

A Study in Proverbs
The Tongue – Counsel on Our Words
October 2011

Introduction: The Power of the Tongue

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (Proverbs 18:21).

Destruction: Death is in the power of the tongue.

For example, the way of the hypocrite is destructive:

“The hypocrite with his mouth destroys his neighbor,
but through knowledge the righteous will be delivered” (11:9).

As for the wicked, violence covers his mouth (10:11).

Verbal abuse is perhaps more debilitating than physical abuse, since words can penetrate deeper than wounds:

“Rebuke is more effective for a wise man than a hundred blows on a fool” (17:10).
“The spirit of a man will sustain him in sickness, but who can bear a broken spirit?” (18:14).

Even casual joking involves deception and risks injury:

“Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death,
is the man who deceives his neighbor, and says, ‘I was only joking!’” (26:18-19; cf. 12:18a).

A fool’s tongue not only harms others, but leads to self-ruin as well:

“Wise people store up knowledge, but the mouth of the foolish is near destruction” (10:14).
“A fool’s lips enter into contention, and his mouth calls for blows” (18:6).
“A fool’s mouth is his destruction, and his lips are the snare of his soul” (18:7).

Construction: Life is in the power of the tongue.

The tongue provides *food* and *drink* for the needy soul:

“The mouth of the righteous is a well of life, but violence covers the mouth of the wicked” (10:11).
“The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of wisdom” (10:21).
“The law of the wise is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death” (13:14).

The tongue also provides *medicine* for the hurting soul:

“There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, but the tongue of the wise promotes health” (12:18).
“Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, but a good word makes it glad” (12:25).
“The light of the eyes rejoices the heart, and a good report makes the bones healthy” (15:30).

In light of these verses, let us consider how rich each of us can be in words, with much to give to others.

Even the poorest among us can by wise words surpass all others in giving.

Also, as with the fool hurting himself by his tongue, so the tongue of the wise helps himself:

“A man will be satisfied with good by the fruit of his mouth,
and the recompense of a man’s hands will be rendered to him” (12:14; cf. 18:21, quoted above).

Disclaimer: The tongue is not almighty.

Though the tongue is a powerful tool for good or for bad, it often cannot accomplish the job alone:

“In all labor there is profit, but idle chatter leads only to poverty” (14:23).
“The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother” (29:15).
“A servant will not be corrected by mere words; for though he understands, he will not respond” (29:19).

The world may boast, “With our tongue we will prevail; our lips are our own; who is lord over us?”
but the LORD speaks on behalf of the oppressed and prevails (Psalm 12:4, 5).

His words are “pure words, like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times” (Psalm 12:6).

Four Guidelines for the Use of the Tongue

Our words should be true, few, slow, and apropos.

Note: *apropos* (ap-rah-POH) means “to the point, pertinent, at an opportune time.”

Our words should be true.

True and straightforward speech deals kindly with people, like a kiss of greeting:

“It is not good to show partiality in judgment.

He who says to the wicked, ‘You are righteous,’ him the people will curse; nations will abhor him.

But those who rebuke the wicked will have delight, and a good blessing will come upon them.

He who gives a right answer kisses the lips” (24:23-26, lit. “a straightforward answer”).

In contrast to such a genuine greeter, the deceiver is all show:

“Fervent lips with a wicked heart are like earthenware covered with silver dross.

He who hates, disguises it with his lips, and lays up deceit within himself;

When he speaks kindly, do not believe him, for there are seven abominations in his heart;

Though his hatred is covered by deceit, his wickedness will be revealed before the assembly” (26:23-26).

In particular, we should guard against two common kinds of falsehood:

Flattery – to speak better of others than they truly are

Slander – to speak worse of others than they truly are

In the long run, reproof is better than flattery, which ensnares and ruins others:

“A lying tongue hates those who are crushed by it, and a flattering mouth works ruin” (26:28).

“Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed.

Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (27:5-6).

“He who rebukes a man will find more favor afterward than he who flatters with the tongue” (28:23).

“A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet” (29:5).

As for slander, it is often the source of strife:

“An ungodly man digs up evil, and it is on his lips like a burning fire.

A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends” (16:27-28).

“Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases.

As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife.

The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, and they go down into the inmost body” (26:20-22; cf. 18:8).

Our words should be few.

If our words are few, we will *live* and *let live*.

First, we will *live*, in that we ourselves will benefit:

“He who guards his mouth preserves his life, but he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction” (13:3).

“Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles” (21:23).

Speaking few words leads to less sin:

“In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (10:19).

Speaking few words leads to less embarrassment:

“Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace;

when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive” (17:28).

Speaking few words leads to less harm due to gossips:

“He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets;

therefore do not associate with one who flatters with his lips” (20:19).

Second, we will also *let live*, in that we will often pass over faults in silence:

“Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins” (10:12).

“A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter” (11:13).

“A fool’s wrath is known at once, but a prudent man covers shame” (12:16).

“A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims foolishness” (12:23).

“He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends” (17:9).

Trust is built by not revealing secrets, and by not recalling the past unnecessarily.

Ceasing even to whisper about past problems starves the fires of contention (see 26:20, quoted above).

Our words should be slow.

To be hasty in speech is a very bad sign:

“Do you see a man hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him” (29:20).

Much harm comes from *hot* and *hasty* words:

“A wrathful man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger allays contention” (15:18).

“There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, but the tongue of the wise promotes health” (12:28).

Much verbal abuse is caused by speaking before thinking.

The best place to stop the strife is before it begins—with slowness to speak—and it is an honor to do so:

“The beginning of strife is like releasing water; therefore stop the contention before a quarrel starts” (17:14).

“It is honorable for a man to stop striving, since any fool can start a quarrel” (20:3).

Interestingly, hot and hasty words provoke the same, but real persuasiveness often comes from slow, soft speech:

“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (15:1).

“By long forbearance a ruler is persuaded, and a gentle tongue breaks a bone” (25:15).

To be slow to speak gives time to listen:

“He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him” (18:13).

“The first one to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him” (18:17).

“Also it is not good for a soul to be without knowledge, and he sins who hastens with his feet” (19:2).

To be slow to speak gives time to think:

“The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, but the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness” (15:2).

“The heart of the righteous studies how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours forth evil” (15:28).

“He who has knowledge spares his words, and a man of understanding is of a calm spirit” (17:27).

Our words should be apropos.

It is a delight to have the right word at the right time:

“A man has joy by the answer of his mouth, and a word spoken in due season, how good it is!” (15:23; cf. v.2).

In fact, it is an art to speak aptly—a real work of beauty:

“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.

Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold is a wise rebuker to an obedient ear” (25:11-12).

Interestingly, even the best information spoken at the wrong time or in the wrong way can backfire:

“Like one who takes away a garment in cold weather, and like vinegar on soda,
is one who sings songs to a heavy heart” (25:20).

“He who blesses his friend with a loud voice, rising early in the morning,
it will be counted a curse to him” (27:14).

Sources:

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, New King James Version, Copyright © 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Many of the ideas behind this material came from Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*,

Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1964), pp. 46-49.