

Foreword by Alyssa and Jefferson Bethke

JODIE BERNDT

Author of the bestselling *Praying the Scriptures* series

Praying ^{the} Scriptures for Your Marriage

Trusting God with Your
Most Important Relationship



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JODIE BERNDT



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Praying the Scriptures for Your Marriage

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CHAPTER

— *five* —

Talking with Love

Wife: I am not talking to you.

Husband: Okay.

Wife: Don't you want to know why?

Husband: No, I respect and trust your decision.

“Hit the ball back.”

That's the advice Robbie and I gave our kids anytime we knew they'd be spending time with adults. Our advice had nothing to do with sports; it was all about being an engaging communicator. When an adult asked a question or made a comment about a particular topic, we urged our kids to return “the ball” with another comment or question to keep the point—the conversation—alive.

Some people are naturally gifted communicators. For most of us, however, it takes some measure of effort. A

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willingness to ask questions. To pay attention to answers. To be vulnerable as we share information about our own interests, worries, desires, and plans. Two people can live in the same house—sleep in the same bed—but if they don't know how to talk and listen effectively, they can start to feel like they don't even know each other.

In the early phases of a relationship, it's easy—and fun—to discover things that are fresh and new and interesting about one another. Later on, the dynamics can change. Communication with your spouse may be more challenging than you thought it would be—and certainly harder than it was when you were dating.

One woman told us it was easier to share things with her sister than her husband. “She’s better at helping me process my emotions,” she said, “and she’s known me my whole life, so I feel like she understands me.”

Another wife shared how much she enjoyed talking with her coworker, who seemed to show genuine interest in the projects she was working on and who asked questions about her life. “I know my husband loves me,” she said, “but he doesn’t seem to care about the same things I do.”

Several couples admitted to feeling like their conversations were increasingly stained by life’s busyness. Robbie and I could understand that. Where we had once stayed up half the night talking to each other about everything—from our different backgrounds to our future dreams—ten years

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into our marriage, our conversations often became transactional: *Are you picking up the kids from soccer practice? Did you remember to call your mom back? Can you believe how much a new dishwasher costs?*

None of these scenarios—an understanding sister, a caring coworker, a busy life—represent bad things. But when we fail to give our best attention or effort to our spouse, the things we don't say can become wedges in our relationships. Left unaddressed, these gaps can grow and even create a narrative of their own: *He loves his job more than he loves me. She doesn't care how I feel. If only they understood me as well as _____ does. We just don't have anything in common anymore.*

While couples may point to a particular issue as the reason behind marital distance or tension—money troubles, challenging in-laws, the birth of children or the transition to the empty nest—the problem is often not the issue itself but an inability or unwillingness to communicate effectively about it.

Communication involves two parts—talking and listening—and we need to be good at both. We'll talk about the importance of listening in the next chapter. For now, let's look at how we can become better talkers.

Let's Give 'Em Something to Talk About

Robbie and I once hosted a large dinner party where, to ensure a good mix of conversation at every table, we seated guests according to whether we thought of them as a Q or an L. Everything was going well—everyone seemed engaged in some lively discussion—until one of the L's noticed the scrap of paper I forgot to remove from under his plate and demanded to know what it was. Not knowing how else to handle the situation, I confessed. “You’re kind of loud,” I said, “so you got an L. The gal to your left is a bit quieter—she listens more than she talks—so she’s a Q.”

The room went silent for a beat and then erupted into laughter as the L's began identifying themselves as—and congratulating themselves for—being the life of the party. The Q's—who didn't say whether or not they appreciated the seating arrangement—exchanged knowing glances, which

made them seem mysterious and alluring.

*As unromantic as it might
sound, good communication
flourishes with a little
advance planning.*

Neither communication style is the “right” one; we all have room to improve. For example, I talk a

lot; Robbie is a great listener (but he's not always the best at telling others—including his wife—what he's thinking). And while I'm sure there are a million little things we could

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do to further enhance our own give-and-take, let's look at four strategies that have proven effective so far.

