

Sermon Summary #2

Your Words have the Power of Life and Death Proverbs 18:20-21

The difference between the right word and the almost right word, said Mark Twain, is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug! His point, I believe, is that just as there is a frightening world of difference between a bolt of lightning, on the one hand, and the luminescence of an insect, on the other, so also between saying the right thing at the right time and the wrong thing at the wrong time. Lightning can light up an otherwise dark and dreary night. It can stun the unsuspecting and blind the person who doesn't know any better than to stare directly into it. Lightning can stir awe and wonder at the power of nature. It can also kill and wreak devastation. It's power is almost unimaginable. A lightning bug, on the other hand, is a harmless, powerless, momentary diversion on a summer's night.

Such, too, are our words. They can bring life and joy and encouragement and hope and healing when spoken in the right tone and at the right time. They can also denigrate and humiliate and destroy if we do not carefully monitor and control their use. At other times, words are as harmless and insignificant as a lightning bug. They may captivate our attention for a fleeting moment, but they leave no lasting impression and are of little benefit to anyone.

There is simply no way to exaggerate the life-giving and life-taking power of our words. We see it in the passage we read a moment ago: ***“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits”*** (Prov. 18:21). Let me give you but one other example of how important your words, your speech, even your casual comments ultimately are in the grand scheme of things. In Matthew 12:33-37 Jesus confronts the religious leaders of his day with this stunning statement:

“Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. ***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***” (Matthew 12:33-37).

Our words, our speech, what we say and how we say it, is so perfectly a reflection of what is in our hearts that, according to Jesus, there won't even be a need to list or evaluate your works on the day of judgment. All that is needed is a recording of your conversations, both public and private. Your words will either make it clear that you are a born again disciple and lover of Jesus Christ, or they will betray you as one who knows nothing of God and his saving grace. That, dear friend, is sobering to consider.

If you want to know how important words and speech are in Proverbs, consider this one fact: approximately 150 verses in Proverbs are devoted to the tongue, to our speech, to our words. Or again, ***one of every six verses*** in Proverbs talks about how we talk.

Again, the reason for this is that ***the tongue is either the greatest of blessings which may accomplish a world of good, or it is the most lethal and destructive of weapons, able to generate endless evil***. Have you ever stopped to think that how you define the gospel, at least from a human perspective, determines eternal life and eternal death. One person declares, “Salvation is ours by faith, *not* by works,” while another declares, “Salvation is ours by faith *and* by works.” The difference between saying “not by” instead of “any by” is the difference between heaven and hell.

Or consider how words manipulate public opinion and shape social policy. Today we rarely hear anyone speak of fornication. Rather, someone is merely sexually liberated. People aren't drug addicts; they are chemically dependent. It's rare that you hear the word homosexual; now it is same-sex attraction or alternative lifestyle. People

don't kill babies; they terminate pregnancies. Men and women don't commit adultery; they have an affair. Which words we use and how we employ them makes all the difference in the world.

And in Proverbs it becomes very clear, very early on, that you can easily recognize the fool by his speech, just as you can recognize the wise person by his. So today we are going to look at how wisdom is displayed in our words.

Given the massive amount of material in Proverbs on this subject, I have to be unavoidably selective. I'm going to use some representative texts to make four important points. I want us to think, first, about what our words tell us about the nature of a person. Second, we need to look closely at what our words accomplish; what precisely is the power they wield. Third, what kind of speech does Proverbs condemn? And fourth, what kind of speech does Proverbs commend?

(1) What do our words tell us about the nature or character of a person?

More than anything else in life, *our words are a barometer of what is in the heart*. They are an index, a revelation of our moral and spiritual character. We saw this a moment ago in what Jesus said in Matthew 12:33-37. Now consider these texts:

“The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence” (Prov. 10:11; cf. 10:20-21).

“The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable, but the mouth of the wicked, what is perverse” (Prov. 10:32).

“The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood, but the mouth of the upright delivers them” (Prov. 12:6).

“The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly” (Prov. 15:2; cf. 15:28).

“Fine speech is not becoming to a fool; still less is false speech to a prince” (Prov. 17:7).

This isn't to deny that even the wise and righteous on occasion let slip a wayward word or fail to guard what he says. But he knows it when he blows it! He is quick to repent and withdraw his destructive or cynical comments. Some who hate God and are fundamentally fools can for a season hide their true colors. But eventually their tongues will give them away.

(2) What can our words accomplish?

First, our words can lead to our personal downfall and destruction. We see this in three texts:

“By the mouth of a fool comes a rod for his back, but the lips of the wise will preserve them” (Prov. 14:3).

“A man of crooked heart does not discover good, and one with a dishonest tongue falls into calamity” (Prov. 17:20).

“A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating. A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul” (Prov. 18:6-7).

It's not that the fool deliberately pursues his own destruction. But he is so impetuous, rash and reckless with his words that he in effect invites his own punishment and rebuke. Careless speech will almost always boomerang on the speaker and bring devastation.

Second, our words can serve as either a source of peace or a cover for violence.

