

## The Word on Words

The Quest for Hidden Treasure – Part VI

Selected Proverbs

### Introduction

One of the better known jingles in the world of communications today is, “I heard it through the grapevine.” This is odd, because if we placed the end of a grapevine next to our ears, we would hear nothing.

In order to understand this lyric, we need to travel back to a time in American history when the abolition of slavery was gathering momentum. This was a time when groups of runaway slaves from the south were making their way north along the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was simply a reference to safe houses along the way where sympathizers would hide the runaway slaves, feed them, and help them get to the next safe location. We need to travel back to a time when Cincinnati was a key location where thousands of slaves could slip across the Ohio River on their flight to freedom.

Among the ways sympathetic people communicated with the slaves along the Underground Railroad was through the use of laundry that was strategically hung outdoors to dry. One selection of clothing communicated that it was unsafe to travel in that area. A different selection of clothing meant that it was safe to move through the area and even identified safe houses where food and rest could be found. I also read that quilts were often created with patterns that actually gave directions to runaway slaves.

Since rope was expensive in the mid-1800s, grapevines were often substituted as clotheslines and this primitive system of communication actually became known as the grapevine telegraph.<sup>1</sup>

Eventually the word “telegraph” was dropped, and people simply referred to the “grapevine”.

We use the word “grapevine” today, don’t we?! We use it to refer to hearing the latest news; the newest gossip; the latest tale.

“I heard it through the grapevine” is now an expression that everyone knows has nothing to do with bringing people to freedom. In fact, it may mean just the opposite. People today are not emancipated by the grapevine, but are often imprisoned by it instead.

Solomon wrote, to those who will join him in the quest for wisdom, the hidden treasure of insight, discernment, maturity, and grace,

***Death and life are in the power of the tongue... (Proverbs 18:21a)***

It is not just the hand, or the knife, or the sword, but the tongue.

I have read that the average person has around 700 opportunities to speak every day. And the average person will speak about 12,000 sentences in a day.

Husbands, perhaps this is the reason that when you come home, you find your wife wanting to talk. You have been on sales calls and you have been talking all day, but she has at least 10,000 sentences ready to go – they are already loaded. And since she spent her day chasing a one year old around the house, none of her sentences were actually complete – so they did not count.

The truth remains that we speak around 50,000 words a day. Imagine that! Fifty thousand words is the size of a small book in the library.

I wonder, at the end of the day, how much of what we say would be worth writing down, or even more, worth reading again.

It is no wonder that one of the most significant subjects to study in our quest for the hidden treasure of wisdom is the subject of our speech. This subject pertaining to the tongue happens to be one of Solomon's favorite subjects in his collection of Proverbs. He refers to:

- a proud tongue;
- a lying tongue;
- a perverse tongue;
- an angry tongue;
- an encouraging tongue;
- a crafty tongue;
- a seductive tongue;
- a deceitful tongue;
- a soothing tongue;
- an instructive tongue;
- a flattering tongue;
- a guarded tongue;
- a quiet tongue;
- a crass tongue;
- and many more.

God has a lot to say about what we say!

For the sake of tackling such an expansive subject, I want to divide our study into two sections. The first is positive and has to do with how our words can help. The second is negative and has to do with how our words can hurt.

## How Words Can Help

### 1. First, Solomon informs that our words can provide good counsel.

He writes, in Proverbs 27:9,

*Oil and perfume make the heart glad, so a man's counsel is sweet to his friend.*

The influence of a friend's counsel is unparalleled. This is the reason we are to be careful who we allow to counsel us.

A godly friend, teammate, spouse, co-worker, fellow student can impact our lives through their words, but the point is that we can impact them. One of God's intended benefits for a body of believers is that we together, admonish one another.

The word "admonish" is "noutheteo νουθετεω," which gives us our word for "nouthetic counseling". Nouthetic counseling, or biblical admonition, even occurs every time we sing as a body of believers.

