

The Power of Words: Proverbs

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We all know the feeling—the feeling of wanting to take back something you just said. I know this has happened to me many times—Stacy could attest to that. One time I remember, though, was from before I had even met Stacy. It was a time in the 9th grade, which shows how these things can stick in our minds. I don't remember the specifics, but I remember that I was standing with some of my basketball teammates and we were watching two other teams playing a basketball game in the school gym. And in order to get a laugh out of my friends, I made a joke about one of the guys on our team. I don't remember what the joke was, but it was not nice. Some of the guys laughed, but then I turned and realized that the guy I had slandered was standing right next to me and had heard what I said. I felt terrible all of a sudden. I hadn't intended to say that to his face. I was just trying to use my words to get a laugh from the guys, which shows the sinfulness of my actions. I assume you can identify in some way—that feeling of wanting to pull those words back into your mouth, wishing they could be erased, wishing they had not been uttered.

Sometimes the feeling comes upon us immediately, sometimes it's days or weeks or even years later. But we all have said things—many things—that we wish we could take back. We would have said it differently, or in most cases, not at all. There are certainly times when our words simply make us sound stupid. And when we realize how stupid we sounded, we're embarrassed. But the problem is much worse than that. Because our words not only reveal our ignorance, but our words reveal the much more serious and pervasive problem, which is our sin. If you're not convinced that you're a sinner, just think about your words. Just rehearse in your mind some of the things you have said in the past week—words you spoke to your spouse, or to your children, to co-workers and friends, even words that nobody else heard, that you just mumbled under your breath or in solitude. What do your words reveal about you? What if we had this morning a recording of every word you have spoken in the past month, and we were to play that recording for all of us to hear? That's a scary thought, isn't it? Each and every one of us would be ashamed, embarrassed, convicted. It would be plain to all that *I am a sinner!*

Even more terrifying than the thought of broadcasting to the world a recording of all your words is the reality that on the last day God will judge us according to our words. Listen to what

Jesus said to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:36-37, “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” That is far more frightening because it’s not just an issue of embarrassment, but an issue of our eternal destiny. And, just to be clear, Jesus is not saying there that we attain salvation by our words. The word justified there is used in a way different than how Paul speaks of justification. In the context of the Matthew passage the meaning is that our words will demonstrate the condition of our hearts. The actions of our lives, and the words that we have spoken, will be clear evidence either that we have been changed by the power of the Gospel, or that we have not have been changed.

Jesus said a couple verses earlier (in Matthew 12:33, and we’ll come back to this at the end of this message), that “the tree is known by its fruit.” The words that come out of our mouths are a very telling fruit, and they show the nature of our hearts. If our words are being sanctified by the power of the Spirit, then it’s evident that God is at work within us. But if our words are not in the process of becoming more holy, then it will be clear on the last day that we were never truly born again.

I begin this way to impress upon all of us the importance of our speech. Words are powerful. And the words that come out of our mouths are the overflow of what’s going on in our hearts. So as we examine our words, we are examining our hearts. And that’s a good thing for us to do this morning.

As we look at what Proverbs has to say about words, I’m going to break it down into three admonitions. Listen carefully, speak thoughtfully, and live peacefully. In the book of James, which we could call a New Testament wisdom book—it’s similar to Proverbs in ways—we find these commands in 1:19. James writes, “be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” That’s a great summary of what we need to learn about the power of words. We need to listen carefully. We need to speak thoughtfully. And we need to deal with our anger appropriately so that our anger does not become the occasion for hurtful words to spew from our mouths. So we’ll look at those three admonitions, and then at the end I’ll talk about the relationship of the tree and its fruit.

Listen Carefully

1) Careful listening exhibits wisdom.

Proverbs 12:15 says, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man *listens* to advice.” Wise individuals are willing and eager to listen to others, because the wise person

realizes that others possess helpful and insightful wisdom. There's obviously a humility that's required here. We need to realize that we don't know it all, and therefore we need to shut our mouths and listen to others.

To be a humble listener is so identified with wisdom that it's even possible for a fool to appear wise if he will just keep silent. Proverbs 17:28 tells us this: "Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent." So even if you're not wise, you may appear wise if you will just listen more than you talk. Of course, the point is not merely to appear wise. The point is to be wise, and this is the second thing I want to point out about careful listening.

2) Careful listening is a way to gain wisdom.

Proverbs 1:5—"Let the wise *hear* and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance." We can't learn if we're always talking. We learn when we are listening. When we listen we will increase in learning.

