in His image, we will be mindful to esteem them highly.

Creating a safe place is essential to nurturing communication. **Chapter 5** articulates the need to understand what is being said without any debate.

Having established a healthy foundation, we begin to discuss specific strategies for the speaker in **Chapter 6**.

Chapter 7 gives several tips on what a good listener can do to really hear what is being communicated.

When the speaker is finished talking, the listener has a chance to ask and explore more about what has been said. These guidelines are in **Chapter 8**.

Processing what has been learned and walking in each other's shoes are valuable skills that are discussed in more detail in **Chapter 9**.

Everything worth learning and doing can be enhanced by practice. In **Chapter 10** we have questions and suggestions to guide your follow-through.

When a couple is becoming proficient in communicating, they may want to share their new-found skills with their family. In **Chapter 11**, several reminders and experiences encourage this process.

When communicating is necessary but not going well, call for help. **Chapter 12** recommends a third party to facilitate safe discussion.

Chapter 13 brings us full circle to the first tenet, which is that words matter. The tongue has the power to curse and bless.

Chapter 14 reminds us that loving relationships do not just happen. They are built through verbal and nonverbal communication.

Finally, **Chapter 15** is an account of how these principles, applied in a small group setting, have resulted in meaningful connections between men and women alike.

CHAPTER 1: THE POWER OF THE TONGUE

As a husband and father, I have the potential to build up my family like no one else. I also have the ability to harm my family and wound them. It seems the closer people are and the more love we have for each other, the greater the potential to hurt and be hurt. This is a sobering responsibility. With encouraging words, I can build up my wife and sons, and with sharp and harmful words, I can discourage and bruise their innermost person.

As Christians, we recognize “death and life are in the power of the tongue.” (Proverbs 18:21) “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is not in Scripture and is completely inaccurate. We all know we can hurt a person’s body by hitting it with a stick, but we will wound their spirit with harmful words. On the contrary, Scripture reminds us, “A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.” (Proverbs 15:4)

As a speaker, I have often prayed this prayer when I am about to address a roomful of people at a convention. “The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary.” (Isaiah 50:4) I regularly look to God for a tongue to sustain weary people and bring them encouragement and refreshment.

I want to have a similar tongue when I talk with those who are most dear to me. During the past few years, I have learned the painful truth of how my actions and words have negatively impacted my wife and my sons. Thanks to God's gracious intervention in my life, I'm taking steps to restore our relationships.

I had no idea how difficult it was for members of my family to communicate with me. The primary reason for this was that I took whatever was said to me personally. As you can imagine, this made it very difficult for them to tell me what I needed to hear. My number one desire now is to be kind and thoughtful so I can listen well and speak gently. I so want my words and actions not to cause harm to those who are nearest and dearest to me.

I am discovering that blurting out damaging words and then apologizing does not undo the harm. Words go deep. With just a moment to reflect, I can remember harsh things that people said to me over fifty years ago. They still hurt me. We can't take back what has been said. There is no amount of repentance or restitution to undo the injury from an unkind word.

Unkind Words

Recently I was doing research for a book I edited called *Hymns for Family Worship*. I was reading about George Beverly Shea, who sang and ministered with Billy Graham all over the world. Of his yokefellow in gospel ministry for over 60 years, Billy

Graham said, “I don’t believe I ever heard him utter an unkind or critical word about anyone.” (excerpt from ***Just as I Am***, Billy Graham’s biography)

Since I read this, I have caught myself several times about to say something unkind about a brother or sister and have stopped because of the testimony of this godly man.

Paul counsels Titus “to speak evil of no one” (Titus 3:2). James says, “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.” (James 4:11)

With a deepening relationship with God and an increasing awareness of God’s love for me, I am seeing positive ways to communicate and hopefully end the cycle of hurt, guilt, and remorse in my relationships. It is my fervent hope that if one person reads these words and can refrain from saying something he or she will regret, then the writing of this book will have been a success.

Parents

As a parent, how I use words can have a lifetime effect on my children. If my son does something wrong or makes a bad decision, which we all do, I have to be careful about how I address the problem. I could say, “You made a bad call today.” Perhaps I will punish him for his actions. This is part of my job as his dad. But if I say, “You made a bad decision; and you are a loser,” then I have crossed the line between correcting his actions and attacking his person. I need to make a distinction between what he did and who he is. As a father, I want to affirm

my love and commitment to my son, while faithfully admonishing him for the infraction.

I can still remember being told as a child, “You could wreck a free lunch,” or, “You could screw up a one-car funeral.” To this day I don’t remember what I did, but I recall those exact words—and they still affect me. Yes, I am sure I make mistakes, but my actions do not make me a loser.

Perhaps this is why I still have difficulty believing I am God’s adopted son and that He loves and likes me for who I am and not for what I do. I worked so hard for years to do good things because I mistakenly thought this was the path to pleasing God and others. I am finally beginning to experience and believe the unconditional, unchanging affection of my heavenly Father. God’s love for me doesn’t change because God doesn’t change. He is God, who changes not. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

When I sin or make a mistake, I still have to confess, ask forgiveness, and make restitution when appropriate, but I am still God’s son throughout the process. When I sin, I grieve my Father’s heart, but he does not love me any less. My adoption is not revoked by my behavior. Nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus—nothing.

Potential for Forest Fires and Maturity

While the book of Proverbs has an abundance of inspired insights into the tongue, perhaps James 3 is the definitive chapter on the potential of our

words. I have emphasized the harmful effects of inappropriate speech, and James reiterates this point. He likens the tongue to a tiny spark that can set a forest on fire.

“In the same way, the tongue is a small thing that makes grand speeches. But a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire. And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself.”

“People can tame all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, but no one can tame the tongue. It is restless and evil, full of deadly poison. Sometimes it praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God. And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right!” (James 3:5–10 NLT)

The tongue also has the potential for having a positive influence on our character.

“Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way. We can make a large horse go wherever we want by means of a small bit in its mouth. And a small rudder makes a huge ship turn wherever the pilot chooses to go, even though the winds are strong.” (James 3:2–4 NLT)

According to this passage, when we control our words, we will control ourselves and be perfect or mature. What an amazing statement!

Our family lived in Georgia for almost nine years. I served as an assistant to the pastor of a small church and also taught math in a public school. I was pleasantly surprised by the respect the students showed to me as their young teacher. They answered questions with “yes, sir” and “no, sir.”

My wife and I were so impressed with this speech, we taught our young sons to say, “yes, sir” and “yes, ma’am” when speaking to their elders. We observed that proper speech encouraged respectful attitudes and behavior.

Based on James 3, we understand that the tongue is not only a fruit of our heart, but it is also a tool, or rudder, that assists our whole body in developing a proper attitude.

Prayer

Father, open our eyes to the impact of our words and anoint our conversations with everyone we meet, especially those who are closest to us. Let our speech be seasoned with salt, and may we have a gentle tongue which brings life and refreshment. Give us the tongue of “those who are taught, that [we] may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary” (Isaiah 50:4).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Reflect on what your words can do to your family. What can encouraging words do? What can sharp and harmful words do?
2. Think about specific situations in the past month in which you used encouraging or harmful words toward others. Journal about the effects your words had in both of those situations.
3. Describe the two different ways a parent can speak to a child about a wrong thing the child did or said.
4. Think back to specific situations where you “crossed the line” in your correction. How could you have spoken differently? (Note: If apologies are needed, pursue them).
5. What effect did the harmful words spoken to Steve as a child have on him over the years? Do you have any similar stories to share? Think about how they have affected you personally and your interactions with others.

CHAPTER 2: THE HEART

Often when you hear a lecture or sermon on the importance of good communication in relationships, the speaker will focus on techniques and strategies to help you speak more clearly and improve your listening skills. While these can be helpful, it is paramount we understand the foundational role that the condition of one's heart plays in communication.

The "heart" in Scripture refers to the real person inside of us. When everything is stripped away, the heart is our true self. We get a glimpse into the inner workings of our heart by what we treasure or value. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Luke 12:34) What we consider important, treasure, and hold dear, sheds light on the state of our heart.

The heart plays an essential role in salvation, for we believe with our heart. "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9) Notice we confess with our mouth what we believe in our heart. Our heart is also where Jesus dwells by faith: "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (Ephesians 3:17).

The spiritual health of our heart is of the utmost importance. I take very seriously the command to "keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." (Proverbs 4:23)

The condition of our heart and how we communicate are very much connected. What we say in an unguarded moment opens a window into

our heart. I have heard people blurt something out loud that they instantly regret. They quickly say, “Oops, I didn’t mean to say that.” If I feel comfortable with them, I respond, “Yes, you did. You just didn’t mean for me to hear it!” I know this because Scripture teaches, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.” (Matthew 12:34–35)

Since the heart is the source of my speech, I know I must take whatever measures are necessary to develop a quiet and tranquil heart. When I am calm, quiet, resting, trusting, teachable, soft, filled with the Spirit, and at peace with God, then my tongue will follow suit.

An Insecure Heart

For most of my life, I did not react well when I received negative input or feedback. I took what was said, not as positive feedback, but as an attack on my person. This is why it was difficult for those who knew me best to tell me things I needed to hear the most. Within the process of our family business transition, I have finally acknowledged this truth. Having a consultant/counselor present in our family discussions enabled my wife and sons to give me input that I should have heard a long time ago. I finally asked, “Why I haven’t heard any of this before?” The answer, which they all knew, was because I would have received it badly.

I have since discovered that one reason I received input or criticism poorly is because I felt others weren't critiquing what I had done; I felt they were attacking who I am. My identity was under attack. Whether it was how I acted as a husband, things I did as a dad, or decisions I made as a businessman, it was very difficult for me to separate who I am from what I do. If someone said, "Using blocks to teach math is a stupid idea," my head translated those words to "I am a stupid person."

I defined myself primarily by how I performed and how others perceived me. As long as my wife seemed happy, then I was happy. If my sons were okay, then this part of my life was acceptable. If customers and employees were content, then so was I. I wasn't finding my sense of who I am in God alone but in how I performed.

A Heart Rooted and Grounded in God's Love

As I have been learning to have my heart rooted and grounded in Christ, I'm able to hear things I never could hear before. I'm realizing my identity is not being a good businessman, or an effective speaker, or a great dad, or even a loving husband. My identity comes from knowing I am an adopted child of God. Period. I do wear other hats and have multiple responsibilities, but I find my sense of who I am, my self-worth, in being an unconditionally loved child of God. I am His son, and He is my Dad.

What I do flows from who I am and not the reverse. Doing good things does not define me.

Being a child of God does. The Spirit has made me know I'm God's kid. In several passages in Romans and Galatians, we are informed of the Spirit's work in witnessing with our spirit that God is our "Abba father," or daddy.

"You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by Whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15)

"Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:6)

Instead of working hard to keep everyone happy, I am redirecting my energies to believing this fundamental truth and abiding in this knowledge—I am His, and He is mine.

The most important part of my day has become the time in the morning when I draw near to my Dad and am reaffirmed that I'm His son. In 2012, I discovered a wonderful truth: my heavenly Father not only loves me, He really likes me.

The Early Years of my Journey as a Follower of Jesus

I heard the gospel for the first time when I was 14 years old at a Young Life Ranch in Colorado. I was taught that if I confessed my sins and received Jesus as my Savior, I would know Jesus personally, have my sins forgiven, and go to heaven when I died. But gradually, over the years, I started thinking somehow

He'd like me more if I did more stuff for Him, like reading my Bible each day.

I know this is bad theology, and I would have identified it as such. Even though my brain knew better, deep down in my heart I embraced this unbiblical thinking and believed His liking me and being pleased with me was tied to what I did.

It's a problem the Galatian church also had. They were tempted to believe that to be accepted into

the church, they needed to receive God's grace AND be circumcised. Today, we have people who tell us we need to believe AND join their church, or be baptized, or be pro-life, or whatever. It seems there is always something more we have to do. While these are all worthwhile activities, if anything is added to grace, then it is not grace but a form of good works. For more on this topic, consider reading my book ***Knowing God's Love***.

God has used John, my son with Down Syndrome, to teach me about the unconditional nature of grace and love. This young man thinks I'm the best thing since sliced bread. He doesn't know if I'm a good businessman or speaker. He doesn't know if I'm a fine husband or good father. I'm just his Pop. The first thing he does every morning is come downstairs and crawl up into my lap. Sometimes I don't really want a 175-pound man sitting in my lap with bad breath and in need of a shave, but I stop what I am doing and hug him back. He doesn't hug me in the traditional sense; he holds me.

Because of John's unconditional love for me, I started praying, "Lord, I know you love me because you love the world, and I'm part of the world, but I'd really like to believe you like me as much as my son likes me." Some have said that the longest distance is from our head to our heart. I wanted to know in my heart what I knew in my mind.

Through sermons, Scriptures, songs, and varied experiences, God revealed His love and affection for me. Here are two of the passages of inspired writ that resonate in my heart and have led to a

significant breakthrough for me. Jesus is speaking to His disciples: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you." (John 15:9) And, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

This knowledge finally made its way from my head to my heart when it dawned on me one day—my Dad really likes me just the way I am!

I reread the account of the prodigal son and highlighted all the verses about the father. "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him." (Luke 15:20) I do studies on the love of God because I have a problem believing God really likes me. One morning, I woke up and God seemed a million miles away. I said out loud, "Lord, do You still love me as much today as You did yesterday?"

I have also assembled studies on the love of God because I have a problem believing God really

likes me. One morning I woke up and God seemed a million miles away. I said out loud, “Lord, do you still love me as much today as you did yesterday?”

I did not hear an audible response, but He did give me a picture in my mind of Jesus, standing in the heavens with His arms spread wide, saying, “Of course I do. I don’t have any baggage.” When I receive a mental picture or a vision, I ask myself, “Is this message biblical?” As I sought to discern the veracity of this illumination, the first thing I thought of was the father of the prodigal son running down the street.

He saw his disheveled son, who had just lost half of the father’s fortune, coming down the street. Instead of waiting for his son to properly clean up and express proper repentance, the father ran down the street with his robe flapping, probably losing a sandal in the process. He grabbed his wayward son, who smelled of pigs, and said, “My boy!”

Then I remembered the verses, “God is love,” (1 John 4:16) and “God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1:5) Both of these passages came quickly to mind along with the concept that God never changes—He is the same “yesterday, today, and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8)) I concluded that the illumination I had received was biblically sound. I like the word “illumination” because this picture was not only biblical, but it also illuminated these truths to me in a fresh way.

Over the course of the past few years, I have learned that the more I accept how much my

Dad likes me for who I am and know He is my Forever Father, the better I'm able to relate and communicate with my wife and others. The more rooted and grounded I am in the love of God, the nicer I am to be around. The best thing I can do for my family is to invest time to be with my Dad. Like my son, I need to crawl up into His lap each day, let Him love me, hold me, affirm me, and bring me to a place of peace.

There is a wonderful prayer found in Ephesians 3:14–19: “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from Whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

It is a long passage, but I have found it very helpful for my faith and my personal prayers. I am seeking God continually, that I might be “strengthened with power through His Spirit” and be “rooted and grounded” and “comprehend with all the saints” the scope of the “love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” The more rooted and grounded I am in His love, the better equipped I am to have godly communication.

When I am resting, settled, at peace with God, and have a healthy sense of my own integrity and identity, I am enabled to:

- Speak the truth accurately and in love.
- Live without erecting fences to protect myself.
- Eliminate the need to defend myself or take information personally.
- Thoughtfully respond rather than emotionally react to others.
- Encourage children to discuss difficult topics.
- Be faithful to the truth.
- Believe the best of the speaker.
- Create a safe place for open, honest, and safe communication.

These characteristics of speaking the truth in love, which is our aim, parallel the expressions of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4–6. I borrowed some phrases from the ESV and others from the NASB while adding the phrase “loving communication.”

- Loving communication is patient and kind
- Loving communication does not brag and is not arrogant
- Loving communication does not act unbecomingly
- Loving communication does not insist on its own way
- Loving communication is not provoked
- Loving communication does not take into account a wrong suffered
- Loving communication rejoices with the truth

- Loving communication bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things

Good Fruit in Our Family

Now I am in a much better place with God and able to listen to the input of those closest to me in a new way. A few years after this personal turning point, one of my sons and I had a several-hour heart-to-heart talk. I learned how my speech and actions had impacted him for many years. He told me that each spring, around April, I would go through a dark time emotionally. He did not know what caused it—the pressures of taxes being due, or perhaps the increased work for the upcoming conference season—but from his perspective, the whole family would hold their breath waiting for the inevitable outburst. When I did finally blow, he said I would quickly repent and apologize, but the damage had been done.

