

Saying Hard Things Jeff Jones

Hello and welcome as we continue *The Secret Sauce*, the key ingredients that compose the kind of relationships we all crave. Today we are talking about a key skill in relationships that is very hard to master. Today we are talking about how to say hard things, how to have hard conversations that actually work.

Before we talk about hard things though, let's have some fun. I'm going to give some famous movie lines with a blank and you fill in the blank by shouting out the word that goes there, right where you are. At home, you can make it a game. Whoever gets the answers quickest gets to pick what is for dinner. I am going to say some famous movie lines, and you fill in the blank. Let's see how we do.

SLIDE _____)
You had me at _____.

SLIDE _____)
May the _____ be with you.

SLIDE _____)
They may take our lives, but they'll never take our _____.

SLIDE _____)
Love is putting someone else's needs before _____.

SLIDE _____)
I'm going to make him an offer he can't _____.

SLIDE _____)
You can't handle the _____.

Let's key in on that last one. The truth? You can't handle the truth! Such a great line, because I think we all have kind of a love/hate relationship with the truth about ourselves. We want to know and don't want to know hard truths about us all at the same time. But in the end, we know that we really do need to know the truth, especially about ourselves. We never want to be the last person to know some truth about us that we need to deal with. Everybody else knows it, but we don't, like the proverbial booger on the nose.

A couple of weeks ago, I spoke in this series about the Unity Table. Does anybody remember that? This weekend is Unity Table weekend, so let's be praying about all those conversations. Here is a video of me doing that message.

***** Video from Unity Table Sermon**

What I did not know when I was speaking but discovered after I spoke is that my zipper was down for that entire sermon. That's always been a big fear of mine, and this is as far as I know the first time it has ever happened. So, after the message, I watched the video, focusing on my pants, to make sure my shirt did its job of covering up my zipper area. Thankfully, it did, at least I think it did.

It's terrible not to know though. Fortunately, I knew some that there were some people watching that taping who would tell me the truth. Jan, one of our pastors who leads production of all of our services, I've known for a long time. She's like my big sister, and I know she would tell me. So, that made me feel better. Because I know some others would feel too uncomfortable to tell me. They would just leave me open-zippered, because it can be hard to tell someone things like that.

That's why people who love us enough to tell us the truth are MVP's in our lives. We all have blind spots, problems in our lives that are obvious to others but not so much to us. We get used to our own stink, whereas other people can smell our stink. So, people who will lovingly say, "You stink," are really valuable. I'm not talking about critics or haters. I'm talking about people who are with you and for you in life, and who will take that uncomfortable step to have hard conversations. We are all flawed, sinful people, and that condition is worse than we think. We need others to love us enough to speak truth into our lives, and of course we need to love others that much too. The best relationships we can have are ones that have total acceptance with total truth.

That's the way Jesus loves. John, one of his closest disciples and friends, summarized the way Jesus related this way:

SLIDE _____) John 1:14

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Jesus came full of grace and full of truth. Grace says, "I love you as you are." Truth says, "I love you too much to let you stay that way." Grace without truth is not loving, because you just leave people with their zippers down. Truth without grace is also not loving. It's just mean.

This past week was my annual review, which of course happens every year. A couple of our board members get feedback from people on my team, as well as a peer who knows me well, make their own observations and do my review. That always gets to my love / hate relationship with the truth. I love happy truths, how great I'm doing. But I'm not so in love with the less happy truths, where I need to do better. But, of course, I really do want to get better. And what makes that work is that they are coming with both grace and truth. If all they did was say positive things, all grace, it would feel nice at first but after a while I wouldn't trust that. I would assume that they weren't telling me the hard things I need to hear to get better. But if all they did was truth, how I need to get better, with no grace, no encouragement, I would get discouraged and want to find another job, maybe join the NBA and play in the bubble. Everybody needs a backup plan. What makes it work

is the presence of both grace and truth. They go together and should in our key relationships.

Paul says it this way in Ephesians 4:15,

SLIDE _____) Ephesians 4:15

“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”

The way we grow to maturity is by being in a community of people who will speak the truth in love. Such a cool phrase, “speak the truth in love,” and that is what we are talking about today in how to have hard conversations. How do we speak the truth, and do it in love? That’s really the key to what we are talking about today, how to have hard conversations that have a good chance of working. For our relationships to go deeper, this is a key ingredient, this ability to have hard conversations. Most of us have a lingering issue in a relationship or a lingering concern about someone close to us, and we are just leaving them with zipper down or leaving an undealt with issue in a relationship, and those things don’t get better over time. So, how do we effectively have a hard conversation? Let’s dive deeper into Paul’s phrase.

