

7 Keys for Speaking the Truth in Love

If you are like me, you struggle when you need to have a difficult conversation. I tend to vacillate between two extremes. Either I am so afraid of rocking the boat or hurting someone's feelings that I don't ever say what really needs to be said, or I'm so upset about something that I drop all pretense and have that no-holds-barred talk with them. In the first case, I think I'm loving. In the second, I know it's going to hurt, but it's about time someone stepped up to the plate and told them what they needed to hear.

Here's the very sad part. Neither of these approaches has ever worked for me. I've tried them both on lots of occasions and in lots of settings. I've gone this route with my wife, my kids, my friends, my co-workers, my brothers and sisters, elders, people I'm studying with, people I've counseled, and on and on. But this approach has never healed any relationships or truly helped with any problems. Usually what happens is the relationship is good so I start with the first approach, the seemingly loving approach. But inside I simply feel resentful and have increasing bitterness because whatever is causing me the problem simply continues. That goes on until the bitter-o-meter in my heart has finally blown a gasket and I swing to approach two.

Sometimes the relationships have survived, though hurt. Other times not. But the Bible demonstrates there is a third alternative, a better one. **Ephesians 4:15** says we need to combine truth with love.

Paul was talking about speaking the truth of the gospel and doctrine of Jesus Christ with love. When we are talking to folks about Jesus and God's way, we need to speak the truth. But we don't need to speak the truth in judgment, condemnation, bitterness, resentment, arrogance, or condescension. We need to speak it with love. However, this principle also applies when we are having any conversation with others. Keep in mind that **Ephesians 4:13** says all of this is about us growing to the unity of the faith. Are you having a conversation with someone you hope to one day have unity in Christ with? Then speak the truth in love.

The fact is whether you are talking to a co-worker who is causing problems in the office because he doesn't wear deodorant, the store manager who sold you faulty merchandise, your spouse who you feel like has been taking you for granted, or a brother in Christ who you think may be cheating on his wife, you need to speak the truth in love.

How do we accomplish that? Here are seven quick keys to help you speak the truth in love.

1) Desire to be a servant, not a master. According to **Matthew 20:28**, Jesus came to serve, not be served. In conversations, we often forget this principle. We want the conversation to end our way and accomplish our goal. We aren't in the conversation to help someone. We are in it to fix them to be the way we want them to be. Approach the conversation as a servant, not a master. Even if you are talking to folks about sin in their lives, remember God is their master and you aren't. When it is all said and done, this will be about their relationship with Him, not with you. You are just a fellow servant trying to help.

2) Maintain humility. As **Titus 3:3-7** says, remember that you are where you are by the grace of God, not by your sheer awesomeness. You aren't God. Don't talk to others as if you are or as if you're His right-hand man. That's Jesus, not you.

3) Speak with gentleness. As **Galatians 6:1** says, even if we are dealing with someone caught in a sinful trespass, we need to speak with gentleness. That is, with the attitude of care and concern, not with arrogance and condescension. Don't conduct the conversation like a bull in a china closet. Rather, be like the powerful horse who has been brought under control, who knows where to step and when.

4) Affirm your love. We all know that Paul speaks some truth in **I Corinthians**. He lets them have it on several issues where they had been falling short. But have you noticed how he began the letter in **I Corinthians 1:4**? "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus..." (ESV). He affirmed his love and appreciation for them. Nothing in this letter changed his love for them. You need to let whoever you are talking with know that nothing in the conversation has changed the fact that you care about them and want what is best for them.

5) Be a partner, not an adversary. The person you are talking to is not the problem. The problem is the problem. As Paul explained in **II Thessalonians 3:15**, even if the conversation is with someone who has turned from the Lord and been disciplined by the congregation, we should warn him as a brother, not an enemy. So, when you are talking to them, speak from the standpoint of a partner trying to help someone overcome a problem, not as an enemy trying to overcome a problem person.

6) Provide specifics. This deals with speaking the truth. Don't speak in vague generalities, "I wish you would be more sensitive." More sensitive than what? What does it mean to be sensitive? Don't use globalizing phrases like "You always..." or "You never..." Provide specific illustrations of whatever problem you want to address. In **I Corinthians 5:1**, Paul didn't just make some sweeping comment about immorality. He dealt with a specific issue that needed to be handled.

7) Don't assume or accuse motives. **I Corinthians 2:11** explains that we simply cannot know the thoughts and motives of the other person. I have a tendency to assume that whatever I feel about a situation is what the other person feels as well. Since I feel taken for granted, the other person must intend to take me for granted. So I accuse them of such. That just gives them a foothold to argue. Don't assume you know their motives. Don't make accusations about their motives. Simply explain how the specific you mentioned above impacts you, what it makes you feel and think. Explain your concern for how you see it affecting your relationship and how it will impact their future. Then talk about it with them, getting their insight and even buy-in.

No matter who you are talking with or why, don't get caught up in the false dilemma of love or truth. Bring them together and speak the truth in love.

--Edwin L. Crozier