I will never forget those words. I remembered them the next spring when I sensed my wife was a little on edge and asked her about it. She simply said, “It’s April,” and my heart sank. How I wish I would have known then what I know now. Now that I am more aware of the effects of the pain which I carry from my past, as well as my propensity to overwork, be stressed, and push myself too far, I consciously seek to rest and be careful not to push myself. For the past several years, we have all made it through April without any outbursts or hurtful

language. With my heart in a better place, my tongue follows suit.

The Heart and the Tongue

As a Christian, I know out of the abundance of the heart, my mouth speaks. My speech reflects what I hold dear and the values I hold in my heart. When my heart is good, my tongue will be good. When my heart is agitated, my tongue is more prone to be sharp and caustic. My tongue does not operate on its own but is an extension of my heart. “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:45)

Prayer

Father, strengthen me with power in my inner being through Your Good Spirit, and may the Spirit of God pour God’s love into my heart. Direct my heart into a full understanding and expression of the love of God and the patient endurance that comes from Christ. In the name of Jesus the Christ, Amen. (Adapted from Ephesians 3:16, Romans 5:5, and 2 Thessalonians 3:5)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What does the “heart” refer to in Scripture? How does the heart play a foundational role in a person’s ability to listen and communicate well? Reread these passages: Matthew 12:34–35 and Luke 12:34.
2. How do you take input or critiques from others? Does your reaction depend on who is speaking to you? Do you take it as a personal attack? Can you identify with Steve’s statement: “Who I was had become interwoven with how I performed.” Explain.
3. Another quote from this chapter is: “What I do flows from who I am and not the reverse.” What defines you? Do you have “hats” that you wear that have become your identity? This is a BIG question that deserves your attention. Set aside some time to wait on God and allow Him to search your heart.
4. Do you believe deep down in your innermost being that God loves you. Does He like you? How does this assurance transform the way you interact with others?
5. Look at the list of fruit borne by a heart that is resting, settled, and at peace. Choose one or two that really draw you, that you desire and need in your life. Write about it; explain why it is important to you.

CHAPTER 3: A QUIET SPIRIT

Knowing I am loved unconditionally is a wonderful beginning. When I have been born from above, I have become a new creature in Christ. I am still the same height, have the same hair color, and have the identical shoe size. On the outside, I am the same guy, but the Spirit of God has transformed me on the inside. I have a new heart and a new spirit.

The Struggle Within

As seasoned believers, we quickly learn we still have two natures present within us, the old self and the new self. For me, these two Steves are engaged in an ongoing contest to have the upper hand. I have to choose daily to die to the old Steve and feed the new Steve. Paul in the Spirit describes this tug-of-war when he writes:

“Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,” and then “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Ephesians 4:22, 24)

These two natures are also described as my carnal nature, the flesh, and my new, redeemed nature, the Spirit. With these new words in mind, consider another description of this conflict in Galatians 5:16–17:

“Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the

flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other.”

When I am agitated and combative, the problem is not someone or something else; it is inside me. My own carnal, fleshly nature is the root problem, and it is where fights and quarrels begin. “Passions” is another word for our carnal nature. In James 4:1, we read about passions: “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” Jesus explains this when He says:

“Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.”
(Matthew 15:17–20)

Specks and Logs as Assessment Tools

Instead of blaming other people for conflicts, I’m learning the first thing to do is assess the condition of my own spirit and heart. The problem is not the guy who cut me off in traffic, or the person who interrupted me, or the waiter who didn’t treat me properly; the problem is usually in the mirror. How I respond to these situations makes me aware of the state of my spirit. If I am easily irritated, it is time to

take a deep breath and seek God for a soft heart and a quiet spirit.

When I am bothered by other people, Jesus encourages me to embrace the aggravation as a teaching moment.

“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”
(Matthew 7:3–5)

Specks or splinters in someone else’s eye are simply indicators that I have a similar problem the size of a log in my own eye. When people push my buttons, it is an excellent opportunity to stop and ask God to reveal my own inadequacies before assuming everyone else is the problem.

I have observed an interesting dynamic in my own life. The more I am rooted and grounded in the love of God, the more willing I am to invite God to search my heart and reveal sources of pain. At the same time, I am discovering there are painful experiences from my past that hinder me from believing that God unconditionally loves me. Confronting my pain and allowing God to continue to reveal His care and affection for me prompted me to write two other books, *Crisis to Christ* and *Knowing God’s Love*. These two areas have been so

instrumental in my personal healing and growth that I could not summarize them in a mere chapter or two.

During our family business transition, I found myself getting upset with other people who seemed to be conspiring against me. At one point, I felt like I was completely alone and everyone was against me. The pain was so deep that I knew there was more going on inside me than what met the eye. I was so shaken, I reached out to a group of friends for prayer and support, and I also enlisted the help of professional therapists. I discovered the problem was in my own heart and was tied to wounds from my past.

Several times God reminded me that “flesh and blood” were not my enemies, but it sure felt like it then. In hindsight, I am grateful for the difficult experience because it unearthed issues which, unresolved, would have continued to emerge and harm others. I needed to confront my own problems and look at the huge logs in my own eye first.

Psalms 139 concludes with this powerful prayer: “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psalm 139:23–24) In the Hebrew language, the phrase “any grievous way” may also be rendered “any way of pain.” Here is the prayer once again with that change: “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any way of pain in me, and lead me in the

way everlasting!” Instead of running away from pain, I am learning to embrace it, examine it, and ask God to reveal what is going on in my heart and triggering this pain.

Good Fruit

As an example of how this internal struggle impacts me, consider a hypothetical situation where my wife Sandi suggests we set aside time to discuss the care of our son affected by a disability. This is an important topic. As I prepare for this conversation, I want to be in the Spirit, be rested, and have my heart rooted and grounded in God’s love. Then I will be more equipped to engage in safe, honest, open, thoughtful communication.

Sometimes, I think I am okay but am not. I have had to learn how to discern whether I am walking in the flesh or walking in the Spirit. Fortunately, Scripture clearly describes the flesh and the Spirit.

“The works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.”
(Galatians 5:19–20)

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” (Galatians 5:22)

The good fruit of the Spirit is characterized by self-control, while the flesh may be described as

out-of-control or casting off restraint. It is obvious that if someone is in the flesh, they will not be fit to communicate well, but if someone is walking in the Spirit, they are in a great place to speak honestly and listen compassionately.

Learning to Communicate Honestly

I have observed that when I am tired, it is more difficult to be in a good place for edifying communication. I used to try and pretend I could speak honestly and converse well regardless of how much sleep I had, but I am learning to simply be honest about how I am feeling.

A few years ago, Sandi, my son John, and I attended a wedding held 225 miles away. We drove both ways, participated in the pictures, the ceremony, and the reception, and returned the same day. Since I do all the interstate driving in our family, my wife and son blissfully slept while I pressed on.

The next morning, Sandi awoke happy and perky, but I was exhausted. I was weary and bone-tired from the journey. When she enthusiastically greeted me in the morning, I simply said, "I need some space. I'm not in a good place." She smiled, thanked me for communicating honestly, and let me rest.

In the past, I would have pretended to be okay and gamely tried to be nice. Sandi would have quickly discerned something was amiss. Then after wondering what she may have done to cause this, she probably would have withdrawn, subsequently

blamed herself for the distance in our relationship, and read another marriage book.

If I had been able to muster some energy, I may have approached her and asked her forgiveness for my response. But she would be left still wondering what she had done wrong. Unless God granted a miracle, we would have existed this way for days or even weeks before we were able to be close again. Guess what we do now? We communicate with consideration. We try to honestly assess how we are feeling and tell each other. When I awakened in the morning, I knew my spirit was fragile because I was emotionally and physically exhausted. That morning, I went back to sleep, and later awoke in a better frame of mind. I went downstairs, and she cheerfully greeted me with, "That was so helpful. Thank you for telling me how you were feeling. I'm happy that we're learning to communicate." There were no awkward feelings, no shame, and no blame or wondering what we were feeling, and we enjoyed a harmonious day together.

Open to Reason

Another passage I consult when seeking to discern if my heart and spirit are quiet and in a good place is James 3:17. Notice the adjectives that describe this heavenly wisdom: "The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere." The NLT version renders the phrase "open to reason" as "willing to yield to others."

I aspire to have a heart that is “peaceable, gentle, open to reason, willing to yield to others, impartial and sincere.” If my spirit is in a state of rebellion, no amount of books, techniques, or workshops will help the way I relate to others. “But if I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me,” (Psalms 131:2)

Prayer

“Let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious. (1 Peter 3:4)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. (Adapted from Psalms 19:14 and 51:10)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. (Philippians 4:23)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Use descriptive adjectives or fruits to define the flesh and the spirit. Describe the warfare between your old self and your new self.
2. Consider Steve's statement: "If I am easily irritated, it is time to take a deep breath and seek God for a soft heart and a quiet spirit." Write the verses in which Jesus talks about embracing aggravation as a teaching moment (Matthew 7:3–5).
3. Think about situations that regularly frustrate you. What are the circumstances that surround these times? How do you tend to react?
4. Do you have unresolved issues with people close to you? Have you ever felt like others were conspiring against you? Remember that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood." Read Ephesians 6:10–18.
5. What plan of action could you put in place to enable you to be in the Spirit and not in the flesh?

CHAPTER 4: ESTEEM ONE ANOTHER HIGHLY

When I wrote this section, I was thinking primarily about communication with my wife, but this principle applies to everyone. I have not done well in esteeming or counting Sandi more significant than myself. This language and this way of thinking are used in the inspired letter to the Philippian church, in which we are encouraged to have this mindset that Jesus exemplified:

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”
(Philippians 2:3–8)

I have been guilty of treating Sandi as a second-class citizen. I have misinterpreted and misapplied passages teaching about submission and “helpmeets” to mean that women are subservient by nature. I was

wrong. I am not addressing roles, which is a different topic. I am focusing on how I viewed my wife.

I learned of my wrong thinking from Sandi's own lips. One evening, she quietly informed me that many times she has felt like I treated her without mutuality and respect. Sadly, I acknowledge she was accurate and that my attitude reflected my beliefs. "For as he thinks within himself, so he is." (Proverbs 23:7 NASB)

My speech reflects my beliefs, my values, and my theological underpinnings. If I am going to treat Sandi in a way that reflects Christ, then I have to think of her as Christ thinks of her. My wife is created in the image of God. She was given to me by God. God designed her to be one flesh with me.

She is a valued member of the Church with gifts and talents to uniquely build up the body of Christ. She is also a joint heir of Christ and an adopted child of God.

The more I think Scripturally about this special and unique individual, the easier it is to esteem her highly and treat her well. She's an incredible woman of God. She's wonderful. She has home educated four sons, one of whom has a disability.

She has been a pastor's wife, an incredible helpmeet, a daughter who has honored her parents, and a steadfast servant of Christ who has followed Jesus faithfully since she was a child.

As I embrace this belief system, my speech will reflect my convictions because my mind, heart, and tongue are all connected. Biblical, God-honoring

thinking precedes and fosters biblical, God-honoring communication.

A significant part of my problem was misunderstanding biblical authority. The disciples also misunderstood authority. Jesus gave them some direct teaching on the topic. “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant.” (Matthew 20:25–26) In the kingdom of men, people in authority rule over others, but in the kingdom of God, people who have been given positions of leadership are to serve others.

Jesus not only taught this doctrine to those who were to be the first leaders of the Church, He also lived it. He gave them an example of this kind of service when He washed their feet.

“When He had washed their feet and put on His outer garments and resumed His place, He said to them, ‘Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.’” (John 13:12–15)

Paul reminded believers in Corinth about “the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.” (2 Corinthians 13:10)

In God's kingdom, the world's ways of operating are usually reversed. God has given authority to serve and to build up, not to rule over or tear down. As a husband and father, I was guilty of misusing my authority. I now am committed to building up and serving those who are within the sphere of my influence, for this is what God created and designed me to do.

As in all teaching, there is a balance. While I have incorrectly thought too highly of myself, there may be others who think too lowly of themselves. Since we are each children of God, created in His image, with inherent value and a gift to contribute to the body of Christ, we are each worthy of being heard. For those who speak too much and think too highly of their insights and thoughts, a little humility may be just what they need. For those who lack confidence in their gifting and what they have been providentially equipped to provide to others, maybe a little spunk and initiative is needed.

This verse covers both bases: "By the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." (Romans 12:3) We need to think soberly and honestly. Not too high, and not too low, but according to the faith God has assigned to each of His children.

Esteem Everyone Highly

In 2006, our family attended our first Joni and Friends Family Retreat. Even though we have a son with Down Syndrome, this was the first time we had been to a camp where every family included someone who was affected by a disability. For the first few days, I noticed the outward signs of disabilities in those we met. But after a few days, I began to see the real people. I didn't see the wheelchair; I saw the man. I didn't hear the speech impediment but got to know the heart of the individual.

The highlight of the camp was the talent show during which each person had a chance to shine. Some sang, some acted, and some played a musical instrument. Others shared a significant event that happened in the past year or read a meaningful poem they had written. Jane is a lady who has difficulty speaking and is confined to a wheelchair, but I learned she has authored several books of poetry. David has cerebral palsy, which affects his muscles, and he is also in a wheelchair. He taught himself sign language with a video program so he could communicate with his best friend. He signed and did an amazing job performing a praise song. Each of these people has value, and I am to consider them more highly than myself. The more I got to know them, the easier Romans 12:3 was to apply.

Whether we are listening to our wives, or someone affected with a disability, or the youngest member of the family, we need to treat them with

love and respect. Good, godly communication begins with two people who esteem each other highly, honor each other, and respect each other. This is really the golden rule, isn't it? Treating others as we hope to be treated. If while I'm speaking to somebody or when I'm listening to someone, I value this person and count them more significant than myself, my communication will be transformed. As parents model this kind of honorable communication, it will rub off on their children.

Before we speak, we should have our hearts resting and calm and our minds thinking biblically. Only God can help us here. Let's seek Him.

Prayer

Father, help me to esteem others highly and value others as more significant than myself. Give me the mind of Christ, be present in my thinking, and be glorified in my speaking. I make this request in the name and Spirit of the Servant King Jesus, amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Steve applies the ideas in this chapter to his relationship with his wife. To whom can you apply it? Write down ways that you can practically do this. If you can, ask that person or persons, "Have I honored you and respected you, treating you as important?"
2. If you are a husband, these ideas are especially crucial in your relationship with your wife. Draw near to God and ask Him to search your heart as David did. Jot down any insights you receive.
3. Our speech reflects our convictions because our mind, heart, and tongue are connected. We need to be transformed from within so our speech and actions will naturally follow. One way we can do this is to ask Jesus to help us see people through HIS eyes. Consider making a list of people's special/unique qualities.
4. How did Jesus model the proper way to serve as a leader? Read and reflect on His interaction with the disciples in John 13. List some practical ways you can build up and serve those over whom God has placed you in authority. Begin with your family.
5. Which category do you fall into: those who think too highly of themselves, or those who think too lowly of themselves or those who do not have confidence in using their gifts in the body of Christ? What verse covers both bases? Copy it here in your favorite translation.

CHAPTER 5: CREATE A SAFE PLACE

If I had the opportunity to start over as a husband and father, a do-over if you will, the number one thing I would seek to be is gentle and kind. My goal would be to have a safe home where everybody could be who God designed them to be without fear of what I might say or how I would react. I would use “the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down” (2 Corinthians 13:10) to encourage those who are closest to me.

My greatest desire is to be like Jesus. I would like to be approachable, gentle, and meek like my Lord. I’m six foot five, weigh an eighth of a ton, and can be very intimidating. My hope and prayer is for my granddaughters, my wife, and my children to feel comfortable around me. I don’t want them to be wondering if I have had enough sleep, or if I am going to be angry, or if they have to walk on eggshells, waiting for a disruption.

The safest man to speak with would be Jesus. In Matthew 12:18–20, we have an insightful description of the Son of God:

“Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon Him, and He will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear His

voice in the streets; a bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not quench.”

This illustration is used to describe Jesus, but it’s hard to understand in our modern culture.

