



Wise Speech

Proverbs series

We are continuing our series through the book of Proverbs this morning. And the topic I want us to consider this morning is a topic that is extremely applicable and pressing for every single person, and that is: **what does wisdom look like in our speech?**

The book of Proverbs gives a *lot* of attention to speech. In fact, it is potentially the most prominent theme in the book. In our English translations, there are over 120 verses that include the words “mouth,” “speech,” “lips,” or “words.”

And we can understand why. Communication is such a vital part of life. And coming to grips with what the Bible teaches us about our speech is vital for us in 2023, because we understand that we have far more avenues for communication than any other time in history. Which means that guidance for how we speak, for how we use our words, is needed for many areas of our daily lives.

So, while our verse this morning use words like “mouth,” “lips,” and “words,” we can also extend Proverbs’ instruction and warning to “texts,” “emails,” “tweets,” and “posts.”

Again, communication is a massive part of our day. Some basic statistics on communication give us a picture of the enormous role words play in our daily lives.

On average, we speak 16,000 words a day.¹ Obviously, more for some, less for others. For me, I’d guess that the only days I even get close to that are days I am preaching. For others, you’ve easily hit that before lunch.

On average, 23-27 billion text messages are sent a day worldwide. Not surprisingly, this varies by age. Those under 24 years old send around 128 text messages a day. That number goes down as the age bracket goes up.²

As far as social media goes, 60% of the world’s population uses social media. That’s nearly 5 billion people. The average daily time spent on social media is 2 hours and 24

¹ Joan E. Greve, “Who Talks More, Men Or Women? The Answer Isn’t As Obvious As You Think,” *Time*, July 16, 2014, <https://time.com/2992051/women-talk-more-study/>.

² Kelly Indah, “How Many Texts Are Sent Per Day in 2023? (Key Statistics),” *Earthweb*, April 7, 2023, <https://earthweb.com/how-many-texts-are-sent-per-day/>.

minutes. Of course, the number of posts varies (more if you are an influencer or wanna be influencer).³

The point is, the *ways* we communicate continually change, but the *need* for and *practice* of communication will always remain. It's a massively important part of life.

And so, God gives us guidance. After all, he is a God who communicates.

This morning we will talk about wise speech, next week we will look at what Proverbs describes as unwise speech and we can even say sinful speech. (some overlap since Proverbs often uses contrasting statements to teach...)

Obviously, there is no way we can look at everything Proverbs says about our speech this morning or even next, so I just want to point out general principles. We will be bouncing around Proverbs quite a bit, follow along as best as you can, as always the manuscript of our sermons are posted online so that you can go back and look at them.

2 big picture truths about wisdom and our speech and then 5 specific characteristics of wise speech

I. The first thing we need to grasp is that Scripture teaches, the way we use our words is a defining characteristic of the wise *and* the foolish.

In the book of Proverbs, we are presented with two important characters. I say "characters" because they aren't real people, they are two metaphorical women who embody wisdom and foolishness.

In Proverbs 8, we hear from Woman Wisdom...

Proverbs 8:1-9

1 Does not wisdom call? Does not understanding raise her voice? **2** On the heights beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; **3** beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud: **4** "To you, O men, I call, and my cry is to the children of man. **5** O simple ones, learn prudence; O fools, learn sense. **6** Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right, **7** for my mouth will utter truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips. **8** All the words of my

³ Dave Chaffer, "Global Social Media Statistics Research Summary 2023," *Smart Insights*, June 7, 2023, <https://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/social-media-strategy/new-global-social-media-research/>.

mouth are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them. **9** They are all straight to him who understands, and right to those who find knowledge.

There is a lot to say about woman wisdom but notice that one of her defining characteristics is her speech. She speaks “noble things” (v. 6), she speaks truth, righteously, and for the betterment of others.

In the next chapter of Proverbs, Proverbs 9, we hear about and from Woman Folly...

Proverbs 9:13-18

13 The woman Folly is loud; she is seductive and knows nothing. **14** She sits at the door of her house; she takes a seat on the highest places of the town, **15** calling to those who pass by, who are going straight on their way, **16** “Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!” And to him who lacks sense she says, **17** “Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.” **18** But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

So, again in contrast to Woman Wisdom, Woman Folly is “loud” (v. 13), which doesn’t mean fools have loud voices, it carries with it the idea of being restless, stirring up trouble, being a negative influence in other peoples’ lives as the rest of the passage describes Woman Folly. The fool destroys people with their speech.

We’ll give more attention to the general characteristics of what makes speech wise and unwise, but we should just recognize that our speech says far more about us than what is on our minds...notice Proverbs 16:23 for example...

Proverbs 16:23

The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips.

Our speech reveals a lot about our character. In other words, what you say and how you speak reveals your heart, not just your opinion. Again, our speech reveals whether we are wise or foolish in heart. Wise speech reveals a wise heart. Foolish speech reveals a foolish heart.

