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Henry Clay was a speaker of great acclaim. If you are successful at anything, those who aren’t successful will be jealous. Some of the older members of the house were jealous of Clay’s ability to sway a crowd with his speeches, and one of them said to him in a rather snide way, “Your problem, Henry, is that you speak for the immediate impact on your audience. I speak for posterity.”

“Yes,” Clay replied, “and it seems that you are willing to keep talking until the arrival of your audience.”

In other words, Clay was saying that his critics were people who talked without anybody listening. Their audience was not a real one. This is (hopefully) a practical book about normal, everyday people talking to normal, everyday people. It is not a book for scholars or professional communicators. It is, in short, a book written to help you reach a real audience—the one we encounter every day of our lives.

Have you ever made a fool of yourself in a public speech? Have you ever wondered what to say next in a conversation with a friend or acquaintance? Have you ever seen speakers sway a crowd and thought that you would like to be able to do that? Have you ever wondered why your words had no effect on the people who heard them? Have you ever felt ignored in a conversation, at a party or
behind a podium? Have you ever wished you could improve your speaking and conversation skills? Have you ever given a report and found that nobody understood what you reported or didn’t even care? Have you ever wished you could say things to your employees that would motivate them toward more efficient work, or wished you could say something to your boss that would motivate him or her toward giving you a raise?

If you’ve had those wishes, this book is for you.

It’s a book about talking.

I’m a talker and a reasonably successful one. This book isn’t going to be filled with academic jargon or impractical theory. The information has come from a lifetime of trial and a whole lot of error. The best way to learn to do something is to first do it wrong, and I’ve done it wrong a lot. I’m going to give you an opportunity to learn from my failure and success.

I teach communications at Reformed Seminary where I try to help young preachers get the fire to the front pew. I spend a considerable portion of my time speaking at conventions, churches, colleges, and seminars. Currently I speak on a daily fifteen-minute radio program heard on over three hundred stations across the country. I have worked in commercial broadcasting, selling everything from Cadillacs to cigarettes, and in Christian broadcasting with a far better message. As the host of a “Christian talk show,” I spend a lot of time discussing people’s problems with a view to helping them find some answers.

In other words, my job is talking. (Of course, it is far more than that, but, at minimum, it is what I do for a living.) Talking is the train that carries the product to the market. The product may be the best any industry has to offer, but if there is no transportation to get it to the public, then the best product in the world will remain on the shelves.
I’m a Christian and I have a concern that Christians learn to talk better. I’m not afraid that the Christian message suffers from lack of truth. It really is true! I’m afraid that it suffers from talkers who don’t know how to talk. As part of my personal calling, I want to help my Christian family talk better.

But communication skills are amoral (they are either effective or ineffective, not “good” or “bad”). So, if you are a pagan, this book might help you too. Just don’t tell anybody where you got the information.

The major problem with talking is that everybody does it, yet hardly anybody understands what it does and how it affects others. In any given day, you will have heard thousands upon thousands of words spoken by a whole lot of people. The odds are that you won’t remember what most of those words communicated. Not only that, during any given day you will speak thousands of words, and few people will even understand or remember what your words communicated.

I’m writing this book to fix one side of that equation: your side. I want you to talk better, to talk so people will listen.

Mostly, I want you to talk better so that your words will make a difference in your church, or your family, or your business or with your friends.

But, also, maybe I’ll meet you someday. Perhaps I’ll hear you make a speech or preach a sermon. Maybe we will talk. And, to be painfully honest with you, I want to enable you to talk better so that I won’t be bored to tears when we meet.
The Power of Speech

For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

Matt. 12:37

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to lose the power of speech? You couldn’t communicate quickly or easily with others about your needs, your feelings, or your desires. You wouldn’t be able to correct false impressions or share your ideas. You couldn’t encourage or reprimand or inspire. You wouldn’t be able to express anger or love or joy. If you couldn’t talk, you would be forced into the shell of your private world and it would be a lonely place indeed.

