

The Tongue

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[0 : 00] Well, if you would like to open your Bible and turn to Proverbs chapter 15, verse 4. I know we read chapter 12, Proverbs 15, verse 4.

I'm going to try and preach on one verse today, but I will quote dozens of others. So just keep me on Proverbs 15, verse 4. We've been doing a series in the book of Proverbs, and today we come to the tongue, how we speak.

The most over-exercised muscle in our body. Some people calculate that on an average week, most North Americans speak enough words to fill a 500-page book.

And most of it's probably not worth reading. I call it the tongue today, but that's not really the focus of Proverbs. It's wise words and foolish words.

Have a look at 15, verse 4, this amazing verse. A gentle tongue, or a healing tongue, is a tree of life. But perverseness in it breaks the spirit.

[1 : 08] Now, a little bit the same as money last week. The problem is there's just, there are so many Proverbs on speech, covering so many different areas.

There's almost no area of speech that's not covered in Proverbs. And you can't reduce it to a list of ten rules, which is a relief, because we wouldn't be able to keep them anyway.

And the book of Proverbs comes to us so wisely. And it gives us such a rich view of the effects of our words on ourselves and on others.

And it does it in a way, I think it's very shrewd. It's so natural, it almost can go unnoticed. The way Proverbs teaches us about the power of the words, power of our words, is that it embeds texts about our speaking in the midst of every chapter.

Every chapter has stuff about words. But sometimes you get two verses on it, and sometimes you get six verses on it. But often you can be reading along and you think, well, we're dealing with poverty and wealth and poverty and wealth or sexual fulfillment and temptation, and suddenly we're talking about speech again.

[2 : 18] And the reason for that is it's woven together as part of our life. And every now and again, it's probably good to put the book down itself and remind yourself that even the very book of Proverbs is a demonstration of the magnificent power of wise words for good.

The mouth of God, says Proverbs, speaks words of wisdom. The Father says to the Son, and wisdom says to us, listen to these words, take them into your hearts for life and for good and for blessing.

And although we read chapter 12 together, and we'll go back there, I really want to just focus on this little verse because there's more in verse 15-4, I think, than our hearts could possibly contain.

And if we just tried to take it in and digest it a little bit, it would bring a different view of life, I think, and some deep change and progress.

A gentle tongue, a healing tongue, is a tree of life. But perverseness in it breaks the spirit. And I want to look at three questions. Why are our words so important?

[3 : 32] What's the difference between wise and foolish words? And thirdly, well, how do we speak wise words then? And I'll spend most time on the first point, just as a warning. Although we don't have anything after church today, so I might go longer on the others as well.

So why are our words so important? You know that English proverb, sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never break me. It's a well-intended proverb to teach children not to take revenge when they've been insulted or hurt.

But the problem with it is it's just not true. The damage words can do are far greater than the breaking of bones.

So our little verse, a gentle tongue, a healing tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit, tells us that the tongue has this massive power to heal or to destroy.

And it's a helpful little proverb because it shows us how proverbs work. There are two parts to each proverb, and sometimes they're in parallel, and sometimes they're contrasting with each other.

[4 : 41] And I want to take the second part of the proverb first. Perverseness in it breaks the spirit. What does it mean to break the spirit? In the Old Testament, spirit is the word wind.

And when the wind is spoken about outside of us, it means it's picturing something forceful, something with energy and strength and vitality and power.

But when it refers to the human spirit, it's speaking about the energy in our hearts, the emotional vitality. It's what pushes us out into life to take it on.

Our spirit is our passion for life, if you will. And a broken spirit is when someone has been pushed down under a big weight or has incurred a terrible injury in their spirit, often through the words of another, so that their energy for life is low, and they have little or no pleasure in life.

They don't want to get out there and deal with it. They feel despondent, passive, no longer caring so much. And a spirit can be crushed or it can be broken.

[5 : 51] So in chapter 18, we hear, A man's spirit will endure sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear, which means you can have a broken body.

And you know people like this. People can have terrible physical suffering, but a really strong spirit and a joie de vivre. But if your spirit is crushed and broken, it doesn't matter how healthy and beautiful your body is, your energy for life is gone.

