

# COVENANT KEEPERS

"Dedicated To Strengthening Marriages Through Biblical Principles"

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## How Well Do You Communicate?

The ability to effectively communicate is an essential skill for any successful marriage. Communication is one of the most important keys to a deeper level of intimacy between a husband and wife. It is also critical for resolving conflicts that will arise to threaten that intimacy.

So, how well do you communicate with your spouse? Is there a simple way to tell how effective you are at this essential element of your marriage relationship? Yes, there is! Let's look at one of the simplest tools to evaluate how well you communicate with your mate.

### What is the overall fruit?

Jesus said, "For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:43-45). If every tree is known by its fruit, then every relationship is also known by its fruit. Jesus also believed that the fruit of our lips would always reveal the condition of our hearts. Bearing fruit was one of Christ's constant messages, and it always reveals the truth of what is good or evil. See also, Matt. 13:23; John 15:2; Matt. 3:10).

Most of the Apostles also addressed this topic of fruit, and what should be seen in our relationship with the Lord and with others. James specifically taught, "Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (James 3:18).

Therefore, what is the fruit of your relationship with your spouse? Is there a fruit of righteousness in your relationship? Is there a fruit of peace? Do

you see the fruit of resolved conflicts? Is there the fruit of harmony, friendship, and real companionship with your mate? How close are you with your spouse? This good fruit is what reveals the truth of how well you communicate. The whole point of marriage is to become best friends and intimate companions with each other. This is declared to be the purpose of marriage in Malachi 2:14 and the Song of Solomon 5:16.



*Effective communication is the key to a successful marriage!*

If you don't see these fruits, then you don't communicate well. Friendship and companionship are the ultimate proofs that you do communicate effectively. If you are realizing at this moment that this is a real problem in your marriage, ask yourself what are you willing to do to change it? If you don't change the behaviors that are hindering your communication, then it's only going to get worse. Why do I say this? The Bible teaches that any sinful practice which is not put off will only get worse. Paul commanded believers to "Put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:22-24 – underline added). The words *grows corrupt* are in the present tense, which means that if you don't put off your former conduct it will

continually become more corrupt, which will stumble every aspect of your life and marriage.

Consequently, I want to challenge you to do an honest evaluation of the depth of your communication. I also want to encourage you with some simple tools to make your marriage better. This growth is so important for the well-being of your relationship with your entire family, and especially with your spouse.

### At what level do you communicate with your spouse?

First, let me explain the levels of communication. As I do this, determine at what level you regularly communicate with your spouse. By looking at these levels of communication, you will see how well you communicate. What are these levels?

**1. The cliché level.** An example of cliché level communications are the light-hearted greetings that you give to others. This is a very superficial level of communication and can be experienced with a total stranger. It sounds something like, "Hey, what's happening?" Or, "How is it going?" When Paul went to see the Apostle James it says, "When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry" (Acts 21:19). Therefore, before you can get into the details of a conversation, you first must greet a person. The problem is, some relationships rarely get past this level of communication.

**2. The acts and facts level.** This level of communication is slightly deeper, yet can still be done with a stranger. The acts and facts of your day are some of the details of what happened that day, of where you went, and what you did. These acts and facts can be asked for as Jesus did when He confronted a man who had brought his son to be healed of demon possession. Jesus asked for the facts when He said, "How long has this been happening to

**"She is your companion and your wife by covenant" Mal. 2:14**

him?" And he said, 'From childhood. And often he has thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us'" (Mark 9:21-22). But, notice that these are only the acts and facts of what happens to the child and how long it has occurred. Only later does the father breakdown and cry out for Jesus to heal his son.

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If you want to communicate more deeply than just the acts and facts of the day, you have to sense and believe that the person you are talking to is safe and reliable. The father clearly believed Jesus was safe and trustworthy, and that is why he brought his son to Him.

What do I mean by safe? If you are known as a gossip, or someone who is harsh, critical, or uncaring, you will not be considered a safe person to reveal the deeper issues of the heart.

