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The Golden Rule of Communication

Guest:	Dr. Emerson Eggerichs
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Bob: Think for a minute about the last thing you said—either to someone face to face, or in an email, or on social media. Was it truthful and was it loving? Here's Emerson Eggerichs.

Emerson: Truth without love is really clubbing someone. In general interpersonal dynamics—"I'm just going to give people a piece of my mind." Well, first of all, you can ill afford to lose what little you have left up there. But secondly, again, they're not going to hear you. So when I draft an email—"Is the tone here?" The truth is there; but what is the tone?

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our host is Dennis Rainey. I'm Bob Lepine. The Bible tells us we are to speak the truth in love. That applies not only to the things we say but to the things we type as well. We'll talk more about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. So has this ever happened to you? Have you ever hit send and then thought "Oh man, I—

Dennis: Oh yes. I was in a meeting one time—you know this because you heard me apologize for this—but I was in a meeting on a very delicate subject. I was taking notes and they were short hand, okay? So I was not writing this for anybody.

Bob: Just for yourself.

Dennis: For myself, but I went ahead and typed in distribution all staff which was—I was going to clean it up later and hit the send button and send it out. I was in that meeting and I hustled to get out of there. I had to leave early because we had another meeting at lunch and then I got a text. [Laughter] I looked, and I went "Oh my goodness."

Bob: Your shorthand notes—

Dennis: What did it say? And here's the thing, there was really nothing terribly wrong—just nothing had a context. It wasn't properly positioned to communicate. So I've learned the lesson. You don't put the distribution or the person in the—

Bob: In the send box.

Dennis: —in the send box until you are ready to send it. [Laughter]

Bob: I know there have been many times when you have written, thought, typed up things that have sat dormant for a while.

Dennis: Oh I've hit the delete button more than once. By the way, just so our listeners know, I did double back on this one and apologize to all staff and apologize to the group of people who were offended by my note.

Bob: Your shorthand notes.

Dennis: By my notes. And honestly, they should have been because it was not properly presented. Our guest on the show today is nodding his head. I guess I've just got to ask you Dr. Emerson Eggerichs, have you ever sent an email before you intended to send it?

Emerson: Well, as you were saying, yes—I mean I wrote the book out of all the failures. I think one of the things that is most common with us is there you see, inadvertently, we hit send when we didn't intend to. We were going to go back and clean it up. Where my mistake has always been is the use of humor.

Bob: Yes.

Emerson: It comes across as sarcasm, and as a put down, and people completely misunderstood. Then I get myself in trouble and I'm having to go back and seek forgiveness because what I thought was just a silly comment they took it very personal. But that's just—all of these things that we're talking about can put us in a position where we hit send inappropriately because we haven't abided by certain principles that will guard us.

Dennis: And it's not just in social media by the way.

Emerson: Correct.

Dennis: It can happen with our tongues and lips as well.

Emerson: Absolutely.

Dennis: Emerson has written a new book. Many of our listeners know of him by his New York Time's bestseller, *Love and Respect*. This new one is called *Before You Hit Send: Preventing Headache and Heartache.*

Emerson has been married to Sarah since 1973. They have three adult children. This is really about how we relate to each other not just in, as I said, around social media but in marriage, with our kids, with friends, with extended family members. Why don't you let our listeners know what those four questions you ask at the beginning of your book—kind of how you built this book around those four.

Emerson: Well I was—It actually began when I was a student at Wheaton, had just come to Christ at age 16—found out that Billy Graham went to Wheaton because I came to Christ through the Billy Graham film, *For Pete's Sake*. I wanted to be an effective communicator because I always felt like I was putting my foot in my mouth or people would look at me. I always used to say, "I know what I mean I just can't say it." But they'd say, "Well if you can't say it, you don't know what you mean." [Laughter] You know that idea. So I had this desire to be more effective communicator. I felt like God was calling me to ministry. I felt like I really needed to know how to do this.

In chapel, somebody was giving credit to Socrates as they were presenting in this chapel—before you speak, Socrates, who was credited with, said "You need to ask yourself. Is it true? Is it kind? and Is it necessary?" Dennis and Bob, as I sat there something just clicked in me. It's like—you know what, that's a great guide for me / that's a great checklist for me. It wasn't that I was *trying* to be untruthful but there were times I might not tell the whole truth. I conveniently kept things back because I was insecure, and wanted myself to look good, and didn't kind of communicate everything. I certainly knew I had the proclivity to be unkind. I knew that bully—angry, you know saying what's unnecessary. I kind of feel like Peter who on the mount of transfiguration said—Peter not knowing what to say said—

[Laughter]

Dennis: Yes, I can identify with that.