Which means that our happiness is not determined by looking good or being healthy. It's much more determined by the strength of our spirit, whether we are feeding on the healing grace of God for our strength.

And how do you break someone else's spirit in this verse, 15, 4? It's by the perverseness of the tongue. So if you want to just flick back to chapter 12 for a moment.

12, 18 says, There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

[6 : 59] Rash words are words you don't think about. They're words without restraint. They're hasty and reckless. And the tongue is in the shape of a sword, like a spear.

And what hasty words can do is what a sword can do to the body. You can cut it in half. You can stab it and slice it. And words can cut straight through us.

And Proverbs teaches us that perverse words come from a perverse heart. In chapter 6, verse 12, it says, A worthless person, a wicked man, goes about with crooked speech. And in verse 14, With perverted heart devises evil continually, sowing discord.

And when you pervert something, you just turn it upside down. You take a bowl of soup and you turn it upside down. Or you twist a piece of rope and you turn it to a different purpose.

God gave us words to bring us together, like he speaks with us. But twisted words are not just a sin against community. They can actually break and damage and injure and crush the spirit in someone else.

[8 : 09] Every one of us knows this. Every one of us have probably received sword stabs and to our shame we've given them. This is partly why words are important.

But I want to say that the emphasis in the book of Proverbs is not on foolish, damaging, perverse words. The great emphasis is on the massive positive power of wise words.

This is just beyond all human possibility. Look back at 15.4. A healing tongue is a tree of life. But perverseness in it breaks the spirit.

The word gentle there in the Hebrew doesn't mean low volume. It doesn't just mean soothing. It's the opposite of breaking and fracturing. It's the word for mending and strengthening and healing.

What it's saying is that wise words, healing words, can take a spirit which has the wind knocked out of it and breathe the wind of God back into it again.

[9 : 16] And I wonder if you believe this. That with your wise words, you can help to heal a crushed and broken spirit in someone else. I think this is astonishing.

That a spirit that might have been wounded or cracked or split, that your words can act as a balm or a splint or some form of cure.

That by our wise words, we can strengthen each other for community. Where people, you can help people regain passion for life. And how is it that our words are so important and powerful?

Verse 4 says, a healing tongue is a tree of life. And we started looking at this last week. I did not say this last week. That the tree of life occurs right at the beginning of the Bible in the book of Genesis in the Garden of Eden.

And it occurs then again at the end of the Bible in the last chapter, Revelation 22. And no other book of the Bible except Proverbs. This is the only other book that speaks about the tree of life.

[10:27] And in the Garden of Eden, the tree of life, it's not just a picture of taking the fruit and eating it and then going on and on and on and on, living on and on and on in terms of duration. It's a picture of the fullness of life.

The tree of life answers every human desire, every desire of our hearts. And I'm not talking about medium-sized desires.

If you take your highest, freshest, most exhilarating experience that you can have in this life, it is a pale reflection of the tree of life.

The best experiences we have, if you hear a piece of music that is just heartbreaking, if you see art that is just ravishing, if you stand on the top of a mountain and feel like you could just fly, these things point beyond themselves to the tree of life and to the fact that nothing in this world can give us this joy.

We're made for something greater. Last week, we spent a bit of time talking about the fact that God protected the tree of life and has planted it again in the cross of Jesus Christ so that on the cross, Jesus goes to death to give us this life, this fulfilling life, and he loses what he desires to give us all our desires.

[11:52] And that means that from now on, everything God has for us comes to us through the person of Jesus Christ. And incidentally, that's why living for a bucket list is not a Christian way to live because our desires are in Jesus Christ.

And if you live for a bucket list, it means you're climbing a ladder, but it's up against the wrong wall. I should say the wrong tree. It also means that you can be patient when you've been insulted and misunderstood.

It means you don't have to get your own way because we know that ultimately our true needs are satisfied in Jesus Christ and not here. But the blessing of God in Jesus Christ is not just to satisfy our own selfish needs.

It's for healing us, healing our desires so that they'll be fixed on God. It's the very nature of the life of God and the fullness of his life to heal us, not by magic formulas or incantations, not by just screwing up our eyes and saying, I believe, but through words.

So, if chapter 15 verse 4 is true, it means that when you speak wise words to someone else, they can breathe the fragrance of Eden paradise.