“The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence” (Prov. 10:11).

There is nothing more refreshing to a man dying of thirst than to come upon a deep well of cool refreshing water. That is what the words of the righteous do for a weary and discouraged heart. But the opposite is also true. Consider what Adolph Hitler regarded as perhaps his greatest discovery about himself. In his book, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, William Shirer describes Hitler as easily the most effective public speaker in Germany who mesmerized his audience with a magical if not demonic power of speech. He could hold sway over millions with the cadence and clarity of his voice. Hitler himself wrote that one of the most significant events of his life occurred in a lecture hall in 1918 when he intervened to denounce a man who had spoken highly of the Jews. "All at once," Hitler later wrote, "I was offered an opportunity of speaking before a larger audience; and the thing that I had always presumed from pure feeling without knowing it was now corroborated: I could speak!" Shirer goes on to describe Hitler's utter delight in this discovery. All of it, however, as Proverbs says, was a cloak to conceal violence.

Third, in words lies the power of persuasion.

"The wise of heart is called discerning, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness. . . . The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips" (Prov. 16:21, 23).

By "sweetness" is not meant slick and sugary words of manipulation but words that are carefully measured and uttered in a tone that is pleasing and attractive.

Fourth, in words lies the power to pervert and alienate.

"A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends" (Prov. 16:27-28).

He has in mind the sort of person who has no desire to use language constructively and for good, so that friendship might be strengthened. He is obsessed with using it to separate and alienate friends and to sow the seeds of suspicion in their hearts. His speech causes searing pain like a scorching fire. Often he doesn't do this by spewing forth blatant lies but rather uses innuendo, spoken with a raised eyebrow or a clever wink of the eye. He uses half truths and fills in the gaps of what he doesn't know with empty speculation. It often is introduced with words like: "Did you know that . . .?" or, "Were you aware . . .?" or, "I don't want to be one to spread gossip, so please keep this to yourself, but you'll never believe what I heard about so-and-so."

So, before you open your mouth, before you release words, whether you think they are true or accurate or necessary, pause for a moment and ask yourself: will what I'm about to say encourage others or tear them down; will it persuade them to pursue goodness or justify their sinful choices; will it build trust in friends or serve only to alienate and divide them?

(3) What kind of speech does Proverbs condemn?

First, Proverbs denounces dishonest, lying speech.

"Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you" (Prov. 4:24; cf. 12:19).

"Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight" (Prov. 12:22).

"Bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man, but afterward his mouth will be full of gravel" (Prov. 20:17).

See especially Revelation 22:14-15 . . .

Second, Proverbs condemns perjury and bearing false witness while it extols the virtue of those who speak the truth (Prov. 12:17; 14:5, 25; 19:5, 9, 28). Know this: once you have become known for telling lies it is often virtually impossible to restore your reputation and regain your integrity in the sight of others.

Third, Proverbs condemns all slander and malicious gossip.

“The one who conceals hatred has lying lips, and whoever utters slander is a fool” (Prov. 10:18).

“Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered” (Prov. 11:13).

“Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babler” (Prov. 20:19).

“The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body” (Prov. 18:8).

This could be referring to the person who is simply weak in character because indiscreet, or perhaps to the malicious gossip who intentionally spreads what he knows will hurt others. He also has in mind those who break confidentiality. This is the person who loves nothing more than to gain secret knowledge about others. He loves “being in the know,” so to speak. He feels special and in a place of power, and knows that only by sharing that knowledge with others will his stature be elevated. He hates it when a quarrel or dispute is settled before he has a chance to reveal it to others!

This raises the issue of confidentiality, which in many instances is an illusion. Never forget that everyone has another best friend whom they trust and with whom they are confident they can share the information you have shared with them. And that person has another best friend, and that one as well. The point is this: You can and must control the information that comes to you, but you can never control the information that comes from you. Once information is out and in the hands of others, never assume it will remain there, notwithstanding their most vigorous promises of silence. And be very cautious and discerning about to whom you promise confidentiality, under which conditions (it is rarely if ever unconditional), and in regard to what issues and/or individuals.

Look again at Prov. 18:8. The words “delicious morsels” comes from a root meaning “to swallow greedily.” The point is that gossip and slander are eagerly gulped down by a person disposed to listen and to spread it to others. Some people are gluttons for gossip. I call it *verbal bulimia*: they eat everything they hear and then vomit it back up in destructive gossip.

So how do you address the presence of gossip and slander? Listen to 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 point is that if you want to extinguish a fire you must take away the fuel. When someone utters the first sentence of gossip or slander, interrupt them immediately. Challenge them to provide concrete evidence for what they are saying. Provide proof, or shut up. Simply put, *evil words die without a welcome*.

Fourth, and finally, Proverbs denounces all forms of flattery.

“Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue” (Prov. 28:23).

“A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet” (Prov. 29:5).

So what is the difference between righteous and loving affirmation on the one hand and calculated and selfish flattery on the other? How do we affirm our children and one another without falling into sinful flattery?

