

Proverbial Speech
Proverbs 18:4-8 March 1-2, 2014

Introduction

- Some of you are aware that before I was a pastor I was a lawyer. **PP** Or, as my dad says, a liar. And as an attorney, I got to hear lots of stories about other attorneys. One of the stories I'll never forget occurred several years back. You see, there was a charter bus of lawyers that was headed to a law conference when the driver lost control of the bus and it careened off a cliff killing everyone on board. Tragically, the bus was only half-full.
 - I know, bad joke. But it's supposed to be funny because of the reputation that attorneys have for being liars and swindlers. **PP** I mean, the stereotype is that they're people who use their words to fight, to twist the truth, to defame, and tear others down. I mean, how do you know when a lawyer is telling the truth? When his lips aren't moving. It's a joke, but it's how many of us think of lawyers because of how they speak.
 - How we speak and what we say, says a lot about the type of person we are.
- Last week we began a sermon series in Proverbs. In the introductory sermon, Pastor Tim taught us that a proverb, **PP** in the biblical sense, is a saying that typically contrasts two truths in order to show us how to live wisely and not fall into foolishness.
- There are hundreds of these proverbs in scripture, covering many, many topics. And today the Lord put on my heart the topic of the tongue...speech of the wise vs. the speech of the foolish.
- Since there are so many proverbs on the subject, it's a little hard to stick to just one text. So I'm going to be referencing several different Proverbs, but our main text is going to be **Proverbs 18:4-8**. As you turn there, let me pray.

The Significance of Speech

- Now before we dive into the body of our text, I just want to look briefly at the significance of speech. **PP** You see, the book of Proverbs contains some 90 mentions of the tongue or speech – making it one of the most prevalent subjects – if not the most commonly mentioned topic – in the entire book, and that's pretty significant.
- Why is that? Well, Proverbs is concerned with the acquisition of wisdom – the skill to properly apply God's truth to our daily lives. And one of the most common actions that people do is speak. Every day we speak to all kinds of people; we should be speaking to God, and we speak a whole lot to ourselves.
 - One study I read estimated that the average person spends 20% of their waking hours talking....which doesn't even account for our inner monologues....That's a lot of speech.
- We speak every day and the contents and manner of our speech are an excellent indicator – and maybe even the best indicator – of whether we're following the path of the wise or the path of the fool. And I believe that is why Proverbs contains so many teachings pertaining to our speech.

- Because the reality is, what comes out of our mouth is a primary indicator of what's going on in our hearts and minds – spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually.
 - Jesus said in **Mathew 12:34 PP** “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”
 - What comes out of our mouth – our speech – is like a flashing sign projecting what's going on in our heart – whether that be sinful or God-honoring. We should all be super-mindful of what is coming out of our lips.
 - And so really, all of these proverbs on the tongue are meant to get us to see our hearts and show us how what's in our hearts and minds overflows into what we say and how we say it.
 - And these proverbs apply to every single one of us...none are exempt, because every one of us speak and our hearts will be revealed through our speech.
- But our speech is significant not only because it's an indicator of what's in our hearts, our speech is also significant because it's one of the chief ways that we affect those around us, and ultimately, represent who Christ is to the world.
 - **Proverbs 18:21** says **PP** that “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.”
 - If we aren't mindful of what's coming out of our mouths – if we don't take care to tame our tongue – we will become foolish speakers of death instead of the wise speakers of life that God calls us to be, and we'll misrepresent who Christ is to the world.
 - Unfortunately, taming the tongue isn't easy. James 3 makes clear that it's impossible to tame the tongue apart from God...**James 3:8** says **PP** that “no human being can tame the tongue”.
 - We need the Holy Spirit for us to be able to speak life. And if we yield our tongue to the Spirit and seek the wisdom of the scripture and address what's in our hearts, we'll draw nearer to the Lord and our speech will be life to those who hear it instead of death.
 - And this brings us to our passage today. **Proverbs 18:4-8**.
- **Verse 4** says **PP** “The words of a man's mouth are deep waters; the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook.”
- The first part of verse four gives us the overarching statement and sets up the contrast between the speech of the fool and the speech of the wise.
 - Verse 4a tells us that the words of a man's mouth are deep waters – there is great depth to words, and deep waters are dark and murky – it's hard to see clearly whether the words someone speaks are foolish or wise
 - Thus, the rest of the passage shows us how to discern between the speech of the wise and the speech of fools, so that we can see through the murkiness of our words and clearly into our hearts so that there can be change.

