



The Skill of Wise Speech

SERIES: *Wisdom for Back to School*

In the next few weeks many of you will scramble to get your kids ready for school. You'll have to buy binders and pencils and ruled paper. You may have to push your kids to get their summer reading assignments done. You'll have medical forms to fill out. You may even have to prepare them for the rude awakening of waking up before noon! It takes a lot to be ready for school. But it seems to me there is something much more important than any of those things, and that's wisdom. Even if we're not going back to school, without wisdom we'll flunk in the school of life. Wisdom is the skill of living life. So for the next few weeks we're going to be looking at a book that's devoted to wisdom, and that's the Old Testament book of Proverbs.

One of the things that Proverbs talks a great deal about is the importance of our words. Maybe you could do a little self test. This past year, if someone paid you ten dollars for every kind and helpful word you spoke about others or to others, but also collected ten dollars from you for every unkind word you spoke about or to others, would you be rich or poor?

If the New Testament is right, we might all be broke. James writes, "All kinds of animals have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It's a restless evil, full of deadly poison." We say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me." That's nonsense. Sticks and stones may break our bones but they can't kill our spirit like words can. Words do far more damage than sticks and stones.

The words we say create most of the problems we face. Most problems at church or in the workplace are the result of words. Most divorces aren't caused by adultery or desertion; they're caused by words. Most conflicts between parents and children are not the result of some generation gap; they're the result of words. Think about your own relationships for a moment. Think about things that have been said to you that have stung or crushed your spirit, or just took the wind out of your sails for days. It might have been something said to you 10, 20, or even 30 years ago. But you remember, and it still hurts. Think about the things you've said that had the same impact on others. Once those words were out of your mouth they could never be retrieved. You really can't take it back, can you? Our words become an enduring part of every relationship we have.

That's why the book of Proverbs says so much about our words. It teaches us the words we speak will make or break the relationships we have. Learn to season your speech with grace and your relationships will grow in depth and in joy and in peace. Leave your tongue unbridled and it will poison your own life and those you love the most.

I. THE POWER OF WORDS

A. The power of death and life: No where is this more clearly stated than in Proverbs 18:20-21: **"With the fruit of a man's mouth his stomach will be satisfied; he will be satisfied with the product of his lips. Death and life are in the power of the tongue, And those who love it will eat its fruit."** Together these two verses speak of the power of the tongue to impact our lives and those around us. The tongue has the power to inflict both life and death. And because of its power we're encouraged to "love it," which means to respect it and to use it with care. If we do so the product of our speech will bring satisfaction to our lives. We'll "eat its fruit" and enjoy the blessing the wise use of our speech brings to our relationships.

The tongue can do great harm or it can do great good. I was watching several football players being inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame yesterday. One of them was Daryl Green who played for the Washington Redskins. He reflected on the impact his father had on him. He said, "Everyone else told me I was too small. But my dad said 'You can run the ball.' Everyone else said 'No,' but my dad said 'Go.'" What was he doing? He was reflecting on the difference words made in his life.

Words contain the power of death: "You're too small." But they also contain the power of life: "You can run the ball." What a difference words can make! With your words you can hurt or you can heal, you can build up or you can tear down.

But how do we distinguish between good words and bad words? What kind of words bear fruit in our relationships?

II. GOOD WORDS—BAD WORDS

A. Good words are few: Proverbs tells us first of all that good words are few words. The Ten Commandments

contain 297 words. Psalm 23 has 118 words, and the Lord's Prayer is 56 words long. Yet, in a recent report, the Dept. of Agriculture needed 15,629 words to discuss the pricing of cabbage. It's not using a lot of words that makes a difference; it's using the right words.

Two verses make this point. Look at 10:19: When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, But he who restrains his lips is wise. This is a scary verse, especially for someone like me who talks for a living. The more we talk, the more we sin. It could be misleading information, thoughtless advice, sarcasm, or expressions of pride. Because of this fact, the wise person will use words sparingly. The Quakers used to put it this way, "Never break the silence, unless you can improve upon it." Another proverb makes the same point with irony. Prov 17:28: **"Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; When he closes his lips, he is counted prudent."** We laugh at this but we all know it's true. Strong, silent types are NOT always wise, but we usually think they're wise, especially compared to those who are constantly spouting off.

This doesn't mean that the talkative personality is less righteous than the silent one. If this were true most women would be less righteous than men because most of the time women talk more than men. But, this isn't a gender issue nor a personality issue. There is plenty of room within God's creative plan for those who are expressive and verbal and outgoing. Silent types can in get in trouble with their tongue, too. But this means that within the framework of your own personality treat words with respect. Words are like dollars. As we print more and more dollars they become inflated and the value of those dollars go down. So use words carefully. Good words are few words.

