

Characteristics of Healthy Families

Expressing Appreciation, Positive Communication

In the previous chapter, we discussed the first two characteristics of healthy families. We looked at the importance of Commitment to the Family and the importance of Spending Time Together as a Family. In this chapter I want to continue the study of these characteristics by turning our attention to Expressing Appreciation to One Another and to Positive Communication.

3. Expressing Appreciation

Strong families express appreciation to one another. To be effective, appreciation must be expressed. Otherwise, it is just a noble thought that does not benefit the other person. Some examples of expressing appreciation would be statements like: “You are really working hard today,” “I’m very proud of you,” “You are very good at that.” “Now that’s what I call a good job.” Expressing appreciation is the process by which we speak words with our mouths that recognize value in the other person. In Matthew 3:17 the Father spoke from heaven when Jesus was baptized and said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” Think of the impact that must have made on Jesus when God the Father spoke from heaven and said this to him.

Wouldn’t you love to hear such a statement from your father? Don’t you think that your children would love to hear such a statement from you? If we focus on the shortcomings and failings of our family members, we quickly fall into the trap of putting them down rather than building them up. Someone has said that, “The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated.” Appreciation communicates to other people that we respect them and that we acknowledge their value and worth.

There once was a little girl named **Kun ning**. Her mother and father worked very hard. There were always many things that needed to be done in order to run the family. They were a normal family living a normal life. But something was missing. When **Kun ning** was nine she spent the night at the house of her friend, **Dan bao**. This was **Kun ning’s** first time to be away from her home overnight. At bedtime **Dan bao’s** mother kissed both girls goodnight. When she kissed **Kun ning**, she also whispered in her ear, “I love you!”

Kun ning could not sleep that night. She lay awake thinking that no one has ever kissed her or told her that they loved her. She was thinking to herself, “is this the way families should be”?

When **Kun ning** got home the next day, she ran to her room. She felt like she hated her parents. They were always too tired to interact with her. She wondered if they really loved her.

That night before bed, **Kun ning** tested her parents to see if maybe this night they would kiss her. But they did not. **Kun ning** asked her mother, “Why don’t you ever kiss me?” Her mother responded, “Because no one ever kissed me when I was little.”

That night Kun ning ran away. She could not live with parents who did not love her. She sat a long time on a park bench, not knowing where to go or what to do. While she sat there she got an idea.

When she returned home her parents were very worried. Kun ning did not answer their questions. Instead she went to her mother, kissed her on the cheek and said, "I love you mama." She gave her father a big hug and said, "I love you, daddy." At every opportunity and everyday thereafter she repeated her plan.

One night she forgot to kiss her mother goodnight. Her mother said, "Where is my kiss?" Kun ning kissed her mother and said, "I love you." But her mother didn't leave the room; she just stood there by the bed. Then her mother spoke and said, "I love you too," and kissed Kun ning on the cheek.

It is one thing to tell our children that we value them and love them. However if we don't show our love through our actions, then it is difficult for children to understand what love really is and how it is applied into their lives. Love is not just a word to describe an emotion. It is an action word. That is how children learn to love; by how it is modeled in our lives as parents.

In some parts of the world there are diamond mines. Outside these mines there are huge mounds of dirt that have been pushed aside by the miners in their search for a few precious gems. The miners' focus is not on the dirt, but rather on the diamonds. Thus, they either ignore or push aside the dirt they encounter. Unfortunately in our families we tend to act in exactly the opposite way. We focus on the dirt and ignore the diamonds. By highlighting the needs and problems in our children or spouses, we overlook their many precious qualities

Our child, for example, may bring home a report card from school and he has four good grades in his report. However, if one of the grades is not so good, we can quickly turn our focus toward that one poor grade, completely ignoring the other four. "This is unacceptable!" we declare. "You have to study harder!" In our zeal to have our child excel academically, we fail to appreciate the achievements he has already accomplished. Our exhortations to greater excellence must be balanced by expressions of appreciation and approval.

