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Series: Proverbs: Living Wisely in a Fallen World
Message: The Power of Words

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You've probably heard the name Thomas Wolfe. He is an author, journalist, writer. In 2016, he wrote a rather fascinating book called *The Kingdom of Speech*. He comments on an article in that book. The article is entitled "The Mystery of the Language Evolution". Authors of that article are eight heavyweight evolutionists from across the spectrum: linguist, biologist, anthropologist, computer scientist. In this article, they announce the fact that they're giving up. They're throwing in the towel. They're folding up their tent when it comes to the question of where did speech or language come from and how does it work. An amazing admission from these very well-known evolutionists. This is what was said: "The most fundamental question about the origin and evolution of our linguistic capacity remains as mysterious as ever. Not only that, they sounded ready to abandon all hope of ever finding the answer. Oh, we'll keep trying, they said gamely, but we'll have to start from zero again. One of the eight, the biggest name in the history of linguistics, said in the last 40 years he and seven others were saying there has been an explosion of research on this problem and all it has produced is a colossal waste of time by some of the greatest minds in the world. What is the problem? Speech is not one of man's several unique attributes. Speech, he says, is the attribute of all attributes. Speech is 95% plus of what lifts man above an animal." Now we would add to that the fact that we have stamped on our very image and likeness the character and image of God. Whether Wolfe or Chomsky or any of these guys realize it or not, their observations about the importance and the power of speech is very much in keeping with what the Bible says.

So we are coming back this morning to the book of Proverbs. We are going to look at the power of words as we see what Solomon in his wisdom has to say to us this morning. We want to see that words are life-giving or they are life-taking. The source of great blessing or of untold harm. Watch your words.

So a quick review. Where we've been and where are we going. Well, we've been out of the book of Proverbs for a little bit. So let's go back and touch on what it is that we've done to this point. We have already covered the first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs. That is really the introduction to the book. The first nine chapters constitute poems of praise that Solomon writes with regard to wisdom. As we go through those nine chapters very quickly, remember we started off saying here's a mom and dad in chapter 1 saying say no to peer pressure. Don't yield to the pressure that surrounds you. Chapter 2 was protection from harm. That's what wisdom will do for you. Chapter 3 was all about true success. Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Don't lean on your own understanding. That's true success in the eyes of God. Chapter 4. It all starts with right-thinking. Guard your heart with all diligence. Guard your mind with all diligence for out of it flows the issues of life. Chapter 5 had to do it the matter of the gift of sex that God has given to marriage. Chapter 6 was things to avoid. All kinds of things that Solomon warns us that we want to avoid. Chapter 7 was the folly of adultery. and then you remember chapters 8 and 9, it's almost like we're standing at this crossroads and he just goes through in both of those chapters and lays out which of these roads we can choose. Are you going to pick the way of the wise or you going to pick the way of the fool? The choice ultimately becomes yours. So that's where we've been.

Now here's where we're going. Chapters 10 through 31 is the second half of the book of Proverbs. Most of us when we think of Proverbs are thinking of what comes in chapters 10 through 31 because what we have in these chapters are the short pithy sayings that are so famous and so well-known. This is the Proverbs as we generally understand them. It's important to see as we look at these that they're not in any kind of topical arrangement. They kind of jump all over the place. So what we're going to do is someone has actually gone through and they have counted 110 different topics. I figure over the course of the next two or three years we will be able to...we won't do that. How about 15? There's a myriad of subjects that are obviously covered from chapters 10 through 31. They really are laying out these principles then for how it is that in all of these different areas we live life successfully.

Let's look this morning at this matter of words and why they matter. Why are they so powerful? Why is it really true that this is the uniqueness of humanity, our capacity to

talk and communicate to each other? The first thing we would note is that words matter because they're the primary way that we communicate. We are using words all day long. Most of our lives are built around words. We are using technology but we're using words when we do that. We're talking or texting or emailing. We may be writing letters occasionally. We're singing. All of these different ways we're using words.

Do you think Proverbs is relevant? Proverbs is going to talk about speech and words and the tongue more than any single topic. Again, someone has gone through and counted – 150 verses in Proverbs having to do with speech, having to do with the tongue, having to do with the mouth, having to do with words. If that's true, that means that one in six of the verses in Proverbs are speaking to this matter of how it is that we use our words.

