

Proverbs, Part 2 8-8-21

Watch Your Tongue

Proverbs 11:9a *With his mouth the godless man destroys his neighbor.* Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. Do you remember saying that as a kid? Can you think of anything more false than that expression? To even suggest that words don't make much of a difference is ridiculous. Words are powerful! It would be more accurate to say that sticks and stones can only break my bones but words, words can just wipe me out. *With his mouth the godless man destroys his neighbor.* In the momentous, fateful days when Nazism was in its early stages Adolph Hitler spoke to a group of people in a beer cellar in Munich. His inflammatory words, which bristled with hate were mirrored in the hardened faces of his audience and soon they engulfed the world in war. An artist captured the scene in that beer cellar, putting on canvas the facial reactions of the group as Hitler spoke those fiery words. He gave this title to the painting: "In the beginning was the word." Those, of course, are the initial words of the gospel of John which speak of the Christ. They are torn out of context to make another statement, I think a powerful statement about the power of words. In the beginning was the spoken word and what followed was years of international conflict and millions of deaths and the redirecting of history, but it all did start with human speech, with what came out of the mouth of one man. Don't underrate the ability of words to accomplish great evil or great good. Words are powerful. 11:11 *By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is torn down.* Nowhere in Scripture is this so forcefully taught as it is in the New Testament book of James. James is sort of the Proverbs of the New Testament and there in chapter 3 it says that the tongue is a little part of the body but it is able to do great things. It is compared to a small rudder which can direct a huge ship and to a small fire which can burn down a great forest. The tongue is like a fire. Fire, as you know, is a tremendous help to mankind but when it is out of control it can be the most destructive thing in the world. What the book of James tells us about it in 12 verses the book of Proverbs scatters throughout the pages of its wisdom and repeats over and again.

We are involved this month in a study of the major themes of the book of Proverbs. Today's theme is "Watch your tongue." Let's see why I call this a major theme of Proverbs. First of all, I want you to see the power of the tongue for good or for evil. 11:11 *By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of*

the wicked it is torn down There you can see the contrasting results of righteous speech and wicked speech. Both are powerful. 10:11-12 *The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.*¹² *Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions.* What you say can destroy your neighbor or your city. But there is also fantastic good that can come from what you say. Your mouth can be a fountain of life. Picture that. Your mouth flowing out with healing and blessings for others. What a beautiful thing that is. So 10:20a *The tongue of the righteous is as choice silver.* 12:18 (NLT) *Some people make cutting remarks, but the words of the wise bring healing.* I hear that some experts in the martial arts have had to register their hands as deadly weapons. There are also those who should register their tongues. Ever had someone say something biting to you and you just felt like it went right to your midsection? Your tongue can be to others like a sword stuck in their belly or it can be an instrument of healing. You will, by the way, find today's study especially relevant for family life. Husbands and wives who vow to love each other till death should part them often, often, destroy each other with words. 15:1 *A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.* Now there is a verse everyone understands. You've been on both sides of that one haven't you? 15:4 (NLT) *Gentle words are a tree of life; a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.* Do you see what power there is for good or for evil in what comes forth from your mouth? You can heal or crush, build or destroy, make or break. No wonder the Proverbs tell you to watch your tongue.

In addition to your tongue's ability to either build up or tear down others, really because of that ability, your words will also build up or tear down yourself. Just based on 15:1 you can see that your control of your tongue can make a big difference in your personal well-being. Do you, by what you say, increase or diminish the wrath a person directs at you? The one who can respond to angry words with gracious words will experience many less angry words and will have an easier time in life. As the verse says, a harsh word only stirs up more strife. Charlie Brown once explained to Linus why he never got in fights. He said, "I learned very early that if you hit someone they tend to hit you back." Proverbs 13:3 *The one who guards his mouth preserves his life; the one who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.* By the grace of God I have been spared big trouble but I have learned from experience the wisdom of keeping my big mouth shut. Have you ever hastily said something, and as soon as it got out of your mouth you would have given your life to get it back? Oh man. One evening in my teen years, when I and some buddies were about to enter our school gym to play some ball this old Cadillac loaded with