As my son was growing up I was concerned about several areas in his life that needed improvement. I wanted him to grow in his Christian character and to be more fully committed to the Lord. He wanted him to have a consistent and effective quiet time and to read the Word of God daily. I wanted him to enter into worship services with greater enthusiasm and to be a model of prayer and purity. I was also concerned about some of the practical issues of life, such as how he managed his money and the orderliness of his room. So, I was continually reminding my son about his shortcomings and about the need to make improvements in his life.

In the midst of my desire to see Jonathan grow and mature, I almost lost sight of the many virtues already present in his life. The Lord challenged me to shift my emphasis from one of disapproval to one of appreciation. I began to thank Jonathan for the respect that he exhibited toward his mother and me. I expressed gratitude that he was not getting drunk and living an immoral life like some of his classmates. As I changed my approach with my son, I was

surprised to discover how many qualities I really did appreciate about him. I realized that I had failed to either notice them previously, or to express gratitude for them. Surprisingly, the more I focused on expressing my appreciation to my son, the more he changed in the areas I was concerned about.

Appreciation does not have to always be expressed verbally. It can also be expressed in written form, as well. For example, I personally struggle in verbalizing appreciation to my wife. I genuinely appreciate her but I just have difficulty expressing it verbally. I discovered that it is actually much easier for me to express my feelings in writing than to express them in spoken words. Thus, anniversaries, birthdays and special days are opportunities for me to express my feelings and thoughts through cards and notes. I never give a card to my wife without including a lengthy note of appreciation.

On one occasion, I was going to be away from my wife for a couple of weeks on a ministry trip. My wife and I were in agreement about accepting this commitment, but we knew it was going to be difficult to be apart. Before I left on the trip I sat down and wrote out a short note of appreciation to my wife for each day that I was going to be gone. I included a scripture verse and a brief expression of my love for her. I then gave these notes to one of my staff members and instructed this person to deliver one of the notes to my wife every day that I was gone. My wife was deeply touched by this simple expression of appreciation. As a result, we actually grew closer to one another during this trip, even though they were apart physically.

On another occasion I also wrote out some notes of appreciation to my wife before I left. This time, however, I secretly hid the notes throughout our apartment before I left. I put them under the pillows in the bedroom. I put them on the chairs in the living room. I hid them in the closets. I put them in the refrigerator. I put them in the sugar jar. I put them everywhere! So during my absence my wife was finding these notes. Again, my wife was deeply touched through this gesture. Appreciation is a very powerful expression of love and care for someone.

Appreciation can also be expressed by respectful attitudes and acts of kindness. In fact, there are innumerable ways to convey how important and valuable a loved one is to you. However it is done, sincere and honest expressions of appreciation will touch one of the deepest longings in a person's heart. We need to be generous and creative in our expressions of appreciation.

The world we live in can be a very cruel place. People can be very insensitive and can say hurtful things to us, even though we have worked hard to please them. Our employers and fellow employees can criticize us or fail to affirm the efforts we have made at our jobs. James 3:6 tells us, "The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." Some examples of unkind spoken words are: "Can't you do anything right?" "What's wrong with you?" "You will never learn!" "You're always breaking something!" "Oh, let me do it!" These kinds of phrases can be very hurtful and destructive. They do nothing to edify or build character.

The schoolyard at school can be a very cruel place where our children are hurt by words of insensitive classmates. They can say critical and mean things to one another by calling each other mean names. Children can treat each other in very unkind ways. When children are shamed, even

in the schoolyard, the experience of that painful time will often stay with them for life. Church people can also be insensitive and ungrateful. They fail to recognize our sacrificial service and our faithful labors. Instead they criticize what we have done or don't give us any recognition for our efforts. As a result, most people are starving for appreciation.

God wants our home to be a place of refuge from the harsh realities of the world we live in. He wants our family to be a place of affirmation and encouragement. Family members should build one another up and refresh one another, just as Jesus refreshed the disciples when he washed their feet. He lovingly washed away the dirt and filth they had picked up as they walked along the dusty road. Expressions of appreciation have a similar effect on people's lives. They cleanse away the criticisms and negative comments that have affected them during the day. Praise and appreciation should flow freely in our families.