This is important because we are tempted to think that speech is merely the overflow of the mind, and it is to an extent, but it’s also the overflow of our heart. The health or lack of health in our speech is an indicator of the health or lack of health of our hearts.

And, of course, Jesus taught this as well...

Luke 6:45

The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

I've heard people say about someone else, the thing they really appreciate about that person is that they say what's on their mind. As if that's the most important character quality we should develop. It's not, because they are not only speaking their mind, they are speaking their heart. It also matters *what* they are communicating and *how* they are communicating.

And this is super helpful for us, because if you're ever unsure about how you're doing spiritually, a helpful way to measure is to gauge your speech. Ask yourself questions, or maybe even better someone else close to you, "How would you characterize my speech? What do I talk about most? Why do I talk about it?"

So, again, first big truth, the way we use our words is a defining characteristic of the wise and the foolish.

II. The second major truth in Proverbs is that Wise people understand *what* they say and *how* they say it has tremendous consequences.

Proverbs 18:21

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.

Now, first, it is important to know what that verse is not saying. It is not saying that you and I possess some divine ability to speak things into existence, like a better job, financial prosperity, or physical healing. There is a stream of theology that believes that and uses this verse as the foundation of their teaching. Our words, they say, are so powerful we just need to declare something and it will come true.

Danielle and I, just like all couples, have those moments when we can't decide what or where to eat. She'll say what do you want? I am pretty low maintenance so I really don't care the vast majority of the time. So, I'll say I don't care, what do you want? She is too sweet sometimes to just declare what she wants because she wants to be accommodating to me or the kids. And I often say, jokingly, "Name it and claim it!"

In that case, she really can speak into existence what we will have for dinner, because I don't really care.

But when it comes to things out of our control, we don't have the creative speaking power to declare things to be real. Only God has that power. So, we don't declare

things like health and prosperity, we pray to the One who can declare health and prosperity. And then, we trust in Him to accomplish his good will in our lives.

So, having the power to speak reality into existence is not what this proverb says. What it *is* saying and so many other proverbs teach is that there are tremendous consequences of our speech, *both good and bad*.

Proverbs 12:18

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

Proverbs 12:25

Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad.

Proverbs 13:3

Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.

Proverbs 18:6

A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating.

So, knowing these two truths - that wise speech is a defining characteristic of the wise and we should seek out to be wise with our speech because of its consequences, we should think through the characteristics of wise speech.

What are some of the ways that the book of Proverbs describes wise speech? I'll give just five...

1. Wise Speech is True

We say that in Proverbs 8:7-8 in the description of Woman Wisdom, her words speak truth, and there are many, many other passages that speak to the foolishness of lying. We'll talk more about honesty and lying next week, but the wise person is determined to present reality with his or her words, rather than a mirage.

There is no wisdom in ignoring reality. There is no wisdom in twisting situations into something false. Speaking only true things enables everyone to know what is true so that they can actually function within the real world. Wise people know that lying, beyond being an offense to our truthful God, only creates chaos and problems down the road. The wise won't be tricked into thinking that a little bend of the truth won't have some sort of consequence in the future.

Besides, as ones made in the image of God, we are to reflect the One who only speaks truth.

2. Wise Speech is Life-giving.

Proverbs 10:11

The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.

We all know that our words have the ability to do incredible damage to others. But they also have the ability to do incredible good for others.

I can think of several times when someone has spoken a word of encouragement to me, whether that is in person or by email or text and it did great good for my heart. I received a card just this week with incredibly encouraging words in it. It was a blessing.

The wise speak in a way that brings life to others. Because there is great wisdom in knowing that most people are in need of encouragement. As a pastor, this has been one of the most important lessons I've learned. People need the gospel first and foremost, but I will never meet someone that doesn't need some kind of encouragement. And you won't either.

I really like how one Christian author who teaches on communication describes the goal for Christian speech. He says we should strive to be "Servant Communicators." That is, as people who follow Jesus who came to serve and not to be served, we are called to serve others, but not just in actions, as important as that is, but also in our speech.

Oftentimes, the goal of our communication is much different than that. Certainly, we just need to convey information in most instances, but oftentimes we speak with other motivations. We just want to share our opinion to impress others, we want to get things off our chest to feel better about a situation, or we want cut someone down to feel better about ourselves. But what if, instead of thinking only about sharing your opinion, you thought, how can I use this conversation, use this medium (social media, text, etc...) to encourage and build up this person? How can my words be a fountain of life? How can I serve them best in this interaction?

3. Wise Speech is Gracious and Gentle

This is certainly not the championed quality of speech in our hostile age, even among Christians, but understand, the Bible calls us to gracious and gentle speech for a number of reasons:

First, gracious words are the words that produce life in others...

Proverbs 16:24

Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.

Proverbs 15:4

A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.

We often think truth and truth alone is what some people need, so as long as what I said is true, then it doesn't matter how I communicate it, but that simply isn't true. How you speak is important as well.

Second, the wise know that gracious and gentle words are actually more persuasive...

