

Wisdom with Words

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 November 2020

Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 0 0] Well, will you join me in prayer as we begin? Father, even as we are thinking about words today, may you use my words to help us to reflect on, to think on, how we may serve you better as disciples of Jesus.

With our words, for the glory of your name, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, I think that most of us as Christians know just how powerful words are.

Words are essential to how we've come to faith, how we know God. That's why the Bible is called God's Word. And Jesus, in John's Gospel, is the Word.

And so even as we've been going through Proverbs, the whole process of acquiring wisdom doesn't happen, does it, without words. Words are powerful because, amongst other things, it's the means for teaching and learning wisdom.

Time and time again, the command in Proverbs is to listen and to hear. But it's for that reason that Proverbs itself also has much to say about the use of words.

[1 : 2 1] Because of their power, the wise or the foolish use of words can have drastic consequences. So in Proverbs 12, verse 18, and tonight we'll be going through quite a few Proverbs, just by the nature of the topic.

We read on the slide, The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Or this in Proverbs 18, 21.

The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit. As we heard in James, it's only a small part of the body, but it can be a world of damage, can do a world of damage, can't it?

Or conversely, it can do a world of good. I find it funny how sometimes people say, so and so has a sharp tongue, and then others, for others we might say, oh, they're so blunt.

But whether it's sharp or blunt, we sort of kind of mean the same thing, don't we? That words, like a knife or a sword, has the power to damage, to be lethal, to cut, to be used to hurt others.

[2 : 3 3] And we probably experienced that firsthand, haven't we? A callous word, or worse, a deliberate insult, has that ability to really hurt us, to destroy friendships even, and sometimes marriages.

Or for a young child or person, just a callous word from a parent, undermining their confidence. And so that sort of brings me to the one more thing, by way of introduction, that I want to say about words, the power of it, that is.

And that is, for those in positions of authority, they have an added responsibility in the use of words, because the power of words, because of the power of words, they are the means by which those in authority use them to bind.

So here is a verse from Proverbs 16, verse 10. The lips of a king speak as an oracle, and his mouth does not betray justice. An oracle is where you speak, and it is like a divine saying, and it is sort of, it is true, just because you say it.

And so, if you are a leader, or a pastor, or the boss, then just by virtue of your position, your words suddenly carry more weight. If there is a dispute among members, say, then when the leader finally speaks, it tends to sort of decide the matter.

[3 : 59] To then challenge the word of a leader, can come across as challenging their authority. Now, when someone speaks justly, that has the effect of establishing righteousness.

But the converse is also true. You institutionalize, or you fix injustice, as it were, into the system.

And in recent times, we've seen how, haven't we, that it takes a groundswell of protests in order to overturn the decree of unjust rulers. But, you know, it's the sole voice of the one strong person in authority, and then it takes tens of thousands of people coming out on the streets in order for that one person to either be overthrown, or to change his mind.

And so, the power of words must not be underestimated. It shouldn't surprise us, should it, since that's how God himself creates and rules his world.

And even though we don't all have that same authority, yet in our little way, the words that we say can have that effect.

[5 : 11] If we speak wisely, it has the power to do great good. And if we don't, it has the power to really harm, or do damage. And again, that reading in James says as much, the tongue, small as it is, it's like a spark that can set a whole forest on fire.

So, what does Proverbs then have to say about wisdom with words? Well, it turns out lots. And so, tonight, we're going to go through some of them. But because there are so many of them in Proverbs, as I was reading through, I've decided to just pick three areas.

So, first, the first area, we are to use words by speaking, sorry, use words wisely by speaking only what is true, speaking only the truth.

So, Proverbs 12, 22, we're told that this pleases the Lord. The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy. It's not hard at all to see why that is, is it?

Because God is the God of truth. So, telling lies goes against his very nature and character. It's an affront, if you like, to his authority.

[6 : 25] And actually, when we lie, what we're trying to do is subvert reality, aren't we? We're trying to subvert God's truth. We're trying to make out what is false to be true.

God has said that, you know, this is the way that the world should be. This is how I've created the world. This is how I've created humans. And by lying, we're trying to say that, God, that's not true.