When my wife and I conduct marriage seminars, we often have the couples write "love letters" or letters of appreciation to one another. We give them sheets of paper and allow them 15 minutes time to write these letters to one another. We ask them to focus on two or three qualities in their spouse that they really admire and appreciate. We tell them to express their thankfulness for those qualities and to point out specific ways their spouse has blessed them. When they finish we encourage them exchange these letters with one another. This simple act is often the most memorable and significant experience of the entire seminar, even though it takes less than fifteen minutes to complete.

I want to encourage you to regularly do something like this in your family. Send little notes of appreciation to your spouse, your parents, your children and your siblings. In our world of modern technology this can be easily accomplished by text messages, e-mails and Facebook. The time investment is minimal but the rewards are great. Don't wait for the perfect conditions to begin this habit; start now!

4. Positive Communication

Several years ago an experiment was conducted with a group of students. They were told that scientists had proven that brown-eyed children were smarter than blue-eyed ones. Immediately, the brown-eyed students began doing better in school. A few days later, though, the students were told that they had been misinformed, and it was the blue-eyed students who were actually smarter. Quickly the scores of the blue-eyed children rose above those of their brown-eyed classmates. This experiment demonstrates that words have the power to influence behavior. The Bible says in Hebrews 3:13, "But encourage one another daily." Positive or negative words can have a powerful influence in our lives. Words can be compared to seeds. Negative words can produce weeds in a person's life, while positive words bear fruit.

It shouldn't come as any surprise that positive communication is one of the characteristics of a healthy family. It is the central theme in almost every marriage seminar or book written on family life. Healthy families are not necessarily born with good communication, but they continually seek to improve it and make it better. Contrary to what some of us believe, everyone communicates. The problem is that some of us communicate in destructive or confusing ways. Even when a person is silent, he is communicating something. His silence, however, keeps us guessing about what he is trying to say.

Many misunderstandings arise out of poor communication in families. The goal in communication is not mutual agreement, but rather mutual understanding. If the message sent by one person is equal to the message received by the other one, then you have good communication. One husband said that, early in his marriage he thought the goal of communication was to persuade his wife to agree with him. That attitude was the source of several misunderstandings in the first few months of their marriage. Many tensions arose between him and his wife because he sought to persuade his wife to agree with him rather to understand her. Their relationship has since improved and is much healthier now since he changed his approach.

The Bible tells us in Colossians 4:6 “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” We need to be gracious and full of understanding when we communicate with others. Ephesians 4:29 says, “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.”

Our communication should be helpful. It should build other people up. It should benefit those that we talk to, and it should meet the needs that they have. We need to guard against any communication that is hurtful, negative and destructive.

Some couples get stuck in their communication and they don't know how to move forward once they get stuck. Their communication starts out positive but it quickly turns negative. As a result, they avoid talking about certain issues because, when they do, their emotions get stirred up and they say things that they later regret. Once they start talking about these topics they don't know how to stop. Things keep escalating and eventually they get out of control. So they back away from each other and avoid talking about these sensitive issues. Eventually, however, something happens that touches that area and then all their suppressed emotions come to the surface again.

Violet and I were stuck in our communication several years ago. I thought our communication was okay, but I didn't realize how my communication was affecting my wife. During our conversations I often expressed my thoughts and feelings quite forcefully. Violet felt that I was attacking her verbally and putting her down. Eventually she would just stop talking to me because of her frustrations and her inability to get me to listen to her. She came away from our conversations feeling hurt and angry. I verbally dominated the conversations and as a result, she just gave up.

I finally realized that there was a problem and I began to look for some answers. I attended a seminar and learned some new concepts. I discovered the importance of setting up protective structures around your communication when you encounter an impasse. Those structures make it safe to communicate again. So, I prayed about what I learned and then shared these thoughts with Violet. We then agreed to try one of the ideas I had heard about at the seminar.

We agreed that Violet needed a way to send a message to me in the midst of our communication if she was getting hurt and wanted to stop the conversation. We both agreed that the message had to be non-verbal, since verbal messages from her to me in the past always produced a

reaction and an argument. I had repeatedly failed to hear her verbal pleas to stop the conversation due to my insensitivity.

If she felt the conversation was becoming negative and she wanted to stop, all she had to do was to quietly raise her hand. Whenever I saw her hand go up, I agreed to stop the conversation without arguing or defending myself. Once I stopped, Violet could then choose to end the conversation or she could invite me to talk about how the conversation was affecting her. If we agreed to stop talking we would continue the discussion at a later time.

