

Wisdom about Words

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[0 : 00] Well, why don't I pray briefly for us and then we'll get into it. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we pray that as people of the word, you would help us this morning to use our words wisely by teaching us how to do so.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. We'll see if you can finish this well-known modern-day proverb, sticks and stones may break my bones, but... Yeah, words or names will never hurt me. Is it true? No. It's not true according to our experience and it's not true according to God's word either, which is why we began our short series in Proverbs last week by looking at the key to wisdom, which was the fear of the Lord, which comes up a couple of times specifically saying it's the beginning of wisdom or knowledge.

And we saw last week, just by way of recap, that this fear involves treating God as God. With a humble awe that obeys his word, but also with a love that we delight in his word.

Someone showed me during the week, Psalm 112, that says, blessed are those who fear the Lord, who find great delight in his commands. I wonder if that's true for us.

[1 : 19] Do we delight in reading or hearing God's word? Do we look forward to it and delight in it?

A healthy fear of the Lord obeys not simply to avoid punishment, you know, kind of like we do when we see the police on the road and everyone slows down because we're fearful of punishment.

No, no, no. A healthy fear of the Lord obeys out of love for God, who delights in his word. A definition I tried to show you last week, or did show you last week, was the fear of the Lord is that humble and affectionate, loving awe by which the child of God, that's us, bends ourselves carefully to our Father's word.

And when we do that, it means that his word of wisdom shapes how we interpret or what we take on from the world's wisdom. There's still wisdom in the world to have, but we need to take some of it and not others.

I like the lady from St. John's I mentioned last week, whose fear of the Lord meant she took some of the doctor's wisdom about treatment, but not all of it about grief groups because she wasn't worried about dying.

[2 : 34] Or this week where God's wisdom about words means we'll take some of the world's wisdom about words, but not all of it, and not that proverb about sticks and stones because, well, we know it's not true, and God tells us it's not true.

In fact, God tells us that words really do matter, point one. And we see that from a number of verses in Proverbs. I've chosen chapter 18, verses 1 to 21, because it's hard to see it on your own, but it actually forms a unit.

It talks about fool in verses 1 to 9, and it gives wisdom to the righteous in verses 10 to 21. And the main topic, there are other topics, but the main topic, though, is speaking and listening, whether it's in the courtroom or in the house or whatever it is.

So, for example, verse 1 talks about a fool or an unfriendly person who starts quarrels. That's with our words, right? You quarrel with your words.

Or verse 2, the fool loves airing their own opinion. That's, again, about words. And on it goes. But as I said, like all topical talks, we won't be able to stick to just this passage.

[3 : 44] We'll need to move around. In fact, we're actually going to start by skipping to the end of our passage in verse 20 and 21. Have a look towards the end. In verse 20, it says, From the fruit of their mouth, a person's stomach is filled.

With the harvest of their lips, they are satisfied. The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat of its fruit.

These two proverbs are a pair. They're joined together by the imagery of eating and fruit. And what they're talking about is what we say will often come back and feed us, either for good or bite us with bad, if you like.

As verse 21 says, Our words have the power to bring us life or death, and perhaps even literally. In fact, if you look on the left-hand side of the page at verse 6 and 7, it says in verse 6, The lips of fools bring them strife, bad stuff in life, and their mouths invite a beating.

That's biting them back, isn't it? Their words. The mouth, verse 7, The mouths of fools are their undoing, and their lips are a snare to their very lives.

[5 : 09] In other words, a fool's words may lead to a literal beating, it seems. Or even worse. In May this year, there was a man who was verbally abusing passengers on a US subway.

One passenger had enough and put him in a headlock, but then actually, accidentally, choked him to death. It was horrible. And so sadly, this man's words brought him literal death, that he didn't deserve, mind you.

This is an extreme case, and Proverbs hints at it, but much more often in Proverbs, the emphasis is on it bringing life or death in terms of living well or not.

And so our words can bring us life in terms of a promotion or a good reputation, reputation because people know from our words that we're an honest person. Either way, our words can make a difference to us, and not just to us, but also to others.

And so Proverbs 10 says, The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life. It brings life to others. But the mouth of the wicked conceals violence. We can bring life to others by giving a word that builds them up and encourages them.

[6 : 27] But the mouth of wicked might sound correct, but it conceals, hides violence underneath. And again, like I mentioned last week, this is like scams, isn't it?

In fact, a lady in our street literally lost her house because of a scam. It's for sale at the moment. The scammers were wicked people, and it concealed, sounded good, sounded convincing on the phone, but it concealed their violence.

