

Relationships: Communication, Expectations, and Healing Wounds

I. RECOGNIZING WHEN THE SPIRIT OF A RELATIONSHIP IS WOUNDED

Well, one year ago today Bob Jones went to be with the Lord, February 14, on Valentine's Day. I was just reflecting on that because many of you know Bob Jones. I will not talk much about that right now, but he had a dramatic encounter with the Lord that was very well known where he stood before the Lord. The Lord said, "I have one question, Bob. Did you learn to love?"

Bob said, "I was so surprised! I thought he was going to ask me about my ministry, how big it was, how much impact I made."

The Lord said, "Did you learn to love?" That became the theme of Bob's ministry and life. Everywhere he went the last probably ten or twenty years that is what he emphasized.

So I was meditating on that, and I just wanted to have a little family talk on this on a day where love is emphasized: are we learning to love? I want to talk first about paying attention to broken and wounded relationships and then seeing them healed. Be attentive and proactive so that wounded relationships are healed before they are totally broken.

- A. A relationship can be wounded at various levels, from being slightly injured to deeply broken. Be alert for signs of a wounded relationship: signs include ***strained communication*** (argumentative, sarcastic) and either party having a ***closed spirit*** (not receptive), ***being guarded*** (unwilling to share freely), and ***resisting touch*** (a spouse or child with a wounded spirit often resists being hugged).

Now a relationship can be wounded at various levels. It can be slightly injured to deeply broken. Some people only pay attention when the relationship is deeply broken, almost too far to ever recover. Sometimes it is too far. The spirit of a relationship can be injured even while the people involved are godly people and are good people. Maybe they are not injured, but their connection is injured. They say, "You know, I am doing well, and he is doing well, but we are not doing well together."

When the spirit of a relationship is injured, it means the trust and the open communication that used to exist does not exist at the same level any longer. This means the relationship is injured. When the trust and the open communication are being diminished, we need to go to full alert, and put time, focus, and energy on this.

Now I am not talking only about husband and wife, I am also talking about parents and children, and I am talking about friends in the kingdom, friends in the marketplace, and all relationships that are so valuable. Sometimes they get wounded, but we do not pay attention to the slight wound until it gets severe. Sometimes it is too late.

I have here just a few signs to watch for when a relationship is injured. Think of your marriage if you are married. Think of your children if you have them. Think of friends, people in the ministry team, people in the department you work with. If these signs are happening—and this is only a few; I could give ten, but I have just three or four here—be alert.

Number one, the person has an increasingly has a closed spirit, meaning they are not receptive in the way they use to be. Or they are guarded; that is nearly the same. They are not sharing openly. They are sharing a little bit, but it was not how it was a year ago or a couple years ago. The relationship is strained. There is a defensive element or there is a sarcastic element that did not used to exist.

In a family—I am talking about family now, family dynamics— there is this one, resisting touch. You know the father goes to his teenage son or daughter, puts his arm around them, and they back away. That does not mean it is “unto death,” but that means pay attention. Something, whether you think it is deserved or not deserved, is a problem. That is an alert that the relationship is injured, not broken, but injured. We want to be alerted. We want to be proactive. We want to be attentive.

As a spiritual family we want to be attentive to relationships. As we grow in that attentiveness, we look at the signs and move in proactively to heal the damage. Again in marriage, a lot of times the relationship is injured, and years go by, and finally it shows up broken. The guy or the gal is thinking, “I do not know what happened.” But really the relationship has been injured for years.

Between parents and children, and the children are now adults and saying, “I do not want anything to do with you now” or “very little to do with you.” The parent wonders where is all the gratitude for all the years you gave them as the parent. Sadly, the relationship has been injured for years, and you did not get it. My point is not if you did get it or if you did not get it. That is not my point. My point is, let’s be alerted. Friendships in the workplace, in the ministry departments, whatever, let’s be alerted.

Now a relationship is injured long before it is broken, long before it is broken. We want to pay attention now. Some only pay attention after it is broken. It is as though after the cancer is all through their body then they want to do something about it. Where the doctor said, there is a speck, now is the time to be proactive. Do not wait until the cancer is in your body and every place and say, “I better take care of this.”

- B. A relationship is wounded long before it is broken, and a broken relationship with offense requires much more effort, wisdom, and patience (entering a fortified city) to repair. The “offended brother” is one with whom we are familiar: a spouse, child, sibling, good friend, co-worker, etc.

¹⁹*A brother offended is harder to win than a strong [fortified] city. (Prov. 18:19)*

Proverbs 18:19, a very well-known passage, says, “A brother offended is harder to win than a fortified city.” A strong city, or many translations say a fortified city, was a city in the ancient world that had all the gates closed up. All the gates were barred and all the soldiers and the weapons were on the towers ready to destroy the advancing army. A fortified city is a really hard city to take. In the ancient world at the time when Solomon wrote this proverb, an advancing army would have to lay siege for two or three years sometimes to take a fortified city. It was almost impossible, very costly, very time consuming. It would take a lot of strategy. You do not really just conquer many fortified cities. It occurs sometimes in history in military terms.

