

Wisdom about Words

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder if you can finish this well-known modern proverb, sticks and stones may break my bones, but...

Is it true? No, it's not true. Names do hurt, don't they? It's not true according to our own experience, and it's not true according to God's wisdom either.

Which is why we began our short series on Proverbs last week by looking at the key to wisdom, which is the fear of the Lord. And so just to do a bit of a recap, Barry mentioned one of these verses at the start of the service, actually.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge or wisdom, and it involves treating God as God in humble awe that obeys His word, but also with a love that delights in His word.

As someone showed me this week gone, a verse from Psalm 112, which says, Blessed are those who fear the Lord, who find great delight in His commands.

[1 : 05] Do we delight in God's word? Do we look forward to reading it and hearing it? A healthy fear of God obeys, not simply to avoid punishment, which is why most of us slow down when we see a police car approaching or on the road, don't we?

Out of fear of punishment. But we want to obey God because we delight in His commands, His law, His word. And so as I tried to summarize for you last week, the fear of the Lord is that humble and affectionate, loving awe by which the child of God bends themselves carefully to their father's word. That's the fear of the Lord. And when we do that, it means His word of wisdom will help shape how we interpret the world's wisdom, how we interpret the world's advice, because there sure is a lot of it out there, isn't there?

I like the lady from St. John's last week whose fear of the Lord meant that she took some of the doctor's wisdom, but not all of it. I like this week where God's wisdom about words means we'll take some of the world's proverbs, but not that one about sticks and stones, because we know it's not true and God says it's not true.

In fact, God says words really do matter. Point one in your outlines. Now, I've chosen chapter 18 because that mentions words quite a bit, but this is a bit of a topical talk, which means we'll have to jump around a bit, and so most of the verses, in fact, all of them will be on the screen for you.

[2 : 46] Chapter 18 is part of Solomon's first collection, and it's hard to see it, but verses 1 to 21 actually form a unit. Verses 1 to 9 talk about the fool, and then 10 to 21 talk about the wisdom that the righteous have.

And the main topic, it's not the only topic, but the main topic is speaking and listening, that is, words. And so verse 1, fools start quarrels. Verse 2, fools love airing their opinions.

I don't know if you know anyone like that, that loves airing their opinions, but it's words, isn't it? And on it goes. But as I said, with topical talks, we won't be able to stick to just this passage.

In fact, we're going to skip to the end of it, to verse 20 and 21. It says in verse 20, Now, this pair of proverbs are connected by the imagery of eating fruit, the fruit of our mouth.

That is, what we say will often come back to either feed us with good and satisfy us, or bite us with bad, if you like. In fact, verse 21 says, Our words have the power to bring us life or death, or perhaps even literally.

[4 : 20] In fact, back in verse 6 and 7 of the same chapter, it says, The lips of fools bring them strife, and their mouths invite a beating.

The mouths of fools are their undoing, and their lips are a snare to their very lives. It brings bad stuff. It comes back to bite them. It can bring them death.

Metaphorically, and sometimes even literally. In May this year, a man was verbally abusing passengers on a U.S. subway, and one passenger had enough, and put him in a headlock.

Only this passenger accidentally choked him to death. Can you believe it? And so sadly, this man's words brought him actual death that he didn't deserve.

It's an extreme case. In fact, it's extreme even for proverbs, even though it hints at it, because in proverbs, the life and death is usually referred to in terms of living well or not living well.

[5 : 24] So our words can bring us life in terms of a good reputation, perhaps a promotion, and so on, because we are known as an honest person.

Either way, our words can make a difference to us, and of course, to others. And so, for example, Proverbs chapter 10 says, the mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, as it brings life to others. But the mouth of the wicked conceals violence. You know, we can bring life to others, perhaps by giving them an affirming or encouraging word that builds them up.

But the wicked may sound good, but they actually bring violence. Sounds good, but they conceal their underlying motives. It's like the scams we heard about last week.

In fact, a lady in our street literally lost her house because of a scam. She was able to live in it, but she just passed recently, and they had to sell it, and these people who made her sign this contract have now got all the money.

[6 : 31] The kids get nothing. They sounded really convincing on the phone, but they concealed great violence. Or Proverbs chapter 12, the words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Words can hurt like swords, can't they? But they can also heal when they're given encouragement, when people ask after us, when we're feeling down, and the like.

And so you see the point? Words matter. They have real power to heal or hurt, to bring life or death, both to us and to others.

Now, to be fair, I think the world has realized that sticks and stones proverb is not true. I think everyone knows that. And I think everyone knows that words matter.

But I'm not sure everyone realizes they matter this much. Life or death, I mean, that's pretty significant, isn't it? Or perhaps we just forget that words matter.