And so, as a result, we're taught that the consequences of lying are dire. Proverbs 12, verse 9 and 19, 5 flesh these out for us. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.

A false witness would not go unpunished by God, but whoever pours out lies will not go free. Sorry, a false witness, but whoever pours out lies will not go free.

Now, let me say that with me, as I read these verses, I say to myself, you know, I have no intention of telling lies. It's always the right thing to do.

[7 : 32] I want to honor God. I'm sure many of you sort of feel that way and are committed to telling the truth. And yet, as I look at my own life, I find that there are still times when I find it hard to tell the truth.

Or rather, I'm tempted not to tell the truth. Now, why is that? Because telling the truth for me sometimes can be costly.

It makes me look bad. It costs me time and money to be truthful. And so, instead of outright lying, I try and be economical with the truth instead.

That's my way of getting around it. I know well enough not to tell a lie outright. That would be too much for my conscience to take. But half-truths, you know, staying silent when the truth needs to be told, well, that's not quite so bad, is it?

Is it? Well, we may think it's harmless, but actually when we're economical with the truth, what we actually do is undermine trust, don't we?

[8 : 43] Because after a while, others suspect that you have things to hide, which you do, because otherwise you'd be telling the whole truth. And then slowly but surely people consider you to be untrustworthy.

In any case, the Proverbs also warn us that even if we manage to fool others, we can't fool God. And one day, whether it's in this life or in judgment, God will call all to account for the lies or half-truths that we're told.

And so we may think that we're avoiding the pain of telling the truth now, but in the long run, that's not true, not as far as God is concerned. Now here's another aspect to consider with truth-telling, because like me, there are times when we do stuff up.

We tell that half-truth and we walk away and our conscience even is pricked. But then you see what happens is that I sort of think, hey, but I actually got away with that.

Nobody seemed to have picked it up. And then I figure, you know, it's just too hard. I'm just going to let this one pass. I'm not going to tell the next one, but, you know, do I really need to go back and sort of make up and tell everyone that I didn't tell the truth?

[10 : 01] It's easy to do that, isn't it? It's so convenient. But I want to encourage us to think, actually, that no, sometimes, maybe always, the right thing is to actually go back and set the record straight.

Because for one thing, I think what it makes us do is face up to the fact that we did tell a lie, face up to the consequences of it, so that it may hurt, it may be embarrassing, but actually, it does build character.

Because the next time around, because we've just remembered how painful it was to go and own up for something that we've lied about, that may be just enough to prompt us not to do it again. And so, see, what we're doing is that instead of becoming a habitual liar or a habitual teller of half-truths, we start to learn to be a habitual teller of truth, the whole truth.

And of course, the other thing, as I mentioned before as well, is when we start hiding things from other people, then it has the effect of undermining the relationship, isn't it? That we've got this half-truth tucked away that we didn't really own up to.

And so, as I said earlier, the trust is eroded. So that's the first of the three points. Speak only what is true, now with the second lot of Proverbs, the point is, speak only when necessary.

[11 : 25] That is, exercise restraint when we speak. So here, the Proverbs that speak to that are Proverbs 10, verse 19, sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues.

Chapter 17, verse 27, the one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even-tempered. Now, we all know people who talk too much, don't we?

Maybe I am, one of those. Sometimes it's just their personality, right? They're the life of the party, when they get there, they love telling stories, cracking jokes. You know, I don't think the Proverbs that we've been looking at just then are talking about people like that.

It's not about personality. It's not about people who are chatty and love to talk a lot. Rather, the restraint that is being called for here are for serious occasions where perhaps there's a crisis, perhaps there's a sin to deal with, there's a conflict, there are problems to be solved.

And that's when wisdom calls for restraint with words. Because the wise know that when it's a difficult situation, callous words add fuel to the fire.

[12 : 35] On the other hand, the proud think, you know, ah, I've got all the answers, no need to worry, just listen to what I have to say. They're only too eager to tell people how smart they are, to correct others, thinking that by doing that they are helping.

You know, have you heard them say, let me give you some constructive feedback? We're always taught, no, never give negative feedback, always give constructive feedback. So we think, just by putting the words constructive in front of feedback, suddenly everything we say becomes constructive.

