

WORDS AND THE PROVERBS (Part 1): THE KILLER TONGUE

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The issue that has dominated the national news in this past week is the protests on college campuses around the country concerning Israel and Palestine and Hamas. Words have been central to these protests: Free Gaza. Free Palestine. From the river to the sea Palestine will be free. Words represent ideas. For Jewish students on these college campuses the ideas are threatening. These ideas suggest that some people don't want the Jews around.

Words are important to us Americans. Most of us learned important words and the ideas they represent in our earlier education. We learned something about the Declaration of Independence: **“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”** We learned about the Bill of Rights, including the First Amendment: **“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”**

Down through history we Americans have been exposed to other inspiring words. The Gettysburg Address: **“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”** There was Martin Luther King's “I Have a Dream” speech: **“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”**

Words are important to us Christians. We are people who believe that God has given us His words: **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” “For God so loved the world that He gave his unique son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”**

The Book of Proverbs recognizes the awesome power of words. While there are about 55 verses in the book that deal with money, which subject we considered the last couple of weeks, there are about 155 verses that deal with speech. That amounts to about one sixth of the Book of Proverbs.

So today and next time we are going to consider what the wise man or woman needs to know about words. Today we shall look at the power of words and words to avoid. Next week we will look at good words to use and how and when to use them.

I.

(PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE POWER OF WORDS) So let's look at what Proverbs has to tell us about THE POWER OF WORDS. Proverbs #18 v. 21 says this (PROVERBS 18:21): **“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.”** The words which pass by our lips can be used for great good or for terrible evil. They can destroy, and they can give life. If we use words for bad purposes, in the end we will suffer for it. If we use good words for a good purpose, we will have good fruit in the end.

(MATTHEW 12:36-36-37) Jesus declared in Matthew #12 vv. 36 & 37, **“...on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”** Such is the significance of our words.

A.

(I. THE POWER OF WORDS A. TO DESTROY) Consider then the potential of words TO DESTROY. In Proverbs #11 v. 9 we read this (PROVERBS 11:9): **“With his mouth the godless man would destroy his neighbor,/ but by knowledge the righteous are delivered.”** Such are the words that we hear tossed around in the last week on college campuses--- destructive words.

Proverbs #11 v. 11 (PROVERBS 11:11) says, **“By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted,/ but by the mouth of the wicked it is overthrown.”** Perhaps the city is overthrown as the result of bad advice. Perhaps it is overthrown as the result of sowing division.

Proverbs 12 v. 13 (PROVERBS 12:13) tells us, **“An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips...”** The evil man may tell lies which get him into trouble. He may spread gossip. He may express blasphemy. But generally his bad words come back to haunt him.

Proverbs #16 v. 28 (PROVERBS 16:28) adds, **“...a whisperer separates close friends.”** Some translations have “slanderer” instead of “whisperer.” Some have “gossip.” Bad words can disrupt relationships.

We will look a little more closely at #12 v. 6 (PROVERBS 12:6): **“The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood,/ but the mouth of the upright delivers them.”** The words of the evil person have the potential to ambush, to kill, to destroy. As children we learned, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” That is not really true. Words can hurt us. They can be far more devastating than physical blows.

This is especially true with children. That is why whom we allow to speak words to our children is so important and why what we say to them is so important.

Years ago I was leading a weekly Bible study in a jail in Massachusetts. One of the guys got a furlough for Christmas day. Back in those days they let some prisoners out for such things. I was single at the time. So I volunteered to take him with me for the day. This fellow was in his early twenties. I brought him to a Christmas dinner. Later in the day we paid a brief visit to his mother and younger brothers and sisters. I was shocked by the mouth that his mother had. She yelled and criticized and swore at everybody in the house except me, since she found out that I was a preacher of sorts. But I quickly discovered one of the reasons that this fellow was in trouble with the law. He had mother that used nothing but negative and critical words with her son.

On a national level words from evil people have even a greater potential for destruction. I have always had a certain fascination with the events involving WW II. I have watched a number of clips of Adolf Hitler speaking to crowds in Germany prior to the war. I don't speak German, but it is not necessary to see the ability which he had to stir up a crowd.

Soon after WW I Hitler got involved in politics. During one political meeting he stood up to speak and to object to a man who had just spoken favorably about the Jews. Later in *Mein Kampf* he wrote about this incident: **“For all at once I was offered an opportunity of speaking before a larger audience; and the thing that I had always presumed from pure feeling without knowing it was now corroborated: I could speak.”**

It was largely because of Hitler's ability to speak--- to use words effectively--- that he was able to have so much influence in his world. But because his words were used to destroy, six million Jews were murdered and millions more died in the great conflict he instigated.

