

5 Languages of Love  
The Art of Affirmation  
Matthew 16:13-17; James 3:6-12  
May 30, 2010

If a sermon series had a theme song, this one would be “What the World Needs Now is Love Sweet Love,” and this morning we’ll be exploring the first of the five languages of love that author and pastor Dr. Gary Chapman includes in the book that Nathan has introduced us to this morning.

To give you an idea about what the first love language looks like, let me introduce you to Ole and Olga.

Ole and Olga lived on a farm in Iowa. They had been married for years, but over time Olga became more and more despondent. She was starved for affection. Ole never gave her any signs of love, and Olga’s need to be appreciated went unfulfilled. At her wits end, one day Olga blurted out, “Ole, why don’t you ever tell me that you love me?” Ole stoically responded, “Olga, when we were married I told you that I loved you, and if I ever change my mind, I’ll let you know.” (Illustrations Unlimited. James L. Hewett, ed. Tyndale, 1988, pg. 323).

For a good many people in the world, being told you are loved once is not enough. The first language of love that many people need is the actual spoken language—words of affirmation. They need to repeatedly *hear* they are loved—and respected and appreciated—in order to feel safe and confident in their relationship.

That may seem self-evident, and it may seem easy. But the truth is, we’ve lost the art of both speaking and hearing affirmative words in our culture today.

Think about it. We don’t hear much “love speech” in our public discourse. In fact, it seems that the more snidely critical a speaker is, the more authoritative weight is given to her or his words. In our public conversations today, attention is given to those whose mean-spirited words tend to cut to the quick of a person’s character—whether the words are true or not.

Just think about how our speech has devolved when we refer to the position of President of our country—and I'm not just talking about the current sitting President, but all of our presidents in the last 3 decades or so. Both sides of the political spectrum have engaged in a free-for-all contest for who can say the rudest, cruelest, demeaning sound-bites about the leader of our nation. There is rarely any balance given, rarely any affirmation that is published or taken seriously by media—or by us, if that President was not our choice.

Affirmative or “love” speech has been relegated to the private sphere of human interactions. But the problem is that the more we hear ugly things said about people in the media and larger culture, the more that ugliness becomes the norm, and seeps into all our interactions.

In a study made by the Institute of Family Relations, a survey asked mothers to keep track of how many times they made negative, compared with positive, comments to their children. They admitted that they criticized ten times for every one time they said something favorable. A three-year survey in one city's schools found that the teachers were 75% negative. Finally, the study indicated that it takes four positive statements from a teacher to offset the effects of one negative statement to a child. (Institute of Family Relations in Homemade, December, 1986).

I'm sure you can believe it, can't you? Don't you find yourself remembering with vivid clarity the negative, critical things someone has said about you more than the positive, affirming things? And when those negative messages are repeated without the balance of speaking affirmations to each other, we begin to believe them, and to act upon them.

Our Biblical guides and authors have tried to teach us the power of our words, and how to use them judiciously. From our Hebrew wisdom literature in the Proverbs we hear “The tongue has the power of life and death,” (18:21), and “An anxious heart may weight a person down, but a kind word cheers her up.” (12:25).

Perhaps the author who speaks most fervently about this was James in Chapter 3 of his epistle. We hear starting in verse 6: “The tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on

fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, or reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, but no human being can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse me, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so.”

James echoes one of Jesus’ own teachings to his disciples about the words we use. Jesus said in Matthew 15:10-11: “And he called the people to him and said to them, ‘Hear and understand; it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles us, but what comes out of the mouth, that defiles us.”

That’s why Jesus was so moved by Peter’s words of affirmation today. Peter was proclaiming who Jesus was to the whole world, filled with pride, filled with respect, filled with joy. “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

And Jesus said, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jona! And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” Two friends and colleagues sharing a moment of affirming the true essence of each other. And look what came of that moment—a movement that changed the world.

Our words are powerful when spoken, and are just as powerful when are left unsaid. There is a whole multitude of us who need to hear affirming words of love in order for us to believe love to be real and true.

How wonderful it would be if we could all be like Mark Twain, who once said, “I can live for two months on a good compliment.” Most of us need to be reminded daily that our actions are valued, our efforts are recognized, and that we are beloved by someone.

Intimate relationships can certainly benefit from practicing the art of affirmation. Indeed, most lovers are fairly good at sharing appreciation and care in the first years of marriage. However, it is a discipline for the long haul of a relationship that will help keep the waters of commitment smooth if it is practiced.