In his excellent book, *Practicing Affirmation* (Crossway, 2011), Sam Crabtree helps us see the difference:

“While affirmation commends virtues, flattery exaggerates them, glosses over flaws, offers excessive input, and is insincere, not chiefly interested in building up the recipient in Christlikeness, but interested chiefly in obtaining some kind of direct favor. Healthy affirmation does not exaggerate or schmooze. Having affirmed, the affirmer can walk away with no expectation of receiving anything from the recipient. A good affirmer . . . looks to God for his reward. In contrast, there is a thread of seduction in flattery. The flatterer is after something from the flattered. While affirmation is a free gift with no strings attached and trusts God

to bring about whatever good harvest he wishes to bring from the seed planted, flattery is a bribe, and a direct return is expected – soon. Godly affirmation approves of Christlikeness and disapproves of anything contrary, whereas the flatterer approves anything – Christlike or not – that may achieve the desired response” (107-08).

(4) What kind of speech does Proverbs commend?

First, we read repeatedly in Proverbs about the virtues of calm, gentle, and pleasant speech.

“The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord, but gracious words are pure” (Prov. 15:26).

“Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body” (Prov. 16:24).

Honey is both pleasant to the taste and of medicinal value. So also it is with gracious, pleasant words rather than biting cynicism and reactionary condescension. Ask yourself this question: Would someone who eavesdropped on my most recent conversation with an adversary use the word “gracious” or “honey” or “sweetness” to describe the tone of my words?

“With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone” (Prov. 25:15).

“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Prov. 15:1).

“A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit” (Prov. 15:4; a verse, by the way, which forever refutes the English proverb, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me”).

The word “bone” here refers to any hard substance or difficult task or stubborn person. The point is that you will make far more progress in persuading an opponent and experience far greater success in making your viewpoint known and accepted when you speak softly and gently. ***Harsh words rarely succeed in overcoming stubborn opposition.***

I recall John Calvin once writing that when a man is running short on evidence, he raises his voice. Shouting is wrongly thought to compensate for lack of substance. But the person who is confident of the truth is calm and gentle.

Second, Proverbs often recommends both being slow to speak and carefully choosing the appropriate time.

“The wise lay up knowledge, but the mouth of a fool brings ruin near” (Prov. 10:14).

By “laying up knowledge” he means someone who is not talkative and makes no show of what he/she has learned. When they speak it is with due deliberation. His tongue is not governed by a hair trigger! The fool, on the other hand, takes no thought for when he speaks or what he says. He blurts out statements which do more harm than good. Again,

“When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent” (Prov. 10:19).

“The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult” (Prov. 12:16).

“Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent” (Prov. 17:27-28).

“If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame” (Prov. 18:13).

Here he has in mind the immediate, knee-jerk reaction fueled by emotion; the retaliatory swipe that has not been carefully thought out in advance. When we speak is often as important as what we say. Even the most priceless of truths fall lifeless to the ground if spoken in haste and with harsh tone. Listen! Think! Weigh the circumstances! Ponder the consequences! Even a fool can hide his deficiencies by simply keeping his mouth shut! Perhaps Abraham Lincoln put it best when he said: "It is better to keep your mouth shut and let them think you a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt."

There is no greater illustration of the crucial importance of restraint and slowness to respond than what happened at *The Diet of Worms in 1521*. And since we are only a couple of weeks away from October 31st, Reformation Day (!), I give you the wise and mature example of Martin Luther. Luther appeared before the diet on April 17 at 4:00 p.m., where he was to defend himself before Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor (then only 19 years old). Said Charles: "It is preposterous that a single monk should be right in his opinion and that the whole of Christianity should be in error a thousand years or more."

Luther was then asked two questions. First, did he acknowledge that the books on the table before him were his? And secondly, would he stand by them or retract what he had written? Instead of instantly blurting out his answer, which most expected of him, Luther asked for time to reflect and pray before giving his reply. He was granted 24 hours. Here is the text of his request:

"I cannot deny that the books named are mine, and I will never deny any of them: they are all my offspring; and I have written some others which have not been named. But as to what follows, whether I shall reaffirm in the same terms all, or shall retract what I may have uttered beyond the authority of Scripture, -- because the matter involves a question of faith and of the salvation of souls, and because it concerns the Word of God, which is the greatest thing in heaven and on earth, and which we all must reverence, -- it would be dangerous and rash in me to make any unpremeditated declaration, because in unpremeditated speech I might say something less than the fact and something more than the truth; besides, I remember the saying of Christ when He declared, 'Whosoever shall deny Me before men, him will I also deny before My Father which is in heaven, and before His angels.' For these reasons I beg, with all respect, that your Imperial Majesty give me time to deliberate, that I may answer the question without injury to the Word of God and without peril to my own soul."

Returning on April 18, at 6:00 p.m. he delivered this now famous response:

"Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the Pope nor councils alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound to the Word of God: I cannot and I will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against the conscience. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen!"

***"Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths,
but only such as is good for building up,
as fits the occasion,
that it may give grace to those who hear"
(Ephesians 4:29)***