

## **GET WISDOM!**

### **IV. “Words of Life or Death”**

8-20-06  
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Prov 12:18

*Reckless words pierce like a sword,  
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

Prov 18:21

*The tongue has the power of life and death...*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Back in the early 1970's when we were at a church in southern Ohio, Polly, our two-year-old son Kris, and her mother traveled to Montana to visit my parents at a time when I was unable to go. Now this is ancient history for some of you—airport security was nothing like now. AND it was before the days when there were clearly posted signs at the security check points about references to bombs not being a "joking matter." On the return trip to Cleveland, they were going through security in the Minneapolis airport. Polly had Kris' winter coat over her arm. The agent told her to put the coat on the conveyor belt too. Polly made the observation, "O sure. There could be a bomb in there." It was not said sarcastically or with an uncooperative attitude. She was merely making an observation of agreement. But, at the word "bomb" an eager agent (probably fresh out of training) said in a loud voice: "THAT WAS AN UTTERANCE!" And, immediately, Polly, Kris, and her mother were escorted away by security personnel to a special room and kept under guard until the FBI could arrive.

The FBI seemed in no hurry to get there. So, Polly, Kris and her mother sat there for a couple of hours awaiting their fate. Finally, two FBI agents arrived for their big interrogation, and Polly was informed that any reference to a bomb was illegal, no matter what the context and that she could be prosecuted. After their interrogation the agents said they needed to call the Attorney General's office in Washington D.C. and see if they wanted to prosecute. When the agents left the room to make their call, Polly said, "I think we better pray." At that, little Kris folded his hands, scrunched up his eyes and said, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." That's a pretty good prayer for a two- year-old! At last the decision was made not to prosecute and they were released to continue their journey. Of course it was long after their flight had left. But they did finally manage to get back to Cleveland very late that night.

I think of that as an illustration of the power of words. They can't be unspoken or taken back in any real sense. Words make things happen.— they set things in motion. Many times during that nightmare, Polly wanted to unsay her words. But, once said there was no way to stop what she'd set in motion. She had to sit helplessly by while the consequences unfolded.

The Bible says a lot about the power of words. It is an important theme in Proverbs. (Note the sampling of verses on the bulletin insert). So this Sunday I want to devote a sermon to some of what is said in Proverbs.

Genesis lets us know that God created the world by speaking words. In a related way, the Bible

tells us that we create the world we live in through the words we speak. All of us can think of times when hurtful words pierced our souls like a sword, as our text says. But we can also remember words that brought healing and life to us and maybe even changed our lives.

## **DESTRUCTIVE POWER**

How many of you learned that rhyme as a child, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me?" I can remember shouting that defiantly at name-calling friends as I walked up the alley to the safety of my home. But, there is a big problem with that bit of folk wisdom: IT IS NOT TRUE! In fact, words can do far more than sticks or stones can ever do. They can kill the spirit. Most of us still carry deep scars of unkind, mean, judgmental words. Destructive words have convinced some that their ears are too big, their voice is too screechy, they are too fat, they are stupid, they are incapable of leadership or speaking to a group.

As a pastor, I've often worked with people with crippling low self-esteem. More often than not, I find at the root that their damage was a word spoken. Maybe it was by a parent or someone else who was extremely significant to that child. Sometimes it was a word spoken in anger or frustration and possibly not really meant, such as:

- "You always mess up everything."
- "You're never going to amount to anything."
- "You're a failure. Why don't you do better?"

And, they spend the rest of their lives either proving that evaluation through failure after failure or are defiantly driven to disprove it, frantically trying to prove their worth or attractiveness. In any case, they are unable to enjoy being just who they are. They are always trying to be what they are not— all because of some words that made them feel what they are is unacceptable. Generally the formula is, the earlier we received those disapproving words, the more controlling they are.

