

THE POWER OF WORDS**Proverbs 15****(Read Proverbs 15:1-7)**

Intro: Just this past week, before I began work on this talk, I saw this meme somewhere and it made me laugh out loud all over again.

And here is another truth that any intelligent husband has learned early and often and I must emphasize the word “intelligent”. Too many dense husbands have wandered into the danger zone where angels fear to tread and they have the scars to prove it.

Now, I guess, in this talk where I’m looking at some Proverbs describing the power of words and where I’m discussing the wisdom of knowing when to talk and how to use words; using illustrations like the ones I just used that can be construed to be casting aspersions on fully one half of the population is probably ill-advised. But they, well actually, the second one, do speak to my point. We need to watch what we say! Words matter. They mean something. They can lift up and they can tear down. Words can send us into rapture and they can destroy. The lyrics of a love sonnet by Shakespeare can profoundly stir my heart and the angry words dressed up as a comedian’s commentary on the state of the Church can make me so distressed I can’t sleep. Words matter.

Abraham Lincoln said of an opponent “*He can compress the most words into the smallest ideas of any man I ever met.*”

Winston Churchill said “*Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.*”

John C. Maxwell says, “*Great people talk about ideas, average people talk about themselves, and small people talk about others*”

These are all truths and they reveal the power of words in the dialogue and interchange of ideas in an increasingly polarized society. It seems people can’t simply disagree, or even agree to disagree, these days. If you don’t believe the way I believe, then you hate me and we must be enemies.

But Christ Followers must not be sucked into that quagmire. We of all people need to use words to heal and not to hate. The text I just read, and the words of Jesus from Matthew 12 that Keith read earlier address the power of words so let’s look into it a bit. First, let’s spend just a little bit of time on that Mathew passage because it shows us that . . .

Words reveal our heart

- Let do that by reading Matthew 12:33-37 from THE MESSAGE

“If you grow a healthy tree, you’ll pick healthy fruit. If you grow a diseased tree, you’ll pick worm-eaten fruit. The fruit tells you about the tree.

“You have minds like a snake pit! How do you suppose what you say is worth anything when you are so foul-minded? It’s your heart, not the dictionary, that gives meaning to your words. A good person produces good deeds and words season after season. An evil person is a blight on the orchard. Let me tell you something: Every one of these careless words is going to come back to haunt you. There will be a time of Reckoning. Words are powerful; take them seriously. Words can be your salvation. Words can also be your damnation.”

Matthew 12:33-37 (The Message)

- The fruit tells you about the tree and in the same way his words reveal the heart of the speaker. Angry words are seldom well thought out. Careless words cannot be retrieved. Cutting, sarcastic, or insulting words cannot be disguised with “I was only joking!” It’s not a joking matter when a heart is broken.
- Jesus was pretty angry when he called the religious leaders (men who should have known better than anyone else) “brood of vipers” because of their cynical and slanderous accusations against him. He was sternly warning them they had better watch their words because they would have to give an account of every careless word. Let’s remember that, Church. Our words matter and as Christ Followers we should know that better than anyone else. Listen to those final words of the Message that I just read, *Let me tell you something: Every one of these careless words is going to come back to haunt you. There will be a time of Reckoning. Words are powerful; take them seriously. Words can be your salvation. Words can also be your damnation.*” Matthew 12:36-37 (The Message)

- The truth is . . .

Words can heal and they can destroy

- *A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

*The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,
but the mouths of fools pour out folly.* Proverbs 15:1-2

- A soft word turns away anger. It's taken me 65 years to learn this one. Too often I've been the fool pouring out folly. I've learned to bite my tongue because "If you don't have something nice to say, don't say it." is really the truth!
- There is some really picturesque language here that helps to illustrate this. David Guzik writes, "*The mouth of fools pours forth foolishness: A fool will be revealed by their words. It isn't enough for a person to claim they have wisdom in their heart or mind; what they say proves either their wisdom or folly.*" The Hebrew words for fools pouring out folly, describe something blurted out like a bubbling fountain, or even a geyser blasting into the sky like Old Faithful.
- Foolish, unthinking words stir up passions but, in the words of one of my commentators, "*A wise man avoids the hot retort.*" Bruce Waltke wrote of this verse, "*Soft speech is like oil on bruised skin to soften and heal it; painful speech has the effect of oil poured on fire.*" Oil can do one or the other as can words. Charles Bridges uses a similar and equally descriptive and helpful analogy "*Pride and passion on both sides strike together like two flints.*" Words can heal or they can destroy.
- Using the analogy of a tree like Jesus did, the writer solidifies this truth in verse 4, *A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.* Proverbs 15:4. This is literally speaking of healing speech. In the Hebrew these are referring to therapeutic words. But the writer points out that the opposite is just as true. Harsh words destroy. A harsh word stirs up anger: A harsh response to wrath often only stirs up more anger. It may feel good at the moment but ends up making the situation worse, not better.
- The New King James uses the word "wholesome" and it sheds some helpful light. Listen, *A wholesome tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.* Proverbs 15:4 (NKJV). In other words, good words are like a tree that continually brings life from its shade and fruit. Our words have the power to do far more good than we often think. The contrast is sad, if someone's tongue is perverse (which is described by Guzik as twisted, crooked, corrupt) instead of wholesome, their words will break the spirit of others. Our words have the power to do far more harm than we often think. We need to think about our words. puts it this way, FB Meyer, "*If we can rule our speech, or at least hand over our tongue and lips to the keeping of God's Spirit, what a world of trouble we should save ourselves and others!*" Are we allowing the Spirit of God to keep our mind and lips and tongue in check – or are we blurting out like Old Faithful?
- So let's ask this of ourselves . . .

Are our words perceptive or are they hollow?

- I've jumped down to verse 7. Let's listen to it again, *The lips of the wise spread knowledge; not so the hearts of fools.* Proverbs 15:7 (ESV) and then from the Message, *Perceptive words spread knowledge; fools are hollow—there's nothing to them.* Proverbs 15:7 (The Message).
- David Guzik writes of this verse, "*The wise man or woman will spread (disperse) knowledge and wisdom. It is within them and will be given to others by the words they say. The heart of the fool does not do so: Since wisdom isn't in the heart of the fool, it won't be on their lips either. They are unable to spread the blessing of wisdom to others through their words.*"

Conclusion: How are you using your words? Let's take stock of the power of what we say. Are we using perceptive and wise words that spread goodness and grace and knowledge, or are we using the hollow, harsh and hurtful words that constitute foolishness and lead to animosity and crushed spirits?

Let's be very aware of the power of our words and use them only to build up the kingdom. Let it be said of us that we are the followers of Jesus by the healing words we use. May the fruit of grace be abundant on our branches. Amen.