



Communication is one thing people cannot avoid. Even if you refuse to communicate, you are still communicating your refusal. For something that is such a unconscious and global element, people are pretty bad at it. Think about the number of times you have been misunderstood, misinterpreted, misread, and mislead. In fact, sometimes it feels like we miss more than we succeed.

God wants to be an intricate part of human communication - on a global and personal level. He gives us tips and clues about how to communicate well with others - and with Him. The question is whether we are willing to take the time and make the effort to become better communicators. Or will that always be the responsibility of someone else?

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THE DEFENSE SERIES



Clear as Mud

HOW TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE

FACILITATOR EDITION



- We also make the other person feel smaller.
- Our sarcastic response keeps us from having to say it – and it makes them feel dumb because they want us to.

CRUEL WITHOUT REPERCUSSIONS

- You can say exactly what you mean without having to deal with the negative response.
- The sarcastic person takes advantage of their history of double meaning to get the satisfaction of saying what they mean, while keeping everyone else in the dark.

POWER TRIP

READ IT Exodus 20:12; Matthew 19:19; Ephesians 6:1,2; Colossians 3:20; 1 Peter 2:13-17

THINK ABOUT IT

- What are some ways you do not say what you mean? _____
- Are you using sarcasm on a regular basis? How can you begin to stop relying on it?

MAINTENANCE

READ IT Ephesians 4:3,26; Matthew 18:15

BE LOVING

- When unconditional love is present in a person, they put others in front of themselves.
- Love is the one thing that can actually help deal with uncomfortable issues in our relationships.

BE HONEST

- Most people deal in shades of honesty.
- Both “sugar-coating” things and being too brutal are damaging to a relationship.

BE TIMELY

- Allowing things to sit there for days before

COMMUNICATION

STUDENT ACTIVITY

Game of Telephone

Have the group play the classic game of telephone. Whisper to the first person the lines below, and then have them whisper to the next person, and so on. Each person can only say the line one time. Compare the line after going through the whole class with what you said.

“Communication is a combination of active listening, honest expression, and continual maintenance – and sometimes it includes words.”

Chances are pretty good that there was a marked difference between the two versions. While this may have been a simple and silly example, it helps to highlight an important truth. Communication is a fragile thing. For something that is so basic, and such an ingrained part of our lives, it should be hearty and resilient. But it is easy to break and damage – and surprisingly very few people know how to do it well.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What are some ways that you communicate well?
2. What are some ways that you communicate poorly?
3. Would you say that most people you encounter are good communicators or poor? Why?

READ IT

Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-12

We see in these two passages two distinct examples of God’s intervention in human communication. In the first story, man was trying to accomplish something without God. At this point, everyone spoke the same language, so it was easy to accomplish tasks. This was something that God had given mankind so that they could fulfill His directives of populating and subduing the earth. But, man turned from God and instead began to focus on his own ideas. Mankind decided

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to build a tower to God, a task that was really just a testimony to how little they thought of Him. They were really saying they felt they could reach His level – bring Him down to them. (Funny, sounds a lot like the lie the Serpent told Eve.) Anyway, God did not appreciate this, and He decided it was time to break up the free communication that was going on within the population. So He “confused the language of all the earth” and “scattered them over the face of all the earth.”

Basically, God introduced different languages, and then caused the people to move all over instead of staying in just one area. It does not say this was instantaneous event – although it could have been. Some people take issue with this story, saying it takes languages thousands of years to develop. Looking at Genesis as a whole, we see the end result of The Flood in Chapter Nine, followed in Chapter Ten with a genealogy of Noah and his sons. Chapter Eleven begins with the story of Babel, and concludes with a more specific genealogy of Noah through to Abram (Abraham). The story of Abraham picks up in Chapter Twelve. Using the ages in Chapter Eleven, at least 390 years pass between The Flood and the birth of Abraham. There is plenty of time for people to move all over and develop different languages – this is of course in addition to the sons of Japheth and Ham who are in different places. The point of all of that is, whether God made an instant confusion or kick-started something that took centuries, by the time Abraham enters the scene, there are different cultures with different languages. And there is mass confusion.

This is what happens with people when God is not involved – confusion sets in. Why are we so surprised that there is so much conflict on Earth? God has not been a part of the plan for a long time in most people’s minds. They all have different ways to interpret things, feel things, believe things, express things. It is inevitable that some of those are going to interact poorly with each other. Contrary to the Postmodern thinker who believes that everyone is right as long as they are sincere, the fact is that not everyone is correct. And people with completely opposing views do not mix well. This is the end result of the chaos caused by the fall of Babel. The Second Law of Thermodynamics (also known as the Law of Entropy) states that the

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HEAR THE MEANING

- Make sure that you have picked up on both the denotation and the connotation of the words
- Are there hidden meanings to the words said?

OBSERVE NONVERBAL CUES

- 90 percent of communication effectiveness is generated by nonverbal cues.
- 60 percent of all communication is from some other source than speaking.

STUDENT ACTIVITY

Come up with ways to tell someone they need a haircut without saying the word “haircut.”

Act how the following emotions would look – without words:

- *Happy; Angry; Insulted; Sad; Bored*
- *Have to go to the bathroom*
- *Insecure about the world tensions and domestic political outlook*

EXPRESSING

READ IT Proverbs 12:22, Ephesians 4:25

- The best thing you as a communicator can do when you are expressing yourself is to be respectful, loving, and sensitive – while being honest.
- People appreciate others who are real and genuine and honest.

SARCASM

READ IT Matthew 5:37, Colossians 4:6, Ephesians 4:29, James 5:12, Matthew 12:35-37

- Sarcasm has become the language of most younger people.

HIDE TRUE FEELINGS

- Sarcastic people never have to be vulnerable.

THINK ABOUT IT

- How can you see the legacy of Babel in our world today? _____
- Have you ever seen a time when you saw clear communication you knew came from God (a teacher, small group, pastor, parent, etc.)? Explain. _____

LISTENING

READ IT James 1:19, Proverbs 8:6

ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE

Poor listening has hurt us all. We may have missed out on an important message because we weren't paying attention. We may have had someone blow off something important to us because they were "somewhere else." But all of this can be fixed by applying some simple listening skills.

