

LESSON 8

Speaking Hard Truth Without Harming Relationships

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and obedience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

— Colossians 3:12-13

Introduction

"By people we are broken, and by people we are put together again" – John Drakeford.

To help monitor, correct, love, and encourage us, God has given us other people. People are God's Spirit poured into human molds - they are a small part of God that we can touch and talk to and love. Others comfort us when we make mistakes and congratulate us when we do well; they make us feel valuable by listening to our ideas and asking our advice and boost our self-esteem by letting us know they enjoy being with us. Seeing the weaknesses, problems, failures, and mistakes of others gives us insight into our own shortcomings; it gives us an opportunity to help people in their time of need and to develop a sense of responsibility for the care of others, as well as learn to develop new skills for giving such care.

Goodness knows, we need the help. Life is filled with problems. As creatures of free will, we all stumble and make mistakes. We sin, we "bump heads", we "rub each other the wrong way" all the time – even our Christian brothers and sisters. It's essential that we get along in the church and preserve unity and fellowship. Sometimes we sin or struggle with problems and issues in our lives that adversely affect our relationships with others. As with any family, just because we love one another doesn't mean we never create problems for each other. We need someone to come beside us to help – sometimes calmly and gently, or sometimes with a stern rebuke to set us straight once again. Remember that quote by Martin Luther King Jr.? *"People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other."* Despite the blessing of having loving people in our lives, these conversations are still difficult and can cause pain and injure relationships (even when necessary). Nobody likes difficult and stressful conversations – they're easy to avoid. But love demands better.

Hard Conversations Are a Part of Life

Hard conversations come along frequently in this life, whether to rebuke and correct, deliver bad news, or have serious discussions. It seems most people do their best to avoid them, as there is always a chance

of injuring or straining the relationship. When correcting others, this must always be done in love, using grace and humility, and always with the goal of restoring the individual or the relationship. But sincere and honest correction or delivery of disappointing news from a friend is always more valuable than false flattery or withholding truth. Solomon stated this very well in **Proverbs 27:5-6**: *"Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful (trustworthy) are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful."*

Fortunately, the Bible is not your typical history book. It is not just facts, dates, and rules. To enable us to see people realistically, scripture is filled with dialogue and even lengthy conversations about nearly all challenging moral and spiritual subjects - all relating to God speaking to man or men speaking to one another. God has much to say, and many of these conversations are very poignant and difficult, dealing with our innermost thoughts and emotions. This is not trivial dialogue but involves subjects of great importance to life's great issues. Let's take an in-depth look at two well-known difficult conversations that changed lives...and history.

David and Nathan: 2 Samuel 11 & 12

This scene presented between King David and the prophet Nathan is one of the most difficult and dramatic conversations recorded in the entire Bible. The prophet Nathan comes to King David and confronts him about his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah. Nathan uses a poignant parable to bypass David's defenses, forcing the king to condemn his own actions before Nathan declares, "You are the man!"

The story begins with David at home in his palace in Jerusalem. It takes place in the Spring, the "time that kings went out to war." David sent Joab, his servants, and "all Israel" out to battle the Ammonites, who they easily defeated. Instead of going out with them (as an example and as the people would expect), David stays at home and relaxes in his palace. It was usually considered the duty of kings to lead their forces in battle – a God-given responsibility. David's poor decision and subsequent careless behavior result in his undoing.

As he rises from his bed in the late-afternoon and strolls along the palace roof, he sees a very beautiful young woman bathing herself. She is unaware of David's observation and completes her purification ritual. David quickly enquires who she is and is told Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. In lust, he quickly has his servants bring her to the palace and he seduces her, while Uriah is away fighting the Ammonites. It's important to note that Uriah was one of David's trusted "mighty men" (at least 37 of them in all), and Bathsheba's father is Eliam, very likely also a "mighty man", or former one. Uriah was a trusted soldier and likely even a friend to David.

Nothing more is said, until Bathsheba notifies David that she is pregnant! Terrified about his sin being discovered, David hatches a plan to cover it up. He has Joab retrieve Uriah from the battle and bring him home for "rest". For most of 3 days David aggressively tries to coerce Uriah to go to his house and sleep with Bathsheba, but to no avail. Even getting Uriah drunk doesn't work. Sadly, David finally sends Uriah back to the battle, carrying the very letter back to Joab that contains his death sentence.

The plan is carried out, and Uriah dies. David is probably mortified by what has happened and what he has done, but selfishness and cowardice convince him to remain quiet. Of course, this cannot be

tolerated by God. He sends the prophet Nathan to deliver a message to David. (Later, Nathan will tell the king that he will not build the temple, and his son Solomon will. He will also coronate Solomon as king). Nathan tells David a story about a rich man and a poor man. The rich man has great flocks and herds, while the poor man has only a single ewe lamb whom he loves greatly. When a traveler comes to stay with the rich man, he is so selfish and greedy that he takes the ewe lamb from the poor man and slaughters it to serve for the feast. Of course, David is furious with this rich man. Although he might have seen himself in this story, he was either blinded to the analogy or petrified to admit his own grievous sin. When David demands an explanation, Nathan reveals that David is actually the man in the story. With his sin and treachery openly revealed, David is spiritually crushed and humbled. “I have sinned...” was all he could mutter, knowing that he was deserving of both physical death and spiritual death. Nathan settles the issue, telling David God has forgiven him and he will not die, but he will suffer grave consequences as a result. David has been restored and spared physically, but he will now struggle to seek God’s help to deal with the aftermath of this event. God forgives and walks with us, but the reality of where we now must walk is not always easy.