1. ***Set the stage.*** As unromantic as it might sound, good communication flourishes with a little advance planning. Pick a regular time to connect and do your best to make it happen, even if you don't have anything major to discuss. That way, when something important does come along, the pathway to being present for each other will be comfortable and familiar. Whether it's a weekly date night or ten minutes every morning over a pot of French press coffee, establish a routine, ditch your phones, and focus on each other.
2. ***Don't expect your spouse to be a mind reader.*** At the risk of overgeneralizing, men and women communicate differently. We'll never forget the gal who texted her fiancé on Valentine's Day. "I can't wait to see you tonight," she said. "Also, I don't need flowers." When he replied, "Great! See you soon!" she realized he hadn't picked up on her hint. Wondering if she had been too cryptic, she forwarded the text exchange to her best friend—who immediately spotted the problem. "OMG," she replied, "he needs to read between the lines! 'I don't need flowers' means 'Flowers are the *only* thing that will make me feel special on Valentine's Day, so please don't mess this one

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up!” (Fortunately for that couple, the guy did show up with a glorious bouquet.)

Clear communication is a must. You have to say what you mean. And if you’re like I am and you sometimes speak in a style that your son-in-law calls “buffering,” don’t blame your spouse if they miss something. Instead, add helpful cues where they’re needed. In our case, once I do have a fully formed thought, I know to stop and ask Robbie, “Are you able to pay attention right now? I have something important to say.”

3. ***Keep it positive.*** In what scientists call a “negativity bias,” our brains are wired to hold on to more negative experiences than positive ones.¹ Negative thoughts stick around, and the buildup from hurtful or disparaging words can create an atmosphere of pessimism and resentment. We’ll obviously need to talk about difficult things and we’ll surely have disagreements, but we can choose how to frame those conversations.

You will have days—sometimes entire seasons—when finding something positive to say feels like a stretch. If that’s where you are, ask God to show you your spouse in the same way God sees them. Be alert to the beauty God reveals and then speak what you see. As Proverbs 18:21 (MSG) says, “Words kill, words give life; they’re either poison or fruit—you choose.”

And don’t forget to talk *about* your spouse, not

just *to* your spouse, in glowing terms. Speaking well of your spouse—praising them in public—actually influences you to look on them more favorably and with greater appreciation.² Your positive words become a gift to you both!

4. ***Hit the ball back.*** Robbie and I thought we invented this term for our sports-minded kids, but renowned psychologist and relationship expert John Gottman was way ahead of us. He built a “Love Lab” back in 1990, one designed to look like a romantic retreat, and watched 130 couples in action.

Throughout the day, the husbands and wives made requests for connection (“bids,” Gottman says), sometimes with something as simple as, “Look at that beautiful bird!” If the spouse took the bid by showing some sign of support (“Wow! That *is* a pretty one!”), the two would connect. If there was no response—if the spouse kept watching TV or reading the paper (today we’d say “scrolling through their phone”)—the bid fell flat and there was no connection.

Six years later, the results were in, and you can guess what the study revealed. Couples who largely ignored each other’s bids wound up getting divorced. Those who took the bid—who responded to their partner by showing some degree of interest or support—were still married.

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Every conversation, even the seemingly insignificant ones, represents an opportunity to keep the point going. Let's be alert to the bids our spouse makes. Let's hit the ball back.

Serving the Ball

I thought the tennis illustration was helpful, but when our daughter Virginia brought home a young man named Christopher (her eventual husband), I realized we had missed half the picture. Chris would walk into the kitchen and toss out a question ("How was your meeting today?") and then listen intently to the answer. All these years of parenting, and we never stressed the importance of *serving* the ball. What a miss!

"We won't discover how interesting someone is unless we make the effort to be interested in them," write Nicky and Sila Lee, authors of *The Marriage Book* and the creators of The Marriage Course.³ Asking questions, they say, is one of the main ways "we can discover one another's opinions on everyday matters as well as how we view issues of wider significance."⁴

At face value, asking questions in marriage—*What was the best thing that happened today? Is there anything you're worried or discouraged about? What makes you feel loved?*—seems somewhat forced. Shouldn't those conversations flow naturally?

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Not always.

One or both of us may struggle to verbalize what we are feeling. We may worry we'll be misunderstood, or we don't want to risk rocking the boat. Maybe we feel like we have to be strong for our partner or that the situation is just too complicated to put into words. Maybe we just aren't sure where to begin. Asking questions can help our partner identify root concerns or issues, even as we let them know they are valued and loved.

