

Communicating Needs Without Provoking Conflict

Guests: Dave and Ann Wilson
From the series: Communicating Needs Without Provoking Conflict (Day 1 of 1)
Air date: December 5, 2019

Bob: Ann Wilson admits that there was a time in her marriage to her husband, Dave, when she had a critical spirit that manifested itself with a critical tongue. There came a time when God convicted her about her critical spirit, and she learned to slow down and to think carefully before she said anything.

Ann: Before, I would just let my thoughts and my words flow. This time, I would take my thoughts; and I would say, “God, should I say this?” That—stopping that and asking God that question, “Should I say this”—I can’t tell you how many times it has stopped me in my tracks; and I would stop and say, “Should I say it? Should I say it?” So many times, it was: “No; say nothing.”

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson, and I’m Bob Lepine. Maybe, you can relate to what Ann is describing. Maybe, you’ve had a critical spirit and expressed yourself with critical words. We’ll talk about how to deal with that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. So, we’re back with one of our fun *Ask Dave and Ann* shows.

Dave: Oh, boy.

Ann: Is it fun? [Laughter]

Dave: It’s fun for you.

Bob: It’s fun for me.

Dave: It all depends on what the question is.

Bob: I get the hot potatoes, and I just toss them to you; and you have to grab them. We get questions from listeners. We get folks who come to our *Weekend to Remember*[®] marriage getaways; and they have questions that they say, “Would you guys address this?” So, I thought, “We’ll bring a few of these in here and just see where we’ll go with them.” We’ve done this before. So, it’s one of those days. You ready?

Dave: I think Ann will do a great job. [Laughter] I can't wait to hear what she has to say.

Ann: We're going to throw it right back to Bob. That's what we're going to do.

Dave: Yes; that's what we'll do.

Bob: Here is the first question. This is in the area of conflict in a marriage. Somebody wrote to us and said, "How do you express your needs and your feelings to your spouse without provoking defensiveness or without the whole thing becoming just a big catastrophe?" You've had both experiences of defensiveness and figuring out how to do it right.

Ann: And catastrophes.

Bob: Okay. So, if you, Ann, had something that has just been bothering you; you're going, "I need to talk to Dave about this"; and it's something that he's got a blind spot or he doesn't seem to care about this; and "I just need to express it, but I don't want him to get defensive, and I want him to hear me clearly"—is there a strategy for that? Well, first of all, you know how to do it the wrong way; right? [Laughter]

Ann: Well, I was going to say, "No; there was no strategy in the early years." I thought it. I said it. I didn't weigh it. I didn't analyze it. If it came to my mind, I thought it was worth repeating and saying. It seemed like if I didn't do that, I would hold on to it; and sometimes, it would fester and grow. Then I would blow up. So, both were horrible, and Dave was kind of taken off guard by—"Where is this coming from"—because he did get defensive by the way I communicated it.

Dave: Yes; we've said this here before; but especially early in our marriage, if Ann would bring up anything negative—and she just told you she did that without thinking—

Bob: Yes?

Dave: Right? I probably did as well.

Ann: I wasn't always mad. I would just bring it up and say it.

Dave: She was sort of a verbal processor. So, as she was thinking it, it would just sort of come out; and I became the guy that just avoided. So, we've shared this; but I would literally walk out of the room or sort of shut down. I remember getting in the car and driving away and going and playing basketball and thinking, "When I come home, everything will be blown over, and we'll be fine."

Obviously, we were young and naïve; and I didn't realize, "If you don't talk about it, it doesn't go away. It actually gets worse." So, I had to learn—okay—not only to stay—I

mean that's one big practical step right there: Don't leave the room. Let's talk this through.

Then, secondly, to hear hard things; and I think that's one of the hardest things for anyone of us. There is a DNA selfishness in us that when somebody—a good friend—and I have men in my life who will speak to me about blind spots.

Bob: Right.

Dave: I've never in my life—even though I can say, "This is good. You need to hear this"—I've never liked it. It's like—"This is hard. I don't have that blind spot. You're not right. I'm right. You're wrong." Man, in our marriage, I really believe your spouse / my spouse is a gift from God to help us become like Christ.

Bob: Right.

Dave: That's part of the mission of marriage. It's the sharpening of one another to become like Christ. So, it's a gift that you have 24 / 7 spouse that sees things other people don't see, loves you enough to speak the truth; but what we do is we run. I ran. "I don't want to hear it." I've learned over the years—it's like—"Oh my goodness! God has given me a gift. I have to sit in that seat, stay, and be willing to hear, hopefully, affirmation but also the truth in love"—Ephesians 4:15—"Speak the truth in love and"—what?—"we'll mature to be like Christ."

