

## WISE WORDS

## PROVERBS 18:20-21

John Adams, the second President of the United States, walked with a friend into a great hall where they found two busts – one of George Washington and the other of Adams himself. Tapping his cane on the closed lips of the Washington bust, Adams said, “That fellow knew how to keep his mouth shut.” Then, using the cane again, John Adams tapped his own bust, saying, “And this foot didn’t!” The right use of words is a mark of wisdom.

Today we conclude a message series entitled *How to Live Wisely and Well* which has been a study on some of the dominant themes in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. Proverbs is all about contrasting the wise person and the fool. The fool isn’t someone with a low IQ or a meager education. A fool is anyone who has little or no use for God in his or her life. By the same token, wise people aren’t necessarily folk with genius IQs or several graduate degrees. The wise are simply those who fear the Lord – meaning they offer God loving and obedient respect day in and day out

Now, the differences between the wise and the foolish are many, but none is more blatant than in the area of words. Words matter to God. Words enable you to have a relationship with God and other people. Words allow you to express thoughts, pose questions, suggest answers, learn solutions, share needs, voice thanksgiving and give praise. Why, later this week we’re going to celebrate Thanksgiving Day. That’s kind of hard to do without using words, isn’t it? There’s more in Proverbs about words than I can cover in one message, but let me talk today about two things God wants for you when it comes to words. First of all,

### **GOD WANTS YOU TO REALIZE THE IMPACT OF WISE WORDS.**

Do you want a strong, biblical statement about the impact of words? Try this! “Words satisfy the mind as much as fruit does the stomach; good talk is as gratifying as a good harvest. Words kill, words give life; they’re either poison or fruit—you choose.” (Proverbs 18:20-21 MSG) So, what’s the impact of words? First of all, words are powerful. Words have powerful potential for good or for evil, for healing or for hurt. Words can frighten, threaten, enrage and frustrate, or they can, also, express love, instill courage, extend grace and motivate action in positive ways. Your tongue is an instrument of life and death, relationally speaking. Your words can breathe life into other people. Your words can also destroy people spiritually and emotionally.

What’s the impact of words? Secondly, they reveal how a person perceives reality. How a person uses words will always tell you a great deal about the true person inside. Sometimes that might create a problem! An elderly man had serious hearing problems for a number of years. His family tried again and again to convince him to get a hearing aid. Finally he relented. He went to the doctor and was fitted for a set of hearing aids that allowed him to hear 100 percent. A

month later he went back to the doctor. The doctor said with a smile, "Your hearing is perfect. Your family must be really pleased that you can hear again." The old man replied, "Oh, I haven't told my family yet. I just sit around and listen to their conversations. I've changed my will three times!"

Words tell you how a person perceives God, other people, the purpose of life or the self-perception of why he or she is on the planet. Words reveal if a person has a wise or foolish perspective on life. The Bible teaches that there's a link between your heart and your mouth – a direct link between the real you and your words. Who you really are will get revealed in what you say and how you say it. Consider this proverb, "A wise man's heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction." (Proverbs 16:23 NIV) Your heart and your mouth are connected. Your heart is like a reservoir for your mouth and your mouth is like a channel for what's stored up in your heart. Jesus made the same point when He said, "...For whatever is in your heart determines what you say. A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart." (Matthew 12:34-35 NLT) You think and make choices in your heart, but you reveal those thoughts and choice through your tongue. Because words reveal your innermost person – your heart – they matter.

Third, words possess great value. The Bible says, "Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a fool whose lips are perverse." (Proverbs 19:1 NIV) There's an interesting set of values expressed in that statement. Most Americans think there's nothing worse than being poor economically. Being honest and poor is well and good, but we don't really value honest poor people very much. But God says here that integrity and truthfulness is of great value to Him. Those qualities mean you're right with God and other people; therefore, you can't put a price tag on the value of honest, truthful words.

God puts a high value on words used wisely. Consider these proverbs, "The words of the godly are like sterling silver; the heart of a fool is worthless.... The right word at the right time is like a custom-made piece of jewelry." (Proverbs 10:20 NLT, 25:11 MSG) Highly refined silver was considered more valuable than gold at one point in Israel's history. Wise words are compared to beautiful, expensive jewelry here. That's a very helpful analogy. A beautiful piece of jewelry is carefully planned out in advance. A beautiful piece of jewelry is appropriate for whatever occasion it's been created. A beautiful piece of jewelry is appreciated deeply by the person receiving it. Wise words are just like that. Wise words are planned out, appropriate and always appreciated. Why? Because wise words enlighten, encourage, inspire, heal and motivate people in positive ways. So, wise words have enormous impact. But, the wise use of words isn't about verbal eloquence. It's not a talent like someone who's a great musician, a great athlete or even a great public speaker. Instead, the wise use of words means learning how to speak truthfully and with kindness. That's why anyone and everyone can learn how to use words wisely. So, then, ...