There were many times when I thought to myself, “Why did I ever agree to THIS!” Initially, it seemed like my wife’s hand was going up all the time! I thought, “She’s controlling me!” “She’s manipulating me!” “This isn’t fair!” Just when I was making my most important point, up would go her hand! However, as we persisted in our efforts, over time, our communication gradually improved.

Violet was now much more willing to open her heart and talk with me, because she knew the conversation could be terminated if became hurtful or overwhelming. She was empowered through this simple act of raising her hand. Previously, I controlled the conversation through my verbal skills and the forcefulness of my personality. My wife had no way of stopping me once I began talking. Now, however, all that had changed when I agreed to honor her non-verbal messages to me.

I, in turn, became more aware of the impact of my words on Violet. I had not realized before how hurtful some of my statements had been. I was surprised to find out how often her hand went up. As I began to genuinely listen to what she was feeling, it gave me greater understanding of her heart. I discovered how my words were affecting her.

It took us about two years to make a transition from destructive and hurtful communication to positive and healthy communication. It was not an easy transition, but we were both committed to break out of the patterns that had caused us so much pain in the past. I must confess that I didn’t always immediately stop talking when Violet’s hand went up. Sometimes we actually had arguments about why she had raised her hand. However, this simple strategy eventually changed our communication greatly. It has now been several years since Violet has raised her hand. Today, we communicate regularly and we both testify that we are closer together as a couple. We understand each other much better.

Listening is never easy but it is one of the most important aspects of communicating. Oftentimes we want to be the one that does all the talking. When one person is talking, that person needs to be in the “spotlight.” Each person needs a time of freedom for full expression without interruption or feedback. Unfortunately, the person who is listening often wants to grab the spotlight and the communication process is interrupted. When you have two or more people constantly fighting for the spotlight, caring only about expressing themselves, communication breaks down.

The Number one Destroyer of Families

I want us to look at Proverbs 18:19 in order to talk about the number one destroyer of marriages

and families. A paraphrase of this verse reads like this, “An offended brother is harder to win back than it is to take a fortified city. His anger shuts you out like bars of iron.” This verse describes an issue that has been referred to as the “closing of your spirit”. Communication breaks down when one member of a family closes his spirit to the other members of the family. Husbands can close their spirits to their wives, children can close their spirits to their parents, and brothers can close their spirits to their sisters. This issue is the number one destroyer of families.

If a husband, for example, offend his wife by something he says or does, she may react by closing her spirit to him. Her reaction is a way of protecting herself against further hurts and wounds. His words are like arrows that go into her heart and she tries to guard her heart by closing it to him. She doesn’t close her heart completely, at first, but if there are repeated offences she eventually will shut him out of her heart completely. The closing of someone’s spirit happens gradually and over time.

Normal communication breaks down between the two of them once her heart is completely closed. All attempts to communicate fail as long as her spirit stays closed. This couple may remain married and continue to live together, but the heart of their marriage has been damaged. Their communication becomes superficial and involves only functional things such as deciding who will pay the bills, how the household duties will be divided, or who will pick up their child from school. They no longer share their hearts with one another and their intimacy is lost.

There are indicators that a wife is closing her spirit her husband and it is important to be aware of these indicators. One indicator is her countenance. You can see anger, hurt, or a pained look on her face. In Genesis chapter four the Lord did not look upon Cain’s offering with favor and verse 5 says, “So Cain was very angry and his face was downcast.” Cain’s face revealed what was going on in his heart.

Another indicator is that she begins to pull away from her husband. She distances herself from him physically and emotionally. If he tries to hug her or express affection to her, she is not responsive. She says, “Don’t touch me” “leave me along” and she will give one-word responses to his questions. She will avoid intimacy and is unwilling to open her heart and be vulnerable to him. She is like that fortified city with bars of iron mentioned in Proverbs 18:19.

Another indicator of a closed spirit is the loss of “eye contact”. If you have a small child at home, one of the first things you lose with that child when it has done something wrong is eye contact. The child won’t look at you. It will look every place else except in your eyes. It doesn’t want you to have access into its heart and soul.