You know the author Tom Clancy. Tom Clancy is known for very long books. 500 pages is a short work that he does. They usually are 600, 700, 800 pages. Well, we are told that the average person speaks about 18,000 words a day. Now some of you don't speak that many. Some of you speak more than that. Some of you speak less than that. There's an average in there somewhere. Each person here would produce somewhere between 15 to 25 of these novels in one year. So we're cranking out a lot of words. We're cranking out a lot of volumes. One study said the average person opens their mouth to speak 700 times a day. You may say that's not me. Okay, well let's cut that in half. That's 350 times you open your mouth to speak. 350 times a day. You might say that's still not me. I'm much quieter than that. 175 times. So you open your mouth 175 times a day. Think of how many things in your daily experience you do 175 times, other than check your phone. It really is true, isn't it? Words and speech matter because we're using them all the time in our communication.

Secondly, notice that words matter because they say a lot about the kind of person we are. This is where Proverbs is going to put us under conviction, I'm afraid. And not only Proverbs but all of Scripture does, doesn't it? You see at this point when you think in terms of the kind of person we are and how it is that our speech and words define the kind of person we are, it is not a matter of getting a list out and looking down at a rather lengthy list of choices as to what kind of person I am. What Proverbs does is it basically says there's two choices. You're either a fool and your words give you away

in that regard. Or you're wise. We often talk about the fact that words reveal who we are and that's exactly what we are going to see not only with this study this morning but probably every topic from here on out is going to reveal the kind of person we are. How you handle your money. You're either wise or you're a fool. How you relate to your children. How you relate your parents. How you relate to your spouse. Pick any topic you want. Proverbs is basically going to force us to say you're either one or the other.

We mentioned way back when we first started that Jesus Himself is the embodiment. He personifies wisdom. In the life of our Lord, we have a living, walking example of the wisest person who ever lived. Jesus speaks directly to this matter of our words in Matthew chapter 12. You're familiar with this passage. He says to either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad. "For the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good when you are evil, for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak. For your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned." Our words simply reflect our heart, Jesus says. They reflect whether we are a fool or whether we are wise.

Listen to what Proverbs says. I just pulled some verses up from Proverbs that reflect our heart. "The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence...the lips of the righteous know what is acceptable but the mouth of the wicked what is perverse...the words of the wicked lie in wait for blood but the mouth of the upright delivers them...the tongue of the wise commends knowledge but the mouth of fools pours out folly...fine speech is not becoming a fool, still less is false speech to a Prince." So the point is Proverbs is going to say to us your mouth simply reflects the kind of person that you are. Words matter because we're using them all the time. Words matter because they reflect honestly what's going on in our heart.

Notice thirdly, words matter because they can affect very different outcomes. Let's note a number of these. One of those differences, one of those outcomes is that words have the power of life and they have the power of death. A well-known statement in Proverbs 18:21 "Death and life are in the power of the tongue and those who love it

will eat its fruits.” That's true not only figuratively but of course it is true literally as well. There literally is life and death in the power of the tongue. The tongue can literally bring death. Someone can say take that person's life. The power of the tongue to bring life. Spare that person. Figuratively we know it does its work as well. In fact, September, as you probably are aware, is suicide prevention month. While there are obviously all kinds of factors that cause people to spiral into despair, oftentimes what people are hearing from other people about themselves contributes to that. You remember the name Vince Foster, the man from the Clinton administration. This is the note that he wrote that was found after he took his life. He said this: “Here in DC, ruining people with words is considered sport.” Tremendous power of words.

Genesis chapter 1. Eleven times. Eleven times God spoke. God said. He just simply spoke and called things into existence. In John chapter 1 verse 1, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. It was the living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, who was revealed in that way. The majority of Jesus's miracles, not all of them but a majority of them, had to do with verbal spoken words. He would heal. He would calm the seas by just speaking a word. He would call Lazarus out from the tomb by speaking words of life into his life. James 3 reminds us that the tongue is the most powerful of all of the members of our body. Think of the power of words in the realm of spiritual life. It is through the power of words that we move from spiritual death to spiritual life, in hearing and understanding and believing the gospel. Your very life and destiny is changed by the Holy Spirit as He takes the Word of truth, the gospel, and He brings life to us, eternal life. The writer of Proverbs says in chapter 13 and verse 14: “The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life that one may turn away from the snares of death.” It brings to us life.