Thus, telling a four-year-old he is stupid is far more damaging than saying it to a twenty-year-old. (Though it is never appropriate to say something like that). And also, the importance of the person who gives that evaluation weighs heavily in its effect. A parent's word contains far more impact than a stranger's.

Reckless, thoughtless, hurtful words also destroy. In Prov. 12:18 we read,

*Reckless words pierce like sword thrusts.*

And in Ps. 64:3,

*They sharpen their tongues like swords  
and aim their words like deadly arrows.*

Have you ever observed an argument between people when hurtful words were spoken and you can see a visible wince in the face of the one being attacked? A sword thrust to their spirit.

How many arguments get started and words get sharper and sharper, and more hurtful.

Afterwards we can say, "I didn't mean that, I'm sorry." But there is no way we can completely erase them. It is like trying to unring a bell. Fortunately, verbal abuse in adult relationships is being paid more attention to today. With verbal abuse in a marriage, you don't see the bruises and scars of physical abuse, but in many ways it is as bad or worse. The damage to the inner person can be harder to heal. Or in a work relationship, there is no place for the verbal abuse of another person. Dr. Ogilvie writes:

*Most people are far more sensitive than we suspect. All of us are more sensitive than we*

*would like to admit. And everyone lives in a world of insensitive people with undisciplined tongues.*

**Gossip and rumor** are another destructive use of words. Some of you may have been victimized by gossip, and you know the helpless feeling, even despair that it causes. There is no one you can go to in order to explain the truth— there is just a nebulous cloud of people out there talking about you. With everyone you meet, you wonder inside what they've heard. You want to explain to people the truth. You feel like wearing a sign, handing out flyers, doing something to salvage your reputation. But anything you try would only make it worse. So, you just avoid people or move away if you can. Yes, I've seen people driven from communities, from churches, and isolated from friends by malicious gossip and rumor.

When does legitimate sharing of interest and concern about people become gossip? There's a fuzzy line that is often hard to discern. Here's a definition I once read that I find helpful:

*Gossip is sharing private information with those who are not a part of the problem or part of the solution.*

Private— is it generally known? Is it accurate? Check it out if you're not sure. Would you feel free to share it **in the way you are sharing it** with that person present? And then, is the person you're sharing this with part of the problem or the solution? Is anything constructive going to happen with the information you're sharing? Even prayer requests can get to be an excuse for gossip— “Please pray for Mary. You know, her husband is having an affair with his secretary.” We need to be very careful in passing along prayer concerns to be sure our information is accurate and we are not sharing more than should be shared. We can be so quick to add speculation, conjecture, or other tidbits we “think we know.”

Here's another formula in acrostic form I came across from the Rev. Dr. Alan Redpath that can help in discerning what gossip is— it's on the back of the bulletin.

**T** Is it **TRUE**? Do you have the facts right? Even when we know the truth, it is tempting to add our opinion regarding motive or other speculations.  
**H** Is it **HELPFUL**?  
**I** Is it **INSPIRING**?  
**N** Is it **NECESSARY**?  
**K** Is it **KIND**?

You see, just because it's true doesn't mean it's okay to share. We need to examine our motives and hearts and what we're trying to accomplish with the information. Maybe we're trying to sound important, “in the know.” Running the other person down can make us feel better. Or, if we're angry or jealous, it can be a means of trying to get even— a kind of guerilla warfare. Paul tells us in Ephesians that when we speak the truth, it must be in love (4:15).

Also, we may think it's all right to listen to gossip, as long as we don't pass it on. Prov.18:8 is powerfully descriptive:

*The words of a gossip are like choice morsels;  
they go down to a man's inmost parts.*

But, just listening destroys something of the person gossiped about in your mind. Even if you

suspect it is not true, you can't look at that person the same again. You wonder if there wasn't at least some basis for the rumor. Or, maybe it makes you feel superior because they've been put down and that elevates you a little above them. And, it encourages the gossiper if we listen or ask questions. I think it's best to stop the person and say, "I'm sorry, but I'd rather not hear it."

