

This summer we're going through the book of Proverbs, a book that is all about how to live wisely. One definition of wisdom, by Tim Keller, is "competency with regards to the realities of life." In other words, the wise person knows the right thing to do in the majority of situations where the moral rules do not apply. After the subject of wisdom, there is one topic that shows up more than any other in Proverbs, because it plays such a critical role in whether we live wise or foolishly, and that is the words that we speak. Communication. The power of the tongue.

If I asked you right now to think of harmful words that someone spoke to you or over you that still impact you today – a harsh word, a lie, a label or accusation - I imagine that most of you would immediately have some examples spring to mind. I know that I instinctively think of one thing that one of my brothers said, another thing that a friend in middle school said, and another thing that a pastor said to me. And if I asked you to think of some harmful words that you have spoken to or over another person, maybe it would be harder to think of them, but the fact is that we have all said some foolish things – harsh words, lies, labels, accusations – that still impact other people today. And so today, I'm asking you to open yourself up to God and hear what He has to say to you about how to be wiser with the words that you use.

I want to begin by considering what the book of Hebrews says about God's Word, the Bible:

Hebrews 4:12–13 - For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

God's Word, which includes Proverbs, is like a sword penetrating through your defenses and exposing your heart's thoughts and attitudes. I want to look this morning at the problematic power of our words, as well as the remedy to the foolish words that we speak. But I want to begin by sharing 20 proverbs on various aspects of wise and foolish communication, broken down into six specific areas. As I do this, ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you, to convict you, to bring specific areas to mind where He wants to work on your heart and your speech. **Have a pen and paper, or take notes on your phone.**

What does Proverbs say about wise communication?

God-honoring, not perverse

Proverbs 4:23-24 - Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. ²⁴ Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips.

Proverbs 10:31–32 - From the mouth of the righteous comes the fruit of wisdom, but a perverse tongue will be silenced. ³² The lips of the righteous know what finds favor, but the mouth of the wicked only what is perverse.

Avoid speech that is morally corrupt or twisted, choosing instead to honor God with what we say.

Truthful, not deceptive:

Proverbs 15:4 - The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit. (NIV 1984)

Proverbs 24:26 - An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips.

Proverbs 26:28 - A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin.

Deceptive speech includes not only lying, but speaking with intentional omissions, or spinning the truth, or flattery.

Gentle and kind, not harsh:

Proverbs 12:18 - Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Proverbs 15:1 - A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Proverbs 25:15 - Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone.

Gentleness can break down the most hardened resistance a person has, whereas harshness often just makes people more defensive or angry in return.

Restrained, not impulsive

Proverbs 17:27–28 - The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even-tempered. ²⁸ Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues.

Proverbs 18:2 - Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions

Proverbs 18:13 – To answer before listening-- that is folly and shame.

Be careful – wise speech is restrained and careful in the words that are spoken.

Apt not inappropriate

Proverbs 25:11 - A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver. (NIV 1984)

Proverbs 15:23 - A person finds joy in giving an apt reply-- and how good is a timely word!

Apt means that there is a right time, right place, and right way. We might speak differently to women than men, sons than daughters, children than adults, privately vs. publicly, might use levity or affirmation vs. saying it straight, speak in the moment vs. letting things calm down.

To the appropriate people, not the wrong people

Proverbs 16:28 - A perverse person stirs up conflict, and a gossip separates close friends.

Proverbs 17:9 – Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.

Proverbs 11:12–13 - Whoever derides their neighbor has no sense, but the one who has understanding holds their tongue. ¹³ A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret.

Again, I'll be focusing this morning on the problematic power of words and the remedy God gives us stop or heal our foolish words. But how has God been convicting your heart as you consider these Proverbs? May you keep your heart open to His loving rebuke, as well as to His gentle call to your heart and mouth to turn from sin to a wiser way of living and speaking.

The problematic power of words

One of the verses on communication that stands out the most is this one:

Proverbs 18:21 - The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

This verse is not meant in a New Agey, the secret, the law of attraction type of way. We do not have the power to call things into existence. However, the tongue does have great power to bring life or death to people. Our words do have tremendous power. On the one hand, our words have the power to bring life. Our words can bring encouragement and understanding to people; there is great power in affirming someone, in speaking to someone the gifts and talents you see in them, in encouraging them and thanking them. As much as the harsh words people have spoken over me remain with me, I can also remember some critical words of affirmation and love that have been spoken to me over the years that have helped shape me for the better.

A wise word can also save someone from sin and from death. Remember **Romans 10:14-15** – “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵ And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” Notice what Paul says – how can anyone be saved unless someone preaches the gospel to them? Our words have the power to bring life to others.

But the tongue also has the power of death.

Proverbs 12:18 – The words of the reckless pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

The damage that can be done by words is like the damage from a sword, causing wounds that may heal but will leave scars. The tongue has the power of death – harsh and hurtful words can lead to **suicide**, murder, war, and all kinds of conflict. And hurtful words and labels, spoken by parents or adults, can cause all kinds of psychological trauma in children that does not go away. **Some of you have been called things that have taken a lifetime to try to get over** – you’ve been called ugly, or no good, or a loser, a failure. You’ve been rejected, beaten up, broken down, and cast aside. And those labels have stuck with you and shaped who you are and the relationships you have. And of course, poorly chosen words can also destroy community through gossip, lies, and slander.