Monitoring the health of our relationships is one of my greatest priorities in my family. I continually observe my wife and my son’s behavior to determine if either of them is pulling away from me. I try to discern if my wife or my son have been offended by something I said or did. I want to avoid, if at all possible, a breakdown of relationship with either of them. I know that I will lose my influence in their lives and lose my ability to communicate with them if either of them closes their spirit to me. Ephesians 4: 2-3 highlights how important it is to keep unity in our relationships, “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in

love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

We need to do everything we possibly can to “to keep the unity of the Spirit” in our family. I reach out in humility and gentleness whenever I have done something or have said something that offends my wife or son. Many times I do not know what I have done but I know I have done something. So, I pursue my relationship with either my wife or son. I go to them in humility and seek their forgiveness. I seek to be patient with them. I extend forgiveness toward them when they are hurting me. I know it is vital to the health of our family to maintain unity in our family. I can’t stress enough how important this issue is in your family. “Make every effort” as Ephesians instructs us to do.

Sometimes, however, no matter how careful you are, a person will close his or her spirit to you. When this happens it feels like you are powerless to do anything about it. This person won’t talk to you. He won’t answer your letters. He hangs up the phone. He shuts you out of his life. It is a very frustrating and hurtful situation, because you love this person and he is rejecting you. In fact, some of you reading this book right now are living with the pain of a family member that has shut you out of your life. You may have tried everything you know to restore this broken relationship. You may feel there is nothing more you can do to reach this person, but I want to encourage you that there are some additional steps you can consider.

First of all, you can pray! You can intercede for this person. You can engage in spiritual warfare on his behalf. You can bind the enemy and ask God to open his heart up again. You can tear down the strongholds and the arguments that have been built up in this person’s mind by Satan. (II Corinthians 10:4-5) Prayer is a powerful, spiritual, weapon that can be used, even when this person will not respond to any attempts to get close to him again. Getting an offended child or marriage partner to open up after they have closed his spirit is a challenging task. It takes the grace and power of God to break down the walls that have been erected.

Secondly, you can create a safe, trusting, environment where he can open up his heart again. A wounded person is fearful of being hurt some more, so he is very cautious about letting others get close to him. He is like a timid wild deer living in the woods. In the part of the world where I live we have many wild deer in the forest. I love to go into the forest and watch the deer. However, these deer are very cautious about stepping out into the open where you can see them.

You can’t make any noise and you have to sit very still in order to see them. If you wait patiently, eventually the deer will venture out of their hiding. When they come out, however, they are always looking and listening for any sign of potential danger. If they hear or see anything threatening they immediately flee back to the safety of the forest.

An offended person is like those deer. He is always looking for signs of danger. Proverbs 15:1 tells us that a gentle answer will turn away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger. When I have offended my wife, I have sometimes gone to her and encouraged her to share with me what was wrong. “I am afraid you will get angry if I tell you what’s bothering me,” she has said to me at different times. I try to assure her that I love her, that I won’t be upset and that I really want to know what is bothering her. Finally, after being convinced that it is safe to share with me she cautiously opens her heart again. Unfortunately, there are times when I have then reacted to what

she shared and I got angry with her. Immediately, she withdraws and pulls back because the environment is not safe.

Thirdly, seek to clear up any offences you have committed and remove any stumbling blocks that are present. Get rid of anything that might hinder this person from opening his heart to you, again. Steps of humility go a long way toward turning someone's heart back to you. Asking for and seeking his forgiveness is a critical step you can take. You can take this step, even if the other person does not respond in a positive way. You don't have to wait for him to change before you take responsibility for your own actions.

Fourthly, it is also important to respect an offended person's privacy and to honor the boundaries he has defined. It is painful and frustrating to be shut out of his life, but here is where patience and forbearance are necessary. We can't force ourselves into his life, even though we are tempted to at times. Raising your voice, threatening him or demanding that he responds to you will only drive him further away. He needs space and time before he will be ready to interact with you again. Jesus does not force himself into our lives. He waits for us to open our hearts and invite Him in. Even though someone rejects you, you need to affirm your commitment to him and love him unconditionally.