[7 : 42] It's easy to forget that words matter in the heat of a moment, isn't it? One of our daughters got so angry with my wife one time, she let loose, and at the end of her tirade, she gave my wife what she thought was the biggest insult she could think of.

She said, and that top looks terrible on you, and stormed out the room. She felt bad and then came back and said, Mummy, you always look good. But the point is, in the heat of the moment, it's easy to blurt out words that hurt rather than heal, isn't it?

That bring death rather than life. And so the first step to having wisdom about words is to remember that words matter.

Especially for us as Christians. We are people of the word, aren't we? Our God created and sustains the world by his word.

Our God relates and reveals himself to us by his word. And the Son of God, Jesus, is called the living word.

[8 : 51] We are people of the word, and so words should matter even more to us. And so the first step, as I said, to wisdom about words is to realize they matter.

And so what other wisdom, though, does Proverbs offer us about our words, point to? Well, as I've looked through Proverbs or the different ones about the words, it seems they can be grouped into four categories.

The first is that words are to be truthful, not false or slanderous. I think this is probably the biggest category in Proverbs. So just a couple of examples.

Chapter 10, verse 18 says, whoever conceals hatred with lying lips and spreads slander is a fool. Slander is a lie that damages someone's character.

And lies and slander makes us a fool. Why? Well, because it not only hurts others, but it will be punished by God. And so, some examples about how lies hurt others, like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is one who gives false testimony against a neighbor.

[10 : 02] Like a maniac shooting flaming arrows of death is one who deceives their neighbor and says, oh, I was only joking. No, no, truth matters, doesn't it?

And false testimony, lies like this, hurt our neighbors. In fact, lying means that you actually hate the person you're lying about.

A lying tongue hates those it hurts and a flattering mouth works ruin. But on the other hand, a truthful witness saves lives, while a false witness, of course, is deceitful.

You see, truthful words can save lives, but lies can take them. Like a club or a sword or a flaming arrow of death, which is why God will hold them accountable.

The Lord detests, that's a pretty strong word, isn't it? Detests lying lips. But he delights in people who are trustworthy.

[11:07] A false witness will not go unpunished. And whoever pours out lies will not go free. Only a fool lies and slanders because it not only hurts others, but it will be punished by God.

It will come back to bite us big time on the last day. Of course, for us who believe in Jesus, then Jesus has taken our punishment for us.

But we still need to live as those he delights in, those who are trustworthy and not those whose lips he detests. of course, sometimes we'll need to say truthful things that are hard to say.

And so Proverbs 27 acknowledges this. It says, better is an open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds, you know, hard things spoken from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

Here, hidden love is not real love. It's fake flattery from a false friend, like an enemy's multiple kisses.

[12:18] It's not real. But, an open rebuke, a hard word spoken from a friend can be trusted because they have your best interests at heart.

But notice though, this is done in the context of relationship. It's talking about a friend who speaks the hard word. We don't go around and tell off everyone who's doing the wrong thing, do we? It's to be done in the context of a relationship.

And we're to do it gently, which brings us to the second category. Proverbs says our words are to be gentle, not harsh or argumentative. And so, for example, Proverbs 15 says a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Gracious words are a honeycomb sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. But he's an argumentative person, as charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife.

And we know this in life, don't we? A person who constantly corrects and constantly picks a fight with you, a quarrelsome person, they're just plain exhausting, aren't they?

[13:37] And how often does an argument escalate because we fire back a harsh word? But a gentle and gracious word, it de-escalates an argument, doesn't it?

I remember watching a tradie talk to Tim Walker at church and the tradie was getting fired up over something, but Tim replied with his gentle usual manner and I could almost see, literally see, the anger drain out of the tradie.

It was amazing to watch. Tim's a great model of gentle words. It works at home too, if you get involved in an argument with someone. So for example, at my house, I won't say who was angry, but a gentle word from the other person can de-escalate the situation.

Gentle answers, turn away wrath, gracious words are healing to the bones. Our words are to be gentle, not harsh and argumentative. Our wisdom also says that our words are to be considered words.

That is, we're to consider what we say before we say it. There's a modern day proverb about that, which I'm sure most of our mothers have taught us. Think before you speak.

[14:53] Consider, in other words. So a proverb says, the wise store up knowledge. That is, they think about things but the mouth of the fool invites ruin because they just blurt it out.

The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, thinks about it, considers it, but the mouth of the wicked just gushes evil. To answer before listening, well, that's folly and shame, it says.

In other words, we are to think before we speak. In fact, just before our reading in chapter 18 of Proverbs, so the end of chapter 17, it says this, the one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even tempered.

Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent and discerning if they hold their tongues. You see, restraint, holding your tongue is wisdom.

We are to think before we speak, which may mean a few things. It may mean we actually don't speak at all. If someone says something, we let it go through to the keeper and stay silent.

[16:07] Do you know who is a great example of this? The queen. She would never respond, would she, to rumours and newspaper articles. She'd just keep quiet. It was almost like the palace

policy.

Sometimes it may mean talking less. Don't nudge the person next to you, by the way. It may mean talking less because we need to consider things first.

But on the other hand, it may actually even mean talking more. For example, when I come home and my wife asks me how my day was or we catch up at night and she asks me how it was, I'm not to give my typical male response of, you know, the male grunt that we're so good at giving.

I can't then justify it by saying, well, Proverbs tells me to keep silent. No. In this case, to consider, to think before I speak means I'll actually say more in this situation.

And sometimes to have a consideration before we, or to think before we speak means we'll think quickly. I mean, can you imagine a nurse or a doctor in an ER situation taking a long time to give an answer?

[17:20] I've just got to consider my answer first. I know what it is, but I've got to just it's dangerous, isn't it? You think quickly in that instance. And so all this shows us that even our considered words depend on the situation, don't they?

Which leads us to the fourth and related character of appropriate or apt words. Words that are appropriate for the situation. So Proverbs 15 says, a person finds joy in giving an apt reply and how good is a timely word.

Timing does matter, doesn't it? A timely word of encouragement can do great good, but a word spoken from a good intention at a bad time, it isn't helpful at all, is it?

For example, if anyone loudly blesses their neighbour early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse. And so someone who is not a morning person, let me tell you this is true.

It needs to be an apt comment. Words are to be apt, appropriate to the situation. Just like we saw last week with sometimes you may not answer a fool according to their folly and sometimes you will answer a fool according to their folly.

[18:37] It depends on the situation and the type of fool, whether they're willing to listen. And if our words are not considered and not apt, not timely, then to quote another modern proverb, we can put our foot in our mouth, can't we?

I like one lady who announced during the Ladies Guild meeting, ladies, don't forget the rummage sale, it's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house, bring your husbands. You might actually think that's still apt.

Wisdom tells us that our words are to be truthful, gentle, considered, and apt. But it actually all starts with our heart, point three.

Proverbs 4.23 says, above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. And this is particularly true of our words.

And so Proverbs goes on to say, the hearts of the wise make their mouths prudent, and their lips promote instruction. It comes from the heart. There's this connection between our words and our hearts, one that Jesus himself backed up in Luke chapter 6.

[19:53] Jesus himself said, for the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. You see, our hearts often determine our speech. That's why in Proverbs, it's the righteous who speak wisely, and the wicked who speak foolishly.

because the righteous have a right heart. In fact, our hearts determine whether we'll have a healthy fear of the Lord or not. And so how do we get a right heart?

Well, it's by believing in Jesus. For when we do, God's spirit cleanses or purifies our heart, makes them right so that we might have a healthy fear of the Lord, one that delights in his commands and seeks to obey his word, including his wisdom about our words.

And so the first question for us is, do you believe in Jesus? Has your heart been cleansed and made right? Do you have God's spirit to help you have wise words in life?

And for us who do, then we're to put it into practice. Yet we're to listen to God's spirit prompt our conscience to use wise words, truthful, gentle, considerate and apt words.

[21:17] Or as our second reading put it, with God's help, we are to put off our old self and put on the new self created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

And it's interesting that the very first example that Paul gives is about our words. Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood, lies, and speak truthfully to our neighbours.

We are to put off falsehood and put on truth, just like we saw in Proverbs. Or elsewhere, we're to also answer with gentleness and respect.

Our words are to be gracious and also apt, seasoned with salt. That's what I think that refers to, appropriate to the situation, appropriately flavoured, if you like. And in this context, it's particularly talking about answering people who ask us why we're Christians. And an apt response would include, I hope, if the situation allows it, to share with them something about Jesus and the life eternal he gives us.

[22 : 26] words. We're also told in the New Testament that our words are to be considered, we're to be slow to speak, to think before we speak, as that well-known verse in James says.

In other words, God's wisdom about words in Proverbs is also seen in the New Testament. And perhaps the best verse to summarise wisdom about words was the last one of our second reading. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs. Not if we think it's funny, but if they think it's funny, that it may benefit those who listen.

This one verse, I think, helps us know what to say in any situation. This one principle. Because sticks and stones may not actually break our bones, but names do hurt us and others.

And so as people of the word, let's be wise with our words. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father, most, if not all, we've heard today, we've heard before.

[23 : 47] But it's one thing to know it, it's another thing to do it. And so by your spirit, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.