

GOD WITH US
Part 4: The Life and Writings of Solomon
Direction and Drift – Proverbs

Message 7 – Wisdom and Folly: Words
Proverbs 10-31

Introduction

There is an old saying: *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.* The book of Proverbs disagrees with that saying. Instead: *“The tongue has the power of life and death . . .”* (18:21). The power of the tongue is a major topic in Proverbs, with over 90 references. How important is the use of the tongue in God’s eyes? Of the seven things the Lord hates, three have to do with the tongue: *“There are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty eyes, A LYING TONGUE, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, A FALSE WITNESS WHO UTTERS LIES, and ONE WHO SPREADS STRIFE AMONG BROTHERS”* (6:16-19). This emphasis on the power of the tongue is echoed in the New Testament both by Jesus and the apostolic writers (see for example James 3:1-12). Ultimately, while the tongue has great power for good or evil, it is really just the voice of the heart. *“The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart”* (Matthew 12:34). The words we use are the most important indicator of the condition of our hearts and the way we love one another. This is the profound message of Proverbs and the rest of the Bible: We are called, above all else, to *love God and love people* (Matthew 22:34-40 and Romans 13:8-10), and our words reveal how seriously we are pursuing these two greatest commandments.

Proverbs has much to say about both wise and foolish words. Following are 6 contrasting ways to use the tongue.

1. Encouraging words: Build up, don’t tear down.

Proverbs makes it clear that our words DO have a major impact on others. Words can encourage or discourage others.

“The words of the godly encourage many” (10:21a).

“The lips of the godly speak helpful words” (10:32a).

“The tongue of the wise brings healing” (12:18b).

“Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up” (12:25).

“Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones” (16:24).

The word “encourage” literally means to “breathe courage into” another person. Words can have that effect. On the other hand, unwise words can “discourage” – “pull courage out of” another person, causing them to lose heart.

“The words of the reckless pierce like swords” (12:18a).

“With their words, the godless destroy their friends” (11:9a).

“The words of the wicked are like a murderous ambush” (12:6).

Psychologists have studied neurological/chemical changes that happen when we are exposed to positive and negative words. Negative words release dozens of stress-related hormones and neurotransmitters, impacting memory, emotions, sleep, appetite, reasoning, and overall happiness. The impact is especially significant on children. “The more negative thoughts they have, the more they are likely to experience emotional turmoil. But if you teach them to think positively, you can turn their lives around.”

2. Measuring our words: Less, not more.

When it comes to words, the wisdom of Proverbs says: *Less is better*. The wise person limits the number of their words carefully, making sure they do not say too much.

“The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even-tempered” (17:27).

According to Lady Wisdom, the more we talk, the more likely we are to fall into sin with our words.

“When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (10:19).

The Living Bible translates this same verse in modern terms:

“Don’t talk so much! You keep putting your foot in your mouth. Be sensible and turn off the flow” (10:19 TLB).

In fact, a restrained tongue can even make a fool appear to be wise.

Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues” (17:28).

How do we know if we are talking too much? Ask the people who listen to you. It may be a blind spot in your life, requiring someone else to lovingly point this out. A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself this: When a conversation is over, does the other person feel like THEY have been explored, understood and 'known'? If your conversations typically revolve around YOUR life, your issues, your family, your opinions . . . then you need to learn to talk less and listen more. Talking too much is not loving others well. You will have much more healthy and productive relationships when you learn to listen with your heart more . . . and talk less.

3. Thinking before we speak: Thoughtful, not hasty.

We've all had that terrible feeling when we let words carelessly slip from our mouths: "*Oh no. I shouldn't have said that.*" Hasty words are dangerous words. Therefore, according to Lady Wisdom, our *minds* not our *emotions* should govern our *tongues*.

"The heart of the godly thinks carefully before speaking; the mouth of the wicked overflows with evil words" (15:28).

"Everyone enjoys giving good advice, and how wonderful it is to be able to say the right thing at the right time" (15:23 – LB).

Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity" (21:23).

Thoughtful, reasoned speech is wise. In contrast, hasty, impulsive speech is fitting for someone who is *worse than a fool!*

There is more hope for a fool than for someone who speaks without thinking" (29:20).