I was speaking at a conference in Detroit and, for the first time in my life, developed a bad case of laryngitis. The only way I could speak was in a whisper and with the sound system turned up very loud. And the only way I could do that was to refrain from talking to anybody outside of the public time on the platform.
Frustrating? You have no idea. I realized then how much I depend on speech. Things I take for granted, like saying “good morning” or ordering a meal in a restaurant, weren’t possible. There could be no dinner conversation, no way to respond to questions. Worst of all, I couldn’t call home in the evening and talk to my wife. I found myself becoming quite depressed and angry. The most frustrating thing about it was that I couldn’t tell anyone how frustrated and angry I really was.

We never realize how important something really is until we lose it. At that conference I discovered how much we depend on words. Language is one of the most important gifts human beings possess. Entire civilizations can trace their beginnings to the point where their speech became viable. “Civilized” is often defined by anthropologists in terms of speech. Most of our early childhood memories go back to that precise time when we first learned to speak. Learning the language of a culture or a country is the most important factor in being successful in that culture.

The problem with many people is that they have taken the gift God has given and have wasted it. I have a friend who used to comment (when there was still a Soviet Union) that there wasn’t much difference between the United States and the Soviet Union in the area of free speech. He said, “In the Soviet Union they don’t have freedom of speech, and they don’t say anything. In America we have freedom of speech, and we don’t say anything either. So what’s the difference?” He was saying that freedom of speech doesn’t mean anything if you don’t have anything to say.

Many people live frustrated lives because they haven’t learned how to use speech properly. They either have nothing to say, or say it so poorly that nobody cares when they do say it. What a pity.

You say, “Steve, come on. I realize that you talk for a living and you think speech is important. But haven’t you overestimated the importance of speech? There are lots of
more important things. My frustrated life, when it is frustrated, has a lot to do with many things—but one of them isn’t speech.”

Let’s talk about it.

Words have power, you know.

When God speaks, His very speaking accomplishes the purpose of His words. “So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:11). In the Bible, words are often used to accomplish their purpose, thus there are “benedictions” (blessings) and “maledictions” (curses) which have the power to bless or destroy. Jesus said that we would be either justified or condemned by our words. It is no accident that the incarnation was described in John 1 as the “Word becoming flesh.”

When God wanted to punish Zacharias because of his unbelief, He took from him the power to speak.

**Words Can Bless**

I teach students at the seminary that it is desperately important that they affirm the congregations they serve. Too many pastors feel they have been sent to a church to preach the wrath of God, to straighten out the members, and to fix
all the problems. The truth is that God usually calls a pastor to a church to love its people and to tell them so.

There is a correlation of what I teach at the seminary to other areas too. For instance, a number of years ago a friend of mine asked for my help with the problems he was having in his business. I asked him if he ever told the people who worked for him that he appreciated and valued them. He replied that he paid them and felt that this was enough. “Steve,” he said, “every time I give them a paycheck, I’ve affirmed them.”

My mother may have had an ugly child, but not a dumb one. My friend thought his problems had to do with laziness in his employees. That wasn’t the problem, as any nitwit could see. After I taught my friend some of the things I’m going to teach you in this book, the change was radical and astounding. He told me later, “Who would have believed that something that little could make a difference that big?”

When I think of people who have made a difference in my life, I remember those who have used their words to encourage, motivate, and affirm me. I think of the five retired pastors in the little church on Cape Cod who had the power to destroy the young pastor in their midst. Instead, they decided among them that they were going to be my cheerleaders. Time after time, when I was discouraged and ready to quit, those godly men would speak words of comfort and love. I often think of what would have happened to my ministry and my life if those men had decided to “fix” me with their words.

My friend and colleague R. C. Sproul, one of the most prolific and insightful Christian writers in America, was once told by a schoolteacher, “R. C., Don’t let anyone ever tell you that you can’t write.” Her words became a motivating factor in the writing of his books.
I read three or four books a week and can’t imagine what life would be like if I couldn’t read. I love reading because an eighth-grade teacher encouraged me to read and then taught me how.

When Sir Walter Scott was a boy he was not considered very bright. As a result, most folks ignored him. When he was twelve, he went to a social gathering where a number of literary figures were present.

Robert Burns, the famous Scottish poet, was admiring a painting under which was written a couplet of poetry. He asked about the author but nobody knew who had written the lines. That was when Scott very shyly gave the author’s name and quoted the rest of the poem. Burns placed his hand on the young boy’s head and said, “Son, you will be a great man in Scotland someday.”