uh – undesirables - drove by and one of the guys in that car shouted out certain profanities about my school, profanities for which I had a great comeback line which I thought was clever. The problem was that the car full of hoodlums didn't think it was funny. As soon as I finished my line I heard their brakes squealing and I knew my mouth had gotten me in trouble. They backed up, and came driving down into our parking lot to do who knows what. I didn't stay around to find out. I hopped into my Plymouth and motored out of there with these guys hot in pursuit. We both got stopped behind another car at a red light and these five guys came pouring out of that Cadillac and they were armed with sticks, and a chain and a baseball bat, 5 on 1 coming at my car! I'll skip the rest of the story but you can see how that illustrates verse 3. Oh, you want to hear how my story turned out? Okay. While these guys were coming at me I jumped a curb, drove thru a parking lot and lost them. It did however, make for a very nervous evening, even a nervous week thereafter but I did live to tell about it and to learn from my mistake. Proverbs 21:23 *He who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from troubles.* One more verse on this that clearly relates is 18:6-7 (NLT) *Fools' words get them into constant quarrels; they are asking for a beating. The mouths of fools are their ruin; they trap themselves with their lips.* It is clear enough that an uncontrolled tongue can bring you to ruin in many ways. So many people have lost control before others and totally embarrassed themselves by it. If you can get someone really angry you can learn a great deal about them. Tozer says you often don't see what a person is really like until you see him angry. I don't know about that but I am sure that when a man's temper gets the best of him it reveals the worst of him. When it happens and you let your mouth just go its own way you harm others and you hurt yourself. To explode in anger is to revenge the fault of others upon yourself. Remember *The mouths of fools are their ruin.*

What we need is to gain control of what comes out of our mouths. I am assuming from here on that your basic orientation towards others and yourself is one of love. You want to say what is right and best but you often fail to do that. You are not in control of your tongue, at least not as much as you would like. So, our goal is to gain more control so that what we say is determined by our minds and not our impulses. Right? Okay. Two things I believe are fundamental to our success in this endeavor. There are two things which we must understand. First we must understand what words are for. Most people think words are for expressing our thoughts. That's not wrong just incomplete. Ephesians 4:29 *Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for*

edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. God says that the purpose for what we say should be what? To bless or build up others. Do you see that? Words are not meant to publicize your thoughts so that all may know what is going on in your head. If we all did that we would have very little hypocrisy but a whole lot of misery. One person suggested that in hell everyone will know each other's thoughts. But words are not for that purpose. What I feel cannot, it must not, determine what I say. Self-expression is no good unless my self-expression can be of use to God or man. Self-expression is real easy. You just say whatever comes to mind. God says we are to run our thoughts thru a filter that would clean out any unwholesome word and let thru our mouths only those things that would serve those who hear. Do you have a goal to be a blessing to others thru what you say? When you go to work, or church or home do you stop to think to yourself, "what can I say to Joe or Suzy today that would edify in some way?" Usually we do better if we plan, but few people really think thru what to say to others. We forget how powerful words can be. We use them thoughtlessly and that is the heart of our problem. If words are meant to express our feeling then you don't need to think, but if their purpose is to bless others then we must think before we speak. Think before you speak. Put your brain in gear and grab the steering wheel before you hit the gas or else all you will do is make noise at best and injure someone at worst. What has got to go is this business of responding to people and things impulsively. Your child acts up and your first response is to yell at him, "You stupid .." Hold on, stop right there. That may be what you are feeling but that need not control what you say. Think first. The old saying that tells you to count to ten before you speak makes a good point. Often, often, the best response initially is to say nothing. Look again at the wisdom of Proverbs. And you folks who have hot tempers need especially to learn this next set of verses. 10:19 *When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise.* 15:28 *The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.* You've heard people who didn't ponder what to say but just let it flow. But the righteous man thinks first. 17:27-28 *He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.* ²⁸ *Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is considered prudent.* That verse says to keep your cool doesn't it? It's good to prepare for those times when your temperature starts to rise. How will you react? When someone says something that sets you off and you feel the adrenalin surging thru your body and your pulse quickening that is not

usually the best time for making wise and godly evaluations of things. Whenever I feel myself getting hot or nervous there are warning signs that go off within me which say, "Now is not the time to debate or confront or respond." If I can put off the matter for a day or a minute I will. God's wisdom calls for restraint. **29:11** *A fool always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back.* **20** *Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.* The point of it all is to keep quiet until you have considered how you should speak. Silence may not be the best response but if you say something it needs to be better than silence. Often, in a time of anger, I can't think of anything better than nothing and my momma always said, "if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