B. Good words are true: Proverbs also says that good words are true words. Prov 12:22: **"Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, But those who deal faithfully are his delight."** The contrast here is between those who lie and those who deal faithfully. To lie is to deal unfaithfully with those around us. Think how our society depends on truth. What would it be like if we couldn't believe what we read in our newspapers? At the heart of journalism is a commitment to tell the truth. How would you feel about that over the counter medicine if you couldn't trust what's on the label? What about sports? With the Olympics right around the corner, we know how important it is not to cheat. Play by the rules or the whole thing falls apart. And in relationships there is no community or friendship apart from truth. Where there is no truth there is no trust and where there is no trust there is no real community.

This need for truth in relationships means that we play it straight with people. We don't say one thing to their face and another to their friends. We're truthful in

how we represent them to others. I like the story of the pastor who had two gossipy sisters in his church. One day, they saw his car parked in front of the liquor store and began spreading word of his "drinking problem." But this guy was smart. When he learned who was spreading the rumor, he parked his car in front of the sisters' house and left it there overnight!

C. Good words are fitting: So good words are true words. But it's not just enough that words are true. It's possible to say something that's right and true but totally inappropriate. Good words are also fitting. Words that are fitting are timely and appropriate. Prov 15:23: **"A man has joy in an apt answer, And how delightful is a timely word."** An apt answer and a timely word are easily recognized by the response that they invoke. They bring joy and delight to the hearer. When Lynn and I were first married we lived on top of a beauty parlor in San Luis Obispo. Our apartment was small and hot and to get to it we had to walk up a dark flight of stairs that was a bit spooky. For that reason, Lynn didn't like the place much. But somehow I felt if we were really spiritual we would gut it out and stay there. I saw that place as a kind of challenge to our faith. But when I told a good friend about how Lynn felt and he came and saw the place he said, "You ought to get out of that place. That place would scare me too." I know that doesn't sound very profound, but it was exactly what I needed to hear at that particular time! I felt relieved. It was the right word at the right time. And Lynn has never stopped thanking him.

To speak words that are fitting requires that we think as much about where and when we say something as what we say. We shouldn't always go around telling people they live in a dump. Think back to words that have harmed you in the past. They might have been true, but chances are they came at the wrong time and in the wrong place. Good words are fitting words.

D. Good words are calming: Proverbs also says that good words are calming words. There's an old story about a man who fixed his wife a sandwich. One of the pieces of bread he used was the heel. When he gave her the sandwich, she blew up and said, "I am so sick of you giving me the heel on every sandwich you make. You've been doing this for 20 years. Why do you do this to me every time?" The husband looked at her and said quietly, "Because the heel is my favorite piece." Now, that's a calming thing to say. Apparently he understood Proverbs 15:1, **"A gentle answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger."** The word here for "gentle" means tender, delicate or soft. The idea is that a soft word can have a calming effect on a situation that's about to get out of control while harsh words just make things worse.

Think about how your marriage would change if you

took this to heart. Here is a secret about how to deal with potentially explosive situations. Your spouse is angry at you because you got home late from work. You're irritated because you did everything you could to get home early. But all you want to do is sit down and read the paper. In a slightly accusatory way she tells you she needs some help in the kitchen and why won't you ever talk to her. You don't feel like doing either. But how you respond may be the difference between a tense moment that blows over and WW III. Good words are calming words. They're words which by their tone and content defuse a situation.

E. Good words are up building: Finally, Proverbs tells us that good words are words that build up rather than tear down. Look at 11:9,11: **"With his mouth the godless man destroys his neighbor, But through knowledge the righteous will be delivered... By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, But by the mouth of the wicked it is torn down."** With our mouth we can destroy or deliver; exalt or tear down. And this is the difference between righteousness and godlessness.

Good words are words which build and heal. They're words which connect: "I love you...I care about you...You're important to me." They're words which affirm: "I appreciate all you do...You really have a gift that way...That's a great idea..." They're words which encourage: "Hang in there; I know you can do it." And they're words which understand: "That must be so difficult...I know that this must be a hard time for you..." All of these are words which build up another.

But what about words that tear down? Anytime we name-call we tear down. Names or labels such as idiot, liar, lazy bones, whore, fatso are all tear down. There are also words that take the heart out of people. This is true of the word "divorce" used by a married couple when they're fighting. To threaten divorce in the middle of an argument is like pulling out a gun. Suddenly the focus isn't on the issue but on the gun. Couples have to learn to leave that one out of their vocabulary.

Words that tear down are also words which overstate a point. We ought to avoid phrases like "You always..." or "You never..." or how about, "You're just like your mother..." All that does is create a reaction to the exaggeration rather than focus on the real issue. Words that tear down are also words that bring up old business, old mistakes, old quarrels, or even old flames. Every relationship has a history and some of it once it's dealt with ought to never be re-read.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, author of *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*, has lectured throughout the country on the powerful and often negative impact of words. He often asks audiences if they can go 24 hours without saying any

unkind words about, or to, another person. Invariably, a small number of listeners raise their hands, signifying "yes." Others laugh, and quite a few call out, "no!" Telushkin responds: "Those who can't answer 'yes' must recognize that you have a serious problem. If you can't go 24 hours without drinking liquor, you're addicted to alcohol. If you can't go 24 hours without smoking, you're addicted to nicotine. So if you can't go 24 hours without saying unkind words about others, then you've lost control over your tongue."