Paul wrote to the Colossians,

*Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing ("noutheteo νουθετεω") one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3:16)*

In other words, we reiterate the truth with helpful words to help one another develop thankful hearts to God.

The question should then be asked, "Did that conversation I just had with another believer leave them more thankful to God or less thankful? Did I counsel them or corrupt them?"

One author made the interesting comment that our daily conversations are actually mutual counseling sessions whereby we exchange the reassurance and advice that help us deal with the routine challenges of life.<sup>ii</sup>

This is a great way for the believer to view his conversations – as a mutual counseling session for the betterment of both.

### 2. Secondly, not only can our words counsel, but they can also confront.

With this comes the idea of correction. This is not just the advice of a friend, but the accountability of a friend.

Solomon writes, in Proverbs 17:10,

*A rebuke goes deeper into one who has understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.*

In other words, if we challenge a committed believer that what they are doing or saying or the way they are living is missing the mark of holy living or quiet surrender, they will deeply consider it. Our confrontation will get their attention for the good.

We use the expression, "A word to the wise is – what? – sufficient." This comes from the implication of this Proverb and others.

Just a word or two and a wise person will listen and learn from his mistakes, accept the word of admonition, yield to authority, and take the appropriate action. Not so a fool, Solomon writes in chapter 17. Even if he is beaten black and blue – with a hundred strokes of a rod – he will go back to his folly.<sup>iii</sup>

Solomon also warned,

***Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you, reprove a wise man and he will love you. (Proverbs 9:8)***

In other words, everyone we confront or challenge may not love us in return.

It may take the courage and insight of Nathan who confronted David's murder and adultery with Bathsheba. It might take the boldness of Joab who confronted David that his unbounded grieving over Absalom was hurting his integrity as a ruler.<sup>iv</sup>

David, proving that he had not completely shut off his heart to wisdom, listened (II Samuel 12, 19).

**3. Thirdly, our words can not only counsel and confront, but also comfort.**

In Proverbs 25:11, we read,

***Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances.***

I would agree with Charles Bridges, who wrote in the mid-1800s that this is literal fruit – golden apples, served on silver trays.<sup>v</sup>

How refreshing then, are words – like ripe fruit – which come served in the finest way possible, satisfying both hunger and thirst at the same time.

**4. Fourthly, along the same lines, our words can not only counsel and confront and comfort, but also cheer.**

Solomon wrote,

***A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but perversion in it crushes the spirit. (Proverbs 15:4)***

This is the power of encouragement.

Can it really make a difference?

Just listen to the sports announcers this afternoon talking about which team has the home field advantage. Why is home field an advantage? Because the players with home field advantage are playing in front of people who are screaming encouraging things rather than things we cannot repeat; who are friends instead of foes. It is most likely that we will play our best game when the fans are cheering us on. This is the reason “home field” is synonymous with “advantage”.

Has it ever occurred to you that the believer's battles are all away games? We are far from home.

The world cheers on the other side that can defeat and discourage and even bring us to despair. The noise in the stadium is sometimes overpowering.

All of our contests are away games.

The only time we will hear much encouragement is when we are in the huddle – with our teammates. Our church assembly is a huddle.

Cheer one another on, the writer of Hebrews wrote, as he said,

***. . . encourage one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:25b)***

What day is this referring to? It is the day the contest is over.

This is the power of encouraging words.

One author wrote about entering what was called a “Half-Ironman Triathlon”. He was a pastor who just wanted to have this accomplishment in the bag. He wrote, “After the 1.2 mile swim and the 56 mile bike ride, I didn't have much energy left for the 13.1 mile run. Neither did the fellow jogging next to me. I asked him how he was doing and soon regretted posing the question. He said, ‘Man, this stinks. This race is the dumbest decision I've ever made in my life.’ He had more complaints than taxpayers against the IRS. I knew if I listened too long, I'd start agreeing with him so I sped up. I eventually caught up with a sixty-six-year-old grandmother. Her tone was just the opposite. ‘Wow it's hot . . . but at least it's not raining . . . don't forget to hydrate . . . you'll finish this race,’ she encouraged. I ran next to her until I couldn't keep up and she waved and ran on ahead.”<sup>vi</sup>

Which runner represents you and your words as you jog alongside others in the race of faith?

