

Proverbs

Wisdom and Words

July 9, 2017

Hey y'all. It's good to see you. My name is Michael Bailey. I am one of the pastors at our Lexington Church. Every time I'm here I like to say thank you to you guys for all your help when we first launched out. Your prayers and generosity to us were amazing. We've had a lot to celebrate over the past year: lots of new folks around and getting connected to our fam. We baptized some new believers at Easter. And kids...kids for days...kids as far as the eye can see. There's something in the water.

But, I'm pumped to be here and continue our journey through God's wisdom revealed in Proverbs. We began by saying that wisdom was this special characteristic of God that he wove into creation. And that when listen to the words of His wisdom and act accordingly, we are actually tapping into how he designed life to work best. And all of this begins with knowing that He is God and we are not and that He has a love for us that is unfathomably great - so his wisdom is worth listening to. And today, we're going to dive into what I consider one of the hardest arenas to live with wisdom. Something the scriptures are going to call a "raging fire" and "a restless evil" in our lives: Our words.

Our words matter. They are the thing that we use and interact with potentially more than anything else in creation. Today, I want to show us 3 things from Proverbs: 1.) The power and potential of our words 2.) how are words used wisely and 3.) How we get there.

1.) The power and potential of our words

So, let's first look at the power and potential of our speech. Listen to what Proverbs say about words:

Proverbs 18:21

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

The thrust of this verse is simple: words are powerful. They carry a weight to them. They can cause things - good and bad - to happen.

On average, we use about 16,000 words a day. Some studies say women use 20,000 and men use 7,000. Some say it's more like 13,000 regardless of sex. Some argue that women save theirs until men have used their up... but we won't go there. But in short, every study concludes that we use an enormous amount of words each day and to a certain degree, every single one of them count.

Consider this, On August 6, 1942 President Harry S. Truman made a decision that altered the course of history. On that day, he made the decision to drop the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. Bringing unbelievable destruction, the likes of which the world had never seen. And he did so with one simple command. Consider also, a judge has the ability to alter the course of a person's life with just a few words: "I find you guilty" or "I find you innocent."

Now, I know few of us will ever be in the position to use our words to fire actual nuclear bombs, Consider the way James chapter three speaks of it... "Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also, the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things."

James says, the mouth is this small thing in comparison with the other muscles of our body, but it boasts of great things... it has an ability disproportionate to its size. Like a big ol' ship is directed by a small rudder, that's what the tongue is like for us. It has the power to move things, shape outcomes, build or destroy.

I'll give you an example, one time Lauren, my wife, saw me wearing a particular shirt and she says to me, "Babe, your arms and chest look really big in that shirt. Like good big." ...Oh, really?! Well, you know what? Let me just put that one at the front of the closet so I wear it a bit more. Her words changed me. Now, I wear that shirt all the time. Every now and again I'll ask, "Hey, Boo, does this shirt still make me look big in the good way?" And now, she just rolls her eyes and says, "Yes, babe, it still makes you look big in the good way" You know what... still counts.

Now that's a silly example, but think about the impact in your own life from words. I guarantee there are things that were said to you 20 years ago that you still remember today because they had such a profound impact on you. Words that wounded you badly. Things your spouse has said to you, things your children have said to you, things that parents have said you that have cut you, wounded you, and scarred you and you still remember and live with the fall out of it. On the flip side, some of you chose the career you have or the major you're in because someone spoke into your life about a strength they saw in you. Some of us live where we live, are married to who we're married to, and all sorts of things because of words spoken to us. Words have the power to set the course for our entire lives.

Listen, don't believe me that words have power? Do this - go home today and just say this to spouse... just drop this one out there like a little brain ninja: "You're just like your mother" and see how that goes for you... Our words have power. Our speech has the ability to affect things in the world. They are a dynamic cause in our lives and in the lives of others.

And there is a reason for this: you and I were made in God's image. As a special part of his creation, he made us, human beings, as a reflection of who He is. And God's words have immense power. By His word he made everything that exists. That he spoke, "Let there be..." and it was. It's by his Word through His spirit that he convicts of sin, and softens hardened hearts to repentance and acceptance of his grace. It's through this Word became flesh, Jesus that he saves the world.