Secondly, words have the ability to heal or to hurt. They have the ability to heal or to hurt. Remember the proverb that we used to say as kids? Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. We usually said that after somebody had just cut us to the quick with something and so to pretend like it didn't hurt, we came back with that silly false proverb. Nothing could be further from the truth. Words cut. Words lacerate. That's why we have the expression cutting remarks. A cutting remark is hurtful words, and words do hurt. They are potent. They are powerful. Proverbs chapter

12 and verse 18: "There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." What a graphic picture. Here the imagery just jumps off the page. Rash words are like sword thrusts. We've all been there. We've all received that. We've all unfortunately given that.

And then the tongue of the wise is the one that brings healing. I suppose the examples of that are all too familiar. We think about child abuse. We think about spousal abuse. Oftentimes it is physical but very often included with that is verbal and those truly are hurtful words. Words that are heard and often tucked down deep into one's heart and mind. They can stay there for a decades of time. that's why the way we speak to each other in our homes, the way we conduct ourselves as husbands and wives, parents to children, children to parents, children to each other. Being disrespectful or hurtful. What we permit and what we model. Here is a strong word to us.

But there's the other side of this. It is not all just about hurtful words. Words heal and they hurt, but listen to these words that have to do with this matter of healing in Proverbs chapter 12 again in verse 25. "Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad." Who hasn't been the recipient of that? There's something going on in your life. You're obviously discouraged but a good word has a way of making one glad. Chapter 15 verse 4: "For a gentle tongue is a tree of life but perverseness in it breaks the spirit." The tongue is a tree of life. It brings healing. It brings hope. I would suppose that some of the most healing words we can say within our homes: I was wrong. I am sorry. Please forgive me. I love you. They're not very long phrases but they're very powerful. We were meant, I think, to be recipients of verbal words of encouragement.

I can't remember if it was the end of '17, seems like it might've been, but it could've been at the end of '18 when I listed out these 10 prayer requests that we could be praying as a church. The fifth of those prayer requests on that list says that we would pray so we would build each other up. One of the things that we would seek to do as the body of Christ is that we would seek to build each other up. There are a lot of ways we can build each other up but there aren't very many ways that we can build each other up more strategically, more intentionally than with words and with words of

encouragement. What would you suppose would happen if every time we came together, maybe even on the way here, you were simply to pray with that in mind and ask God, don't let me say one word to anybody today but that would be an encouragement to them, that it would be a blessing to them, that would reflect your heart for them. What if we were to pray that every time we came together that God would allow me to speak words of encouragement into somebody's life when we come together as the body of Christ. I think there's a word for that and I think it's called revival. I think that's what would happen. There would be such an encouraging spirit that would be a part of the gathering of God's people. Of course, it doesn't have to be limited to here. That could be our daily prayer at home too. It could be the way we begin every day: Father, let me be a blessing with what I say to people in my family and in my circle today.

Thirdly, words either reward or they trouble. They either reward or they trouble. Chapter 12 of Proverbs and verse 14 says "From the fruit of his mouth a man is satisfied with good, and the work of a man's hand comes back to him." He's talking about how words become a good investment. It is almost like getting insider trading information here. He is saying if you want to be rewarded, if you want to receive rewards, then use good speech. His Word will not return void is what Isaiah promised. There's a saying. the man or the woman who does good does good for themselves. The man who does good is good for himself. A woman who does good does good for herself. It's just a principle of life. The opposite unfortunately is also true because in Proverbs 13 verse 3: "Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens his lips comes to ruin." He who opens his lips comes to ruin.

Then lastly, our words are especially good when... let's look at a number of things here. Our words are especially good when they're honest and not false. Remember back in Proverbs chapter 6 that expression that Solomon uses about the six things that God hates, no, make that seven. I always liked the way that is stated. Here are six things that God hates. No, I mean there are seven of them actually. They're an abomination to Him. As you look through that list, two of them have to do with lying and one of them has to do with sowing discord among the brethren which would very often be in the use of words. It speaks to that whole matter of being truthful. In the 16th

chapter of Proverbs in verse 13: "Righteous lips are the delight of a king and he loves him who speaks what is right." Chapter 14 verse 25: "A truthful witness saves lives; the one who breathes out lies is deceitful." It is so easy to shade the truth. So easy to embellish it. So easy to state something to our advantage, to where we look a little bit better than maybe we should. But it's not surprising that God, as being a God of truth who has given us the written Word that is described as truth, whose Son is described as truth, wants us to be people who speak the truth. So our words are good when they are honest and not false.