ONE THING AT A TIME:

- To show a person that you truly respect them, give them your undivided attention.
- If you cannot do that, then have the courtesy to say that – and then schedule a better time where you can be uninterrupted and undistracted.

EYE CONTACT:

- For some, poor eye contact is tied into self esteem.
- For others, it may be due to the media/entertainment industry.
- Some could be that they are struggling with lust.
- Keeping good eye contact is a way to tell the person talking that you are completely focused on them.

WAIT YOUR TURN:

- While the other person is talking, they are the most important thing. Wait to make sure your response is appropriate and helpful – and that it is not stealing their thunder or turning things to you when they are supposed to be about them.

universe is always moving towards chaos – that is the end result of things. Ironically, scientists fail to realize the implications of this – that the universe at one point was a place of great order, and it has degraded since that point. This is a natural stepping-stone to the Genesis account of Creation. The world and everything in it has been unraveling since the Fall of Man. It is no different with communication – with people slowly losing their ability to converse well.

Babel shows us what happens to communication when God is removed – it moves to chaos and confusion. The Acts passage shows us the opposite point. Here we see what happens when God is included in communication. The end result is clarity. In Acts 2, we see the apostles together, waiting on God to give them directions – just like Jesus told them to do. In an action that we call Pentecost, the Holy Spirit rushed into the room, and into these men. Each one was given an amazing ability to fluently speak other languages – a skill that they then used when they went out into the city. Acts 2:5 tells us that there were “devout men from every nation under heaven” in Jerusalem. Imagine the chaos and confusion that must have been ruling the day prior to the appearance of the apostles. A great way to imagine it is what it would sound like in the General Assembly of the United Nations if everyone was talking – before their translators began to work.

Well, into this chaos comes the apostles – suddenly being able to speak those diverse tongues and able to deliver Peter's message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to everyone. How did this happen? God's people were sitting in prayer asking Him to move and to guide them. He did indeed move – and His appearance brought clarity. It highlighted truth, and dispelled darkness. It is interesting how many will quibble over this story and whether it means the Apostles could speak languages or “tongues.” People want to know if they were able to speak the languages or if the Jews present could just hear the languages. However it was done, it should be no surprise. God was the one who created man in the first place, and gave him his ability to communicate. When man was created in God's image, as Genesis 2 says, it reflected the fact that God also communicates. And God was the one who

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frustrated man's ability to communicate clearly in the first place. How hard would it be for that same God to lift the veil of confusion for a moment so everyone could clearly hear?

So what do these two stories teach us? We need to realize that for us to have a chance at really, truly learning to communicate well with those around us, we must have God's influence. He is the one who brings discernment and wisdom and clarity and knowledge. He is the one who is the source of all good things. And He is the one that can help us to break the natural barriers to good communication. There are three elements to communication, and God plays an important part in each of those. The first element is listening – and not just detecting sound waves, but really being able to listen to what a person is feeling and desiring. That desire to care about others that much is something that God must place in our heart. The second element is expressing – really truly being able to honestly say what you feel and think. That commitment to honesty in a loving manner also comes from God. The last element is maintenance, which covers the areas of confession, confrontation, conflict, and forgiveness. Again, God is the one Who tells us to make things right with each other – and the only One who can actually make things right. We will now look at each of these elements in more depth.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. How can you see the legacy of Babel in our world today?
2. Have you ever seen a time when you saw clear communication you knew came from God (a teacher, small group, pastor, parent, etc.)? Explain.

LISTENING

READ IT

James 1:19, Proverbs 8:6

Chelsea was talking to some of her co-workers one afternoon. "So I got set up with a blind date. He's a bull

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Communication

STUDENT ACTIVITY

Game of Telephone: As a group play the classic game of telephone. Your facilitator is going to tell the first person a message. They are going to whisper it to the next person, and so on. Each person can only say the line one time. Compare the line after going through the whole class with what the facilitator said.

THINK ABOUT IT

- What are some ways that you communicate well? _____
- What are some ways that you communicate poorly? _____
- Would you say that most people you encounter are good communicators or poor? Why? _____

Communication is a fragile thing. For something that is so basic, and such an ingrained part of our lives, it should be hearty and resilient. But it is easy to break and damage – and surprisingly very few people know how to do it well.

READ IT Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-12

- God gets involved in human communication on a global scale twice in the Bible.
- At Babel, God counteracts the efforts of the people to become equal to God by creating languages.
- This shows without God, communication is chaotic and confusing.
- At Pentecost, God steps back into human communication and brings clarity. Every person could hear in their own language.
- There are three elements to communication: listening, expressing, and maintenance.

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of them are accusatory and uncomfortable. But they come from the heart of people who want to follow God and don't understand His ways. Isaiah tells us that His ways are not our ways. It is natural to be confused, and healthy to express that. God can handle it. And we will actually learn our lessons earlier when we ARE honest – it helps to show those things we are harboring that God probably wants to get out of us in the first place.

MAINTENANCE: Just like with other relationships, we need to include apology and confession to God. This draws us back to Him when we drift away. It needs to be honest and thorough and truly repentant. The awesome thing about God is that He wants us to be reconciled – it has been His goal throughout time. So He will receive our efforts – and He speaks all languages of apology. This is still necessary, even though Christ has forgiven our sins. Some people believe that because our sins were erased, we never have to repent again. That is not true. We still need to restore our relationship – more for OUR sake. It helps us to realize what we have done and what we need to do to get things right. We can see where our commitment is weak. It also clears our conscience and removes the possibility Satan can trip us up with doubt.

Prayer is the area where we can see God interact with human communication on a personal level. As we spend time with God, we can see the chaos and confusion of our own lives lift as we begin to understand clearly what is truly happening. It gives us a better understanding of God, a better way to interact with others, and a better view of ourselves. It is not just a practical application of good communication. It is also like oil to lubricate our entire communication process. As we pray, we will see how to love others, how to be honest, how to make things right, how to truly care about people, how to know if things need repaired. By including God, through prayer, we can actually reverse the effects of Babel and have healthy and profitable communication with those around us. God wants to be involved in every area of our lives – that is the way we were designed. And when we let Him be involved in our communication, we can make sure we are truly giving the message of love and hope that he wants us to give.

