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Does Anybody Listen to You?

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By Dr. Robert A. Cook



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When you speak, does anybody really listen? Does your message get through to the hearer in the way you meant it should? The answers, and many others, involve the important subject of communications.

We are inclined to regard any in-depth study of this theme as being intensely modern. But Job, the oldest book of the Bible, has something pertinent to say about it. The patriarch asks some penetrating questions related to what God has done and will do for and through the believer. Note the verbs: "helped," "saved," "counselled." The final point in this series (Job 26:1-4) is "plentifully declared," which I take to refer to the whole idea of meaning, of communication in its fullest sense.

Communication begins deep inside your life. It doesn't start with what you say. It doesn't even begin with what you do. It begins in what you are. People know what you are without your saying very much. Ladies, were you ever introduced to some man and you immediately thought, "I don't like him"? You had known him less than thirty seconds, but something about him said, "Watch out." Later you found out he was the office wolf. But your woman's intuition (ignition, I call it) came up with quick evaluation and warning.

Can you tell when somebody likes you? Yes, you can. Can you know when you are being merely tolerated? Of course you can. So it is the inner person to whom you have to give careful attention. Remember, we often communicate without saying a word. The lectures that we give people are seldom retained, but the lessons they learn through observation - - by absorption, osmosis, so to speak - - are carried through life. If you occasionally tell a "white lie" to get out of an embarrassing situation, you are teaching your children that truth isn't nearly as important as saving one's own hide. It's the inner person to whom you have to give careful attention.

A physician friend of mine told me he could usually recognize the personality profile of his patients simply by observing them as they came into his office. He described one lady to me and said, "I knew she was full of resentment the minute I laid eyes on her, without ever having heard about her or examining her, because everything about her was sharp edged. She had a long quill sticking out of her hat and every other ornamentation she wore was sharp-pointed. Even her posture indicated resentfulness."

Well now, I suppose it would be a mistake to say that everybody who wears a feather in his or her hat is filled with resentment. But taken together, all of these indications told this man of medicine and of science something about the individual. Unwittingly, she was communicating something about herself.

Sure enough, when she told the doctor her problems, it had two main symptoms. She had a sore aching neck and she had pains across her chest that she attributed to heart trouble. The doctor put her through all the pertinent tests and conscientiously analyzed them. Her heart was fine - - beating strongly and regularly - - and there seemed to be no real physical problem with her neck. He began to ask her some questions and found out that she was terribly jealous of her husband's mother and that these attacks would come on generally coinciding with visits from her mother-in-law. The last attack had been triggered by the fact that the dear old lady had fallen ill and had been taken to the hospital and the husband had taken money that she, the wife, had been counting on for something for the house and had bought flowers for his mother instead.

I don't know whether she ever did face her resentment and get rid of it. The point I'm making is that we communicate our inner attitudes by the way we look and the way we talk and the way we act.

The wise man (Solomon) said it years ago: "Keep (guard) thy heart with all diligence" (Prov. 4:23). Why? "For out of it are the issues" - - the breaks; we'd call them, - - "of life." People say, "The breaks went against me." Brother, we create our own "breaks." They are directly related to the lordship of Christ in the life. "No *good* thing will He withhold ..." And when your inner life is right with God, when you confess to Him your daily need and are prayed up to date, the very presence of the Lord is communicated through you to other people.

Simon, Peter and John, on their way to the three o'clock prayer meeting, were accosted by a beggar. You remember Peter's classic assertion: "Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6).

What happened? Peter "took him by the right hand, and lifted him up: and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God."

You communicate what you are as a result of God's grace in your life. And you communicate what you thus have, to others.

How do we communicate positively?

Concentrate

First, fill your mind with the Word of God. This is the only way to modify character and

change conduct.

To do this you must will to fix attention on the Scriptures. Oh, you may have many fleeting thoughts around the edge of consciousness - - I know that. But you can really concentrate on only one thing at a time. If you will thus devote yourself to the Word of God, and put it back into the unconscious mind so that it will come out of your "computer" when it is needed, you will find that two things happen: One, the intense effort that you have made to direct your mental powers toward the Word of God will leave little room for lesser things. And two, having put the Word of God into the computer portion of your mind, it will be *the Word* that will pop out when you are under pressure. The psalmist makes this point clear. He says, "I thought on my ways" - - that's *concentration* and it can come only as the Word of God is applied. "And turned my feet unto thy testimonies" - - that's conduct. (See Psa. 119:59.)