- Verse 4(b) makes a short statement that lets us know that the words of the wise will bring life...they are like a bubbling brook supplying life-giving water. And we're going to look at ways that our tongue can speak life near the end of this sermon. But before we do that, **PP** we see that our text looks primarily at the sinful speech of fools, teaching us how to speak wisely by giving us examples of how *not* to speak.

The Sinful Speech

- So we're going to look one by one at these four verses and look at some sinful speech.
- **Verse 5 says PP** "It is not good to be partial to the wicked or to deprive the righteous of justice."
 - At first glance, this verse may not seem like its dealing with our speech at all, but if we dig into we see that it's referring to courtroom testimony. **PP** Basically, it's addressing false witnesses and slandering others...which we can make a little broader and say it's talking about lying – lying to and lying about other people.
 - You see, if you are called to give a testimony in a court, your words will be used as evidence in the case. So this verse highlights the fact that the foolish person will speak slander and lies and justice won't be done.
 - One attorney I practiced with used to handle worker's compensation claims – basically, these are claims that an employee makes against their employer when they get hurt on the job. And he told me the true story of an attorney who was cross-examining a plaintiff who claimed to have a shoulder and arm injury, and was suing his employer for damages. The attorney asked the plaintiff to raise up his arm as high as he could to show the court his lack of range of motion due to the injury. The plaintiff gingerly raised his arm to about a 90 degree angle. The attorney then asked the plaintiff to raise his arm as high as he used to be able to raise it before the injury; and the plaintiff shot his arm up as high as he could put it. Naturally, the plaintiff lost the case.
- So we see that this guy was a liar and he was certainly a fool. Fool's lie, they don't speak truth. So what is the heart issue being revealed here? Well, at the basest level, the primary reason we don't speak truth is because we're trying to benefit ourselves in some way. We're selfish and we're putting our own benefit, desires, and reputation above everything else. When we lie we're being selfish at heart and loving ourselves above all else.
 - Unfortunately for liars and slanderers, their gain is momentary and it will ultimately lead to death. **PP Proverbs 21:6** "The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a snare of death."
 - I found an interesting study that said that if the average person is in conversation for more than five minutes then they have told a lie. And the study found that the primary reason we lie – or twist the truth – is to make ourselves look better.
 - So we need to really think about this...how often does my selfish heart rear its ugly head through my speech? How often do we lie to make ourselves look

better? How often am I following the fool's path to death for a momentary gain? It's so simple to just slightly change the facts or to omit something that makes us look better at the expense of the whole truth. And don't let the devil fool you, half-truths are full lies.

- And you know what? God hates a lying tongue....no matter how "small" the lie may be. In the list of things God hates in **Proverbs 6:17-19**, we are told twice that God hates lies....and **Proverbs 12:22** says that "lying lips are an abomination to the LORD"... God hates selfishness, and seeks a selfless heart that serves others and not itself. A selfish fool's speech is full of lies.
- But as we move on to **verse 6** we see that fools also quarrel and fight with their words.
PP It says "A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating."
 - The speech of the fool is provocative and vulgar and is going to cause quarreling and arguing. Now, some of us like to speak our mind without regard to the impact of our words on others, and we speak in spite of knowing that our words are going to incite anger or bitterness. And scripture says that people who speak this way are worthless fools.
 - **Proverbs 12:18 PP** "There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts..."
 - **Proverbs 16:27** "A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire."
 - Are you someone who always seems to cause bickering and arguing when you speak or share an opinion? Do you let others know what you're thinking without any filter? Is your speech devoid of grace towards others, or often times critical? Do you speak rashly without considering the impact of your words?
 - If you're resonating with any of these questions, then we have to look at what's going on in our hearts...and the basic issue that is being exposed through our rash, tactless speech is pride. We're going to say what we want to say regardless of what others will think or how it will affect them – and that's pride. I'm right and they're wrong and they need to be put in their place – that's pride. The prideful fool speaks rashly and his words are like daggers to those who hear them causing quarrelling and fighting and ultimately will lead to ruin.
- In fact, as we move on to **verse 7** it specifically says that **PP** "A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul."
 - While this doesn't outline a specific sin, it reiterates how vitally important it is to be mindful of our speech...because if we aren't allowing the Holy Spirit to tame our tongue and lead us into wise living, then our tongue will be our ruin. This is why we're called to pursue wisdom, because it'll transform our hearts and minds and produce godly living – including pure speech.
 - **Proverbs 4:24** says **PP** "Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you."

