

“THE POWER OF THE TONGUE”

**I. Introduction**

- A. The tongue is an extremely powerful instrument.
1. James put it well when he said that “the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.” (3:5)
  2. On the one hand, words can do great damage.
  3. The saying ‘Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words can never hurt me’ is simply not true.
  4. We all know that words can do a lot of harm.
  5. Think of Adolph Hitler’s use of words, or the tragic instances of bullying that have resulted in young people taking their lives.
  6. On the other hand, words can also do a great deal of good.
  7. The right word spoken at the right time in the right way can make a profound difference in a person’s life.
  8. Think of the power of a word of encouragement, a word of comfort, or even a word of correction.
  9. It should be clear that if you want to be wise, you need to learn how to use your tongue properly.
  10. This is why it is not surprising that Proverbs has so much to say about our speech.
- B. As we survey Proverbs’ teaching on this topic today, I want to consider it under three categories.
1. First, we will see that the tongue is a two-edged sword, an instrument that can do great harm and great good.

2. Second, we will look at what Proverbs tells us about the connection between our words and our character.
3. And third, we will reflect upon the fact that, when it comes to our words, it is often the case that less is more.

## II. A Two-Edged Sword

- A. The verses that we just read from Proverbs 18 nicely sum up what I mean when I say that the tongue is a two-edged sword.
  1. "Death and life are in the power of the tongue."
  2. Words can do all sorts of negative things.
  3. Consider these Proverbs:
    4. "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." (18:6-7)
    5. "There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts" (12:18)
    6. "With his mouth the godless man would destroy his neighbor." (11:9)
  7. These things certainly ring true.
  8. We can all think of instances when someone hurt us by the things that they said, as well as times when we hurt others by the things that we said.
  9. And there are countless examples of a person's words having a devastating effect upon both himself and those closest to him.
  10. Rash words have ruined people's careers.

11. Unkind words have destroyed marriages.
  12. Abusive words have scarred children for life.
  13. It is no wonder that James tells us that “the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.” (3:6)
- B. That being said, there are all sorts of positive things that can be accomplished through speech.
1. We use words to express our love for others.
  2. We use words to show gratitude.
  3. We use words to extend comfort and encouragement.
  4. Consider this sampling of Proverbs:
  5. “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life” (10:11)
  6. “The lips of the righteous feed many” (10:21)
  7. “the tongue of the wise brings healing” (12:18)
  8. “Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.” (16:24)
  9. The book of Proverbs is all about the right use of words.
  10. The purpose of the father’s speeches is to impart life to his son through his words.
  11. We should make it our goal to use our words for the same purposes.
  12. Even when we have to say something difficult, even when confrontation or rebuke is called for, our intent should always be to do good and not to do harm.

- C. Notice that Proverbs 18 also tells us that a person eats the fruit of their tongue.
1. Verse 21 says that “those who love [the tongue] will eat its fruits.”
  2. There are two sides to this, and they correspond to the two ways that the tongue can be used.
  3. If a person loves to use his tongue for evil purposes, he will eat the fruit of his evil words.
  4. But if a person loves to use his tongue for the right purposes, he will enjoy the blessings that flow from doing so.

### III. Words and Character

- A. We turn now to our second category for Proverbs’ teaching about the tongue: the connection between our words and our character.
1. Proverbs makes it clear that the words that we speak reveal what is in our heart.
  2. “The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.” (15:28)
  3. “The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips.” (16:23)
  4. “The words of a man’s mouth are deep waters; the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook.” (18:4)
  5. The things that we say are a reflection of what we are on the inside.
  6. When a person becomes a Christian, he is given a new heart, but the remnants of his old, sinful heart still remain.
  7. This is why we need to be so careful about how we speak.

8. Instead of speaking in a fleshly manner, in a manner that is reflective of our old nature, we need to cultivate righteous habits of speech so that the things that we say flow out of our new nature in Christ.
- B. One of the areas in which this kind of self-control is so important is in the area of gossip.
1. Proverbs says, "Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent. Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered." (11:12-13)
  2. Instead of belittling others and revealing secrets about them, we need to maintain discretion.
  3. Another proverb helps us to see why gossip is such a strong temptation for us.
  4. "The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body." (18:8)
  5. There is something delicious about sharing information with those who do not have that information.
  6. It makes us feel like we are in the know, that we are important.
  7. But in reality an appetite for gossip reveals something extremely unattractive about our own hearts.
  8. It exposes our our selfishness, our pride, and our disregard for other people.
- C. Another character issue that is addressed in Proverbs addresses is that our speech should always be honest.
1. "Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment... Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who act faithfully are his delight." (12:19, 22)

