

Proverbs: What We Say

Proverbs 12:14-25

I read this week that Winston Churchill's false teeth were put up for auction and fetched a staggering 14,000GBP. The man who put the false teeth up for sale was the grandson of the dental technician who made the teeth for Churchill. Apparently when Mr. Churchill got angry he would spit his teeth out and throw them across the room. His dentist said he could tell how badly the war was going by how far the teeth flew!

But what intrigued me about the story was that Churchill had his teeth made in such a way as to preserve his famous lisp. He knew that by the way he talked, by his lisp, everyone knew when he made a speech on the radio that it was Churchill talking. It was his trade-mark and he wanted to keep it. And it's been argued that it was Churchill's speeches that kept the British going in the dark days of the war when the nation stood alone against Nazi Germany. Someone has said that Churchill mobilized all the forces of the English language and sent them into battle against Hitler. He realized the power of the spoken word.

You could argue that WW2 was a war of words, on the one side Hitler whipping up a nation to the most appalling deeds through his rhetoric, and on the other Churchill steeling the nerve of a people against seemingly impossible odds. All by the power of the spoken word.

Words have that kind of power. And it's not reserved for political leaders. Have you ever seen someone wilt under a harsh word, or almost visibly grow when you say something encouraging to them? If you have then you realize the power words can have. And so it's not surprising that the Book of Proverbs, whose aim is to help you and I live with wisdom, to live life with skill, has lots to say about the stuff we say.

And this morning I've got four points: 1. Words of grace (or not) and what Proverbs says lies within the power of the tongue; 2. Words of Influence, how what you say (or don't say) has the ability to profoundly influence others for good or bad; 3. Words under control and what Proverbs says about sometimes it being better to shut up than speak up; and 4. Words of Life – where can we go to find words that will impart life to us.

Words of grace (or not)

When I was at primary school there was a saying: sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. Typically you would chant it after someone had told you that you smelt or they didn't want to be your friend anymore, or they didn't want you on their football team because you were lousy at football, which if you were as bad as me at football was nearly everyday. But you will never find that proverb in the book of Proverbs. In fact whoever came up with that, neat though it is, had clearly never read Proverbs. Because Proverbs tells us, and you know this is true from your own life that words, what people say to you, and what you say to others can cause great hurt.

Listen to Proverbs 12:18 'There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts.' And don't you know that to be the case! Because you've been on the receiving end of that sword, and it stings! Someone can say something to you and it pierces your armour, it slices right through and you know you've taken a hit. Or maybe

you know you're the person wielding the sword: you say things, rashly, without thinking, and sometimes you love the results and other times you see the damage your sword thrusts make.

Or what about Proverbs 16:27 'A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire.' Back in 2005, we were camping in Valais and the hillside on the opposite side of the valley where we were staying had been devastated by fire. All that was left were burnt out charred tree-stumps. And tragically some people's speech, maybe you know someone like this, can have similar effects on their relationships. Their speech can be like a scorching fire, and people have a hard time coming close, because they don't want to get burned, so they keep their distance. And around them, like the charred tree-stumps on that hillside, are broken relationships and hurting friendships.

But in the grace of God there is another side to all this, and that is that our tongues, what we say, rather than being sword thrusts or scorching fire, can be the means of God's grace spoken into others lives. Listen to Proverbs 12:18 again and this time we'll add in the second half of the proverb: 'There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing'. Or Proverbs 10:11 'The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life.' Or Proverbs 10:21 'The lips of the righteous feed many.' Or Proverbs 12:25 (and how true this is) 'Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad.'

Yes, words have the power to cut and burn, to hurt in a way sticks and stones could never do, but what you say to someone can also have the ability to heal, to bind up, to give life, to nourish, to make glad. Don't you want to be someone like that? Someone whose words have that sort of impact on others' lives?

In the village where I grew up there was a man who kept bees, and just once or twice my mother took us down to his cottage to buy some honey with the honeycomb. It was delicious. And Proverbs 16:24 says 'Gracious words -words filled with grace, are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.' Your words, my words, have the power to be that in other people's lives. God's grace to us in Jesus Christ is all about how He treats us so much better than we deserve to be treated, because of what Jesus has done for us in and through the cross, and you and I get the opportunity to spread some of that grace around, to share it, 'God has been good to me so I am going to do good to others', and one of the ways, if not *the* chief way, we can do that is by what we say to others. Words filled with grace.