Fifthly, seek to understand this person and try to identify with what he is going through. Understanding his perspective will help you be more compassionate and loving. Be sure that you extend unlimited forgiveness to this person for rejecting you and shutting you out of his life. It's hurtful when, someone you love, treats you in this way, so you must keep your heart clear of any resentment and bitterness. You do that by continually forgiving him for the way he is treating you. .

Finally, ask God to show you a creative way to break through the impasse you are experiencing. Remember, normal communication does not work when someone has closed his spirit to you. You can't just sit down and talk about the issue with him. He shuts you out of his life. You need a creative, unique solution that reaches into this person's heart and opens it up again. God gave us a creative answer at one point in our family when our son had closed his spirit to us.

When Jonathan was a teenager our family spent several summer holidays leading a Youth With A Mission training school somewhere in the world. We did this for three summers in a row. However, when Jonathan was seventeen year's old he came to us shared that he didn't want to spend his summer doing this again. Instead, he wanted to stay in Wisconsin where we lived and to get a job for the summer. He wanted to make some money, be with his friends and enjoy his summer holiday.

We prayed about this decision with our son and then agreed to let him move into a house with three other Christian young men that we knew and to get a job for the summer in the city. The city was about 60 kilometers from the YWAM base where we lived. He moved in with his friends and found a good job. We let him use our car since we were going to be overseas. We then left for three months. He had a great summer and thoroughly enjoyed the freedom of being "on his own." There was an active Christian youth group in the city where he was working and he enjoyed getting together with his friends regularly. He kept in touch with us by phone

throughout the summer and everything seemed to be working out fine.

At the end of the summer we returned home from our trip and Jonathan moved back home to finish his final year of high school. When we greeted our son upon our return home we were shocked at his response to us. He appeared angry, withdrawn, and distant. He wouldn't communicate with us what was going on in his heart and his spirit was closed to us.

We tried to talk with him, but he resisted all attempts to get close to him. This condition persisted for several days. He gave us only one-word responses when we tried to talk to him and he spent most of his time in his room listening to his music. I became increasingly concerned about my son and was alarmed about the growing barrier between him and us. After one particular outburst of anger by our son, I got on my face before the Lord and cried out for some insight as to what we should do.

The Lord gave me a creative answer by, first of all, reminding me of an experience from my own teenage years. When I was a young boy, a friend of mine had some horses that I loved to ride. We would spend the entire summer riding those horses and I enjoyed every minute of it. The horses were good-natured and responded in a positive way to me all through the summer months. In the fall, the horses were put out in a pasture for the winter because it was too cold where I lived to ride the horses during those months.

In the spring, I went out to my friend's place and eagerly looked forward to riding the horses again. However, the horses did not respond to me in a positive way when I went out to catch them in the pasture. They were not the least bit interested in giving up the freedom they had experienced during the winter months. They wanted to remain in the pasture, unrestrained and free. They didn't want to come back into the barn or to be confined by bits and bridles.

They didn't want saddles on their backs or people riding them again. My friend and I would spend hours chasing those horses, coaxing them with sugar cubes to come closer to us. We had to use ropes to catch them when they got close enough. Once we caught the horses, we had to re-establish our relationship with them again. The horses would try to run away, kick us, and buck us off after we put the saddle on them. It was terrible!

I remembered that it took several days before the horses finally adjusted to us after running unrestrained in the pasture all winter. During that transition time, it was very unpleasant and difficult. Once the horses made it through that transition, things returned to normal and everything was fine for the rest of the summer. There were no further problems when I came to ride the horses.

As I thought about my experience with those horses I felt the Lord showed me that my son, Jonathan was going through a similar transition in returning home. Jonathan had enjoyed running unrestrained with his friends all through those summer months. He had enjoyed living with his friends and spending lots of time with the youth group. He liked the job he had and he had money to spend as he pleased. He had the use of our car and we were across the ocean thousands of miles away. He had been running all summer with the other horses, so to speak.

Now the summer was over and he had returned home. He had given up his job and had gone back to school. He had given the car back to us and he had to be more accountable to us once again. He wasn't able to be with his friends regularly anymore since they lived forty minutes away in the city. He was struggling to adjust to these new conditions.