SLIDE _____)

Speak the truth in love.

SLIDE _____)

Speak the truth in love.

- * **Be direct.**
- * **Be balanced.**
- * **Be face to face.**

You do have to speak. Don’t leave the unsaid thing unsaid and don’t just drop hints or assume they know. Speak. That’s true of positive things, like encouragement, as well as concerns. We leave so much unsaid. It’s like a husband in marriage counseling whose wife said, “You never tell me you love me anymore.” He replied, “I told you I loved you forty years ago, and if

that ever changes, I'll let you know." That's no good. We need a steady diet of encouragement and affirmation, and in relationships that forms the security that allows us to say hard things. People need to know that we are for them, that we accept them, that we are a fan, before they can hear the hard things. So, start with that. Don't assume people know the good things you think about them.

And when it does come time to say a hard thing, say it. Be direct. I have family who live in New Jersey, and they seem to have no problem being direct. I grew up however in the south, and we seem to have a harder time doing that. I will tend to beat around the bush so long that my message gets lost. I say encouraging things for a long time, and then soften my corrective message so much that people don't even hear it as a hard thing. Like one person told me once, "You can tell me to go to the bad place in a way that I want to go there." I have had to learn to be direct and to be concise. I find it's best to start with a question, such as, "Can I ask you something hard?" Or, "You know I'm a big fan, right? So, is it okay if we talk about something that is really concerning to me?"

And when we speak, let's do it face to face. Like Jesus said in Matthew 18,

SLIDE _____) Matthew 18:15

"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you."

He says go to him and speak. Jesus didn't say, "If you have a concern or offense, text your brother, or message your brother, email your brother, or put it out on Instagram." You go to the person, face to face, or if that person is too far away for that, at least call.

SLIDE _____)
Speak the **truth in love.**

SLIDE _____)

Speak the **truth in love.**

- * **Be humble.**
- * **Focus on the facts and your feelings.**
- * **Be specific.**

We are talking about speaking the truth, when we have an issue in a relationship or a concern about someone we care about. So, that means we need to make sure that what we are speaking is actually true. A friend of mine when he talks to me about something that doesn't smell right in my life often says, "I could be 90% wrong, but here is something I think you need to hear." I always love that, 90% wrong, because he probably isn't 100% wrong.

Let's think about this when a person has offended you in some way, and you need to talk about it. Focus on the facts, what you know to be true, not your judgments about their motives. You don't know people's motives. But what you do know are two things:

SLIDE _____)
Facts and Feelings

Focus on facts and feelings. You know facts: what they did or what they repeatedly do that is a concern to you. And you know how that makes you feel. When you share the hard thing, personalizing by sharing how it makes you feel is really helpful.

So, let's say your spouse or your roommate don't help around the house much and are really messy, and it bothers you. You can judge motives. "You don't care about anybody but yourself, and just want me to do everything." You don't know that. But you do know how you feel. So, you can say, "I am feeling overwhelmed with keeping the house clean. Can we talk about how we can approach this issue together?" You may be concerned how your spouse is handling finances. He or she may be spending more money than you think they should. If you were judging motives, you might say, "You are selfish and just spend money on whatever you want even though you want me to be careful." Or, "You don't know how to handle money." That is not

going to help you focus on the real issue. What you might say is, “I feel frustrated about our finances. Would you be willing to discuss some ways that we can stay more in line with a budget?” Or, if there was a direct offense, to say, “I feel hurt that you spent money on that convertible when we agreed that we would talk to each other about big purchases. Can we talk about this?” That can make all the difference in the world. This little formula:

SLIDE _____)
When you do _____, I feel _____.

When you do _____, I feel _____ is a winning formula in hard conversations.

Don't say statements like, “You always” or “you never,” because those aren't even true. I bet I could think of one time I actually did do what you are upset that I don't do. So, get specific. Rather than saying to your mom who has a tendency to make your wife feel diminished, get specific: “Mom, I've noticed you are often critical of Lori's cooking and parenting. You may not remember, but the other night at our family dinner, you put her down a few times in front of everybody. I don't know what's going on with that, but it isn't good. It makes her feel deeply discouraged, because she really cares what you think and is trying really hard. It makes me feel angry with you and protective of my wife, because I really think she is a great mom and wife, and she is my wife. And it makes our kids feel really confused as to why you would be mean to their mom. Can we talk about what is going on here and figure out how to relate in a way that avoids all that?” Notice, that focuses on facts of what happened and how it made other people feel. It was also very specific because the more specific we can be the better.