Although David is forgiven, the story is far from over. In the process of this terrible action, the effects ripple throughout the kingdom. *Just count the sins*: David sins by committing adultery; he forces Bathsheba to agree to his lust and also sin; David’s servants are involved by helping cover up the evil deed; he unsuccessfully tries several times to force Uriah to sleep with his wife and make it appear that Uriah was the father; desperate, David finally plots to have Uriah murdered in battle to hide his sin, even involving his trusted commander Joab by having him carry out the plot; tragically, David’s sin condemns the newborn child to an untimely death. The penalty for this trespass continues to follow David throughout his life, as anger, intrigue, and murder invade David’s household. His family learns to be deceitful and disloyal. It finally ends with his beloved son, Absalom, usurping the throne and finally being killed for his treachery. David loses his trustworthiness, loses his reliability, loses friends, loses his good name, loses control of his family, and almost loses his throne and even his life. Think of the great damage caused by just one man and one event. All this because of a careless, sinful attitude and a selfish idle mind. If it weren’t for God’s intervention and “difficult conversation” through the prophet Nathan, David may never have repented, and the entire nation of Israel may have collapsed spiritually.

Jesus and Peter (John 21:15-19)

Consider another famous difficult conversation, found in John 21:15-22. The disciples had gathered by the Sea of Galilee, as previously directed by an angel (Matthew 27:7-10). The disciples had already seen the resurrected Jesus in Jerusalem but were like lost sheep hovering together and wondering what the Savior would do next and what would become of them. They arrived in Galilee without any plan and finally decided to go fishing (back to what they knew). Catching nothing, they rowed back to shore and met Jesus there. He said nothing but revealed His identity by performing a miracle. Jesus welcomed back these disciples who had previously abandoned Him, and it was likely another awkward reunion for the seven disciples there. After they all shared a meal, Jesus spoke directly to Peter. Since the crucifixion, the two had not yet spoken about Peter’s three-time denial. Since the crucifixion, Peter had been left alone to contemplate his betrayal and repent. Before His prayer in the garden, Jesus had already charged him

to strengthen the brethren once he had made peace with God. It was now time for a very difficult conversation.

Jesus speaks, and calls him Simon, son of Jonah (Simon means “hearer”, or “one who listens” - no longer Peter, the Rock): “Do you *love* me more than these?” He uses the word *agape* for love (selfless/ sacrificial love), and then instructs him to, “Feed My lambs.” Peter responds by saying, “Yes, Lord. You know I love (*phileo* – fondness or friendship love) you.” Again, Jesus asks, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love (*agape*) Me?” Peter responds the same way: “Yes, Lord. You know I love (*phileo*) you,” followed by Jesus’ response: “Shepherd My sheep.” Almost painfully, Jesus asks a third time: “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love (*phileo*) Me? (now using Peter’s choice of words to reflect the lower affectionate form of love).” Peter realizes Jesus’ three-time question follows his three-time denial of Jesus and is now fully aware of his lack of true love and dedication to the Savior. Peter’s response is, “Lord you know all things. You know that I love (*phileo*) you.” Jesus finally responds, “Feed My sheep.” Peter is finally made to confront his lack of full love and commitment and trust in Jesus. He is called to rededicate himself and be what the Savior has planned for him to be. As difficult as this conversation must have been, the bandage is torn off, the wound is finally treated, and healing can proceed.

The questioning ended with Jesus indirectly telling Peter about how he would glorify God in his death, also something Peter would rather not have heard. Jesus didn’t condemn Peter, but He certainly didn’t let this fisherman off the hook. Although Jesus’ correction was gentle, Peter was humbled (likely even humiliated) and forced to look at his relationship. With nothing else to say. Peter tried to change the subject (as we might have done) and asked, “*Lord, what about this man?*” referring to John. Jesus replied, “*If it is My will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!*” Essentially, Jesus was saying to Peter, “*What about him? We’re talking about you now. You follow me and do my will. You must lead My sheep.*” Jesus made Peter realize that failure wasn’t fatal...or even final. No further words are recorded, but Jesus had already set Peter’s mind and heart straight. No accusations. No anger. No punishment. No lengthy prescription for penance. This brief conversation directly addressed past failures while still extending grace and providing for a renewed and even greater mission and purpose. God wasn’t done with Peter. Peter is at once both humbled and fully restored. This was truly transformative communication.