Can you recall a time when you spoke rashly, without giving proper thought to your words? Or, a time when emotion overtook your rational side, and you said things in the wrong way? (Perhaps you need to go ask forgiveness from someone for hasty words.) Picture an imaginary "pause button" on your cheek. Now, reach up and use your index finger to push the pause button. Next time you are tempted to blurt out your words, reach up and push that pause button. (To an observer it will look like you are just putting your finger on your cheek.) While you are pushing the pause button, ponder your response. You might even say: "I need time to think about how to respond to what you have said. Can I get back to you in a few minutes after I process a bit?" It takes some time to form a new habit; but if you practice this regularly you will find that hasty, emotion-driven words are being replaced by calm, thought-driven words. This is WISE use of the tongue.

4. Listening before we speak: Listen, don't react.

An extension of the above (thinking before we speak), good listening must come before wise speaking. As the old saying goes: There's a reason God gave us two ears and one mouth!

"To answer before listening - that is folly and shame" (18:13).

"A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion" (18:2).

James instructs us: "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry . . . (James 1:19). One of the biggest complaints of married couples is that the spouse doesn't listen. We hear the first part of a person's statement, and begin formulating our response without hearing the rest. We are "answering in our head" while the other person is still talking. OPC's Listening Well course is intended to help us to learn better listening skills. It is only when we listen well that we can speak well. Do you need to improve your listening skills? It is a wonderful experience to be able to verbally process your thoughts and feelings with someone who has learned the art of listening well. In fact, listening well IS loving well.

5. The tone of our words: Gentle, not harsh.

The wise person is not only careful to decide *when*, *what* and *how much* to say; but also *HOW* to say it. Wise words are gentle words. The tone and facial expression accompanying our words magnifies their impact for good or for ill.

"A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare" (15:1).

"Gentle words are a tree of life; a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit" (15:4).

"Kind words are like honey - sweet to the soul and healthy for the body" (16:24).

When it comes to words, *anger* is the deadliest emotion that we can allow to govern our tongue.

"Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end" (29:11).

"A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel" (15:18).

“Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered displays folly” (14:29).

This explains why James makes such a strong connection between the tongue and anger. *“Be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (James 1:19,20).*

Self-awareness is critical when it comes to governing the tongue. You must learn to live with an awareness of the emotions that are lying just beneath the surface of your being. Feelings such as sadness, fear, hurt, anger and bitterness can rise up in an instant and propel our tongue into damaging action. As James says: *“How great a forest is set on fire by such a small flame (James 3:5)!”* When we are aware of our own deeper emotions, then we can push the pause button on our tongue and take time to process these emotions before God, allowing the Holy Spirit to bring light and healing to negative emotions.

A further issue has to do with speaking harsh words to people who have been wounded by anger in the past. If we are truly seeking to love well, we will be aware of the sensitivity to anger in another person, and guard our tone accordingly. To one who has been wounded by anger in the past, even ‘strong’ words can be ‘felt’ as angry words, and such words can shut them down or cause them to become defensive.

6. Honesty with our words: Truth, not lies.

One of the seven things the Lord hates is a lying tongue (6:16-19). In contrast, the wise person speaks truth with the tongue.

“Truthful words stand the test of time, but lies are soon exposed” (12:19).

“An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips” (24:26).

“The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in those who tell the truth” (12:22).

While *lying* in general is folly, there are three particular forms of lying that Proverbs warns against: gossip, flattery and slander.

GOSSIP is saying behind a person’s back what you would never say to his/her face. Proverbs has a *lot* to say about the gossip.

“A gossip goes around telling secrets, but those who are trustworthy can keep a confidence” (11:13).

“A perverse person stirs up conflict, and a gossip separates close friends” (16:28).

“Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends” (17:9).

“A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid anyone who talks too much” (20:19).

“Fire goes out without wood, and quarrels disappear when gossip stops” (26:20).

“The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts” (18:8).

“Rumors are dainty morsels that sink deep into one’s heart” (26:22).

Note: Those last two references (18:8 and 26:22) warn against us becoming willing EARS for the gossipy TONGUE. Gossip is like a tasty piece of candy. But we should not bite on it.