Who has seen community broken by hurtful words, or by untruthful words? Imagine living in a country where you could not trust what your leaders tell you, or what the media tells you. Imagine being in a marriage or family where you can not trust that your spouse or parents will tell you the truth, and will speak words of love? Or being in a church where you can not trust what the pastor or leaders are saying? There are people here who are dying because of words that have been spoken to them. There are people here who have been wounded as if they were pierced with a sword, and have not recovered. The tongue has the power of life and death.

Remember how James put it in the New Testament:

James 3:1–12 - Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ² We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. ³ When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴ Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵ Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶ The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹ Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

That is the problematic power of words. So how are we going to tame the tongue and become wise with the words we use?

The remedy

1) Open your heart to God's healing and forgiveness

Words give voice to what is in your heart. You say what you feel. And if our hearts are full of hurt, fear, anxiety, defensiveness, anger, idolatry, or a lack of trust in God, it will eventually come out of our mouths.

Matthew 12:33–37 - "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. ³⁴ You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. ³⁵ A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. ³⁶ But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. ³⁷ For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. Your mouth just gives voice to what is already in your heart. And so, the ultimate remedy to our foolish words will be for

God to heal our hearts. Heal us of our own woundedness, our defensiveness, our fear, our anxiety, our idolatry, our lack of trust in Him.

Remember what James told us about our tongue:

James 3:6 - The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

Our tongues can be set on fire by the fire of hell, as the enemy using our words to tear each other down or to lie to each other. But there is another fire:

Acts 2:1–4 - When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

On Pentecost, the fire of the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples, and they spoke the gospel in the various languages of the people who gathered, so that everyone heard the wonders of God declared in their native tongues, bringing them life. And God's healing Spirit is still available to fill our hearts and mouths today.

For all of the harmful words that were spoken over you, and for all of the harmful words you have spoken over others, there is healing and forgiveness.

Romans 5:6–8 - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

And for those of us who have been saved, who are right with God, the words spoken by the Father over the Son are the words He speaks over us in Christ:

Matthew 3:16–17 - As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

There is no condemnation in Christ. We are loved. The love and acceptance and forgiveness and grace of God that covers our sins and heals our heart can also heal our words, so that we speak out of the overflow of a healed heart.

2) Speak the truth in love

Ephesians 4:15 - Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Truth and love – that is how we grow into maturity. Not lying, not flattering, not stuffing down our feelings. Honest speech includes speaking difficult things to someone, but doing so in love, not with a goal of revenge.

Speaking the truth in love is how we grow into maturity. Think about it: some are good at “speaking the truth,” telling people what they need to hear, but they don’t care about love. They are fine being brutally honest, but they more concerned about getting their point across than they are about actually building the other person up.

And some speak in love, but without truth, and end up flattering others, telling them what they want to hear instead of what they need to hear.

Wise speech is supposed to include both. Speak the truth, but do it in love. And in case you don’t know what love is, consider 1 Corinthians 13:4-8:

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails.

We speak with patience, kindness, not rudely, not throwing out a record of wrongs, always protecting and hoping. We speak to serve the other person, to build them up, to spur them on towards holiness. We speak in a way they will understand and receive. And we speak the truth. Not flattery, not avoiding the problem, but saying what needs to be said, no matter what the response might be.

3) Make every effort to live at peace

Ephesians 4:1–3 - As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Romans 12:18 - If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

You may not be able to bring peace in every relationship, but you are not responsible for how other people react. You are only responsible for your part in trying to live at peace with everyone. Consider that there are two main passages when it comes to confrontation, and there is one common theme between them:

Matthew 5:21–24 - “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. ²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”

Matthew 18:15–19 - “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸ “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.”

Both passages are about dealing with conflict in our lives. The first is about what to do when you think you have offended someone. The second is about what to do when someone has offended you. **The common theme, of course, is that you need to go to them.** In the first situation, you’re coming to worship and you think someone may be upset with you. Go and be reconciled – that is more worshipful to God than the songs you might sing or the gift you might give. God’s greatest desire is for unity and peace in His family. And secondly, if someone has sinned against you, go and show him his fault, and if he will not listen, take one or two others along, and if he still won’t listen, tell it to the church. In both circumstances, we are told to go and do whatever we can in our power to make peace instead of waiting for the other person to come to us.

Some of you are waiting for the other person to come to you. *She must know what he has done. He is the one in the position of authority. He hurt me. She disrespected me.* The command in these passages is clear – you go to them. Let’s just get that clear from the outset. Once again, this is about you doing what you have to do to make it right – not about what the other person needs to do. Make every effort. Remember that God is patient with us, bears with us, and so He calls us to love as He loves us. There are no limits with God, no point at which he says “I can’t stand no more.” Don’t just give up

on people or cast them aside. Be humble. Be gentle. Be patient. Bear with one another. Make every effort to keep unity and peace. Work at it. The church is your family and you don't give up on family. Have you put a limit on your efforts? A limit on your patience? We love as God loves us. God has never put a limit on his patience with us, but continues to forgive. **Love keeps no record of wrongs.**

Matthew 5:9 - Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

The heart of the gospel is reconciliation, making peace where there is disunity. Open your heart to God's healing and forgiveness. Make it your goal to always speak the truth in love. And make every effort to live at peace.