

Choosing Words Wisely Sunday, 8/28/22

Last week we considered the Proverbs concerning the fear of the Lord and learned that living with the fear of the Lord isn't the same thing as living in fear. Healthy, holy fear of the Lord characterizes our relationship with God when it's marked by our embrace of God's wisdom, including humility, obedience, and contentedness to find our worth in our identity as God's beloved children.

Today we wrestle with our words. There are few topics in the Bible that get as much press as the use and misuse of our gift of speech. Both Old and New Testaments give copious and clear warnings that there are both helpful and harmful ways that we can use our words. Yet despite reading and hearing these admonitions again and again, we still struggle to do the right thing. Of all our body parts, the tongue truly is the most difficult to master.

In our first reading, James gives us three clues about why the words we use can be so dangerous. In verse 5, James warns that "a tiny spark can set a great forest on fire."¹ Today we might say, "a single tweet can start a flame war." Do those words ring true for you? Have you ever sent a text or an email that you desperately wished you could take back? It's probably no accident that Apple recently announced that they're adding the ability in iOS 16 to edit or delete sent text messages. Our words can start fires, and fires destroy and leave scars, on forests as well as people. Sometimes it's not even the words we use, but a subtle shift in the tone of our voice that gets us into trouble by suggesting that we're not in sincere agreement with the words we just uttered. An insincere apology comes to mind as a common example. And depending on how fragile the relationship is, a single spark is all that's needed to start a fire.

The second reason James gives us is in verse 9: "Sometimes [our tongue] praises our Lord and Father, and sometimes it curses those who have been made in the image of God."² In other words, when our words visit violence upon other people, they reveal that the praises we offer God in worship are hollow, because we heap insult and injury on those who God has called "very good" and called his own. Think about that the next time you open your mouth to speak to another person: every person bears within their lives the image of their

¹ James 3:5. New Living Translation (2nd edition)

² James 3:9. Ibid

creator. Just as faith without works is dead, praise of God without reverence for God's creation, and especially God's children, is dead.

Finally, James notes in verse 10 that "blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth."³ When we say that God is holy, we mean that God is set apart from the profane, which is just another word for everything that's not of God. God commands us to "be holy, because I am Holy."⁴ That doesn't mean that we're all supposed to dress in white robes and pretend to be better than we really are. What it does mean is that the attitudes of our hearts and our words and actions should identify with the heart, Word, and will of God, rather than being derivative of the corrupted cultures around us. Curses called down on others reveal the corruption of our hearts and despoil the would-be blessings we have to offer others.

James, of course, hardly invented this wisdom about the way we use words. It may be the most common topic of all the proverbs. In the days of King Solomon, when they talked about speech they used words like lips, tongues, and mouths. Today we get to add to that list: text messages, emails, Facebook postings, tweets, blogs, and Instagram." Proverbs 2:6, which we read last week, tells us, "For the Lord grants wisdom! From his mouth come knowledge and understanding."⁵ Unfortunately, from our mouths often come folly and misunderstanding.

The right use of our tongues is associated in the proverbs with wisdom, honesty, listening, long life, trustworthiness, friendship, healing, encouragement, and peacemaking. The wrong use of our tongues in the Proverbs is associated with lying, flattery, violence, sin, foolishness, sarcasm, ruin, anger, evil, destruction, wounding, slander, gossip, argument, and discouragement. As I read some selections from these proverbs, listen to see if one or more of them speak to your heart this morning. Pay attention to nudges of the Holy Spirit on your heart, or impressions or feelings you experience as you listen. Let's assess how we're doing with choosing our words wisely.

The Proverbs warn us that speaking, in general, is perilous. For example, Proverbs

³ James 3:10. Ibid

⁴ Leviticus 11:44. Ibid

⁵ Proverbs 2:6. Ibid

10:19: “Too much talk leads to sin. Be sensible and keep your mouth shut.”⁶ And others are much like it, such as Proverbs 21:23: “Watch your tongue and keep your mouth shut, and you will stay out of trouble.”⁷ Sometimes it’s wrong to stay silent, but for most of us, we tend to err on the side of talking too much. How about you? How can you know when you’re talking too much?