Well, Solomon says of the brother offended that his heart is like a fortified city. His heart is so guarded with so many walls, he does not trust, does not listen to you, does not receive what you say. It may take some years before those walls come down. The term “the brother” here is just a familiar relationship. That is the idea. It could be a spouse. It is not brother versus sister; that is not the point. It can be a spouse whose heart, little by little, is becoming guarded like a fortified city, and that is bad. It is going to take time to win that heart is what Solomon is saying. Do not wait until it becomes a crisis before you become attentive and proactive.

Maybe it is the children or maybe it is a friendship. Do not think we are only talking about marriages. This is widespread for every important, close relationship in our lives. Take time and wisdom and effort. Put it in now or you will have to put a whole lot more in later and may possibly lose the relationship.

- C. A husband is called by God to honor his wife and train his children to honor her.

⁷*Husbands...giving honor to the wife...that your prayers may not be hindered. (1 Pet. 3:7)*

I want to highlight that the Lord emphasizes husbands in taking the place of headship in the family. It is a privilege, but it is also a responsibility, and it is sacred to God. One of their primary responsibilities in accepting this high, sacred privilege, this challenging privilege, is the responsibility of seeing the wife is honored in the home, not just by him, but by the children as well. That is the husband's role.

Now the biblical view of headship is not that the head is the boss. That is the secular view of headship: if you are the head, you are the boss. True in the kingdom, Jesus is the boss, but that is not my point. When we look at the way that Jesus modeled it, when He talks about His headship and compares it to a marriage, He is the one who laid His life down. Headship in the New Testament means it is the leader who loves the most, serves the most, and takes the initiative for healing and reconciliation.

He is saying here in 1 Peter 3, husbands, in the position of headship in the family, one of your top mandates is to make sure you are the guardian and the steward of your wife's honor in the family. You model it, you do it, and you establish it with the children. Of course children will honor Mom as a reflection of how Dad honors Mom. It is not always connected, but often it is. Peter tells them that the Lord is so earnest about this that your prayers will be hindered if you do not honor her. I mean that is a big issue! Your prayers will be hindered. He is saying that God will wake you up to the value of honoring your wife by restraining your prayers, withholding the answer. I mean that is a high priority.

I tell you, women, the prayer movement that is growing so fast across the earth is one of the safest places for women to be. It is in the prayer movement. Because, if you want to move forward in prayer, this issue comes right to the top from the Holy Spirit's emphasis, the honor of a wife by her husband and in her home and the husband being the steward of that.

Now the flip side is that for the man who honors his wife, his prayers are unhindered. So do not just take it as a warning because implicit in that is the promise as well. If prayers are hindered to wake up the husband to the value of honor, then the prayers are unhindered to affirm that he is honoring his wife. There are many ways to do that, and that is not the topic right now of this morning. I just wanted to highlight that, as the prayer movement grows, honor for wives in kingdom families is going to grow. Then honor for women and honor for young girls, everything flows out of that. The Lord ties the prayer movement to this issue of honor.

II. THE POWER OF SPEECH IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS

- A. The most common way to wound the spirit of a relationship is through corrupt speech, which includes **complaining** (overly negative), **unfair criticism** (accusatory), **sarcasm** (insulting), "**sitcom humor**" (joking about faults), **anger** (harsh), **being condescending** (talking down to others).

²⁹Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit. (Eph. 4:29-30)

*Well, let's look at Ephesians 4. We will look at a few phrases for just a moment. Paul said, "Let no corrupt speech proceed out of your mouth, but only speech that is good for necessary edification that it may impart grace to the hearers. Neglecting this, you grieve the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit can be grieved related to the words we speak in our families, in marriages, to our children, to our friends, about our friends. By the words we speak **to** them and the words we speak **about** them the Holy Spirit is honored or the Holy Spirit is grieved. Paul lays it out here; this is a big issue.*

One of the most common ways a relationship is injured is by speech. It is not the only way, but it is the most common way. The way a relationship is healed is by speech. That is not all, but that is the most prominent way.

Kingdom speech or gracious speech is one of the most powerful and the most prominent way humans are involved in the process of healing relationships because God breaks in and helps. It is the healing balm of the Lord that makes the difference, and it is in correspondence to our speaking words that agree with His heart.

Now corrupt speech is so natural for all of us. It just comes out of us. This is because we were born with a sin nature and an orientation to sin. Corrupt speech is just natural to all of us. When we come under the leadership of Jesus, this is an area He really cares about. It is often an area that is last to come under the lordship of Jesus in a believer's life. People will submit their time and some of their money and some of their sexual life first. They will submit some of the things they do and financial transactions they make long before they will submit their speech to His leadership. Speech and wounded relationships and speech and healed relationships are all dynamically connected. Speech and loving well are dynamically connected.