Jesus understood the power and importance of questions, and he asked far more than he answered: *Do you want to get well? Why are you so afraid? What do you think?*⁵

Jesus knew all the answers, of course. His questions weren't intended to produce information; rather, they were designed to build relationships, create conversations, and take his listeners to a new level of understanding. Which, at the end of the day, is what we all want in our marriages, right?

We all want to be deeply known.

*We all want to
be deeply known.*

We want to be understood.

It doesn't matter if we are a conversational L, a Q, or somewhere in between; we all want to be able to look at our spouse and ask what may well be the most powerful of all the Lord's questions—*Do you love me?*—and know that the answer is yes.⁶

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Remember —————

Words kill, words give life;
they're either poison or fruit—you choose.
(Proverbs 18:21 MSG)

Reflect —————

Think about the communication patterns in your marriage. Do your words build up or tear down? Do you find it easy to confide in your spouse? Do you make time for regular, meaningful connection through conversation? Do you ask good questions?

Reflect on your different backgrounds or personalities and consider how they've shaped the way you express yourself. Ask God to reveal any areas where you may be holding back (fearing you'll be misunderstood, not wanting to rock the boat, thinking that what you have to say isn't important, and so forth), and share those concerns with your spouse.

If you don't already have a regular date night or "communication time" on your calendar, build it into your schedule. It may feel forced or awkward at first, but trust God to work in and through your conversation as you establish an atmosphere in which connection can flourish.

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Respond _____

Heavenly Father,

Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight (Psalm 19:14)

Let no unwholesome talk come out of our mouths, but only what is helpful for building each other up according to our needs, that it may benefit those who listen. (Ephesians 4:29)

Words kill, words give life. Let us speak fruitful, life-giving words. (Proverbs 18:21 MSG)

Equip us to speak and listen with love, knowing that eloquent, powerful, and faith-filled words—the things we say, believe, or do—are all bankrupt without love. (1 Corinthians 13:1–3 MSG)

May we communicate with heavenly wisdom, speaking in ways that are pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, and sincere. Let us be peacemakers in our marriage, sowing in peace and reaping a harvest of righteousness. (James 3:17–18)

May we speak no evil, avoid quarreling, be gentle, and show perfect courtesy to each other in our communication. (Titus 3:2 ESV)

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When we're tempted to speak up or defend ourselves, remind us that you will fight for us; we just need to be silent. (Exodus 14:14 ESV).

Set a guard over our mouths; keep watch over our lips (Psalm 141:3)

May our hearts be storehouses of treasure so that we will produce only good things, knowing that we will one day give an account for every idle word we speak. (Matthew 12:35–36 NLT)

Give us words that will encourage each other and build each other up, both privately and in public. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

Let our conversations be full of grace, seasoned with salt, so we will know how to answer each other. (Colossians 4:6)

CHAPTER

— *six* —

Learning to Listen

My wife yelled at me today, saying, “You weren’t even listening just now, were you?”

And all I could think was, “Man, that’s a strange way to start a conversation.”

Dinners at our house are loud, especially when the whole family gathers. I’ll never forget one of the first times our son-in-law, Charlie, sat at the table with us. The conversation pinged back and forth, changing topics rapidly as people jumped in with opinions and stories, sometimes talking over one another to make a point. I thought it was all perfectly normal—it’s what we had grown used to—but as I wrote in *Praying the Scriptures for Your Adult Children*, Charlie found his head spinning. “You people,” he finally said, “always interrupt each other. And you always think you are right. I wanted

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to ask a question about something a few minutes ago, but now I don't even know what it was."

It's true. We Berndts (the women at least) do talk a lot. And some of us (okay, me) don't listen very well. Over the years, Robbie has grown used to this pattern. Once, when we were on a car trip, I decided to be purposely quiet, just in case he had something to say.

We hadn't gone more than a few miles before Robbie asked if I was okay. Did I, he wondered, need him to pull over. Was I going to be sick? (I think he thought I was dying.)

The Bible has nothing against talking—and Jesus was a wonderful storyteller—but it's clear that God wants us to know how to listen. "To answer before listening is folly and shame," he declares in Proverbs 18:13, highlighting

The Bible has nothing against talking, but it's clear that God wants us to know how to listen.

the fact that listening promotes understanding.