I assume a reed is a thin, fragile piece of wood placed in the end of a clarinet. Smoking wick sounds like a flickering candle about to expire. Apparently, Jesus was not loud or boisterous, for He did not cry aloud or quarrel. He was also careful not to crush a fragile object or extinguish a candle about to go out. He was safe to be with. Your spirit would not be crushed, extinguished, or bruised in His presence.

Because Jesus is a safe person, we are in a safe place when we are near Him.

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30)

I want Sandi’s spirit to be able to rest when we are together. I want to encourage her and not quench her spirit. I don’t want to blow out her candle but rather fan its flame so that it burns more brightly.

Two important verses to me in this regard are John 15:9 and 12. Jesus is speaking: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.” Then He says a few verses later, “Love one another as I have loved you.” He’s not telling me to love only my wife this

way, but everybody. We are to love people as we have been loved by Jesus.

How did Jesus love me? With this concept as my guide, I think about how Jesus loves me. Since Jesus is God, and God is love, then Jesus is love. To help me flesh out how Jesus loves, I made a slight modification to 1 Corinthians 13. "Jesus is patient and kind; Jesus does not envy or boast; He's not arrogant or rude." In another version it reads, "Jesus is not irritable or resentful. Jesus rejoices with the truth. Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

We could also amplify this concept by placing our own name at the end of each phrase. Jesus is patient to Steve. Jesus is kind to Steve. Jesus does not envy or boast with Steve. Jesus is not arrogant or rude with Steve. Jesus is not irritable or resentful with Steve. This is your first homework assignment: Make a list of these attributes and put your name at the end. This is how Jesus loves each of us. This helps me know how I am to love others.

As Jesus is to me, I desire to be for my wife. I want to be patient and kind. The hardest part of 2012 was having a consultant at the table, providing an environment in which my wife and sons were free to have a voice. As each member of my family spoke, I learned I had been hurting those closest to me through things I had said and through attitudes I had adopted. This painful revelation was almost more than I could assimilate.

I no longer have a strong desire to build big things and do great deeds. I do want to be thoughtful, quick to hear, and slow to speak. I want to create a safe place in my home where my wife and my sons can freely express their opinions, embrace their own convictions even when they are different than my own. I want them to feel heard, valued, and safe. Do I agree with my kids and my wife on everything? No. I still have my own strong convictions and opinions. I am learning that I can have my own convictions without hurting people. This is the message of Romans 14:5: "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." In verse 19 Paul adds, "Let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."

Our Family Code

One way our family tried to ensure our communication would be open, honest, and safe was to develop a Communication Code of Conduct. Before every family board meeting, we opened with prayer and then read the code. The chairman for the day then designated a sheriff to make sure we all adhered to these principles. Most of the points are common sense, but the process of developing them and then intentionally reading them at the beginning of each meeting kept them at the forefront of our thinking.

Demme Learning Communication

Code of Conduct

1. Listen and provide each other space
2. Don't interrupt
3. Full participation giving safe and honest feedback without fear
4. Watch our tone of voice
5. Ask for clarification
6. Ask for time to process information and emotions when necessary
7. Try not to personalize (keep it professional and above the line)
8. Define a clear agenda for meetings with advance notice
9. Ask for feedback
10. Process out loud
11. Avoid ultimatums
12. Share your thoughts and feelings openly (come to the line)
13. Use a process manager (sheriff)

We used this code for several years. As I grow in my understanding of speaking the truth in love, I continue to tweak and make changes to it. These principles are universal and apply not only to board meetings, but to everyday family situations as well. I will expand on these principles in the ensuing chapters.

Prayer

Father, fix our eyes on Jesus. Fill us with the Spirit of Jesus. Let the aroma of the gentle, kind, meek, and patient Savior permeate our conversations. In Jesus' name, amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Think of someone you find safe to talk to. What makes them safe to you?
2. "The safest man to speak with would be Jesus." How do we know this from Scripture? List some characteristics of Jesus, using descriptive phrases from the Bible, that confirm He is safe and approachable.
3. Look at John 15:9 and John 15:12. Draw a chart, a web, or a map, including descriptive words, to show the relationships described in these verses.
4. Do the homework assignment Steve proposes near the end of the chapter. Make a list of the attributes of love in 1 Corinthians 13, with Jesus as the subject and yourself as the object. For example, "Jesus is patient to _____ (your name)." Meditate and pray through these verses regularly to help you remember and rejoice in how Jesus loves you so that you can better know how to love others.
5. Create a Communication Code of Conduct with and for your family.

CHAPTER 6: SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE

In this chapter, we will discuss multiple techniques to consider when engaging in heart-to-heart conversations. In any dialogue, both the speaker and listener have work to do. We've already discussed the importance of being aware of the state of one's heart. Ideally, both parties are rested and willing to speak clearly and listen with respect. "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ." (Ephesians 4:15)

Tips for the Speaker

1. Watch Your Tone
2. Communicating for Clarity
3. The Pen
4. Be Emotionally Honest and Real
5. Avoid the Bully Pulpit
6. Don't Overstate Your Convictions
7. Look in the Mirror
8. Foster an Atmosphere of Mutual Respect

Watch your Tone

My counselor Steve once said, "When I counsel a couple, I don't listen to what they say; I listen to how they say it." His observation astounded me. I had always thought the content was the most important ingredient of speaking. Yet he had observed the tone in which someone is speaking is more revealing of what is going on in the relationship.

Speak the truth and do it with love. Let your tone convey you are not angry or hurt, but speak in a way that is controlled and thoughtful. “If you claim to be religious but don’t control your tongue, you are fooling yourself.” (James 1:26 NLT)

In the Gospel of John, this language is used: “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:17)

Watching one’s tone is more than not raising your voice or speaking harshly; it is speaking the truth with grace and mercy as well.

Have a sense of reflection in your tone of voice and an openness, as if you are simply sharing information. Avoid sarcasm or using the opportunity to sermonize. If possible, keep your communication light and employ some humor.

Communicating for Clarity

The hardest principle for me is communicating for clarity and understanding, rather than convincing or persuading. As a Christian, this is almost counterintuitive to me. When I meet someone who is not a believer, I am generally praying and looking for an opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus.

As a result of this mentality, which is admirable to a degree, I’m not dialed into what someone else is thinking and feeling as much as I am looking for openings to interject truth. The reality is that I believe I do know the truth and have a responsibility to preach the gospel. However, that is not what I am addressing in this seminar. The prime objective of

two-way communication is not to change the way someone thinks but to understand what they think.

The Pen

One strategy our family has used is having a physical object for the speaker to hold. Holding this object clarifies that the speaker has the floor. We have used a pen, a salt shaker, and a wooden stick from Africa. Having the pen authorizes the speaker to speak without any interruption.

The possessor of the pen represents himself or herself. The speaker may use lots of personal pronouns such as “I,” “me,” and “my,” and they may say “I feel,” “I’ve observed,” and “I think.” The speaker strives to express as clearly as possible what they are thinking and feeling. Their job is not to make a convincing argument or change the listener’s opinion, but to speak the truth accurately and plainly.

If you are speaking, represent yourself and talk as you would want to be talked to if you were the listener. If you can, take off your “salesman’s hat,” which is trying to get the customer to agree with what you are saying. You are simply attempting to be open, honest, and gracious regardless of how the listener is reacting to what you are saying. You are communicating for clarity.

Several years ago, I was present at a meeting of family members. There were seven siblings from around the country who had not been together in one room for years. We were discussing the estate of their parents, a discussion that had the potential to

be explosive. We gathered around the dining room table, and I suggested we use a saltshaker to help with our discussion. Whoever had the saltshaker had the floor. Everyone got on board with this idea, and it worked. Holding the saltshaker gave people permission to express themselves without fear of being interrupted, stifled, or intimidated by another sibling.

Younger siblings expressed themselves clearly and with confidence. Some of them had been influenced and bullied by an older sibling their entire lives. For the rest of the afternoon, one after another of the family members asked for the saltshaker and took turns talking until everybody had a chance to express their thoughts.

In our home, when my wife has the pen, she has the floor, and she is able to express herself fully. When she has finished talking, while she still holds the pen, I will ask questions to clarify or restate what she has said so I can see if I heard her accurately. Or I might ask her to expand on specific words she mentioned. I'm not going to judge her, or decide if I agree with what she believes, or debate what she has stated. My goal is to hear and understand her.

Be Emotionally Honest and Real

In addition to beginning sentences with personal pronouns, also share how you are feeling by saying "I feel." Then follow this phrase with one-word adverbs such as "afraid," "nervous," "hopeful,"

“happy,” or other words to describe what is going on in your own person.

A few years ago, I had to go through a difficult lawsuit. One evening while I was out of state, Sandi texted me and asked how I was doing. In the past, I would have said, “Fine,” but I am learning to be intellectually and emotionally honest. Instead of cutting the conversation short with “Fine,” I texted her back and said, “I’m a little relieved, feeling a little vulnerable, a little wounded, and I’m sad.” She replied, “Thank you for letting me in.” When I am open, transparent, vulnerable, and real with Sandi, our relationship grows and deepens.

I have probably lied thousands of times by saying I was fine when I wasn’t. When people ask me, “How are you?” and I answer, “Fine” when I am not, I am being dishonest. I’m taking this simple query very seriously now. When I was going through my tough time in 2012, friends would inquire, “How are you doing?” I would look at them and say, “Do you want to know?” If they hesitated, I knew they didn’t want to know the details, so I would respond, “I’m doing,” which is honest.

But if they said “yes” and were genuinely interested, I would tell them. When I shared my story and was emotionally honest, they felt free to share how they were feeling as well. We all spoke with integrity. I hardly had a shallow conversation for about two years because when I was open, others became open, and we experienced sincere fellowship and a heart connection.

I would like to add a little postscript on the response “Fine.” I have the privilege of teaching about principles of communication. If the audience is comprised of men and women, I like to ask the ladies what they feel like when their husband tells them they are fine. Their responses include: “shut out,” “he doesn’t want to tell me how he is feeling,” “helpless,” and “not good enough to talk to.”

As a man, when I say “Fine,” I am not trying to shut my wife out. I think I am being noble by sucking it up and sparing her having to hear about my personal struggles. However, what really happens when I respond with “Fine” is that I create distance between my wife and myself. She feels at arm’s length and excluded from my personal life. I think I am taking the high road and helping her, but the exact opposite message is conveyed.

Many people assume men answer “Fine” because they are unable to express their emotions. This is bunk. Men have emotional muscles, but when we do not use them to work on articulating the emotions we are experiencing, they become atrophied from lack of use. The Psalms, many of which were written by David, the warrior king, the lover of God, are replete with expressions of how David was feeling. He was honest and raw when talking to God.

Consider the emotions and feelings expressed by David in Psalm 6. He didn’t put on a brave face and hide his thoughts. He wrote what he was experiencing as a prayer to God. He was real, transparent, and true to himself. “My soul also

is greatly troubled. But you, O LORD—how long?” (Psalm 6:3) “I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows weak because of all my foes.” (Psalm 6:6–7)

In Psalm 13:1–2, David is filled with sorrow because it seems God has forgotten him, “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?”

Avoid the Bully Pulpit

The expression “bully pulpit” was first used by Theodore Roosevelt when he was president. During his presidency, in the first years of the 20th century, “bully” had a different meaning than it does today. It was used to describe something as really great, a good thing. The term “bully pulpit” means a great position of authority enabling one to promote personal views or agenda. As president, he used his unique position to put forth his political platform.

God has given me, as the father of my children, the authority to serve, build up, encourage, and train them. I have misused this position by expressing my thoughts on a wide variety of topics, assuming my family shared my opinions as well.

When my sons went off to college, they had an opportunity to think and examine life for themselves. One of my sons attended the services of a different

denomination than ours each Sunday for several months to hear what they taught. He was searching for and developing his own convictions, which I applaud. I have always wanted my sons to be seekers of truth like the Bereans, those people described by Luke in Acts 17:11 (ASV): “Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica, they received the Word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” They heard Paul and then examined the Scriptures themselves to see if his message was accurate.

During a Christmas break, one of my sons got up his courage to tell me he had a crisis of sorts in his personal beliefs because he had met someone from a different political persuasion than mine, who was not only a believer but a nice man. This shocked him because he assumed from the way I spoke about people of this stripe that they would be almost evil, and it shook him to wonder what other misinformation I had taught him.

He told me, “Pop, if you had explained why you believe what you believe, that would have been so helpful. You assumed because we lived in the same home with you, we would adopt all of your convictions. We didn’t know why you are pro-life, and why you think government should be limited, and why you call yourself a conservative. But if you had explained this from Scripture or your own experiences, this would have helped us to understand you.”

I learned the hard way from my son's comments. 1 Peter 3:15 says, "Always [be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect." My son helped me realize I had not done a good job of explaining from Scripture the reasoning behind my beliefs. Nor had I done a good job of responding with "gentleness and respect" to those who didn't agree with my positions. Fortunately, I have watched each of my sons grow and mature, and they are much better than I was at thinking through what they believe and articulating their beliefs honestly, with gentleness and respect. I think they have inherited this propensity from their mom!

Don't Overstate your Convictions

Absolutely every story sounds a million times better when the facts are embellished and exaggerated by the speaker. Absolutely every one? A million times better? When you speak, be accurate and honest. Speak the truth, nothing more and nothing less. When you use a time of discussion as a platform for making a point, then you will be tempted to stretch the truth to support your position. If you are not trying to win an argument or convince someone of your position but are simply representing yourself and seeking clarity, then this will not be a problem.

"Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil."
(Matthew 5:37)

Look in the Mirror

When you speak, think about how you look when you are communicating. Consider looking in the mirror once in a while. You might not know how you look when you process what is being said. Let me try to explain.

Sandi is an introvert. When she is assimilating information, she processes and thinks through what she hears. She needs time to chew on and digest new information. While she is processing, she is not aware of her facial signals. She is totally concentrating on what she has learned.

On the other hand, I am an extrovert and an open book. People who speak to me know pretty much what I am thinking by the expressions they see on my face. I process information quickly and can formulate a response to what is being asked of me in a short time. I think quickly on my feet.

As a speaker and teacher, I read faces and look for clues to see how my presentation is being received. I've spent years as a preacher, taught in many classrooms, and sat across the table from students whom I was tutoring. I can look at an audience and have a pretty good idea of who is struggling, who is being moved, and who wishes they were not present. However, I'm learning I can't read introverts as well as I thought because introverts are focused on processing what they are hearing and thinking things through. I've learned I probably won't really discover what they think until the next day.

For example, one day after I had just spoken at a conference, Sandi complimented me on my presentation. I thought, “Really?” because I had watched her throughout the session, and her face conveyed that she didn’t like what I had said. But now her mouth was saying she liked the talk! I was unable to reconcile the inconsistency between her facial expression and her words. I puzzled over this disparity for years.

My family is learning to apply these principles of communication, so a short while ago I said something, and as Sandi was processing how to respond, she quit smiling. I wondered what had upset her and I had a puzzled expression on my face. She saw my bewilderment, thought about the mirror and said, “Don’t move.”

She walked into the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Then she emerged and said, “I’m sorry. I understand why you think I’m reacting to what you said, but it’s just my face. My face is telling you something I’m not really thinking. I’m just processing.” After being flummoxed for years, the mystery of the facial disparity was finally solved.

This situation may be totally reversed in your home. Perhaps the husband is the introvert and the wife is the extrovert. You will figure these things out as you talk to each other. You might even say, “I’m really sorry, but I’m getting two messages. Your words are not lining up with your face. Can you help me?” The same may hold true for the facial expressions of your children.

Foster an Atmosphere of Mutual Respect

When I was going through a dark time in 2012, which corresponded to a bad time for my wife and sons, I sought the help of a therapist. That was something I didn't think I would ever choose. "I'll never go to a shrink. I can figure this out myself," was my mantra. During one of our sessions, the counselor asked Sandi if there was anything she would like to tell me that would be difficult for me to hear. She said, "There is one thing I could never tell Steve because he would die if he knew what I think."

She went on to say, "I have lived with this man for thirty years. I know what he thinks." I had never been silent on my convictions about faith, education, or politics. I made them known to everybody within my home and anybody else who would listen. Our therapist said, "Why don't you try?" She took a deep breath and shared this difficult revelation she had held within her heart for decades. Having a third party present provided the safety she needed. After a brief silence, the counselor looked at me for a response, and I said, "Still breathing."

Do I agree with my wife on this particular subject? No, she's correct in her assessment of my convictions. I don't agree with her, but I heard her. I am valuing her opinion even though I don't share it. You might say, "This is basic stuff." For me, this is huge. I'm learning that my responsibility is not to fix people or change the way they think. Change and transformation are God's department. My calling is

to love them, understand them, and remain faithful and honest with what God has revealed to me.

