

Using Words Well

Proverbs 15:1-4

Language is an incredible thing.

The volume of words that the average person is able to use is somewhere in the neighborhood of 30-50000 according to the National Institute of Health.

People take those individual words and put them together with other words to communicate ideas to other people at incredible speed.

Even more incredible is that we learn a massive amount of our native language when we are extremely young without books or formal instruction.

A young child simply absorbs his parent's language by listening and imitating and through that he eventually gains understanding.

The whole thing is absolutely incredible and is one of the things that sets us apart as special creatures made in the image of God.

Because talking is something that we do all the time it is an easy thing to set on auto pilot and do without a whole lot of thought involved.

There is some necessity to that. If every word we said had to be analyzed and agonized over it is hard to imagine getting anywhere talking to each other.

On the other hand, failing to give much consideration to the things coming out of our mouths more often than not leads to trouble.

Because that is the case the bible has a fair bit to say to us about how to use words well.

[That is what our passage for this morning **Proverbs 15:1-4** is about. In this passage we see that the words that come out our mouths can have a big impact on our lives and the lives of those around us, we see that the things we say to some degree display the condition of our hearts, we are told about how God's attributes should affect our thinking about the words we choose, and about the power of words to build up or destroy. If we are experiencing the transforming work of the Holy Spirit according to the grace of God in Christ, then we should be seeing the fruit of our salvation in the things that we say. Let us first consider how are words can impact our lives and the lives of those around us. We see that in verse 1 where we are reminded that...]

Point #1 – Words can bring peace and conflict. (Verse 1)

We all face confrontation in life for a variety of reasons. What we choose to say in those moments can either seek to calm the situation or through gas on the fire.

An experience that I'm sure most of us can relate to is someone being angry with us.

Every human being alive breaks God's commands, we all do wrong things, it is what the bible calls sin.

The bible says in Romans 3:23, "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*"

If we have any sense of the true nature of God's glory we will immediately see that we fall so far short that there is no hope in ourselves.

We all need a Saviour. That explains why there is hostility between people.

When people who are far from perfect, which is everyone, interact with each other there are going to be problems.

People are going to get upset there is going to be conflict and arguments.

The proverb here is **verse 1** speaks into that reality.

Let's recall for a moment what a proverb is. "A proverb is a short saying that points us in the right direction."

We are not to take this to mean that we should always give a soft answer and we are not to take this to mean that a soft answer *always* 'turns away wrath.'

We are to understand this to mean that a 'soft answer' *can and often does* 'turn away wrath.'

I'm going to guess that when many of us hear the word 'soft' we think of weakness.

Avoiding conflict by giving into the demands of angry people is the opposite of what we find in the Scriptures especially when we look to the example of Jesus.

Rather than 'soft' meaning 'weak' here, it means 'restrained for the sake of preserving or protecting.'

In other words it is responding without getting all riled up in anger towards someone who is angry with us.

If we are going to give such an answer we must be greatly concerned with at least two things. First, we must be concerned about the tone of our voice and our body language.

The actual words we use are only part of the equation. How we say what we say matters.

Secondly, we must be concerned for the person who is angry with us. Not to fold to their demands but to seek their highest good.

If we do that then we are genuinely seeking to make peace with someone who is upset.

The other option given here is "harsh words".

For most human beings that is our default response.

Commentator Franz Delitzsch says these are cutting words, words intended to wound or cause pain.

When that is our response we are throwing fuel on the fire of conflict.

When it says here that 'harsh words' stir up anger it applies both to the one we are speaking to and in our own hearts.

When we respond to anger with angry and bitter words our own anger gets ramped up along with the other person.

Things go from bad to worse until we walk away or the fight goes beyond words which is really bad.

[Many years ago I was sitting on a friend's porch waiting for him to get home and across the street there were two guys burning some leaves. They were having a hard time with the fire and one of the guys got the idea to pour some gas on the fire. He did so right from the gas can. He was fortunate the thing did not blow up but it did catch on fire. His solution was to give the can a football kick which simply made the problem worse and in a few seconds the can was melting, black smoke was pouring into the air, and the fire department was on their way.]

That is the way harsh words work.

Sadly, if we are passive about this then harsh words can become such a pattern in our lives that we can use them without realizing it.

It is like we are a can of gas in our relationships.

The bible calls us to the opposite. We are to be 'peacemakers'.

Instead of being like a gas can in arguments we should strive to be like firefighters.