Paul says not to let any corrupt speech leave your lips. We looked at corrupt speech last week. There are many expressions of it. I just have listed a few here to give you a little idea of what it looks like. Complaining is probably the most common type of corrupt speech. It is amazing that people can worship fervently and complain freely, and they never connect that a life of free complaining, of just free venting, actually grieves the Holy Spirit dynamically. It is the opposite of worship, yet in the Body of Christ this is not something that we naturally connect.

Sarcasm, I think there is just no place for sarcasm. I mentioned last week that Diane and I were married thirty-eight years ago. One of the first things I said as we approached marriage is that I wanted to raise a family that had no place for sarcasm, never in our family, in our marriage, in our conversations, in our children. I did not want our children to hear it. I did not want our two sons to do it. I wanted it to be addressed. I said, "If I do it, I want it addressed. Diane, if you do it, if they do it, I'll address it. I want all of us to address it if any of us do it." We wanted to see this not have a place in our family culture. I urge you to really take that on. Anyway, there are a number of types of corrupt speech.

- B. **Complaining:** This injures relationships and causes people to draw back from the relationship (Prov. 14:1; 17:1; 19:13; 21:9, 19; 25:24). This principle applies to men and women in all their relationships.

¹⁹**Better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman. (Prov. 21:19)**

¹³**The contentions of a wife [or spouse, parent, friend] are a continual dripping. (Prov. 19:13)**

I want to go to the most prominent type of corrupt speech, and that is criticism. I mentioned this last week, and we spent the whole message on it because it is so prevalent. I am not trying to get down on anybody. I have this corruption in my speech, but hopefully I have it less now than ten years ago and less than twenty years ago. You know I want to be growing. I want this out of my life completely, and it is not yet, but I see it as an enemy. I see it as an enemy of love. It is an enemy of my walking in the Spirit. It is an enemy of communing with God. It is an enemy of relationships. It is an enemy of my family when it is in me. It is an enemy towards my family when I give way to this. When we really see it for what it is, we will say, "Whoa! Okay, this is not 'just how I am.' This is a real serious issue and is an enemy to the Church." Well, that enemy still wins in my life sometimes, but I call it an enemy, and I aim at it. When I do it, I tell the Lord—mostly privately, every now and then I will go to the person—"Lord, I sinned. That was a sin; that is not okay."

I feel like the Lord says, "Yeah, you stay in that attitude and you will continue to get more freedom over that."

Well, I brought this up last week because I was talking to a young couple, and I made just the casual statement that we were on vacation for three weeks and I enjoyed it so much because I enjoy my wife so much. They asked, "You enjoy your wife? You're thirty-eight years married and you still enjoy your wife?"

I said, “Yeah, yeah.” I was not making some big statement, just a casual statement when I said, “Yeah, I enjoy my wife; that is why the vacation was enjoyable.”

They made the comment, “Oh, we have got to learn to really be interesting”—because they were newly married—“We got to work on being interesting so year thirty-eight we still enjoy each other.”

I responded, “No, no. Being interesting, that is cool. I like interesting. That is good, but that is not why I enjoy her.” I had not thought about it, really, and I said this just inadvertently, but it was the right answer. I said, “No, the reason I enjoy her because the tone of our conversation is almost completely absent of complaint. She has been like this for many years.” I emphasized, “That is what makes it enjoyable.”

Yes, she is cute, and yes, she is interesting, but that is not why I really enjoy her, at least those are not the biggest reasons. Yeah, those are on the list, but are not the main thing. I said, “If you will get rid of complaint, get it out of the tone of your conversation in your marriage, the whole tenor of your marriage will change.”

This young couple looked at each other and said, “Wow! Okay. That is a different answer than we were thinking.”

Here in Proverbs 21:19 it says that it is better to dwell in the wilderness than to live with a contentious and angry woman. Now it is interesting that in the book of Proverbs there are about ten or fifteen verses about women being complainers. There are about fifty verses about men being immoral. You read Proverbs and you’ll see that men are immoral and women complain. Like, when I get with Solomon, I am going to say, “Solomon, I know you had some unsettled issues in your life about this issue of immorality in your life, and I know you had a whole bunch of wives, and maybe that affected your theology.” I do not know how all of that works. He had 700 wives; I am not even going to comment.

I want to say this, lest you read this wrongly: men complain greatly. This is not something that is intrinsic to women, just as immorality is not just about men; there are many immoral women. So do not make these two big lists of Bible verses mostly about one gender or another. This is brothers complaining about each other. This is a man with his wife, and he is complaining. It is the wife with the man. It is every kind of relationship. I am going to talk about parents to children, parents to children; it is the same principle. Friends to friends. He said that it is better to dwell in the wilderness than with a contentious, angry woman.