And what Proverbs is trying to help us understand is how each of us, being made in his image, wield some of that same power. Our words have the power to build up or destroy. Our words have the power to be fruitful or sour. The old adage may say that sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me, but Proverbs will say, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will break my spirit." In short, our words have the power and potential to give life or to take it and the person who walks in God's wisdom will be careful with how they use them.

2.) How are words used wisely

So, what does it look like to use them wisely? Let's look at a few other proverbs.

Proverbs 15:23

To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!

Proverbs 25:11

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

An apt answer is an appropriate response, a thoughtful answer, gracious response. "A word fitly spoken..." is a word spoken when it needs to be to whom it needs to be. The implication is this: the wise speech is thoughtful, careful, and intentional in what it says.

Proverbs 13:3

Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.

Proverbs 14:3

By the mouth of a fool comes a rod for his back, but the lips of the wise will preserve them.

The person who gives no thought to what they are saying. Who just speaks whatever comes into their mind. Who shows no discretion or intentionality in their speech is basically welcoming hardship and strife into their lives.

The old pastor John Calvin used to say: "I consider looseness with words no less of a defect than looseness of the bowels."

Another way of saying it would be like this: Wisdom speaks the right word with the right tone at the right time in the right place to the right person.

Let me break that down for you: Right word = The wise person takes into consideration what is the appropriate thing to say. The right word is the thing that needs to be said. It's not just spouting off at the mouth or saying whatever pops into your head, but take the time to think about what that the person you're speaking with needs to hear. Perhaps it's some encouragement, or rebuke...

Proverbs 12:18

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Rash words are careless words, thoughtless words. When we speak without thoughtfulness or care or intentionality, it's like we are thrusting sword into our hearers. We can cause damage or bring healing. Our words can either be a sword thrust or a surgeon's scalpel. Both may pierce, but one kills and the other heals. One destroys and the other saves. The difference is in how thoughtfully we use them.

I had a somewhat troubled youth. Lots of drugs, crime, promiscuity. God saved me from a lot of destructive habits. One night, after that portion of my life was over, my dad and I were driving back from my grandparents' house and he was asking me about how I was doing. We were just chatting and I was filling him in on some things in my life, when seemingly out of nowhere, he turns to me and says, "You know, Michael. I just want to apologize to you. I feel somewhat responsible for all that you went through as a teenager. I got too caught up in my work and sorta just tried to let the church and your mother raise you. I'm sorry for that. But I want you to know I'm so proud of who God has turned you into".... I just kinda stared. For a few minutes, I didn't know what to do... I certainly didn't think he held of the blame for my issues - and he certainly didn't have to say those things to me, but the fact that he thought about what he needed to say and what I needed to hear and said those words to me, left a lasting impact on me on what it meant to be a man and a father. It inspired me to be the type of guy who owns his mistakes and seeks to heal with his words. They're words I'll never forget.

But the wise don't just say right words, they say them with the Right tone. This is how Solomon will say it:

Proverbs 15:1

A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

For many years, I had this nickname "Cannonball Bailey". I got this name because I had this habitual preference for saying big, bold, utterly unnuanced statements that I would just sorta fire off at the mouth with reckless abandon. Sorta like a Cannonball. If you know me, you might be thinking, "Wait, isn't his son named Cannon." Yes. Yes, he is. And I named him that because he's my boldest statement to date. Luckily, I did not tell my wife that until after she agreed to the name. (Because I'm learning how to be wise with my words).

But, the thing was, I had this mentality that I never met a verbal altercation that I couldn't win and that it didn't matter how I said things as long as what I said was true. So, I would say things so rashly and so sharply that even if I was right, people would want to disagree with me because of the way I said it.