Fear of saying something to a person’s face turns one into a gossip. “The fear of man will prove to be a snare ...” (Proverbs 29:25). Jesus told us that if we have something to say to someone, we **MUST** go directly to that person and speak the truth in love (Matthew 18:15). We commit a grave sin when we speak negatively about others behind their back. But the real question is: What are we afraid of? What makes us avoid difficult conversations? What are we trying to protect? It may take some serious self-examination to get to the roots of this fear of speaking directly to others about difficult matters. It may take some healing prayer in order to root out the fear-based lies and replace them with faith-based truths, resulting in the ability to address difficult situations more forthrightly and honestly . . . instead of gossiping behind people’s backs.

FLATTERY is another form of ‘lying.’ Flattery is saying to a person’s face what you would never say behind his/her back.

“A lying tongue hates its victims, and flattering words cause ruin” (26:28).

“In the end, people appreciate honest criticism far more than flattery” (28:23).

“To flatter friends is to lay a trap for their feet” (29:5).

SLANDER is the 3rd category of *dishonest* words in Proverbs. Slandorous words seek to unjustly destroy another’s reputation.

“Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent” (11:12).

“Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is one who gives false testimony against a neighbor” (25:18).

Final Thought: Words and Love

Words flow from the heart and reflect love or hate.

This is the simplest way to summarize what the Bible says about our words. Words are the most common way we *love* or *hate* God and man. *“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be” (James 3:9,10).* Thus, the key to taming the tongue is in the *heart* not in the *mouth*.

The real question then is this: What is the condition of my heart? I believe there are two core issues of the heart that must be constantly examined. **1)** What is the SPIRITUAL condition of my heart? Am I living in fellowship with Jesus? Am I “abiding in Christ” (John 15:1-10)? Am I allowing the Holy Spirit to rule in my heart (Galatians 5:16-25)? Our daily walk with Jesus will in large measure determine what flows forth from our mouths into the ears of God and man. **2)** What is the EMOTIONAL condition of my heart? Am I living a self-aware, ‘examined’ life? Am I dealing with my wounds, lies and triggers that cause me to react with harsh words, instead of responding with gentle, thoughtful words? Am I dealing with the fear that makes me defensive, or the terror that causes me to avoid people and become a gossip? Am I asking God to heal the “I’m not valued” wound that causes me to try to be the center of every conversation?

The tongue is one of the most important topics in the book of Proverbs. But there is one verse that must never be forgotten: *“Above all else, guard your heart . . . for everything you do (and everything you SAY) flows from it” (Proverbs 4:23).*

An Unforgettable Classroom Exercise

One day, a teacher asked her students to list the names of the other students in the room on two sheets of paper, leaving a space between each name. Then she told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates and write it down. It took the remainder of the class period to finish their assignment, and as the students left the room, each one handed in the papers.

That Saturday, the teacher wrote down the name of each student on a separate sheet of paper, and listed what everyone else had said about that individual. On Monday she gave each student his or her list.

Before long, the entire class was smiling. "Really?" she heard whispered. "I never knew that I meant anything to anyone!" and, "I didn't know others liked me so much," were most of the comments.

No one ever mentioned those papers in class again. The teacher never found out if they discussed them after class or with their parents, but it didn't matter. The exercise had accomplished its purpose. The students were happy with themselves and one another. That group of students moved on.

Several years later, one of the students was killed in Vietnam and his teacher attended the funeral. The church was packed with his family and friends.

Mark's mother and father wanted to speak with his teacher. "We want to show you something," his father said, taking a wallet out of his pocket. "They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it." Opening the billfold, he carefully removed two worn pieces of notebook paper that had obviously been taped, folded and refolded many times. The teacher knew without looking that the papers were the ones on which she had listed all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him. "Thank you so much for doing that," Mark's mother said. "As you can see, Mark treasured it."

All of Mark's former classmates started to gather around. Charlie smiled and said, "I still have my list. It's in the top drawer of my desk at home." Another student's wife said, "My husband asked me to put his in our wedding album." "I have mine too," Marilyn said. "It's in my diary." Vicki, another classmate, reached into her pocketbook, took out her wallet and showed her worn and frazzled list to the group. "I carry this with me at all times," Vicki said. Without batting an eyelash, she continued, "I think we all saved our lists."