## **GOD WANTS YOU TO LEARN TO USE WISE WORDS.**

First of all, God wants you to think before you speak. Proverbs has much to say about not saying too much and about not speaking before you consider what you're going to say. Consider these statements, "Too much talk leads to sin. Be sensible and keep your mouth shut.... A truly wise person uses few words; a person with understanding is even-tempered. Even fools are thought wise when they keep silent; with their mouths shut, they seem intelligent.... The heart of the godly thinks carefully before speaking; the mouth of the wicked overflows with evil words." (Proverbs 10:19, 17:27-28, 15:28 NLT) There's an undeniable connection between lots of words and sin. Your tongue has a built in tendency towards exaggeration, gossip and shading the truth. The more you use it, the more opportunity you give it to mess up.

When you're learning to use words wisely, you learn to guard what comes out of your mouth. Here's an acrostic I like very much. Before we open our mouths, we would be wise to ask ourselves five simple questions. Is it true? Is it helpful? Is it inspiring? Is it necessary? Is it kind? THINK! Wise people have learned – sometimes the hard way – that an unchecked flow of words often results in sharing incorrect information or making thoughtless comments. God says that fools like to hear themselves talk and the more they talk the more other people get hurt. The wise person uses words with restraint. Wise people are constantly thinking, evaluating and reflecting on what they're going to say before they say it.

What else does God want you to learn? Second, God wants you to tell the truth. Obvious, yes, but important, nonetheless. The Bible says, "Truthful words stand the test of time, but lies are soon exposed.... The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in those who tell the truth." (Proverbs 12:19, 22 NLT) You can't find a stronger word in the Bible for not liking something than "detest." God tells us explicitly in His Word what He detests – homosexual behavior, adulterous relationships, idolatry, human sacrifice and witchcraft. Add lying to that list. We tend to excuse telling lies as no big deal. We differentiate between black lies and white lies. God just can't stand lying in any way, shape or form. He abhors it. Remember that God is Truth personified, so telling a lie, living a lie, shading the truth – all of that is like slapping Him in the face. On the other hand, telling the truth honors Him. God delights in truthful people. God takes pleasure in truthful people. If you want God's blessing upon your life, learn to tell the truth and do it. If you want to forfeit His blessing, just keep on excusing your lies.

Proverbs has a great deal to say about two kinds of lying that most of us dismiss as more or less socially acceptable. What are those? The first one is gossip. "Hiding hatred makes you a liar; slandering others makes you a fool." (Proverbs 10:18 NLT) Slander is just another word for gossip and gossip is the native tongue of the fool. What makes up a lot of the content on TV and radio talk shows? What makes up about 90% of the office chit chat? What gets circulated around the neighborhood? What can even creep into the church? Gossip. R.G.

LeTourneau, an amazing Christian businessman, owned a large earth moving equipment company. He sold a machine called a scraper known as the Model G. Somebody asked one of his salesman one day what the G stood for. The salesman had no idea, but he thought for a few seconds and replied, "Well, I guess the G stands for gossip, because like gossip, this machine moves a lot of dirt and moves it fast."

Proverbs says, "Listening to gossip is like eating cheap candy; do you really want junk like that in your belly?" (Proverbs 18:8 MSG) Gossip can be fun, entertaining and appealing – like lots of Halloween candy. But once you eat all that candy, it just sits there in your stomach and refuses to digest. Gossip is like that. It's delicious and fun at first, but the more you partake the more uncomfortable you become spiritually. Avoid it. Walk away from it. Your inner life will be lighter, freer and more alive when it isn't weighed down by information about other people that may or may not be true.

The second kind of lying we tend to dismiss as trivial is flattery. So what's the big deal? Listen to what God says. "A lying tongue hates its victims, and flattering words cause ruin." (Proverbs 26:28 NLT) Flattery is using words to tell people what you think they want to hear in order to get something out of them you want. It's verbal manipulation. It's insincerity. It's lying. God detests it. Don't do it.