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rider at the rodeo. My sister, Luann, knows him. I kept telling her I wasn't interested, but she did it anyway. This Friday. It's a date. It's blind."

Darren walked by and questioned with concern, "You're going blind?"

Chelsea was puzzled, "No. OH, no. I have a blind date."

Darren looked at her, a little confused. "Your date is blind? That's kind of different. How did you meet him?"

"No. He's a bull rider."

"He's a blind bull rider?" Darren was amazed. "That's incredible! How does he do that?"

"That's not what I meant. He's not blind."

"The bull's blind? Why would he ride a blind bull? Is that dangerous and cruel?"

"Listen to me Darren! He's not blind. The bull is not blind. He is a bull rider, and I have a date with him on Friday. It is a blind date. Got it?"

Darren looked at her for a second. "Got it." He started to walk away, and then turned back, puzzled. "You have a date with a bull?"

Sometimes it feels like no one is actually listening to what we are saying. Like Chris Tucker's character in *Rush Hour*, we want to yell at the person talking to us, "ARE . . . YOU . . . LISTENING TO THE WORDS . . . THAT ARE COMING OUT OF MY MOUTH!?" Most people like to talk. [But, as we'll see later, that doesn't mean they can express themselves.] But those same people are horrible at actually listening to the other half of the conversation. They are thinking of what to say next, coming up with arguments, checking out other people in the room. They may even be hearing, but they are not listening. Being able to listen is a skill that we need to develop if we want to have good communication with others – and with God (1 Samuel 3). We are going to look at three specific areas that we can work on to help increase our listening skills.

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ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE

Think about how you usually listen during a conversation. Do really pay attention to what the other person is saying? Are you preparing your response or coming up with a defense to their accusations? Are you keeping one eye on the television or computer, watching to see when their lips stop moving so you know when to talk? Is your mind drifting? Guys, are you secretly trying to check out the girl who is talking, with your eyes dropping down to her breasts? All of these are things that people do instead of actually listening. How many are you guilty of?

When it comes to listening, many people find it very difficult to give their full attention to the speaker. They get jittery or bored. They want to share their lives, and do not really care all that much about what is being said. As a result, they miss out the message. They may miss a word here or there, but overall does that really matter? It does matter. It matters because it shows disrespect for a person. It says that you are too busy to care, and they are not important enough to get you to stop what you are doing. You are very clearly telling them that their business is not anywhere near a priority to you.

Now, this is a real big problem when that same attitude is extended to your spouse, your family, your close friends. These are the people that you should see as a priority. But these same poor listening skills are applied to them too. They begin to wonder if you really care about their concerns – which makes them more hesitant to share with you. It insults them, and makes them feel unimportant. If you don't believe it – just think back to a time when it happened to you. Maybe you were a kid and came in to tell your father about something great that happened, but he wouldn't take his eyes off the tv screen. Maybe it was someone you were dating, and you were trying to communicate insecurity to him – but he kept looking everywhere else but at you and immediately switched subjects. Maybe you had a minister who just gave you a typical, emotionless church answer to a really big dilemma you were facing.

Poor listening has hurt us all. We may have missed out on an important message because we weren't

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us to pray for wisdom – but why bother if we never take the time listen to the wisdom being dispensed? This means that prayer needs to be more than just a few lines before meals, or tossed up in the car on the way to work. It needs to be an ongoing dialogue that allows for both expression and response.

EXPRESSING: It would be easy to assume that people have the expression element of prayer in order. We all know how to send requests up to God. But is that all there is to expression? Looking back through this section, we find one area that many of us are very weak in when it comes to praying – being honest. Sure, we have no problems being honest about our needs. “God I really need you to help me pay my bills.” That is not all there is to it. Most of the time, our experiences and circumstances are not just so we have something interesting to do during the day. It is to teach us things – to mold us into the people God wants us to be. So, a lack of financial security may be part of God’s plan to help us become dependent on Him instead of ourselves. Health problems may be make us slow down and take time with God. Problems at work may be to give us insight into what really resides deep within us. And many times we get so frustrated with the issues that we just want them to go away – not thinking about what God is doing. So we get angry or hurt or confused. But we have been taught to always pray for “God’s will” to be done. So instead our prayers sound like this, “God, please help us to have enough to cover the bills this month. Supernaturally provide . . . if it is your will.” But what we are really feeling inside is, “God, are you there? Why are you making me do this? Why won’t you provide? Why can’t I ever catch a break? I want to ask you do something amazing, but I don’t believe you will. I’m sick of being here.”

While genuine desire for God’s will to be done – and for us to be okay with it – is a noble thing, why is it that we feel we can’t be honest with God? Doesn’t He know what we are thinking anyways? In his fabulous book *The Bible Jesus Read*, Phillip Yancey takes a chapter to look at the Psalms. He points out that the 150 psalms can actually be divided into three different and nearly-equal groups: praise, prayer, and lament. One-third of the longest book in the Bible is David and others railing at God. Have you ever read those entries? Some

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miscommunication, they still are hurting. Don't minimize or marginalize their feelings. You can't tell them their feelings are invalid. They are real, and you need to address that. The last way to be sensitive is when it comes to apologies. In their brilliant book *The Five Languages of Apology*, Dr. Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas talk about how there are five different kinds of apology. Each person "speaks" one or two of those apology languages. That is what they need to hear for them to believe that an apology is genuine. Are you being sensitive to make sure that your true feelings and remorse are being understood? It is not always the other person's responsibility to make sure that they hear you correctly. If we are truly trying to be loving and effective in our communication maintenance, we will be willing to go the extra step (or two or three) to fix things.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What are some ways that you can improve your "communication maintenance" practices?
2. When someone apologizes to you, what do you want them to do? What do you need to hear to know they are genuine? (Chances are this is how you apologize – even if the other person needs something different.)