B.

(I. THE POWER OF WORDS A. B. TO BUILD UP) Words also have tremendous power to do good, TO BUILD UP. Look at Proverbs #12 v. 18 (PROVERBS 12:18): **“There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts,/ but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”** An Old Testament scholar by the name of Tremper Longman translates the verse like this (PROVERBS 12:18 LONGMAN): **“There are those who chatter on like a stabbing sword,/ but the wise tongue heals.”** The contrast presented in this verse suggests that a few good words are often more effective and healing than many words.

Proverbs #16 v. 24 (PROVERBS 16:24) says, **“Gracious words are like a honeycomb--- literally, an overflowing mass of honey---,/ sweetness to the soul and health to the body.”** The Old Testament tells us that David's friend Jonathan was in a battle with the Philistines. At one point when he was becoming tired, he came across some honey. He ate it and regained his strength. He was encouraged and strengthened.

Pleasant words can be like that. A word of encouragement can accomplish much. “I am sorry” can heal significant wounds. One of Hitler's opponents in England also knew how

to use words effectively. At the lowest point of the war when the Allies had been chased out of Europe, Winston Churchill used words to give hope to his people.

In one of his most famous radio addresses he declared, **“We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.”** His words were powerful and inspiring and effective to build up his people. The best words, perhaps, are Bible words--- words like love, truth, grace, hope.

C.

(I. A. B. C. TO REFLECT OUR INNER CHARACTER) We also need to consider the power of words TO REFLECT OUR INNER CHARACTER. Ultimately the words that we use reveal the kind of person whom we are. Chapter 15 v. 28 (PROVERBS 15:28) says, **“The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer,/ but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.”** Whether words are used for good or evil depends upon the heart that we have. The heart in this verse and others is a symbol for our inner character. Words reveal what that character is. The wise person thinks before he or she speaks. The contrast with the wicked individual is that this person tends to be impulsive. He or she speaks without thinking.

Christian educator Bruce Lockerbie writes, **“What a person says matters because what he says is a direct reflection of who he is--- or who he may pretend to be! Jesus Himself put it plainly: ‘For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.’ From the deepest recesses of one’s being comes the dead giveaway: the words he says. That is why language is so important for Christians who wish to think and act like Christ.”** Words are a reflection of our inner character. But it is also true that the words which we tend to use affect that inner character. Will our words tend to be characterized by anger and bitterness or by graciousness and love?

II.A.

(II. WORDS TO AVOID) Realizing that words can be destructive and that we can be tempted to use such words, let’s think about WORDS TO AVOID. First on the list is DISHONEST WORDS. (II. WORDS TO AVOID A. DISHONEST WORDS)

A number of proverbs touch on this. Consider Proverbs #12 v. 22 (PROVERBS 12:22): **“Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord,/ but those who act faithfully are his delight.”** “Lying lips” are an abomination to the Lord.” That sounds pretty harsh, doesn’t it? Jesus provided part of the reason for this judgment on harsh words in the New Testament. In John #8 v. 44 (JOHN 8:44) He is recorded as saying, **“...there is no truth in him [the devil]. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for his is a liar and the father of lies.”** Such is the contrast we have between good and evil.

This judgment on evil sounds so harsh to us partly because we live in a culture where lying is often trivialized. A USC psychologist by the name of Jerald Jellison says,

“...research shows that people are honest when it pays them to be so and dishonest when there are comparable rewards.”

That ought not to be so among us who are Christians. Lying is prohibited in the Sixth Commandment. The Apostle Paul tells Christians to lay aside falsehood and to speak truth to one another. I came across this helpful definition of lying some time ago. (KANTZER DEFINITION) Seminary professor Kenneth Kantzer says, **“A lie is a statement or sign intended to lead another to believe what we ourselves do not really believe, except when it is mutually understood that our words are not to be trusted.”** (*Christianity Today*, 10/6/1989)

So Professor Kantzer says that jokes and some games and some situations in sports do not really involve lying. Untruths may be communicated, but they are expected. He also argues that some situations in wartime where untruths are told also do not count as lies, at least not as sins against God.

A number of proverbs in this book deal specifically with honesty in legal proceedings. For example, #14 v. 25 (PROVERBS 14:25) says this: **“A truthful witness saves lives/ but one who breathes out lies is deceitful.”** Dr. Bruce Waltke was once my Old Testament professor. He comments, **“A perjurer has the disposition to deceive in order to advantage himself at the expense of the innocent.”**

Notice also #19 v. 9 (PROVERBS 19:9): **“A false witness will not go unpunished,/ and he who breathes out lies will perish.”** Ultimately God will do the punishing, but hopefully the king and his agents will also enforce honesty in the legal system.