Proverbs 15:1

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Proverbs 22:11

He who loves purity of heart, and whose speech is gracious, will have the king as his friend.

Proverbs 16:21

The wise of heart is called discerning, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness.

Now, this doesn't mean we don't speak hard things, sometimes in very firm ways, but the Bible is clear that the *default* posture, or Christlike posture, of the Christian, should be gentleness and graciousness.

I'll regularly see someone on Twitter or Facebook defend mean speech by pointing to the scene in the Gospels where Jesus overthrew the money changers tables and kick them out of the temple. And they'll say, "See! I'm just being like Jesus. He wasn't just gentle." But then their entire posture to everyone and every post is like that, no matter what the conversation is about.

First of all, Jesus was right in his actions, there is such a thing as righteous anger, but don't pattern all of your speech as if Jesus just went around yelling at people and calling them names all the time.

Paul describes his communication with the Corinthian Church as being done by "the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:1). Peter says that we are to be ready to give an answer to those who ask the reason for our hope, but to do so with gentleness (1 Peter 3:15). Paul instructs believers to make their gentleness evident to all (Phil. 4:5).

So, again, wise—and Christian—speech is gentle and gracious.

4. Wise Speech is Controlled

Proverbs 17:27-28

27 Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. **28** Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.

I love the description of having a "cool spirit." They are the ones who are of understanding. They aren't quick to speak up, they aren't quick to make their opinions known, they don't run off at the mouth, they are cool and collected, and this is very wise - for a few reasons:

First, it keeps you out of trouble...

Proverbs 21:23

Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble.

I think we all know that to be true. We've been quick to share, quick to speak up, quick to share our thoughts about something or someone, quick to weigh in on some online controversy or in conversation, only to regret it later.

The wise are controlled in their speech.

Also because controlled speech better equips us to know how to answer...

Proverbs 15:28

The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.

The wise person knows that they can't give an accurate or helpful answer until they understand as much about the situation as possible. We fail at this all the time, don't we? We make quick judgments after only reading headlines. We settle into one tribe or another without any real interaction or conversation with someone from another tribe. We give quick rebukes when only knowing part of the story, or on the flip side we give only affirmations of others before hearing the ways they've contributed to a conflict.

The wise, on the other hand, says, I need more information before I make any kind of definitive statement or opinion. The wise are controlled in their speech.

5. Wise Speech is Humble

Proverbs 27:2

Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.

Proverbs 30:32

If you have been foolish, exalting yourself, or if you have been devising evil, put your hand on your mouth.

Can you think of someone who is a "one-upper?" That person who, no matter what someone is talking about, they've had a bigger or better experience, or a greater knowledge or expertise? I can?

Anyone been that "one-upper?" I have.

Anyone tempted to praise your accomplishments on social media. I have. It's ok to share good things happening because its nice to have others rejoice with you, but there is a fine line between inviting others to rejoice with you and inviting others to praise you.

But the wise know that isn't a good look. We are trying to impress others but it does just the opposite. Just follow Jesus and serve others, and allow others to praise you if they decide to.

GOSPEL

Again, the Bible has much to say about our speech, especially here in Proverbs, but I know that I fail to speak this way in so many ways. We all do. In fact, we might identify better with what Proverbs says next week when we look at foolish and sinful speech.

As always it's easy to identify others who might need to grow in wisdom with their speech. It's humbling to realize you need to grow in wisdom with your speech.

Thankfully, there's grace for that.

Of course we don't know everything that Jesus said, but we know that Jesus is wisdom, himself, sinless in every way which would include his speech. Jesus lived a life of honesty, self-control, gentleness, and righteousness in his words. He died for the ways you and I have failed to exhibit righteous and wise speech.

Now by faith in his finished work we can have our sin forgiven and his righteousness given to us by his grace.

COMMUNION

CONFESSION

PRAYER

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Romans 10:9-11

9 because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. **10** For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. **11** For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame."

The wisest thing we could ever do with our speech is to confess that Jesus is Lord and having done so we can know that our sins are forgiven, we are redeemed, and will be saved for all eternity.

VERSES

Proverbs 8:1-9

Proverbs 9:13-18

Proverbs 16:23

Luke 6:45

Proverbs 18:21

Proverbs 12:18

Proverbs 12:25
Proverbs 13:3
Proverbs 18:6
Proverbs 10:11
Proverbs 16:24
Proverbs 15:4
Proverbs 15:1
Proverbs 22:11
Proverbs 16:21
Proverbs 17:27-28
Proverbs 21:23
Proverbs 15:28
Proverbs 27:2
Proverbs 30:32
Romans 10:9-11

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are other means of communication other than speaking?
2. What does it mean to be a “servant communicator?”
3. In what ways has someone been a blessing to you with their words?
4. How can we be gracious and gentle even in a difficult conversation?
5. How do people show pride in their speech?
6. Being completely honest with yourself, how do you think you’ve done with your speech (in all forms)? Where do you need to ask the Lord to grow in wisdom and holiness?