

“Speak Your Mind”
Proverbs 15 (selected verses)

- 1 A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.
2 The tongue of the wise adorns knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.
3 The eyes of the LORD are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good.
4 The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.
5 A fool spurns a parent’s discipline, but whoever heeds correction shows prudence.
6 The house of the righteous contains great treasure, but the income of the wicked brings ruin.
7 The lips of the wise spread knowledge, but the hearts of fools are not upright.
- 13 A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit.
14 The discerning heart seeks knowledge, but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly.
15 All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast.
16 Better a little with the fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil.
17 Better a small serving of vegetables with love than a fattened calf with hatred.
18 A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.
- 22 Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.
23 A person finds joy in giving an apt reply— and how good is a timely word!
26 The LORD detests the thoughts of the wicked, but gracious words are pure in his sight.
28 The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil.
29 The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.
33 Wisdom’s instruction is to fear the LORD, and humility comes before honor.

Introduction

I’m sure you recall the childhood proverb and taunt, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Not true! as many biblical proverbs teach. “Sticks and stones” may be courageous or mocking but you and I know from painful memories that words can be exceedingly hurtful.

Words, words, words... Previous claims from a University of California professor reported that women speak an average of 20,000 words daily compared to only 7,000 words for men. Subsequent research showed that on average, women actually speak as many as 16,215 words per day and men 15,669. The average person speaks at least 7,000 words. Think about what that means for you. The 7,000 or 15,000 words you speak each day are your imprint on the world. They dictate how people perceive you – and largely define you.

None of us can avoid transgressions with the tongue, our words, our speech. Sooner or later, we’ll slip. Someone suggested, “Therefore, the more we say, the more likely we’ll get it wrong.” The common theme of Proverbs 15 is about our attitudes about and our use of speech.

I. Verses 1-4

Starting with verse 1: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” The way you answer people can influence their response. King Solomon wanted this proverb to making peace, to promote conciliatory speech. Using harsh words can cause pain and brings an angry response. I know what I usually do when someone affronts me. You and I have been on both ends of giving and receiving the blessing or curse.

Like when shopping, finding the nearest parking space: it’s a priority. Isn’t it? So, I spot an older couple walking very slowly to their car. “If I follow them, wait for them to get in their car, the parking space will be mine!” They carefully put their bags in the trunk. He slowly walks around to open the door for his wife. I sit there with my blinker on. He slowly walks around to the driver’s side. I think, no, I say out loud to myself, “Oh, come on! Get in the car and go!” They back out slowly in just the right direction for another car to pull in front of me and steal my space. I get out of my car and have an interesting chat with the driver. Had my mother been there, she would have washed my mouth out with soap. She angrily backs out of the parking space. “Yes! I got my much-deserved parking space.”

But then Jesus’ words come into my head, “The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a one unclean” (Matthew 15:18). And now, today, I’m preaching on Proverbs 15:1. It’s embarrassing how the condition of my heart is reflected by what comes out of my mouth and how I live it out. I’m not proud of it. Maybe you’ve been there too. “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (I read about this common experience from Nancy Ortberg, a teaching pastor in Menlo Park Presbyterian Church).

Verse 2: “The tongue of the wise adorns knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.” Simply put, “knowledge comes from the wise, stupidity from the fools.” Let me comment here on Hebrew poetry. It rhymes in parallel thoughts. Verses 1 and 2 are antithetical, opposite thoughts. “A gentle response defuses anger, but a sharp tongue kindles a temper. Knowledge flows like spring water from the wise; but fools are leaky faucets, dripping nonsense.” (That’s the Message translation).

The reason I’ve chosen selected verses from Proverbs 15 is to group together the common theme about the use of words. But verse 3 shows how the Book of Proverbs is a collection of sayings often unrelated to one another. This one is synthetic parallel, the second phrase adding to the meaning of the first. “The eyes of the LORD are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good.” In other words, the Lord knows what’s going on with both good and bad.

Then, we’re back to speech in verse 4. “The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.” What we say and how we say it can bring healing or harm, our words can bring life to the spirit or crush it. This proverb is especially important for family relationships: husband/wife, parent/children, sisters/brothers.

I read about a family with teens. They decided that as part of their Sunday commitment they wouldn't criticize each other. As the months went on, the parents realized more and more of their children's friends were coming over on Sundays just to hang around. No one in the family had talked about their commitment to withhold criticism, but somehow other teens knew this home was a good place to be.

Looking back, I certainly wish I had offered a tree of life more often in my household, and less a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.

II. Verses 18, 23,

Moving to verse 18 as it continues the theme: "A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel." With contentious political and social commentary these days, an August 17th *Wall Street Journal* headline caught my eye: "With Civil Discourse 101, Colleges Address Campus Climate." Colleges the U.S. are challenging students, parents and alumni to talk politics without going on the attack. It's a much-needed effort to counter growing polarization and nastiness in political discourse. American University, Wake Forest, Tufts, Duquesne and the University of Pennsylvania are among them. Last June, 26 private colleges met in Atlanta for a workshop on diversity, civility and the liberal arts.

It takes the wisdom of great patience and calmness to maintain peaceful relationships. There are people in church and culture who thrive on acrimony, resentment, antagonism. And, thankfully, there are people who will do everything in their power to minimize contention, to avoid or prevent a sour-tasting conversation. Which one is wise, would you say? And which one is foolish?

In the New Testament letter James, chapter 3, the church is cautioned how "the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell."

Videos of the massive fires in California have been terrible. Authorities have arrested a 32-year-old man on arson charges in connection with five fires including the largest, Cranston Fire, which quickly turned into a wall of flame that torched timber and dry brush. In a matter of hours, the fire grew to 7.5 square miles. Thousands of residents were under evacuation orders. Blazes throughout California are being battled by 30,000 emergency workers and have overrun more than 1.6 million acres. Draper City Fire Department Battalion Chief Matthew Burchett, 42, died on August 13th fighting the Mendocino Complex Fire.

Like starting a forest fire, producing a "wildfire" with our tongues requires little effort. Rumors, half-truths, grumblings, sarcastic remarks, hurtful things said in the heat of anger — all of these smoldering matches have the potential for burning down acres of work place morale, family peace, and church unity.

Verse 28 says, “The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil.” Those who are wise are cautious in how they answer. They carefully weigh, consider, study how to answer, as opposed to the wicked who blurt out vicious things.

Conclusion

Jesus emphasized the power of words when he spoke about the day of judgment. In Matthew 12:37 he said, “By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” Proverbs 18:21 has a similar idea: “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”

Proverbs 15 closes with a general wisdom saying. “Wisdom’s instruction is to fear the LORD, and humility comes before honor.” This phrase “The fear of the Lord” is often seen as negative. But, it means not only a deep reverence for God, but it means a humble submission in faith to the Lord. “Humility comes before honor.”

Romans 12:9-21

9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.

11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.

12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

13 Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.

18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.

20 On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.