There are a number of other proverbs that have similar warnings. The reason for this emphasis may have to do with the original purpose of the book. King Solomon compiled these sayings largely for the purpose of training young men for government service. He knew that many of these guys would have involvement in legal proceedings. He wanted his students to be convinced that honest words are what wise men should speak. They ought to be our concern as well.

In a book entitled *Floods on Dry Ground* a former missionary to the Congo in Africa tells about how the first missionaries acquired respect from tribal leaders. These leaders came up with a term roughly translated as “real Christian.” One day a Christian convert was arrested and charged with harboring an escaped prisoner. The tribal chief who was presiding as judge knew that this man was a convert from the work of these missionaries. So when he was brought to trial, the judge asked him, **“Did you hide this escaped prisoner?”** The defendant replied, **“No, sir. I did not.”** The judge then turned to his accusers and said, **“You, therefore, are liars, because this man is a ‘real Christian,’ and he cannot tell a lie.”** Isn’t that the kind of reputation that we Christians ought to seek in the use of our words?

B.

(II. WORDS TO AVOID A. B. SLANDER AND GOSSIP) The Book of Proverbs also contains a number of warnings about SLANDER AND GOSSIP. We are going to begin with #18 v. 8 (PROVERBS 18:8): **“The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels;/ they go down into the inner parts of the body.”** The NIV translation uses the term “gossip” instead of “whisperer.” The original word appears only a few times in the Old Testament. It is used in Deuteronomy to refer to Israel’s grumbling against God in the wilderness. It says that the people murmured against God in their tents, rather than in a situation of open confrontation. So the author here seems to be describing negative words or complaints that are uttered behind the scenes.

The expression “delicious morsels” comes from a word that means “to gobble eagerly.” It paints an accurate picture of the delight that we may get from obtaining inside information, especially negative information, about people. On a certain level we like controversy.

Shohei Ohtani (SHOHEI OHTANI) is perhaps the best baseball player in the world. He is both a great pitcher and a great hitter. He signed a \$700 million contract to play with the Dodgers this year. A few months ago rumors came out that his translator was involved in spending millions of dollars on sports betting. Gossipers were initially wondering if this translator was doing this betting in behalf of Shohei Ohtani. If this was the case, it would mean the potential end of his baseball career. I suspect that there were some players and fans of other teams in the same division as the Dodgers who were hoping that these delicious morsels might be true. For this would take the Dodgers down a couple of notches. It appears in the end that Shohei Ohtani was not involved in this betting. His translator has been arrested and fired.

Look at #26 v. 20 (PROVERBS 26:20): **“For lack of wood the fire goes out,/ and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.”** Gossip is to contention and disunity and division what wood is to fire. It is fuel for dissension. In a church it can have dangerous effects. The negative talk may involve important doctrinal beliefs, or it may involve seemingly trivial matters. The effect can be the same.

The remedy is to stop spreading gossip. Sometimes confrontation is necessary. In Matthew #18 vv. 15 & 16 (MATTHEW 18 :15) Jesus instructed His followers, **“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (MATTHEW 18:16) But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”**

When I was a youth pastor, there was a mother who blamed me for her son’s lack of interest in the church. I had tried to reach out to him, but he just was not spiritually interested. One day two different women told me that the unhappy mother had said a couple of uncomplimentary things about me. One of them that I remember was that I wasn’t spending any time with the young people because I was too busy working on my Master’s degree, which was silly because I already had my degree and wasn’t taking any classes at all.

So I got together with this woman and her husband, and we had a heart to heart talk about the situation. They still weren't real happy with me, but the negative talk did stop.

Look also at Proverbs #20 v. 19 (PROVERBS 20:19): **“Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets;/ therefore do not associate with a simple babbling.”** Some translations call the babbling a gossip. Some call him a talebearer. The Hebrew word originally meant “to go about from one to another, as in trade.” Here the term has a negative connotation. The telling of stories of a negative nature may be done maliciously and with evil intent, or it may simply be done because of a lack of discretion. But the implication is that such tale bearing is not good.

So the first warning in this verse is: Do not break confidences. Don't tell secrets, especially those that might have negative implications for the teller. The temptation and weakness that we face is to tell a secret we have learned to a friend whom we can trust. That friend in turn tells it to his friend whom he trusts. Pretty soon everyone knows the secret.