And, when we're upset with someone, Jesus gives very careful instructions in Mtt. 18 about how to handle it. First we go to the person and talk it over with them. If we just did that and got the facts and motives from them, most problems would probably end right there. As Christians, we are not free to talk about people, running them down. We are to talk to them.

The Psalms talk a lot about weapons enemies use in attacking us. But, did you know that the most frequent weapon used against the psalmists is the tongue? I expect things haven't changed. I believe our tongues are one of the enemy's favorite weapons.

While the destructive power of our tongues is awesome, the creative power of words is also amazing.

### **LIFE-GIVING WORDS**

Words can heal, renew people, uplift people, and do more than any medicine. Consider the power of words like:

"I love you."

"I forgive you."

"I believe in you, you can do it!"

They revive sagging spirits and give resurrection to destroyed self-esteems. Prov. 15:4 affirms, *A tongue that brings healing is a tree of life.* Creative energy is unleashed by positive, complimentary words. Aren't there clothes you wear that as you put them on, you remember a warm compliment from a trusted friend— "You really look sharp in that?" Maybe as you took a difficult action or stand, you remember the support and encouragement from someone important to you, blessing you for what you did? Prov. 12:25 says it well.

*An anxious heart weighs a man down,  
but a kind word cheers him up.*

Our job is to build each other up, help, and motivate in positive ways— not tear down, put down, and be critical.

Nathaniel Hawthorne came home from work one day, devastated. He'd been fired from his job. His wife, instead of responding with anxiety, surprised him by eagerly saying, "Now you can write your book!" Well, he wasn't nearly that positive. His dejected response was, "And, what shall we live on while I write my book?" To his amazement, she opened a drawer and took out a wad of money she had carefully saved over the years out of her housekeeping budget. She explained, "I always knew you were a man of genius. I always knew you'd write a masterpiece." Because of her encouraging, life-giving words, Nathaniel Hawthorne did write that masterpiece, The Scarlet Letter.

Right words, can energize us and move us in the right direction. Mary, Queen of Scots, said she

feared the tongue of John Knox more than an army of 10,000 men. A historian of Napoleon said that half of what Napoleon achieved was through the power of words. And Winston Churchill is legendary in how he rallied the British nation and kept hope and courage alive in the hearts of people in the darkest days of the battle for Britain through his words.

### HOW DO WE CONTROL OUR TONGUES?

Jesus warns us that words are the fruit of what's inside. In Mtt. 12:34 He says, *Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks*. So, we must begin with the heart. If one's heart is filled with angry, critical thoughts and feelings, then in unguarded moments, critical, judgmental, hurtful words will spew out. If we feel insecure or threatened by another, we may put another person down to make ourselves look good, or gain status through our inside knowledge of the gossip. But, if our hearts are filled with love, joy, peace and other good things from the Lord, that's what will come out. If you really love a person, you want to encourage them, build them up, not tear them down.

Take a look at your heart this morning? Why do you feel it's your responsibility to correct everyone's mistakes and imperfections? What makes you so judgmental of others? Why does it feel good to you to spread harmful gossip or rumors? Does it make you feel superior? Is it a way of getting back at another person who's angered you?

### CONCLUSION

James tells us, *If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man* (James 3:2). I expect all of us have some things to repent of. I'd like to conclude with selected verses from one of David's Psalms, the 15<sup>th</sup>:

*LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary?  
Who may live on your holy hill?*

*He whose walk is blameless  
and who does what is righteous,  
who speaks the truth from his heart  
and has no slander on his tongue,  
who does his neighbor no wrong  
and casts no slur on his fellow man,*

....

*who keeps his oath  
even when it hurts,*

....

*He who does these things  
will never be shaken.*

As we close, join me in praying this prayer of David from Psalm 141 (vs. 1 & 3):

*O LORD, I call to you; come quickly to me.*

*Hear my voice...*

*Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD;*

*Keep watch over the door of my lips.*