So, if you're not willing to hear that, you're not going to mature like Christ; but if you are—man—it can really shape us to be who God wants us to be.

Bob: For you to stay, though, you had to learn how to express your frustrations or your concerns or just your observations in a way that wasn't a personal attack / that didn't feel threatening. So, how did you adjust the instant spewing and turn it—

Ann: Yes.

Bob: —into something that was more refined?

Ann: And Dave did start staying. So, he would hear me out that I didn't realize the way I was saying it was—it was almost damaging your soul. That's how I would put it. It felt like disrespect, and I didn't realize that I started to critique him a lot. He would stay. He would listen, and he would say nothing. So, I would say it again and again, like—"Oh, maybe, he didn't hear me," because he would just be quiet in his response.

So, I've shared this story before, and it's in our book; but we were speaking at a women's group, and I asked Dave to come with me. I said, "Women are going to love what you say. You're so good this. They are going to love hearing a man's perspective." I said to Dave, like—"Are you in?" He said, "Yes; I'm in."

So, we get up there, and he just starts talking about what it's like to be a man. He said to these women: "Women, I don't think you get what it's like for us because as little boys someone is cheering for us. Then we get older, and there is a coach or a teacher or a someone cheering for us saying, 'You're good at this. You're great at this.'" He said, "Then I played college football. So, I've had that in my life. I've had cheering. When I met Ann—more than anybody in the world, she's for me saying, 'Dave Wilson, you're the man. You're great at this.'"

He said, "Then, after we're married for a while, we as men walk in the door; and all we hear is 'Boooo! Boo!'" I'm sitting there thinking, "What in the world are you talking about?!" He had never communicated that. He had never said it to me personally. He had never voiced any concern. So, we got in the car; and I said, "What was that?!"

Dave: It was one of those long drives home. Have you ever had one of those, Bob?

Bob: Yes.

Dave: Sure you have. I was like—"Well, maybe, we should have talked about this before I said it publicly." But I did. I mean she said, "I'm not booing you."

Ann: "I'm helping you."

Dave: "I'm helping you." I'll never forget. I'm like—all I remember saying is: "Well, it sure doesn't feel like help."

Bob: Yes.

Dave: That was actually catalytic because it was a beginning of discussion: One, for me to be able to articulate what her critique felt like. Boy, looking back, I needed that. I needed the truth in love; but the way it felt—it felt like just chopping me down. She didn't believe in me / didn't feel like affirmation. So, it led to a conversation.

Ann: I did believe in him. I just thought, "This is motivating him." That's what I thought: "By pointing out his flaws, he is going to become more motivated to be better." I really thought I was helping you, not realizing that my critique or my continual like—"Hey, you could do this," or "Why don't you do this?"—made you feel like I wasn't respecting you. So, I went on this journey, and it was a journey of my tongue because before I would just let my thoughts and my words flow.

This time, I would take my thoughts and say, "God, should I say this?" I can't tell you how many times it stopped me in my tracks. I would stop and say, "Should I say it? Should I say it?" So many times, it was: "No; say nothing"; but other times, I would ask—if He gave me that green light, my next question was: "Lord, how should I say it?" That changed everything because, in James, when James says, "Anyone who lacks

wisdom, let him ask of God who gives generously,” and God would always give me this way of saying it in a way that was respectful and the timing of it too.

Bob: So, I hear you saying two things. First of all, you made a conscious decision to turn up the positive affirmation / to say—

Ann: Yes.

Bob: —to cheer Dave on. Then I hear you saying that, at the same time, you began to adjust those helpful observations you were making in the past and say them differently.

Ann: Right.

Bob: So, talk about the different timing and the different way that you would say it. Let me just start there. If you were noticing that Dave is not spending enough time with the boys—

Ann: Yes?

Bob: —how would you have said it in the early days, and how did you change to say it later?

Ann: In the early days, I would say, “Why are you always gone? The boys don’t even know who you are anymore!” That’s not very motivating.

Dave: Uh, yes; I can remember. It’s like yesterday hearing her say that as I was walking out the door to a meeting / to a—you know, again, I’m walking out the door thinking, “I’m providing for my family. I’m working hard. This is really all for you.”

Bob: And it’s the church. I’m serving Jesus.

Dave: Yes.

Bob: Yes.

Dave: But I’ll tell you this, Bob. Sitting here almost 20 / 30 years removed from that “boo” story, she started speaking life. Now, we’ll get to this. She had to speak helpful truth as well.