We must also be willing to receive a rebuke. We must listen to correction. Proverbs 19:20—"Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future." And Proverbs 13:1—"A wise son hears his father's instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke." If we are going to gain wisdom, we must be willing to listen to a rebuke. It's not easy, and it's not enjoyable at the moment. But when a brother or sister in Christ comes to us and speaks the truth in love to us about a sin in our lives, we need to take that to heart. We must not squelch that with an avalanche of words, trying to justify ourselves and explain it away. Through that loving rebuke we will grow in wisdom. We will grow in holiness. That correction will be a powerful means by which God will sanctify us.

3) Careful listening exhibits love.

Think about these words from 1 Corinthians 13 in light of listening to others. Think about listening carefully to your Christian brothers and sisters as well as unbelievers and how these characteristics of love are manifested in listening. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7—"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Most of these things don't happen apart from listening. When we truly listen to people, whether they are sharing with us a great joy or a great sorrow, they will know that we care about them and love them because we are taking the time to listen. What an awesome way to minister to one another

and to the hurting world around us. Take the time to listen. Take a genuine interest in the people around you, and love them by listening to them.

4) Careful listening is also selective

We do want to show love to others by listening, but that doesn't mean we listen to everything. "An evildoer listens to wicked lips, and a liar gives ear to a mischievous tongue." (Proverbs 17:4) There are plenty of things we should not listen to. I mentioned this last week, contrasting wisdom and folly. You must listen to wisdom and tune out folly. Eve listened to the Serpent and ended up falling into sin. So be very selective in your listening.

"The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body." (Proverbs 18:8) It can be very tempting to listen to that juicy piece of gossip. Resist that temptation.

"A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends." (Proverbs 16:28) We must be very discerning in our listening, so that we do not fall prey to the destructive power of dishonest words or slanderous words.

Charles Spurgeon, in the book, *Lectures to my Students*, has a chapter entitled "The Blind Eye and the Deaf Ear." He's making the point that there are many things that are said that we must not even pay attention to. Things said around us, to us, about us, about others. There are many things to which we must simply turn a deaf ear. If we hear words of slander, back-biting, gossip, we must not take those words to heart. When you are within earshot of these things, do you gravitate toward it or away from it? Take Spurgeon's advice, and turn to it a blind eye and a deaf ear. At the end of that chapter Spurgeon writes, "I have one blind eye and one deaf ear, and . . . they are the best eye and ear I have" (*Lectures to My Students*, 335).

As James says, we are to be quick to hear and slow to speak. As I've heard it said, this is why we have two ears and only one mouth—because we're supposed to listen twice as much as we talk. We should be eager to listen—quick to listen. We should NOT be quick to speak, though. Rather, we should be slow to speak. We should listen and think, and *then* speak.

Careful listening and thoughtful words: these are two sides of the same coin, and they both exhibit wisdom. These are two characteristics of the wise person. Proverbs 17:27—"Whoever

restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.” This doesn’t mean that we are always silent. But we must restrain our words. We shouldn’t just blurt out whatever comes to our minds. We need to exercise restraint to think first and then speak.

And Proverbs 10:19—“When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.” If you speak without exercising restraint, you can guarantee that you’re going to sin in what you say. If you don’t give thoughtful consideration to your speech, you are going to fall into all kinds of sin. You may fall into gossip or slander or crude joking. When we fail to think before we speak, sin is inevitable. Surely we will come to the end of the day and wish we could take back something we said. Let us be wise and think before we speak.

We don’t want to be the fool. “If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.” (Proverbs 18:13)

Words are powerful, and that can go in both directions. Words can be powerfully destructive. Or words can be powerfully constructive.

Let’s think about the destructive potential first. Proverbs 16:27 says, “A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire.” And Proverbs 26:20-21, “For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases. As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.” The fire of quarrelsome words is a very destructive force. The more words we heap upon the flames, the greater the destruction. It’s like pouring gasoline on a bonfire.

You may think it’s no big deal. But a few words of gossip, which you thought were so innocent, are repeated to person after person. And eventually the information becomes so misleading that relationships are damaged and reputations are maligned. Or think of quarrelsome words and how quickly a small squabble can turn into a war. How many marriages have ended in divorce because of seemingly minor quarrels? Words of complaint and criticism, which can be so much more contagious than words of gratefulness and encouragement. Critical remarks and complaining can do so much damage as it infects those around us. Think of impure speech and how degrading it can be. The coarse joking that is carried along the radio waves and fills the TV screens and then becomes the substance of so many conversations—it is a wildfire of destruction, drawing our attention away from God to be amused by perverted things.

