



Making Headlines

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Good afternoon. Thank you so much excellencies, parliamentarians and distinguished guests in this room. Thank you for honoring me with your time. I know it is valuable and it is one of the things that you can't get back in life. And you are here today to hear what I will be sharing. So thank you so much for being part of this time.

At this point we have had food for our stomachs and I hope to give you some food for thought. Hopefully, there will be some things that you will find helpful. I realize that we are in a very international room. This may be the most international room that I have ever been in my life.

I think this is an incredible picture of humanity. What a privilege it is to sit at tables and in a room with people from all over the world. And at a time where it seems, that polarization is pulling at the fabric of society and we can sit together and have a meal. And I think this is a beautiful thing and is worth doing. Thank you very much for coming. We already had some robust discussions at our table and I am sure that you did as well. Hopefully that can continue even hereafter.

When people are asking questions, there is a hesitancy to actually embrace giving an answer, because of the assumption that the reason the person is asking you is to leverage your answer against of you.

Our topic today is, something that I think many of you probably relate to - some of you more directly than others - the question of and the challenge of making headlines. I think part of a public discussion, where you may not even be a participant in that discussion. One of the things that I have noticed about the way our interaction in society is changing, is that questions are not necessarily perceived the same way as they were in the past. I don't know about you, but I have noticed that when people are asking questions, there is a hesitancy to actually embrace giving an answer, because of the assumption that the reason the person is asking you is to leverage your answer against you, to find some kind of stereotype, and to find some way to fit you into the box that they want to attack. So the questions have become part of an arsenal.

I think that is unfortunate, because for me - I don't know about you - but if I am trying to build a relationship or if I meet someone, I have to ask questions. It's the fundamental way to begin to know each other. That we seek understanding before we seek to be understood.

And so to live in a time where questions are perceived as a step of hostility or aggression is so unfortunate.

I will say, as a believer of God and a Christian in particular, I am so grateful to have a belief in a God who is relational, because the first step of relationship is always questions. That is the same with Christianity and how I relate to God. I think that God is personal, that he can be known and that that begins by asking questions. I hope that this is a place today where you feel that you can do that. Even if you have a rejection - it won't be the first time that I have heard those - so please feel free to verbalize that as well. We really want to make the most of our time.

What I have seen is a growing scepticism towards those in leadership and a growing mistrust in the systems and the institutions by which people become leaders.

I have noticed something in my travels. One qualification: all of you are international and I will be speaking about the western world, about my context. I am not going to speak to you about yours. But I think that there is enough here to draw parallels about something that is going on not just here in the West, but globally, internationally.

And what I have seen is a growing scepticism towards those in leadership and a growing mistrust in the systems and the institutions by which people become leaders. I don't know if you have seen that yourselves. But it seems that there is a widespread hesitancy about this. That in general, it is assumed that ultimately people are about themselves and their own agenda. It is only a matter of time until something surfaces, that vindicates that suspicion and provides an opportunity for those in opposition to capitalize on some kind of past or present failure. And that demonstrates the utter disqualification, not only of that person, but anyone who is directly associated with them - anyone who even holds their views.

It is that attitude and approach that I think has put us under tremendous pressure at times and has presented an enormous difficulty about dialoguing over issues. Because a political argument will never beat a moral argument. If you can demonstrate that somebody's character is suspect, then their position is invalid. That seems to be the approach in our time. Does any of that sound familiar to you in what you experience? I think we can all think of examples, given this kind of pattern of polarization that characterizes the society in which we live today.

It is not the first time. Allegations are not new. Political mischaracterization and mudslinging is a thing of the past. The Whig Party in the United States in 1848 criticized a presidential hopeful, Lewis Cass, as being a "potbellied, mutton-headed cucumber" in response to the Democrats' accusation, that opposing candidate Zachary Taylor, is among other things, a poor dresser. So we know that this goes back in history and maybe the 48 years prior to that in 1800, the

federalists mounted the ultimate smear campaign, claiming that the Republican candidate Thomas Jefferson had died. That is a pretty disqualifying fact, if true.