**5. Fifthly, our words can counsel and confront and comfort and cheer, and finally, they can construct.**

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians,

***. . . build up one another, just as you also are doing. (I Thessalonians 5:11)***

He wrote further,

***We urge you, brethren . . . encourage the fainthearted, help the weak . . . (I Thessalonians 5:14)***

Teach, strengthen, build up one another in the faith.

Solomon put it this way,

***The lips of the righteous feed many . . . (Proverbs 10:21a)***

In Proverbs 15:7a, he writes,

***The lips of the wise spread knowledge . . .***

This is the edifying, building, strengthening effect of words provided by the wise that constructs and counsels and confronts and comforts and cheers one another along.

What are you hanging out on the grapevine? Does it lead to safety and strength?

Words can help, but words can hinder as well.

## How Words Can Hurt

Solomon provides insight into several ways that words can hurt. Let us look at these, as well.

### 1. First, our words can deceive.

This is what one author included in what he called the primeval sins. These are the sins of Satan's nature. They are pride, in that he coveted the throne of God (Isaiah 14:12-17), and lying. In fact, his first recorded words in human history were a lie to Eve – "Eat this and you will be as wise as God." (Genesis 3:1-5)

Solomon recorded, in Proverbs 6:16-19, that God hates seven activities. Among these seven are pride and lying.

It is no wonder that Solomon had a short prayer list. Listen to his list, from Proverbs 30:7,

*Two things I asked of You [Lord], do not refuse me before I die: keep deception and lies far from me...*

Solomon is really praying that he would be kept from the influence of Satan, as well as that he would not imitate the great deceiver.<sup>vii</sup>

Why? Because he recognized, as we should, that we have the devilish ability to imitate our former father, Satan, who is,

*... the father of lies. (John 8:44b)*

### 2. Secondly, our words can not only deceive, but destroy.

Do you remember the child's chant, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me."?

This is a lie, is it not? It is not true. Sticks and stones are easy compared to words.

I do not have many scars from sticks or stones. Do you? I have one scar – at the corner of my right eyebrow – that is fairly easy to see. I got it when I was around six or seven years old. I was out in the front yard throwing a large rock up in the air and catching it. The last time, I missed. My mother had good reason to worry – "He was playing catch with a rock . . . that's my son."

Rocks hurt for a while, but words hang on.

Words have the ability to tear down and destroy everything from friendships to marriages to work places to churches.

*... the tongue is a [raging] fire . . . set on fire by hell [itself]. (James 3:6)*

Solomon wrote, in Proverbs 18:6,

*A fool's lips bring strife, and his mouth calls for blows.*

In other words, a fool is going to start a fight; he is going to provoke some kind of controversy or argument in which everyone loses. Someone's reputation will be ruined; someone's name will be dirtied; someone's spirit will be crushed.

In seminary, we were told sort of the ultimate nightmare by one of our pastoral theology professors. He told us this true story, not only to make us careful to watch our steps as pastors, but to show us the destructive power of gossip.

A pastor and his wife were barely squeaking by in their small church, but they faithfully served Christ. There was a successful businessman in their church who was an immense help. He and his wife volunteered and served the church and the pastor's family.

On one occasion, the pastor was invited to preach in a meeting in another city several hours away. He did not have money for a plane ticket and his own car was a little too old to risk the drive. When this businessman found out about the situation, he told the pastor that he had the perfect solution.

The man had a business trip to make and would be flying out of town during the same period of time as the pastor's trip. He told the pastor, "Listen, why don't you drive over to my home, drop off your car, take me to the airport, and then take off for your meeting in my nice new car. When we both get back into town, you can pick me up."