[How is that going in your life? Do we care about how what we say comes across to others or do we say, "That is the way I am deal with it?" Do we have a habit of ramping up with angry words or are we devoting time and energy into how we might respond both truthfully and seeking the highest good of others? Christians don't roll over in the face of sinful hostility, we are to stand firm with great gentleness, patience, and humility. What we say and how we say it matters a great deal in terms of being a peacemaker or stirring up more conflict. Here is something else words can do...]

Point #2 – Words reveal the wise and the foolish. (Verse 2)

Jesus said, "...what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart" Matthew 15:18.

What we say is a window into whether or not our hearts are governed by what is true and good or by what is false and useless.

Let's look together at the **first half of verse 2.**

The word 'tongue' here is clearly referring to more than the muscle in our mouths.

Most often in the Bible when we read the word tongue it is referring to a person's language, the manner of their speaking, or the content of what they have to say.

In this case, Solomon is telling us about the content and manner of a wise person's speech.

It is important to remember that helping people become wise is the primary purpose of the book of Proverbs.

It is also important for us to remember what wisdom is.

Wisdom is the ability to apply the truth of God's instructions to everyday life.

The level to which we have grown up in wisdom is evident in the things that we say and do on daily basis.

One of the qualities of a wise person is that they have the ability to 'commend knowledge'.

The word that is translated 'commend' here means to display something as good, pleasing, or enjoyable.

To put something on display is to reveal it or make it known as it is.

In other words a wise person is calling attention to the goodness of true knowledge.

A wise person is not a salesman trying to make a product appear to be more than it is, a wise person is tour guide that helps people see the greatness of what is there.

The wise person speaks of the joy of the knowledge of God's word because he/she has lived it and knows firsthand the blessings of living life according to God's commands.

The second half of verse 2 tells us that what comes from a person's mouth also reveals the fool.

If wisdom is the ability to apply God's word to life, then foolishness is living contrary to God's instructions.

This has very little if anything to do with a person's level of intelligence.

In fact, I would suggest to you that some of the smartest people who have ever lived have been some of the greatest fools in the history of the world.

This is about people who are promoting ideas that encourage people to live opposite to the way the LORD intends.

Fools, we are told here, 'pour out folly.'

The idea is that they are always talking.

[The picture here is like a broken water pipe in your basement or a hole in the bottom of a boat. In both of those cases you have water that is pouring out not stop. As soon as that starts to happen it is bad and the longer it persists the worse the situation becomes.]

That brothers and sisters is the time and place we are living in.

We live in a twenty four hour news cycle, much of which has a godless agenda.

The ease of social media has given world wide platforms to people bent on leading others towards self-destruction, particularly young people.

The constant conversations that are taking place around marriage, family, education, and economics are far from random.

They are the fruit of the philosophies that can be traced back hundreds of years and that are leading people to eternal destruction.

We are constantly told today that individual people determine their own reality and everyone else has to affirm that.

What the Bible says about who we are and how we are made is the subject of scorn and ridicule.

Basic biology and science are tossed out the window for the sake of the idolatry of self.

Just as a boat will sink from a hole allowing water to pour in so too will people and societies that tolerate many fools pouring out folly.

[It is neither wise nor loving to encourage people to live life rejecting the rule of God; that is utter foolishness. The LORD calls us to something better. He calls us to commend His ways to the world. He calls us to do that with words that come from actually experiencing the goodness of His commands. The things that come out of our mouths reveal either wisdom or foolishness. I am convinced that God has called us to Himself through the Person and Work of Christ to call attention to the goodness of Who He is and what He has commanded. Some might say, "What does it matter? It all seems hopeless and nothing I say is going to make any difference." I agree it all seems like an impossible situation, but we also need to remind ourselves of something very important. Our primary goal as believers is about pleasing God rather than people. Verse three reminds us of that by reminding us that...]

Point #3 – Our words are known by God. (Verse 3)

The LORD bears witness to everything we say and that is both a comfort and a warning.

Recently I have been reading a book on the history of western civilization which begins with the Greeks and Romans, goes through the Middle Ages, the renaissance, the reformation, and up to the present day.

One of the things that has stood out to me is the effect of the starting point of philosophy and morals.

The author Francis Schaeffer describes it as a choice between beginning with the universal and then figuring out the particulars or starting with the particulars and from that try to figure out the universals.

In other words do you start with objective truth that applies to everyone or do you begin with individual reason and observation and from that try and figure out what is true for everyone?

That question goes back thousands of years and Schaeffer makes the excellent point that no individual or society has ever been able to arrive at the universal by starting with the particulars.

This is the great problem of our time even within the church; that our thinking begins with humanity and tries to figure it out from there.

