

## WORDS AND THE PROVERBS (Part 2): THE TASTEFUL TONGUE

### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Don had all the ingredients necessary for becoming a loser in life. For starters he was an American Indian from a reservation in North Dakota where alcoholism was rampant and few ever succeeded in rising economically above the poverty level. On top of that Don had physical deformities. His upper lip was mostly gone, and he had a hole in the roof of his mouth. At age six or seven he still could not talk. His family had written him off as retarded. His alcoholic father physically abused him. He was bullied by other kids. Don appeared destined to become one of the unnoticed casualties of a struggling native American culture.

When I heard him speak years ago at a banquet at a Christian school, Don Bartlette (PROJECTOR ON--- DON BARTLETTE) still had a noticeable speech impediment. But he also had a resume which included a Ph.D. in education, several national television appearances, numerous awards, membership on the boards of various educational institutions, and teaching experience at the university level. He and his wife were parents to eight of their own kids and foster parents to a number of special needs children. By almost anyone's standards he was a success.

What made the difference in his life? By his own testimony it was the gracious words of a white lady who took an interest in Don and determined to help him succeed. She taught him how to talk. She spoke to him words of comfort. She spoke to him words of hope. She spoke to him words of encouragement. By her positive speech she helped Don to make it in life.. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Good words rightly used have the power to transform lives. The Book of Proverbs was compiled by King Solomon for the principle purpose of teaching young men preparing for government service about wisdom, which I have defined as "skill in daily, godly living."

Solomon realized that the use of right words at the right time would be crucial to these future leaders. It is also a skill that is vital to us in our roles as parents and teachers and managers and friends and Christians. Two weeks ago we looked in the Proverbs at words that the wise man or woman ought to avoid. Today we shall look at words that we ought to use, and when and how we ought to use them.

### I. A

(PROJECTOR ON--- I. GOOD WORDS TO USE) First, we are going to look at GOOD WORDS TO USE. One category of positive words described in this book are what I call GENTLE WORDS. (I. GOOD WORDS A. GENTLE WORDS) We are going to look at two verses which illustrate that. The first is #15 v. 1. (PROVERBS 15:1) That verse

says, **“A soft answer--- some translations have ‘gentle answer’--- turns away wrath,/ But a harsh word stirs up anger.”**

Last time we focused on the second line of this proverb in regard to harsh words. Now we want to focus on the first line. The original word for “soft” or “gentle” could also be translated as “tender” or “delicate.” It is the opposite of “harsh.” It has the opposite effect of harshness. A gentle word tends to calm anger. It soothes. Our natural, human reaction to words that provoke and attack is anger expressed in harsh words. But the wise man will exercise control of his words. He or she will learn how to diffuse explosive situations.

Our last church was located on a busy highway, but it was also in an upper middle class neighborhood. We put up a large sign (CHURCH SIGN) that had a movable message board. The initial reaction of the neighbors was negative. They complained that it was too big and too bright and inappropriate for the neighborhood.

The initial reactions that went through my mind were things like this: “Life must be tough when the only thing that you have to get worked up about is church signs.” “We’ve got all the legal permission that we need. So bug off.” “Tell you what, friend, I won’t tell you how to decorate your lawn if you don’t tell us how to decorate ours.”

Fortunately none of us in the church responded with such harsh words. We tried to be gracious and sympathetic. We said things like, “Short of taking the sign down, what do you think that we could do to help beautify it?” Because the messages that we put on the sign tended to be positive and thought provoking, the attitude of the neighborhood soon changed. The comments began to be positive. The sign is still there.

Consider also #25 v. 15 (PROVERBS 25:15): **“With patience a ruler can be persuaded,/ And a soft tongue will break a bone.”** People in leadership hear complaints and sometimes face anger from their constituents. In order to survive they have to develop a certain toughness. Often what is most effective in persuading constituents in regard to a particular course of action is a gentle word. Gentleness and patient perseverance can overcome stubbornness.

B.

(I. B. PLEASANT WORDS) Closely related to gentle words is another category that I would call PLEASANT WORDS. Chapter 16 v. 21 makes reference to them: **“The wise of heart is called discerning,/ and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness.”** People are more likely to tune in to words that are sweet and pleasant. They are more likely to be persuaded by the message that they convey.

Verse 24 (PROVERBS 16:24) of the same chapter also makes reference to this kind of speech: **“Gracious [or pleasant] words are like a honeycomb,/ sweetness to the soul and health to the body.”** The soul refers to the spiritual, immaterial part of man. The bones refer to the physical part of man.