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

THROUGH PRAYER

When trying to apply all of these instructions on communication, also take time to look at your prayer life. How we communicate with people will dictate how we communicate with God. It is easy to apply these same guidelines for our interactions with others to our interaction with God.

LISTENING: So often when we pray, it is like we are reading a shopping list to God. But part of prayer is supposed to be allowing God to speak back – through His Word, His Spirit, other godly people. While the skills of reading body language and such are not going to help when praying, but the willingness to be quiet and attentive certainly do help. The book of James tells

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paying attention. We may have had someone blow off something important to us because they were "somewhere else." But all of this can be fixed by applying some simple listening skills.

ONE THING AT A TIME: Even the best multi-tasker cannot pay complete attention to a person while doing other stuff. You may be able to carry on 80% of a conversation while typing and reading. But you are probably going to miss out on some of the emotional aspect by only listening to words. To show a person that you truly respect them, give them your undivided attention. Close the book, turn away from the computer, mute the television or stereo. When a person begins a conversation, you have no idea what they want. This could be the most important discussion they have ever had. They may have been unbelievably nervous and scared about this. Show them the decency to be attentive. If you cannot do that, then have the courtesy to say that – and then schedule a better time where you can be uninterrupted and undistracted. "I know how important this is to you. Right now, I cannot give you the attention that you deserve. Would you mind if we met in a little while, once I have met this deadline, so I can be there completely for you?" There are few people who would not be appreciative of that. If it truly is something that cannot wait (a death in the family, a life-altering event), you will know that you need to hear them right away.

EYE CONTACT: One of the worst skills for many younger people is eye contact. For some, this is tied into self-esteem, where they feel ashamed to be "staring." For others, it may be that they have a very short attention span due to the media and entertainment industry. For others, it could be that they are struggling with lust and cannot see others in a respective way. Whatever the reason, having poor eye contact skills sends the message that you are not completely invested in the conversation. The person talking gets the impression that they are not that important – you are busy looking at the wall hangings, the computer, the people in the hall. This is a very big problem for guys, who easily will get distracted by a girl who is talking to them. Sometimes their roaming eyes are to cover up or help avoid checking out the

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young lady's body. Again, this is a matter of respect. Keeping good eye contact is a way to tell the person talking that you are completely focused on them – not on anything else. For that conversation, they are the most important person around. By keeping them as the focus of your eyes, they are going to be foremost in your mind – which will help you to pay attention. This is a difficult skill to learn, and one that takes time to master. When you catch your eyes wandering, dropping, or drifting, force yourself to look up at their face.

WAIT YOUR TURN: During many conversations, we are probably thinking through what we are going to say next. How will I answer this question? Do I have something similar to their story that I can share? How am I going to defend myself? The problem with that is while your brain is coming up with the next line of dialogue, you have checked out of the discussion. It could have taken an unexpected turn, and you are completely unaware of it. The person's story about their grandmother's farm may have gotten you thinking about your experiences on a farm, which you want to share. The problem is, that story soon turned into the fact that their grandmother had died yesterday. Instead of running ahead of the conversation, you need to make sure you are keeping pace, and following its twists and turns. According to Philippians 2:3, we are supposed to consider others as more important than ourselves. This is a time to apply that. While the other person is talking, they are the most important thing. Wait until they are done to make sure your response is appropriate and helpful – and that it is not stealing their thunder or turning things to you when they are supposed to be about them.

HEAR THE MEANING

In the English language, there are two different meanings to words. There is the denotation, which is the definition of a word according to a dictionary. Then there is the connotation, which is the understood meaning based on context, community, culture, etc. For example, in the dictionary the word "sucks" means "draws in a specified direction by creating a vacuum." This could be applied to using a straw, or sucking a thumb, or pulling someone into a situation. That is

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things to sit there for days before dealing with it allows for anger, resentment, and disappointment to set up shop and begin poisoning. While it may be helpful for a cooling off period after a conflict or confrontation, that should be kept to a minimum. Addressing the issue while it is still fresh keeps things accurate, and it also keeps from "dragging up past issues."

The flip side of timeliness is making sure that the time for the confrontation is the "right time." In the middle of a meeting may not be the best time – or immediately after a very stressful exam – or right before bed. Be aware of the timing, as much as of the time since the argument. It may be that, by finding a better time when you and the other party can be alone and away from distractions, the discussion can actually be given a better chance for success. If you seize upon the wrong time to discuss something, you may end up doing even more damage than already had been done. In addition to whatever issue that needed discussing, there could be added embarrassment or awkwardness. Keep in mind Ecclesiastes 3 where we are reminded that there is a time and season for everything. That can apply to conversations also.

BE SENSITIVE

If you are truly doing all of this in a loving manner, then you will want to be sensitive. This does not mean that you are personally sensitive; rather you are concerned for the feelings and emotions of the other person. There are several ways to do this. First of all, fight fair. Do not take cheap shots or target areas that you are vulnerabilities for the other person. Try not to drag past problems into the discussion unless they are relevant and beneficial. The second way to be sensitive is to be controlled in your language and approach. Do not use insults or harsh or crude language. These are inflammatory in nature, and will push the discussion into a fight. Keep your focus on love, and know that means you will be careful about what you say.

Third, be aware of how your words are being received. Even if you do not intend to hurt them, it is possible that your words are being misunderstood. If you hurt the other person's feelings, even if it was through

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issue that you are painting it to be. Just glossing over an issue does not allow for a dialogue on it – or for an opportunity to work through it. If you keep on patching a tire or a pipe, it will hold for a while. But at some point the structural integrity will be compromised, and there will be an explosion with permanent consequences.

This is not a time for “brutal honesty,” though. If you are truly letting love guide your conversation, you will not desire to hurt people. It is possible to be loving and honest. It is walking a line between criticizing and critiquing; bullying and guiding; demeaning and encouraging. Much of this comes down to motive and purpose. Are you trying to repair and restore? Or are you trying to get vindication? When you get hurt, you need to express that – “I was hurt by what you said. It made me feel stupid.” That allows for the other person to see that they messed up, and try to do better. If you made a mistake, fee up to it – “I dropped the ball. I got careless. I have done my best to fix the mistake. I am sorry, and I am making sure that never happens again.” That shows your superior that you are trustworthy, that you know when you mess up, and that you will make it right. This can be scary, because once again you are being vulnerable and putting yourself out there for possible rejection. However, remember this if you are tempted to lie instead of be honest. Satan is the Father of Lies, and he will try to get you to lie whenever he can. Lying does not fix anything – it only causes more problems in keeping the lies covered up. Being honest will allow for growth, trust, and repair.