Proverbs 18:21 says 'Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.' The tongue has the ability to impart death: sword thrusts and scorching fire. But it also has the ability to impart life. Which is it with you? Are you predominantly one or the other, or are you a mixture, some good stuff, some bad coming out of your mouth. Send up a quickie prayer to heaven, 'God, I want to be someone who imparts life by what I say, I want to be a messenger of your grace through my words'. And the amazing thing is that what goes around comes around, and the person who loves it, Proverbs says, will eat its fruit. If you deal out death with your tongue, that's what will come back your

way, but if you deal out life and grace and encouragement and blessing, strangely enough, you'll start eating its fruit.

And Proverbs picks out for special attention a number of ways in which what you say can positively or negatively influence someone else.

Words of Influence

And one area, which Proverbs highlights, where you and I have the ability to influence for bad, is the area that Proverbs calls 'discord'. And discord is like an orchestra playing out of tune. These various instruments, if they all come together make a beautiful sound, but if they all play their own thing and go their own way, try and drown each other out, it's just noise. And discord is just that in fractured relationships and broken trust. It's about people who by working together could produce something great, but who when they work against each other produce something worse than bad.

And Proverbs points this area of discord out as if to say, look, if you want to live with wisdom, and negotiate your way through the maze of life with skill, if you want to build your life on the foundation of the fear of the Lord, loving God so much that you don't want to sin against Him, then you need to get this area of discord and what you do or don't say about others sorted in your head and heart.

Proverbs 6:14 says there is a type of person, and it calls him worthless and wicked, who is 'continually sowing discord.' Proverbs 16:28 says 'a dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.' Now, you know how this works. Something doesn't go the way you want it to go, could be at home, or among your circle of friends, or at work, or even here within the church family. And when that happens you're faced with a choice, do you go on talking about it, behind others' backs, trying to garner support, trying to win hearts, trying to turn this friend against this one, or this work colleague against that one so that you can finally get your way. Or do you stay quiet and do your best to be loyal? What you do or don't do, particularly what you do or don't say may profoundly influence how others respond. You see Proverbs 18:8 says 'The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.' Like it or not, people like gossip, people like a bit of back-biting and if you engage in that you will influence people and influence them for bad.

But that kind of influence comes at a price. In Proverbs 6:16-19 Solomon sets out six things that the Lord hates, 7 that are an abomination to him. Guess what the last one is? It is 'one who sows discord among brothers.' Friends, God hates that. God hates it when people say stuff that turns people against each other, when people undermine someone else, or cause factions and divisions. It's an abomination to Him.

Now, none of us want to be engaged in the kind of conversation that God hates. And that's why Proverbs 26:20 says 'For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.' By deciding that you are going to honour God, by what you do or don't say in the work place, in the home, in the church, with your friends, and not get involved in factionalism, you will still be an

influence on others but it will be for good, even if it goes unseen. Though God sees it all.

But it's not just by staying quiet that you can influence for good. Proverbs says you can positively impact the lives of those around you by both the content and the character of what you say. Listen to Proverbs 16:21 'The wise of heart is called discerning, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness.' And Proverbs 25:15 'With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue may break a bone.'

So far from sword thrusts and scorching fire being the way to influence people Proverbs says look, if you want to live with wisdom and skill, and you want to speak in such a way as to influence others, then you've got to realize that how you say something – sweetness of speech, a soft tongue, is just as important as what you say, in getting your message across. Use the scorching fire technique, with your parents, your husband or wife, or your colleagues, and you'll just get burned in the process; use the soft tongue method, words filled with grace, and you might just persuade them.

But its not just the way you say it, as if all that matters is the spin and sugar-coating you put on the message. Proverbs says you and I have a responsibility before God to influence others for good by the content, not just the character, but the content, of what we say. Proverbs 15:7 'the lips of the wise spread knowledge.' It's like a farmer with his bag of seed, who goes out into the field spreading the seed. So the man or woman who wants to live life with wisdom, recognizes their responsibility to others to spread knowledge through what they say. You're not spreading tittle-tattle, or gossip, or discord, but as we live out our lives in relationship with Jesus Christ and allow Him to work on our characters, as we build our lives on the fear of the Lord, growing in wisdom and our knowledge of Him, we have something to share, we've got something to spread. As one commentator has said (Kitchen) 'the wise leave behind them a trail of wisdom.' And you do that in your families and with your friends; you do that with your friends and colleagues who don't yet know Jesus, as in humility you point them to truth; and you can do it in the church, principally by getting stuck into a home group and sharing what God has given you.

But as well as encouraging us to speak words of grace and words of influence, Proverbs also recognizes that learning how to control what we say is a battlefield for many of us.

Words under control

When I was about 18, and a new Christian I was convicted by Proverbs 10:19 – 'where words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.' In other words, Slack, the more you open your mouth, the more likely you are to sin. And I'm still working that through. And Proverbs talks about the babbling fool who comes to ruin, whose words make a rod for his back, whose lips walk into a fight, and whose mouth invites a beating. And if you're one of those people who opens their mouth to change feet, who has ever said something and the moment it left your mouth you wished you could take it back, you'll know what Proverbs is talking about.