Our words are good secondly, when they are few and not many. when they're few and not many. Some people have misconstrued this principle and try to say its primary application should be on Sunday morning at about 10 o'clock but that is not true. Remember Solomon is the preacher of Ecclesiastes so I'm sure he would not want that principle to have been applied in that way. We remember the Proverbs are not absolutes. There are always exceptions to those principles that he puts forward. Look at the 10th chapter and this matter of words being few or many. The 19th verse: "When words are many transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent." Chapter 13 verse 3: "Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens it wide comes to ruin." We already read that one. Chapter 17 and verse 27: "Whoever restrains his words has knowledge; he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips he is deemed intelligent." Proverbs would say our default position should be to speak fewer words and not more, to say less rather than more. James 3 tells us why that is. James 3 tells us that our tongue is prone to messing up.

Then lastly, look at this matter of words are good when they're fitting and they're not untimely. There is a great verse in Proverbs 15 verse 23: "To make an apt answer is a joy to a man and a word in season. How good it is." Apt. To make an apt answer. How many of you remember using the word "apt" this week? Probably did not use it. It's not a word we use very often. But what does it mean to make an apt answer? It's a great word because the word "apt" simply means exactly suitable. An exactly suitable word. One that is totally appropriate. An apt word. That is speaking a good word. What constitutes an apt word? What would have to take place for there to be exactly a

suitable, appropriate expression? Well, there would certainly have to be thoughtfulness. There would have to be thoughtfulness. We would have to be careful in our choice of words. You're not speaking rashly and not speaking carelessly. There's certainly the matter of timeliness. In Proverbs 15 and verse 28: "The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things." You see the contrast. The fool just opens his mouth and starts talking. No care. No discipline. Just whatever is there is coming. Whereas the wise man is pondering. He's thinking about how he should answer and what he should say. Then in 15:23, the verse we were just looking at, this matter of an apt answer is a joy and a word in season. How good it is. That's why I read Ecclesiastes at the beginning because Ecclesiastes says there is a time to talk and there's a time to be silent. There is a time for a few words and maybe there's another time when it's appropriate for more words. But timeliness is especially important in this matter of an apt word.

I think the last thing would simply be truth. Truthfulness. Thoughtful. Timely. Truthful. That is an apt use of words. Words are life-giving and they're life taking. They are the source of great blessing and they are the source of untold harm. Watch your words.

What do we take away? Very straightforward simple point. Get serious about your words because God is. Get serious about your words because God is. A couple of verses to memorize could be Psalm 141: 3 "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips." What a beautiful picture! How about Ephesians 4:29? Let no unwholesome, no corrupt talk come out of your mouth but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion. It's apt, right? It fits the occasion that it may give grace to those who hear. So let's be the people of God who are resolved to speak grace into each other's lives, to bless each other with our words.

God has blessed us with words, not only in His Scripture to us but specifically in giving to us the truth of the gospel. We've all failed in this regard. Our words have often betrayed our heart. The idea this morning isn't to feel all beat up about how we have misspoken and how we have failed in this area, but it is rather to rejoice in the gospel that continually reminds us that with God there are always new beginnings. Today is a new opportunity afforded to us to speak timely and encouraging words to each other. All

of that comes to us through Jesus. Our heart's desire for you is to hear the Word this morning. The Word of the Lord, the Word of the gospel that says that Jesus came. He came to this earth as the perfect Son of God. He lived a perfect life. He died a terrible death on the cross. He did that for you and He did that for me. What God asks of us is not that we do our best, not that we work and perform to whatever level or standard we feel that we can, but rather He wants simply from us to trust in Jesus and in Christ alone for our salvation. It is the power of God unto salvation, that powerful Word.

Let's pray. Father God, we are thankful this morning for the Word that has come to us both in the person of Your Son and in this written Word. Lord, we understand what You have said about the power of words. We want to be people who are known for bringing blessing and grace and hope and encouragement into each other's lives with the words that we speak. Lord, enable us to do that today. Help us to be people who are encouraging each other in all the things that You have so called us to do. We pray in Jesus's name, amen.