I used to prefer associating with people who believed what I believed. I had strong convictions about this. Now I'm learning there are probably no two people in the world who agree on every single point. I have to remind myself that we are all created in the image of God and we all have value. I'm learning for the first time to listen with respect to people with whom I don't agree.

After years of practice, Sandi and I can now talk about pretty much anything. If you have never gotten to the place where you can talk about difficult and important matters, consider having a consultant or therapist present. During the first two years of our family business, we always had a consultant present at board meetings. It created a safe place for everybody in the room.

I have listed these eight points to help in communicating with grace and clarity. Feel free to make your own list and make changes as you grow in your ability to speak well.

"Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!" (Psalms 141:3)

"Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." (Colossians 4:6)

Prayer

Father, keep a watch over my mouth, and let my speech be gracious and seasoned with salt. Enable me to speak the truth with love. In the precious name of Jesus, amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is the prime objective of two-way communication?
2. Look at the list of “Tips for the Speaker” at the beginning of the chapter. List these items in order for you from easiest to hardest.
3. From “The Pen” section, summarize the points that are important to follow when having a family meeting. Star (*) the one that would be the easiest for your family to follow and underline the one that might be the hardest for you.
4. If you are a parent, consider whether you use your authority as a “bully pulpit.” Have you experienced this situation?
5. Think about your spouse and your children, OR, if you are not married, think about your parents, siblings, and close friends. When you have differences of opinion or feel like they are in error, do you feel a responsibility to FIX them or CHANGE the way they think? Remember, “Change and transformation are God’s responsibility. [Our] calling is to love them, understand them, and remain faithful and honest with what God has revealed to [us].”

CHAPTER 7: QUICK TO HEAR AND SLOW TO SPEAK

Tips for the Listener

1. Listen Without Interrupting
2. Provide Undivided Attention
3. Value the Speaker
4. Listen Without Personalizing
5. Rule Your Spirit
6. Stay at the Table
7. Take a Time-Out
8. Follow Through

The primary responsibility of the listener is to listen carefully and hear what the speaker is communicating. Whether you agree with what is being said is not the point. The number one goal is to understand what the speaker is saying. As the listener, I need to be rested and at peace. I want to hear and understand what is being said, regardless of whether I agree or not. I want to value the speaker and their words. My aim is to treat the presenter as I would want to be treated if I were speaking.

Listen without Interrupting

When it is my turn to listen and I have relinquished the pen (from the previous chapter), I am trusting God to help me be “quick to hear, slow to speak.” (James 1:19) When a speaker opens his

heart and entrusts us with truths and insights into his being, we have to receive what has been said carefully. The speaker is vulnerable and much more liable to be wounded when his guard has been let down.

Provide Undivided Attention

If Sandi is going to invest time to speak to me, then as the listener, I choose to turn off my cell phone and any other electronics. I am not going to check any social media. I want to face her when she is speaking, focus, and maintain positive eye contact, occasionally nodding, affirming, and expressing interest in what is being spoken.

We have a dear friend who is on the autism spectrum. Eye contact is hard for him. He can listen well without looking at the speaker, which is natural for him. However, he has learned that looking directly at people when they are talking to him is important. He makes the effort to do what is not easy for him because he is thinking of others. In this tangible way, he is valuing them.

While I am seeking to hear and understand Sandi, there will be no deep breaths, no sighing, no sucking my lips, no rolling my eyes, nor interrupting. In other words, I am to apply the second of Jesus' greatest commandments and treat her like I want to be treated when it's my turn with the pen. I'm giving her respect. I'm esteeming her highly.

Value the Speaker

Before I make a snap judgment and speak based on my quick analysis, I have found I need time to pause to really understand that I have heard and value what the speaker is thinking, feeling, or expressing.

I need to intentionally remember the principles of esteeming one another highly covered in Chapter 4. Knowing the speaker is a child of God and a member of the body of Christ, with unique value and a spiritual gift, helps me to focus and listen with all of my attention. The speaker is not inferior to me but is my brother or sister in Christ. Even if they are not a believer, they have still been created in the image and likeness of God.

Another strategy that helps me is considering how I would like to be listened to if I were speaking. This is treating others like I want to be treated. I want to be heard, understood, and valued regardless of what I believe. I want to be listened to with respect.

Listen without Personalizing

When we first began having family business discussions, I was surprised and shocked at how personally offended I was by any comments I perceived as critical of how I had run the company to that point. I thought I was big enough to hear what everyone had to say, but I found out I was the most susceptible to being offended. I learned these skills in the context of our family business discussions,

but I am now applying them to my times of talking with Sandi.

One of the highlights of our marriage communication occurred about two years ago. Sandi began the conversation by saying, “I have something to talk about today, which is going to be hard for you to hear, but it worked out okay.” First of all, this is a thoughtful way to start a conversation that has the potential to be painful. It made me know that what I was about to hear might hurt me, but she was at peace with how it ended.

In the past when Sandi would say, “We need to talk,” I would immediately become defensive. Do all men respond similarly? When we did sit down, I was only about ten percent present. Even though I was outwardly calm and engaged, ninety percent of my brain was desperately assembling my defense team. I was contacting my lawyers, I had my research people on full alert, and I was scanning my internal hard drive wondering, “Where did I mess up?”

I figured I was in trouble for something I had done, and I was scrambling to figure out what it was because I would be on the stand soon. Today, I am in a much better place than ever before. I’m much more rooted and grounded in Christ alone. The phrase “rooted and grounded” is found in Paul’s prayer for the Ephesian believers:

“According to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through

faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:16–19)

I can still get offended by input and correction because I’m still human, but it doesn’t happen nearly as often as in the first thirty years of our marriage.

So while my wife was speaking on this occasion, I was all there. I was one hundred percent focused on what she was about to say. I didn’t have any defense team; there were no lawyers on call—nothing.

She began to talk about a painful experience. As she shared it, I was fully present. I understood her and even felt some of her pain. I empathized to the point that I teared up while she was speaking. When she was finished speaking, I said, “Oh, I’m so sorry; that must have really hurt.” Because I was fully present, I understood her as I never had before. After she picked up her jaw from the floor, she replied, “Wow, you really heard me.” Thanks to these principles I am hearing and understanding her more and more.

Rule Your Spirit

If you decide what you are upset about is something to overlook, then do so without carrying around an attitude. If you need to address it, take responsibility to do so with clarity so that no one has

to wonder or guess what you are thinking. It is better to express your grievance rather than allow your emotions to escalate and explode.

“Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.” (Proverbs 16:32) One thing I know is that if I am hungry, tired, or on edge, my spirit will not be easy to control. As humans, we are spiritual, physical, emotional creatures. Our emotions impact our body. Our spirits are affected by our emotions. We are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” (Psalm 139:14) We are also fragile and easily broken. “We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” (2 Corinthians 4:7) If I am not taking care of my jar of clay, I will not be able to speak well or listen carefully.

Stay at the Table

Avoid ultimatums, tantrums, and the explosive power play when you are upset. I was at a family business meeting when some hard stuff was coming across the table. Our consultant said to me, “Steve, I have seen so many fathers at this juncture who will just pound the table and say, ‘I don’t need this,’ and walk out of the room. Their family will probably never recover.” He knew I was struggling, but he affirmed me for staying at the table and not walking away when I was tempted to do so.

When your buttons have been triggered, verbalize it. Say “I am hurting” or “I need some

space.” Let the people at the table know what has been said has touched you deeply and you need a time-out to process the words.

When I was hurting, the temptation for me was to make extreme statements and issue ultimatums. I am sad and ashamed to confess this. I have since learned that anger and power plays are not conducive to honest and open communication. We need to be careful. We may not necessarily be feeling anger, but we still use it as a tool to get our way and to create separation when we are on the hot seat. Sometimes the reason we get angry is because people are getting a little too close to the truth, and we feel vulnerable. Don’t let anger drive away those closest to you.

When I think of staying at the table and not leaving the room, I also think about staying engaged emotionally as well. I know it is possible for me to be physically present but emotionally absent. I want to be present in body and spirit and not check out when the going gets rough.

Take a Time-out

If you need time to process and assimilate information you have heard or to discern your emotions, ask for a time-out. This takes maturity, being comfortable in your own skin, and a healthy sense of who you are in Christ. We have discovered how talking about difficult problems can affect each person differently. It is hard to predict how some piece of information will be received by everyone in

the room. Give each other space and don't assume you know how each person will respond or react.

If you feel like you are going to react after an emotional button has just been triggered, verbalize what you are experiencing or call for a short recess. You may only need a few minutes to breathe deeply or go for a short walk to restore peace in your spirit. Say, "Wow, that was hard for me to hear. I think I need a few minutes to process this information." Or "I need some space. Could we have a short break so I can collect myself?"

When I am in the emotional hemisphere of my brain, I am unable to respond thoughtfully. My tendency is to react emotionally, and that is never beneficial to the other people in the conversation. In order for me to move back into my rational hemisphere, I need time, space, and a cooling-off period. Because words uttered rashly have so much potential for harm, my counsel is to take whatever time you need to regroup and settle down your spirit.

A few chapters ago, I shared how I responded when my wife awoke all perky and full of joy, but I was exhausted after the long drive to and from a wedding. I knew that no matter what she said, I was going to react emotionally. I was fragile, and I was aware of my own condition. I needed time to rest before I could respond thoughtfully. That is why I said, "I'm not in a good place and need some space." I was essentially asking for a time-out.

Follow Through

If you are unable to overcome your anxiety and need more time, come back to the room and tell how you are feeling. Suggest postponing this discussion for until another day. But don't leave this open-ended; get out your calendar and set a time and place.

If Sandi tells me something difficult to hear and I am too tired to follow through right then, I don't want to suggest that we talk about it later without setting a specific time. If I just say, "Let's talk about it some other time," then I am not valuing her or what she has said. If I ask, "When can we address this again?" and make an appointment, I am conveying respect for her and our relationship

Prayer

Father, give me grace to be a thoughtful, gracious listener. Help me to value the speaker and listen carefully to what is being said. Give me ears to hear. In Jesus' name, amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is the primary responsibility of the listener? Write a Bible verse that supports your answer.
2. What actions demonstrate that the listener is giving his or her undivided attention to the speaker?
3. Can you identify with Steve, in that when someone (e.g., your spouse) approaches you with a request to talk, you find yourself assembling your defense team, contacting your lawyers, getting your research team on full alert, and scanning your internal hard drive, wondering, “Where did I mess up?” How does that prevent you from truly HEARING the one speaking to you? What in your past may cause you to react this way?
4. Explain what it means to “stay at the table.” (Note: This is not only physical but also emotional.) How can you follow this principle even if your buttons have been triggered?
5. Of the eight tips for the listener in this chapter, which one or which ones are the hardest for YOU to do? What can you specifically do to improve in these areas?

CHAPTER 8: CLARIFY FOR UNDERSTANDING

Tips for clarification

1. Affirm and Acknowledge
2. Ask, Don't Assume
3. Inquire
4. Explore Key Words
5. Restate
6. The Gift of Being Heard

Affirm and Acknowledge

Even though the speaker may be finished talking, the listener's work is not yet finished. This next step, which we call "clarify for understanding," begins with you as the listener giving a quick summary of what you heard the speaker say, humbly asking if you heard correctly what was just shared. You might begin your remarks by saying, "Thank you for sharing," even if you don't agree with what has been said. Affirm the speaker by saying, "I get what you are saying, and I appreciate your insights and courage for speaking." It doesn't mean you endorse what they said, but that you appreciate them.

I have never had the privilege of going to an AA meeting, but I have attended a joint meeting of AA folks with church people. I admire their candor, courage, and honesty. A person will stand up and say, "Hi, I'm Joe." Everybody politely responds, "Hi,

Joe.” After Joe has given his testimony, everyone will say, “Thank you for sharing.” And he sits down.

If people were to be brutally honest at a Christian prayer meeting, what might happen? As soon as they were finished speaking, well-meaning folks would be trying to help by praying over them, giving them a book, or connecting with them by sharing how they had a similar problem and how God healed them. Why would anyone want to open themselves up in this kind of environment? I wouldn’t. Perhaps this is why we are so superficial in our sharing of needs. We can be helped to death. I think there is a lot we can learn from AA. God help us to be open and honest and say, “Thank you for sharing. I hear you. I understand you.” I believe the AA approach is closer to the spirit of “bearing each other’s burdens” in the New Testament.

We are not trying to fix people but understand them. This is the prime directive, as a Star Trek officer would gently remind us.

Ask, Don’t Assume

After the speaker has finished the presentation, you have listened well, and before the pen is handed to you for your turn to speak, ask questions to clarify and explore what has been said. The primary objective for the listener is to truly understand what has been said. “You do not have, because you do not ask.” (James 4:2)

My mind works very quickly. That can be an asset and a liability. In this area of listening, I

have to consciously not allow my mind to jump to conclusions based on the impressions I gathered while listening to what the speaker had to say for the first time. I need to ask questions to find out more accurately what has been communicated. I do this by asking questions, exploring keywords, and restating what I heard. That is not natural for me. But the fruit of the Spirit is “self-control.” (Galatians 5:23) The Spirit helps me pause and listen to understand better than I ever could if left to my own devices.

Joshua 22:10–30 tells the story of a potential civil war about to break out. The two and a half tribes of Israel were returning to the lands east of the Jordan River, having fulfilled their obligation to fight with their countrymen until the land was securely in the hands of the Israelites. They built an altar to establish their kinship with the nine and a half tribes, but the intent of the altar was misunderstood. So, an army had been sent to quell what was thought to be a rebellion.

There are two lessons to be learned in this account. The first is that before the battle was joined, Phinehas the priest took the time to ask the heads of the Transjordan tribes to explain the purpose of the altar even though they thought they knew why it had been built. When they heard the response, war was averted, and reconciliation occurred.

The second lesson concerns the response of the altar builders. These men from Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh did not impulsively react; they carefully responded. Their soft answer turned

away the wrath of the leaders of the other tribes. “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (Proverbs 15:1)

Inquire

When our sons were becoming young men, Sandi and I took a class on being a Christian coach. Coaches are different than counselors or mentors. Counselors address needs and seek to help in the healing process. When I was in pain, I sought the help of a counselor or therapist because I was wounded and needed help. Mentors provide information. When I buy a new computer, I need a mentor to show me how to use it. I need someone to teach me and give me knowledge I don’t possess.

A coach comes alongside and, by skillfully listening and asking questions, helps their client to discover what they already know deep inside. “The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.” (Proverbs 20:5) A coach doesn’t seek to help you be whole (counselor) or provide new information (mentor); they help you to “work out your own salvation.” (Philippians 2:12)

These same skills contribute to good communication. When the speaker has finished expressing what is on their heart, the listener can restate or rephrase what they have heard to see if they have listened well. When Sandi is finished speaking, I might sum up what she said and say, “Is this what I hear you saying?” My goal is to avoid

jumping to conclusions and find out if she agrees I have understood what she has communicated.

I have friends who won't let me complete a sentence but do it for me. Or they begin to nod and agree when I have not completed my train of thought. They think they know where I am going and are moving faster than I am. That is disconcerting and causes me to stop talking because I am not being heard.

Celeste Headlee delivered a message, "10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation," which I have found helpful. You can find a link on the Building Faith Families website or just search online for "10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation" by Celeste Headlee.

Explore Key Words

Maybe in your conversation, the speaker used some confusing words or phrases. Now is the time to have them explained. Perhaps some significant words or expressions were mentioned, and you can ask the speaker to amplify what they mean. As an example, perhaps the speaker said she felt sad. You could follow up by asking, "What makes you sad?" Here is an example of a conversation I had at an education conference. Tiffany was sitting in the front row and offered to be my volunteer.

Steve: Are you enjoying the education convention?

Tiffany: Yes, very much.

Steve: Why did you come to this conference?

Tiffany: I am looking for encouragement and a math curriculum.

Steve: Have you been encouraged by any of the sessions so far today?

Tiffany: Yes.

Steve: Which one?

Tiffany: I went to a workshop on setting reachable goals for your children and yourself.

Steve: How was this encouraging to you?

Tiffany: I have a tendency to try to do too much and then get discouraged when I am not able to accomplish what I hoped to. The speaker gave specific tips on how to be diligent while also being reasonable.