Now when he says “the wilderness,” you might not really get this. That means to live out in the wild with no resources, no family comforts, and no domestic comforts at all. There is no air conditioning. There is no electricity. There is no refrigerator, no food supply. The wilderness is a really ugly concept and Solomon means that. He is not talking about a guy who is a skilled camper who has got fifty tons of equipment that he packs out there and lives almost as nicely out in the wilderness as he did back home. That is not what we are talking about.

*Now I have a little experience of living in the wilderness, very little, but I am going to tell you about it. I was eighteen years old and at the University of Missouri. I was zealous for the Lord. I read the verse about how Jesus went to the wilderness and fasted forty days. Of course I told everybody I was going to do it. I learned it is better to tell people **after** you return than just as you are going. I was going forty days. I had a blanket and a jug of water. I thought I was just going to ration the water. I did not know how. I was going where there was no water. I had not thought it through.*

So I went out in the wilderness, Bible, blanket, jug of water, me, and God. Moses, Part Two, here I come. It is silly now, but I meant it then. I went out there thinking, “Okay, forty days.” Day one, hour eight there was nowhere to sit. I was thinking, “I am tired,” but I sat down and now that did not feel good, that just did not feel

good. I did not have a pillow, I did not think about a pillow. Hour eighteen, “Um, okay, ouch, ouch!” Bugs, snakes, never saw them but I knew they were there.

Day two. I only made it until, well, I said day three, but it was only the first hour of day three. So it was really two days, but I called it three days. It was the most horrible experience I ever had. I came back in and my friends said, “Oh, you are back early.”

I said, “I made it three days,” I mean two days plus one hour type thing, horrible.

When I think of this verse, I remember that experience and I say, “Ugh!” I think Solomon actually meant that. He was talking about that. He said that it is better to live without the comforts and the resources of life than to have all the resource and all the comforts but have contention in the relationship. It is more difficult to have the comforts and have the contention.

- C. **Anger:** An angry response does not result in accomplishing God’s righteous purpose in our lives.

²⁰***For the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. (Jas. 1:20, NASB)***

Now we are talking about the issue of anger. Again it is not angry women, though that is what Solomon focused on. It is also angry men. It is angry parents. It is angry children. It is sincere parents, but they have anger in them and they are raising children. It is sincere children, but they have anger in them related to their parents or their siblings. Anger is just everywhere; we all understand that.

Here is what James tells us about anger in James 1:20. Now your anger, I am going to add, may be justified. You may have a reason to be angry. You may have been really mistreated in your upbringing, really mistreated in that relationship in the marketplace, in the church, in the department, the ministry department. You may have been really mistreated in the marriage, really mistreated by your parents, and you have a reason to be angry. James would say, “Okay, let’s give that to you, but I want you to know this: anger does not achieve God’s purpose, His righteous purpose for your life.” You can be angry, you can justify your anger, but your anger will not heal the relationship or fix the problem. So he is saying to shift gears and do not stay with the anger strategy of “I am going to let him or her know they need to know.” James said that is not going to achieve the righteous purpose of God. The relationship will not get changed. The man or the woman will not get changed. Nobody will be changed or fixed. What he is really saying is to lay down that approach, even though the anger might be justified, and go for the thing that is going to work, and then throughout the book of James he talks about what works.

- D. **Seeing virtue and expressing gratitude:** We are to seek to see people from God’s perspective, to see their virtue and excellence, and to express gratitude for the good that they have done and seek to do. Saying “thank you” for small things makes a big difference over time in a relationship.

³***As for the saints...“They are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight.” (Ps. 16:3)***

David made a most important statement. He said, “As for the saints...they are the excellent ones in whom is all my delight,” Psalm 16:3. “As for the saints, they are the excellent ones in whom I delight.” Now that is a great verse hanging out there all by itself, wow! You know, put it on a big poster.

In the last forty years I have done a lot of study on the life of David. I just finished a twenty-four-session course on the life of David just last fall. I mean I understand the basic characters in the life of David. Let me tell you about David’s family, his core leadership team, David’s friends: it is was filled with betrayal, weakness, and sinful decisions. I mean I know David’s life a little bit, and I say, “How on earth did you say this statement?”

because he was talking about his friends, his family, and his coworkers on the leadership team. They are excellent, wow! Well, not according to 1-2 Samuel. They were not that great. They were pretty flawed. Their love was pretty deficient. Some of the most loyal had such deficiencies in what they were doing that it brought trouble to David.

Excellent? And you delight in them really? How? I think the answer is—I am sure, I feel sure the answer is—David viewed them through the lens that he understood God viewed him with. It's as if David said, "The Lord has given me such a good deal compared to what I deserve. The Lord sees my virtues and my intentions far more than my failures." David's failures were serious. The way the Lord related to David and revealed His delight to David, He saw David's virtues.