6000 times my first year of marriage this led to what I'll just call "robust exchanges of ideas." And after or during each one, Lauren would say something like the following to me, "It's not what you said, it's how you said it." At first, I didn't have the slightest idea what she meant... I felt like I was just telling it like it was. I was just speaking my mind and saying what needed to be said. What I didn't understand was that sometimes the right thing said in the wrong way can be the wrong thing. I wasn't careful or intentional or thoughtful in what I was saying and it wound up hurting her.

This is what Solomon is driving at here. If we want to be wise with our words, we can't just take into account what we say, but also consider how we say it.

And then there's the right time and right place.

Proverbs 27:14

He who blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, it will be counted a curse to him.

Can you imagine that? Your buddy walks into your room before the sun comes up, before your alarm clock goes off and yells, "Man, get up! I just gotta tell you how wonderful of a friend you are and how I hope we get to be friends for our whole lives!" I'd be like: "lucky for you, your life isn't gonna last too much longer." This is not the time for that. This is the time for sleep. Get out of my room.

Wise words also consider when and where is the right time and place to say this thing. If you want your words to be listened to, then you need to say them at a time and place they can be heard. For example, when your roommate comes home from a long day of work and tells you about how his boss was a total jerk to him... it might not be the best time to tell him that he needs to stop leaving his dirty dishes in the sink. That could maybe wait.

Married people in the room - when your spouse is upset at you for something you've done and they are currently letting you know what that something is - perhaps with some fervency. That is not the right time to bring up the things about them that are frustrating you, too. That's gonna go nowhere quick. The wise thing would be to recognize that, "You know what, I'm just going to wait to bring this up until there's not smoke coming out of her ears or we're not around his family" ... hypothetically speaking, of course.

And the wise person says these things to the right person. Wise words are said to the people they need to be said to and no one else.

Proverbs 26:20

For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.

The whisperer is Solomon's way of talking about the gossip. The person who says things, even true things, to the wrong people. He says, when you say the right thing to the right person it keeps peace, but going about telling it to people who don't need to hear it can just throw logs on the fire.

If you don't go to the right person with what needs to be said, you enter into the realm of gossip. It might be the right word at the right time in the right place...but because you went to the wrong person you're in sin as a gossip. "Yeah, but I'm just relaying the facts. What I'm saying is true" Exactly. It's the right word, but the wrong person.

So, if wise speech says the right thing with the right tone at the right time in the right place to the right person. It begs the question for us: Do you think about the things you say? Do you consider their impact? Do you think about what you say before you say it? Do you consider what might this person need to hear? How

might this person need to hear it? Before we speak, we need to ask ourselves the questions, “How will this affect the person I’m speaking to?” “Is this the right time for me to say this?”

Because here’s the thing. When you do this, your words will do what they are meant to do. They will give life.

Proverbs 16:24

Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.

God intends to use our words not just to be thoughtful and intentional, but to give life. Wise speech gives life to those who hear. The wise use words like God uses words - to give life and love and grace to their hearers. Words that encourage and inspire. Words that heal. Words that are thought-through in order that they may be of maximum benefit to the person who hears them.

So, I heard this story the other day. There was a family with daughter turning 13. 13 is kind of a big year. Think about all the shifts that take place when you go from being a pre-teen to a teen. Think about all the insecurity and identity building formation going on at the age of 13. Think about how many stupid decisions come out of insecurity about who I am at this time of my life. Do I need to do drugs to be cool? Do I need to be promiscuous to be loved? Do I need to get drunk to fit in?

So, these parents thought through a series of words that they thought described their daughter and they wanted to affirm in her - words like strong, beloved, ambitious. And they sent that list of words to their friends, essentially their LifeGroup. Everyone in the LifeGroup wrote a letter to their daughter that focused on one to two of those words and how they saw God at work in her. Then they had what I can only describe as a blessing ceremony, think like a bar or bat-mitzvah type deal - it was a party where at one point each of these adults that were close to her family read their letter to her while looking her in the eyes, speaking words of life and affirmation.