Steve: I can see this would be encouraging. Could you share one tip?

Tiffany: She said at the end of each day, take one minute and write down five things we were able to accomplish. At the end of the week, read the lists, and you will feel a sense of satisfaction and recognize you did more than you thought.

Steve: This is a great idea. Have you had a chance to look at a math curriculum?

Tiffany: Not yet, but I am planning on going to a workshop on MathUSee after lunch. I heard the author is at the conference and will be presenting.

Steve: Excellent. I think you will come away with some new ideas about how to teach math. You may want to sit where the light from the reflection off his bald head will not be a distraction. :-)

As Tiffany was speaking, I was listening for keywords or expressions I could explore. I focused on “encouragement” and “math curriculum.” With this new skill I am acquiring, I find myself conversing with people whom I have never met before and having a meaningful conversation with them. I listen to what they are saying, ask related questions, and then we are both edified. Not only am I learning about them, but they feel valued and heard.

An open-ended question is another possible strategy. Since you have been an understanding and empathetic listener, you may have an opportunity to discuss other topics which have not been addressed. Let me ask Tiffany one more question and see what she has to say.

Steve: Is there any other motivation for coming to a conference of this sort that you haven’t thought of?

Tiffany: Mmmm. Well, yes. Now that you ask, I like being with a group of people who are all concerned about educating their children.

Steve: Why is this meaningful to you?

Tiffany: Sometimes I feel like I am the only one who is troubled about what my children are learning. Now I find myself in a room with a hundred other parents who share the same concern.

Steve: I hear you. It is easy to feel alone as a parent, and we all need the support of others. Are any of your friends here with you?

Tiffany: Just one, but we saw some ladies in the curriculum hall from our community, and we are planning on meeting tonight for dinner.

Steve: Wonderful. I hope you all go home tomorrow refreshed and reenergized.

Tiffany: I think we will.

Steve: Thanks for being my volunteer.

Tiffany: You're welcome.

Restate

When you have asked questions and explored keywords, consider restating what you heard. You might begin by saying, "Is this what I hear you saying? Another strategy is to say, "Here is what I heard you say. Is my summary accurate?"

When I was attending seminary, I learned there were three sermons preached each Sunday morning: the one the preacher intended to preach, the one the congregation heard, and the one reported in the local newspaper. When the speaker has expressed themselves honestly and clearly to the best of their ability, compare notes to see if you heard the same message they were seeking to communicate.

The Gift of Being Heard

"One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say."

—Bryant H. McGill

You have spoken clearly, listened carefully, valued the speaker, and clarified what you have heard. You have given a great gift to the one who

is speaking. You have heard them. There are so many people who are never given the opportunity to be fully heard and understood. You have devoted time and energy to listening well and are to be commended. Well done.

Prayer

Father, teach me how to ask insightful questions and genuinely want to know what is on the heart of the speaker. Help me acquire skills that help me understand and comprehend what is being articulated. In the name of Jesus, amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When the speaker stops talking, is the listener's job finished? Why or why not? What are some phrases you can say to demonstrate your love and care for them, regardless of whether you agree with what they said?
2. Do people at your church share deep personal needs? If they do, how do you respond? How do others respond? Have you experienced, as Steve says in this chapter, people trying to help too fast rather than first hearing and truly understanding and empathizing? How can we as a church "bear one another's burdens" in a more Christ-like way?
3. What are three ways you can find out more accurately what the speaker has communicated? How is this principle demonstrated in Joshua 22:10–30? Read it and summarize the key points of the story.
4. What do keywords and open-ended questions have to do with better communication?
5. Choose a few of the techniques in this chapter that you'd like to grow in and practice them with a friend. Give each other feedback. Be aware that you might feel awkward at first, and that's okay.

CHAPTER 9: PROCESS WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

Tips for Processing Together

1. Thoughtfully Respond
2. Lifelong Learners
3. Moccasins
4. Rooted Before Walking
5. An Understanding Way
6. When in Doubt, Ask

Up to this point, we have been focusing on how we are each to function, whether as a listener or a speaker. After all parties have had a chance to be heard and understood, process what you have learned together.

Thoughtfully Respond

Thoughtfully responding leads to good, open, safe communication. Take time to gather your thoughts, draw a deep breath and pause before graciously responding. “The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer.” (Proverbs 15:28)

The opposite of carefully responding is reacting emotionally. When I immediately react in my emotional nature, my remarks are generally abrupt, brusque, and harsh. My tone can be hard. This kind of response will discourage two-way communication and put people in a defensive mode. Because my eyes have been opened to the awful potential I

have to wound the spirit of others, I am much more careful than I have been in the past.

Lifelong Learners

Sandi and I are still learning and growing in the area of communication. After two and a half years of incredibly open and honest communication, Sandi told me something this past spring, and I didn't answer properly. I reacted with a harsh tone, and then I walked out of the room. I violated several principles in just a few seconds. About ten minutes later, I returned and said, "Honey, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have walked out of the room. I shouldn't have reacted in that tone, and I apologize."

Then I beat myself up. In the past, I would have been sorry, but I could have received her forgiveness and moved on. This time it was much more difficult because we had been doing so well for so many years. I was much harder on myself because I expected better of myself and didn't know how to find grace.

She nipped my self-abasement in the bud and said, "Steve, I forgive you." She knew I was suffering, so she continued, "Stop and look at where we are now. We are so far ahead of where we were three years ago. If this same situation had happened in the past, it might have taken six weeks before we got our hearts back together. I have been told this is a similar pattern in many marriages: fight-distance-reconnect. And now after 30 minutes, we are talking and are already in harmony."

Our pattern of behavior for years had been that if we had a disagreement, I would shut down emotionally, and there would be distance in our relationship. Then Sandi would sense the detachment from me and blame herself for the problem, asking herself what she should have done differently. She may have even read one of a vast number of marriage books, which generally place the blame on the woman for not being more respectful or submissive. We noticed there are very few books calling for the man to shape up; they all seem to lay the onus at the woman's doorstep. This is so sad—and so wrong.

All of us are going to make mistakes and react poorly. God's grace is always available. We will always have our sin natures to overcome. When I fall and am convicted, I need to ask forgiveness of the person I offended and then ask God to pardon my sin. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

I also need to remember while conviction is a work of the Spirit of God, condemnation is from our enemy, the "accuser of our brothers." (Revelation 12:10) There is no condemnation in Christ Jesus. None. Nada. Zilch. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1)

Then I need to get back up and not wallow in regret or remorse. "The righteous falls seven times and rises again." (Proverbs 24:16)

Moccasins

My wife did a beautiful job of this recently. She was sharing an observation from a recent Bible study. As she was commenting, one of my theological buttons was triggered. Without going into specifics, I tried not to react, but in responding, my tone was a little hard. I didn't raise my voice, and I was not ready for battle, but all it took was a little bit of a rough tone on my part, and I knew I was being contentious.

Our conversation came to a halt, and we did not discuss it further because I had crossed the line. I was not teachable in my spirit. The subject was dropped, and we went our separate ways. I felt bad, but she had already gone off to do some errands. So I texted her: "Really sorry for my tone and how I responded to your point." She responded, "I think I know why you feel as you do because I've been walking in your moccasins."

Instead of taking offense at what I said she was taking the mature path and trying to understand the conversation from my perspective. She asked herself, "I wonder why my words affected him this way?" She also said, "I understand how important this is for you, and I get it." She is way ahead of me in this area of not taking information personally and reacting negatively. Instead, she thoughtfully responds.

Rooted Before Walking

The more we are each rooted and grounded in the love of God, the better equipped we are to put

ourselves into other people's shoes and imagine what they are thinking and feeling. One of the reasons I took offense at negative input for so long was because I did not comprehend the depth and the scope of the gospel of grace. My identity was not in Christ alone; my self-worth was based on what I did instead of who I was in Christ.

I have written another book called ***Knowing God's Love***, which is about being cognizant of how much God likes each of His children. I won't rewrite it here, but one of the fruits of knowing you are loved and affectionately liked by God is that you can like yourself. When you and your spouse learn to communicate well, you will be able to discuss things you have never talked about before. You will become closer as a couple, and your relationship will deepen IF you value yourself and each other as much as God does.

Often the barrier to being more fully known is that we have a low self-image and do not believe we are valuable. Or we fear that if others really know us as we know ourselves, they will not like us. When we are rooted and grounded in the gospel and are fully assured by Scripture that God knows us intimately and still loves us, then we begin to see ourselves as God sees us. His "perfect love" (1 John 4:18) sets us free from fear. His complete knowledge of us, and the fact that He created and designed us to be who we are will transform us. When in doubt, please read Psalm 139.

Put your name in these inspired words and drink in the truth. I used my name and changed a few pronouns to give you the flavor. These words are true. You and I are worthy of being known and loved, because God knows and loves us.

“O LORD, you have searched Steve and known Steve! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all Steve’s ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.” (Psalms 139:1–5)

“You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

“Your eyes saw Steve’s unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for Steve, when as yet there was none of them. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.” (Psalm 139:13–18)

I would like to reiterate, the more rooted and grounded I am in the love and acceptance of God,

the more I accept myself. I feel like I am finally growing up. I am finally becoming comfortable in my own skin. Knowing God loves me for who I am and not for what I do or don't do is wonderfully freeing. Being more secure in my relationship with God frees me up to see life from other people's perspectives. Jesus knew who He was. If He ever had a doubt, it was dispelled at His baptism and on the Mount of Transfiguration, when His Father boomed from heaven, "This is my beloved Son!" (Matthew 3:17) God's Son was rooted and grounded in the love of His Dad. Because He possessed this knowledge, He could be whom He was created to be. He could stand alone against the world, the flesh, and the devil. He could fulfill His calling.

He could also respond and not react. Read through this passage and see how Jesus was the ultimate example of someone who was secure in God:

"For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth. When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly."
(1 Peter 2:21-23)

When I am reviled, my first thought is to defend myself or react. When I am threatened, my tendency is not flight, but fight. But God is helping me, and I

am making progress. When I see someone driving poorly, instead of instantly being upset, I find myself wondering what they are going through in their personal life which is adversely affecting them. When someone is rude or terse, instead of complaining to their superior, I am learning they may just be having a bad day.

Walking in someone else's shoes begins with my own heart being secured and anchored in the love of God. That is why I now spend more time reading the Word of God, waiting on God, and immersing myself in truth than I ever have before.

An Understanding Way

Several years ago, I read a book called *Discovering the Mind of a Woman*, by Ken Nair. I have also had a chance to meet Ken and learn more about his story. He was raised, along with a twin brother, in an all-boys orphanage. He then joined an all-male U.S. Navy. He had very little contact with women, and when he did get married, God gave them three girls.

One day, after much turmoil in his marriage, his wife drew a line in the sand, and Ken became determined to learn how to understand his wife. The impetus was 1 Peter 3:7: "Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way." He reasoned if God commanded husbands to understand their wives, then they could. One of my chief takeaways from his book was learning to sense the spirit of my wife. We are sometimes told that men and women are from

different planets and that men are dunces while women are more spiritual. I don't buy this thinking.

However, I have observed that men are often more in tune with their cars than with their wives. I am not a big car aficionado, but I do avoid potholes. When I inadvertently hit one, I wince. It hurts me. There is one stretch of road near our home with several manhole covers. I have spoken about this road in a mixed audience, and all of the men knew exactly what I meant. We even discussed our different strategies to miss hitting them. All the women in the room on this occasion were oblivious to the need to swerve and avoid the manhole covers.

Maybe men are wired a little differently, but I still believe we can learn to understand our wives better and get in touch with what they are sensing and feeling. Open, honest communication and making an effort to see life through each other's eyes will aid in this process. While I am built to sense a pothole, my wife can feel when I say something that hurts someone. I need her help in learning how to connect with people in a way that is helpful and not hurtful, especially my children. Her insight and discernment in learning how to speak and hear better are invaluable. We need each other to grow and develop. While I am learning these things from her, perhaps she needs my help to avoid a front-end alignment.

When in Doubt, Ask

To help you reflect on your conversation, you may simply ask each other how you are feeling

after you have expressed yourselves. Another way to verbalize this same thought is to ask how this discussion impacted or affected you. Different strategies work for different folks, but when the heart truly wants to know what has been communicated, the tongue will figure out how to articulate the correct question.

Use this time to thank each other for being honest and willing to share feelings. After you have had some discussion, you might want to set a date to follow through on any issues that have been raised.

When you have had a chance to ponder and process together, set aside some time to pray over what has been shared. “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2)

Prayer

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:14–19)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How is your response as a listener different based on whether or not you take time to respond thoughtfully instead of reacting emotionally? Write out some examples from your life, if possible, of both types of responses.
2. How are we lifelong learners in the area of responding to our spouse and/or family members and close friends? Consider Steve's example of himself and his wife.
3. Explain the difference between conviction and condemnation.
4. Skim back through these sections: Moccasins; Rooted Before Walking; An Understanding Way; and When in Doubt, Ask. Summarize each section in one or two sentences.
5. Read Psalm 139 with your name in the appropriate places. Meditate on how much God knows and loves YOU! Be secure in that truth, so you can speak with others from an emotionally healthy perspective.

CHAPTER 10: PRACTICE

Communicating as a Couple

Sandi and I build into our weekly schedule a specific time to communicate. We currently meet on Wednesday mornings at 10:00 AM. We call these times “chair chats.” Often, we are seated in two cushy recliners in the sunny part of our house. Our purpose in talking, listening, and communicating together is not to change the way the other thinks but to understand each other. I desire to hear Sandi, understand what she is expressing, and value her while esteeming her more highly than myself. Is this a tall order? Yes. Can it happen naturally? No. I need God’s help, which is one of the many reasons I am a Christian. I acknowledge my dependence on His Word, His Spirit, and His grace.

Communication between those who are closest to you, particularly family members, can be difficult because you each value and love each other so much. It is often easier to have tough discussions with people who are not as close to you. That doesn’t mean you should avoid family meetings, but you should approach them carefully and find help when you need it.

Since our goal is to truly hear each other, and since we have the potential to wound and hurt each other as well as understand and build each other up like no one else, we want our times of heart communication to be safe. We want to take whatever

steps are needed to ensure that the atmosphere is conducive for each person to be free to speak the truth from their heart, be heard, and not be silenced, despite their opinions. This takes time, practice, and effort. And it is worth it!

Another reason why my wife and I have these scheduled times to talk is because she needs time to think about what she wants to say and how she wants to say it. It is very helpful for her to know there is a specific time when we are going to talk. I, on the other hand, am more of an extrovert, and when I have a question, I address it within nanoseconds at the first opportunity. I am not a planner by nature, but I have observed that our regular meetings help us address life together in a healthy way.

During the first year we began our chair chats, Sandi would bring note cards to our morning appointments. I silently gulped when I saw the first card with a list of topics, but I learned to turn off the angst and go with the flow. I later learned that Sandi would jot thoughts down throughout the week as items for discussion would come to her mind, knowing that we would have an opportunity to discuss them during our chair chat. Being able to count on this time each week is very meaningful to Sandi.

Getting Started

God-honoring, healthy, safe communication does not come naturally to me. I need to practice

this new approach and keep at it until it becomes second nature. I also hope by reading this far you have begun to see the incredible potential for good and harm coming from our heart, via our tongue. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” (Proverbs 18:21) “Out of the abundance the heart, the mouth speaks.” (Matthew 12:34)

When my marriage was on the rocks and our family was suffering, I needed to learn how to talk and listen. I desperately sought to learn skills to heal and rebuild the relationships with my family. I learned how to develop a quiet spirit and a teachable heart. I learned how to speak for clarity and listen for understanding. But I am an old dog, and learning new tricks takes time and intentionality.

If you would like to apply what you are reading and learning, I hope you will set aside time to practice and talk about this information with your spouse. Most of my experience was in the crucible, and the discussions were about deep and painful topics. I wish I had developed some of these strategies years ago so when life became tough and talking was not easy, I could have applied these skills.

To this end, here are some interesting questions you might consider discussing with your spouse to get the ball rolling. Focus on applying the principles and strategies from the previous nine chapters.