**3. Sharing ideas, opinions, and feelings about someone's acts and facts of the day.** This level of communication requires a deeper level of security, safety, and honesty. Why? Because you must reveal what you personally think and feel about your day and about the things that happened to you. If you want a depth of relationship with your spouse, you must be able to get to this level of communication. Jesus often reached this level of communication with his disciples. He constantly asked them what they thought, why they were feeling a certain way, and what they were going to do. Remember when the tax collector came to Peter and asked him if Jesus paid taxes? Peter blurted out an immediate "yes." But then it says, "And when he had come into the house, Jesus anticipated him, saying, 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?'" (Matt. 17:25). Jesus obviously wanted to probe Peter to see what he was thinking. This was a common effort of Jesus. See also Mark 9:11; Mark 4:40 for examples of when Jesus did this.

When your mate asks you what you think or why you are feeling a certain way, do you walk away, just remain silent, say "I don't know," or become dismissive of their questions? How do you respond when your spouse shares their thoughts or feelings about what you have said? How you respond at this moment will determine if you will ever go to any deeper level of communication, because your mate will recognize whether or not you are safe to talk to about this issue.

**4. Giving and receiving encouragement.**

This level of communication requires an even deeper level of love, trust, and security. Why? Because you must be willing to lovingly reach out to give encouragement to your spouse. Will your spouse listen to what you have to say? Will they receive what you have to say? Will they respond favorably to your encouragements? Why is this important? When you are encouraging, loving, and respectful it should open the door of your mate's heart, which then enables further and deeper communication between you.

Conversely, if your mate gives you encouragement and you become critical, defensive, harsh, unresponsive, or dismissive of their thoughts, this offends them and the door of their heart closes. Solomon taught, "A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a castle" (Prov. 18:19). If there are locked bars and doors between you and your spouse, then someone has obviously been offensive in their speech.

Solomon also taught that, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Prov. 15:1). This is why the Apostle commands us to "exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13). Do you encourage and support your mate daily when things are difficult in his or her life? Is this a normal everyday behavior between you, or are you the critic or the one who is harsh in your response? The words that you speak are so important.

**5. Giving and receiving correction, and confession with forgiveness.**

In all human relationships there will come a time when loving correction is needed. Why? Because we are sinners, and sometimes we hurt and offend each other. But the question is, can you receive correction and ask forgiveness when you are out of line? So we see, this level of communication requires even more love,

trust, security, humility, and honesty because of the sensitivity of this encounter.

When you correct your spouse if there is an immediate conflict between you, something is wrong. Likewise, if your spouse can't ask for forgiveness, there is something wrong. Scripture teaches that you are to, "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16). Confession of sin and prayer together are clearly things that only happen between two people who are humble and honest with each other. Two people will only correct and forgive one another when they believe that the correction has been motivated by love. Remember, you must also be motivated by love to encourage and receive that encouragement as noted at level 4, or you will never successfully communicate the correction, confession, and forgiveness of level 5.

**6. Decision making and planning for the future.**

To communicate at this level requires you to possess all the skills of the previous points I have discussed, because making important decisions entails being able to listen to one another, lovingly disagree, discuss a compromise, and then come up with a mutually agreed upon decision. Decision making requires all of these important skills.

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One of the best biblical examples of this problem in decision making is the conflict Paul and Barnabas had when they were planning for their second missionary journey. As you recall, they couldn't come to an agreement on whether to take John Mark, because he had left them abruptly on their first missionary journey. Scripture declares that, "Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. Then the contention became so sharp that

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they parted from one another” (Acts 15:37-39). This division only revealed the weakness in their relationship and the pride in both of their hearts. If you can’t seem to make decisions together, or plan for the future without a conflict, then you have not mastered this level of communication.

**7. Sharing your personal hopes, fears, hurts, discouragements, and goals in life. In addition, sharing spiritual truths of what God is doing in your personal life.** This is the deepest level of communication which results in the most intimate level of friendship, love, and companionship in your marriage. The more you communicate at this level, the more mature your relationship will be. Sharing your deepest hurts and struggles, and what God is doing in your life, reveals you possess a depth of trust and openness with your spouse. When you are struggling in your life separate from your marriage, you need a safe haven to talk about these issues. Your marriage should be this safe place. Unfortunately, you will never open up to share the deep things of your heart, unless you can first successfully communicate at levels 1 through 6. Just as God wants us to, “*Trust in Him at all times, you people; Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us*” (Ps. 62:8). Similarly, God also wants you to be able to trust your spouse and pour out your heart to him or her.