BE TIMELY

“Don’t let the sun go down on your anger.” This phrase from Ephesians 4:26 is very well known – and very much ignored in communication maintenance. The principle of being timely in repairing a relationship is vital. The more time that passes allows for the problem to fester. If you were to get shot, the doctors would not leave the bullet in the body for a few days and hope that “everything will work itself out.” They rush to remove the intruder, to make the body right again. The goal is to get things done before infection sets in. The same is true when something damages a relationship. Allowing

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the denotation of the word. However, most young people used “sucks” in a completely different way. “This lesson sucks.” The dictionary tries to define this as “(informal) to be very bad, disgusting, disagreeable.” This is the connotation of the word. In today’s younger generations, “this sucks” means the same as “this stinks.” However, among Baby Boomers, the connotation of “sucks” was actually pretty obscene.

That is just a small example of how words can change their meaning over time – and a way to illustrate that we need to make sure that we are paying attention to the meaning behind the words and not just the words themselves. This problem does not only surface in denotation/connotation situations. There are many times people will say certain words, but have hidden meanings behind them. Picture the girlfriend who will say, “I want you to go play and have fun” to her boyfriend when he wants to play basketball – when she really means “I want you to not WANT to go.” Or there is the husband who will reply “that’s fine” to his wife’s request to go with her to the mall – when he really wants to say, “That’s fine if you go. I want to stay and watch football.” We need to be aware of the fact that people will often hide meanings, and not be completely forthright in their answers. So we must be able to try to go past the initial comments to make sure that there is not something more to be mined. Much of those additional meanings we gain through observing nonverbal cues.

OBSERVE NONVERBAL CUES

Nonverbal cues are the ways people communicate in addition to their words. This can include vocal tones, body language, facial movements, eye contact, posture, and attitude. A study done at UCLA indicated that up to 93 percent of communication effectiveness is generated by nonverbal cues. Another study indicated that the impact of a performance was determined 7 percent by the words used, 38 percent by voice quality, and 55 percent by the nonverbal communication. The social anthropologist Edward T. Hall claims that 60 percent of all communication is from some other source than speaking. There is so much more going on than just what is coming out of our mouths.

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If a person becomes sullen, withdrawn, and disinterested during a conversation, it is pretty obvious that they were not happy with something that came up – and probably got offended by something along the way. If a person slide forward on their seat, leans toward the other speaker, furrows their brow, and begins talking in a higher register with more hand gestures, it is a good guess that they have become agitated and upset about something in the conversation. We learn early on to pick up on these cues. As a child, you can usually tell when your parents are upset – just by their volume, tone, and how many of your names they use.

STUDENT ACTIVITY

Ask the group to come up with ways to tell someone they need a haircut without saying the word "haircut."

Have individual students act how the following emotions would look – without words:

- *Happy*
- *Angry*
- *Insulted*
- *Sad*
- *Bored*
- *Have to go to the bathroom*
- *Insecure about the world tensions and domestic political outlook*

You can see through that simple activity we have lots of ways to get the message across. And when we are listening to someone, we need to use our eyes as well as our ears. We also need to use our minds, as we are weighing what is being said in light of what is being communicated through the nonverbal cues. One reason that so many younger people do not know how to communicate well is their poor ability to interpret these cues. Part of that is due to the influence of the computer. With chat rooms, instant messaging, and emails, it is hard to really tell what a person is

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drive the desire to make things right. It also will guide the words being spoken. Even though uncomfortable words may have to be said, they will be done in a loving manner – always delivered for the benefit of the listener and the relationship. This is critical when performing communication maintenance. If this is done without love, it is going to go poorly – and more than likely add to the problems already present. On the other hand, love is the one thing that can actually help deal with these uncomfortable issues. 1 Peter 4:8 reminds us, "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins." Love is what allows us to forgive and be humble and work through these problems. It is what helps us to put our wounds to the side and work to reach out to the other party – even if they are the ones who hurt us. That is what Christ did. As our model, Jesus showed how to love the very same people who rejected Him, spit on Him, and crucified Him. And His death on the cross was actually His way to reach out and repair the relationship. Love is the most important element to possess when trying to make things right with people.

BE HONEST

Don't you love it when you ask someone a question and they say "Well I'll be honest with you" or "to be perfectly honest with you?" It always makes me wonder what they were doing earlier in the conversation. For supposedly being the best policy, honesty is not a popular choice in today's world. Most people deal in shades of honesty. They may say something that is mostly correct, but it has been edited for a better response. An employee tells a boss about a mistake that she made, but has excuses at the ready – and she eliminates certain parts that make her look bad. A husband swears that he is "fine" when his wife apologizes for her harsh words, but he is actually harboring a very strong silent grudge.

If your ultimate goal is to repair the relationship, and the paths of communication, you have to be honest. The temptation is to think that by "sugar coating" the issue or "playing it down" you are actually helping things. But there are so many problems with that. The other person may not see it as the small

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wound you, let you down. It could be co-workers, fellow students, parents, siblings, church staff. However, most of the time we don't want to deal with it. We don't want to "make them mad." There is a fear that we will be labeled as "petty" and "trivial" due to our concerns. (That's why Michael didn't talk about the problems with James.) Maybe there is someone who hurt you, but you don't want to look "like a baby" by confronting them. Or maybe you did a number on someone and don't want to deal with it because you don't want to look like a jerk. Not only is all of this unhealthy, but also it is unbiblical – and it destroys communication. So how does a good communication maintainer look? They all have some of the same qualities.