Those of us who have a problem here (and I certainly include myself) can feel frustrated in our attempts to do better. Things happen so quickly. Before you know it you have already said something hurtful and although you wish you could take it back you cannot. I know it is hard. You aren't committing premeditated sins but impulsive ones. What can you do? I share this with you as a fellow struggler. The key to improved behavior in this area is the same as with other temptations. It is bringing the truth of the word down to the moment of temptation. It is remembering what is right not after but at the point of the temptation. Now the problem with a quick tongue is that you often have no more than a moment. Still it can be done. Here are a few steps to success. First, cultivate your hatred of this sin. Think on how much it hurts you and your family and friends. Secondly, memorize relevant Scriptures. Sink them into your head. Maybe post them in places you frequent. Thirdly, be open to reproof about this sin and even invite someone to help you overcome it. If you do those three things what will happen is that you will be convicted of what is right earlier and earlier. It will start with you being quicker to repent when you do blow it. And then you will begin to catch yourself in mid-sentence and then more and more you will remember the word before you sin. If you are like me it will be a long slow process but the transformation does take place. Stay at it and keep praying.

A while back I told you that there are two things that are fundamental to our success in guarding our lips from being destructive and making them fountains of grace. One which we have covered is to realize what words are for. The other is to realize who you are. Whereas the first point addressed what we actually say, this point goes deeper and deals with who we are and why we are likely to lose control. To explain: Most of the time, tempers flare and harsh words are spoken when someone does something that insults me or makes me look bad. The root of

the tension is pride and selfishness. If I had no pride I believe I would have little problem with anger. But because I believe, deep down, that I deserve respect and pleasure I get riled when anyone robs me of what should be mine. Two perspectives on who you are should go a long way toward helping you respond differently to the offenses of others. One is that you do not deserve respect. This is a tough one for proud people to see but I'm convinced it's true and it says no more really than you do when you confess that you are a sinner. I honestly believe that God would be just to send me to hell and so I won't feel cheated out of my rights if I don't get respect from church members, salesmen, my children or whomever. What I should see as remarkable is that anyone does respect me. That is the puzzler. There is this incredible story in II Samuel 16 about David. It is after he had done his evil thing with Bathsheba and Uriah and repented. He is walking along one day with his entourage when this guy named Shimei starts cussing at him and throwing stones at him. David is surrounded by his soldiers, he is the king of the land and this maniac comes out doing this stuff. One of David's men asked for the honor of removing Shimei's head and do you know what David said? He said, "leave him alone, for perhaps the Lord has sent him to rebuke me." I believe David felt that he had it coming anyway, no reason to get upset. David had confessed in his prayer of repentance in Psalm 51 that God would be righteous to condemn him for his sin. Do you believe that? Are you humble in your own eyes? If so then others cannot put you down and get you upset.

The second perspective to have is that you already have great dignity. Oh, you don't deserve it but you have it anyway as a child of God and you are above the petty barbs of little people. What people do to you does not matter when you know that you are precious in the sight of God. I don't gain my sense of self-worth from men and so men cannot take it away. To let them get to you and upset you requires you to come down to their level. It is a little man who has to avenge his honor. Who has to retaliate when wronged. Real greatness does not mean you get revenge. It does not mean you prove yourself by overcoming the other guy. Look at Proverbs 16:32 *He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city.* Self-control is the most important control of all. And what does it really mean to be a big man? 19:11 *A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression.* Not to avenge a transgression but to overlook it, to forgive and forget is the mark of real strength. And who exemplifies that so much as Jesus Himself, the embodiment of personal power, control over his emotions and pardon to those

who fail in this arena of life. When I really believe that God has made me his son then I can love others whether they bless me or curse.

Our perspective is critical. We must think right if we are to live right. Proverbs helps us see things as they really are. You can see who you are, you can see what words are for, and you are in a position now to use your tongue, your mouth, your words to build and not destroy. God's word says to us that death and life are in the power of the tongue. So like my mother told me so many times, "You watch your tongue." Let's pray.