Questions to ask your spouse

1. What are you most thankful for?

2. What is your favorite summer activity?
3. Which season is your favorite and why?
4. Name one person, alive or dead, who you would like to meet.
5. Which five books were special to you when you were a youth? When you were a young adult? As an adult?
6. Name three people who have influenced you the most. How did they impact you?
7. What were three favorite movies when you were a youth? When you were a young adult? As an adult?
8. If money were no object, nor was travel, where would you like to spend a day, a week, or a month?
9. What does an ideal day look like to you?
10. What experience has stretched you the most?
11. What is your favorite time of day and why?
12. Would you share your favorite childhood memory? As a teen? As a young adult?
13. What was your most painful day as a child? As a teen? As a young adult?
14. What was your favorite job as a teen? As a young adult?
15. What would you consider an ideal occupation?
16. What is your most troublesome weakness?
17. What is your greatest strength?
18. If you had to pick three books of the Bible to have with you on an island, which would you choose and why?

19. What is your favorite verse in the Bible? Most meaningful chapter?
20. Can you think of five people from Scripture whom you are looking forward to seeing in heaven?

Prayer

“May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. Amen” (2 Thessalonians 2:16–17)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When considering your communication goals, “safe” is a keyword. Explain.
2. Why is it important, if you want to grow in communication skills, to set aside time to discuss and practice these principles?
3. In a spirit of humility, ask your spouse if they would enjoy meeting together to communicate on a regular basis.
4. If both of you sincerely desire change in your communication, set a time for “chair chats” and begin with the 20 questions listed above.
5. Occasionally, when you are both in a healthy place, ask each other to give feedback about how the other person is listening and responding to you. Do some communicating about your communication!

CHAPTER 11: AS A FAMILY

As you learn how to communicate more effectively as a couple, consider having the whole family participate in regular communication times. Healthy family communication is built on healthy parents who have learned to have safe conversations. Moms and dads impact their children more by what they model than by what they say. Kiddos will observe their parents having healthy interchanges and note the new degree of peace in their relationship. We all yearn for this kind of security in our interactions, especially with those we cherish the most.

As a Family

When you are both feeling comfortable in your ability to converse with each other, consider meeting as a family to pass on your new skills. At the first meeting, think about having the kids come up with their own rules or code. This could be an interesting time as you solicit their input. They may say, “Nobody is allowed to interrupt me.” Or, “Please don’t holler when someone is talking.” kids are very discerning, and this could be a wonderful opportunity to hear what they value.

A little piece of advice for parents before you first meet as a family: Let’s assume you haven’t always been the best listener in the past and have wounded some or all of the children, like most parents. Your family has summoned their courage, and you are

beginning the first session. You have come up with a list of rules; remember, you can add to or tweak them whenever you need to since it is your list

Taking the Plunge

I am going to predict one of your kiddos will test the waters to see if this is going to be a safe experience. This brave child may toss out a verbal hand grenade to see how the parents are going to respond. If he were in my family, he may say, "I don't think you should use blocks to teach math." He thinks this is sure to push my button, and he is fully aware of how I might react, which is why he chose this comment. Children need to see whether I will respond or react. How I reply, and my tone, will be a signal for the rest of the family.

If I dismiss it out of hand, or react angrily, or say something like, "Well, you better be careful what you say, mister, because those blocks pay for your food!" then everyone will withdraw. But if I thoughtfully respond and say, "Why do you think blocks are not effective?" or "What do you think is a good way to teach math?" and truly listen with respect to his response, I am creating a safe place where other less explosive topics may be addressed.

Maybe the next brave child will say, "I want to get a tattoo." Everyone holds their breath, for this might be an extreme test for you. If your family is anything like ours, they know what I like and dislike. Maybe you have an aversion to tattoos. This is why she chose this topic.

Are you going to say, “What color tattoo would you like to have?” or “Absolutely not!” You have every right to your own opinion of tattoos, and so do your children. The object of a family discussion is not to agree or disagree but to understand. An honest answer may be, “Well, I need a minute to take a deep breath and think about what you have said. You all know I am not a fan of tattoos, but I would like to hear what you think.” You are being honest, you are processing your feelings aloud, and you are still at the table and not issuing ultimatums. In my mind, what transpires after this point is unimportant because you have modeled so well the essence of honest, open discourse in the sharing of yourself and what you are feeling, while valuing and striving to hear your child.

When your family sees you are serious about really listening to them and they feel safe, beautiful times of connecting at a heart level will happen. Give your family time to warm up to the idea while you continue to win their trust. It may take years to establish this kind of confidence. Hang in there.

Breathe

Just as we discussed in the earlier section on ultimatums and time-outs, we all will have experiences when we need time and perhaps space to respond thoughtfully and not react emotionally. When families gather together, children may confront their parents with their hypocrisy or inconsistency.

Instead of pulling the authority card and telling your kids to back off when you feel attacked or you sense an angry retort forming in your breast, take a deep breath. Remain open and present, perhaps call a time-out and give yourself time to process what you are feeling. You are human. You have emotions. So do your children and spouse. Be real. Acknowledge you are struggling to process what has been said and respond in a positive manner. Your example will have a tremendous impact on the whole family.

Have Patience and Seek Feedback

After 2012, the hardest and best year of my life, I took my three older sons out to lunch and made myself available to them. I said, “I know you have forgiven me for things I have said and done, but I am your dad, and I know I have wounded you. Whenever you’re ready to tell me the ways in which I have wounded you, or if you feel the need to confront me, I’m willing to hear what you have to say. If you need to vent, or are seeking closure, I’m willing to meet with you, or you and your therapist, or you and your wife, or you and your church. I want you to be whole, and I’m dead serious about this.”

One of my boys got in the car immediately after lunch and began to talk. Another began dropping little pieces of information over the next few months to see how I would respond. However, almost two years passed before he made an appointment with me to talk one-on-one. The two of us met in

his home, where he read me a letter that he had composed several months earlier. We talked our hearts out for almost three hours. It was hard and painful, but a major breakthrough occurred.

I heard what he had faced growing up with me as his dad, what I had done right, and what I had done wrong—the whole package. I got to hear it, but it took several years for him to believe I was serious and for me to earn his trust. Sometime after our heart-to-heart talk, I asked him, “How are you doing?” He said, “Pop, I’m good because I have nothing I’m holding back from you. I have told you everything.”

It takes a while to rebuild trust before you can experience open, honest, safe communication. Be patient and remember principle number one: “Pursue a heart trusting and resting in the love of your heavenly Dad first.” My wife and kids and I have never been in a better place than we are right now. We had to go through hell to get here, and I had to work through a lot of my own painful stuff, but it was so worth the effort.

Maintain the Prime Objective

Encourage each member of your home to have personal times of waiting on God and developing a settled, soft heart that is in a place of peace. Read the Word of God together as a family and pray together before each meeting. Maintain the prime directive, which is to communicate for clarity and not to convince or change the way someone thinks.

Teach the skills necessary for a speaker and a listener. Learn to apply your unique code of conduct that you have put together as a family team. Learn how to ask good questions. Practice restating what you have heard for clarity. Listen for words you can ask the speaker to expand on so you can explore more of what she is thinking.

Practice as a family just as you have practiced as a couple. Save the potentially harmful and explosive topics until you are each comfortable with easier subjects. Without pressuring each person to participate, conduct several conversations by asking someone to go first and possess the pen. A starter query might be: "What is your favorite family activity?" Then each person can apply their skills as a listener to maintain eye contact, turn off electronics, ask questions for clarification, and affirm the speaker.

A family in Maryland wrote and shared what they have been doing with their sons to encourage family communication. "We include time to identify the best part of the day and explain why we can appreciate it. And then we discuss the worst part of the day and how that can be a blessing. Everyone takes a turn and no 'pat' answers are allowed. These two questions often lead to deeper discussion that have included apologies and very 'courageous' conversations."

I quizzed a few children during a recent workshop and asked, "What is your favorite thing to do?" One little boy said, "I just like to hang out

with Dad and do whatever he is doing.” I hope his dad heard him because I almost cried on the spot. Children want to be near us, but sometimes we don’t know what is going on in their hearts until we give them a chance to speak.

I met one family who sets time aside every Sunday afternoon for one-on-one discussions with each of their children. While the kids are lazing around, Mom and Dad are in another room. They call in each child, one at a time, to give them a chance to talk and ask questions. While there is wonderful potential in discoursing about life as a group, it is important to give each person individual time as well. I met some of the children in this family, and they seemed content and confident.

Relationships are built with positive, healthy, two-way communication. My relationship with God sets the tone for my relationship with my wife and subsequently with my sons. When I am abiding in the steadfast unchanging love of my Dad, then I am able to have deep and meaningful times with my wife and sons. Bottom line: Treat each other as you want to be treated.

Remember, Family Matters

“At the same time, saith the LORD, will I be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.” (Jeremiah 31:1 KJV)

At one point in our family discussions, I discovered the pain I had been causing my sons. I was distraught and devastated. I surmised the best

thing to do would be to walk away and remove myself from the equation. I was unable to speak without breaking into tears, so I wrote on a piece of paper, “I’ll hand the business over to you and walk away.” Do you know what my sons did? They passed the paper back and said, “We don’t want your business, we want you.”

We are each a part of a family. Our kids want us. We want them. Husbands and wives want each other. Learning how to communicate in a safe, edifying manner takes work. But when we make the effort, the results are wonderful. Our family no longer needs a consultant to oversee and facilitate our discussions. We are learning how to address elephants that have been in the room for a generation—with success. I hope these principles, which have helped our family so wonderfully, will be a help to your family as well.

Prayer

“May the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.” (Hebrews 13:20–21)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is the purpose of a family discussion? Will safe, harmonious times of connecting at the heart level happen the first time you have a family meeting? Why or why not?
2. As you begin to engage your family in more open communication, how can you create a safe place even if (when) they “push your buttons”?
3. What will you as a parent do if (when) your children confront you about one of your faults or inconsistencies during a family meeting? An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. :-)
4. What is the prime objective for open, honest, and safe communication?
5. Name four techniques from chapter 8 your family or group can focus on while they practice having healthy conversations.

CHAPTER 12: ASK FOR HELP

When I was taking the class on Family Therapy, Steve, the professor, mentioned he had been meeting with some couples for over a decade. I was surprised to hear this because I surmised that when husbands and wives learned these principles and applied them, they would outgrow the need to continue seeing a therapist. I asked for more information. He said a particular couple would schedule an appointment whenever they had to tackle difficult issues or make decisions. They needed him to be there as a facilitator and third party.

When Sandi and I were struggling in our marriage, we enlisted the help of Steve to meet with us as a couple and help us learn to speak and hear each other. Sandi and I continue to meet for our weekly chair chats, and we have also been a part of a small group in which we learn and grow together. Life is a journey.

Our family benefitted from a consultant who was both qualified in setting up a corporation as well as counseling families. Mike became a personal friend, and his counsel, expertise, and general demeanor were invaluable to us at a critical juncture for our family and business.

Since those initial years, we have had a few family concerns that we believed would benefit from having one or both of these men at the table, and so we reenlisted their services. For the most part

though, we are now able to use the skills we have learned to work through life on our own.

If you are in a difficult place, pray about finding someone to sit at the table with you so you may use their expertise and experience to help your family. I do not believe there is anything more important than my relationship with God, my wife, and my sons. I pay fees for lawyers, accountants, financial experts, mechanics, doctors, dentists, trainers, and realtors. Should I not also invest in finding help in this most crucial arena?

If you begin to look for a third party, ask friends for referrals, pray, and do your homework. My next statements may surprise you. I am a believer in Jesus. Both Mike and Steve are believers. But we hired them based on their track record and referrals more than their faith. I would rather have a qualified accountant who was diligent and honest regardless of his profession of faith, rather than someone who was born again but incompetent.

I know there are Christian mediation services available, but I have not had good experiences with them, nor have my associates. A good heart is great, but it cannot replace experience and training. I know sad stories of well-meaning men and women in ministry who tried to counsel folks and did more harm than good.

My advice is if you need help as an individual, a couple, or a family, get the help you need. Do not hesitate. I vowed I would never see a “shrink,” but when I was desperate, it was just such a person

who helped me, my marriage, and my family immeasurably. Look for the right person. The first counselor I went to was not a good fit for me, so I went elsewhere. I looked until I found someone who could help. God will provide. You would not be reading this book if I had not humbled myself and asked for help.

Prayer

“Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find.” (Luke 11:9)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. After reading this brief but important chapter, summarize the major points.
2. Have you ever sought the advice of an accountant, lawyer, realtor, doctor, or financial planner? Was their advice helpful?
3. How did a third-party help the Demmes?
4. How will you know when you, your spouse, or your family needs to meet with a consultant or a therapist?

CHAPTER 13: THE POWER TO BLESS

The first chapter in this book was about the power of the tongue. “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.” (James 3:10) I’ve also observed that family members, and others who are closest to us have the most potential to build up or to wound us with words. Since we began this book by recognizing the potential of the tongue to curse, I would like to close by recognizing its power to bless.

At a men’s conference, I had the privilege of witnessing a blessing. A leader showed a video of a father blessing his son and his son’s bride at their wedding. The father had MS and was unable to stand, so he was in a wheelchair. I was amazed and inspired to hear Scripture truths that poured forth from this elderly saint’s heart and mind as he blessed these two newlyweds. Without a script, this godly man spoke truth over, and into, the lives of this devoted young couple for at least five minutes.

I felt as if I were on holy ground as I witnessed this powerful event, which had been videotaped fifteen years earlier. The experience was so sacred and moving that I had trouble processing what I had just witnessed. The words and obvious love and affection between father and son impacted me at a deep level. Even now, I am still trying to assimilate what I observed.

A little background: This grainy family wedding video was being shown to a group of ministry leaders at a conference where we were seeking to

find ways by which we could teach and encourage fathers. As one man succinctly stated, all of the current social ills of our society stem from fatherlessness. After two days of deliberating on the current situation in our country, we were now observing the antidote—an anointed example of a godly father affirming and blessing his son and his new daughter-in-law.

The father, who was the vehicle for this heavenly benediction, had not been raised in a godly Christian home. He desperately wanted his children to have every spiritual advantage he had not received. To that end, he read every book he could procure on raising godly children, including *The Blessing* by John Trent and Gary Smalley.

When the video concluded, the son, who was the beneficiary of those inspired words, stood and addressed us with words of comfort and hope. Many of us were wishing we had received a similar blessing from our fathers, and he comforted us by pointing us to the Word of God. In Ephesians 1:3, the Spirit informs us that “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing.” While we may not have received a blessing from our earthly dads, in Christ we have been given “every spiritual blessing.”

Then, this man, whom I will identify later, imparted a vision and hope for the next generation as he told us what it was like being the recipient of such an anointed blessing. He said many children live FOR the blessing of their father, while he lives

FROM the blessing of his father. I hope you will meditate on the distinction.

Many of my friends and I are looking for approval and acceptance from our dads. I could tell you many examples from my life, but one sticks out to me. I was watching the U.S. Open on Father's Day with my brother and my dad. Ken Venturi, who had won one major championship, bared his soul and told how he longed to have his father say, "Well done, son." For him, golf had been the vehicle to earn this praise. But regardless of how well he did, his father never affirmed him. One day, when he was facing surgery on his hand, which might prohibit him from ever playing golf again, he sought out his dad. He explained the gravity of the situation and asked his dad's advice. His father listened and then told him, "Regardless of what happens, you have always been number one in my book." Those simple words changed his life.

I am one of many who would dearly love to have had a written or verbal blessing from my earthly dad. He did the best he could with the resources he had, and I rise up and honor his memory. But deep down, I have craved the affirmation only a dad can bequeath. In the past few years, the Spirit of God has satisfied this longing by making me know in my heart that I am an adopted son of my heavenly Father.

Now I am a father, and it is my earnest hope and desire that my sons will experience life not looking FOR my blessing, but living FROM my blessing.

You and I are living in troubled times—but also wonderful times, for the Spirit of God is turning the hearts of fathers to their children, children’s hearts to their fathers, and all of our hearts to our heavenly Dad. (Malachi 4:6)

In case you are wondering, the man who received the blessing was Stephen Kendrick. He related that his frail father had also pronounced similar blessings at his brothers’ weddings. Part of the blessing proclaimed that his sons would be fruitful in reaching thousands with the gospel. If the name is not familiar, these Kendrick brothers have produced several inspiring movies that have pointed thousands of people to Christ, including *Fireproof*, *Courageous*, and *War Room*.