Do you know how to do this? Obviously you're going to read your Bible. But more than that is indicated. Meditate upon it. Choose key verses to memorize. Learn whole portions. Think about them during the day. Share them with others.

Remember how, when you were kids in school, you used to put a Lifesaver or something like it in your mouth when the teacher wasn't looking. You couldn't be seen chewing it, so you would slip it alongside your molars and hide it in the side of your cheek. Then once in a while when you thought it was safe you'd slip it out with your tongue and savor that good minty taste, and then you'd slip it back again. Remember that?

There are moments when you can slip a portion of God's Word into the tender area of your consciousness, so to speak, and you can meditate on it. You can enjoy it even for so much as thirty seconds. And then you have to get back into routines again. But for that brief period you were savoring, you were tasting, you were meditating on the Word of God. Form the habit, dear friend. You'll be surprised how much it enriches your life. Later, you will find that you are speaking not necessarily in Biblical terms but on the basis of the truth from God's Word which has taken hold of *your* mind and heart - - and people will *listen*. You will be communicating God's thoughts. If you want other people to wonder what has happened to you and why you have improved so much, try soaking up large portions of the Word of God. Then your instinctive reactions to pressure situations will glorify God and bless others.

Depend

Second, learn to depend on the Holy Spirit. Our Lord Jesus said to his disciples on one occasion, "It is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost" (Mk. 13:11). The Holy Spirit possesses per-

son al characteristics: seeing, speaking, directing, etc. Note the great number of such declarations as these: "Peter, full of the Holy Ghost, said ..." "Saul, full of the Holy Ghost, said ..." These verses tell us that the Holy Spirit will speak through a person effectively under certain circumstances. What are those circumstances?

You must know that you are God's child. The Spirit of God will not speak through you or use you unless you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. If you have never settled that matter, my friend, you need to make this your first priority. No matter how religious you may be, you need to invite Jesus Christ into your heart and life to be your Lord and Savior. Settle that. That's the beginning.

Next, be sure there is nothing in your heart that is still waging war against the will of God. It is difficult for God to use a person who is fighting Him. The ancient prophet asked the rhetorical question, "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3). Two people can't walk together, if they go in opposite ways. Neither can your mind follow two sets of ideals successfully at the same time.

Years ago I asked a medical doctor - - a man in charge of a large state hospital - - "Doctor, is there anyone reason why many of your patients are here?"

He replied, "Yes. Many of my patients are here because they tried to be true to two sets of ideals at one time." And he added, "Doesn't your Bible say something about no man being able to serve two masters?"

"Yes, Sir," I said, "it does."

"Well, Preacher," he concluded, "you'd do us medical men a favor if you'd preach oftener on that." And he turned and walked away.

It is difficult for God to use a person who is not wholly yielded to Him. If there are some unsundered pockets of resistance that need to be cleared out, well then, deal with them. Let the Lord shine the light of His Word upon you. Let Him give you the power of His redemption and the cleansing and enabling presence of the Holy Spirit focused upon these very areas of your life.

If you are God's child, and you know you are yielded to Him the best you know how - - not perfect, but yielded and wanting God's will - - if you know *that*, then you can depend upon the blessed Lord to guide you.

Norman Grubb says in one of his books that the Christian soldier has the right to wait at headquarters until he gets his marching orders and then go out in the field confident that his Commander will back him up. He cites the fact that some of the greatest of Bible characters acted on this principle. They did not have time to call a prayer meeting when confronted with an emergency. They acted in faith, yes. But because they were sure that God was with them, and they were sure that they were doing God's will, they simply took Him at His word and went ahead. Grubb says:

**In two whose activities are given us in so-me detail we see the point most clearly. We can watch both Moses and Elisha when various sudden demands are made upon them - - demands that came in the natural course of their lives. Moses, as leader of Israel, is suddenly called upon for bread and water. He's brought up without warning against the barriers of the Red Sea and the unexpected pursuit of the Egyptian army. He has to meet a surprise attack by the Amalekites ... In Elisha's life the point comes out in still more dramatic fashion. A widow of one of his assistants is in financial difficulty. A pot of stew is poisoned by mistake. One of his students loses his borrowed ax head. Exactly the same kind of sudden demand was laid on Christ. The disciples sinking in a storm. The multitude with no food. The leper, the blind, the suppliant father and mother falling at His feet. In few of these cases is there Indication that a period of retirement was sought in order to find the mind of God, although there were certainly critical moments when it was said of Moses, for instance, that he fell on his face before God. The same is noticeable in Elisha when sent for by the idolatrous king Jehoram with whom the godly king ehosopha had allied himself. "What had I to do with thee?" said he indignantly to Jehoram. "Get to the prophets of your father." Now when only persuaded to stay for Jehosopha's sake, he asked for a minstrel to soothe his rightly ruffled spirit, before he could know and give out the Lord's word. But the striking fact is that normally these men of God, as in the case of the Saviour Himself, took the supply of God for a sudden emergency in their stride, as it were. They took it for granted that where need was there also was Divine supply if they would Simply draw upon it. Look at Elisha providing the oil, healing the waters, raising the ax head, getting the water for the army, and so on. What was special revelation to them is meant to be common grace to us. The mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations now is made manifest to His saints, which is what - - Christ in you, the hope of glory. To us it is now said that God worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure."*

The Law of Faith, Norman Grubb; Christian Literature Crusade, Philadelphia, p. 129- 131.

Now that's the point. If you know the Lord Jesus, He dwells within you by His Spirit. Learn to rely on the Holy Spirit. You can depend on Him to say through you what He wants to say - *and people will listen.*

Focus

Third, learn to focus on the other person instead of yourself. This principle can be illustrated in many different ways. For example, if you were raised on a farm before the days of the sophisticated equipment that we have now, you know about plowing a field the hard way. What did you do to achieve a straight furrow? Did you keep looking behind to see if it was straight? No. You fixed your attention on a tree or a fence post or a hill or some other distant point and as you proceeded toward it, the row was straight. We are to be "looking (always) unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith."

Now when you communicate with people, the same principle applies. Don't focus on yourself. Focus on the other person. How does he feel about things? What are his goals and dreams? What are his disappointments and heartaches? Where - - if you can find out - - is he hurting and would appreciate a word of comfort?

Years ago I read a series of little books on management. One of them said that the essence of negotiation is to ask these questions: First, what does the other fellow want? Second, what do I want? Third, how can we get together? That's oversimplification, but it is a workable formula.

God does something for you when your first concern is the other person. As an illustration, when you point that old twelve gauge shot-gun at something and pull the trigger, the charge of buckshot is projected out the business end of the barrel, but you feel a mighty kick against your shoulder. Similarly, God's power reaches you as well as the one you communicate with.

Dawson Trotman, founder of the Navigators, used to write on the palm of his hand with India ink the particular object of his attention that day - - the person, the Scripture verse, or whatever. On one occasion I saw the letters "O.W." on his hand.

I said, "Daws, I don't know any of your workers that has those initials."

He laughed and said, "They don't stand for a person. They stand for "Other Works" and he quoted this verse: "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others" (Phil. 2:4).

“Today,” he said, “we are praying for other people in the Lord’s work. As a matter of fact, we just got through praying for you as you came in.” Isn’t that beautiful?

I remember complaining to somebody years ago about a certain job situation, spelling out my troubles. The other person stood there listening and when I had finished he said, “You know, it’s wonderful that you understand about me.” All the while I was talking about me he was thinking about himself.

The other person is the center of his world. You may just as well realize it and count on it. So focus on his need - - and he will listen to you. Consider another idea.

Language

Fourth, make sure that you and the other person are talking about the same thing. It is amazing how people can converse with each other with entirely different meanings to the words they use in common.

Learn to pin down generalities. Parents, of course, are familiar with what I am going to tell you. Your teenager comes home and says “May I do this or that?” and you say, “No, I don’t think you should.”

Your child replies, “Oh, Mom, you don’t understand. Everybody’s doing it.”

Well, now, who is “everybody”? It turns out that Josie down the block is “everybody,” and knowing that puts an entirely different cast on the whole situation. Define your terms. You hear: “It’s only a little way,” How far is a little way? “It will be only a little after midnight.” How long after midnight?

“There will be just a gang of the kids.” Who are the kids, and how many are in the gang? If that sounds like cross examination, it doesn’t have to be. Just establish in your own mind and in the minds of your loved ones that you want to know what the facts are.