- **Proverbs 6:12** “A worthless person, a wicked man, goes about with crooked speech.”
- So we can ask ourselves, is my speech honoring to God or is it crooked and perverse? Do I fall into the trap of course jesting and talking with sexual innuendo? Do I put others down all the time, making derogatory remarks, judging, and making others feel worthless and demeaned? Do I complain all the time?
 - All of these things are crooked, perverse speech and will lead to our ruin and will turn others away from the God we claim to serve, and each of them reveal deep heart issues that are sinful and will separate us from God.
 - And you know what, maybe you’re not resonating with any of these types of crooked speech, but I’ll bet every one of us can think of others who speak like that. And so these verses should teach us that the godly response isn’t to judge them for their speech and toss them aside, but to come alongside them and help them see what’s in their heart that is producing this perverse speech.
- And this brings us to the final verse, **verse 8** which is all about our speech concerning others, **PP** its say “The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.”
 - You see a whisperer or a talebearer is a gossip. Someone who spreads rumors and information about others behind their backs. And the reason why it’s so easy to fall into this sin is because these juicy tidbits of information are like tasty little morsels that people can’t resist but swallow up. And as the information is shared it often gets twisted and more off base each time it is repeated.
 - I want you to think of what a Viking looks like. You have the picture in your mind? Ok, well most of you probably pictured something like this. **PP** But did you know that it’s a historical fact that Vikings never actually wore horned helmets into battle? In fact, they barely ever wore any helmets at all. But because they were terrorizing the “civilized” world, the leaders of the “Christian” countries tried to demonize them, spreading false information that they had horns and producing art with them wearing horned helmets. Well, this lie – this gossip – caught on and to this day popular culture pretty much always depicts Vikings with horned helmets. **PP**
- Gossip can quickly and effectively spread a lie about someone no matter how absurd it may be. If enough people are talking about a lie then eventually people assume it to be true. And pretty soon there is anger, bitterness, and division – which is exactly what Satan wants.
 - **Proverbs 16:28** says **PP** “... a whisperer separates close friends.” While **Proverbs 17:9** says “Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.”

- You see those who gossip and spread information – whether its rumor, or its fact that simply isn't your place to share – they're going to cause division and separate a body. And **Proverbs 6:19** says that God hates those who sow discord and cause division among brothers. While **Proverbs 20:19** says that this is such a problem that we shouldn't even associate with someone who babbles about secrets.
- But gossiping is merely symptomatic of the deeper heart issue. What's down in the heart of a gossip? Well, amongst other things, it's a heart of self-righteousness and judgment that wants to lift itself up over others. You see when we gossip, and spread information about others that we have no business sharing, we put ourselves above and in the judgment seat of the other person we are gossiping about, and trying to elevate ourselves in the eyes of the person we are gossiping to.
- So we have to be honest here...how many times have we shared a "prayer request" that was just an excuse to gossip? How often do I lower my voice to a whisper because I'm afraid someone else is going to hear something I say?
 - And you know what, it doesn't matter if the information is true...if it's not your place to share it – and it's usually not – then you're gossiping...and the self-righteousness in your heart is pouring through.
- But there is another sin that whisperer's fall into, and that's the sin of flattery. While gossip is something that you say behind someone's back that you wouldn't say to their face, flattery is saying something to someone's face that you wouldn't say behind their back. And flattery is just as sinful and destructive a form of speech as any of these other things.
 - **Proverbs 26:28 PP** "A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin." While **Proverbs 29:5** "A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet."
 - And we can easily fall into flattery when we're trying to get on someone's good side or are trying to get something we want. We say what we think they want to hear – instead of speaking the truth – and we lie; they may be nice lies but its deception nonetheless and it's sin that will bring us to ruin.
- John Smith is one of the most common names in the United States. It was for that reason alone that Mark Twain **PP** dedicated his story of *The Celebrated Jumping Frog* to John Smith, who, he wrote "I have known in diverse and sundry places and who's many and manifold virtues did always command my esteem." Twain figured that anyone to whom a book is dedicated would be sure to buy at least one copy, and since there were thousands of John Smiths, his book would be assured of at least a modest sale. Mark Twain was counting on the power of flattery to get people to buy his book....to get them to benefit him.
- You see the flatterer doesn't really care about the person their speaking to...they're just using them as a means to an end. And the heart issues usually at play here are selfishness and/or people pleasing. We butter people up to get what we want or to