[13:10] They can taste the fruit of the tree of life in your words. That's what our broken lives and our broken world need.

And of course we know that it's only Christ who does this. But what Proverbs is teaching us is that Jesus includes us in this healing that comes to each other.

We are meant to be healing to each other in his body through his community. As we speak words of wisdom to one another, the Holy Spirit moves the life of God through us, the fullness of life, eternal life to other people.

Do you not find that amazing? I do. I just want to have a look at one more layer about why the words are important because there's so much on this.

The Proverbs say there's another reason why our words are so important. Not just because of their positive and negative effects on others, but there is a boomerang effect of our words.

[14:14] Does everyone know what a boomerang is? I explain this. Okay. So, I warn you, if you go to Australia and you go out to one of these tours and they put a real boomerang in your hands, I just warn you, it's a weapon.

And it really is. And it's meant to knock a creature unconscious. But if you miss the creature and it comes back to you and you aren't watching, it will knock you unconscious. And that's part of the point here.

So, in chapter 12, verse 13 and 14, an evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips.

There you go, boomerang. And the righteous escape from trouble. Verse 14, In other words, what it's teaching is, it's not just that our words have impact on those we speak to.

They also impact us. They come back to us, both good and evil. And several times, actually, frequently, the Proverbs pictures our words like food.

[15:29] And we satisfy the hunger of our hearts with our words. It's very unusual. But I think it's a wonderful picture. Eating is a great picture of words because it's the idea of taking words.

They come deep down inside us. They digest. They're digested and become part of us. But this is my words. The words I speak are my food. I think it's one reason why Christians generally tend to be in love with language.

God speaks to us. We love his word. Twice in this service, you have rejoiced, delighted, said that you will sing about the word of God.

And we search for ways to say things that are truthful and gracious, but as we say these words, we bring blessing to ourselves as well. It shapes our convictions. And we taste the tree of life as well.

So what we say to each other and how we say it's very important. Secondly, what's the difference between wise and foolish words? Well, since words are so relational and connect us to each other, the emphasis in Proverbs is on framing our words for real people in real situations.

[16:44] So in 1523, to make an apt answer is a joy to a man and a word in season how good it is.

But there are some things, there are some words that are always foolish and there are some words that are always wise. For example, flattery. Now don't turn to these verses, I'll just read them to you. Flattery.

Don't turn to these verses because you're such a clever congregation. That was... Just seeing who's awake.

Thank you. In chapter 26, verse 28, it says, a lying tongue hates its victims and a flattering mouth works ruin.

It goes on to say that flattery comes out of a crooked heart. It's manipulating another person and it's put exactly in parallel with hating that person. So if you have someone in your life who's flattering you, they may be hating you.

[17:48] And the flip side of flattery is boasting. Chapter 27, verse 2, let another praise you, not your own mouth, a stranger, not your own lips.

It's always foolish to boast. And insults and slander and gossip, chapter 10, verse 18, the one who conceals hatred has lying lips. Whoever utters slander is a fool.

Now that doesn't mean that wise people always speak nice things or nicely. The intention of a fool, though, is to demean and to hurt and belittle. But by far, the largest category of foolish speech is straight out lies.

And I wonder if you would just turn back with me to chapter 6. I'll read a couple of verses here. chapter 6, I'll start at verse 16.

There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him. Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.

[19:12] Now three of the seven of those sins have to do with what we do with our lips, lying. They're all sins against community. Lies break the bond of love and fellowship.

If you're in a relationship with someone who's lying to you, it's just evacuated of any form of covenant promise. And God hates lies because it sows discord.

And he says, these things are an abomination to him. And you might be sitting there thinking, that's an exaggeration. That's a bit of a strong word. I think it's very difficult for us because we are just so immersed in our own lies, little white lies and big back lies, black lies, and everything in between.

And we believe and we tell ourselves the most outrageous silliness. We deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But you see, for God, God knows the distance we fell in Adam and Eve in the garden.

And he knows that death and evil and injustice and oppression all entered into our creation through lies. That Satan tried to change the word of God and when that didn't work with Eve, he just said, remember he said, you will not die.