What else does God want you to learn? Third, God wants you to bring encouragement and healing. Do you remember the old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me"? I'm glad that's not in the Bible, because it isn't true. Words have enormous power to encourage or discourage, to heal or to hurt, to extend grace or to condemn. Consider these statements in the book of Proverbs, "Kind words are like honey—sweet to the soul and healthy for the body.... The words of the godly encourage many.... Some people make cutting remarks, but the words of the wise bring healing." (Proverbs 16:24, 10:21, 12:18 NLT)

Jeff was a great, big, tall kid with pimples all over his face – very awkward and self-conscious. His parents had a guest over for dinner who tried to put Jeff at ease. He asked, "Jeff, are you in college?" Jeff was thrilled at the question because he was a junior in high school at the time and no one had ever thought of him as being a college student. The guest asked Jeff, "What's fun about what you're studying right now?" Jeff said, "Math. I love math. I hope they have math in heaven. I just love math." The guest asked him, "Well, what would you like to do with it?" Jeff answered, "Someday, I'd like to be a math teacher in high school." "Where are you going to go to college?" asked the guest. Right about then, Jeff's dad said, "He's not going to college. He's not smart enough to go to college." You could just feel Jeff's dream wither and die right there at the dining room table.

You can use words to either feed people or starve people. Yes, you can starve the inner life of another person - often someone very close to you – by using thoughtless words, harsh words, rude words, judgmental words, critical words – or, even sometimes, by saying nothing at all. On the other hand, wise words are pleasant, sweet, nourishing and healing. Proverbs compares them to a honeycomb – just dripping with sweet honey. When you hear them, those words energize you, inspire you and feed something inside of you. Wise words are like a spiritual and emotional food that satisfies something deep within. Wise people learn how to use words to fill up the inner lives of other people. They use words to bring healing, encouragement, grace and life to others.

You older football fans out there like me will remember Bart Starr who was the legendary quarterback of the Green Bay Packers many moons ago. One year he made an arrangement with his oldest son to encourage good grades. For every “A” Bart Jr. brought home from school, Dad would give him ten cents. Now that was the 1960s! One Sunday, the Packers had a particularly bad game and Starr didn’t play well at all. It was a long plane ride home. But when he arrived home and entered his own bedroom, Bart saw a handwritten note from his son, Bart Jr. It read, “Dear Dad, I thought you played a great game. Love, Bart.” And taped to the note were two dimes! There are times in all of our lives when we need to receive encouragement. Funny how it works! When you decide to become an encourager, you get encouragement. When you decide to extend grace through your words, you receive gracious words. When you use words to bring healing, you get healing words in return.

What an opportunity all of us have to feed the inner spirits of other people just by sharing words of encouragement! You have that opportunity every day in your home. Do you take advantage of it? You have that opportunity every day at your place of work, in the school you attend and in the neighborhood where you live. Do you take advantage of it? You have that opportunity every Sunday here at this church. I can tell you that lots of people walk in here on most Sundays bleeding and busted up on the inside – and usually words have played a big part in their broken condition. People wounded by words! Hurtful, harmful words from a spouse, a friend, a parent, a child, a classmate, a boss. You and I have the opportunity to spiritually nourish and re-energize people as we follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. Do you take advantage of it? “Kind words are like honey—sweet to the soul and healthy for the body.” (Proverbs 16:24 NLT) God might be bringing someone to your mind right now as I speak that He wants you to encourage. Find him or her after the service. Or go and visit. Make a phone call. Send a card. God wants you to experience the joy of using words to encourage someone else. There’s plenty of honey to go around and – let me assure you – other people just never get enough of wise words!

A young manager named Steve was challenged by a leadership coach to express encouragement and appreciation to the people who reported to him. Steve resolved to visit each of his subordinates - all six of whom he had not seen

face to face in over six months even though they worked in the same building and on the same floor. Steve wanted to tell each of them how much he appreciated them, and name one thing they did excellently.

After the visit from Steve, one of his software engineers, Lenny, presented him with an Xbox gaming console. Steve was taken aback, because he knew Lenny had taken pay cuts over the last year. But he was more surprised to learn that the money had come from the sale of a nine-millimeter pistol—a pistol Lenny had bought months earlier with the intention of killing himself. Lenny told Steve of his mother's death the previous year, and of his ensuing loneliness and depression:

“I started a routine every night after work: eating a bowl of Ramen, listening to Nirvana, and getting the gun out. It took almost a month to get the courage to put the bullets in the gun. It took another couple of months to get used to the feeling of the barrel of the gun on the top of my teeth. For the last few weeks, I was putting ever so slight pressure on the trigger, and I was getting so close, Steve—so close. Last week, you freaked me out. You came into my cubicle, put your arm around me, and told me you appreciated me because I turn in all my projects early, and that helps you sleep at night. You also said that I have a great sense of humor over e-mail and that you are glad I came into your life. That night I went home, ate Ramen, and listened to Nirvana—and when I got the gun out, it scared me silly for the first time. All I could think about was what you said—that you were glad I came into your life. The next day I went back to the pawnshop and sold the gun. I remembered that you had said you wanted the Xbox more than anything, but with a new baby at home could not afford it. So, for my life, you get this game. Thanks, boss.”

Wise words. God wants you realize their impact. God wants you to learn how to use them. It's one very important way to live wisely and well.