We could have chosen several other great examples of difficult conversations from scripture, such as **Paul with Peter at Antioch** (Galatians 2:11-14); **Paul and Barnabus at Antioch** (Acts 15:36-41); **Moses and God at Horeb** (Exodus 3:1-22 and 4:1-17); **Moses and God at Taberah** (Numbers 11:10-17), and **Joseph with his brothers and father Jacob** (Genesis 42-45). Scripture is filled with so many examples where love demanded the truth be spoken without destroying relationships. All were different, but all dealt with difficult issues in the way God intended. In the two examples we discussed, there are several **important similarities** that contributed to their successful outcome:

- There was no *avoiding* what had to be said
- There was the involvement of *God*

- There was no need for *anger, vengeance, or violence*, (physical or verbal – no yelling, harsh words, or belittling)
- There was no *final condemnation*
- There was *clear communication* – no “beating around the bush”
- There was a specific *identification of the problem* to be addressed
- There were *clear expectations* of the goal of the discussion
- There was a *pathway* provided for *forgiveness and restoration*
- There was always a spirit of **love** involved

There always was a goal of *reconciliation*.

Spiritual Benefits from Having that “Difficult Conversation”

- Successfully resolving a serious problem, concern, or division
- Restoring or improving a relationship
- Learning how to communicate on a much deeper and better level
- Learning how to love each other much more deeply
- Creating or restoring trust
- Learning to better depend/ rely on one another (and God)
- Restoring unity to the body

How can we be more successful when we have to speak hard truth to our sisters and brothers...and still preserve the relationship?

13 Ways to Help:

- **Always live righteously** - so that your words and example will be respected (and you have nothing to fear before God) – Micah 6:8
- **Know where you stand & what you believe** - make up your own mind first, with God’s direction and advice; don’t begin a conversation without all the facts (as far as possible) – 2 Timothy 1:12
- **Avoid avoidance** – NEVER put off making things right and having that hard conversation; the issue will only get worse with time and become even harder to resolve later – 2 Timothy 1:7
- **Pray** – pray before, during, and after you talk; pray with all individuals involved - God must be part of the conversation – 1 Thessalonians 5:17

- **Reaffirm the importance of both the issues and the relationship** – the first thing to do: state your love and concern, and highlight the importance and benefits of your relationship – Romans 12:10
- **Separate the merits** of the discussion from the *value* of the person – Ephesians 2:10
- **Focus on ways to unify** – a productive discussion should not promote division – Ephesians 4:3-6
- **Speak honestly** – we can all tell when someone is lying; that will quickly kill a discussion and a relationship – Ephesians 4:25
- **Don't be defensive** – even if you are attacked, don't lose your cool; this is about reconciliation and restoration in love, not your feelings and your comfort – Proverbs 15:1
- **Don't attack** - carefully frame the problem, and present all pertinent issues in a fair way; the point is not to judge, but to correct and / or forgive – Romans 12:19
- **Be kind and respectful** - – don't lecture or "talk down to" others, and don't demean or criticize; be sure to carefully listen and don't interrupt; you can show respect and courtesy even if you disagree about nearly everything – Colossians 3:12
- **Be patient** – don't rush; bringing others to the truth is usually a slow and ongoing process; give others the time to think about what is said, to ask questions and form conclusions – Ephesians 4:2
- **Be present** - show up when opportunities arise...even if things still aren't settled; don't be afraid to revisit the issue in the future and as often as needed – and always in a positive light – read Hebrews 10:24-25

Although not present in the two examples we outlined, another factor might sometimes be added:

- **Encourage feedback** to make sure your message is properly communicated; enlist their input and understanding of the problem, and ask for suggestions to help; sometimes this is appropriate, and sometimes not – Proverbs 18:2 & 13

Conclusion

If we truly are created in God's image, we can only have and show the utmost love and respect for one another. Having said that, people are very difficult because they are unique and fragile. Relationships are so necessary but often so hard to maintain and certainly to repair. We are delicate creatures mentally and emotionally and don't take well to criticism or correction. Remember **Colossians 4:6**: *"Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."*

Also remember **Proverbs 15:1**: *"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."*

Having a deep understanding about people's hearts and minds and their resulting problems will do us no good if we are unable to effectively talk about these points to others in a spirit of love and concern. If it is

truly important, we should never back away from discussing issues that may be uncomfortable for others and ourselves. Communicating clearly, correctly, and kindly is essential to preserve and strengthen any relationship. When we avoid difficult conversations, we trade **short-term discomfort** for **long-term dysfunction** - not an even trade. Unity in the brotherhood involves loving communication, not silent acceptance. Douglas Stone once said, *"People almost never change without first feeling understood."* So...are we working hard to make sure we always understand each other?

Memory Verse

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. – Ephesians 4:32

For Discussion

1. Why do we fear having difficult talks so much? Is it we're afraid we'll come across as a "know-it-all?" Are we afraid we don't have the moral high ground? Do we have enough love to do what's necessary?
2. What should we do if a conversation doesn't go well? What steps can we take to recover?
3. How can our reputation either help or hurt our ability to discuss matters with family, friends, or our brethren?
4. What are all possible motivations one might have for 'speaking hard truth' to others?
5. What do we hope to accomplish by *avoiding* hard discussions?

6. Discuss how attitude and demeanor can affect the ability to engage in speaking hard truths.
7. Think of examples of difficult conversations you have had in the past which changed a relationship.