Words matter. The tongue has the power to curse and bless. If you would like to bless your own children, I would suggest the priestly blessing: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:24–26)

Prayer

“May the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.” (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What were your thoughts as you read the story of the father with MS who spoke a lengthy verbal blessing over his son and his son's bride at their wedding?
2. Have you been verbally blessed by your father? Write down your thoughts and your desires for this kind of blessing.
3. If you have not been blessed well by your earthly dad, draw near to God, and He will draw you to Himself, and His Spirit will witness with your Spirit that you are a child of God. (Psalm 27:10)
4. Realizing that you have the power to bless your family members (especially as parents, to bless your children), what will be your plan of action moving forward?
5. Pray earnestly that God will allow your children to live FROM your blessing and not FOR your blessing. Read through the benedictions in the appendix and choose one or more to use with your children. These Scriptures can be used both as prayers on behalf of the ones you want to bless AND as verbal blessings declared in their presence. Include these in your prayers with them at bedtime, mealtime, and special occasions. Let them come from your heart and your mouth.

CHAPTER 14: LOVING RELATIONSHIPS TAKE EFFORT

You have read the book and heard my heart. Without summarizing all you have read, allow me to hit a few high points to review.

Words are powerful in and of themselves. When they are spoken by people whom we love and respect, their influence is magnified. No one has the potential to build up and encourage me like my wife and sons. Conversely, no one can hurt or tear down my wife and sons like me. "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." (Ephesians 4:29)

Good words and healthy listening skills do not come from my tongue but my heart. When my heart is marinating in the grace and kindness of God, my mouth will be a source of comfort and encouragement. A quiet spirit and a peaceful heart are the prerequisites for safe and profitable discourse.

My own life was transformed recently in grasping and comprehending the gospel in new and deeper ways. I have become reacquainted with the love of God. I know I am an adopted child of God, who not only loves me but genuinely likes me. My Dad and I have a wonderful relationship. I know that God is for me.

The assurance that I am loved and liked has overflowed and impacted my relationship with my wife and sons. The more I immerse myself in the love of God and seek to be rooted and grounded in Christ alone, the better I am able to speak honestly and listen compassionately.

Loving relationships do not just happen. They are built through verbal and nonverbal communication. I need to continue to practice these skills to make them second nature. While some of them are common sense, others are not and require sustained effort and practice. My wife and I are now into the seventh year of our regularly scheduled chair chats.

I have a vision, a dream if you will, of healthy families. I want to see every person rooted and grounded in God, and thus enabled to love each other as God has, and is, loving them. In 2020, I released a book with this theme in mind, ***Loved to Love, Loving Others as Jesus has Loved Us***.

I have a hope that Christian homes will be safe places where every family member is free to speak and be heard, regardless of the content of his or her speech. As a result of every person's connection with God and the acceptance and support of their family, they will each be built up and encouraged to be whom God designed them to be.

When family after family is transformed through applying these principles, I envision robust, growing churches and healthy, flourishing cities and towns. The family, created and designed by God, is the foundation for our churches and communities.

Prayer

“May the Lord direct our hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. And may the words of our mouth and the meditation of our heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.” (Adapted from 2 Thessalonians 3:5 and Psalms 19:14.)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. After the introductory paragraph, each of the next five paragraphs contains at least one key point of this book. Summarize the key point in the second paragraph in your own words.
2. Summarize the key point in the third paragraph in your own words.
3. Summarize the key point in the fourth and fifth paragraphs in your own words.
4. Summarize the key point in the sixth paragraph in your own words.
5. Describe Steve’s vision for families in your own words. Include how it stretches to encompass our churches, our communities, and our world.

CHAPTER 15: SMALL GROUPS AND FAMILIES

Biblical Principles of Communication Applied to Small Groups

In 2009, I invited 20-plus men to meet for a weekend in St. Louis. The location was chosen because it was in the center of the US. While many of the men knew each other, I was the only one who knew each of them. Many of these men were state leaders or fellow speakers on the convention circuit. I was fairly confident we each had much in common, but we had not invested time to deepen our relationships. I was also interested in hearing what they thought God was doing in their sphere of influence.

I suggested each man take fifteen minutes to speak about anything that God put on his heart. This could range from his testimony, to what was his passion, to how he saw God moving in his heart. When the fifteen minutes were up, the rest of the men would have fifteen more minutes to ask him questions.

It's About Time

I brought a fifteen-minute blue sand timer to keep track of time, and I assigned two large fellows to enforce the time limitation. Many of the men present are speakers, and they have a lot to say. We

did extend grace to those who needed a few more minutes. If the time ran out and the speaker was in the middle of an important point, the first question would be to ask him if he could expand on his last point. We all smiled, and he would have a few more minutes to complete his original thought. Then we asked questions to learn more about our brother.

Most of the men in the group are servant-hearted exhorters and teachers, and this part can be difficult. Instead of asking questions and focusing on the speaker, there is a temptation to want to give advice, share resources, or recommend a remedy. After having followed this format for over ten years now, we still have to remind ourselves each year that we are to be listening and asking questions instead of fixing our friends.

The first year, we spent all Friday evening, most of Saturday, and an hour or so Sunday morning listening to each other's stories. We all connected with each other in such a remarkable way! I was amazed. I noticed that even when we were sharing meals, eating popcorn in the lobby, or walking up the street to the local BBQ joint, this special bond of fellowship continued. When the weekend was over, we had become a band of brothers. These annual events continue to this day.

Fruit

Three years after that first gathering, I went through the best and hardest year of my life. When I was at my lowest point, I sent an email to these

men, along with some other Christian brothers and sisters, asking for help. They stepped up to the plate and carried my burden with me. I received a ton of prayer, offers to fly to be with me, and phone calls over the summer. These men walked with me through my personal crisis in a way that I find hard to describe. They fulfilled the law of Christ by bearing my burden with me. They didn't try to fix me (one man did send a book), nor did they abandon me; they were at my side. One man told me he awoke each morning and prayed for my wife and me for six weeks.

This past summer another one of our brothers lost a son in a tragic accident. At the funeral, there were several of us present to share our brother's grief. A few of the men delayed their visit a few weeks so we would have an extended presence with this grieving dad and his family.

Special Dynamic

I have asked myself this question: How could twenty-plus men from all over the country come together and in a few days bond and connect with each other at such a deep level? I have seen sobering statistics about the number of men who do not have a close friend. I have read about how many men feel isolated and disconnected from the body of Christ. I have often wondered what elements of our time in St. Louis have contributed to making our fellowship so unique and special. I have tried to discern what principles have contributed to this unique dynamic.

I have now identified several components which I believe have led to our success.

As you read through these principles, keep in mind that these principles may be applied to assist family communication as well as small groups of men.

An Experiment

After many years of meeting in St. Louis, I had the opportunity to see if our model could be replicated in a different setting. In May, I met with four other men for a weekend. The five of us had not spent time together as a group for decades. We gathered from around the country and convened at a cabin in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania.

The plan was to set aside time on Saturday to share our stories, following a similar format of a set period of time for each brother to share, followed by a season of asking questions. But as we sat around the campfire Friday night, we began sharing what was on our hearts and went very deep very quickly. As I watched this dynamic unfold, I realized that men hunger for authentic and meaningful fellowship.

On Saturday, I gave a brief outline of the format we would follow. Each man would have twenty minutes, then the rest of us had the opportunity to ask questions and explore further what we had heard, in order to more fully understand our friend. Each man had his turn, and the afternoon became sacred as we opened our hearts to one another. We were not there to fix each other but to hear,

care, and share each other's burdens. Since it was a smaller gathering, we had time to intensely pray for each man before moving to the next man in the room.

One of the men spoke about something so close to his heart that he started by saying, "I have never shared this with anyone before." We listened to him bare his soul and then prayed our hearts out for God to meet him. I spoke with him a few weeks later and asked how it was going. He said he was a changed man.

A Different Group of Men

A month later, I was serving in the men's ministry at a Joni and Friends Family Retreat. During the week, we meet each morning from 10:30 AM–12:00 PM. At the first day's meeting, I began by telling a little bit about my story and how God has met and transformed me through difficult experiences. I sought to be honest, real, and transparent. I also talked about Peter and his denial of Jesus and his blessed, painful restoration on the shore of the Sea of Galilee at the charcoal fire.

That left about 45 minutes for our first small group meeting. Before we broke up into groups of 6–8 men, I distributed a handout with communication principles. When the men had this handout in front of them, I briefly expanded on each point. The suggestions were divided into two sections: encouragement for the speaker and tips for the listener.

Handout

Encouragement for the Speaker

Be faithful to what you know and have experienced. Represent yourself. There is no need to sell your story or convince the listeners of its veracity. "Hi, my name is _____." (think AA)

Objective for the Listeners

Invest your time and energy to hear and understand the speaker. God has given them a unique, authentic, helpful message. He is writing their story to transform them and edify us.

Temptations to Avoid

1. Checking your phone, rolling your eyes, or taking deep breaths
2. Interrupting and relating how you have experienced a similar situation
3. Judging, jumping to conclusions, making assumptions
4. Fixing, giving advice, or sharing helpful resources

Good Neighbor Practices

1. Maintain eye contact while facing the speaker.
2. Project positive body language with relaxed posture.
3. Explore key words or ask questions for clarification. "Could you amplify or explain what _____ means?" "What did you mean when you mentioned _____?"
4. When the speaker is winding down, "Is there is one more thing you would like to add?"
5. Thank them for sharing their story. Affirm them for their courage and honesty.

Encouragement for the Speaker

Be faithful to what you know and have experienced. Represent yourself. There is no need to sell your story or convince the listeners of its veracity. Begin with: “Hi, my name is_____.” (think AA)

Stories seem better when they are embellished, but try to avoid exaggerating details and give us the facts as you see them. People appreciate integrity and authenticity.

Objective for the Listeners

Invest your time and energy to hear and understand the speaker. God has given them a unique, authentic, helpful message. He is writing their story to transform them and edify us.

Practice the golden rule. Be quick to hear and slow to speak. “Grace was given to each one of us.” (Ephesians 4:7). “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” (1 Peter 4:10)

Temptations to Avoid

1. Checking your phone or any electronic device, rolling your eyes, or taking deep breaths. All of your attention should be directed at the speaker. The best gift we all have the power to give each other is the gift of being heard. One person said that it was very meaningful to “look up when sharing what is deep in your heart and

see eyes 100% fixed on you and hearing you. Thank you.”

2. Interrupting and relating how you have experienced a similar situation. We want to tell the speaker that we understand and have experienced similar situations, but this is not the time. They have the floor. Respect their time.
3. Judging, jumping to conclusions, or making assumptions. My mind works quickly, and I often think I know what is about to be said, or I jump to conclusions. I have been right, and I have been wrong in my assumptions. Listen. Ask questions when it is time for that. We know God has taught us not to judge. We also know that we do not know the hidden man of the heart, neither our own, nor the speaker's. Avoid making assumptions. You have two ears, and this is a good time to use them.
4. Fixing, giving advice, or sharing helpful resources. If you are a big-hearted exhorter who wants to help your brother, avoid the temptation to do so in a small group context. If you still feel the same way after the speaker is done, make an appointment to meet with him one-on-one at a later date.

Good Neighbor Practices

1. Maintain eye contact while facing the speaker. “The eye is the lamp of the body.” (Matthew 6:22)

2. Project positive body language with relaxed posture. I have heard that as much as 90% of communication is nonverbal. If that is even partly accurate, I want to communicate a positive message to the speaker—that I care about what they are communicating.

3. Explore keywords or ask questions for clarification. “Could you amplify or explain what _____ means?”

“What did you mean when you mentioned _____?”

As the speaker is talking, listen for these keywords, and then when they are open to questions, ask them to go deeper or give more background. Our objective is to understand them to the best of our ability. And as we ask these thoughtful questions, we are communicating that we want to understand them, we have been listening, and we value them and their story.

4. Ask when the speaker is winding down, “Is there one more thing you would like to add?” Sometimes the most meaningful information will come out with this question. “Thank you for all you have shared with us. Is there one more thing, or one last thought, that you would like to add?”
5. Affirm him for his courage and transparency. “Thank you for sharing your story.” Words are meaningful. Let’s encourage and build up our brother. He has just made himself vulnerable

and taken a risk in doing so. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” (Proverbs 18:21)

Joni and Friends Family Retreat Experience

At the first camp, the guys were a little slow to buy in. The first day, we only had time for three men to share in my small group of twelve men. I picked the guy on my left to go first. He is an extrovert, and I was pretty confident that he would be willing to cooperate with this new program. As he spoke, I watched the clock but didn’t need to stop him since he was done a little early. When he was finished, the other men did a super job of following the guidelines, albeit jokingly, as men will do. They asked good questions, and then thanked him for sharing.

The man to the first speaker’s left figured that we should continue this clockwise momentum and went next. He did a beautiful job of going deep, and I let him go a little longer than normal, as we could all tell he was expressing meaningful insights. We asked follow-up questions, thanked him for opening up, and affirmed him for being so articulate. When I said this last affirmation, his friend from church commented that this guy is referred to as “Mr. Vague” in their fellowship. He was amazed that this man he had known in a church setting was such a clear communicator.

Day two was even better as we continued around the circle, each man telling his story and the listeners seeking to encourage him. On day three,

there were still a few men who had not had a chance to share their stories, and time was running out. A few of us stayed for an extra half-hour so they would have their opportunity to speak. To the best of my knowledge, every man shared his story during the three days.

At each successive Family Retreat, I held my breath to see if this story-telling, small group model, would be successful with a new group of men. I followed the same structure by sharing my own story on day one, followed by an explanation of the communication tips.

On day two, I reviewed these tips before we broke up into the small groups. I didn't want to seem like a school teacher giving the same directions two days in a row, but I did want to reinforce the importance of these principles. To keep it light, I brought a handful of chocolate candies and tossed them to guys who could recall the different temptations to avoid, as well as the good neighbor practices to implement.

I have been attending these retreats for over twelve years, and these were the best men's times I had experienced. Each camp had a different flavor as the personalities of the men created a new dynamic. But thanks be to God, each week was a success as men connected to each other by sharing their hearts and giving us a glimpse into their lives. I had attended camp with some of the men for many years. Even though I knew bits and pieces of their journey,

in this small group setting was the first time I had the privilege to hear their whole story.

As each man opened his heart and let us walk with him on his journey, I was deeply moved. The only drawback was that I felt like I was just getting to know these men. Family camp would soon be over, and they would be going home. I wasn't the only one who felt this way, and we began making plans to reconvene during the winter instead of waiting a year to see each other again. God blessed that effort, and we just hosted the first winter men's event, which we called the Winter Men's Reset. Thirty-four men braved the cold and snow and came for the weekend. It was such a success that we have already chosen dates for next winter. Thank God.

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS FROM LEADING SMALL GROUPS

Unique and Sacred Stories

Each person has been created in the image and likeness of God. We each have a story that is being written by God. As we believe that God is at work in each of our journeys, we are encouraged to listen and value what the speaker has to say.

Hearing one another is beneficial for both the teller and listener. I hope we will feel free to not only share our happy memories but our painful ones as well. Our past shapes us and contributes to who we are. Our unique story can also be a gift which only we can offer to the Body of Christ.

Brennan Manning, in *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging*, writes: "In a futile attempt to erase our past, we deprive the community of our healing gift. If we conceal our wounds out of fear and shame, our inner darkness can neither be illuminated nor become a light for others."

I recently watched a talk that helped me grasp the therapeutic value of telling our story. You can find the link on the Building Faith Families website, or just search online for "How the Story Transforms the Teller" by Donald Davis at TEDx Charlottesville).

Circle Up

Sitting in a circle conveys the message that we are equals. None of us is an expert. We each have a story worth sharing and worth hearing.

Follow the Rules

The time parameter is an important part of our small group communication. I have been in groups in which we each had fifteen minutes and others where we had five minutes. It is my observation that the length of time is not as important as following through on whatever you decide. When I am keeping track of time in my small group, I keep my phone timer in front of me. When the speaker has one minute left, I will encourage him to begin his wrap up, and when the alarm goes off, his time is up. Then the rest of the group has time to ask questions for the duration of his time allotment. After the speaker has had a chance to tell his story and the

listeners have asked follow-through questions, we have the opportunity to affirm him by saying something like, “Thank you for sharing” or “Thank you for giving us a glimpse into your life.”

Follow the Leader

The leader sets the tone on the first day. When he is real and authentic, he encourages other men to do the same. Nelson Mandela said, “As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.” Honesty begets honesty.