Now when we get into contention with somebody—a spouse, a parent, a child, or a friend—they do something that brings irritation and annoyance. Because it is annoying, it becomes center focus for that period of time, that short period of time hopefully. That annoyance is right there and it becomes the dominant idea in our narrative in that relationship. They do this.

The Lord is saying to take a step back. Yes, they did do that, but look, they do this virtue, that virtue, that virtue. Remember all the years, all the virtues. Do not forget the virtues. Do not forget the good thing they have done. Do not forget what they set their heart to do. It is natural in the moment to get caught up with the annoyance of the other thing.

David is saying here, "I am intentional about not allowing that to control the narrative of how I relate to that person." That is the most beautiful thing.

I love what my wife says; I have heard her say this at different times. She will say it again; she said it this morning at the first service, and it is just so powerful. She said, and I want her to say it again when she gets up here in a couple moments. She says that we judge ourselves by our good intentions, but we judge others by their behavior. We are gracious in judging ourselves. "Well, I did badly, but my intention was good..." and we do not use that same standard when we judge others. I love it that she has that revelation. I mean that really makes it easier for my life; that is a glorious thing.

- E. ***Pick your battles wisely:*** Don't use up your "relational equity" by correcting too many small things related to your spouse, children, or close friends. Resist commenting too often on how the smaller things need to be better in their lives or actions, and focus on speaking into the most important things. Make sure you affirm people far more than you point out their deficiencies.

III. BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES IN RESTORING AND BUILDING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

- A. ***Clearly defined expectations:*** Offenses, tension, and lack of trust in relationships often result from unfulfilled expectations or broken commitments. Therefore, take time to define expectations as to how each spouse agrees to serve the other and what they can expect in terms of time, service, communication, etc. Seek to establish practical, coordinated rhythms in your personal and family schedules that can reduce tension. It is essential to acknowledge when you do not keep your commitments, even in small things related to time and money.

When I think about healing relationships or about a relationship that is not broken but it is new and you want it to be strong, one of the number one issues is the issue of expectations. Meaning, most relationships do not have clearly defined expectations. So even in friendships—I am talking about close friendships; I am not talking about every time you meet somebody—in my closest friendships with people in my family, my friends,

coworkers—and coworkers are friends. I mean it is all one reality in my world—it takes time, it even takes some years to define the expectations.

What are they thinking I am bringing to the relationship? What am I thinking they are bringing to the relationship? Now you do not always know that on the front end. I mean nobody does, but taking a little time to define that will cause so many tensions and conflicts to be avoided, because so many of our conflicts in marriage and in friendship are based on unfulfilled expectations. I do not know what expectation they have of me and they do not know what expectations I have of them. So we collide, whether marriage or friends, family. My point is to take time to lay that out. It is huge and is totally important.

A young person asked me some years ago, “How did God tell you to marry Diane those years ago?” My answer was totally disappointing to this young guy. I mean he was like taking notes, bright-eyed, “Mike, you are kind of amazing! Wow! Tell me. How did God tell you?”

I said, “He did not.”

He said, “No, no, no, no, no! I mean how did God tell you?”

I repeated, “He did not. I do not know what else to tell you.”

He pressed, “Why did you marry her?”

I answered, “She was so cute I figured I could just sort things out as we went.”

He said, “That is a horrible answer!”

I said, “That is a horrible answer, but it is the true answer. But I did it. Oh my life could have been a disaster! I thought, ‘She is so cute that we will sort it out as we go.’”

He must have said, “Note to self: do not go to him for marriage counseling.” He was so disappointed! Well, that is a disastrous way to go forward. Cuteness is cool, but it will not make a relationship good I promise you. It takes a whole lot more.

I have written here that many offenses, many tensions, and much lack of trust comes because we do not have the expectations clear. I do not know what she is expecting and she does not know what I am expecting.

As I mentioned last week, when I was a pastor, twenty-one years old, I went to this marriage seminar for four days, twelve hours a day. I learned all these ideas about marriage because I was a young pastor and I did not know anything about marriage counseling. So when I met Diane a month or so after I went to this seminar, I was waxing eloquent with all of this great insight. None of it was proven in my life. I could not even remember everything. I had to look at my notes when I told her all my great insights that I learned from that seminar.

One of them was this: they said to write down your expectations. Like what? What do you mean write them down? Like what expectations? He said that all marriages should do this. Expectations related to the time you are going to spend together; that means your schedule. Expectations on how you are going to communicate, like when you are under stress and tension you are not going to solve problems and you are both going to be at peace. Expectations on what happens when you are in a conflict or one of you break your word. I mean on small things, I do not mean some big, scandalous sin. You break your word on you committed to give the hour, you committed to give the day, you committed to \$100, the little nickel and dime stuff, but you did not do it.