Part of speaking truthfully too is to be humble in the conversation, open to the fact that you may be the one who is getting it wrong. Maybe it is just a misunderstanding. Maybe you are actually being way oversensitive. Maybe you are getting the facts wrong. Make it as truthful as possible, but also be open to learning more that will help you become more clear about what is actually happening.

SLIDE _____)
Speak the truth in love.

SLIDE _____)
Speak the truth in love.
* **Remember the goal.**
* **Be completely humble and gentle.**

Let's talk about love, shall we? How do we make sure that our hard conversation is soaked in love? First, love is focused on the benefit of the other. That's what love is. It is putting the other person ahead of me. So, this isn't about me getting even or lashing out to hurt the person who is hurting me or cutting the other person down to size. It is about building the other person up.

Later in Ephesians 4, Paul says,

SLIDE _____) Ephesians 4:29
“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

That's the goal of a hard conversation, is building the other person up, not tearing her or him down. So be careful with your words, especially if you are speaking out of hurt. Proverbs 12:18 says,

SLIDE _____) Proverbs 12:18
“The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

We all know how reckless words can wound. So, plan ahead before you have a hard conversation. Before I preach a sermon, I practice what I'm going to say. I speak through it five times before I ever get on stage and speak it. We probably need to be even more careful when we are having a

hard conversation with someone. Consider what you are going to say, so that you give the person the best chance possible to respond well. Also consider the best time and place to have the conversation. What is the best context for them to be able to listen in a way they are most likely to be open?

SLIDE _____) Ephesians 4:2

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”

An essential component of love is humility. Galatians 6 says,

SLIDE _____) Galatians 6:1-2

“Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself.”

Be gentle and humble, speaking not on a judgmental or condescending way but as one imperfect struggler to another imperfect struggler. Be gentle, not harsh, and be humble, not condescending. You can even say, “Hey, you know how imperfect I am, and I could be getting this all wrong, but can we talk about something that I think you might need to hear that is hard for me to talk about?”

Here’s a great example of a hard conversation. A couple of weeks ago I overbooked one of my days and was on an important zoom call where people really were counting on me to be present. But I wasn’t. I was doing other things while the call was going on, hoping it wasn’t obvious. This is an important initiative that I am helping lead, so the other person leading was really counting on me to be in the moment. I wasn’t. So, after the zoom call he reached out and said, “Hey, you know I love you and am honored to be leading with you, but do you realize how obvious it was that you weren’t fully present in the meeting? It left me hanging out there and left the impression with the group that you don’t really care that much about what we are talking about. I know that’s not true, but it’s how you made us all

feel. I know you have a lot going on, and I do too. I know what it's like to be pressured and therefore not fully present. I've made that mistake myself so many times I can see it when someone else is doing it. I love you too much to let it go. I just wanted you to know how it left us feeling."

That was speaking the truth in love, and I needed to hear it. It rescued me from bad leadership and helped the initiative go way better as I reengaged differently. He could have just let it go, but he loved me too much to do that and cared too much about what we were leading to do that. That's a good friend.

So, my guess is that you have a hard conversation you need to schedule. Say it. Be direct, be in person. Focus on what you know to be true, remember facts and feelings. Like my friend emphasized: the fact was I wasn't fully present on the call. He didn't judge my motives, but in fact assumed the best. And then he shared how it made him feel on the other side. He did it with love and humility, giving me the best chance to receive it. That's a good model for the conversation you need to have.

Great relationships are ones that have both grace and truth, that say I love you as you are, but too much to keep you that way. Great relationships accept us 100% and are also 100% truthful. They won't just leave you with your zipper down. They will say the hard thing in love.

I want us to pray for the conversation you are going to have, but before I do let me say this to all of us too. If someone initiates a hard conversation with you, unless they are just a jerk and a critic who doesn't have your best interest at heart, take it for what it is. Think about how hard it is for you to initiate a hard conversation with someone else, so that if someone is doing that with you it means they love you a lot. So, listen to what they have to say. It doesn't mean that they are 100% right, but they probably aren't 100% wrong, and they care enough for you to share their concern. Wise people listen and consider it without being defensive, even if the other person doesn't do the conversation perfectly. We become our own best friend when we are open to correction and feedback, because we don't know the truth about ourselves without people who will love us enough to fill us in.

With all this in mind, let's take it to God in prayer.