Emerson: [Laughter] So saying things that you just don't need to say. But then I added a fourth—Is it clear? Because over the years, I thought that I was communicating truthfully, kindly, necessarily and still people were saying "I'm not tracking with you." So it was important for me as a person to make sure "Is this really clear to *me*?" Pastors say, 'If there is a miss in the pulpit, there's a fog in the pew." If I'm not clear within myself, it's certainly going to, probably, be confusing to others. So back when I was like 20 years of age, I began to try to figure out "If I'm going to say something, what would be a quick checklist for me to go through?"—for me personally. I didn't think about ever writing a book on this. It was just I want to keep myself out of trouble. I wanted people to get the right idea rather than the wrong idea.

Bob: And those four questions have kind of a cadence/a rhythm to them that remind us of Philippians 4:8—where we're told to think on things that are pure and honorable and true. And really the beginning of all communication begins with are we thinking the right things before we ever engage our speaking, right?

Emerson: Yes, yes and then to that point on scripture, I had the privilege of studying the Bible for 30 hours a week for nearly 20 years as a senior pastor. We all quote speak the truth in love. There are two of them right there—the first two—truth and kindness. So speak the truth in love. Everybody—they don't know the reference on that but they all—"We're to speak the truth in love." We kind of know it. Also there's a time to speak and a time to refrain. We kind of know that out of Ecclesiastes. And Paul even prayed himself that he would speak as clearly as he ought to speak. We see the idea that if a person doesn't understand, you're like a symbol, a clanging bell or whatever. So we instinctively kind of know. Now we spent money on research and a professor—an academic—who did a national study for us came back and said, "This is mind boggling." All four of these are distinct. It's not like they blend together, or they wet over—you can kind of remove one of them from the equation and you're still going to be okay. He said "This is mind boggling. They all must be in place." And the point is that if they are, then hit send. The other side—someone read the book and said "I thought you were telling us to shut up. You're actually telling us to speak up."

Yes, we need the courage then—and this is where most of us are—we lack the courage when we should say what's true—say it in a kind way, say what's necessary, say it clearly and if all those align, we need to communicate it. But the problem, of course, is that if we don't think through ahead of time, we end up putting our foot in our mouth. I used to put both feet in my mouth and wonder why I couldn't walk. [Laughter]

Dennis: Well are you—

Emerson: Do you like that image?

Dennis: Look at my face right here. These look like dimples; they're heel marks.

Emerson: From yourself. [Laughter]

Dennis: I mean I've got that same foot in mouth disease as you have. We do lack courage when it comes to speaking the truth, but we also lack love.

Emerson: Correct.

Dennis: And that is one of the things you talk about in your book that I really like is that these things need to be held in proper tension with each other because kindness and love make hearing possible of the truth.

Emerson: Someone comes to us and speaks what's truth, but we don't think they really care about us. They're not saying it in a way that will give us the impression that they really love us, or they respect us or they're saying it kindly.

Long term it's just not going to be received. It's just simply not. Truth without love is really clubbing someone. Now if I'm in a medical room and I'm—you know the doctor says, "Unless we do this, you're going to die." Obviously, he doesn't have to say it in a way that makes me feel good. I want him to get on with it. In general interpersonal dynamics—"I'm just going to give people a piece of my mind." Well, first of all, you can ill afford to lose what little you have left up there. But secondly, again, they're not going to hear you if it doesn't feel loving to the person. Now that doesn't mean that we are unloving because they say it feels unloving. Sometimes you can be truthful and people saying you're being cruel. When the truth is you care for them more a mother toward her son, father toward a daughter, whatever. But by and large the principle holds. So when I draft an email—"Is the tone here?" The truth is there; but what is the tone? What does that feel like? That's why one of the principles is let it set for a while. Or I have Sarah read this.

Because again we can have good intentions but if the other person feels that somehow, we're saying something that's bullying them / is rude, they're probably not going to receive it. Because I take the position that most of us feel badly about ourselves to begin with. We certainly don't want to feel worse on the heels of reading your email.