In the Ancient Near East honey was regarded as a kind of cure-all. It was used for coughs, sore throats, and general weakness. In the same way that honey was a kind of total pick-me-up, pleasant words can provide a general boost. Modern medicine has come to recognize the close relationship that exists between physical health and mental health, or our general sense of well-being. This proverb says that pleasant words can have a transforming effect on people.

Augustine (AUGUSTINE) was a leader in the early church. As a young man he led a wild life. He was highly educated, and he became a follower of a philosophical system called Manichaeism. He did not find what he was looking for there, and he began to lose hope of ever coming to know a personal, loving God.

At one point he moved to Milan, Italy. He heard about the reputation of Bishop Ambrose of Milan (AMBROSE), who was noted for his eloquence. Being trained in rhetoric himself, he went to hear Ambrose a number of times. Augustine found that his speech lived up to his reputation. When he spoke to Ambrose on a personal level, he also found that his words were kind and generous.

Initially Augustine was uninterested in the content of the bishop's speech. But later he wrote, "**...as I opened my heart in order to recognize how eloquently he was speaking, it occurred to me at the same time (though this idea came gradually) how truly he was speaking.**" So Augustine came to know God through a personal relationship with Jesus. Pleasant words were largely responsible for transforming his life.

Pleasant words can also be used by us to accomplish our goals in life. They can especially be used to attract people to our Savior. In the hyper partisan world in which we live pleasant words are desperately needed to bring peace to our country. Pleasant words can attract people to the One who has transformed us.

C.

(I. A. B. C. SPIRITUALLY INSTRUCTIVE WORDS) Proverbs also speaks about SPIRITUALLY INSTRUCTIVE WORDS. Look at #13 v. 14 (PROVERBS 13:14): "**The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life,/ that one may turn away from the snares of death.**"

Life and death in the Proverbs may be literal or figurative or both. It is hard to tell here. The word for "teaching" is "torah," which is the name used to describe the first five books of the Old Testament. The word "teaching" may be a good translation, but it seems clear that this teaching is related to the Old Testament law. It would thus seem that this wise teaching includes spiritual instruction.

The reader is challenged to be aware of the importance of these kinds of words. There is a responsibility for us to listen to them and apply them. There is also a responsibility for us to make them known to others, whether they be children, or neighbors, or people in other parts of the world.

Proverbs 22:15 (PROVERBS 22:15) says, **“Folly is bound up in the heart of a child...”** If we do not give our children spiritual instruction, they will indeed stay foolish. If unsaved people around us are not exposed to the spiritually instructive words of the gospel, they will experience eternal death. All that Satan needs to do to be successful is to keep us silent, to keep us from speaking words of instruction.

II. A.

(II MANNER AND TIMELINESS OF GOOD WORDS) Almost as important as using right words is using words at the right time and in the right way. We are going to think about Roman numeral II in the outline: MANNER AND TIMELINESS OF GOOD WORDS. First, under this category is the need to use words WITH RESTRAINT. (II. A. WITH RESTRAINT)

There is a multitude of verses that stresses the importance of this. Consider #10 v. 19 (PROVERBS 10:19): **“When words are many, transgression is not lacking,/ but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.”** When there are many words that pass by our lips, there is danger that we will give thoughtless advice or misleading information. We may fall in to gossip. We may say prideful things. We may hurt others. When we run off at the mouth, we are often inclined to lose control of our words and to be prone to sin.

Proverbs 13 v. 3 (PROVERBS 13:3) says, **“Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life;/ he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.”** Not only can unrestrained words lead to sin against God and unknowingly hurt people and make empty promises, those words can come back to haunt us. The ruin may be social, financial, physical, or emotional.

In an English country church yard there lies a gray slate tombstone that contains these words: **“Beneath this stone, a lump of clay,/ Lies Arabella Young,/ Who, on the 24th of May,/ Began to hold her tongue.”** This woman’s apparent failure to restrain her words came back to haunt her.

Chapter 12 v. 16 (PROVERBS 12:16) describes a different situation where restraint of words is to be advised: **“The vexation of a fool is known at once,/ but the prudent ignores an insult.”** A fool reveals his irritation immediately. He leaves no room for possible misunderstanding or for opportunity for apology. The wise individual will do his best to give another the benefit of the doubt. He won’t give an enemy the advantage of knowing that he has been hurt. In situations where a response really is warranted, often the prudent man will speak in private or wait until an appropriate time.