Bob: Right.

Dave: Whenever we talk about this at a conference or anywhere, wives will come up and say, “Yes; but I need to speak critical things to him. You’re saying, ‘Don’t do that.’”

Here is what I would say, “No; you need to do that at times; but if that is all he hears, he is not going to be motivated. But if he hears positives / affirmations / belief / respect words—if that’s what’s going in that pocket, change, change, change, and you pull a quarter out, your son / your husband—and this is true for women as well. It goes both ways—they are going to receive that much better if there is more affirmation.” So, that is what happened in our marriage.

Bob: So, she increased the affirmation.

Dave: Oh, it was incredible. She started saying things like—“You’re a good man. You’re a good husband.” I remember when she first started saying it, I just looked at her like—“No; I’m not. Why? You’ve never said this! You’ve said this opposite of this.” So, I thought she was lying.

Ann: Part of it was I felt like Dave got praise from everyone. Oh, the church is praising him. People—everybody in my—he doesn’t need that from me.

Bob: Yes; and if I say it, he’s going to start to get complacent and go—“I am a good man.”

Ann: Exactly; it will enable him to stay the same.

Dave: But here is the truth that I discovered, and I think it’s universal—is when she started saying I was good / good man / good husband / good father / good pastor, it sort of like she raised the bar up; and I was thinking, “I’m not that good”; but what it did—it motivated me to become the man she was saying I was that I didn’t even really think I was yet. Instead of—“Why don’t you do this?” “You shouldn’t do that”—thinking that motivated me, that demotivated me; and I think it demotivates men because respect is our language.

One of the areas I remember Ann—it felt like continually critiquing me on was spiritual leadership in the home especially with our boys when they were little.

Ann: I think I had this idea of what it should look like, and I had always had Dennis Rainey in mind. [Laughter] I would think, “Dennis would do it like this,” or “Dennis wouldn’t have done that.”

Dave: And she used that name a couple of times.

Ann: I did. I really did. [Laughter]

Dave: That really worked really well.

Bob: Yes; right.

Dave: Yes. But no; I remember feeling like—“I’m a good spiritual leader at the church. I’m not good at home.”

But I’ll tell you something. I remember one night—you asked earlier, Bob, like—“How would you say this differently?” I remember one night walking out of the bedroom after putting the three boys down in bed—again, they are young. They are probably six, four, and two—something like that—and praying with them, telling a Bible story. As I’m walking out the door, she is coming up the stairs. I can see it. This is how powerful respect is to a man. I can see this moment. She said to me, “Man, I admire the power you have.”

Ann: I said, “I’m jealous”—

Dave: Yes.

Ann: —“jealous of the power you have over our boys. You say a few words, and they cling to every word. That’s an amazing influence that you have. They don’t cling to my words like they cling to yours.”

Dave: So, what was she saying? She was saying the opposite of what she said before in a positive way. “Why aren’t you ever home? Why don’t you ever spend time with the boys?” She said it like, “You have this power.” So, what happened? The next night, I’m running up to the bedroom to pray with my boys because I’m like—“Yes; I do have power. It’s amazing. Thank You, God, for this power. Why would I miss this window in their lives?”

Again, she wasn’t—

Ann: I didn’t make it up.

Dave: —trying to manipulate me.

Ann: Yes.

Dave: But it was a different way to speak truth in a positive way that motivated me.

Ann: I had asked God—“God, give me eyes to see the things that Dave is doing right.” Many times, we only look for the things that they are doing wrong. It’s like I think we create neurological pathways to only see the negative. So, I was asking God to show me the positives.

Here is the thing that I want to ask you guys—is for Dave and I, we are in front of all of these women when I find out Dave has had this need that he’s never communicated to me. Like, you never said, “You boo me.” You never said, “I feel like you’re not cheering

for me.” You never had said that. You were just silent. It seems to me from the women I’ve talked to that men aren’t as expressive as women in their needs. Is that true? Should men express the needs that they have in their marriage besides intimacy needs—physical intimacy needs?

Bob: Why besides those?

Ann: Because I think those can be communicated because we hear those. [Laughter]

Bob: So, I think for a man to say, “These are things I need,” is to say, “I’m weak and helpless,” at some level. What man wants to say to a woman—“Hey, here are my weaknesses. First of all, now, I’m giving you a tool to know how to wound me. If you know my weaknesses, then you know how to hurt me. Secondly, I’m confessing that I’m not the self-sufficient man. Are you going to respect me less or love me less if you think, “Oh, there are these things that he needs. He’s not self-sufficient. He can’t handle himself?” Who is attracted to a guy who is needy?