Years later, Scott remembered Burns’ encouraging words as the turning point in his life. They made the difference between a man settling for a life of obscurity or reaching for greatness.

Wives and husbands don’t often realize how important they are in the success and failure of their spouse’s career and relationships. My wife, Anna, has always been a benediction on my life. Oh, she is loved by her husband for a number of reasons. She is beautiful and fun. She has been a wonderful mother. She is a great cook. Her abilities in business and in management are superb. But the most important gift she has given me over all the years of our marriage has been the fact that she believed in me—and told me so. She has picked up the pieces of a sermon that bombed or a project that failed and has applied the words of encouragement and affirmation that enabled me to get up each time I was knocked down.
Words Can Destroy

There is a rhyme many of us learned about words: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” I suspect my mother taught me that rhyme when someone had said something cruel and hurtful to me. She wanted me to know that I could survive the verbal onslaught of thoughtless people. I’m sure it helped, but she was wrong.

Words can hurt far more than sticks and stones. In fact, much of the pain and sorrow with which we all live comes from words. Words used as a curse can destroy us. If you don’t believe me, think of those incidents in your life when someone’s words devalued you (“If brains were dynamite, you wouldn’t have enough to blow yourself out of a peanut shell!”), or when angry words stung so terribly that you thought you would die (“You are a stupid idiot! I can’t believe you did that!”), or when critical words eliminated the possibility of success, (“Can’t you ever do anything right? Look at how you bungled it!”), or when words let you know that you weren’t important, (“Here’s a quarter. Go call someone who cares!”).

Bill Glass, who works with prisoners, often asks at his meetings in prisons, “How many of you had a father or mother who told you something like, ‘Son, some day you are going to end up in jail?’” Bill says that time after time

Query:
“Has he finished his speech yet?”

Response:
“He finished long ago. He just won’t quit talking!”
almost all of the prisoners raise their hands affirming the prophetic power of their parents’ words.

Our children often become what we say they will become. If we tell them they are stupid, they will probably act that way. If we tell them that they won’t amount to anything, they probably won’t. If we speak to them like criminals, they will, in all probability, become criminals. While physical and sexual abuse of children is horrible and rampant in our society, verbal abuse, while it is not often recognized and condemned as such, can be almost as devastating.

One of the key principles of business management is that words of encouragement or discouragement affect production. Leaders have great power to destroy, discourage, and debilitate their followers with words. How many times have teachers demolished a potential Einstein with thoughtless words? Think of the marriages that have been destroyed, the friendships shattered, the churches divided because of careless words.

Words Define How We See Ourselves

Words do more than bless and curse. The words you use when you are talking define how you think about yourself. Give me a few minutes of conversation with almost anyone and I’ll be able to tell you whether that person thinks of himself or herself as a champion or a chump.

John Wesley, after some significant failure in his life, became convinced that faith was the key to reaching the world for God, but had trouble making faith a reality in his life. He went to one of his mentors and asked this question: “How can I preach faith if I don’t have faith?”

Wesley’s mentor made an interesting comment. “Mr. Wesley,” he said, “preach faith until you have faith, and then because you have faith you will preach faith.” In other words, “Learn to see yourself as a man of faith, articulate that reality in your life, and then you will become a man
of faith.” Words do define how we see ourselves and determine, sometimes, what we become.

I want to show you how to begin to think more highly of yourself and to articulate that reality to others. You will be surprised at the power of words to change your life.

There are some people whose conversation and speaking style could be described as a perpetual whine. In their talking they have defined what they think of themselves, which leads me to the next point.

**Words Set the Parameters of How People Will React to You**

If your verbal messages sound like a perpetual whine, you must expect that people will treat you accordingly. If you speak with authority, people will react to you as a person with authority. If you speak words of love, people will react to you with love. If your words reflect a seething anger, don’t be surprised if people avoid you except when they want to fight you or enlist you in their battles with someone else.

Religious people can sometimes be quite pompous. Not too long ago I was criticized quite harshly in a church magazine for something I had said. I received letters from all over the country in which people tried to correct my “spurious theological views.” But by far the most interesting feedback in that whole episode came from a quite stiff and religious young man who approached me after I had spoken at a conference. He said, “Dr. Brown, what you said grieved my heart.” (Watch it when Christians say their “heart is grieved.” That generally means they have a howitzer pointed at you and are getting ready to pull the trigger.)

