

Ten Biblical Ideas for Verbal Communication

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- *What can we learn about communication from Jesus?*

This brochure presents ten rules for effective verbal communication, illustrated by Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well in John 4.

#1 The Rule of the Speaker

The one speaking must know what he wants to say and the person to whom he wants to say it.

In John 4:3-26, it's clear that Jesus knew what He wanted to say and the woman to whom He wanted to say it. The communicators of the Bible were not like abstract artists who expect everyone to come away with their own interpretation. Biblical communicators had a meaning in mind. That's why the most basic principle of interpretation is to discover the author's intended meaning. But biblical authors also knew those to whom they were talking. Joseph knew his brothers. Moses knew the Israelites. Daniel knew Nebuchadnezzar. The apostles knew the people to whom they wrote letters. One thing that made Jesus the perfect communicator was His perfect knowledge of the people to whom He spoke (Matthew 9:4).

#2 The Rule of the Language

The language that communicates the message must be common to both the speaker and the listener.

Communication requires shared meanings. That includes gestures, facial expressions, tones of voice, body movements, and especially words. The fact that the Greek language was spoken all across the Roman Empire greatly enhanced the spread of the Gospel. But shared meaning is more than the dictionary definition of words. It also includes the personal significance of those words. When Jesus spoke to the woman at the well, they had a common understanding of the significance of worship in Jerusalem vs. Mt. Gerizim, the history of Jacob's Well, and the significance of drawing water (John 4:10-21). For example, one thing that makes husband/wife communication difficult is that men and women often have different meanings of words like love, sex, parenting, caring, etc.

#3 The Rule of Initiation

The one with something to say should initiate the conversation.

In John 4:3-8, Jesus initiated the conversation. He was the one with a message. He was the one with something to communicate. Of course, we might initiate a conversation with a question. In that case, the thing we have to say is that we want to learn something. But unless something is initiated, there is no communication. And the one with the message must do the initiating. We should not just wait for the other person to bring it up.

#4 The Rule of the Listener

The listener must be interested in what the speaker has to say.

In John 4:9-12, we see that the woman was almost immediately interested in what Jesus had to say, and as the conversation progressed, her interest grew. It is interest in the message, not a need to hear the message, which results in communication. Interest in a message may come about because of (1) an existing desire to know it, (2) a perception of a need for it in others, or (3) the speaker convincing the listener of its value—as was the case in John 4:9-15 with the woman at the well.

#5 The Rule of the Speaker's Job

The speaker must stimulate thinking in the listener by inspiring a spirit of intrigue.

By just talking to the Samaritan woman, Jesus got her attention because Jews didn't talk to Samaritans. But what really intrigued her was when He said, ... *you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband* (John 4:18).

#6 The Rule of the Listener's Job

The listener must reproduce in his or her own mind the message of the speaker.

Notice in John 4 how both Jesus and the woman repeated the main idea of the other person before going on (John 4:10-11; 20-21). Before a pilot takes off at a controlled airport, he receives instructions from Air Traffic Control, which he repeats back until Air Traffic Control says, "Read back correct." Any time someone is talking to us, it's a good idea to re-say (perhaps silently to ourselves) what the speaker is saying. Even Jesus reproduced in His own mind the thoughts of the Father (John 14:10).

#7 The Rule of Understanding

The one who hears a message should be able to reproduce it.

Understanding is the link between hearing and reproducing. James said we should not just be hearers of the Word but doers (James 1:22). Jesus said that the gap between those two is bridged by understanding (Matthew 13:23). To understand is to take ownership of the author's intended message so that it can be reproduced accurately. When Jesus talked with the woman, she reproduced the essence of His message with the people of her city (John 4:28-29). Excellence in communication requires that we not just be able to repeat the message but understand it well enough to communicate it to others.

#8 The Rule of the Message

The message will be understood through what is already known.

Communication requires building on the foundation of what is already known. For example, you can't read a book unless you know the language, you can't scan a document into a PDF format unless you know about computers and what a PDF is, and you can't check your oil if you don't know what the dipstick is, etc. In John 4, Jesus knew what the woman already knew and used her desires to move her to what she needed to know (vv. 20-24).

#9 The Rule of Incarnation

The speaker will communicate best when in the physical presence of the listener.

Incarnation means "in the flesh." Communication is never complete without physical presence. Even God did not consider His communication complete until He became flesh and dwelt among us, so that we could behold His glory (John 1:14). The convincing reality to the woman of Samaria was that Jesus was physically there, sitting by the well, telling her *all the things that I have done*, as she put it. The first thing we do when we receive a letter, e-mail, or phone message is to visualize the sender. Businesses spend lots of money flying personnel to customers, suppliers, and distributors because in-the-flesh contact is optimal communication. The apostles who wrote the New Testament saw their letters as a part of, not apart from, their incarnational presence (Romans 15:27f; 1 Corinthians 16:5-7; 2 Corinthians 2:13; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-9; Hebrews 13:20; 2 John 12).

#10 The Rule of Impact

The speaker's message should have a lasting effect on the listener.

Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well had a lasting effect, on her and apparently the whole city (John 4:39-42). Communication happens, not when a speaker or message is entertaining but only when it makes an impact. Mark wrote about Jesus' communication, *And they were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes* (Mk 1:22).

Questions and Answers

Q: *What can we learn about communication from Jesus?*

A: **#1**—He knew what He wanted to say and to whom He wanted to say it.

#2—He used words which both He and His listener understood.

#3—He initiated the conversation.

#4—His listener was interested in what He had to say.

#5—He stimulated thinking in His listener by inspiring intrigue.

#6—The listener was able to reproduce His message in her mind.

#7—The listener was able to reproduce His message to others.

#8—His message was understood because He used concepts that were already known.

#9—He communicated in the physical presence of His listener.

#10—His message had a lasting impact on His listener.