Small Group Leaders

Each small group has someone assigned to follow through and apply the principles of healthy communication in their group. If someone interrupts, stop him. If a well-meaning brother starts to share a helpful resource or give advice, politely, but firmly, stop him. This is not the place for fixing, but for hearing. Remind the men that they can make an appointment to speak one-on-one at a later date but not during the small group time. When the men see that everyone is committed to following these principles, they will fall in line and cooperate with the program. It is important to be faithful to the time parameters. Having the rules of communication and the set time structure seems to contribute to a sense of safety for each of the participants.

I have led small groups for years, and yet I am still generally uncomfortable. I am not a gifted small group facilitator. I usually struggle to find an

interesting topic which will stimulate discussion and lead to edifying conversations. Since starting to have men share their own stories, I have not needed to come up with a scintillating agenda since everyone has their own story to tell. I am convinced that everyone wants to share their story. It is a wonderful gift to be heard and validated.

A Gift

When we listen from the heart, we communicate to the speaker that we genuinely care. After one meeting, I received this note from a man in our small group: "Thank you for listening." David W. Augsburg said: "Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable."

Transformed

There is a tangible effect of sharing your story with a caring listener. Dr. Daniel Siegel explained how recent discoveries in neuroscience and attachment are helping people. He said:

"An important part of how people change—not just their experiences but also their brains—is through the process of telling their stories to an empathetic listener. When a person tells her story and is truly heard and understood, both she and the listener undergo actual changes in their brain circuitry. They feel a greater sense

of emotional and relational connection, decreased anxiety, and greater awareness of and compassion for others' suffering."

Using the language of neuroscience, Dr. Siegel labeled the change "increased integration." (Thompson, Curt. *Anatomy of the Soul*. Tyndall House Publications, 2010, page xiv).

Extroverts and Introverts

I am outgoing by nature and have a lot of experience speaking to audiences. Since I am generally transparent when I address audiences, I find it relatively easy to share my story. I am married to an introvert and have learned how different we are, especially in small group settings. I wondered how introverts would fit into these discussions with these principles and parameters in place.

It seems that having the structure articulated and adhered to provides a safe place for introverts. Knowing what is expected of the speakers and listeners helps them gather their thoughts in preparation for their turn. In the small groups where I have facilitated, I did not choose an introvert to get the ball rolling on the first day. But by day two, everyone was participating, and by the end of camp, all the men had the opportunity to speak and be heard.

Vegas

I never overtly said that we should respect each other's privacy and never share outside the

room what we learned in our group. However, this message was inferred. We do believe that what is said in Vegas, stays in Vegas. I am planning on adding this instruction to the communication tips for the future. This pledge to be discreet contributes to the sense of safety and encourages men to be open, knowing that what is shared here with the group is sacred and private.

Church Retreat

This past fall, I was a part of a committee of guys to plan a retreat for the men in our church. We had four traditional sessions on the schedule. We began each meeting with worship and then listened to a speaker. Each session was followed by breaking into small groups for discussion. The first evening, I passed out the communication tips with a brief explanation. The next morning, I reviewed the principles before we broke up into our assigned groups of 5–6 guys. Once again, the men bought into the program and applied these principles. Almost to a man, everyone said it was the best men's retreat we have experienced as a church.

Replicated in Texas

Now that I had seen five diverse groups of men all respond so positively to this small group discussion model, I wondered if it would work in other places and with different people. I had a long conversation with a friend living in Texas about this approach. She sent me this note a few weeks later:

I wanted to let you know I used a modified version of how you have been getting men to share at your retreats in the conference I spoke at this past weekend. I cut my talk on “Overcoming Doubt” a bit short (it helps that I am REALLY real in that talk) and then had the ladies break into groups. I had each individual share for five minutes about herself, and then the group was to ask questions of her. NO ONE LEFT until they were completely done! We stayed almost an hour past the program time the first night, and everyone was so excited to get back together the next day to keep connecting.

Final Observation

I believe we have tapped into a unique dynamic which helps people feel free to share their story and connect with one another. I hope these small group principles have proven helpful to you.

Families are also small groups, depending on the size of your family. The insights I have gleaned leading small groups at camps and retreats also applies to our homes. For example, in the unit entitled “Vegas,” I hope that families protect each other’s confidences. The unit on “Follow the Leader” is especially important for parents. As dad and mom are transparent, children will feel free to be transparent themselves.

May God bless your efforts to enable men, women, and families to connect with each other and experience authentic fellowship.

Scriptures

A chapter by chapter compendium of all the Scripture passages referenced in this book are available on the Building Faith Families website here: buildingfaithfamilies.org/speakingthetruth/

Or you can locate the section entitled “Books for Follow Through and Study” and select the book, ***Speaking the Truth in Love***. As you click on this book, you will find a PDF with all the Scripture passages, as well as a talk on the same subject, and eventually an audiobook.

If you have any additional insights that you would like to share with me, send them to spdemme@gmail.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Demme and his wife, Sandra, have been married since 1979. They have been blessed with four sons, three lovely daughters-in-law, and two special grandchildren.

Steve has served in full- or part-time pastoral ministry for many years after graduating from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He is the creator of Math-U-See and the founder of Building Faith Families.

He produces a monthly newsletter and weekly podcasts. You can follow him on Facebook at facebook.com/stevedemme/

Steve is a regular speaker at home education conferences, men's ministry events, and family retreats.

BUILDING FAITH FAMILIES

Exists to teach and encourage families to embrace the biblical model for the Christian home. Scripture declares God created the sacred institution of the family. In His wisdom, He designed marriage to be between one man and one woman. We believe healthy, God-fearing families are the basic building block for the church and society.

The family is foundational and transformational. Parents and children become more like Jesus as they lay their lives down for each other, pray for each other, and learn to love each other as God has loved them.

RESOURCES TO ENCOURAGE AND STRENGTHEN YOUR FAMILY

The Monthly Newsletter

- This includes an encouraging exhortation as well as updates on Bible contests and upcoming speaking engagements.

Podcast

- Each week, a new episode is released on our website, iTunes, and our Facebook page. These may be downloaded for free.

Seminars for free download

- For over 30 years, Steve has been speaking and teaching at conferences around the world. Many of his messages are available for your edification.

BUILDINGFAITHFAMILIES.ORG

KNOWING GOD'S LOVE,

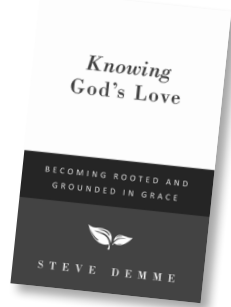
WE LOVE BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US

Comprehending God's unconditional love is the cornerstone for the overarching commands to love God and our neighbor. For we are unable to love until we have first been loved. "We love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19) and "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us." (1 John 4:10)

The first, or as Jesus called it, the Great Command, is to love God. I began asking God to help me love Him with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength and was wonderfully surprised by how He answered my request.

Instead of awaking one morning with a burning love for God, which I expected, He began to steadily reveal how much He loved me. In 2012, I found myself believing in a new way that God knows me thoroughly and loves me completely. This knowledge that God likes me for who I am, and not based on what I do, has transformed my life.

As I have become more rooted and grounded in grace, my relationship with God is now much richer and deeper. My wife and I are closer than we have ever been. Knowing I am loved and accepted just as I am has freed me to be more transparent and real as I relate with my sons and others.



LOVED TO LOVE

LOVING OTHERS AS JESUS HAS LOVED US

When Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest, He responded, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” (Matthew 22:37–38)

As He was about to be crucified, Jesus washed His disciples’ feet and introduced a new revolutionary teaching: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you.” (John 13:34)

Jesus was able to love well, for He was well-loved. At His baptism, the heavens opened, and God the Father spoke, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.” (Matthew 3:17 NLT)



The more you and I comprehend and assimilate the love of God by His Spirit, the greater our capacity to love God and others, for perfect love flows from God. “We love because He first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

As a husband and father, my primary responsibilities are to love God, my wife, and my children. I am writing as a man and sharing how God has led me to begin applying these principles in our home. But these principles are applicable to every believer.

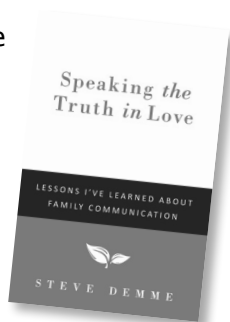
The fruit of loving others as we have been loved will not only bless each of our homes, but our communities as well. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35).

SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

LESSONS I'VE LEARNED ABOUT FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Most of what I've learned about communication, I acquired in the past few years during transitioning my business to a family owned business. The ability to communicate about difficult topics like business, values, your occupation, and a family's legacy takes effort and training.

As a husband and father, I have the potential to build up and encourage my family like no one else. I also have the ability to tear down and discourage my wife and sons. The Bible teaches effective principles of communication which are timeless.



My relationship with my wife and children has been transformed through godly safe communication. As I continue to grow in grace and the knowledge of God, I am in a better place to have open, transparent, and honest communication. While the skills we have acquired in being a clear speaker and an engaged listener are beneficial, investing time to have a quiet heart is essential. For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.

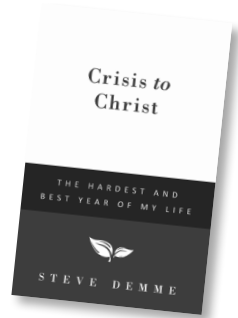
I hope the principles we have learned and applied to such benefit in our own home and business will be a help to you on your journey. May the words of our mouth and the meditation of our heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer. (from Psalm 19:14)

CRISIS TO CHRIST

THE HARDEST AND BEST YEAR OF MY LIFE

I have wounds, scars, baggage, and stuff from my past, which I have tried to ignore, but which is always present. In 2012, I was confronted with the distressing knowledge that my own wounds, which I thought were hidden and of no consequence, were wounding my wife and sons. I discovered I cannot hide my toxic issues, for eventually they will leak out and hurt those who are closest to me.

This difficult time, the hardest and best year of my life, was instrumental in changing my life and transforming my relationship with God and my family. On this journey, I experienced pain, which led me to acknowledge my own hurts and get help from the body of Christ to understand root causes of my distress and confront unbiblical thinking.



While I experienced incredible pain, I also discovered that my Heavenly Dad likes me just the way I am. Even though my path went through deep waters, God was with me every step of the way.

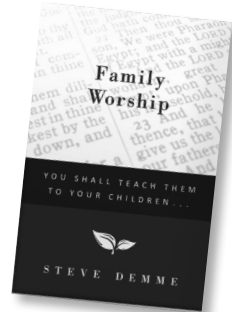
My motivation in writing is to affirm others who are going through similar valleys and tribulations. These hard journeys are normal for the Christian. Every person of note in Scripture endured at least one lifechanging crisis. God uses these difficult times to work deep in our hearts, reveal more of Himself, and transform us into the image of His Son.

FAMILY WORSHIP

YOU SHALL TEACH THEM TO YOUR CHILDREN

In this readable and encouraging book, Steve shares the ingredients for a doable plan of family worship. After many years of trying and failing, God helped the Demmes make studying God's Word a daily part of their home.

Steve also addresses obstacles which we all face in establishing the discipline of reading God's Word as a family. Be encouraged by Steve's experiences teaching his four sons, and learn from other families who share strategies that have worked for their children. All families are unique and special. May each home find their own style which works best for them.



"It was helpful to see the comments at the end from other families saying what they had done. I know in my heart that God does much more than we can imagine when we even take the smallest steps to disciple our children, but it was good to have some practical examples from you and others. Even just the reading of Scripture allows God's words to take root and his Holy Spirit to minister to us all."

"I loved the book and read it in about a week and a half. My chief take-away was family worship needs to be an important part of family life. Your book had some great examples of how to make it more appealing to the kids."

"My husband had never realized that he needed to give his family his best. He had never considered that we have to love God before we can teach our children His commandments."

HYMNS FOR FAMILY WORSHIP

This time-honored collection of 100 classic hymns will be a rich addition to your family worship. Make a joyful noise to the LORD!

In addition to the music for these carefully selected songs of worship, the history and origin of each hymn enhances the meaning of the lyrics.

There are four CDs with piano accompaniment for singing along in your home, car, or church.

Some of the titles are:

- What a Friend We Have in Jesus
- Holy, Holy, Holy
- It Is Well with My Soul
- To God Be the Glory
- All Hail the Power of Jesus Name
- Amazing Grace
- How Firm a Foundation
- Blessed Assurance
- Christ Arose
- Rise Up, O Men of God
- Jesus Paid It All
- Just As I Am, along with 88 more!



COME INTO HIS PRESENCE

TASTE AND SEE THAT THE LORD IS GOOD

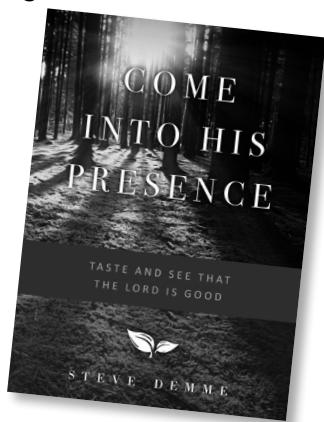
God invites each of us to come into His presence. His “Father heart” has ever yearned to be near His people. This book is about how the good Holy Spirit led Steve to apply the eternal principles found in Psalm 100 and draw near to God through Jesus.

“Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth! Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into His presence with singing! Know that the LORD, He is God! It is He Who made us, and we are His; we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture.

Enter His gates with thanksgiving, and His courts with praise! Give thanks to Him; bless His name! For the LORD is good; His steadfast love endures forever, and His faithfulness to all generations.

By applying these inspired Scriptures, Steve has discovered what David meant when he declared, “Taste and see that the LORD is good. Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in Him!” (Psalm 34:8 NLT)

Because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, God and His people are being restored to a close relationship with their Heavenly Father. “Look, God’s home is now among His people! He will live with them, and they will be His people. God Himself will be with them.” (Revelation 21:3 NLT)



STEWARDSHIP

“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Luke 12:34)

Stewardship is personal finance taught from a biblical perspective, written by the author of the successful Math-U-See curriculum, Steve Demme. With his signature humility, humor, and sharp math skills, Steve combines practical math instruction with biblical principles of finance and discipleship material.

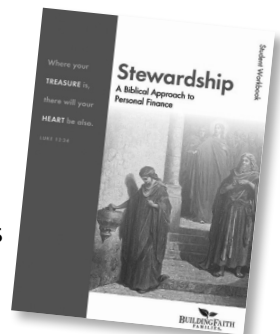
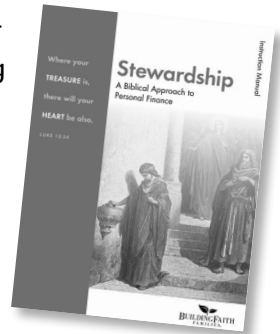
This program is appropriate for anyone with a good understanding of math and beginning algebra. Many parents have commented they wish they had this class when they were a young adult.

The second edition is updated with current topics relevant to young people aged 15–17, who are beginning to explore more independent financial opportunities and responsibilities. Here is a sampling of the thirty–six topics

Consumer Math Topics

- Banking & Checking
- Budgeting & Credit Cards
- Cost of Owning a Vehicle
- Understanding Mortgages
- Insurance and Bearing Burdens
- Cost of Post Secondary Education
- Entrepreneur
- Christian Micro–Finance
- Compound Interest and Investing

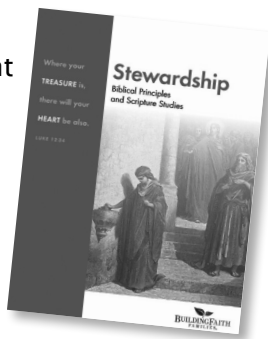
Once the heart is connected to our treasure, it is essential to nurture our heart from God’s inspired



Word. In each of the thirty-six lessons, there is devotional material called Biblical Principles and Scripture Studies. These focus on Biblical principles of finance as well as Scripture studies on basic discipleship. Here is a sampling

Biblical Principles to Govern Our Treasure.

- The Love of Money
- Trusting God and Being Content
- Honor the Lord with Your Wealth
- Giving from a Redeemed Heart
- The Poor, Widows and Orphans
- The Blessing of God
- Scripture Studies to Instruct Our Heart
- Loving God and Belonging to God
- Conviction Versus Condemnation
- The First Commandment with a Promise
- David, a Man After God's Heart
- The Ministry and Work of the Spirit
- Jesus, the Suffering Servant Our Identity in Jesus



The Student Workbook has thirty-six lessons which are organized into a weekly format, with five worksheets per lesson. There are ten questions per lesson. Seven problems are from consumer math topics, two are from the Biblical Principles and Scripture Studies, and one is written to facilitate family discussion.