

Watching Our Words

Proverbs 6:1-5

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Many summers ago, our family was invited to a party at someone's house. After we were done eating, a group of adults started playing volleyball. Meanwhile, the children gathered into groups and held up bed sheets while a couple of us launched water balloons into the air. The idea was for them to catch the balloons on the sheet without breaking them.

As I gently lofted balloons to the kids, I turned to my buddy, gave him a sinister smirk, and pointed to the volleyball players located about 50 yards away. He instinctively knew what I was thinking and we began unleashing balloon bombs on the unsuspecting adults.

We were out of control and didn't stop our volley until all the balloons were gone. The kids wanted more, while the volleyball players kept looking up at the sky in dread of more missiles coming their way.

Our water grenades were small, and yet they had the ability to cause delight or destruction, depending on how they were used. Likewise, our words have the same power -- they can bring joy or cause despair. Words can hurt or heal, devastate or delight.

How many of you are reading a chapter of Proverbs every day? Our main emphasis last weekend was on developing the fear of the Lord: *To be wise in God's eyes, let's revere and draw near in the new year.*

Psalm 34:11-13 tells us when God wows us, we will watch our words: ***“Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. What man is there who desires life and loves many days, that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit.”***

Proverbs has a lot to say about what we say as it refers to our tongue, our mouth, or our lips over 150 times in 31 chapters!

Our primary text is Proverbs 18:21: ***“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.”*** Our words either launch life or they deliver death. Everything you said this week either assassinated or

invigorated the people around you because words have the power to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate and to humble.

Let's try an exercise. Could you stick your tongue out? Can you see it? Notice how small it is. But actually it's the most powerful force in the world. Turn to the person next to you and say, "*Death and life are in the power of your tongue.*" Now let's personalize Proverbs 18:21 by saying it together using the words "my" and "I": "*Death and life are in the power of **MY** tongue, and **I** will eat its fruits.*"

Here's the decision I want each of us to make as a result of the sermon: *I will use my tongue to launch life instead of delivering death.*

Our Words are Powerful

The first thing we see in Proverbs 18:21 is "*the power of the tongue.*" This is the word for "*strength.*" During World War II the government printed posters that showed a drowning soldier in the ocean, with four words at the bottom of the picture: "*Loose Lips Sink Ships.*" Because there were spies around, sailors had to be very careful when in port. Someone who talked too much could literally lose his life and put thousands in danger.

Here's a more modern version: "*Tweets sink Fleets.*"

Words are powerful for at least three reasons.

1. Words are everywhere. According to researchers, on an average day, we open our mouths to speak 700 times, using at least 7,000 words! Interestingly, one study found we only use about 700 words that have actual value.

If we speak this much (and some of us get this many words in before breakfast), we're bound to say something that brings death to someone. No wonder Jesus said in Matthew 12:37: "*For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*"

2. Words penetrate within. Proverbs 12:18: "*There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*" Our tongues torpedo relationships and ambush reputations. Like a sword, our speech can lacerate a life in a matter of seconds. The things we say can either bring emotional life or emotional death to others. Proverbs 12:25: "*Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad.*" Think of a time when

someone spoke exactly the right words at the right time. Now think of a time when someone spoke recklessly. Some of us remember words that sliced through our souls decades ago.

3. Words spread far and wide. We say a lot of words and they go down deep. They also get spread far and wide. Proverbs 16:27: ***“A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire.”*** Perhaps you’ve experienced the pain that comes from a rumor that spreads like wild fire. It’s no fun, is it? Words don’t just evaporate once they’re spoken. They’re like burning embers that engulf an entire forest. One of my friends offers this insight: *“Words have tremendous power for good and evil...they take on a life of their own and ‘hang’ out there forever.”*

Words are powerful. Proverbs 18:21 says they are either used for life or death. Let’s say this again: *I will use my tongue to launch life instead of delivering death.*

Let’s consider some ways we deliver death through toxic talk.

Delivering Death

When I was growing up, I remember hearing catchy sayings that made a lot of sense, such as, *“People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones,”* and *“A rolling stone gathers no moss.”* Another popular one was this: *“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”* That’s actually not true, is it? Broken bones can heal but words can wound and break our hearts.

We’ve all used venomous verbs and noxious nouns and have been on the receiving end of these words as well. Proverbs lists several examples of how the tongue can be used to hurt, destroy and kill.