Dennis: Most teenagers feel badly about themselves too, by the way, and we found as parents, that if you want to be able to guide them through the perilously teenage years / if you are about to bring a boundary around them—like they want to stay out later than they are supposed to be staying out—Barbara and I would practice. And this was so difficult. It was so hard not to react and go "What are you thinking about? There's nothing good that can happen after midnight. I mean let's talk about this." But instead we say "You know—and I'd like to say we did this a few times right, okay Emerson, but not every time.

Emerson: Right.

Dennis: We had four teenagers at one time. Sometimes they just wear you out, you know? We would try to say to them "I'm hearing you say you'd like to extend the boundary of when you come home.

I just want you to know your mom and I are really committed to helping you grow up and know how to handle freedom and how to be able to handle everything when you're out on your own later on. I want you to know if there is any way we can let you do this, we will do it. But you need to know if we don't think it's a good idea right now for a 15-year-old or a 14-year-old to stay out past midnight, then I just want you to know we're going to come back and we're going to be united as a couple and we're going to talk about that and why it's not wise." Now I wish I could say we did that every time, Barbara and I, but we didn't. But the times we did, it did take the sting out of the truth which was "You know, you're just not quite ready to have that amount of freedom right now."

Bob: As you're describing that, I'm thinking about a coworker we had here at FamilyLife for a number of years. He had a nickname. I remember friends referring to this guy as "The velvet brick."

He was the guy who when he sat down with you, he would tell you the truth in clear terms and you walked away feeling challenged and affirmed simultaneously. I think part of it was you knew this guy was on your side and was for you and not against you. So even when he said the hard things, he said them wisely and you walked away going "Okay, that was hard to hear but I know it's coming from somebody who cares about me and is on my side." That's an important foundation. If we're communicating with people, we have to know what's our relationship with these people to understand how our communications going to be received.

Emerson: Well and that first point of is it true and this is beautifully said by both of you. We have to convey to other people that we have the best version of them in our minds—that we have their best interest—that we have good will toward them.

The idea you guys are saying here is potent because again, if I'm speaking the truth simply because you're bothering me—you know, I'm telling you the truth because I need you to knock it off—Yes, that may be true but the other side of it is if I say it in such way—"The reason I'm bringing this up and it's hard for me to say this because I don't want you to reject me. I think I believe in you maybe at times more than you believe in yourself. How do I say this in such a way that you don't think I'm trying to put you down but as much as helping you understand that I'm for you?"

We had an idea with my son one time—David, our middle. I said "There are three concepts. There is authority. There's responsibility and freedom. You're wanting more freedom and you don't want my authority, but you want me to be responsible for you. It's three pieces of a pie. As you become freer, that pie piece is going to enlarge. So my authority is going to decrease, and my responsibility is going to decrease for you. But you're a man's man and if you want me not to have authority over you and you to increase that freedom—you know, the truth is you can be totally free by becoming completely responsible for yourself.

If you want a 100% responsibility for yourself and I want that for you. You know the truth is when you leave the home—mom and I want that and when you do, we're going to party, okay? We're going to party." [Laughter]

Dennis: We did. We did.

Emerson: Exactly. He used to grin at that. But the point is I want your freedom. But in the meantime, there's going to be this normal tension. So how do I communicate to you that I'm going to have authority over you? You're not going to have as much freedom. I'm going to take a lot of responsibility for you but there's always going to be a tension here. How do I communicate this to you where you don't feel I'm trying to say you're not

a man or that I'm controlling? But that's that idea of trying to say to a person "I'm for you." Your ultimate goal which we your point I want you to be free. Our success as a parent is contingent upon your freedom and being successful as that. So we're on the same page there but it's now an issue of timing.

Bob: Of the four areas: is it true, is it kind, is it necessary, is it clear—those four questions—is there one that is more routinely violated than another? I know we're different personalities/different people and we may have our own blind spot in any of those areas, but in general, in our communication, do we tend to be less true, less kind, less necessary, or less clear in how we communicate do you think?

Emerson: Well that's an excellent question—no one's really asked that of me. As I pointed out, they're distinct and they're all vital. I think the key is truthfulness. I mean to what extent are people lying and being untruthful. That sets off the domino effect and what difference does it make if I'm kind and I'm lying to you. You know, I tell you I'm lying. So I think—

Dennis: And I'm clear. I'm being real clear. [Laughter]

Emerson: I'm clear about this lie.

Dennis: I was guilty about that as a kid. I don't remember all my lies, but I remember some of them. I was real clear about my lie.