Listening is a way to show love, to let our spouse know that what they are saying is valuable and important. That *they* are valuable and important. And listening is a gift we *all* have the power to give. "Everyone," Scripture says, "should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."¹

Will listening well sometimes be hard? Of course. People are not often "taught" how to listen (not like we're taught how to walk or how to read), and learning to listen may be "as difficult as learning a foreign language," writes marriage

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expert Gary Chapman. “But learn we must, if we want to communicate love.”²

We can all listen—that’s the good news. The bad news is that we don’t always want to. Author Stephen Covey says, “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.”³ And apparently I’m not alone in my tendency to cut into a conversation. The average person pays attention for about eight seconds and can only go seventeen seconds before interrupting someone.⁴ *Seventeen seconds!*

What a Bad Listener Sounds Like

As it turns out, being a serial interrupter isn’t the only bad habit that can color our communication in marriage. Authors Nicky and Sila Lee identify four more patterns to avoid: reassuring, giving (unsolicited) advice, intellectualizing, and deflecting.⁵

Reassuring listeners try to help by minimizing the problem. You may want to say, “It will all be okay; you’ll feel much better tomorrow” (and maybe they will), but your spouse needs to be able to express feelings of fear, worry, disappointment, or anything else without feeling like they’ve been dismissed.

Advice givers focus on fixing the problem. Robbie is a gifted analyst (we joke that his tombstone will read,

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“Problems animated him”), but sometimes I just need him to listen before he identifies the root issue and tells me what I should do. After nearly four decades together, I’m finally learning to start some conversations with, “I know you’ll have a good plan to fix this, but first I just need you to listen.” And he does.

Intellectualizers try to explain the problem. If your spouse is worried or stressed, you may be eager to give them the “why”: *You’re not getting much sleep. I know work has been extra hard lately, and we just had that big car-repair bill. Plus, it’s been rainy for the past week—I know how much you hate that.* You might be right, but sometimes being *right* is not the best way to foster a stronger *relationship*.

Finally, deflectors derail conversation through redirecting. When your spouse shares a feeling or an experience and you say, “Really? You know, that reminds me of the time . . .,” you’re not being helpful. You may think you’re taking their mind off a problem, but what you’re really doing is communicating a lack of interest in what your spouse is trying to say.

As you look at that list, do you notice any bad habits that color your own listening style? If so, don’t despair. God knew taming the tongue would be tricky—“No human being can tame the tongue,” says James 3:8—but “what is impossible with man is possible with God.”⁶ The Bible says that not only did God make our ears, but he’s also the one who can open

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them.⁷ And to echo Epictetus, a first-century Greek philosopher, maybe God gave us two ears and only one mouth for a reason. Maybe he wanted us to listen twice as much as we speak!

How to Listen with Love

Again, we're all perfectly capable of listening well; we just don't always choose to do so—particularly, it seems, with the people we talk to the most. We may pick up the phone if we see a friend calling but send our spouse to voicemail, knowing we'll be able to catch up with them later. And yet listening—and giving our spouse our *best* attention—is a way to live out the charge God gives us in Ephesians 5:21–23 to treat each other with love and respect.

In her book *The Flirtation Experiment*, Phylicia Masonheimer shares her struggle in this area. As a nationally bestselling author, the host of a popular podcast, and a home-schooling mom, Phylicia is always engaged in one project or another, and it's easy, she says, for her to get distracted or distant in her marriage. She thought her husband, Josh, would feel loved and respected if she thought highly of his work and said so publicly, commending him to other people, but that wasn't the case.

"I think respect," Josh told her, "looks like paying attention when I am talking, even if you have better things to do."⁸

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Paying attention. It sounds so simple, and yet in our busy, distracted lives, it can be so very hard. One of our friends tried any number of ways to get her husband to focus on what she was saying before a counselor suggested a solution. “Take his face in your hands,” the counselor advised, “and say, ‘This. Is. Important.’”

Some husbands may find such behavior a little off-putting, but not this fellow. This guy knew he wasn’t the best listener, and he was only too happy to put his face—and the good of their relationship—in his wife’s hands. That simple gesture became a game changer.