How do you move forward in life after having made or regretted a huge mistake?

So allegations have come and gone, but what about instances of actual failure? What about instances where integrity really has collapsed - real misdeeds, whether past or present? It seems in recent trends that forgiveness is no longer an option.

I found it interesting. Canada's own, Jordan Peterson, was asked the question "How do you move forward in life after having made or regretted a huge mistake?"

He paused extensively at that question. And I found it very interesting that eventually when he spoke up, he said, that even though he is not a believer professing Christianity, he pointed to the Bible and he said, "You know one of the interesting things about these silly people in the Bible is that they are constantly making mistakes."

And that's true, he mentions Abraham, a man called and chosen by God in Genesis 12. And he is a man who made catastrophic mistakes. Immediately after God made a covenant commitment to Abraham, he went to Egypt with his wife, turned to his wife and said, "Honey, you are very beautiful and they're going to notice that. Let's call you my sister for this trip, because then they won't kill you. They'll let me live and hopefully they will treat you well too."

So Abraham, after making the first covenant relationship with God, threw his wife under the bus to save his own skin. This man is called the "Father of the Faith." The narrative of the Bible does not shy away from the fact that these are very imperfect people, who made mistakes - sometimes repeated mistakes. There are many examples of that in the Bible.

The Christian position is one of a humble receptivity of a needed forgiveness.

And I think it is one thing that Christians often, unfortunately are mischaracterized as claiming moral superiority. Ladies and gentlemen that's not true. The Christian position is one of a humble receptivity of a needed forgiveness.

The Bible has also served as the foundation for something else - redemption. Historically the story of redemption has been the story of Western religion: confession, repentance, redemption, reconciliation and restoration are part of the working of Western society. And so taking responsibility, asking for forgiveness, pledging to do differently, that model of interaction has preceded from the Judeo-Christian worldview, but increasingly the West is abandoning religion. And here research continues to report the rise of what is called the "religious nones" - no affiliation.

Reorientation towards truth

In addition to that, there has been a reorientation towards truth. Now historically, it's been the case, that truth was considered an authoritative category. What people believed to be true was very idealized and so we lived life top-down. We had a paradigm of truth and through that lens of what is true about life, about me and about you is how I filtered my experiences and understood my existence.

But that has now been inverted. We now, in my generation in particular, take a bottom-up approach to life. Where I filter *my* truth through the lens of my experience and my feelings. It is a reorientation of truth and it has massive implications for how society works. Because now nobody is held accountable to an oppressive absolute category. They are left to themselves to draw conclusions.

Disempowerment of truth

There are several who have traced this pattern to the point of a disempowerment of truth. One who I think very slightly points to this, is Rabbi Jonathan Sacks - some of you have maybe heard of him - he is in London. And he traces a four-century progression of the secularization of the Western world - the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

The first is the secularization of knowledge that came through the Enlightenment.

The second is the secularization of power, that came through revolutions - 1776, the American Revolution and 1789, the French Revolution.

In the 19th century, the secularization of culture came through the evolution of art. Where people, instead of going to the cathedral to worship and to experience the sublime in awe and wonder, started going to the museum and to concerts to encounter the transcendent.

And in the 20th century, the secularization of morality was demonstrated at its height, maybe in the sixties. Some of you have lived through that time, during what was called the Sexual Revolution, the questioning of things like the sanctity of life and the covenantal nature of marriage.

And now here we are at the 21st century. What has been the entailment of this progression? I would suggest to you that the entailment has been the disempowerment of truth.

In this new orientation that's considered Post-Truth, it's not rooted in facts or reason, it's rooted in feelings and preferences. It's not a denial that truth exists, it's a relegation of truth to what I want.

That as a society we have removed the transcendent, absolute structures that governed the way that we behaved between, and with one another. The way we understood what it meant to

take responsibility, to confess, to ask for forgiveness, to have integrity. So in this new orientation that's considered Post-Truth, it's not rooted in facts or reason, it's rooted in feelings and preferences. It's not a denial that truth exists, it's a relegation of truth to what I want.