1. Gossip. Proverbs 20:19: ***“Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babbling.”*** Proverbs 18:8 tells us some people feed on gossip like others enjoy food: ***“The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.”*** The Living Bible offers this paraphrase: *“What dainty morsels rumors are. They are eaten with great relish.”*

Gossip is usually fun and interesting but when we feed on gossip we’ll always crave more. That reminds me of the person who was gossiping about someone in the church. When the friend asked a question to get more juicy details, his buddy replied, *“I’ve already told you more than I know!”*

Remember this. The person who gossips to you will gossip *about* you.

2. Angry words. Some of you have experienced pain from being around someone who spews volcanic verbiage. Proverbs 29:22: “*A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression.*”

3. Lying. In Proverbs 6:17 “*a lying tongue*” is one of the six things that God hates. Proverbs 12:19 adds: “*Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment.*”

4. Flattery. Most of us secretly enjoy flattery, but Proverbs warns us to be on our guard against those who sweet-talk: “*A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet*” (29:5). A flatterer is one who pats you on the back today only to locate a soft spot where he can insert a knife tomorrow.

5. Impulsive speech. Proverbs 29:20: “*Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.*” We’ve all experienced the horror of saying something too quickly as we open mouth and insert foot.

For several months I saw a gas can outside of Pastor Ed’s office. I didn’t say anything for a long time but finally I couldn’t take it anymore. When I asked him about it, he told me he put it there as a reminder his words either throw gas on situations or his words can throw water to help put fires out.

Launching Life

Words are powerful because they can enflame or encourage. They can be used to bring death and they can also resuscitate a floundering life. We can belittle or we can bless. Proverbs 18:21: “*Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.*”

Let’s say this again: *I will use my tongue to launch life instead of delivering death.*

We’ve considered how our words can deliver death and now let’s look at how our tongues can launch life. Proverbs gives us three word pictures.

- **Refreshing water.** Proverbs 10:11: “*The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life.*” When we listen to wise words it’s like taking a long drink of fresh spring water on a hot summer day.

- **Tasty food.** Proverbs 16:24: *“Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.”* Honey was both a luxury and a medicine in ancient Israel. When we talk tenderly with others, our words become priceless and provide healing to broken hearts.
- **Expensive jewelry.** Proverbs 25:11-12: *“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reprove to a listening ear.”* Like an expert jeweler, our words should be balanced just right, beautiful in their appearance, and as valuable as gold and silver.

Taming Your Tongue

Unfortunately, we don't always use our words wisely. Have you ever been hung by your tongue?

Listen again to Proverbs 18:21: *“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.”* Let's focus now on how we can *“eat its fruits”* because in a real sense, you and I *will* eat our words. Let's make sure what we say is delicious and nutritious.

After reading through the Book of Proverbs, I made a list of the “Top Ten Tongue-Taming Tools.” We could also call it “How to Avoid Slipping with Your Speech” or “How To Stop Trespassing With Your Tongue.” Proverbs 21:23 challenges us to be careful about our conversations: *“He who guards his mouth and tongue keeps himself from calamity.”*

1. Think more. Most of my mouth mistakes are made because I simply don't engage my mind first. I'm Exhibit A for the truth of Proverbs 12:18: *“Rash words are like sword thrusts.”* When I say something that is unkind to Beth it's usually because I've not spent any time thinking about what I should say. Instead, I just let things fly out of my mouth. Proverbs 15:28, in the NASB, challenges us to think before we answer: *“The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.”* We could say it like this: *We need to ponder before we pour.*

When we engage our minds, we'll avoid messing up with our mouths. Sometimes its best to not answer at all according to 26:4: *“Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.”*

Before you answer, hit the pause button. Speak when you're angry and you'll make the best speech you'll ever regret. It might be helpful to get in the habit of taking a deep breath so that you can reflect before you respond.

2. Talk less. Our chances of blowing it with our words are directly related to the amount of time we spend with our mouth open. The Quakers follow this maxim: *"Never break the silence unless you can improve on it."* Abraham Lincoln was fond of saying, *"It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt."*

Proverbs 10:19 puts it this way: ***"When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent."*** The more we talk the more we trespass; the less we talk, the wiser we are. One of my favorite Proverbs is 17:28: ***"Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent."***

Ecclesiastes 3:7 says there's a time to be silent and a time to speak. Proverbs 13:3 links our lips to our life in a very unsettling way: ***"Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin."***

Could you stick out your tongue again? Now grab it and try to talk. Here are seven situations when it's good to hold your tongue.