She signed away her house, and so she's since passed away, and now the house is up for auction right now, and it's going to go, the money's going to go to the scammers. The family gets nothing. Or in Proverbs 12, verse 18, The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

You see, words really can hurt. I mean, we know this, don't we? They can hurt like a sword really hurts, but they can also really heal. When someone gives you a word of encouragement when you're down, asks after you when they didn't see you for a few weeks, those words can really heal, can't they?

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

[7 : 51] Now, to be fair, I think the world has worked out that sticks and stones proverb is not true. I think we all know that. But do we realise that words matter this much?

They can bring either life or death. That's pretty significant, isn't it? Or perhaps we just forget, which is easily done in the heat of the moment, isn't it?

I remember when one of our kids was so angry with Michelle one time, they let loose, and at the end of the tirade, they gave Michelle the ultimate insult and said, that top looks terrible on you, and then walked off.

They felt bad and came back later and said, mummy, you always look good. But in the heat of the moment, we can just blurt out words, can't we? And so the first step to having wisdom about words is to remember how much they matter, especially as Christians.

After all, our God created and sustains our world by his word. And in fact, God relates and reveals himself to us by his word.

[9 : 01] And God the Son is known as the living word. We are people of the word. And so of all people, words should matter to us.

And so what wisdom is there for us from Proverbs about how to use our words, point two? Well, the Proverbs are kind of scattered all over the book, but I think we can group them into four categories. Firstly, this is point two, our words are to be truthful, not false, nor slanderous. This is probably the biggest category in Proverbs. Let me give you a couple of examples.

So from chapter 10, whoever conceals hatred with lying lips and spreads slander is a fool. That slander is a lie that damages someone's character.

And if we lie and slander, Proverbs says we are a fool. Why? Well, because it not only hurts others, but it'll be punished by God.

[10:03] And so some examples about how lies hurt others from Proverbs 25, like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is one who gives false testimony who lies against the neighbor.

Or like a maniac shooting flaming arrows of death is the one who deceives their neighbor and says, oh, I was only joking when they weren't actually only joking. false testimony and lies hurt others. In fact, lying, a lying tongue actually hates those it hurts. That's how bad it is. It's a form of hatred towards them. And a flattering mouth works ruin.

But on the other hand, a truthful witness saves lives, it says. So you see, truthful words can save while lies can hurt and bring death like a club or a flaming arrow of death.

Which is why Proverbs also says the Lord detests lying lips. That's a pretty strong word, isn't it? Detests lying lips. But he delights in people who are trustworthy.

[11:09] 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 judged 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 like those he delights in, don't we? And not like those whose lying lips he detests. Of course, sometimes we need to still say truthful things that are hard to say.

So, Proverbs 27 also says better is an open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted but an enemy multiplies kisses.

Hidden love is not real love. It's fake flattery from a false friend. It's the multiple kisses of an enemy that's not really speaking the truth to you.

[12:14] Real love is from a true friend who will openly rebuke, who will speak the truth even when it's hard to say and hard to hear.

But notice it talks about a friend. This is done in the context of relationship. It's not as though we go around and tell people off willy-nilly. No, no, we're meant to have a relationship with this person where they know us and we know them so that they know we're trying to speak the truth in love, that we're trying to help them live the right way.

And it's to be done gently. Which brings us to the second category. A proverb says our words are to be gentle, not harsh or argumentative. So, for example, 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, as charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife.

You know, a quarrelsome person leads to fights and strife. And don't we know this in life? You know, a person who constantly corrects you and picks fights with you, a quarrelsome person is exhausting.

[13:36] And how often does an argument escalate because we say a harsh word back? But a gentle and gracious word, it de-escalates an argument, doesn't it?

I remember watching a tradie here at church talk to Tim Walker and the tradie was getting fired up about something, I can't remember what it was, but Tim replied in his usual gentle manner and I could almost literally see the anger draining out of the tradie's face.

It was phenomenal. Tim's a great model of gentle words and it works at home too. You know, if we're having an argument, I won't say who's angry and wrong.

A gentle word from the other person de-escalates the whole situation. Our words are to be gentle, not harsh or argumentative. Wisdom also tells us that our words are to be considered.

We're to consider what we say before we say it. As one other modern proverb puts it, think before you speak. Yeah, think before you speak.

[14:43] And so, for example, from Proverbs, it says, the wise store up knowledge, that is, they think about it, but the mouth of a fool invites ruin.

The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, considers it, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil. To answer before listening, well, that is folly and shame.