No, instead another proverb, 18 verse 13, tells us what to do instead. To answer before listening, that is folly and shame. You see, making a conscious effort to listen first is an effective way to show restraint.

It forces us to concentrate on hearing first before we speak. So it's not to say that we don't speak at all, it's not to even say that the less words we use the better, but the idea here is hear first, seek to understand, and then that will give us a sense of measure in what we say.

We then say only what is necessary, what we think will be helpful. So here's something I try to practice. I think I'm getting better at it as time goes by.

[13 : 51] Some of you can tell me because I've done this with you. But whenever I set up a meeting or conversation with anyone, even when I do have an agenda or an outcome I'm looking for, what I try and do now is always to find a way of hearing and listening first.

hear what others have to say before I try and offer my own solution. Now I'm not doing that just to get the process for sure so that, you know, I pretend I'm listening but actually I'm just going to tell them what I want to do anyway.

No. I'm trying to listen to understand how people think. To listen, because perhaps they do have a better idea. To listen, perhaps then we can find something of common ground to solve a problem.

You see, when we listen before we speak and when we say only what's necessary, then benefits flow from it. Here are a few more Proverbs that tell us what they are.

So Proverbs 13, verse 3, those who guard their lips preserve their lives and those who speak rashly will come to ruin. So the first benefit is actually self-preservation. You reduce the chance of conflict, of getting yourself in trouble.

[15 : 07] So if nothing else, you've preserved your life. And boy, can I remember the number of times when if only I had shown some restraint, the amount of trouble that I would avoid for myself.

Because you see, once you say something without thinking, it cannot be unsaid, can you? You do try and retract and say, oh, I actually didn't mean that or whatever, but the damage is done, isn't it? You almost have to work ten times as hard to undo the one thing that you said.

But next, the second benefit is that we avoid unnecessary strife, which is sort of related. But Proverbs 15, verse 1 says, a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Peace with others aid preservation of life, I think. But I think the point here too is it's not just preserving your own life, it's preserving the relationship as well. If your gentle and restrained answer turns away wrath, then you have a better chance for a relationship to be restored or reconciled if it was in conflict.

Now again, I have to say, each of these Proverbs as I reflect on myself, I'm not pretty good at, I'm not good at this at all, I think. When someone comes to me angry at what I've done, my first instinct is to get defensive.

[16 : 29] You know, what are they accusing me of? What about what they've done to me? That's provoked what I've done to them. But I think if, with God's help, we're able to not allow our defensiveness to go up straight away, but give ourselves the time to listen to them, then perhaps the situation can be diffused with a restrained and gentle response.

we might actually be able to find a solution, a way forward that placates them and therefore restore that relationship, calms them down.

And then of course, the third benefit which I've picked is to see that if you're able to hold your tongue, then not only does it preserve your life, you come across wise as well.

So Proverbs 17, verse 28, even fools are thought wise if they keep silent and discerning if they hold their tongues. Or if you want a modern equivalent, I think it's by Mark Twain, better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and to remove all doubt.

Now the aim of this verse isn't to say, look, if you're foolish, just be quiet so that you just look wise. No, fools can't help themselves, I think, by just speak. Rather, it's an advice for those who aspire to be wise.

[17 : 55] That is, if ever there's anything you are in doubt about, then it's better not to say it than to say it and run the risk of making yourself a fool. And the wise are humble enough, aren't they, to know that they're not the expert on everything, that every time somebody says something you have to offer an opinion, whereas the fools don't, do they?

You just have to look on Twitter and Facebook and all that and you see all these people who are really no experts at any of the things they talk about, just giving us their valued opinion. They seem to have a view about everything.

No, instead, let me encourage you to practice having that thinking look. You know, when people talk to you, just nod thoughtfully, even rub your chin if you like.

You know, in the Chinese movies they have that mustache and beard and they, you know, stroke that beard. Yeah, do something like that. But however you do it, train yourself to slow down with your response, to think before you speak.

And then you can sort of, as you're doing that, buy yourself time to work out what is the most helpful thing to be saying here. How can I be listening and really understanding so that when I speak, and because you're measured and considered when you speak, people will come to actually respect what you do say because what you say is never frivolous.