And so Proverbs tells us that if we want to negotiate life with skill, we are going to need to learn some self-control in when we speak. And Proverbs highlights a few areas: There is the area of debate and discussion. Proverbs 18:2 'A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only expressing his opinion.' How many of you have attended a conference and seen that scenario played out on the conference floor? Some people just want to express their own opinion and they don't listen to anyone else. But young people, that could be you relating to your parents, or those of us who are married relating to our spouses.

If you are ever called on to stand with a friend who's going through a tough time, you'll have to learn that sometimes silence is better than talk. Proverbs 25:20 says 'whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day and like vinegar on soda.' When I was a junior doctor working in casualty a young couple came in, the wife of whom had walked into a car door, and she had this very black and very sore eye. I told them that I would take an x-ray which would tell us if she had broken anything and I added it would also tell us if there was anything inside her head or whether it was empty space. Which her husband and I thought that was very funny, but one glance from the patient silenced us both. When people are hurting and grieving, Proverbs says sometimes it's unwise to try and cheer them up, sometimes it's better simply to sit with them than talk at them.

The same goes for knowing when to joke: Proverbs 26:18-19 says 'Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows and death, is the man who deceives his neighbour and says 'I am only joking!' One of my school reports from Primary school said 'Martin has a good sense of humour but needs to learn when to draw the line'. And I still haven't found that line. And listen to Proverbs 27:14 'whoever blesses his neighbour with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing.'

Now, I don't think that's just about how you greet someone in the morning. That and the one on singing songs to a heavy heart, or joking at the wrong time, are all about being aware of the other person, and where they are at; and you and I, if we want to be wise, need to learn how to temper our moods, and target what we say. It's why Proverbs 15:28 says 'the heart of the righteous ponders how to answer'. They don't just blunder in, two feet first, telling inappropriate jokes, trying to force someone to be happy, they ponder it, they think about it, they ask God for the right words to say, and at times they are prepared to say nothing.

And nowhere does Proverbs spell that out as being more important than in the area of arguments when things start to hot up. Because if sin has this tendency to multiply as words multiply how much more is that the case when anger starts driving the words. Listen to Proverbs 29:22 'A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression.'

So Proverbs speaks highly of the man or woman who has control of themselves, who knows when to speak and when not to. Proverbs 15:18 says that 'he who is slow to anger quiets contention.' Proverbs 15:1 says 'A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger'. Proverbs 16:32 says that 'whoever is

slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.' And Proverbs 29:11 says 'A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise person quietly holds it back.'

So let me ask you, how are you doing in this area? When a discussion gets going, how quickly does your anger start rising up? How in control of that are you? Or does sin multiply as your words multiply?

You know, it would be easy to listen to a subject like this and go away thinking, 'Ok, I need to get more control of my tongue, I need to speak more words filled with grace, I need to stop getting so angry.' And it wouldn't be long before you got pretty despondent. You see, if like me you know you aren't perfect when it comes to what comes out of your mouth, it is all too easy to see your mouth as the problem and try and control it yourself. Your mouth isn't the problem. Jesus said it is from the overflow of the heart that the mouth speaks. The mouth, like it or not, is simply the overflow of what's going on in the heart. So it's not so much a mouth-wash that you and I need as a heart wash.

And we can't do that on our own, which brings me to our last point.

Words of Life

The case Proverbs makes is that words have tremendous power in our lives. They have the power to convey God's grace to us and profoundly influence us for good.

So where can you and I go to find words that can bring about lasting change in our hearts so that what comes out of our mouths, as the overflow of our hearts, is blessing to others?

In John's gospel, John records a time when people started to desert Jesus. They didn't like some of what they were hearing so they began to turn their backs on Jesus. And seeing them go, Jesus asked his twelve disciples 'Do you want to go as well?' here's your opportunity if you do. But Peter replied to Jesus (John 6:68) 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.'

Church, it's only in Jesus, there is no one else to turn to, where we will find the words to bring about lasting transformation in our lives. Jesus said my words are Spirit and they are Life. The first step in having your heart washed is becoming a Christian, and having the Holy Spirit come and fill you, as you put your trust in Jesus, that He has paid the price fully at the cross for all the sin we've committed, all the words we shouldn't have said but have said, and all the words we should have said but haven't. And then it's by continuing to walk with Him, allowing the Holy Spirit to slowly but surely transform our lives to be more like Jesus. Politicians can make excellent speeches; preachers can encourage us or kick us up the pants occasionally, but it's Christ who has the words that will change, challenge and transform our hearts as we put our faith in him, taking him at his word.