The key to making any relationship work is knowing how to communicate well when tensions are high. In this practical study we will discover principles from ancient scripture and modern research that will help us communicate well when things get tense.

Some of you are dating or engaged... What if I told you I could spend 2 hrs with you... ...then tell you whether or not your relationship will work out - strong marriage or divorce?

That’s what a group of 4 researchers discovered how to do in “A Lasting Promise”
- followed 135 couples for 12 years - met every 2 yrs with each – collected tons of data
- found there was ONE PRIMARY KEY to determining whether a marriage would last
- with that key in mind they could meet with engaged couple for 2 hours...
- ...then predict with 80-90% accuracy whether they’d be together in 12 years

Would you like to know what that one key is that determines if your marriage will make it?

How to COMMUNICATE when tensions are high
- They identified patterns of good & bad communication that show up in tense conversations
- All they have to do: get a couple talking about something stressful and they can tell whether that couple is likely to make it or not

That’s the power of communication.
- Relationships live or die largely based on how you communicate when it’s tense
- True for any relationship: spouse, parent, child, friend, roommate, coworker
- Want healthy relationships? You must learn to communicate well when things get tough
  - when your spouse gets angry about something you said
  - when your child tells you they hate you and wish you weren’t their parent
  - when your roommate refuses to do the dishes for the 100th time
  - your coworker accuses you of doing something wrong you didn’t do

This morning, I’ll show you from scripture to modern research how to communicate well when tensions are high

Let’s begin with a roadmap: Here’s where I’m headed this morning...
- 2 things you must get right ahead of time
- 4 bad habits you must avoid if you want to communicate well
- 3 steps you must take to have good communication

2 Things to Get Right Before the Conversation Begins...
- Many don’t realize: good communication begins long before the conversation
- You must get these 2 things right before you enter a difficult conversation

1) You Must Learn to Respect the Power of Words
- “Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me” WRONG!!!
- Prov 18:21 - Words are powerful. They can give life; and they can take life.
- You’ve been alive long enough to see how destructive words can be
  o grown men haunted by insecurity because of what their dads said 40 yrs ago
  o women struggle when they look in mirror because of something hurtful said in Jr High
  o marriages devastated by some stupid thing said in the heat of an argument

- Communicating is probably the most dangerous thing you do on any given day!
  o So much potential for harm

- But on the flip side, there is also huge potential to do good
- Prov 12:18 - words used wisely are like medicine
  o can rescue someone from despair... deliver from deception

- We’ll never communicate well till we learn to respect the power of our words
  o When you sit down to have a conversation... BUCKLE UP! This is serious!
  o Your words can bring great blessing or cause great harm

2) Fill your Cup at the Cross
- We all have deep emotional needs (even us men!)
  o need to feel secure, loved, valued

- The Bible is clear: only God can meet those needs
  o Blaise Pascal, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, and it can never be
    filled by any created thing. It can only be filled by God...”

- When 2 people fail to communicate it’s often because one or both are trying to fill that God-shaped
  vacuum with this human relationship
  o The relationship is doomed to frustration & conflict because they are trying to get something
    from the other person he/she can NEVER provide!
  o like two leeches stuck together trying to suck the blood out of the other
  o That doesn’t work - leeches feed off blood - have none to give
  o Don’t be a leech! That will torpedo your relationships

- Good communication requires us to fill our cups at the cross
  o Only God can meet our deepest needs
  o And the good news is, He will if you will simply turn to Him in faith
  o John 3:16 – believe in Jesus and you will have eternal life
  o And if you’ve trusted in Jesus then this is what’s true of you: 2 Peter 1:3
    ▪ Notice the verb tense... “has granted” – past, not future
    ▪ He has ALREADY provided for ALL of your deepest needs thru Jesus

- So, in my relationship with Julie, what do I need from her? NOTHING!
  o Many things I may want... but nothing I truly need!
  o God has already provided all I need
  o So when it’s time to communicate with her... I don’t come from a position of need
  o I am free to give! How can I bless her? care for her?