The second warning in this proverb is that we should not associate with a gossip, with a person whose life is characterized by slandering and telling tales. By hanging out with this kind of person we may become an accomplice in his or her wrong speech. We may unwittingly become an encouragement to that person in it.

When we get into a position of leadership at church or school or work or in a community group, we often acquire information about people. Some of it is good. Some of it is neutral. Some of it may be negative. It can be challenging to handle this information well. Some of the questions that we may need to ask ourselves are these: Especially if information about someone is negative, is there a legitimate need for this other person to know about it? Maybe yes, maybe no. We may need wisdom in figuring that out.

We can also ask ourselves, “Would sharing this information violate a confidence?” That needs to be taken into consideration. We might also ask ourselves, “Would the person in question be upset with me if I shared this information?” Maybe they would. Maybe they would not. As we get to know people in any kind of group, we discover that some are more private and prefer not to have people know so much about them. Others are more open and don't really care if things are shared about them.

C.

(II. WORDS TO AVOID A. B. C. FLATTERY) A third kind of speech which Proverbs warns us about is FLATTERY. Consider this next verse, Proverbs #29 v. 5 (PROVERBS 29:5): **“A man who flatters his neighbor/ spreads a net for his feet.”** Nets were used to capture small animals, especially birds. The author is saying that the one who flatters is liable to get himself in trouble.

My brother was looking for a job one time many years ago. He attended training classes for a particular company. Although it was a large class the main instructor called Rob

the evening after the first class and was extremely complimentary about Rob's involvement in the class. He said all kinds of nice things. Shortly afterwards my brother found out that the man had said the same thing to others in the class, perhaps to all of the others. The teacher was trapped by his own flattery. He was shown to be something of a fake.

Flattery is different from praise in that flattery is given out of selfish motives. It uses pleasant words. But those words are designed to manipulate and control.

Proverbs #28 v. 23 (PROVERBS 28:23) says, **"Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor/ than he who flatters with his tongue."** Flattery is the use of dishonest words. They sound nice, but they are not necessarily true. A rebuke hurts. It makes us feel bad. But afterward, in the end, it is better for our own well being, if it indeed involves a legitimate issue. When a surgeon tries to remove a tumor or take out an appendix, he hurts the patient. The patient bleeds. It is not an enjoyable experience. But the doctor is doing what is best for the overall well-being of the patient.

D.

(II. WORDS TO AVOID A. B. C. D. HARSH WORDS) The last category of words to avoid that can be found in Proverbs is HARSH WORDS. Chapter 15 v. 1 (PROVERBS 15:1) says, **"A soft answer turns away wrath,/ but a harsh word stirs up anger."** There may be situations where harsh words are necessary. Jesus used harsh words in casting the money changers out of the temple. But we must realize that harsh words generally will stir up anger. Palestinian protesters seem to be oblivious to that simple bit of wisdom.

With that woman whom I mentioned earlier who was saying critical and untrue things about me when I was a youth pastor, I followed the procedures outline in Matthew #18 in talking to her and her husband in private. But I was pretty upset with what they had been saying, and that came through to them. The bad talk stopped. But my relationship was not so good with them. In retrospect I learned a lesson. In that kind of situation it is best to affirm people and think of positive things to say about them before you bring up something that needs to be changed or addressed. The goal is not just to speak truth, but to correct behavior and restore relationships. It usually helps if we can avoid harsh words.

The significance of words to us Christians is perhaps communicated to us in no more a significant place than in the Gospel of John in the New Testament in Chapter 1. In verse 1 (JOHN 1:1) the Apostle John writes, **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."** The Greek word is *logos*, with which some of you have some familiarity. Its basic meaning is "word," but it had a broader range of meaning which meant something more to Greek philosophers of the first century.

In a recent book philosopher Christopher Watkin explains, **"...it appears that the logos is a principle of transformation that orders the cosmos."** (*Biblical Critical Theory*, p.

364) Some of the Greeks regarded it as the creative force behind the universe. Christopher Watkin adds, “...in every case but John’s, the logos is impersonal.” It was somewhat akin to the Force in the Star Wars movies.

But in John #1 v. 14 the apostle makes this declaration which would have been startling to a secular first century Greek audience (JOHN 1:14): “**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.**” This primordial, creative force has become personal. He has become one of us. God has communicated to us in the best possible way. He has become a human being like one of us.

This is the heart of the gospel. God has communicated with us. The Word has become flesh. Jesus Christ was the Son of God. He became a human being that He might reveal God to us. More than that He dealt with the greatest problem that we humans have: sin. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. If and when we decide to put our trust in this Jesus, we are promised forgiveness of sins and eternal life.