BE LOVING

The overarching quality of a good communicator – especially when it comes to maintenance – is love. They truly love the person they are talking to. We have such a poor concept of love in today's world. It has been discolored with lust and selfishness. In Bible times, there were three different words for love (thanks to the Greek language). There was *eros*, which represented sexual love. Then there was *phili*, which reflected a love similar to deep friendship. The last word was *agapos* (also called agape). This was the love that God demonstrated, what we see referred to in 1 John. It is an unconditional and unselfish love – one without restrictions or stipulations. This love is what we are supposed to have for all people.

When an agape love is present in a person, they put others in front of themselves. They do not merely focus on themselves and what they can get out of a relationship. But this love is difficult to practice. So, most people have created a hybrid form of love, where selfishness and pettiness still have full access. This manifests itself constantly in relationships – part of the reason that conflict and confrontation and apology are so necessary. So, when a person does not practice a loving lifestyle, they usually are not going to love in their communication either.

Love in communication acts like a framework of guidelines for the entire interaction. Love is what will

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thinking. You can use all the clever abbreviations (LOL, ROTFL) and emoticons :) you want. But they don't really communicate everything. In an IM, your friend may say that he is fine with something, while really hurting inside – and there is no way for you to know. A person who mostly relies on emails and the sort to communicate with people begins to lose the ability to pick up on the other cues. This is why people who spend large amounts of time on the computer actually develop horrible social skills. They can be overly blunt (which you have to be online or the other person won't pick up on the subtlety) or they can be extremely dense (believing everything said carries no other meaning) or they can be very poor at expressing their own feelings (since most virtual relationships are not deep enough to include feelings).

EXPRESSING

READ IT

Proverbs 12:22, Ephesians 4:25

The other big part of communication is expression. While it is the responsibility of the listener to be active and engaged – trying their best to understand the message being communicated, it is also the responsibility of the speaker to be honest and forthright. While nonverbal cues are good ways to amplify your meaning, relying on them to really tell the full story is unfair to your listener. As the person expressing a thought, you should be willing to say what you really mean. That is the only way to guarantee that the listener will "get" what you are saying.

This is not to say that we need to be roaming around and insulting people or being cruel because that is how "we really feel." There are guidelines. We need to be loving and sensitive. There are kind ways to deliver our message – and those are going to be far more effective nearly every time than being harsh. Too many people rely on saying something that is palatable to the listening ear, but then tacking on other cues – like facial expressions, changing tones – to really get the person to understand. A boss may have to tell her

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employee that his report was not up to expectations. But naturally she does not want to cause a big problem, so she decides to say, "I guess your report was ... okay." But she lengthens the word "guess," takes a pause after "was," and lengthens the last syllable of "okay." She also says it with her eyes down at the report, shrugging her shoulders a little. Then she looks up with just a hint of disappointment on her face. The employee picks up on all of that and responds, "Was it not what you wanted?" The boss was able to get her point across without getting the employee angry or defensive. But she wasn't honest.

If you look at the ministry of Jesus, who is to be our example, you do not see hidden meanings in His words. You may see a story where there is an earthly and a heavenly interpretation. But He did not go around and tell the Pharisees, "I gueeeessss your are doing a deeeeeeent job. I guess." He told them they were wrong. He didn't go up to the woman at the well and say, "Ummm, soooo, how's it going? How is that guy - what's his name? Ephram? You guys getting married?" He told her that He knew she was living with a guy she wasn't married to. Jesus was honest. He knew that there would be conflict, but He didn't shy away from that. Conflict is a part of life. However, with most people, they don't want to be honest because they cannot stand conflict. They don't want to be transparent because they are afraid they will be rejected. (Jesus knew that was going to happen too.) People don't want to add stress to their lives.

The problem is that by trying so hard to avoid conflict, stress, and rejection, we have to rely on verbal trickery. Think about it, though. Do you honestly think that by using those cues and techniques, you can avoid conflict, stress, and rejection? Of course, the answer is no. It does not matter how much people like you, you are still going to have to deal with conflict, stress, and rejection. And by trying to avoid them, you actually are going to cause more frustration - and you are not going to learn how to deal with those three things. (We are going to talk about that issue in the section on "Maintenance" right after this one.)

The best thing you as a communicator can do when

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he wanted. But Michael soon began to notice that James had a lot of quirks that drove Michael crazy. He ate with his mouth open, smacking his food. He read the newspaper in the car on the way to church, blocking Michael's ability to see out the window as he drove. He would use earphones with the television when Michael was studying or sleeping, but would still have a dialogue with the show. He left his stuff on the floor, so Michael would trip over it - breaking those blasted headphones once and having to replace them. He always seemed to be tagging along with Michael - and grilling him about where he was going. But, rather than every say anything about any of that stuff, Michael just kept it inside. He just wanted to keep the peace. While growing up, Michael's parents fought - a lot. Fighting made him feel queasy inside. So he would keep his feeling inside, and just get angrier and angrier.

One day, Michael was tired (he battled insomnia his first semester at school) and irritated at James. It had been another night of food smacking and annoying conversations. Finally, Michael went to bed, and James put on his earphones. As usual, James would laugh at the shows, make comments to himself, and talk back to the tv. Michael just laid in bed and got mad, then steamed, and finally boiled over. After about an hour and a half, Michael sat up in bed and bellowed at James, "WOULD YOU JUST SHUT UP! GOOD LORD, SHUT UP! YOU ARE SO ANNOYING!" James was stunned, and quietly said, "I'm sorry." Michael laid there for another two hours before he had calmed down enough to go to sleep. The next day, James was gone before Michael got up. There was a note, apologizing again for being loud. Michael felt horrible about the situation, and that night they finally talked it out. But the hostility and irritation that had been building damaged their friendship. Michael bolted the next year for another roommate, and the two barely talked for over year - despite living next door to each other. They finally started to hang out again their junior year, but did not truly repair the damage until before their senior year.

We have all been in this situation at some point. It is not an extreme story that is rare to experience. Think about your own life and the people in it who drive you crazy, hurt your feelings, take advantage of you,

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THINK ABOUT IT

1. What are some ways you do not say what you mean?
2. Are you using sarcasm on a regular basis? How can you begin to stop relying on it?