Proverbs 12:18 contrasts the hurtful and healing potential of words—“There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” We said as children, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” But that’s a lie. Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can break my heart. That’s more like it. And that’s what this proverb is saying. Words can be like a sword thrust. Once the wound is inflicted, the healing could take a long time. And still, there may very well be a significant scar.

Wise words, on the other hand, have tremendous power to heal . . . and to nourish, “The lips of the righteous feed many . . .” (Proverbs 10:21, ESV) When we put together careful listening and wise words, then our speech can be a tremendous means of grace to others. When we listen carefully and then speak thoughtfully, this will comfort, encourage, and bring healing and nourishment to the people God brings into our lives.

“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.” (Proverbs 25:11) To be able to say the right thing at the right time is a very precious gift, indeed. It’s a gift both to the one who speaks these apt words, and it’s a gift to those who hear them. We should desire that God would give us the grace to do this for one another.

I think often of Paul’s statement in Ephesians 4 about “speaking the truth in love.” That is such a great summary of what we should desire for our speech. There is a need for both truth and love. If either is missing, then it’s not going to be helpful. The truth is essential. If we shy away from speaking the truth just because we’re scared it’s going to hurt someone’s feelings, then we fail to do the most loving thing. Speaking the truth boldly is a loving thing. If a doctor gave you a clean bill of health even though you had a terminal disease, we would not call that love. As kind and friendly as that doctor may be, it would be wicked to hide the truth.

On the other hand, it is certainly possible to speak the truth in a demeaning and harsh way. William Cowper called this “a furious and abusive zeal.” A person may be zealous for the truth, but that truth needs to be communicated in love, with a broken-heart for the lost, and a deep joy in God, and a passion for others to experience the joy of the Gospel!

Live Peacefully

The issue of anger is closely related to our speech, because it is so common for the anger in our hearts to overflow in our speech. A woman once told a preacher, “I have a bad temper, but

at least it's over in a minute.” To which the preacher replied, “Like a shotgun blast. It's over in a second, but look at all the damage it does.” Anger can well up within our hearts, and then our words become the shotgun blasts of that anger. We lash out with harsh words toward a spouse or parent or child or friend or co-worker or complete stranger (someone who cut us off in traffic, or cut in front of us in the grocery line). Often times, it doesn't have much to do with the other person. There's sinful anger in our own hearts, and we unload those frustrations on anyone who happens to be in the vicinity.

Proverbs 29:11—“A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.” Also Proverbs 16:32—“Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.”

This is so important when we encounter conflict in various relationships. Conflicts are inevitable, because we live with and work with people who are going to have different ideas than us. And that's OK. That can actually be very good to be able to share ideas and debate ideas and refine our thinking or our plans accordingly. But the problem is when someone else's ideas conflict with mine, and I get really angry about it. We can think of conflict in many contexts.

When I was serving as minister of students at a church in KY, there was an incident where there was a misunderstanding with nursery policies, of all things. There was a couple who were almost ready to leave the church because of some of the changes that were being made. It could have become really ugly, especially if any of us exaggerated the issues, or gossiped about it, or lashed out with inflammatory speech. But fortunately we were able to sit down and talk it through. And it was pretty tense at first, but as we talked calmly and listened, we came to an understanding of one another. God's grace was evident in working through that conflict. And those are the kinds of situations where taming the tongue is very important. Those are the conflicts that can become very divisive in a church. The big, theological questions can be divisive, too. But it's often the questions like “What color is the carpet going to be?” that cause big quarrels. Again, it's OK, even beneficial, for us to share our different opinions, but we must do so in a peaceful way, in a way that builds up rather than tears down.

Conflict in marriage can be the most hurtful, because it's in the most intimate of relationships. Stacy and I have certainly had our times of conflict, and many of them have been painful. By God's grace, I think we have grown a lot in that area. We got married and naively thought that we would live happily ever after

with very little struggle or conflict. Very early on in our marriage, we went to a Family Life Marriage conference. And we enjoyed the sessions, but we didn't get as much out of it simply because we didn't yet know the kinds of things we really needed to work on. We were still in the honeymoon stage. We commented to each other many times over the following few years, "Now we could really benefit from one of those marriage conferences." And we did attend other things, and have read and listened to things, that have been very good for us.