2. Honesty is a rare quality.
3. The Greek philosopher Diogenes once illustrated this point by carrying a lamp throughout the city of Athens in the middle of the day, explaining to everyone who asked that he was searching for an honest man, to no avail.
4. It is easy for us to grow cynical over the fact that honesty is so rare.
5. I came across a good example of this in the current edition of *World* magazine.
6. It contains a brief note about a white politician in Houston, TX who won an election in a predominantly black district by running ads that implied that he was black.
7. The magazine reports that when this politician was called out on this, he defended himself by saying this: "Every time a politician talks he's out there deceiving voters." [*World*, Nov. 30, 2013, p. 16]
8. It is so tempting for us to think along these lines, to think that the fact that everyone else is dishonest means that we have the right to be dishonest too.
9. But that is not how you should think if you are a Christian.
10. Even if everyone else in the world is a notorious liar, your Lord still requires you to speak the truth.

#### IV. Less Is More

- A. This brings us to our third category for what Proverbs teaches us about the tongue: less is more.
  1. This is a point that is made repeatedly throughout the book.
  2. Here is a sampling of proverbs on this subject:

3. "When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent." (10:19)
  4. "Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent." (17:28)
  5. "Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble." (21:23)
  6. It would serve us well if we remembered these things before we speak.
  7. Our tongues can get us into a great deal of trouble.
- B. Closely related to this are the many warnings that Proverbs gives about rash speech.
1. For example:
  2. "The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things." (15:28)
  3. "If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame." (18:13)
  4. We should take time to measure our words, lest they come back to bite us.
  5. This is illustrated in a story involving the famous evangelist George Whitefield.
  6. Once, when Whitefield was about to preach before a large crowd, he was handed a note that contained only one word: "Fool."
  7. When Whitefield stepped up to preach, he told the crowd about the note and dismissed it by saying this: "I have often received notes of abuse with no signature, but this is the first time I have received a signature but no note."

8. Rash words are easily refuted because they have not been thought out.
- C. While it is important for us to practice restraint in our speech, we also need to make sure that we do not fail to speak when we should.
1. Proverbs has a lot to say about the value of a timely word.
  2. "Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad." (12:25)
  3. "To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!" (15:23)
  4. "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reprove to a listening ear." (25:11-12)
  5. Don't forget that your words have the power to benefit others in many ways.
  6. Be careful how you speak, but make sure that you speak when you should.

## V. Conclusion

- A. In his book on the life of Christ, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish minister Alexander Whyte imagined what it must have been to enjoy an evening's conversation at the dinner table with the Lord Jesus.
1. Whyte says: "What topics would come up all that night in conversation, and how wisely and well [Jesus] would handle them all; and always taking less than His proper share in them all... He has his eyes on all the company. He is tender toward the bashful, gentle toward the distant, and merciful to the absurd. [241-242]"



2. Then Whyte says this: "I feel sure there is nothing in which we are all of us more unlike [Jesus] than just in the way we carry our conversations at table. A holy man used to say when he returned home from a night of table-talk that he would never accept such an invitation again, so remorseful did such nights always leave him; so impossible did he find it for him to hold his peace, and to speak only at the right moment, and only in the right way. And, without his holiness, I have often had his remorse, and so, I am quite sure, have many of you. There is no table we sit at very long that we do not more or less ruin either to ourselves or to some one else. We either talk too much, and thus weary and disgust people; or they weary and disgust us. We start ill-considered, unwise, [untimely] topics. We blurt out our rude minds in rude words. We push aside our neighbor's opinion, as if both he and his opinion were worthless, and we thrust forward our own as if wisdom would die with us. We do not put ourselves in our neighbor's place. We have no imagination in conversation, and no humility, and no love." [244-245]
  3. These are harsh words, but who among us will deny they are true?
  4. How many times have you reflected upon something that you said and regretted that you said it?
- B. Praise God that our Lord Jesus makes the best possible use of words.
1. There was no deceit in his mouth.
  2. His words reveal a heart of perfect righteousness.
  3. His words are words of eternal life.
  4. His words bring us comfort, help, and hope.

5. As we reflect upon the truth, the beauty, and the goodness of our Savior's words, let us respond by endeavoring all the more to use our words in the best possible way.
6. Let's strive, by the Spirit's power, to speak only those things that will glorify God and be of true benefit to those around us.
7. Make the prayer of the psalmist your regular prayer:

"Let the words of my mouth  
and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable in your sight,  
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer." (Ps. 19:14)