I felt the Lord directed me to write a letter to my son in which I shared the story about the horses with him. The letter was a creative way the Lord gave me to communicate with Jonathan. At this point, Jonathan was not open to direct conversation with me. His spirit was closed, so I needed some other way to reach into his heart. The Lord used this letter as a way to open his heart again.

I concluded this letter to my son in the following manner:

As I thought about this story, I felt this described what you were going through as you returned home. I imagine you feel a lot like those horses. You may want to kick, rear up, run away and resist any attempts to get close to you right now. I am sure you miss the freedoms and fun of running in the pasture all summer with the other horses.

It hurts me when you shut me out of your life and won't let me get close to you right now. But that's OK! Mom and I love you a lot and think you are a fine son. We won't push ourselves on you, even though we may want to at times. When you are ready to let us back into your heart and life we will be overjoyed.

We are committed to you no matter what. You will always have a place in our lives. We are praying for you and we love you deeply.

Love,

Dad

When I finished writing the letter I placed it on my son's bed with two pieces of candy on top it. (I wanted to use a couple of sugar cubes but we didn't have any!) Then I prayed that the Lord would touch my son's heart when he read the letter.

Later that evening Jonathan returned home and I asked him how his day was. He reacted in a negative way and wouldn't talk to me. Instead he went straight into his room and closed the door. I knew he would read the letter. So I prayed fervently that the Lord would open his heart. Later that evening, just before retiring, I heard my son call to me from his room. He only said one word. "Dad," he called out with a soft and tender voice.

I knew immediately, by the tone of my son's voice that he had opened his spirit again. I went into Jonathan's bedroom and found him crying. I began to cry, as well. Violet, my wife, came into the room and she started crying. Jonathan poured out his heart to us and shared the struggles he was going through in being back home. As I had suspected, he was having a difficult time being back in school and away from his friends in the city.

As Jonathan shared his heart, Violet and I sat and listened patiently to our son's words. When he

finished, we affirmed our love for our son and voiced our commitment to him. We had one of the tenderest and intimate times we had ever had as a family. We wept together, we prayed together and we shared our hearts with one another. We would never have been able to share like that if Jonathan had not first opened his heart to us. Prayer, patience and my creative letter all contributed to the breakthrough that we needed.

As you read this story you might be reminded of a loved one who has closed his or her spirit to you. I want to encourage you to bring that person to the Lord and intercede for him or her. God's heart is a heart of restoration and He wants to give you breakthroughs in your family; just as he did in ours. He wants to release creative answers to you and he wants to open the heart of anyone who has shut you out of his or her life. God is a God of miracles and He is able to do far beyond what you could ask or think. He knows the burden you have been carrying for your family and He wants to lift that burden today. Jesus calls you to Himself in Matthew 11:28 "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Bring your burden to Him today.

If you, yourself, have closed your spirit due to past wounds and disappointments, I want to encourage you to come to the Lord right now and open your heart to him. Let him release you from your pain and invite him to heal your broken heart. Allow the Holy Spirit to break down the walls that you have built up inside your heart. God wants to heal the relationship that has broken down. Let the Lord do a transforming work in your own life before you continue on with the rest of this book.

Jesus came to set prisoners free. He said in Luke 4:18-19, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Let this year be a year of the Lord's favor in your family.

Application Prayer

Lord, open my eyes to see the positive qualities of each member of my family. Forgive me where I have focused on his or her failings and shortcomings. Help me to express appreciation to him or her. Help me to recognize the "diamonds" that are in that person's life.

Please help my family develop positive communication together. It is so easy to fall into negative communication patterns. Help us to build each other up, to speak graciously to one another, and to encourage one another in love.

Please open the hearts of those individuals who have closed his or her spirit to me. It hurts me deeply when that loved one shuts me out of his/her life and puts up a barrier between us. I ask that you would work in his/her heart and restore our relationship. Show me any steps I need to take to remove this barrier.

Give me the creative answers that I need to overcome the distance in our relationship. I trust you to do a miracle and to bring a powerful breakthrough in my family. Thank you for your faithfulness. In Jesus Name! Amen.