Over the years, Robbie and I have found a handful of our own game-changing tools, strategies that have helped us upgrade our listening skills and show love and respect to each other. Maybe one or more of these ideas will be helpful to you.

First, we try to acknowledge each other’s feelings. Communication experts teach a strategy called “reflecting back,” which is just what it sounds like: Listen to what your spouse is saying, without trying to judge if they’re right or wrong, and then repeat what they’ve said in your own words: *You must be worried about that. I didn’t realize you were concerned about _____. That must really hurt.*

Acknowledging feelings isn’t the same thing as agreeing with your spouse; rather, it’s a way to let them know

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they've been heard. Reflecting back opens the door to deeper conversation.

Second, we try to listen with an ear toward identifying the main issue instead of getting distracted by things that don't matter. In business, good salespeople know how to recognize “phantom objections”—reasons people give for not buying something that don't reflect their true concerns. In marriage, the same thing can happen. We can circle an issue, voicing concerns without ever revealing and hitting the target.

I am a natural circler, and we can have conversations where I toss everything into a mixing bowl. When Robbie senses there's no real pattern to my comments or complaints, he'll often stop and ask a few clarifying questions to help determine what is really causing concern. If we don't determine the real issue, he has learned we'll keep chasing the phantoms—which will leave one or both of us frustrated and feeling misunderstood.

Third, once we feel like we've expressed our thoughts and feelings and identified the main issue, we figure out how we want to proceed. Again, here's where a few simple but thoughtful questions can help: *Is there anything you want to do about what you've just said? Is there something you'd like me to do? What, if any, action steps should we take together?*

A couple can have what feels like a rich and meaningful conversation, but if the talk doesn't lead to action (or if we

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keep circling the target), it won't be long before we begin to feel like our communication is pointless. We can settle into the conversational equivalent of the problem spelled out in James: "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like."⁹

All of these strategies—acknowledging feelings, identifying the main issue, figuring out the best action steps—can help us become better listeners, but be prepared to give grace to each other, as the process can take some time.

God promises to supply all we need, and he is always ready to hear our concerns.

And don't be shy about asking for help! God promises to supply all we need—patience, self-control, wisdom, and every other good thing—and he is always ready to hear our concerns.

"Because he bends down to listen," the psalmist says, "I will pray as long as I have breath!"¹⁰

Remember _____

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. (James 1:19)

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Reflect _____

Would your spouse say you are a good listener? Do you give them your “best” attention, or do you sometimes take them for granted or put their concerns or feelings on hold?

Take a moment to reflect on a time when you felt heard and understood. Share that experience with your spouse, along with your gratitude for the gift of their time and attention. Talk to each other about what each of you does well when it comes to listening and where you can improve as you work to show greater love and respect in your conversations.

Ask God to show you any underlying attitudes that may hinder your listening skills (pride, selfishness, jealousy, the desire to prove yourself right, and so forth). God is the one who bends down to hear you when you pray; trust him to help you listen with love.

Respond _____

Heavenly Father,

Tune our ears toward wisdom and our hearts to understanding, especially as we talk about _____. (Proverbs 2:2)

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In our conversations, may we listen like Daniel did—showing aptitude for every kind of learning and being well informed, quick to understand, and ready to serve. (Daniel 1:4)

Show us how we can listen with greater love and respect for each other. (Ephesians 5:33)

Wise people listen and add to their learning, and discerning people get guidance. Please guide us as we discuss _____.
(Proverbs 1:5)

To answer before listening is folly and shame. Help us listen first and speak later. (Proverbs 18:13)

May we listen without forcing ourselves on each other, trying to be “me first” when we talk, or flying off the handle about something our partner says. (1 Corinthians 13:3–7 MSG)

Let us know when it is time to be silent and when it is time to speak. (Ecclesiastes 3:7)

Where we have differences of opinion or understanding about _____, help us listen with humility, putting each other’s need to speak above our own interests or desires. (Philippians 2:3)

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Teach us to be careful and wise listeners, making the most of our conversations and seeking to understand what your will is in every situation, including _____. (Ephesians 5:15-17)

As we talk with each other, remind us to listen to you. Teach us to recognize your voice and follow you. (John 10:27)

Let us be devoted to each other in love, listening well as we honor each other above ourselves. (Romans 12:10)

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