Listen, for example, to a husband's reactions to his wife's colds during 7 years of marriage:

First year: "Sugar dumpling, I'm really worried about my baby girl. You've got a bad sniffle and there's no telling about these things with all the strep going around. I'm putting you in the hospital this afternoon for a general check up and a good rest. I know the food's lousy, but I'll be bringing in meals from Hattie's. I've already got it all arranged with the head nurse."

Second year: "Listen darling. I don't like the sound of that cough, and I've called Doc Miller to rush over here. Now you go to bed and rest. You deserve it."

Third year: "Maybe you better lie down, honey. Nothing like a little rest when you feel lousy. I'll bring you something. Have we got any canned soup?"

Fourth year: "Now look, dear, be sensible. After you've fed the kids and got the dishes done and the floor finished, you better lie down."

Fifth year: "Why don't you go to Walgreens and get you some aspirin?"

Sixth year: "I wish you'd just gargle or something instead of sitting around barking like a seal all evening."

Seventh year: "For Pete's sake. Stop sneezing! Are you trying to give me pneumonia?" (Hewett, op. cit. pg. 332).

The author of our study, Gary Chapman, invites us to begin practicing our affirmation art at home, with those closest to us. He offers several categories that might help us become more aware of the disciplined speech that will help construct/build up our relationships, rather than watching them destruct before our eyes.

First, he suggests using encouraging words. The root of the word "encourage" means 'to inspire courage.' "All of us have areas in which we feel insecure. We

lack courage, and that lack of courage often hinders us from accomplishing the positive things we would like to do.” (pg. 40).

Encouraging words help to define another’s gifts and talents, to support them in their exploration of their potential. Chapman says, “Please note, I am not talking about pressuring your spouse [or child or friend] to do something *you* want. I am talking about encouraging him or her to develop an interest s/he already has.” (pg. 41) Never has the phrase, “We all need an encouraging word” been more relevant to our lives than now.

Second, try using kind words. “When we communicate love verbally, we must use kind words. That not only has to do with the choice of words we use, but also with the way we speak. The same sentence can have two different meanings, depending on how we say it. The statement ‘I love you’ when said with kindness and tenderness can be a genuine expression of love. But what about “I love you?” The question mark changes the whole meaning of those three words. (pg. 42-43)

Included in this section of Chapman’s book is one of the wisest reflections for any relationship. To be kind in love means not to keep score of wrongs. None of us is perfect. In any relationship, we do not always do the best or right thing.

Of course, we have to confess that something we have said or done might have hurt the other, whether we intended it or not. But once it is confessed and sincere apologies made—biblically, we call that repentance—then it becomes history.

Chapman writes, “I am amazed by how many individuals mess up every new day with yesterday. They insist on bringing into today the failures of yesterday (or last year or three years ago) and in doing so, they pollute a potentially wonderful day.

“The best thing we can do with failures of the past is to let them be history. Yes, it happened. Certainly it hurt. And it may still hurt. But once the other person has acknowledged his or her failure and asked for your forgiveness, the kind

thing to do is to accept it as history, and move forward. The word 'forgiven' is one of the kindest words we can give to another person. (44)

The third affirmation Chapman asks us to practice is the use of "humble words." Love makes requests, not demands. We all know how WE respond when someone we feel is our partner, our peer, tells us how to think, what to do. We get defensive and obstinate, and a wall goes up between us. (45)

Humility asks rather than tells. It reflects rather than issues commands.

So using encouraging, kind, and humble words is just a small part of reclaiming the lost art of affirmation and appreciation in our modern world.

Now not everybody needs to *hear* words of love or plaudits in order to feel love. In the next few weeks we'll be exploring other languages of love that are non-verbal that may be more relevant to you personally, or to the people within you live intimately.

However, wherever you go—whether at school or work—or maybe with your kids or your parents or your siblings—you will on a daily basis run into more than one person who is motivated best by hearing your words of affirmation.

So in the week ahead, I'd like you to practice becoming more verbal with your appreciation. If you are married or in committed relationship, practice on your spouse and/or your children. Every night before you go to bed, write down the things that you have appreciated about them throughout the day. The next morning, pick out one on the list that you'd like to share with them. Let them know how much they blessed your life.

If you already do that at home with spouse and children, and you really need help at school with a teacher or at work with a colleague—try it out.

Or if you don't have anyone else to practice on—find a political figure that you might have at one time spoken critically of, and practice on him or her.

Truthfully, we get to practice it every time we come to worship on Sunday morning, for what is worship if not the opportunity to tell God how much we love Him, how deeply we appreciate him for all that we have received.

**Because you see, in a word—**

What the world needs now is love, sweet love  
It's the only thing that there's just too little of  
What the world needs now is love, sweet love,  
No not just for some but for everyone.