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**You must examine your hearts to determine what you each are doing that is hindering this deeper level of companionship through communication.**

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### **The question to answer!**

Do you get to these deeper areas of communication with your spouse? If you do, then these conversations are deeply satisfying, and they draw you into an ever-deepening companionship. This reveals that you have learned the skills of good communication, and you should rejoice in the work of God in your hearts. But, if you don’t get to these deeper levels of communication, you must acknowledge that you have not acquired the skills of effective communication. What should you do if this is the case? You should be asking God to help you to see what you are doing that has hindered

these deeper levels of communication. Jesus gave the best course of action for what you should do when there are issues that divide you and your mate. He said, “*First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye*” (Matt. 7:5). There is no better counsel. You and your spouse must be brutally honest with yourselves. You must examine your hearts to determine what you each are doing that is hindering this deeper level of companionship through communication. Then, go and pray together and ask God for His transforming power to bring the changes necessary.

### **How can you get to deeper levels of communication?**

**1. First, make a list of all the things that have been hindering your communication with your spouse.** If you need help identifying these problem areas, read through “*What Hinders Communication in Your Marriage*” found at our website [www.covenantkeepers.org](http://www.covenantkeepers.org). Once there, look for “*Online Articles*” and then the topic of “*Communication.*” Next, under the “*Worksheets*” topic, print out the “*Identifying Communication Roadblocks.*” You and your mate should each fill out a separate questionnaire. Once you have both completed the questionnaire, then sit down together, compare your answers, and discuss possible solutions.

**2. A helpful hint.** In my experience of counseling couples for more than 40 years, most communication break-downs occur at levels 3 and 4. When you can’t listen to your mate’s thoughts and ideas, or respond in an unloving way, are offensive, or you respond with silence, you will not effectively communicate at any of the deeper levels of communication. When you have this adversarial relationship, you will attempt to talk about the issues in levels 5 through 7, but it just won’t go well, and you will most likely give up.

**3. Why does communication break down at levels 3 and 4?** There is a really simple answer to this question. It’s just a lack of Christian character. If you will read the Apostle Paul’s teachings in Colossians 3:8-14 and Ephesians 4:21-32, you will come to the conclusion that he directly connects putting off the old man, which are your sinful attitudes and

behaviors, with putting on the new man and beginning to walk under the control of the Holy Spirit. As you read these passages, note the association he makes between anger, wrath, malice, and filthy language (Col. 3:8). In Ephesians, he links putting off the old man with putting off lying, and instead speaking truth with one another. Paul wanted them to put away any corrupt words that would proceed from their mouths, and instead impart grace to the hearers (Eph. 4:22; 25; 29). In other words, with the Holy Spirit controlling you, this will enable you to control the things that come from your mouth.

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In reality, every communication problem is, at its core, a spiritual issue that needs to be addressed in your life. If you want to become a good communicator, you need the character qualities that result from the fruit of the Spirit. He will give you the humility to become a good listener, and one who seeks to understand your mate’s opinions and feelings. He is the One who enables you to be honest with yourself when you see the sin of your own heart, and moves you to ask for forgiveness. He is the One who produces self-control and allows you to control your anger. The Holy Spirit will always help you to speak kindly, truthfully, and lovingly (Gal. 5:22-23).

**4. Practical guidance.** The next time you or your spouse say something that is harsh, unloving, insensitive, or dismissive, stop the conversation right then before it goes any further. Moments like these can get out of hand very quickly and must be stopped immediately. Solomon said, “*The beginning of strife is like releasing water; Therefore stop contention before a quarrel starts*” (Prov. 17:14). Note that the primary message of this proverb is to stop contention before the strife gets out of hand. This is clearly the intent when Solomon uses the image of releasing water. In the NIV version, it is translated that “*the beginning of strife is like the breaching of a dam.*” Now, think about what happens as water is released when a dam is about to break open. At first the water begins to trickle

out slowly, then the dam itself begins to erode, and finally water comes gushing out. This is the very reason God tells you to stop contention before it's too late. You know how it happens. Someone says something offensive or harsh, and you get angry; then you respond in a similar way. Then they respond back with a little more attitude and volume, and then you find yourself in a full-blown argument, often saying things you regret.