You see what it's saying? We're to consider, think before we speak. In fact, just before our reading in chapter 18, at the top left hand side of your Bibles, or on the screen either way, it says, the one

who has knowledge uses words with restraint and whoever has understanding is even tempered. They don't fly off the handle, in other words, they think before they react. And I like this one, even fools are thought wise if they keep silent and discerning if they hold their tongues.

We're to think before we speak, which may mean a few things. Firstly, it may mean we then don't speak at all. We just let the comment go through to the keeper, as another proverb says.

[15 : 54] You know who was excellent at this? She's since passed away, but the queen. You know how she just never responded to rumours or the newspapers? It was like palace policy, just let it go.

And so it may mean we just sometimes let it go and say nothing. Other times considering means we talk less. We restrain and just say a few words because we know any more is just going to rile things up.

Sometimes though it may even mean talking more. You know, if Michelle asked me how my day was, I'm not to respond in the typical guy grunt.

Do guys do that? The guy grunt? And I can't justify it by saying well Proverbs tells me to keep silent. Rather, these Proverbs are about holding our tongues in order to give a consider response, which may mean letting it go and saying nothing.

It may mean saying less or it may mean saying more. Which brings us to the fourth and related category. Words are to be appropriate for the situation.

[17 : 00] They're to be apt words. And so Proverbs 15 says, a person finds joy in giving an apt reply. And how good is a timely word.

They're to be apt or appropriate to the situation. A nurse or doctor working in an ER and in an emergency someone comes in and they don't have time to consider for a long period.

Oh, let me just have a think about the best treatment. I know what it is, but I just think about it because I've got to consider my words. But no, no, that's not apt for the situation, is it? They need to think quickly and respond appropriately.

A timely word can save lives in that case. A timely word of encouragement can also do great good and an untimely word, great evil, like this one.

If anyone loudly blesses their neighbour early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse. And as someone who is not a morning person, that is so true. Words are to be appropriate, apt for the situation.

[18 : 04] Just like we saw last week, about sometimes we won't answer a fool because we'll just be sucked into their argument, but other times we will answer a fool to try and help them in life.

It depends on the situation. It needs to be apt, appropriate for the situation. If our words are not considered, not apt, not timely, then to quote another modern proverb, we can often put our foot in our mouth, can't we?

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

I don't know. Wisdom tells us that our words are to be truthful, gentle, considered, and apt, appropriate for the situation, words, but it actually says that our words start with the heart.

Point three. Proverbs 4.23 says, above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. And this is especially the case with our words.

[19 : 08] The heart of the wise make their mouths prudent. See, the heart leads to prudent words, wise words, and their lips promote instruction.

Jesus himself says something similar in Luke's gospel. He says, for the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. You see, there's this connection between our hearts and our words.

And that's why in Proverbs, it's the righteous who speak wisely and the wicked who speak foolishly often. Because the righteous have a right heart.

In fact, our hearts determine whether we'll have a healthy fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of all wisdom, including for our words. And so, how do we get a right heart?

Well, by believing in Jesus. For when we do, God's spirit cleanses or purifies our hearts. And his spirit works in us to move us to have a healthy fear of the Lord.

[20 : 14] That delights in his commands and seeks to obey his word, including this wisdom about our words. And so, do you believe in Jesus?

Has your heart been cleansed and made right? It's the only way to be able to speak wise words or have a fear of the Lord that speaks wise words.

And for us who do, then we're to live it out. We're to listen to God's spirit when he prompts our conscience to speak this way and not that way.

We're to follow God's word that says, like today, speak truthful, gentle, considered, apt words. Or as we heard in our second reading, we're to put off the old self with God's help and put on the new self which is created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

And it's very interesting that the very first example that they give of putting off and putting on has to do with words. We're to put off falsehood and speak truthfully, just like we've seen in Proverbs.

[21 : 33] Or elsewhere in the New Testament, we also see we're to answer with gentleness and respect. Our conversation should be full of gracious words. And even apt words, seasoned with salt, I think, refers to it being apt for the occasion, the situation.

Appropriately flavoured, if you like. In the context of these two verses, it's particularly talking about answering for the hope we have as a Christian when someone asks us why we go to church.

That would be an apt word to talk to them about Jesus. But the New Testament also says we're to have considered words or be slow to speak. Think before we speak.

I think the best verse that summarises wisdom about words was the last one we've heard from our second reading, the kids talk one. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mama mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

The joke might be funny for you, but if it's not for them, it's not going to benefit them, is it? We do not let any unwholesome talk come out of their mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up.

[22 : 48] I think this one verse, if you remember just this one verse from today, it will help you to speak wisely in any situation. Just this one verse. Because sticks and stones may not actually break our bones, but names do actually hurt us and others.

And so as people of the word, let's use our words wisely. Let's pray.