MAINTENANCE

READ IT

Ephesians 4:3,26; Matthew 18:15

One of the most unpleasant and dreaded things people face is confrontation. When combined with conflict, stress, and rejection, these become like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. People will do anything to avoid these encounters – but as a result they damage their long-term availability to communicate. A natural part of owning a car is maintenance. When something goes wrong with you car, you take it to a mechanic to get the problem fixed. If you don't do this, you car will not work right. There is also preventative maintenance – things like oil changes, tire rotations, alignments. This is just as important as fixing major problems – because they will turn INTO major problems if not done. If you don't change your car's oil, there will be damage to the engine. At that point, the \$30 oil change becomes a problem that requires thousands of dollars of repairs.

It is the same way with people. Sometimes we want to overlook something small or irritating so that we don't cause a conflict. The problem is, the more we ignore the problem, the bigger it is going to get. Instead of having a small issue that could be resolved with a quick chat, you now have created a huge problem with massive ramifications. Michael roomed with James in college. It was the first time either of them had spent much time away from home, so they spent a lot of time together. Even though they had known each other and been friends since elementary school, those interactions did not prepare them for living together. For the most part, they had a good time. They watched movies and ate together. They went to church on Sundays. James had bought a new computer and let Michael use it whenever

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you are expressing yourself is to be respectful, loving, and sensitive – while being honest. Sure, there may be bumps in the road. But you are going to find that people appreciate speaking to you if you respect them enough to say, “I know that I am taking a chance here, but I don't want to force you to harvest my meaning.” Think about what qualities will make people gush. “He's just a genuine guy. What you see is what you get.” “She's so real and transparent. She doesn't hide behind some fake version of herself.” “He's not playing some game.” People appreciate others who are real and genuine and honest. We can't stand pastors or politicians or celebrities or athletes who say one thing and do another, who make non-committal speeches where no one could possibly get upset, or who hide behind some public persona while being something opposite off camera. But we do the very same thing – just on a smaller scale. One the biggest ways that people express themselves poorly is through the use of sarcasm.

SARCASM

READ IT

Matthew 5:37, Colossians 4:6, Ephesians 4:29, James 5:12, Matthew 12:35-37

Sarcasm is defined as “the use of irony to mock or convey.” Its origin comes from Greek words that mean, “to tear flesh, gnash the teeth, speak bitterly.” In its original format, it was seen as a mean way of speaking – making the listener feel stupid or confused. Today, though, it has become the language of most people – especially those under the age of 40. Some of this has developed as sarcasm moved from the realm of bitter and angry people into the mainstream through entertainment that utilized sarcasm as comedy.

Shows like *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *The Simpsons* broke away from the traditional situation comedy format by forsaking the traditional joke and punchline style. Instead, much of the humor was found in the way that the characters interacted – and their increasingly bizarre outlooks on the world. Matthew Perry's

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portrayal of Chandler in *Friends* was hugely popular due to his consistent ability to zing his friends and foes alike – poking fun at their imperfections, insecurities, and miscues. The entire cast of *Seinfeld* made it a daily ritual to comment on the society around them in a sarcastic manner – implying that they were the only four people in the universe that actually saw things as they should be. But they also turned on each other frequently. If you compare these comedies with shows like *The Cosby Show*, you can see how the comedy is completely different in attitude.

But sarcasm’s rise in popularity cannot be blamed solely on television. It also is linked in with people’s inability to communicate and be open with each other. Speaking in a sarcastic manner is like having a piece of armor between you and the listener. You are able to send mixed messages through tones, looks, and words – where the message and the meaning rarely match. Sarcasm allows a person to hide their true feelings, to be cruel without repercussions, and to exert power over another person.

HIDE TRUE FEELINGS

A man surprises his wife by buying her flowers and setting them up in a vase on the table while she is out. When she returns, she sees the beautiful bouquet and gets excited. “Honey,” she calls. “Did you buy me flowers?”

“If it wasn’t me, then we are going to have a pretty serious talk.”

“Why did you get them?” She gets a teasing look on her face. “Did you get them because you loooove me?”

“No,” the husband replies with a snotty look. “I got them because I hate you.”

“Well, whatever the reason, thank you. That was sweet.” She gives him a kiss on the cheek.

The husband looks back at his magazine and replies, “I figured I need to do that. I need to get you flowers ever so often so you don’t leave me.”

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– they like knowing they can jerk people around. It may not be a sadistic, conscious enjoyment. But there is a satisfaction in knowing that they in power so much that they can keep people on their toes. Plus, they can always use the whole “you misunderstood me” defense if one of their efforts backfire. They can be vicious without getting beat up, they can be sweet without being seen as weak, they can express insecurity without looking stupid. They are in control – which is really what this time of person is desperately seeking. Achieving control is also why sarcasm was so readily adopted by the last few generations.

Everything around these people was out of control. They looked around and saw the environment, the political system, the economy, the education system all out of control. Think about the number of controversies, scandals, and message of doom that people under 35 have heard. They have seen huge companies that were the foundation of the national economy collapse due to leadership stealing and lying. They see government agents lying to get policies approved. They see teachers and pastors and coaches using them to get ahead in the world – and then abandoning them as soon as a better offer comes along. By keeping the older generation off balance with their communication, the younger generation was able to exert some control. Earlier generations have done the same thing but with different techniques – through sex and drugs in the 60s and 70s, by being surly and rude in the 30s and 40s and 50s, through intellectual snobbery in the early parts of the century. This is the latest effort.

And through it all, God is not happy. He is not happy because it is in direct opposition to the His Word. Those passages you just read all tell us to have respect and to submit. Sarcasm is a way to circumvent that respect and submission. You may speak the right words, but you do it in a way that you still know you are fighting. God is also not happy because the intimacy that communication is supposed to strengthen continues to be damaged. By sending mixed messages, we keep walls up between each other – giving people more things to do before they can actually see our true selves. We are intentionally going back to the aftermath of Babel instead of the clarity of Christ.

NOTES:

A student is talking to his friends about his goals in life and how he feels empty with his current choices, He starts to feel that they are going to make fun of him for being sappy, so he quotes a Switchfoot song in a goofy voice. "We were meant to live for so much more. Have we lost ourselves?" Everyone laughs, even though that is EXACTLY what he thinks.