This plan sounded terrific. The only problem was that this pastor now had his vehicle parked overnight at the man's home, while the man's car was away.

The neighbors jumped to conclusions – and spread the word. In a matter of days, this little community had heard the news. The pastor ended up resigning, unable to overcome the destruction to his reputation and integrity.

There was no way this pastor could compete with the grapevine that had spread like cancer all over this little town.

Solomon wrote,

*With his mouth, the godless man destroys his neighbor . . . (Proverbs 11:9a)*

Words can deceive and they can destroy.

**3. Thirdly, along the same lines, words have the ability to divide.**

This person is more than happy to hang dirty laundry out in the open on whatever grapevine is available.

Proverbs 16:28b says,

*. . . a slanderer separates intimate friends.*

Remember, this was the chief objective of Satan who accused Job before God – “Watch me and I’ll separate that man from walking with You . . . He’ll curse You to Your face.” (Job 1, 2)

This was Satan’s plan with Adam and Eve – to separate them from their intimate relationship with God, and also to separate them from each other. How he must have rubbed his hands with glee as Adam and Eve accused one another and ultimately, accused God. (Genesis 3)

Satan is the great deceiver, destroyer, and divider of the brethren.

What is startling about Solomon’s statement is not that distant acquaintances are separated – church members who hardly know each other – but that intimate friends are divided.

This was such a serious problem in the early church that nearly every Epistle dealt with the power of the tongue.

In fact, Paul bluntly told Titus to dismiss the divisive person from the assembly after the second warning. This was not traditional church discipline in which witnesses were brought to bear and the congregation brought in to woo and warn the brother. No, Paul said,

***Reject a factious [divisive] man after a first and second warning. (Titus 3:10)***

Why? Because the church is to demonstrate unity in the Spirit and the transforming power of the gospel to produce love and good works. The enemy can use a divisive person’s words to handicap the church’s ability to demonstrate unity and love.

So, the question remains, “What are we to do about this incredible power we carry around in our mouths?”

We are in this quest for wisdom – which is the application of this truth to life. What do we do about our speech?

## What Should We Do With Our Words?

### 1. First, surround our words!

Solomon wrote,

***He who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from troubles. (Proverbs 21:23)***

Is this not the truth? We should have learned this in third grade, right? I was never sent to the corner of the room for staying quiet.

I laughed when I came across a story that I had written down about a time when my twin sons were in elementary school. As I read this account again, I could not help but imagine the personal struggle their teacher was probably engaged in as he tried to maintain control of his emotions.

Before homeschooling, our sons were attending a public elementary school in Raleigh and they were in the second grade. We were sitting at the dinner table and one of my sons said, “Hey, Dad, I think our music teacher is a Christian.”

His brother chimed in, “Yeah, we’re pretty sure he’s a Christian.”

I thought, “Man, my sons are really discerning about spiritual things at such a young age.”

I asked them, “How do you know?”

They said, “Well, we were all sorta acting up in class and he went over to the corner and we could tell he was praying.”

He probably was. And this is what he just might have been praying,

***Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips. (Psalm 141:3)***

We should surround our words – “Lord, post guards at the door of my lips. Don’t let anything out without clearance from You.”

### 2. Secondly, at every possible chance, silence our words!

Solomon records,

***. . . he who restrains his lips is wise. (Proverbs 10:19b)***

Abraham Lincoln once wrote, “I have often regretted my speech, never my silence.”

I memorized, a few months ago, this little saying to roll around in my heart and mind, “My silence may be misinterpreted, but it can never be misquoted.”

While you are at it, let me recommend that you burn the grapevine. Treat it like the poison ivy vine you have out by the back fence that keeps wanting to come back. Deal severely with it. Do not ignore it.

Stay away from your group of internet friends if you are having trouble staying out of the gossip mill. Gather all your sources up and delete them.

Solomon wrote later,

***He who restrains his words has knowledge... (Proverbs 17:27a)***

In other words, one of the smartest things we can do sometimes is bite our own tongue.