- *When you're tempted to say, "I told you so."*
- *When you have information that makes someone look bad.*
- *When someone is upset about a problem and you've had a similar experience.*
- *When you're tempted to judge or criticize someone.*
- *When you want to correct someone on a minor point as they tell a story.*
- *When someone has not asked for your opinion.*
- *When you want to tell something about yourself in order to impress someone.*

If you struggle with talking too much, like I do, let me encourage you to build some "wordless moments" into your day. That leads to the next tongue-taming suggestion.

3. Listen better. Someone has said the reason we've been given two ears and one mouth is so we would listen twice as much as we talk. Proverbs 15:31: ***"The ear"***

that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise.” 19:20: ***“Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future.”*** It’s tough to hear someone tell us something we don’t want to hear, but it’s really the only way to become wise. Have you been blowing off some advice recently? As hard as it is, take the time to listen to what God is trying to tell you through the individuals who care about you.

One of my problems is I’m often not fully engaged when I’m talking with someone. Instead, I’m often formulating my answer even while the person is pouring out their heart. Proverbs 18:13: ***“If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.”***

I’m renewing one of my goals from several years ago by trying to meet someone new every day. Related to this I want to be fully present with everyone I’m talking with. Will you join me in that?

*A wise old owl lived in an oak,
The more he heard, the less he spoke.
The less he spoke, the more he heard,
Why can’t we all be like the wise old bird?*

4. Encourage others. Do you realize there are people all around you who are discouraged and defeated? God can use your words to breathe life into a person who is piled by life’s problems. Proverbs 15:4 says: ***“A gentle tongue is a tree of life.”***

How many of your words this week were words of encouragement? How many sentences were devoted to helping lift anxious hearts? If you were paid 10 cents for every kind word you said and had to give away 5 cents for every critical comment, would you be rich or poor today?

Someone has said it *“takes no size to criticize.”* I would add it takes a big person to encourage. One way you can tell if you are an encourager or a discourager is to honestly ask if people like being around you. Are you the kind of person others are glad to see coming into the room, or do they turn their face away when they see you? Let’s work at inserting an encouraging word into every conversation we have this week.

5. Speak gently. One of the best ways to evaporate anger from your conversations is to work at being calm. Proverbs 15:1: ***“A soft answer turns away***

wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” The next time you’re talking to someone who is really torqued, instead of responding in turn, give a gentle answer.

Let’s work this week at getting our points across without raising our voices. We’ll be much more effective according to Proverbs 25:15: ***“With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone.”*** Harness the power of a gentle word. As someone has said, *“Keep your words soft and sweet; you never know when you may have to eat them!”*

6. Cut others slack. Most of us are way too tough on others. We expect perfection from people while minimizing our own mistakes. We grow our grudges instead of giving grace. If you want to tame your tongue and give life to others, then practice the principle found in 12:16: ***“The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult.”*** Proverbs 19:11: ***“Good sense makes one slow to anger, it is to his glory to overlook an offense.”*** 17:9: ***“He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.”***

Some of us get bent out of shape with people who sin differently than we do. When we first got married, I made the mistake of making too many things moral issues with Beth. I’ve since come to realize (it’s taken me awhile), that most things in relationships are not a matter of right or wrong, but just differences of preference or opinion. Over 30 years ago, we went to a Family Life Conference and learned a phrase we still say today: *“Not wrong, just different.”*

7. Avoid gossip. Someone has said, *“A gossip is just a fool with a keen sense of rumor.”* Proverbs 11:13: ***“Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered.”*** I need to know my name is safe when I’m out of the room if you’re in the room, and you need to know that name is safe with me.

Remember this rule about gossip: *“The more interesting it is, the more likely it is to be false.”* One of the best ways to avoid gossip is to simply refuse to listen to it. 17:4: ***“An evildoer listens to wicked lips, and a liar gives ear to a mischievous tongue.”*** When someone is sharing something juicy with you, tell him or her that you don’t want to hear it. If they have an issue with someone, they need to go and talk to that person, not talk to you *about* that person. Another thing you can do is to reroute the conversation by sharing something positive about the person being raked over the coals. When you hear someone speaking against someone, then speak *for* that person.

8. Tell the truth. It's important to be known as a truth-teller, no matter the situation or cost involved. Proverbs 12:17: "***Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness utters deceit.***" People value those who speak truth, even when it hurts. Proverbs 16:13: "***Righteous lips are the delight of a king, and he loves him who speaks what is right.***"

Sometimes God calls us to speak truth into others. In Proverbs, this is known as a rebuke or correction. 17:10: "***A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.***" Proverbs 27:6 says, "***Faithful are the wounds of a friend.***" Don't hold back on truth telling but remember to do it gently and with the goal of encouraging the individual.