That's impossible! The Bible starts in the only place that makes sense, the Bible starts with God.

We see that here in verse 3.

The 'eyes' here represent the LORD's ability to observe what is taking place.

Look at where God has the ability to observe! It says, 'in every place.'

That is possible because the bible teaches us that God is present everywhere.

Are there any kids here this morning that know the big word for God being everywhere?

There is more here than God simply being present. We are told He is 'keeping watch'.

He is taking an active interest in everything that happens including the words that we say.

[I am often amazed at how we can change both what we are saying and how we say it depending on who is with us. Anybody remember the days before caller ID? In those days you could be in a heated argument with someone as angry as could be and then the phone rings and you pick it up and everything changes. Why? Because we care about what we sound like depending on who is listening.]

Now apply that to what this verse is saying.

I can guarantee that if the LORD Who is present with us right now were to make His presence visible it would have a dramatic impact upon us.

I suspect if we could see with our eyes that the LORD is constantly with us it would change the way to speak to others.

If I ask for a show of hands of how many people believe in the omnipresence of God the vast majority in this room would put up their hand.

Do we really? Why then do professing Christians yell at their husbands, wives, and children?

Why do professing Christians curse and swear at work or at home without sorrow or fear?

Why do professing Christians gossip and speak with malice and bitterness?

Conversely, why would we ever think that calling attention to the goodness of what is true is a waste of time?

God sees it and is pleased even if we are hated because of it.

Do our words reflect what we say we believe about the attributes of the LORD?

[Matthew Henry says, “The great truths of divinity are of great use to enforce the precepts of morality and none more than this...that the eye of God is always upon the children of men.” How amazing would it be if we cared more about what God hears coming out of our mouths than we did about anyone else? That would be powerful because the fact is that what we choose to let past the gate of our lips has the capacity for great good and for great harm. We see that clearly in verse four where we are reminded that...]

Point #4 – Words have the power of life and death. (Verse 4)

In both what we say and how we say it we can seek to build others up or tear them down.

Just like verses one and two, **verse four** begins with the positive and then compares it to a negative.

This is very similar to the idea of ‘a soft answer’ that we saw in verse one, but it goes a bit deeper.

Where the answer in verse one is more of a restrained response for the sake of dialing down the temperature of an angry person, the ‘gentle tongue’ here in verse four is focused on restoring wellbeing to someone.

The word translated as gentle here means ‘healing or cure’.

It is words acting as medicine for the soul, and Solomon tells us that those kinds of words are ‘a tree of life’.

Those words should sound very familiar.

They take us back to the beginning of the bible to the Garden of Eden as well as to the end of the Bible to the New Heavens and the New Earth.

While Adam and Eve lived in the garden in unbroken relationship with God they had access to everything that was life giving and good.

It will be the same in eternity. The LORD will make a place that will sustain His people to the glory of His grace forever.

If we read that into this verse, which I am convinced we should, then a ‘gentle’ or ‘healing’ tongue is describing someone who is pointing people to Who God is, who we are, and how we can be in a right relationship with our Creator.

Now contrast that with the second part of the verse.

‘Perverseness’ can also be translated as ‘crookedness’ or ‘falseness’.

This can be outwardly malicious where the speaker’s intent is to hurt the other person, or it may words that are based in a

false reality that keep people lost in sin and separated from God.

Saying things like, “You are a worthless and there is no hope for you” is speaking this kind of language.

Saying, “You are amazing just the way you are and you are good enough on your own” is also speaking with a perverse tongue.

They sound very different but both lead people into brokenness.

Someone with a gentle tongue say things like, “There is a glorious God and you have been made in His image.”

He has made you to enjoy His goodness forever and even though, like me, you have messed up countless times, He has made a way for us to be forgiven and restored in the life, death, and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ.

A healing tongue invites people into a God centered view of reality which is the way things truly are.

The difference between ‘a gentle tongue’ and a mouth with ‘perverseness in it’ is the difference between giving someone medicine and poison.

One brings life and the other brings death.

Language is incredible.

I believe it is one of the most significant aspects of being made in God’s image.

It is through language that the LORD has revealed Himself to humanity.

It is through language that people have cooperated together to build civilization.

Every time we open our mouths to say something we are employing something with great power.

Words can be used to make peace and war.

They reveal the wise and the foolish.

Everything we say is said in the presence of God.

And finally ours words can point people to either life or death.

There is both great weight and glory to what can be accomplished through what we say and because that is true we should all resolve to be people who use words well to the glory of God.

Let’s pray together towards that end.