Ann: Every woman is if it’s not a needy needy; but to say, “This is what I’m feeling. This is what I’m longing for,” I want to hear that from Dave. But he doesn’t usually express it.

Bob: So, if Dave had said to you, “I need your praise / your affirmation / your approval,” and you said, “Okay; I can do that,” the problem is the next when you go—you know—“You’re such a powerful man,” we’re thinking, “You’re just doing what I told you to do yesterday.”

Ann: So, it doesn’t count.

Dave: “You don’t really believe that. If you really believed it, it would come out naturally. If I have to tell you that and then you do it, it’s like—“You’re just—you don’t believe that. You’re just doing it because I told you I need it.”

Ann: Oh.

Bob: Do you agree with that?

Dave: I don’t think, often, we think through all that Bob just said; but it’s what we’re feeling. “I’m not going to share because I’m weak. We grow up with a wrong, macho DNA that says, “A real man isn’t weak.” So, it’s hard to say out loud. So, yes; I’ll stand on stage and say it to a whole bunch of women talking about being weak; you know? [Laughter]

But yes; all I know is this: Ann is my biggest cheerleader. I mean it’s real. She’s says it daily how much she believes in me and thanks me and notices and really brings life to me. So that story was decades ago, and it isn’t the way she lives anymore. She’s learned to speak life, and it’s really changed my life.

Ann: Well, I think you've done a really good job of doing that to me. It's amazing how a simple thank-you changes everything. The reason I didn't say those things to Dave before was because I had this selfish attitude: "Well, who thanks me? Who looks at me? Who appreciates me?" It was this self-pity mindset that I had; and when I started realizing, "When I'm with Jesus, He saying that every day: 'Look at you, Ann. I see everything you are doing.'" So, it changed my heart. It changed my attitude.

So, by simply saying, "Dave, thanks for taking out the garbage," or "Thanks for being with the boys," or "Thanks for—you were amazing preaching today." Those are little things. It sounds like—"Oh, that is so simple to do"—but sometimes, our pride keeps us back from saying that.

Bob: So, the action points from today are: To improve your communication so that you can express what you're thinking / feeling / needing to one another turn up the volume on appreciation / on respect / on saying positive things to one another and building one another up. That's a biblical principle—encourage one another / build one another up.

Then, secondly, when you do have to communicate something that is going to be hard to hear, think through how to say it and when to say it. Mary Ann and I have had this conversation. For her to say, as I'm leaving for work in the morning, "I want to talk to you about something tonight." [Laughter] Then I'm, all day, going—"What am I"—

Dave: Yes.

Ann: Am I in trouble?

Bob: Yes; right. So, she's had to know first thing in the morning when it's fresh on her mind and she's liked to get it resolved, that's not the time to talk to me about it. I have to know that 9:30 at night when she is starting to fall asleep is not the time for me to say, "Hey, let's talk about this right now." We've got to find that time when we are both alert and awake and can receive it—think through how to say it and when to say it. Then I think it's good to sandwich the correction in between two slices of affirmation.

So, to put—to start off with a positive—

Ann: Yes.

Bob: —then say, "Here's an area I think could use improvement." Then come around with another slice of affirmation on the other side. It just makes it easier to hear.

Ann: Easier to swallow.

Michelle: *FamilyLife Today* is a production of FamilyLife. And our goal is to develop godly families and marriages that change the world one home at a time. One of the

ways we do that is through this radio broadcast, *FamilyLife Today*. We also partner with people around the world, people who share our same desire to see strong marriages and families and these people are sharing FamilyLife resources in their countries, maybe that's yours.

We have resources that may be helpful to you. On topics such as forgiveness, finances, honoring your parents and *FamilyLife's Art of Parenting*. You'll find information about these resources and others at FamilyLife.com. And, you can also email us global@familylife.com with any of your questions or concerns.

We'd love to hear from you. You are part of the FamilyLife family and we want to know how God is using *FamilyLife Today* in your life.

Thanks for listening. Thanks to Marques Holt, Dennis Leake, Rhonda Street and our entire broadcast team. We hope you've enjoyed the broadcast and that you will be back for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*.

FamilyLife. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

We are so happy to provide these transcripts to you. However, there is a cost to produce them for our website. If you've benefited from the broadcast transcripts, would you consider [donating today](#) to help defray the costs?

Copyright © 2019 FamilyLife. All rights reserved.

www.FamilyLife.com