How much did you need that when you were 13? To hear that a group of adults who knew you and your parents saw Godliness in you and saw how God was at work in you? Think about how that girl walks into middle and high school now knowing who God has made her to be? That is the right words with the right tone at the right time in the right place to the right person. That is words used to provide sweetness to the soul and health to the body. Words that protect and inspire.

3.) So how do we get there?

In Matthew chapter 12, Jesus tells us something very important about why we use words the way that we do. In order to become a people wise with their words we have to see what lies behind the things we say....

Matthew 12:33-37

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, 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.

He says our words reveal our hearts. The reason we take life with our words instead of give it, the reason we speak carelessly and sinfully instead of thoughtfully is because of our hearts. If we’re going to address our words, we have to address our hearts.

We use our words wrongly because our hearts are wrong - Instead of using them to give life, we use them to build up our identity, to overcome insecurity, to protect ourselves, and gain control. This is why we use our words wrongly. Every one of us. We’ll lie, we’ll exaggerate to cover up our failures. We’ll lash out in anger because we feel out of control. We gossip to prop ourselves up over others.

Our hearts have to be set free from the controlling power of sin. And only the Spirit through faith in the gospel can do this. Only Jesus can make us new creatures and give us new hearts.

When your identity is there you don't have to lie to make one up. If you believe the gospel you are free to be honest. If you believe in the gospel, you don't have to be in control. If you believe in the gospel, you don't have to be protect yourself. And when you feel the inability to use your words well, the gospel tells us that God has given you the Holy Spirit to help. To open eyes to your misuse of words and help you see a more helpful and life-giving way.

But notice how he said, out of the good treasure of his heart - other translations say it out of the good stored up in his heart. The good that has filled your heart. For many of us, the reason we don't have any good, life-giving things to say is because we aren't storing any good up.

Have you noticed how our lives are almost constantly filled with superficial chatter? How it's just much easier to talk about college football, or essential oils, or video games than the life-giving words of God?

It always shocks me at how I know so many guys in my life who you get us talking about hunting or college football and we can talk for hours. "Oh, did you see that high school junior's film? He's lightning quick. I heard he ran a 4.2 40 at Nike's The Opening..." I'll be only a handful of you even know what I'm talking about right now... but those of you who do, I guarantee you could talk about it for hours. But the second conversation shifts to anything meaningful - such as what is God doing in your life? Or How's your marriage? How's your faith?... crickets. We just shut up.

If this is you, you need to hear me: this is a problem. It's not that those things are bad, they're just superficial. And often, we talk about superficial things a lot because superficial things are all we're storing up.

Our inability to have meaningful conversations with our friends, family, and neighbors says something about us. We're never storing up the things God says in his Word - the truths of the Bible and the gospel - in order share them and give life to someone else. So, when the opportunities arise, we feel awkward and don't know what to say. And if we want to use our words well, we need to fill our hearts up with God's words to us - his words of grace, love, and truth.

So, this means we need to be putting ourselves in positions to be filled up with God's words. We need to be a people who soak up the Scriptures. For some of us, I think the most practical thing we can do to affect our words would be to start setting aside 15-30 minutes a day - to sacrifice one rerun of the Office - to read the Bible. I know for those of us who are believers in the room, the lack of surrounding ourselves and storing up the truth of God's Word and love is the culprit of so much of our struggle. We become a people who drift from the truth because of all the other distractions out there.

But our aim is to store up God's Words - the truth of who He is and what He's done for us... and let it overflow into our words towards other people. As our hearts are transformed by the power of the Spirit to be more like Jesus then our words will start to look more and more like Jesus. Gracious. Loving. Thoughtful and life giving.

This morning I invite you to consider your speech. What does your use of words say about your heart? Where do you need to repent? Who might you need to apologize to? What areas do you need the Spirit's help?

And also consider, how might you begin to walk with God's wisdom with your words. How might God want to use your words to give life? In your marriage? In your LifeGroup? To your kids? Co-workers?

Here's what I'm going to do, I'm gonna give us some space right now: I'd love for you to write down the names of 4 people you walk closely with and let's just ask God what might he have us say to them to speak life to them. Let's be intentional to do that this week.