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Affirmation

by William P. Wilson, M.D.

-- *Commentaries from past newsletters* --

Most of us do not stop to think that the people we work with are a blessing. I have had the same office manager for the last 18 years and she is a treasure. She had never worked in a doctor's office before she came to me. When I interviewed her I looked at her resume and she had been unemployed. When I asked her what she had been doing she told me that she and her husband had been farming. Since her other credentials were quite good I hired her on the spot. I knew that farm wives have to work and be resourceful so that was all I needed to know to hire her. My wife taught her how to set up the office accounts and she knew all the rest. She had to learn how to file insurance claims, how to make appointments, how to send out reports and all the other things that are an important part of a doctor's office. Over time she has become computer literate by going to workshops, and has learned how to use our computer program for keeping office accounts.

The most important thing about her is that the love of the Lord is manifest in her relationships with patients and with the other persons who work in our office. This morning I told the Lord that I was grateful for sending her to me then I came in the office and told her so.

My purpose in telling you about her is to emphasize the importance of affirming those with whom we have constant interaction. Affirmation is a necessary ingredient in all our lives. We have to have it. Conrad Baars a psychiatrist on the West Coast once wrote a book called *Born Only Once* in which he described what he called the deprivation syndrome. It was the result of having never been rally affirmed. To illustrate how this syndrome develops I want to tell you the story of one of my former secretaries.

Betty was mean. One day one of my patients came into the office and said that I needed to do something about my secretary. "You should knock her in the head.. She's mean," she said.

Now, at that time I had just read Bruce Larson's book *Setting Men Free*. In it he urged his readers to relate to people in an affirming way. I knew that Betty was curt and sometimes abrupt, but she was such a good secretary that I decided to try Larson's approach to changing people without confronting her. I did, therefore, look for ways to affirm her. One of the first chances I got was when she came in with a new pantsuit. This occurred in the days when they were quite popular. So I said to her, "My, Betty you sure do look great today. I really like that pantsuit on you.

A few days later she had typed a manuscript for me that was error free. It was correctly formatted and very well done. I said to her when I had read it over, "Boy that is a great job. Thank you for a perfect manuscript."

My next opportunity came when she came in with a new hairdo. She really looked like a million bucks so I told her so. When I said that she looked beautiful, she began to cry. I, of course, wondered why she was crying so I asked what was wrong. Her reply was heartbreaking. Betty told me that all of her youth her father told her that

she was dumb, ugly, would never amount to anything and that no one would ever love her enough to marry her. As a child and youth no one had ever affirmed her. Betty had, though, married and was satisfied with her marriage, but never could believe that her husband really loved her because he never said so.

After she told me all this I put my arm around her and told her that God loved her and I did too. I really appreciated her faithfulness, the quality of her work, and her love for the Lord. I also told her to go home and tell her husband that he had to tell her he loved her once a day. It was not hard for him to do this because he really did. With all this Betty was a changed woman with all this. My patient, on a visit after all this happened, came in and said, "What did you do to your secretary? She is so nice I cannot not believe she's the same woman." I did not stop my affirmation of her because I really did appreciate her in all dimensions of her relationship with me. I was heart broken when her husband got another job, and she moved away.

We all have a need for affirmation for it is a verbal expression of love, and love is our greatest need from birth to death. God is love and when he created us he understood that for us to relate to him we had to have a radical need for love. So he placed within us the radical need for a mate, for children, for friends and for himself. Love draws people together and, therefore, is the basis for intimacy. Love makes us vulnerable so that we let people get to know us at the deepest level of our being. We are able to tell them of our plans and hopes for the future and the problems of our past and their resolution. We tell them about our assets and liabilities, our vices and our virtues, and also of our perfections and imperfections. We also tell them of the scars on our souls from abuse that we have received in the past. In other words we bare our souls. It is interesting that if we love that person and they love us then we accept them for what they are and make them part of us.

Men and women are created in disjunction. God made man, but realized that he could not live alone. So his took his rib and made woman out of it. Adams comment was that she was bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. In that statement he was describing the disjunction that exists. Love is what undoes the disjunction and makes us one.

When we are one we live our lives for the other person. Wherever we go they go too. And the things we do they do with us even though they may not be physically present. When I used to travel overseas I tried to take my wife with me, but she could not go all the time. If she was not along I always sensed her presence with me for she was installed in me. The same was true for my children especially when they were still living at home.

How does this apply to others in our life? All people close to us are partially installed in our life, so we carry them around psychospiritually with us. Jesus made this plain about himself. In his discourse on the vine and the branches he made it clear that when we are grafted onto him we can draw from his strength at will. We can do the same with others that we love. Therefore, it is imperative that we maintain our love relationship by communicating our love to those with whom we have a close relationship.

How do we do this? We use Gary Chapman's languages of love. (1) To say it. This is where affirmation comes in we tell people we love them unconditionally. We

love them for who they are, not what they do. (2) We spend quality time with them. This means they have our undivided attention and we are communicating at an intimate level. (3) We give and receive gifts. Most people have a tough time receiving gifts. They respond many times by saying, "Oh, you shouldn't have done this" or "I don't deserve it" and other negative statements, instead of saying a simple "thank you" and responding appropriately physically. (4) Acts of service are also expressions of love. My wife does many things for me. She washes my clothes, she shops for us, she manages our finances and so many other things that I can't name them all. I really recognize that she is doing acts of service and she does them in love. I reciprocate with similar acts. (5) Finally, physical touch is a love language. I can use physical touch with my wife, but in my office I have to be careful how I touch my office manager or any of my patients. In psychiatry and in psychology we are warned against touching our patients. In this day of "sexual harassment" some women are warned against letting any male touch them in the work place, and will interpret any touch as having sexual significance. Sadly, in the pagan world it is true that they are sexual "come-ons." Even so, in a Christian work place we can give Christian hugs and touches that are clearly acts of love and have no sexual significance if we know that the person will interpret them as non sexual acts of love.

I know I have gone far beyond that the subject of verbal affirmation, but it is important that we as Christians be affirming of with whom we have a relationship using those love languages that are appropriate for the situation and for the people we are relating too.