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“How to Speak in Public”
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I was at it again. I was eating lunch with a Houston professional. Of course, some of our conversation was spent catching up on personal and professional activities of late, but given my enjoyment of stepping into some of the deeper question of life, it's not unusual for conversation to move towards the motivations and perspectives and struggles that often drive what we do, how we perform, and how we react to others. But on this occasion, my friend did not ask me a question like, “Do you think there really is a God? Or why would the Bible say something like that?” No, his question was much more immanent than that. It was this: “Can you give me any tips to speak better in public?”

Now, I must tell you I don't get asked that question very often. And on the spot, I offered only a couple of tips. But since our lunch, I thought there is a good number of people who could use a little help in this regard, and given it's what I do all the time, maybe I can be a bit more useful when asked this question. So today is that attempt—my attempt to give you some helpful tips about speaking in public. But as you will see, even when it comes to this issue I can't completely divorce it from the deeper questions of life. So, with that said, here are a few tips on how to speak better in public.

1. **Discover what you can about your audience.** Whenever I receive a request to speak, I want to know early on what kind of audience I am looking at. Will it be a group of 4 or 400? Will it be mothers of preschoolers or senior executives? Will it be people who are novices at the topic I will address or will it be people who are very familiar with what I am speaking about. It simply doesn't work well to have a formal speaking style with a smaller group, and business examples just don't work for a group of teenagers. If effective speaking is connecting with your audience, then you've got to know something of your audience.
2. **Know the question you want to answer *and* answer it.** There is nothing worse in the public speaking realm than for people to come away from a presentation having no idea what you just said or why

it really mattered. That's why it's so important to know the question you are trying to answer and to actually answer the question in your presentation. Because of the roles I have played over the years, I have sat down with a great number of people before they taught a class or made a presentation. And, of course, I ask them what they are going to talk about. If they struggle answering my question, I know there's some work to do. Most people have some facts and maybe even some points of real value to share, but often times their thoughts are disconnected and not really headed in a specific direction. They are not sure what question they are really trying to answer with their presentation. Is the question: How do we increase sales? How do we keep costs down on an existing project? Or, how do we improve security in our neighborhood? It does not really matter what the question is, only that as the speaker you are very clear on what it is and that what you plan to say really answers it.

3. **Tell people what they don't already know or sheds new light.** Once in a while you might be asked to speak before a group that knows nothing of your topic and as long as you can show them what you are sharing is of value, you should have people listening and learning well. But most the time when we are asked to speak, the audience has some knowledge of your topic and, in some cases, knows even more than you do. That's certainly the case for the topic today. All of you have done some public speaking and have certainly seen hundreds of other people speak publicly. So, my aim today is not so much to tell you something you've never experienced or even heard before, but just to package in it a way that makes you say, "That was a helpful reminder." Or, "I've never really thought of it from that perspective before."
4. **"Practice, man, practice."** There's a story of a man who held a violin case under his arm in Times Square looking lost. He asked a policeman, "How can I get to Carnegie Hall?" The policeman answered, "Practice, man, practice." There aren't any shortcuts to performing in Carnegie Hall, and there are no shortcuts to speaking well. It takes practice. Oh certainly, it gets easier the more you do it, but don't expect to wing it and do too well. At the very least you need to outline what you want to say, fill in your outline with illustrations, and work out how you will transition from one point to the next without losing people. Then say your talk out loud to

yourself at least once, if not several times. I can tell you from experience that my most important adjustments came from hearing myself say what I wrote and recognizing it just didn't work.

In order to be prepared, most people will actually want to write out what they want to say. Just remember two things if you do that. First, when you write out your presentation, write it in a conversational tone since that's the way you will want to deliver it. And secondly, use your writing only as a way to work out your thoughts not as something you plan to read. People have come to hear you speak, not hear you read. So once you've written your presentation go through it enough so that you only need a few written prompt to get you through. In the end, that might mean you won't say things just the way you wrote them out, but that's okay. It's better that you come off as naturally speaking to people than that you perfectly recited what you wrote.