One conflict has remained especially clear in my memory. We were living in an apartment near the campus of Southern Seminary, where I was a student. We had been married for about a year and a half at that point and were realizing that we had some issues in our marriage.

Whatever it was we were arguing about on that particular occasion . . . I was angry and didn't know what to say next, so I just left the table. Stacy's words were offending my pride, and I didn't have a quick comeback, so I just stormed away. And that's something Stacy and I have really had to work through over the years. Stacy is very communicative and will say what she feels. And if I end up feeling like her words are attacking me in some way (even if she's not really intending them in that way) then my sinful tendency is to just walk away and slam the door behind me.

On this particular occasion in our apartment, I popped up from the dinner table so fast that the chair fell down behind me, and I stormed down the hall. Then Stacy, too, got up and left the apartment to go for a walk. I remember looking out the window, watching her walk away (with kind of an angry walk), and I thought, "This is miserable. Why do we have to do this to each other?"

When the frustration of conflict becomes an occasion for our sinful anger to erupt, it can be terribly destructive.

In the relationships of parents and children, words are also so powerful. It's easy for parents to get angry with kids and say all kinds of mean things to them. It's easy for children to get upset with their parents and say mean things.

You can think about relationships with co-workers, or in-laws, or friends or neighbors. Wherever there is conflict, our speech has the power to make it a whole lot worse or a whole lot better.

And thus there is so much wisdom and power in being the kind of person who is slow to anger. Don't let yourself be controlled by sinful anger. Don't spout off in ways that will hurt those around you. Don't unleash your tongue in ways you're going to regret later. Live peacefully with those around you.

The Tree and Its Fruit

Your words are important. They are a vivid representation of who you are. They are such a clear measure of the condition of your heart.

So I ask you: What kinds of things are expressed in your words? Are there hateful words, bitter words, critical words, words of slander and gossip, words of ungratefulness and complaint, filthy joking, crude comments, prideful remarks, words of self-pity?

Jesus says in Matthew 12:34, "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." Our words are really a reflection of our hearts. Our talk is simply the overflow of what is going in our hearts.

"For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body." (James 3:2)

We all stumble in many ways, and our stumbling is particularly evident in our speech. So we read that verse and the first thing we need to recognize is, "I am not this perfect person. I fall far short. I stumble in many ways, and I certainly stumble in the things I say."

But then secondly we must direct our attention to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who IS perfect. He is the perfect man who never sinned in word or deed. He has never stumbled in what He says, and He also perfectly bridles His whole body. 1 Peter 2:22-25 says, "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." Jesus is our perfect Savior. He committed no sin of any kind. He was sinless in His words. No deceit was found in His mouth. And even when He was reviled, He did not revile in return. Think of how difficult that is! When He suffered, He did not

threaten. And see what He did in the place of threatening. He “continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” That is perfect trust which produces perfect actions and perfect words.

Jesus taught in Luke 6:43-45, “For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” Jesus was making the same point in Matthew 12, in the verses I read at the beginning of this message. “the tree is known by its fruit.”

What I want us all to see is the connection between the tree and the fruit. This is also described in the James 3 passage. The point is not that we’re going to be perfect in our speech, the fruit is not going to be perfect, but we will be different. Those who have a new heart will have a new tongue.

So I don’t want you to hear this message and leave today just with the mentality that you’re going to try harder to have self-control with your words. The point I want to make now is: an act of the will, however sincere it may be, is not the solution. So don’t leave today thinking, “I’m going to do better.” No, that’s not the answer you need. James said very clearly, “No human being can tame the tongue.”

The proper response is to see your desperate need to be born again, to see your desperate need for God’s grace. Before our speech will change, God must change our hearts. If you are convinced that you’re a sinner—and this is something we should all be convinced of, simply by thinking of our sinful words—then the proper response is to cry out to Jesus for grace and forgiveness. He is the One who does not stumble in what He says. He is the perfect man, able also to bridle His whole body. And this perfect man went to the cross to die in the place of sinners like you and me. He died so that all who put their trust and hope in Him will not have to die, but will have eternal life in heaven.

Don’t think that you can change yourself. Cast yourself on Jesus and plead for His grace. And then, by the Spirit, put to death the deeds of the body (as Paul writes in Romans 8). It’s only with a new heart, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, that we can tame the tongue. So let’s pray to God to enable this important part of our sanctification—the sanctification of our words, in order that our communication can be powerfully (not destructive, but . . .) constructive, and helpful and life-giving and God-glorifying.