Write down your expectations before you have a tension so you know how you are going to resolve that. I thought, “I do not really know what this guy is talking about.” I do now, but I did not then. So I got together with Diane, and I said, “We are going to write down our expectations.”

She asked, “What does that mean?” I had to look at my notes because I was not sure what it meant. We did it, and we put our time together on our schedule.

Now the minute you say, “schedule,” some people disconnect. When I put down “time with my wife” and then a few years later we added our children on my schedule, it did not mean it is some robotic commitment. It meant this is so sacred that I am not going to let anybody touch this time. That is what putting time on your schedule is about. It is not about being legalistic or robotic; it is about valuing that time. When I put time down on our schedule—and we worked on it together and as we had children—I said, “This amount of time I will be home on these days.” It is on the schedule. I will not do it 100 percent of the time, but when I cannot do it, we will communicate ahead of time—or if I do not do it I will acknowledge it as a failure—so that she was not left in the lurch, wondering “When are you coming?” Nagging and complaining and begging and wondering are often rooted in wanted to know when and what a wife could count on. That is what I learned from the seminar, and it was really quite important.

We did the same thing with how we communicate, how we spend money, how we decide to spend money. When we were at peace, we would talk about it. I would write those commitments and expectations down, and the reason I wrote it down was that the guy at the seminar said to write it down. I was twenty-one. He was sixty, an old guy. He said to do it, and I just did it.

She said, “Let’s do it.” How we are going to raise children? We read a few books, and we put down the principles we were committed to. We wrote them so we could review it because we tweaked it all the time. We changed it regularly, but we changed it together.

Now when I first sat down and talked to her, I asked things like what do you expect about time, about how we make money decisions, about how we communicate, about how we raise children, etc.? Well, first off she did not really know. She knew some. You know that statement I said that she was so cute I thought I could make it work? Well, I wanted to fix it all before we started. Anyway, she said, “I do not know what all I expect. I know a few, but I do not know them all.” I did not know either.

Then when we started to figure out what we wanted in those five or six areas she knew, I would look at her and say, “Why do you want that? That is a weird thing to want.”

Or she would say, “Why do you want that? That is a weird thing to want.”

So we had to work this thing together. We had to get the rhythms of our schedule, but we put time and energy into it. It is a very, very important thing to do. I am going to give you just a one, two, three, four on things about writing family agreements and taking time to do that. Now you can do this with your children as well. We did it with our children about how we would relate to them.

Some of you may think that writing it down is just so archaic. No, when you write it down a couple things happen. When you write it down, you get really specific. Because when I wrote down what I thought her expectations were, she said, “That is not what I said.”

I said, “Well, yeah, but that is what you should have said.”

She said, “That is not what I said.” When you write it down, it is remarkable how clear and specific it gets.

You can start really simple and build it out over a couple years. Also when you write it down there is accountability. It is there. We would review it regularly. I would think, “Hmm, I guess I was in a real chipper mood when I wrote that one, wow.”

We even talked about what we would do if I did not keep those commitments. I am talking about the little ones, the time and money ones. I do not mean the big money ones, but the little ones. If I did not keep these commitments in my verbal communication, in our words, if I did not keep them, what did I commit to do? If I failed to follow through, if I failed to repent, what should she do? We wrote all this stuff down.

We even had an older couple that, if we came to a point where we did not connect on this, we would bring in. They would arbitrate and help us think it through together. It takes time to do that, but I tell you it was one of the wisest things I got from that marriage conference.

It is more than marriage. These principles even work with friends, close friends. Now you are not going to do this a lot with a lot of friends, but there is an element of this in really close friendships. “Hey, let’s talk. What do we mean?” I would not do that the first time you meet them; I would let a few years go by.

*Now, when you write it down—understand you do not have to write it—but if you write it, it gets much more clear, way more clear. You can adjust it, but be at peace when you are doing it. Be really gracious to each other when you are doing it as well. One of the things she did so well—and you have to do this—is that when she was telling me her expectations she was doing it with respect. She said, “I really want these things **in time**. I want these things in money, these things in the way we communicate.” She was so respectful of the pressures I was under so it actually provoked me to be respectful of her, to understand that all day long she is at home with the children with huge pressures, while I am over there. It is in that connection right there where a lot of good things happen. Okay. Diane, come on up.*