As Solomon wrote in Proverbs 18:13, “Spouting off before listening to the facts is both shameful and foolish.”⁸ One discipline you might consider is to ask yourself before speaking if you’ve listened at least as much as you’ve talked. Even better, perhaps you should listen at least twice as much as you speak. Epictetus, a Greek philosopher who lived shortly after the time of Christ, is quoted as saying “We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.”⁹

Sometimes we fail to control our words because we’ve allowed ourselves to get caught up in our anger. Proverbs 29:11 warns us, “Fools vent their anger, but the wise quietly hold it back.”¹⁰ Similarly in Proverbs 29:22: “An angry person starts fights; a hot-tempered person commits all kinds of sin.”¹¹ The adage about counting to ten is pretty good advice when you’re angry. You can think of it as giving your tongue a preemptory time-out. That can really be hard to do, especially when your hands are hovering over your keyboard. Never respond to an angry email or text message immediately. I suggest taking a day before responding, and after that, praying about whether you should respond at all. Sometimes the motive to respond is one of anger or self-defense rather than a constructive dialog. When in doubt, examine your heart and take your advice from God’s Word.

Have you ever tried to count up the number of lies that you speak during any given day? I’ll bet it’s more than you think. It must be a problem for us, because there are so many Proverbs that speak to it, like Proverbs 12:22: “The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in

⁶ Proverbs 10:19. Ibid

⁷ Proverbs 21:23. Ibid

⁸ Proverbs 18:13. Ibid

⁹ <https://www.nordangliaeducation.com/biss-puxi/news/2022/02/22/we-have-two-ears-and-one-mouth-so-that-we-can-listen-twice-as-much-as-we-speak>

¹⁰ Proverbs 29:11. New Living Translation (2nd edition)

¹¹ Proverbs 29:22. Ibid

those who tell the truth.”¹² Or Proverbs 12:19: “Truthful words stand the test of time, but lies are soon exposed.”¹³

There are a great many ways for us to lie, of which the Proverbs take special note of false witness, which is lying about someone else. That’s easier to do than you might imagine. We might give false witness in subtle ways, through exaggeration of events, through selective omission of key facts, or from simply failing to acknowledge that we might not have all the facts. Always remember the wisdom of Proverbs 17:28: “Even fools are thought wise when they keep silent; with their mouths shut, they seem intelligent.”¹⁴

And then there’s gossip. Is it any surprise that so many of the proverbs condemn it? Proverbs 11:13 warns us, “A gossip goes around telling secrets, but those who are trustworthy can keep a confidence.”¹⁵ And there are many others, like Proverbs 16:28: “A troublemaker plants seeds of strife; gossip separates the best of friends.”¹⁶ What is gossip? One pastor defines it as “bearing bad news behind someone’s back out of a bad heart.”¹⁷ That’s pretty good. Why do we do it? Once again, the proverbs explain in 18:8: “Rumors are dainty morsels that sink deep into one’s heart.”¹⁸ Whether we’re speaking gossip or listening to it, we need to go on a diet. There are much more wholesome ways for us to feast on words than the junk food of gossip.

The proverbs aren’t all negative. There are plenty of positive ways for us to speak mentioned. For example, Proverbs 16:24: “Kind words are like honey—sweet to the soul and healthy for the body.” Proverbs 18:20: “Wise words satisfy like a good meal; the right words bring satisfaction.” And Proverbs 18:4: “Wise words are like deep waters; wisdom flows from the wise like a bubbling brook.” The trouble, of course, is that all too often, when we think we’re speaking wise words we’re actually spouting foolishness. How can we tell the difference?

I’ve suggested to you before that you can quickly get your spiritual compass bearings

¹² Proverbs 12:22. Ibid

¹³ Proverbs 12:19. Ibid

¹⁴ Proverbs 17:28. Ibid

¹⁵ Proverbs 11:13. Ibid

¹⁶ Proverbs 16:28. Ibid

¹⁷ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-is-gossip>

¹⁸ Proverbs 18:8. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

by asking yourself three questions. Does this glorify God? Is this consistent with God's Word? And does this build up God's people? These questions won't necessarily prevent you from deluding yourself and someone else, but it's better to ask them than not.

When was the last time you intentionally set aside some time to only listen and not speak? For most of us, that's not a realistic way to get through our days. We necessarily rely on God's gift of speech to interact with each other, often unaware that our tongues can bring "life or death."¹⁹ But we don't have to be captive to the accidents and malice of our tongues.

Like all disciplines worth cultivating, holy speech requires our attention, developing an awareness of our speech and slowing down our communication long enough for us to practice what might be less than natural responses. But even more so, holy speech requires holiness of heart, because as Jesus reminded us, "whatever is in your heart determines what you say."²⁰ If you're struggling with holy speech, then perhaps it's time to take an inventory of your heart.

Please take some time now to reflect on what's in your heart today that's been shaping your speech, for good or for evil.



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¹⁹ Proverbs 18:21. Ibid

²⁰ Matthew 12:34. Ibid