The Jewish Talmud has this saying: **“Happy is he who ignores. A hundred evils pass him by.”** Our best example is Jesus Christ who was silent at his trial when all kinds of wild accusations were thrown at him and when he was assaulted by the soldiers. First Peter #2 v. 23 (1 PETER 2:23) says, **“When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.”**

B.

(II. A. B. AT THE RIGHT TIME) The wise person will not only use words with restraint, but he will also use them AT THE RIGHT TIME. Look at #15 v. 23 (PROVERBS 15:23): **“To make an apt answer is a joy to a man,/ and a word in season, how good it is!”** Sensing when people are ready to hear something and seizing that moment are signs of wisdom. There will always be some uncertainty before the words are spoken. But when they are received well, there is joy in the recognition that it was the right time.

The Philippian jailer in Acts #16 was probably not especially open to hearing the gospel when he put Silas and Paul in jail. But in the middle of the night when he was awakened by an earthquake that caused the doors of the jail to open, he was suddenly ready to listen to Paul’s message. It was the right time.

I like how #25 v. 11 (PROVERBS 25:11) puts it: **“A word fitly spoken/ is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.”** The reference is to some kind of metalwork that is attractive and desirable and appropriate. A right word at the right time is like this gold apple in a beautiful silver setting. The good word is always gold. But saying it at the right time and in the right circumstance enhances its value. It puts it in a setting of silver.

When my wife makes a constructive suggestion for improving my preaching on Sunday after church, it often is not received that well. But when she mentions it a day or two later, it is usually better received. Likewise when I try to tell her something that is a kind of constructive criticism, timing can be crucial in terms of how it is received.

C.

(II. A. B. C. AFTER LISTENING) Closely related to this principle is the notion that good words should be uttered after having listened to another person--- AFTER LISTENING. Chapter 18 v. 13 (PROVERBS 18:13) tells us, **“If one gives an answer before he hears,/ it is his folly and shame.”** Quick answers often reveal insensitivity and lack of respect. The press of time and concern for our own agendas often prompt us to cut short the listening process.

Look at #29 v. 20 (PROVERBS 29:20): **“Do you see a man who is hasty in his words?/ There is more hope for a fool than for him.”** A man hasty in words does not control them. They control him. Such a person is not able to take into account the emotions and responses and thinking of his listeners. He does not take time to think about his choice of words.

Once I had a group of teenagers on a weekend retreat. During one of the meetings one guy who had been marginal in his involvement with the youth group was called out to receive a phone call. Afterwards I saw him laughing with other kids from the church. I went up to him and said, “Get a call from your stock broker?” I don’t remember what he said, but an hour or so later I found out that the call was about his aunt who had just died. Hasty words on my part did not help my relationship with him.

Answers and words of advice are effective when they have been preceded by a listening ear. We may feel good about tossing out quick advice, but our listener may not feel so good about it if he or she does not sense that he or she has been heard.

### III. A.

(III. WHY TO USE GOOD WORDS) Let's consider finally WHY TO USE GOOD WORDS. The first reason that I find in Proverbs about why we should use good words is that WE WILL BE REWARDED. (III. A. WE WILL BE REWARDED) One proverb that demonstrates this is #12 v. 14. That proverb reads (PROVERBS 12:14): **“From the fruit of his mouth a man is satisfied with good,/ and the work of a man's hand comes back to him.”**

We will be rewarded by others when we use words wisely. Kindness begets kindness, whether words are involved or deeds. When we speak good words to others, more often than not they will speak good words to us. So it is an excellent investment to work on using good words rightly with our mates, our children, our friends, our relatives, and our coworkers. It will pay dividends for us.

Verses 2 and 22 in the same chapter, #12, speak of God's sovereign involvement with rewarding good deeds. So we can expect that v. 14 also includes an element of divine reward for the use of good words. Why should we use good words? Because we will be rewarded by God and by other people for our use of them.

### B.

(III. A. B. THE LORD CARES) We should also use good words because THE LORD CARES. One evidence of this is found in #12 v. 22. (PROVERBS 12:22) That proverb says, **“Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord,/ but those who act faithfully---- I think that it is implied that faithful dealing with words is in view--- are his delight.”** We looked at this proverb last time in regard to the danger of dishonest words. My point here is simply that the Lord cares about the words that we use. They are important to Him. So using good words in the right circumstances ought also to be important to us.