- B. **Make a godly appeal:** When a relationship is wounded, make an appeal to the wounded person. We are to appeal in the right *tone*, *timing*, and *ratio* of affirmation to correction.
1. **Tone:** The tone of our communication is a most important issue in restoring a relationship. A *negative tone* includes speaking with anger, defensiveness, and impatience (rushing people to answer or interrupting them while they are answering) and may include sarcasm, sighs, huffing, slamming doors, etc. This hinders the ability of others to hear our concerns. Our tone involves our body language and facial expressions, including making eye contact.
¹A soft answer turns away wrath [anger], but a harsh word [tone] stirs up anger. (Prov. 15:1)
 2. **Timing:** When resolving a relational tension, it is *important to wait* until both parties are in a place of peace, or have a happy spirit, instead of communicating while angry or agitated.
 3. **Ratio:** A healthy family relationship requires about ten positive statements to one negative one. We must not speak more about someone’s failure than their virtues and desire to do right.
- C. **Ask the person:** Ask them to tell you what they were thinking, feeling, doing, or wanting in the situation, instead of starting with statements of complaint or correction for them. Ask, “*What were you thinking or feeling when you told me...?*” or “*Help me understand what you felt when I said...*”
- D. **Tell them what you feel:** It can be helpful to share how you *felt* about what they did or said, instead of just making statements about their faults. Start by saying things like, “*I felt rejected (or pained, or disappointed) when you said/did...*” Opening our heart to share our feelings can help.

- E. **Active listening:** Be careful not to interrupt or cut them off, but listen to discern their *unspoken* words, pains, or disappointments. Speak back to them what *you heard* them say. For example, “*It sounds like you are saying...*” This gives them the opportunity to clarify what you heard.
¹⁹But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger. (Jas. 1:19, NASB)
- F. **Be non-defensive:** A defensive manner hinders communication and the restoration process. It helps to see people who criticize us as a “free research team,” giving us insight into our blind spots.
- G. **Confess your faults:** Do not say, “I’m sorry *if* I offended you.” Rather say, “I repent, *because* I sinned against you, or failed you” (by coming up short in love, in keeping my commitments, etc.).
- H. **Get an arbitrator:** An arbitrator can be very helpful in solving deep-seated relational conflicts.

Diane: I hope you guys are drawing courage and hope from the Lord that you look at some of the dorky ways that we started our married life and feel like, “Wow, if they can make it, we can make it.”

Mike: And we still mess up on this stuff.

Diane: The Lord is so good, and He is merciful, and yeah, we do not do it all right.

Mike: We do not do all of this right, right? It preaches better!

Diane: For real, we have not done it right and do not do it right, but we seek to. You know, I would just like to add about this whole family agreement principle of having these agreements that if we do not communicate, then the only thing we can do is speculate.

Mike: Wait a second! Say that again. I need this in my handout next week.

Diane: If we do not communicate, then we are left to speculate, and that is never good.

Mike: That is excellent!

Diane: So we make assumptions about this person’s intentions or lack of follow-through or whatever it would be. Instead, we really want to be purposeful and intentional in our communication, and that is in a marriage or with a family or with friendships.

Mike: Again, we are not talking only about marriage. Some people at the end say, “Oh, you are talking about marriage. I am not married.” No, we are talking how you relate to your parents, your children, your siblings, your friends.

Diane: So, so yeah, we did write down our agreements one to another. It was about honoring each other, and it was about honoring the Lord with our expectations and serving and wanting to love well. So I think of an agreement simply as a plan for success, a success plan, and in business or on the job we all have a plan to succeed. We never walk into the job intending to fail that day. We walk in with the intention of succeeding. We walk into our marriage with the intention of succeeding and glorifying the Lord.

Mike: So why do you think in a lot of marriages, they don’t do this? A businessman or woman will do it at the job. But they come home and they are just hoping for spontaneous greatness to emerge with no clarity about what they expect from each other. So why don’t marriages make a plan?

Diane: I think maybe just not knowing how to or not knowing the value of doing it.

Mike: So I got a question. You were twenty-one. I was twenty-one. So I came with all this great insight from that seminar. What did you think the first couple years when we kept writing and rewriting communication styles, and schedules? Did you like this or were you pressured by it? Because we got it wrong a bunch and we had to keep rewriting it.

Diane: It pushed me in a good way, and in a way it forced me to crystalize my expectations and not have ideals that could not be flushed out properly. Then also it helped me to understand who he was and what was important to him because I wanted to be able to value what was important to him.

Mike: Well, in an early conversation she would say something like, “I just want to feel totally loved and cherished and pursued.” I thought, “Ugh, how am I going to jump over that ten-foot hurdle?” So I would suggest, “Can we break that down? Like, does it mean if I am nice to you and I listen to you? We got to break that down a lot more because I am going to fail if that is what we are doing right now. What do you mean? Do you mean what was in that book you read or do you mean the weak man you are looking at?”

Diane: The weak person who we are looking at wants to love well just as you do. There are certain commitments that can be made and are right to be made. The thing that I value in our agreements as we have just walked through thirty-eight years of marriage—

Mike: We still rewrite them; we still do them.

Diane: —I value the commitments that he does make, and I have come to depend upon them. I have come to count on them and that he does fulfill the commitments that he has made.

Mike: She is talking about the time commitments of us together with our family over the years.