And most of us would have to admit, that's us. So the real question is, how can we tame our tongue? Complete mastery of the tongue is impossible for any of us, but we can still make progress. We don't have to go through life tasting the bitter fruit of an out of control tongue. Proverbs says a number of things about this as well.

III. HOW TO TAME THE TONGUE

A. Do some damage control: First, we might have to start by doing some damage control. Some of the best words we can ever say are "I'm sorry." Proverbs says in 12:15 that **"The way of a fool is right in his own eyes..."** Since we all fall in what we say, saying "I'm sorry" a lot is an absolute necessity for a relationship to remain close. If you're in a marriage or a close friendship or if you're a parent and these words aren't on your lips a lot then something is probably very wrong. Taming the tongue means doing some damage control.

B. Listen and think: Secondly, Proverbs tells us to listen and think before we respond. Prov 18:13: **"He who gives an answer before he hears, It is folly and shame to him."** Also, Prov 15:28: **"The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, But the mouth of the wicked pours forth evil things."** Both of these verses suggest that we listen before we respond and we think through what we say before we say it. Often times as we do that we'll have some doubts about what we intended at first to say. A good rule of thumb is, if in doubt, don't say it. There is a sense here that we should slow down in our speech. Sometimes we're impressed with the one who has a quick response, but usually that's a recipe for disaster, especially when emotions are out of control.

I think email is a wonderful invention, but it's also a dangerous weapon in the hands of one who fails to think before he speaks. Writing an angry letter used to take quite a bit of effort. You had to put the paper in the typewriter, type it out, use whiteout to correct your mistakes, look up the person's address, find an envelope and stamp, and take it to the post office. Now you can just blast at your keyboard for a few angry moments, hit send, and there's no retrieving

it. I can't count the number of emails I've sent that I've regretted.

C. Deal with the source: Finally, Proverbs suggests that we go to the source of our words. The source of what comes out of our mouths is what lies beneath the surface of our skin. The real issue is our heart. Prov 4:23-24: **"Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life. Put away from you a deceitful mouth, And put devious lips far from you."** It would be a mistake if you somehow got the idea today that the way to respond to this message is to go out and try really hard to control your tongue. Because the real problem is not with our tongue but with our heart. Jesus said, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks."

When I shake a salt shaker, what comes out? Salt. Why does salt come out, and not pepper, or sugar, or parsley? Because there's salt in the salt shaker. What else could possibly come out of the shaker than what's in it? You see, whatever is in your heart comes out of you—especially when people shake you. You speak what's in your heart. When I give in to the temptation to say something harsh or cruel, I realize that the problem isn't with my vocal chords—the problem is with my heart. I see who I am by the words I speak. It's the same for all of us. Your words reveal who you really are. So, in order to change our words, we must change our hearts. But how do we do that?

When my dad had a heart attack 15 years ago, his doctor told him he needed bypass surgery. Obviously, my dad couldn't perform the operation on himself, but then, neither could the doctor if my dad didn't cooperate. He had to submit himself to the surgeon so that the surgeon could do his job. In the same way, if you want a changed heart, you have to submit yourself to God so that he can change you. In the Psalms, David wrote, **"Create in me a pure heart, O God."** (Ps 51:10). That's where you start. To change your heart, give it to God. Submit it to him. The key to taming the tongue is to keep our heart yielded to the Lord. That's impossible unless you have Jesus dwelling in your heart. But when we invite Christ to come into our lives he comes in and he begins a process of transformation from the inside out. From that point on we have a choice to yield to the Spirit or to yield to the flesh. Going to the source means yielding to the Spirit; it means repenting of my bitterness, jealousy, selfishness and lack of faith which gives rise to harsh words in the first place.

CONCLUSION

As I think about the powerful impact that our words have on our relationships I'm reminded that one of the great themes of Scripture is the idea that God himself has spoken to us. Our God is a God who speaks. But, how does he speak to us? Hebrews 1:1-2a says, **"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways. But in these last days he has spoken to us through His Son..."** You see, the preeminent way that God has spoken to us is through the One who is called the Word of God, Jesus Christ. He is the "Word made flesh." He's the communication of God to us. He's the one who expresses to us the heart of the Father. And what a word that is! Sometimes we question how important our words really are. We say, "Oh, mere words, what can they do?" But if anything should convince us of the importance of words in our relationships it is this fact that when God chose to speak to us he chose to speak in one word—his Son. This wasn't a careless word, was it? This was communication at its best.

As God's beloved children who have his Spirit dwelling within, we have the privilege of imitating his gracious speech. No one can tame the tongue; you can't, I can't. But there is one who can. Will you come to him this morning and ask him to heal your tongue? Will you do that for your marriage? Will you do that for your children? Will you do that for your friends? Will you do that for him?

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