- Your relationships will be strong if you realize that your needs are already met by Jesus
- So before you have a tense conversation, remember:
  o What do you need from your roommate / spouse / boss / parent? NOTHING

- Lots you want - lots they should provide - but nothing you NEED
- Go to the cross to get your needs met! That’s where good communication begins

Now... let’s move to the most practical thing I have learned from research on communication
4 Destructive Habits we must avoid if we want to communicate well when tensions run high

- The researchers discovered 4 specific bad habits that show up in tense conversations
  o any one of these, if left unchecked, will destroy a relationship!

- EVERY ONE OF US tends towards one or more of these habits
  o The question is: will you take responsibility to battle that bad habit?
If so, there’s hope for your relationships. If not, you’re in trouble.
- Identifying my bad habit from this list was one of the most helpful things I’ve done!
- As I walk you through these bad habits, look for the one that you lean towards...

1) Escalation
- when someone hurts you, you hurt ‘em back worse
  - Imagine a married couple - Ted and Amy
    o Amy notices that the trash hasn’t been taken out and says,
    o Amy: “Ted, you forgot to take out the trash, again”
    o Ted, feeling attacked, says: “Fine, fine, quitting nagging me”
    o Amy responds: “I wouldn’t nag if just weren’t so irresponsible”
    o Ted hits back: “Irresponsible? I’m out earning a living all day and you call me irresponsible.
      You’re so ungrateful. I can’t stand being around you?!”
    o Amy hits the parting shot: “Why don’t you just leave then? No one’s stopping you!”
  - Extreme example of escalation… but you get the idea.
  - When you’re in a tense conversation and you feel hurt - your hurt back - you fight

2) Invalidation
- when things get tense you diminish or dismiss how the other person feels
  - Example 1:
    o Your wife comes to you and says, “You hurt my feelings when you told that joke at the party last night.”
    o You respond, “Come on. Get a sense of humor! We were just having fun. You’re making too big a deal of this”
    o That’s invalidation. You invalidated your wife’s feelings.
  - Example 2:
    o A friend comes to really shaken up by a bad performance review he got at work.
    o And you respond, “It wasn’t that bad. Hey, I’d be happy to get an evaluation as good as that at my job. Just give it to the Lord and quit worrying about it.”
    o That’s invalidation. You diminished and dismissed your friend’s pain.
  - Men: we do this when our wives bring us a problem and we rush to try to fix it
    o What they need: to know we care, empathize
    o If you rush to fix it, you risk invalidating how they feel & hurting them

3) Negative Interpretations
- this is the habit of assuming the worst in a relationship or conversation
  - A person says or does something that could be interpreted in multiple ways
  - and you default to the negative interpretation
  - When I was in high school... I was NOT confident at all around girls
    o Senior year - finally got the courage to ask a girl out - she said ‘Yes’!!!
    o A few days before our date - “I forgot, that’s my grandmother’s birthday…”
    o What did my low self-confidence lead me to assume? An excuse to cancel!
      - Shut down that conversation - never asked her out again
    o 15 years later - my cousin tells me she was being truthful - wanted to go out!
    o My negative interpretation ruined that relationship before it began!
  - Here’s another example for those of us who are married...
    o Ted and Amy again. Ted has always seemed a little distant from Amy’s parents, leading Amy to wonder, “Does Ted really like my parents?”
    o It’s fall and Amy says: “We should start looking into plane tickets to go visit my parents this holiday.”
Ted hears that and immediately thinks about their struggling budget. So he says, “I was wondering if we can really afford it this year.”

Amy gets angry and responds: “My parents are very important to me, Ted, even if you don’t like them. I’m going to go with or without you.”

What happened?

- Ted said something that could be interpreted in two ways: either he was really worried about the budget, or he was making an excuse.
- What did Amy choose to believe: the negative interpretation.

Rather than believe the best about the person’s meaning... you assume the worst

4) Withdrawal & Avoidance

- Easy to explain: when a relationship gets tense, you shut down or run away
- Either through Avoidance
  - A coworker tells you, “I need a half hour to talk to you about something you did that really frustrated me.” And you look at your relatively open calendar and say, “Oh man, I’m all booked up. Maybe next month.”
  - Avoidance = making excuses to get out of having a difficult conversation.
- Or Withdrawal
  - The conversation starts and you try to find a way to bail.
  - Extreme example:
    - Your spouse is upset at you.
    - Rather than deal with it, you get up and leave the room
  - More common example:
    - Your spouse is upset with you for what you said
    - So you say, “Sorry, sorry, you’re right. I shouldn’t have said that. I’ll never do it again. Oh, look - our show’s about to start.”
    - No real communication has happened – you just hit eject button
    - You say whatever’s required to shut down the tense conversation
  - That’s withdrawal. It’s very common, especially among men - sadly enough!

