

Tips for Open-Air Preaching

Adapted from *The World's Greatest Preachers* by Ray Comfort and Kirk Cameron.

Open-air preaching is as old as preaching itself. Throughout history God has used open-air preachers to bring the Gospel to the multitudes. There are right and wrong ways to preach in the open-air, but like swimming, you can't really learn until you "take the plunge". This sheet contains helpful tips for anyone who desires to preach the Gospel publicly to those outside the church's walls.

Qualifications of an Open-Air Preacher

- A good voice.
- Naturalness of manner.
- Speaks with confident assurance.
- Good at using illustrations to make a point.
- The ability to think on your feet.
- A good knowledge of Scripture and of human nature.
- Ability to adapt to any crowd.
- "Thick skin" in the face of mocking and ridicule.
- Zeal, discernment, and common sense.
- A large, loving heart.
- Sincere belief in everything you say.
- Entire dependence on the Holy Spirit for success.
- A close walk with God by prayer.
- A consistent walk before men by a holy life.

Preparation

- Be utterly convinced that God wants you to open air preach, and that by His grace you are willing to obey Him no matter the cost.
- Check your motives. Open air preaching is not about proving how devoted you are or about being a martyr. Your motive should be a sincere compassion for the souls of others, and a selfless desire to take up your cross and glorify Christ no matter what the cost.
- Learn as much as you can about public speaking.
- Practice! Watch yourself in front of a mirror. Record yourself and listen to how you sound.
- Study up. Be prepared to face a host of objections from hecklers, and know how to answer them. This skill will be strengthened through experience, but do your best to be prepared ahead of time.
- Recognize your utter dependence on the Holy Spirit.
- If you are a beginner, bring someone with you who has done open air preaching before. If you can't find someone, ask a couple of friends to come with you and so they can give you feedback afterwards.
- Understand your success depends entirely on God. He is the one who will convict and convert, your job is to be faithful in sowing the seed. No matter what happens during the open-air meeting, God is in control. "Surely I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20).

Setup

- Preach only on public property. Check with the authorities and get necessary permits before you begin.
- Elevate yourself by standing on a small step stool or crate. People can see you more clearly, your voice will carry farther, it gives you a sense of authority, and the crowd will be more inclined to think what you are saying is important.
- Use the surrounding environment to amplify your voice. Speak towards buildings so your voice will bounce off.
- Never stand with the sun behind you, or it will get in the crowd's eyes when they look up at you.
- Preach with the wind, never against it.
- If possible, choose a location away from music, fountains, cars, and machinery of any kind.
- Avoid narrow sidewalks. The police can legally break up your meeting if your crowd clogs the sidewalk, forcing pedestrians out into the street.
- Bring some supportive friends with you. A crowd draws a crowd, and their friendly company will help to keep the crowd orderly. Give them tracts and encourage them to start conversations with the other hearers. But they should not interfere with hecklers, as they are best handled by the preacher. Nor should they hand out tracts to active listeners as it will distract them from the preacher's message. They should give out tracts only after the preacher is done, or to people who are aren't listening or who have listened but are now leaving.

Drawing a Crowd

- Grab their attention right away! Try a "mock funeral" (have someone lay on the ground covered with a sheet and surrounded by pallbearers), or give out money in response to trivia questions.
- Begin in the natural and then swing to the spiritual. News stories or the recent death of a celebrity can be excellent springboards into the subject of death and the afterlife.
- Nothing draws a crowd like a good heckler.
- Bring some supportive friends with you. A crowd draws a crowd. But make sure they face the preacher and give him their attention. If they turn their backs or talk amongst themselves, it sends a message to passers-by that the preacher is not worth hearing.

Preaching Do's and Dont's

DO:

- Do talk *to* people, not *at* them, or worse, down to them.
- Do speak in a lively, confident manner. Fire and energy will hold a crowd. Cold, tedious preaching will not.
- Do speak with the right tone. What you say to a crowd is just as important how you say it. Let them hear the passion and concern in your voice. Find a tone that is loving but firm, gentle but bold, humble but uncompromising.
- Do find the right volume level for your voice. Speak loudly enough for people to hear you while still using a pleasant, conversational tone. Don't yell, scream, or strain your voice.
- Do speak from your stomach rather than from your throat. If you don't eat beforehand, you should end up with strained stomach muscles when you are done. This is a good sign that you are using your diaphragm to project your voice rather than your throat. If you solely use your throat, your voice may not last very long and you may do damage to your voice.
- Do use lots of illustrations and word-pictures.
- Do expect some "street wit" (smart alecks or jokers in the crowd), and be prepared to answer in kind. But respond with genuine wit, not sarcasm or humor that humiliates.
- Do use hecklers to draw a larger crowd, but handle them with patience, gentleness, and humility (2 Tim. 2:23-26). Smile and ask a heckler his name as a sign of respect (bless those who curse you). If you are stumped by a heckler, be humble enough to say "I don't know the answer, but I'll look into it".
- Do be patient with hecklers. Remember that sinners are spiritually blind, incapable of seeing the truth. So you must instruct them gently and patiently (2 Tim. 2:24-26).
- Do keep bringing the conversation back to the sinner's conscience and his responsibility to God on Judgment Day.
- Do teach as well as preach (2 Timothy 2:24-25; Psalm 51:13; Acts 5:42; Matthew 13:23). It's not enough that sinners hear the gospel, they must understand it (Acts 8:30). If the sinner fails to understand his need for a Savior, your preaching is like a loud gun that misses the target.
- Do quote Scripture frequently. Never underestimate the power of the right verse quoted at the right time.

- Do be snappy and brief. If you dwell too long on any one point, you will lose your crowd. Speak intensely with short sentences and with simple, direct points. "The chain of thought must be taken to pieces and each link melted down and turned into bullets" (John Wesley).
- Do remind your hearers of your motives. You don't want their money. You're not telling them to join a church. You are there only because you care about their eternal welfare.
- Do be wise as a serpent but gentle as a dove (Matthew 10:16)

DON'T:

- Don't be scared (Psalm 27:1). It's natural to feel nervous, even terrified. But remember that nothing will happen to you apart from the will of the Father, and anything that He allows to happen will be for the best.
- Speak boldly but don't antagonize.
- Don't be dull! Be energetic, use illustrations and humor.
- Don't read or use notes. Commit your message to memory.
- Don't be soft! An open-air meeting is no place for a nice, namby-pamby preacher. A soft, gentle tone is good for one-on-one discussions but terrible for open-air preaching.
- Don't talk too long. Ten minutes is often more than enough. Open-air crowds don't want to listen to a long-winded preacher. Be passionate but be brief!
- Don't let the meeting be broken up. If an interruption occurs, do your best to hold your ground and keep the crowd.
- Whatever happens, never lose your temper! When you get angry, your message looks weak. If you stay calm, your message looks strong.
- Don't get caught up in arguments (2 Timothy 2:23). Such "rabbit trails" will take you off of your main topic (the gospel), and the crowd will quickly lose interest. Apologetics can "bait" the crowd, but the "hook" must be the gospel.
- Don't let an angry listener shake you. Anger is often a response to conviction of sin. "If you throw a rock into a pack of dogs, the one who yelps is the one who got hit".

Dealing with Interruptions

Police - If the police interfere, keep a humble, respectful attitude. Generally the police will respond favorably if you respect their authority. Even if they are in the wrong, it is best to submit and then complain to their superiors. To fight with the police in front of a crowd does insult to the gospel of peace.

Drunks - It is generally useless to argue with a drunk. It is best to ignore him, or have one of your helpers persuade him to leave.

Debaters - It's fine to answer questions (you should even say, "That's a good question"), but realize some people just want to argue. Keep your eyes on the cross! Once you enter into a discussion, you have stopped preaching. Keep bringing the topic back to the sinner and his guilt. Evolution and other subjects may tickle the intellect, but they don't address the conscience.

Finishing Up

- Always remember to politely thank the crowd for their time and attention.
- Hand out as many tracts as you can before the crowd disperses. Plant friends in the crowd to help with this.

Afterwards

- If you had friends "planted" in the crowd, ask them for feedback or suggestions.
- If you couldn't get a crowd or things didn't go well, don't be discouraged. Even the best preachers sometimes say the wrong thing or fail to draw a crowd. Use your mistakes as an opportunity to learn and grow. Failure keeps us humble, and a humble person is the one God most uses.
- Like any other skill, preaching only improves with practice.
- Remember that success is not determined by the number of converts, but by your faithfulness in proclaiming the Gospel.