If your truth is your truth, and my truth is my truth, then whose truth is true? And how do we determine it?

What happens in a society when truth is no longer a factor bearing on what people decide for their lives and they are left to decide subjectively for themselves? What is left to determine what's right and wrong? If your truth is your truth, and my truth is my truth, then whose truth is true? And how do we determine it? I don't know if you've heard that phrase "*share your truth.*" It's very common these days. Is your truth true? Maybe I should think about that twice. I don't know, we just met, I hope it is. But this is a dilemma for us now.

The weapon of our time is not information based on fact, but blame and shame. And perception is the new reality.

So we are left creating truth for ourselves. And if you don't have a way to determine what's right or wrong, then the only solution left will be power. And that's what we see: enter the outrage industry of our time. The new standard of justice by which repentance is impossible and by which we must assume the worst about everybody else, especially those we disagree with.

Ladies and gentlemen, the weapon of our time is not information based on fact, but blame and shame. Perception is the new reality. If you can create a perception of somebody that is counter to what our society deems as acceptable, then you can disarm them entirely.

Two cases come to mind, I will share one of those for time's sake in thinking about how our society reacts and responds to public failure...There is a governor in Virginia, a Democratic governor, Governor Ralph Northam. Recently, it was alleged that he was in a picture from 1984 in his medical school yearbook, that included a picture of two men, one wearing blackface, which is where a white person puts black paint on his face, and the other in a Ku Klux Klan outfit. And there is no question, that a photo like that would provoke massive offence for good reason. And this photo understandably brought an explosive reaction, both from Democrats and Republicans.

So what are the facts? Well Northam initially gave a public apology. But shortly after that, he claimed that he actually wasn't in the photo. Ultimately, we don't know. Because you can't tell in the photo. You can't see clearly whether or not it's him or not. You can't identify it, though his name is listed underneath it. If he's not, then he should be acquitted, though it raises questions why he originally made an apology - it's confusing.

Assuming he is in the photo, Governor Northam did something reprehensible 34 years ago. Something that in the least is racially insensitive, and at most is racist. Since that time, he has lived for 30 years, both personally and professionally, meritoriously when it comes to racial issues. Not a single instance of anything. There is nothing to suggest that he has retained any kind of racism in his speech, or in his actions. So the question is, should we disregard his entire life's record because of this racist picture of more than 34 years ago? What do you think?

As Princeton Professor Robert George points out, lots of people are racially insensitive out of ignorance and stupidity, rather than outright bigotry. I think there are many examples we can look at in our society, where offense is being taken, because of a lack of understanding and not necessarily a proactive attempt to be hostile, or demeaning, or discriminatory towards another person. Additionally Northam was raised in a cultural context with residual prejudice in the American South. How did people respond?

I was at the University in Virginia not too long ago and I sat down with some students to ask them what they thought. The University of Virginia is considered the number one public education university in the United States, founded by Thomas Jefferson. And in that conversation I asked them, "What do you think should happen?"

And their response was unanimous. They said, that he should be judged in light of that photo. He should be forced out of office and he should never be able to enter politics again. That was their response.

What's interesting about this case to me, is that shortly after all of this came out, it wasn't just the Governor alone who was guilty of such an act. The Virginia Attorney General admitted to wearing blackface. And to throw fuel on the fire, the Lieutenant Governor was accused by two women of sexual assault shortly thereafter as well. This is a bad time for Democrats in Virginia. It's an absolute PR nightmare.

And this is what I find fascinating. When the situation involved just Northam, there was a demand from both parties for his resignation. But as these other offences and allegations surfaced, the Democrat detractors became very silent. According to the *New York Times*, after a week in which denunciations were the norm, Democratic lawmakers avoided speaking to the press. And a pledge from one delegate to begin impeachment proceedings had been completely stalled, accompanied by a refusal to participate in an interview.

Interesting. The immediate backlash and cascading condemnations from politicians subsided. Why? Well, according to a somewhat speculative article in the *Wall Street Journal* shortly thereafter, when it was one administrator involved, it would be realistic to get another Democrat in the office. But three would be such an interruption in the succession of office that it was a threat for a Republican inroad.