Proverbs also mentions the importance of telling the truth to those who need to know the way of salvation. Proverbs 10:21 says, "***The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense.***" That means you can use your lips to help bring spiritual nourishment to people by pointing them to a relationship with Jesus. Proverbs 11:30: "***The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise.***"

9. Stop boasting. It's not attractive to hear someone boast and brag, is it? Proverbs 25:27: "***It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glorious to seek one's own glory.***" Honey is good but it's pretty tough to sit down and chug a quart of it. The word translated "***brag***" in James 4:16 literally means, "***a wandering quack.***" When you sing your own praise, you always sing out of tune. If you feel the need to honk your own horn, then you may have a problem with boasting. Instead of seeking your own name in lights, focus on God's honor and He will take care of you. When you feel yourself starting to talk about what you've done, look for ways to quickly give credit to others.

10. Don't quarrel. Proverbs 17:14: "***The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so quit before the quarrel breaks out.***" We would have a lot more peace in families and in the church if we would just refuse to quarrel with others. Instead of engaging in disagreements that can turn into a tidal wave of conflict, let's work at dropping the matter before disputes break out. I'm convinced that much of what we fight about is not really all that important anyway. God values community more than conflict. Don't be the one to start or continue a quarrel. 20:3: "***It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling.***"

Action Steps

Let's conclude with some action steps.

1. Make things right with others. If you've trespassed with your tongue, it's time to make it right. Do you need to repent and go to someone today and ask for forgiveness for something you've said? Or, do you need to grant forgiveness to someone for something that was said to you? Take care of this today and then keep short accounts with people on a daily basis. When you mess up with your mouth, repent and make things right. When you've been lacerated by a cutting comment, restore the person by granting them forgiveness.

2. Yield your tongue to God. Listen to Romans 6:13: ***“Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.”*** This is a good prayer to pray, *“Lord, my tongue now belongs to You. Here are my lips, let me speak for You. Here is my mouth, let my mouth speak the words that You want.”* You could close with Psalm 141:3: ***“Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.”***

3. Be part of the solution. When we intentionally engage by trying to help, it's much harder to be negative about something. Beginning February 2-3 our worship services will be held in the gym. We're working hard to make sure we have plenty of seats. We'll be fine on Saturday nights and Sundays at 8 but will be tight at the 10:45 service. If you normally attend the 10:45 service, would you consider attending one of our other services during the renovation?

4. Express your surrender through baptism. We've scheduled time for baptisms in the services January 26-27 so I encourage you to consider taking the plunge that weekend. We're planning to utilize a portable baptistery in the gym in March and will have baptisms in a swimming pool this summer, but I encourage you to get baptized now if you've been considering it.

5. Feast on the Word of God. The last part of Proverbs 18:21 says we will ***“eat the fruit of our words.”*** One of the best ways to change your heart and to make sure your speech is nutritious is to digest the Word of God on a daily basis. When God wanted to use the words of the prophet Ezekiel, he was given specific instructions in Ezekiel 3:2-3: ***“So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. And he said to me, ‘Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give***

you and fill your stomach with it.’ Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.” Psalm 119:11: “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.” When God’s Words are in our heart, we’ll be more likely to speak wise words to others.

6. Ask for a new heart. If we want to stop using death words, and begin speaking words of life, we not only need to make things right with others and yield our tongue to God, we may in fact, need a different heart. The good news is that Jesus specializes in heart transplants.

Only God can give us the power we need to build others up instead of tearing them down. If you want to be a dispenser of life words instead of death words, you need to be rightly related to God. That’s something we do through our words. Romans 10:9-10: *“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. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”*

I have a vivid memory of the many times my mom would make me stick my tongue out if she thought I was lying. She claimed she could tell by looking at where my tongue was attached in the back of my mouth. When I got older I realized she was just making it up but now I realize there’s great truth to that because our tongues are actually connected to our hearts.

Jesus gives us some insight in Matthew 12:34 and 15:19: *“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks...for out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.”* Our words are but the public pronouncement of the private place of the heart. What comes out of our mouths reveals what is in our hearts. Another way to say it is that our words reflect our true character.

[Hold up a water balloon] Are you launching life or delivering death? Let’s say this one more time: *I will use my tongue to launch life instead of delivering death.*

Closing Prayer

Closing Song: “Give us clean hands”