5. **Speak your first words confidently.** A number of years ago I was asked to give a eulogy for a young man who had taken his own life. I was in my late twenties at the time, and he was probably 4 or 5 years behind me. He was a super likable guy and came from a very well-respected family, so the loss of his life hit a great number of people. The church in which the service took place could hold about 1,000 people and it was full. The pastor presiding over the services had probably buried more people in town than anyone and so he wisely gathered those who would be speaking beforehand. I am sure he gave us a few tips, but there is one that I have always remembered. He said, "This is an emotional time. And it will be hard to get out your words. Be sure you're first words come out strong. If you do that, you'll be all right." And, you know, his advice really helped that day, and it's helped countless times since then. If we start out weak in our first words, it can be hard to recover. But if we get the train off to a strong start, it will usually keep on rolling.
6. **Express yourself.** Most of us are not born cheerleaders. We have no desire to get in front of people and lead a pep rally. And most the time that is not called for anyways. But that does not mean you cannot or should not let your passion and personality shine through. In fact, you will have a very hard time getting people to show a whole lot of interest in what you are talking about if you don't

sound like you're interested in it yourself. That means that some of the words you speak need to be "italicized," and a few even spoken with "all caps." Sometimes that happens by changing the speed or volume of your delivery, but many times it also comes from gestures. Most of you are probably familiar with TED talks that are given live but then posted for all the world to see. What presenters are most viewed online? Those with more gestures, interestingly enough. Are their gestures rehearsed? Perhaps on occasion, but more often than not they just come out of the passion and interest they have in what they are sharing.

7. **Assume something is not going to work.** Ignore it, laugh at it, or apologize for it. Then move on. Recently, I had a little gathering in my home. It was just family, but it was something I was leading. We were all sitting down, and halfway through my wife leans over and whispers in my ear. "Don't stand up your zipper is down." So what do you do with that? Fortunately, it was must family, so I smiled at her, stayed in my seat, and kept on with what I was doing. And sometimes that's the best we can do. Just smile and move on. And frankly, you'll find that if you smile and move on, so will everyone else. Even if you must apologize for something not being as it should, don't act like everything is ruined. Again, just move on and so will your audience.

8. **Deal with your nerves by looking heavenward.** I have played a lot of competitive tennis over the years, and if there is one thing I have learned is how fickle nerves are. Sometimes it's not there when it probably should be, and other times it's there and you don't know why. The same is true when it comes to speaking. I have spoken publicly thousands of times over the years, so I don't get nervous all that often, but every once in a while, it comes upon me even in circumstances where I am only addressing a smaller group. So what do I do? Well, at times I breathe a little more deeply, and sometimes I remind myself to speak my first words confidently. But most frequently I say a prayer, not out loud, just in my mind. You might expect the prayer to go like this: "God help me!" Or, "If you get me through this one God, I'll..." But it's not like that. It's a much different kind of prayer. It's one in which I thank God for two things. First, I thank him for the way he has shown himself to be faithful in

the past. It's not like God hasn't consistently given me more than I deserve over my lifetime, so why doubt him now? Secondly, I thank him in advance for his acceptance of me regardless of how things turn out. I am quite certain that God's measuring stick of me has nothing to do with how my presentation comes across, and I thank him for that.

Please understand I don't say this kind of prayer because I think it is magic and will produce a great outcome. I say this kind of prayer because when I am nervous I tend to forget those two things. I forget God's past faithfulness, and I forget God's unconditional acceptance of those who look to him in faith. Now, I will tell you this, when I remind myself of those two things through a simple prayer, it's amazing how the bite of my nerves goes away. It's not as if I suddenly get calm. There's still some nervous energy there, but it's not crippling anymore. And it's not crippling anymore because rain or shine, knock it out of the park or not, I figure God has got my back. And I figure, he'll have yours too if you are willing to turn your face towards him.