[19 : 15] or thoughtless. And so in the long run, that proverb's right, isn't it? You learn and you become wise. Well, let me come to the third point in the outline and that is if the goal of our speech, sorry, because if the goal of our speech is to speak what is true and only when necessary, then what that means is that we should speak only to build up.

Now, the proverbs I've chosen for these are Proverbs 10, verse 21, the lips of the righteous nourish many, but fools die for lack of sense. Proverbs 12, verse 18, the words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

And here's another one, 15, 4, the soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit. And then finally, this is my favorite, gracious words are honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

All of these talk about the soothing tongue or gracious words as words that heal, that bring life, that nourish people, whereas the converse, the perverse tongue and all that, crushes and, you know, brings damage to people.

There is one more I'll add, actually, on the next slide, Proverbs 11, verse 13, and this one is not so much about building up individuals, but as I said again, building trust among individuals.

[20 : 53] A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret. So, speaking wisely to build up, speaking only what's true and what is necessary has the effect of building up trust among people as well.

Now, I could delve deeper into each of these and I encourage you to go away and do it in your own time. There are quite a few, but instead, I thought what I'll do tonight is to point to the one example and that is to point to Jesus.

as I've done in the past, Jesus is the best example of wisdom, isn't it? And tonight, we see again that in Jesus, we have no better model of someone who uses words with wisdom.

Now, of course, when you've read the Gospels, you can see that he speaks only the truth, but also, he speaks with restraint, don't you see? I think the incident that most impacts me is the one when he was right in front of Pilate, his ability to stay silent.

I know that for me, if ever I was accused of doing wrong and I know I'm in the right, I don't know, but I don't think I could even control my tongue. I would leap straight up to my own defense of my own reputation.

[22 : 17] I would want to set the record straight. And yet, what do we see Jesus do? He holds his tongue, doesn't he? Even when he knows that it will cost him his life. Now, this is not to say that Jesus doesn't speak forthrightly at times.

There are times when his righteous anger calls for rebuke, which he does to Pharisees and disciples. And yet, when he comes to defending himself, he's silent. And even when he rebukes and warns people, he does that because he doesn't want them to fall into eternal judgment.

He was actually doing it for their own good. And in a sense, it's the ultimate in building them up, isn't it? To secure their eternal salvation, even though the way to get there is for them to humble themselves.

So much so was Jesus' wisdom with words that even Simon Peter could say in John 6, verse 68, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

Now, I don't know about you, but as I look at Jesus' example, I sort of feel like, well, what hope do I have? It's so hard, isn't it, to get my words right. And that's even when I've tried thinking about being wise with my words.

[23 : 40] What hope do I have when I'm flustered and I can't think clearly? And I think part of the problem is that a lot of times it's hard to be objective, isn't it? We can't really observe ourselves in conversation to know how we are, how we come across to people.

Sometimes I would get my wife and she'd say, do you know that you were pretty loud then and pretty harsh? And I said, really? I thought I was just being enthusiastic. But no, actually, I think you come across a bit scary.

Oh, okay. So, here's a suggestion. If you find it hard to work out what to do, maybe find someone whom you trust. Maybe, like me, my wife, a spouse. But whoever it is, perhaps ask them to give you an honest assessment about how you use your words.

And, you know, it's going to be hard, but try not to be defensive when they say so. You'll be surprised what you discover, but if you're open to their suggestions, if you're open to perhaps God using them to tell you the truth, then perhaps you'll be able to understand how you can begin to change the way you use words and how you speak.

And then, with the Spirit's help, you might become wiser with words. And then, God willing, as you're wiser with words, your words become more effective.

[24 : 59] They can be used to build up, to heal, to soothe, and to bring about God's will and purpose, and not just in your life, but in the life of others as well. So, I encourage you, why don't you try that as a very practical application from tonight.

Even as you concentrate and meditate on the words of Proverbs, perhaps ask someone you trust, how am I going with the way I use words? And then be open to what they say.

Let me pray, and let's pray. Father, thank you for the gift of words, and thank you for its power. Thank you for your word and your Son, who speaks only what you will.

help us to be like him. Teach us how to use words wisely for your glory and for the blessing of others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.