### C.

The third thing which I find running through many of these verses that we have looked at is that good words rightly used transform lives. (III. A. B. C. THEY TRANSFORM LIVES) Why should we use good words? Because THEY TRANSFORM LIVES. They give life, they rescue from death, they overcome stubbornness, they heal, they calm, they comfort. They change the life of someone like Don Bartlette.

The most powerful of all good words relate to the gospel, the story of how people can be made right with God through Jesus Christ. Those words and the truths behind them transform lives.

George Whitefield (GEORGE WHITEFIELD) was a famous British preacher of the 1700s and a contemporary of John Wesley. Through his preaching in England and the Colonies thousands of people became Christians. Lives were transformed by his good

words. Whitefield made seven trips to the United States, and his words are credited with having a major part in what historians call the Great Awakening.

In October of 1740 he stopped in Middletown, Connecticut, to preach. A farmer and carpenter by the name of Nathan Cole described that event and the power of his words about the gospel to transform lives. These are excerpts from that account: **“...in the morning about 8 or 9 of the clock there came a messenger and said Mr. Whitefield preached at Hartford and Wethersfield yesterday and is to preach at Middletown this morning at ten of the clock. .... I dropped my tool that I had in my hand and ran home to my wife, telling her to make ready quickly to go and hear Mr. Whitefield preach at Middletown, then ran to my pasture for my horse with all my might, fearing that I should be too late. Having my horse, I with my wife soon mounted the horse and went forward as fast as I thought the horse could bear....**

**“We improved every moment to get along as if we were fleeing for our lives, all the while fearing we should be too late to hear the sermon, for we had twelve miles to ride double in little more than an hour... And when we came within about half a mile... Of the road that comes down from Hartford... I saw before me a cloud of fog arising. ...this cloud was a cloud of dust made by the horses’ feet. It arose some rods into the air over the tops of hills and trees... I could see men and horses slipping along in the cloud like shadows... all of a lather and foam with sweat... Every horse seemed to go with all his might to carry his rider to hear news from heaven for the saving of souls. It made me tremble to see the sight, how the world was in a struggle. ....**

**“We went down in the stream but heard no man speak a word all the way for 3 miles but every one pressing forward in great haste; and when we got to Middletown old meeting house, there was a great multitude, it was said to be 3 or 4,000 of people assembled together. We dismounted and shook off our dust, and the ministers were then coming to the meeting house. I turned and looked towards the Great River and saw the ferry boats running swift backward and forward bringing over loads of people... Everything, men, horses, and boats seemed to be struggling for life. The land and banks over the river looked black with people and horses; all along the 12 miles I saw no man at work in his field, but all seemed to be gone.**

**“When I saw Mr. Whitefield come upon the scaffold, he looked almost angelical; a young, slim, slender youth, before some thousands of people with a bold undaunted countenance. And my hearing how God was with him everywhere as he came along, it solemnized my mind and put me into a trembling fear before he began to preach; for he looked as if he was clothed with authority from the Great God, and a sweet solemn solemnity sat upon his brow, and my hearing him preach gave me a heart wound. By God’s blessing, my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me.” (PROJECTOR OFF)**

This man came to the understanding that it was not by any effort or good works on his part that he could become a Christian, but rather by simply placing his trust in Jesus Christ alone for his eternal life.

It was likely on this same trip that a 16 year old youth from Rhode Island by the name of Joshua Morse was converted by the preaching of George Whitefield. Ten years later he would be involved in starting a church in Fairfield, Connecticut, which I pastored for fifteen years.

Good words rightly used have the power to transform lives. Let's give attention to the words that we use. Let's try to have such pleasant speech at such appropriate times that people can't help but be encouraged by it and can't help but be attracted to the one who has transformed our lives--- the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you have never trusted in Jesus as your Savior, I would invite you to make that decision right now. Jesus was God who became man, who died upon the cross and who rose again from the dead. His death upon the cross paid the penalty for our sins. The Bible says that our one responsibility is to accept the payment that He made for us by faith. We are simply to put our trust in Him. One way to express this faith is by prayer. So as I close the message today, and as we bow our heads, I invite you to pray a simple prayer with me expressing your faith in this Jesus, if you have never trusted in Him as your Savior and would like to do so.

"Lord Jesus, I believe that you are God who became a human being and that you died on the cross and rose again from the dead. I acknowledge that I am a sinner who has broken your laws. I believe that you died to pay the penalty for my sins. I put my trust in You now as my Savior and receive the gift of eternal life by faith. Amen."