I said to the young man, “Son, this is a small conference held in a small place and I’m a peon. There isn’t anything here big enough to grieve your heart.”
If the minds of men were laid open, we should see but little difference between that of the wise man and that of the fool. The difference is that the first knows how to pick and cull his thoughts for conversation... whereas the other lets them all indifferently fly out in words.

Joseph Addison

He was shocked and then spoke about his concern for me. “Don’t you want to hear what a brother in Christ has to say?”

“No, son,” I replied, “I really don’t, unless you want to spit it out. I’ve had about enough spiritual nonsense for one day. If you want to tell me what you really think, without all the subtle trappings, I will listen.”

“I think,” he almost shouted, “that you are arrogant and rude!” And then he started blushing. It was probably the first up-front and honest thing he had said in a long time.

“I think,” I said, “that I agree with you. But I am better than I was and God isn’t through with me yet.” Then we began to talk, and it turned out to be a very pleasant and helpful exchange.

His opening words, however, set the parameters of what was clearly going to be an adversarial relationship. He didn’t mean to do that. He just didn’t realize that words often determine how people react to people.
When I was in commercial broadcasting and part of the news team of a radio station in Boston, I learned that if one can’t pronounce a word correctly, one should mispronounce it with boldness and people will think they are wrong.

If your conversations are always reflecting “Harry’s humble habit,” you will find that people will assume that you have every reason to be humble. (As the psychiatrist said to the patient, “The reason you have an inferiority complex is because you are inferior.”) If you reflect confidence in your message (whether that is a sales talk, a presentation of the gospel, a sermon, or an acceptance speech), you will inspire confidence in your hearers. If you apologize for what you are about to say (“I don’t tell stories very well, but I heard the funniest joke the other day...” or “I am not a public speaker but...”) people will think that you have much about which to apologize.

The words you use will determine your success or failure in accomplishing the goal you set when you speak the words.

I was once the pastor of a church where it became necessary to add some new buildings. We were told that the new buildings would cost no more than one and a half million dollars. The lowest of five bids from contractors was over three million. In trying to explain the building program to the members, we almost junked the whole program. The building committee resigned and a blanket of doom settled over the leadership.

I called a friend of mine who had been through three building programs and told him my problems. (There is something weird about any pastor who has gone through more than one building program. One building program is a result of inexperience. Anything more reflects a warped personality.) He gave me two pieces of valuable advice. First, he told me that a leader must lead. And second, he
told me that once I had laid the first brick, the problems
would stop.

I called two guys and had them report to me. I told them
that in two weeks we were going to have a ground-
breaking ceremony in the parking lot. “I don’t know what
we are going to build,” I added. “It may be only an out-
house . . . but we are going to build something.” Then I
called my pastor friend and said, “Jim, if you are wrong,
I’m in serious trouble.”

Over the next few months I spoke words of encourage-
ment and vision to that congregation. At times I was dis-
couraged and without vision, but I continued to use the
words that were needed. The congregation was too small
to build such elaborate buildings and a number of people
left the church and there were times when I would pray,
“Lord, are you sure you want this thing built?”

You know something? Those buildings are now stand-
ing. The congregation is proud of what has been accom-
plished. People who, before the building started, had said,
“We can’t do this. It’s too big and we are too little,” are now
saying, “Look what we did!” They are pleased at what God
did with people who were committed to a project. And
most of all, there is one amazed preacher (me) who still
looks back to those days with unbelief. It is hard to believe,
sometimes, how God uses words of vision to inspire a
people to do what they thought was impossible.

Do words have power? Of course they do.

Rabbi Stephen Samuel Wise was asked to address an
anti-Nazi meeting in Brooklyn. As a result of his acceptance,
he received a number of threatening letters. Some of the
writers told him he would be killed if he addressed the rally.
When the day finally came, Wise mounted the podium and
said this: “I have been warned to stay away from this meet-
ing under pain of being killed. If anyone is going to shoot
me, let him do it now. I hate to be interrupted.”
Now there was a man who knew the power of words! He had something to say, knew how to say it, and dared anybody (others knew the power of words too) to try to stop him.

Do words have power? Give me ten men or women like Rabbi Wise and I can change the world.