So, which of these 4 habits do you tend to fall into?

- All of us tend towards at least one. No one in this room is immune to this list!

Identify which bad habits you lean towards so that you can watch out & resist

- Identify your bad habit - pray about it - watch out for it
- When you see it coming - fight the urge to fall into this pattern again!!
- Don’t let these bad habits destroy your relationships!

3 necessary steps to good communication when emotions run high

If you’ll do these 3 things, your conversations and relationships will improve

1. SLOW DOWN AND LISTEN

- read James 1:19
- When a conversation gets tense and emotions run high - SLOW DOWN
  - Don’t rush to give an answer; don’t rush to get angry
  - Stop and listen carefully to the other person
- Step back and observe what’s happening
  - Do you feel angry, anxious, attacked? Ask yourself, WHY?
  - Maybe you can’t help feeling that... but you can give yourself time to think it thru
    - Why am I getting angry?
    - Why is the other person getting angry?
    - What unmet needs or expectations are driving these emotions?
  - Slow down and give yourself time to listen and process and you prevent a lot of damage!
2. SPEAK TRUTH
   - Read Prov 27:6
   - **Friendship and love require us to speak truth to one another even when it’s hard**
     - We’re actually being cruel when we refuse to have hard conversations
   - God wants you to be COURAGEOUS and speak the Truth
   - So don’t avoid hard conversations, and don’t withdraw when they begin
   - Pray for courage to engage fully in the moment and speak truth… with GRACE

3. SPEAK GRACE
   - Read Col 4:6a
   - **We use that word “grace” all the time…**
   - **But what exactly does grace look like in a conversation? 5 practical ideas for you**
     - 1. **Reaffirm commitment**
       - Good communication ONLY happens in an environment of SAFETY
       - If a person fears the relationship is about to be lost fear & emotions escalate
       - So don’t wait for the other person to ask, Do you still love/like me?
       - Tell them – right off the bat – no matter what happens, I still love you.
     - 2. **Assume the best**
       - 1 Cor 13:7 “[love] believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”
       - Meaning: love chooses to believe the best & hope the best about the other person
       - Stop yourself from running to negative interpretations
       - Give the other person the benefit of the doubt
     - 3. **Remain persuadable**
       - Nothing as insufferable as someone who’s absolutely convinced he’s right
       - Even if you strongly believe you’re right - be open to the possibility you’re not
         - You are human after all! No human is perfect!
       - Be humble – remain persuadable
       - One of the things I admire about Brian
         - very strong, well-thought out opinions
         - but always willing to be convinced otherwise
         - humble enough to admit that he could be wrong / could be a better way
     - 4. **Surround rebuke with encouragement**
       - Sometimes you have to confront someone - don’t shy away from that
       - But surround painful truths with encouragement
       - “Encouragement sandwich”!!
     - 5. **Refuse to hit back**
       - Escalation only happens if both partners participate
       - Shut it down by responding with grace
         - Even if they deserve vengeance - give them a blessing instead
       - Prov 15:1a “A gentle answer turns away wrath…”
       - Say, “I love you and I’m sorry you feel that way about me.”

And now my final, and perhaps most important piece of advice for you…
To Communicate well… you have to work at it!
   - You learned to “talk” when you were 2. But you didn’t learn to “communicate”!!
   - Communication takes a lifetime of study and practice to do it well
   - **So when it comes to communication: ALWAYS BE LEARNING**
   - The two best books I know of to help you grow as a good communicator:
     - A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for your Marriage, by Stenley, Trathen, McCain, and Bryan
- Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High, by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler
  - If you haven’t read one - I strongly encourage you to get one and read it!
    - read and discuss with spouse, fiancé, friend
    - then put it into practice
  - If you will put the truths in these books to practice, I guarantee that you will become a better communicator with your spouse, family, friends