Do we care about the truth and justice from real convictions, or do we leverage things as true when it's politically expedient to do so and ignore them when it's not?

So here we see a possible example of outrage proportional to opportunity. That opportunity closed and that outrage ceased. And it raises serious questions about whether we care about the truth and justice from real convictions, or whether we leverage things as true when it's politically expedient to do so and ignore them when it's not.

Now there are lots of other examples of this and I am choosing to use American examples because I would like to come and visit this beautiful country one day again. So thank you for permitting me to be an American.

Public, preemptive confession

Normally if you've done something that you regret, or something that you know is wrong, there are several options that people have resorted to to deal with that. The first is this, you can publicly confess - preemptively. Like actor Liam Neeson just recently did. He confessed to having a bout of violent anger towards people of colour, because a close friend of his had been assaulted by a person of colour. He publicly confesses this, but then he also condemns it, he says, "There is something primal about this."

And he recounts his feelings, he says, "It's horrible. Horrible when I think back that I did that."

But he wasn't met with grace. He was met with hostility.

And so there is the option of a public confession. Also there can be skepticism about that. Maybe somebody is doing that so that they can be inoculated from scrutiny. Might as well just come out. One Democratic candidate in the United States just released his whole rap sheet, that everyone would know preemptively and that he wouldn't have to respond to accusations later.

Regret, repent, move on

The second option is to do the standard human thing, which is to feel regret, hope that nobody was majorly impacted, to seek repentance and move on, hopefully learn from our mistakes and not repeat them. This would be the most common option, especially among those who are non-politicians and those who do not have a public platform. As you know sitting in this room, your decisions have public consequences and that other people's do not.

Jump in and go all the way

And the third is to double down on the original sin and just to go for it and decide that there is no hope for me. I am going to jump all the way in.

Our Post-Truth culture has become inevitably a post-forgiveness culture, because truth is inextricably linked to forgiveness.

Here's the problem in our society today. That second option has been disincentivized. Our Post-Truth culture has become inevitably a post-forgiveness culture, because truth is inextricably linked to forgiveness. If you are going to take responsibility for something, it must be true that you've done something wrong. But we live in a society that says you decide what is right for you.

It's like the problem of the moving goal posts: if you miss the mark, you just move the post. And at the end of the day you are quite literally at the mercy of yourself, where you decide to do away with guilt by changing your own moral standards. And that's what a generation of people are doing today - not appealing to any absolute truth.

We have no framework, no fabric with which to talk about needing forgiveness anymore, to take responsibility, to hold other people accountable.

To need forgiveness is to accept that you have done something wrong. But if you have done something wrong, it must be true, and it must be true that other people care about the thing that you did wrong. So you see, we have our hands tied. We have no framework, no fabric with which to talk about needing forgiveness anymore, to take responsibility, to hold other people accountable. If nobody takes responsibility, you cannot hold anyone accountable. That would be hypocrisy. It requires taking responsibility, but the frameworks for that have been removed.

What do we do when we need mercy, when we need forgiveness and it is nowhere to be found?

So practically what does this mean? Well it means that the only people who will be able to engage in public life, are those with absolutely no shame, or who are entirely perfect, entirely pure. Now looking around the room, if we are all honest with ourselves, we would say that we don't fall hopefully not into the first, but definitely not into the second category. I know I don't., I am not perfectly pure or perfect. So what do we do? What do we do when we need mercy, when we need forgiveness and it is nowhere to be found?

For many of us, entering into that kind of shame in a climate of today's culture is too much to bear. And I can understand that feeling. Public failure can be ultimately crushing. It can mean and has meant for some loss of everything: reputation, fear, finances, relationships. So, where do we turn?

The Christian faith is one of the only places where your identity, your sense of self and your sense of worth is not primarily rooted in what you do.

This is where I think the Christian faith has something unique to say and why I'm compelled particularly by the Christian faith. The first is in the area of identity. The Christian faith is one of the only places where your identity, your sense of self and your sense of worth is not primarily rooted in what you do.