[20:23] And it was a bald-faced, flat-out lie. That's how sin entered the world when Adam and Eve believed the lie. And God loves the truth.

He is the truth. And his reaction is deeply personal. He's deeply outraged and revolted by lies. And I think that is the hope, the true hope of everyone who's been a real victim.

It's the hope of those who've suffered injustice or who've cried out and gone unheard or where the truth has been covered up. Our God is a God of truth and consequences.

He hates lies. But that does not mean that it's always wise to tell the whole truth. Sometimes you have to answer a fool according to his folly and sometimes not.

It will depend on what will best serve the kingdom of God. It's very interesting, you know, you read through Proverbs. Humor is very important.

[21 : 25] I know we're talking very seriously here but let me give you so in chapter 27 it says this, whoever blesses his neighbour with a loud voice rising early in the morning will be counted as cursing.

I think that's funny. How about I shouldn't tell you a personal story. I won't. That's a true verse though.

The end of chapter 17, even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise. When he closes his lips he is deemed intelligent.

So if you want to make others think you're more intelligent just don't say anything. Wisdom and wise words is more than morality.

So they're always at least truthful but there's more. the Lord wishes our words to be righteous and reliable and they tend to be gentle but they can also be as strong as iron.

[22 : 26] To verse 27, better an open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, profuse the kisses of an enemy. It's talking about rebuke and this is very difficult for West Coasters.

Don't you feel as West Coasters we've become absolute experts at navigating that sort of emotional space in conversations and knowing where the pain line is and we know all the signals about when we're approaching the pain line we never cross the pain line and so we tend to be superficial and truth tends to be a victim but we're very nice very nice very nice people.

Well the Bible calls us to cross the pain line with love and grace with our own heart in our hands and it's difficult to be faithful to Jesus without crossing the pain line in conversation.

Wisdom is knowing how to deliver that difficult news and rebuke and it's also knowing how to hear it and respond to it. So that's some of the ways that wise words are different from foolish words.

A gentle tongue is a tree of life perverseness in it breaks the spirit. Words are important. We've done a little bit on wise and foolish speech and I just want to finish briefly. How do we get to speak wise words then?

[23 : 50] We know from the New Testament that no human being can tame the tongue. Only God can and that is encouraging.

the Bible tells us that we do not understand each other really. There's no one else who understands you and we do not understand ourselves and we do not understand our spirits but God does and what we need of course are new spirits spirits that are renewed by the wisdom of God which is one of the great points of the book of Proverbs.

In chapter 1 woman wisdom says this if you turn at my reproof behold I will pour out my spirit to you I will make my words known to you.

And after he died on the tree and rose again and went to heaven Jesus Christ sat at the right hand of the Father and he sent his Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts and the Holy Spirit part of the Holy Spirit's ministry is to bring Jesus Christ into our hearts so that he might heal and strengthen and we might taste the fullness of the tree of life.

It's the Holy Spirit who remakes us in the image of Christ and it shows in how we begin to speak. It gives us energy it gives us a passion for life.

[25 : 16] The only way our words can heal a crushed and broken spirit in someone else is if we've begun to taste the spirit of God and if our words proceed from the mouth of God.

But there are two practical things I want to encourage you in from the book of Proverbs. Proverbs says two things and I'll just finish with these. If we go back to chapter 15 verses 28 and 29 two spiritual disciplines that have been part of believers lives for many years.

The first is to ponder so verse 28 the heart of the righteous ponders how to answer but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.

It was a very ancient spiritual discipline to think to ponder to reflect to think about what you might say and to deliberately remind yourself that your tongue has enormous power to bring people in touch with the tree of life.

It's a daily discipline I think to think through in your family or for yourself and your community to reflect on your words the words that you might have spoken the day before and the words that are you're going to speak the day coming up and in some situations as you ponder you might decide I need to speak more about this or I need to speak less or I need to speak in a different way or I need to listen ponder and secondly pray the very next verse says the Lord is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous we need to pray about our speech pray that the Holy Spirit would take the words that he inspired and that they would become the tree of life filling our hearts with hope and healing and healing spirit and pray for your words that they would be the spirit of God to others healing others with the fragrance of the tree and the fruit of the tree and if anyone lacks wisdom let them ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given to them [27 : 30] Amen