We all have done this – tried to play off something we said when we were afraid that the people around us would disagree or get upset. The sarcastic person takes advantage of their history of double meaning to get the satisfaction of saying what they mean, while keeping everyone else in the dark.

POWER TRIP

READ IT

Exodus 20:12; Matthew 19:19; Ephesians 6:1,2; Colossians 3:20; 1 Peter 2:13-17

All of this really boils down to a person trying to place himself in a place of power over someone else. Think about it. If you are constantly saying things that require the people around you to have to figure out what you are really saying, you are in control. They have to do all the work. They are the ones at risk. They are the ones who may not be able to figure it all out – which takes the burden of expression off of you. If they misunderstand you, it is not your fault. They should have known better. After all, they know you and know what you really feel.

Or do they? A sarcastic person keeps everyone around them off balance – never really sure where they stand. On one hand, the message that our first sarcastic guy is delivering could be exactly what his wife thinks: he loves her, he values her. But, there is always that nagging doubt that maybe he was being honest that time and that he really was only buying flowers to keep her from leaving. The co-workers of the lady in the second example assume she didn't mean the vicious comments she said. But, after she leaves, they wonder if she really did mean them.

A person who majors in sarcasm likes this feeling

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A genuinely sweet act is destroyed because the husband cannot actually express what he means. The flowers were an expression of the fact that he cares about his wife. But, his sarcastic responses are hiding the true, sensitive statements he really wants to say. Maybe he is embarrassed, maybe he is nervous, maybe he's just a jerk. Whatever the reason, this man is hiding his true positive feelings behind a mask of cruelty. The problem is that when the negative words are thrown enough, the recipient begins to wonder if they are true. (This is especially true when compounded with the second reason for sarcasm.)

What the man in the example actually was saying was that he did get the flowers (but felt too macho to say he had bought flowers), that he did love his wife (but felt to embarrassed to say it), and that he either is truly afraid that she will leave him or that he appreciated the attention (but his pride won't let him admit he needs her).

Sarcastic people never have to truly open up. They don't have to be vulnerable with someone else because they can hide behind words. If you look at this guy again, he didn't have to say anything close to what he felt. Basically, he put the weight of those expressions on the other person. When you say that you love someone, you really put yourself out there. Even if you are already married, there is the risk you are going to say something very personal and not get the response you want. But you don't have to take the risk if you make the other person "figure it all out" for themselves. This is also true when having to express negative feelings. If you have been hurt, you can make your feelings very clear – even if you say the right words. Read these statements and think about how they would sound if the person saying them did not really mean those words.

"Oh, great. Meatloaf. My favorite."

"Hey, don't worry about telling me I did a good job. I'm fine."

"Look everyone, Mr. Happy is here. Break out the balloons and fun packs."

"Good idea you had – turning that back room into

NOTES:

a *Star Wars* shrine – since you have not put that box of action figures away.”

It is easy to hide our feelings behind words that do not match our meaning. In addition to keeping ourselves from having to be vulnerable, we also make the other person feel smaller. It is like we just can't believe they even have to ask the question, or make the comment, or feel the feeling. They should already know – why ask? Our sarcastic response keeps us from having to say it – and it makes them feel dumb because they want us to. (We will again address this in the third part.)

One last thing on this point: think about a small child you know. They are very literal minded. If you try to be sarcastic to a small kid, they don't know that you are being silly or snotty or mean. They just heard the words – and they assume they are true. When you deal with children, you have to be honest and say what your really mean. Why should it be any different when talking to everyone else? Doesn't that play into the verses we just read?

CRUEL WITHOUT REPERCUSSIONS

A woman walks into a store where she used to work. She had left about six months earlier, not necessarily with the best attitude toward the people there. Her visits at first had been frequent: she had to get her checks, she still shopped there from time to time. But she recently has stopped going by as much. One day she decides to stop by and several of her co-workers see her. Excitedly, one of them says, “Hey! Long time no see! You haven't been around much lately.”

The lady smiles and replies, “Well that because I hate all of you and can't stand coming by.” Everyone laughs, assuming a joke is being made.

Another salesperson perks up, “You know, we still could use you around here. Things aren't the same since you left.”

“Well, that's because I was the only person who did anything.” Another round of laughter ensues.

This lady speaks fluent sarcasm. In fact, she is so good

NOTES:

at it that she can totally manipulate everyone with her words at all times. After working at this place for a few years, all of her co-workers had learned her style of speech. They know that she says things she doesn't mean all the time. So when she says the above comments, they just write them off as more of the same – just poking fun without any true meaning. However, to the lady, they were completely true. She did hate those people, she was avoiding them, and she really did think she was the best worker. She wasn't kidding, but they didn't know that. They figured she was just joking around. By flipping her words, she had been able to say EXACTLY what she felt, without having to deal with the ugly response those comments ordinarily would have generated.

We already mentioned that the sarcastic person does not want to be vulnerable by being honest. Here, they are being honest, but they still are wanting to avoid the vulnerability. Usually, if you wanted to tell someone you couldn't stand them or that you thought they were a lazy worker, you would be very vulnerable to a fight, a returned insult, a counter-attack. However, by putting on a fake smile and laughing, you avoid the fight and get the satisfaction of saying exactly what you feel. It is still hiding behind sarcasm, putting up walls, keeping your armor of double meaning. This time, though, the double meaning is found in the way the words are said. The message and method do not match, so the person assumes that you are “just playing.”

Again, the flip side of this is also true, when you want to say something positive about a person, but just cannot bring yourself to be that honest. Here are some examples:

A young man wants to tell a girl that he has extremely deep feelings for her, but knows she probably doesn't feel the same. So, when she asks why he is so sweet, he just jokes, “It's because I'm madly in love with you.”

A teen girl excels in school, and tells her father about how well she did on the test she took. She wants him to be thrilled and to tell her how good she did. So she ends the story by seriously saying, “I just did it all to make you proud, dad.” Then she starts laughing to cut the tension.