Diane: Yeah, absolutely, and that has taken the angst out of my heart and so I do not want to nag. When he does fulfill his commitments, then I am not tempted to nag. Even when I am tempted to nag, I still have to own that before the Lord and bring my speech to Him.

Mike: So when our boys were nine and ten years old, we had this commitment of “I am coming home. I am going to put this amount of time into the boys.” I put it on the schedule. I said, “I will be home and I will engaged in the boys these hours, these days, and others besides but not less than this.” How did you feel?

Diane: Delighted, relieved, excited that we were doing this parenting role together. Frankly, it was like he would show up in our front yard, and our boys would be out there with all the neighborhood boys who were ready to play soccer or baseball as Mike blew the whistle and they all had to do the playing...

Mike: I told my boys that we would do anything. I wanted to commit myself: I will be home, I will give you three hours a day, five days a week, and I did that for twelve years. I said that I would not let a leader coming into town, a crisis, an elder quitting, or the church blowing up keep me from this. I will be there for those three hours, five days a week. And we will do what you boys want. So when they are five, they want this. When they are ten, they want that. When they are fifteen, they want that. So I would come home and I would tell Diane, “Hey, come and join us.” She said, “No, I am good. You can have them. Here, take them. You are good; you are good.” I would say, “No, come join us.” She would say, “No.”

Diane: Partnership, it is all about partnership, and we were in this together and it was a good thing.

Mike: Now not everybody can do three hours a day, five days a week for twelve years, but I could because I had certain liberties over my job [meaning, working early mornings and late evenings]. To me it was something we decided as a family. Meaning she said this and I said that. We worked on that for a few years to get that

number. Then the boys waited, and then I told the leaders of the church, because then I could not be there as much and then this and then that. So it was a work in progress, it was hard, and we did not do it perfectly.

Diane: One more thing that I want to say is that when he did not fulfill his commitment or if he was twenty minutes late and these little boys were in the front yard—that was not the rule but it did happen on occasion—he would own that to the boys and to me. You know what? That just takes the pressure off when someone acknowledges that they are human and they failed you. You want to honor them, and you want to extend grace. When someone refuses to acknowledge that they failed you and maintain that they are superhuman, then it makes it a little more difficult.

Thankfully we, we had that ability to acknowledge to each other that when we dropped the ball or we did not do what we said we would do. We would say that we were sorry, that “I am human and give me grace” because that is what we wanted from the other person. That is what the Lord gives us, you guys, when we go before Him and just are honest with Him and pour our heart out before Him. He washes us, He cleanses us, He empowers us, and He builds us up so that we can go out there and give ourselves to our best intentions that we have.

Mike: See when we were talking in those early days, she said, “I want a schedule I can count on. That is what I want.” I said, “Like what does that mean?” “I do not want to wonder what part of the week and years even you’ll be here. I want a chunk of time that I do not have to wonder, beg for, or nag about, that I can count on. Tell me when it is and I will be fine.”

We worked on it, and again we change it a number of times and that kind of thing. It shifts every season. You cannot do all that we did without adjusting it, and what we did changed every season. So do not even look at the details of our schedule. Like some guy might say, “Three hours? I cannot do that.” Forget our deal. You do your own deal. You’ve got your own personality, your own assignment, your own tensions, your own marriage. Everyone is different, but the Lord made this clear to us: that this was doable.

She said, “I want something I can count on. I want something I do not have to wonder about.” Men, I think that is a great gift you can give your wife, whether it is time or a way you promised to communicate or about money, about child raising. You do not have to get it all clear, but the few things you get clear she can count on it. That does not mean all this tension is gone, but a whole lot of it is prevented, and it is taken out of the way.

Diane: Yeah, absolutely. One more thing just to throw into this whole communication-relational conversation is that forgiveness is not optional; it is essential. So you know somebody asked Jesus, “Okay, do I have to do this like seven times, Jesus?” He said, “No, seventy times seven.” You know in life you get that many opportunities to continue just to take your heart before the Lord and ask Him to help you to forgive. Again what Mike said was that we judge others by their actions.

Mike: No, I quoted you. You said it, not me.

Diane: We tend to judge others by their actions, but we judge ourselves by our good intentions. So we want to remember that Jesus judges us by our hearts.

Mike: So when I blow it, you are going to be nice to me because you want me to acknowledge that I blew it. That is the key right there.

Diane: That is it.

Mike: Acknowledge you blew it, and she will be nice. I do not acknowledge it, then you blow it, and it goes up a little bit. Then we call another couple that we talk to. So I just said, “I did bad.” She says, “I will go with you.”

Diane: *Because we want our sins forgiven. Matthew 6 says that when we forgive someone else's sins the Lord forgives our sins. I want my sins forgiven; therefore I have to forgive, and the Lord will help me to do that. He will help you to do that as well.*

Mike: *Very good. Amen, let's stand.*