[Laughter]

Emerson: It was necessary.

Dennis: Yes, it was necessary. But here's what I want you to tell. Tell the story of Teddy Roosevelt because there is a consequence when somebody is caught in a lie.

Emerson: Right. Right. Well the story is that he was a cattle rancher and he had hired this individual. They were out roaming the territory and there would be these, basically, cattle that got away but was unbranded. So kind of open game at that point. This new hire said to Teddy, "Hey, I will go and put the stamp of our symbol on them and we're good to go. We'll round them up." Teddy Roosevelt, as the story goes, said "You're fired." The guy says, "What do you mean I'm fired?" "You're fired." "I was just going to go do this for you." He said, "If you will steal for me, you will steal from me." I then use that as an analogy if we're with people who will lie for us in a business—If you're hiring people as a business man and you're getting them to lie for you, that's not the better part of wisdom because I'm going to tell you, they're going to lie to you—because you've sent them that message— that that's really the way we operate here.

Bob: I think you've made a significant point here. The base line in all of this is we've got to be truthful.

We've got to be honest with one another. Now the question is—In our honesty, are we kind, are we clear, is it necessary? But you have to start with that because you can get the other three down exactly right and if the honesty is not there, we've got real problems.

Emerson: Right. That's right. Well and then I go even deeper because most of us don't get up in the morning thinking of ways we're going to lie. I unpack 20 reasons why we as believers might hedge a little bit on the truth. It's not always a wicked reason. For instance, there are peacemakers out there and peacemakers do not like conflict. So they don't intend to lie they just don't want the conflict. So their hearts are in the right place. You want to click your heels and salute them. I am so appreciative of your peacemaking tendencies. I just applaud that. But at the risk here though is your compromising the truth on this. So I unpack 20 reasons why we might hedge on that truthfulness.

In fact, there are 81 different reasons why we would compromise on those four areas; not 20 reasons.

Dennis: What did you say?

Bob: Eighty-one.

Emerson: Eighty-one. There's 20 under each. In other words, I unpack why would I not be kind? Why would I not be necessary in what I'm saying? Why would I not say what's clear? As I thought about—I just kept adding in my own life. Here might be the peacemaker idea. He's not a bad person. But this would be a thing that could set it all off. And then short term, you've got peace but long term—they're going to come back and say "Wait a minute. You weren't truthful with me." There's a price to pay then when we compromise these. But most of us compromise them because short term it works. I mean, why would a person be a bully? Why would they be unkind? Because it works!

Bob: Yes.

Emerson: So there is a pragmatic perspective that we bring. I was talking to my son and he was saying "Dad, everybody lies. Everybody's lying today. People lie when they don't even need to lie. And so there is a challenge for all of us in "Why do we do that?"

Because somehow, we fear the truth. We fear that if I'm just truthful it's going to lead to some kind of consequence to me. Why don't I say it kindly? Because I think if I'm kind, they're going to take advantage of me—that if I'm nice to the clerk behind the counter, they're not going to listen to me because Joe over here is screaming at them and he's getting his product replaced. So we begin to convince ourselves that compromising these four things are to our benefit. My point in the book is not long term; short term yes but not long term.

Dennis: Two stories. One a father was trying to take a nap on a Saturday afternoon. The phone rang, and it was his boss. The father said to the son who answered the phone "Tell him I'm asleep." The son started to answer, and he put his hand over the phone and said "Dad, you're not asleep." "So here, give me the phone." That's one father. The other father I'll tell you about is mine. My dad; his name was Hook Rainey. Hook was not something crooked about him—like he had a hook on his hand. It was he had a wicked curveball. But that was the only thing wicked about my father. I do not remember my father *ever* telling a lie. Period. He had business dealings in a community where he lived all of his days for 66 years—not far from the log cabin he and his eight brothers and sisters were born in. So his reputation was well known in the community. But he was known that all you need to do was reach across the table and shake his hand. His word was better than any contract that was secured by attorneys and by courts of law. He was a straight shooter. Emerson, I don't think we as parents have any idea how important the model is that we set for our children. How we relate to each other. Do we stretch the truth? Do we lie?

Will our kids remember us as someone who was—you know what, when he did lie, he fessed up. He dealt with it and he asked for forgiveness. I think that's what your book is about, and I just want to commend you for writing it. I think this first area you've talked about here—speaking the truth in love. Ephesians chapter four verse 25 "Laying aside all falsehood, speak the truth in love."

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