Every pattern in our world points to what you do as the source of your value. Your value is earned and your value is based on your utility, and that results in the pride of upward comparison. It's not that you're proud to be good at something, it's that you're proud to be better at something than someone else.

This was exposed in my life when I went to the University of Oxford. You think you're smart until you go to the number one university in the world in your field and you realize, "Wow I wasn't proud that I was smart. I was proud that I was smarter than other people and now I am the last rung on the ladder in this atmosphere."

Some of you have had this epiphany. Some of you need this epiphany.

In the Christian worldview, your identity is not rooted in what you do, it's rooted in what has been done for you.

So there is this challenge of upward comparison. In the Christian worldview, your identity is not rooted in what you do, it's rooted in what has been done for you. The Christian claim is this: that none of us can ultimately earn the acceptance and love of God. It is freely given and must be freely received. In doing so you are receiving a statement of who you are. A statement of your value. It's a stable identity.

In fact the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.

Secondly, there is one who is willing to enter into the kind of public shame, that when considered in detail is quiet unspeakable. And that is Jesus. And he did that knowing he was innocent. In John 18, Jesus was falsely accused, he was standing before Pilate, who was looking for some way to rightly condemn him as a rebel against Rome. So he asked him if he was claiming to be a king - because that would make him an insurrectionist. Jesus answered him, "You say that I am a king. In fact the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

The truth, what is the truth? I thought we are in a Post-Truth culture. The truth is, that while Jesus was falsely accused, none of us are falsely accused of having done, said, or thought something for which we need forgiveness. For which we owe a debt, that we ourselves cannot pay. And the truth is that God is prepared to absorb that debt for you. On our behalf of making an exchange of a perfect life for your imperfect life.

After that Jesus was sentenced to be brutally beaten. Shortly thereafter, he was condemned to death by Roman crucifixion - even though he was an innocent man.

You see, this is the funny thing about mercy and justice. We live in a society that cries for justice. And I can understand that longing: a need for things to be reconciled, for people to be held accountable for their actions. But I think, if we're honest, we also need mercy.

You know where this plays out most clearly, is on the roads, for those of you who are drivers. When you see that person violate a traffic law and you think, "Where is the police right now to pull him over?"

But then you are driving and you hear the "wup wup," and you get pulled over. All of a sudden, justice is very much secondary to the mercy that you want in that moment. Isn't that right?

In all of philosophy, human thought and religion, there is only one place where justice and mercy exist simultaneously. And that is the cross of Christ.

And so we live with this conflict. Why is there a conflict? Because when it comes to justice and mercy, the existence of one will always compromise the other. In all of philosophy, human thought and religion, there is only one place where justice and mercy exist simultaneously. And that is the cross of Christ. Because on the cross, God was able to uphold His justice through the means of the extension of justice and mercy to all of us who need it. It's an incredible intersection of two fundamental sources and important factors for our lives.

In that moment on the cross, Jesus's world was stripped away. On the cross everything of support in Jesus' life was gone. His friends gave way in a shaming abandonment, his reputation gave way in a total humiliation, his decency gave way in being hung naked, his comfort gave way in a shaming torture and his dignity gave way in the utterly undignified way that he died.

Why did Jesus go to that death? Because for Jesus, the shame was incomparable to the joy for what the cross would do for you and for me.

Why did he do it? Why did Jesus go to that death? We get a hint in Hebrews 12:2, where it says this, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross. What that statement means, is that for Jesus, the shame was incomparable to the joy for what the cross would do for you and for me. So your hope is secure in what Jesus has done. And I think we live in a time where many people are having to ask the question, "How do I deal with the imperfections of my life?"

Because of what Jesus did on the cross for us, we can have the confidence that even if forgiveness is not available to you, around you in your community, in your family, in your profession, it is available to you from the One who gave His son on the cross to die for you. And that's an invitation, that if you haven't considered and you haven't considered Jesus, then I would encourage you to consider personally, then I would love to talk with you about that.

Thank you so much for listening intently.