The mark of an educated person is that he quantifies and qualifies his statements. How much, how far, at what cost, and so on. Somebody said to me the other day. “I’m about to give up the whole thing.” What did he mean? His marriage? His job? His house? I had to ask him. It turned out that “the whole thing” he was talking about was one small segment of his life. When he thought about it he decided he’d better not let that go either.

Learn to define your terms to yourself. You may think this is pretty dull, but do remember

that it's terribly important. Be exact in your terminology, not pedantic, not pedestrian, not so terribly detailed that later, when you speak, you put everybody to sleep. I'm simply saying that you need to think clearly about what you mean before you say it. It will save you many a painful situation afterwards.

We don't go around preaching to people in the ordinary course of daily affairs. But our main business in life is to share Christ with them. Well, then, if you really want to communicate with people, isn't it worth the trouble and time it takes to think out what you mean before you speak?

I would be the first to admit that oftentimes I speak quickly and without thinking. They say my mother had a sharp although gentle Irish tongue and I think I inherited some of the sharpness at least. So I admit that I need to apply what I'm telling to you. But we're all in this together, dear friends, because we're human beings. And if we want to communicate Christ to people, let's learn to be very sure of what we believe and let's say it in terms of the other person's interests and needs.

Organization

Fifth, in terms of work to be done, be sure you and your listener are talking about the same things. There are six questions to be asked, and the answers found, if you want to organize anything.

First, what is to be done? (Many people get into arguments about the *how* before they have settled the *what*.)

Second: who is to do it?

Third: How is it to be done?

Fourth: By what time is it to be finished? (Always set a deadline.)

Fifth: How much will it cost?

Sixth: (a supplemental evaluative question): How well was it done? Always have a post mortem so you can learn from your mistakes.

On this matter of improved evaluation you can do three things to help yourself. Just before you close your day, go over the things you did and said that day and ask: How can I do better next time? Then plan, in order of priority, the activities of tomorrow. (Better to plan them at

night than later, when the day begins. The list will change, of course, but you will be surprised at how much you accomplish.) Finally, speak to your blessed Lord and let Him speak to you so that the last word in your consciousness is the Word of God. Drift off to sleep with a passage of Scripture in your mind and you'll wake up with a blessed awareness of God in your life.

Listening

Sixth, play back to your friend what he has said to you. The formula is simple. A tells B; B tells A what he understands; then A tells B he understands B understands! If you really want to communicate, play back in your own words what people want you to grasp, and vice versa. You'll often hear, "No, that's not what I meant at all!" It is like the video tape that is backed up and replayed on a close call at second base. This matter of playback takes a little time, but do be patient with people because, quite frankly, you expect them to be patient with you, don't you? Apply the Golden Rule: listen to others as you hope they will listen to you.

Many people don't really listen. They just wait for you to pause for breath so they can jump into the conversation. Some one has given a classic definition of a bore: He is somebody who insists on talking about himself when I can't wait to talk about myself.

Incidentally, you pay your listener a subtle compliment when you play back his thoughts to him. That person begins to feel safe with you because he knows you listen with great respect and interest - - enough to put forth the effort of rephrasing, for himself, what you have said.

What do you do in the case of a wild idea that seemingly has no value to you whatsoever? Do you say, "That idea's absolutely way out in left field and doesn't make any sense"? If you do, you lose your audience immediately. Dr. Clyde Narramore gives a suggestion at this point.

You turn to your listener and say, "Well, you certainly have an idea there!" You haven't said whether it is a good idea or not, but you have acknowledged the intelligence of the listener. You could then go on to say, "I wonder if we could talk about it together" - and in the course of the ensuing conversation you might be able to show certain difficulties that would render the plan not feasible.

Whenever you are going to point out a weakness, say "we." When you acknowledge people and their worth, say "you." When you praise, say "you." When you criticize say "we."

So far as your witness for Christ is concerned, you need to specialize in a few things that you can communicate well. I once saw a graphic demonstration of how little of what people hear is retained by them. Let us suppose you say ten different things to a person. How many of them does he remember? Experiments have shown that that person recalls no more than three.

Then when that person, who remembers only three things, tells those three to somebody else, do you know how many get across? One, or none.

Learn to clearly spell out a few things: God's plan of salvation as you have received it, the walk of faith as you are enjoying it, the hope for the future as the Word of God outlines it. When you do this consistently, *people will listen to you*. Your own heart will be warmed and will be blessed. Try it!