Surround our words; silence our words.

### **3. Thirdly, sweeten our words!**

“Keep your words sweet,” someone once said, “you never know when you’ll have to eat them.”

Solomon wrote it this way, in Proverbs 16:24,

***Pleasant words are a honeycomb . . .***

Good words are sweet.

Ray Pritchard, in his devotional commentary on many of the Proverbs, wrote about a study he had read that stated it takes 8 to 10 positive comments to offset one negative comment. In other words, 8 to 10 loving, caring, kind words are needed to erase the effects of just one hurtful, unkind, unloving, careless word that was written on the blackboard of someone’s mind.<sup>viii</sup>

So we had better get busy.

What are some pleasant words that are sweet like honey? Let me suggest a few to repeat often this week.

- “I’m proud of you.”

Talk about sweet to the soul – letting someone know you admire them; you have noticed them; you have acknowledged their contribution is wind in their sails.

Perhaps it has been too long, Dad, for your child to hear these words. Perhaps it has been too long, young man or young lady, for your parents to hear these words from you.

Let me recommend some more sweet words.

- “I forgive you.”

There may be no more powerful words in the English language, besides “I love you,” than these three words. These are life-giving words; hope-filled words; reconciling words.

A man came to me a few months ago and said, “I took your advice and contacted my estranged wife. I

simply admitted I had been wrong and asked her to forgive me.” Then, with tears streaming down his cheeks, hardly able to get the next sentence out, this man said, “And my wife said, ‘I forgive you.’”

There might be a relationship between a son and a father; a businessman and a client; two believers caught in conflict; a teacher and a student; an employee and a boss turned from darkness and despair to light and hope with the humility and grace of offering these words, “I forgive you.”

Let me give one more set of words to practice. They are simple, yet profound.

- “Thank you.”

You say it to your waitress; you say it to your dentist; you say it to the nursery worker when you pick up your child; you mouth it to the guy parking cars in the church parking lot as you drive by – instead of mouthing something else, like “I don’t want to go there,” you go there and say, “Thank you.”

Sweet words require humility. To thank someone is to admit that we did not necessarily deserve it; we could not have done it without him or her; we needed their assistance.

This is why hurtful words are words of pride and helpful words are words of humility.

Husbands, how long has it been since you said, “Thank you,” to your wives for the myriad of things they do for you. When is the last time you thanked your wife for supper? “Thank you, Honey, that was delicious.” If you cannot say it was delicious, then, “Thank you, Honey, that was unforgettable.”

## **Conclusion**

Ladies and gentlemen, let us be wise with our words.

With our words, we can:

- counsel;
- confront;
- comfort;
- cheer;
- construct.

With our words, we can also:

- deceive;
- destroy;
- divide.

So we should surrender our words to the Spirit to:

- surround them;
- silence them;
- sweeten them (if we must speak).

I love this prayer that someone once prayed:

*Lord, fill my mouth with worthwhile stuff  
And nudge me when I've said enough.  
Enough said.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/20/2008 by Stephen Davey.

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<sup>i</sup> Bringing Home the Bacon (Castle Books, 2002), p. 81.

<sup>ii</sup> Robert J. Morgan, Nelson's Complete Book of Illustrations (Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 261.

<sup>iii</sup> John Phillips, Exploring Proverbs: Volume One (Kregel, 1995), p. 518.

<sup>iv</sup> John Phillips, Exploring Proverbs: Volume Two (Kregel, 1996), p. 393.

<sup>v</sup> Charles Bridges, Proverbs (revised by Mott Media, 1978), p. 553.

<sup>vi</sup> Max Lucado, Facing Your Giants (W Publishing Group, 2006), p. 65.

<sup>vii</sup> Phillips, Volume Two, p. 550.

<sup>viii</sup> Ray Pritchard, The ABC's of Wisdom (Moody Press, 1997), p. 290.