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**Do you encourage and support your mate daily when things are difficult in his or her life?**

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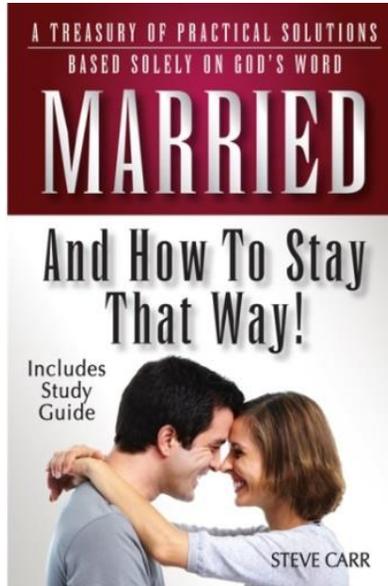
So, the next time this happens, stop the conversation and take a time out. Hopefully, both parties can admit their own bad attitude, wrong words, or selfish behavior. Then start the conversation again. Do this as many times as it takes until you can talk the issues through without arguing. Don't walk off in a huff and refuse to resolve the issue. Remember, you have till the end of the day to resolve the conflict in a respectful way. Don't let the sun go down on your wrath (Eph. 4:26)!

To communicate effectively takes hard work. It requires dying to yourself and putting off selfishness in your life. It takes not giving up, because love endures all things (1 Cor. 13:7). Do the work, and you will see the fruit!

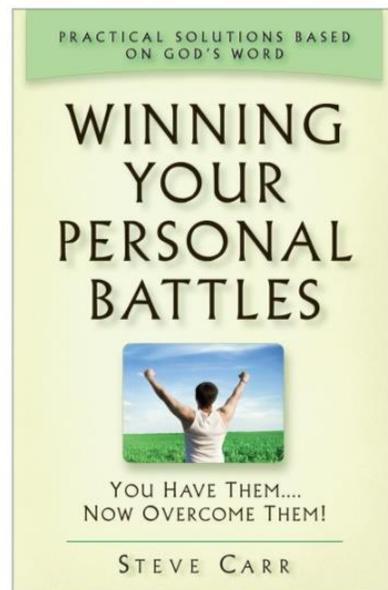
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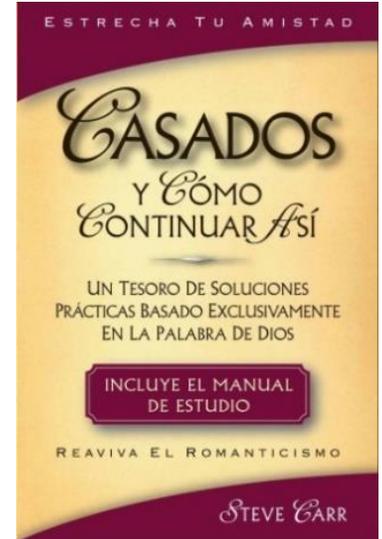
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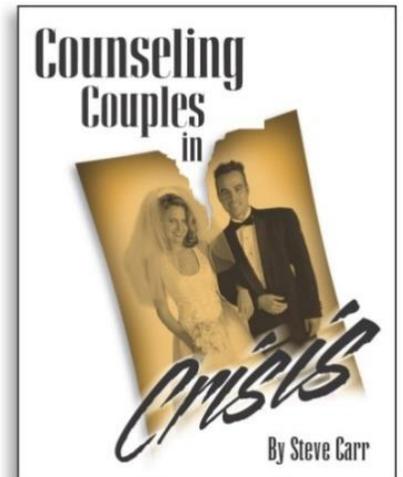
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