make people think better of us. And we disregard pleasing God for the opportunity to please ourselves and gain the approval of others. If we fall into the people pleaser category then we're essentially making that person an idol, and idolatry is never a good thing to have coming out of our hearts.

- Does this mean we can't ever say anything nice to someone? Of course not, we're called to edify and encourage one another. But our motives need to be for the other person's benefit.
- So ask yourself how often do I tell people what I think they want to hear in order to further my own agenda or benefit myself somehow? Maybe your boss? Maybe your parents or friends? Or how often do I tell people what I think they want to hear in order to gain their approval? Both of those things are flattery, and that's walking the selfish, idolatrous path of the fool.
- All of these sins of the tongue are deadly. And if they are present in our life then we need to really examine our hearts to see what is going on in them. Remember, out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks, and death and life are in the power of the tongue.

The Skillful Speech

- Now we've just spent a lot of time looking at the sinful speech proceeding from a fool's heart and the death that it produces, but I want to spend the few remaining minutes looking **PP** at what the skillful speech of the wise looks like...the life giving speech that should proceed from our lips.
 - Remember verse 4(b), "the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook". Wisdom – skillfully applying the truth of God to our lives – will produce transformation in our hearts that brings forth life from our lips.
- And while verse 5 starts off by warning us about lying and slandering others from the heart of selfishness, the first characteristic of wise, life-giving speech is that it always speaks selfless truth. **PP**
 - **Proverbs 12:19** "Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment."
 - **Proverbs 8:6-8** "Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right, for my mouth will utter truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips. All the words of my mouth are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them."
 - Skillful speech is characterized, first and foremost by truth. This not only means that what we say is true, but it also means that wise speech will be full of the truth of scripture.
 - Skillful speech puts to death the selfish desires of the flesh that produce lies and seeks truth above its own selfish desires, with a selfless heart.
- But skillful speech is also characterized by peacemaking. Whereas, a pride filled heart will produce speech that causes quarrelling and fighting, the heart of the wise, humble speaker will produce peaceful speech and avert hostility. **PP**

- The very first I ever memorized was **Proverbs 15:1** “A gentle answer turns away wrath. But a harsh word stirs up anger.” – maybe God was preparing me to be a lawyer with that one, because there were many times he brought that verse to mind as I was reasoning with an adversarial attorney. And a gentle word from my lips was enough to diffuse a hostile situation and lead to a positive outcome.
 - The words of the wise don’t incite others to fight but bring peace to a volatile situation and avert anger because the heart of wise is filled with humility.
- But sometimes more wisdom than providing a gentle word is necessary...sometimes the skilful tongue is the restrained tongue that says nothing at all. **PP**
 - **Proverbs 17:27** “Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.”
 - **Proverbs 21:23** “Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble.”
 - **Proverbs 10:19** “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.”
 - The heart of the wise is humble enough to keep silent where appropriate and keep itself out of trouble. In fact, **Proverbs 17:28** says **PP** “Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.”
 - The skillful speaker knows when to restrain herself and not speak at all. In fact, I’ve heard it said that it’s better to keep your mouth shut and let everyone think you’re a fool, then to open your mouth and remove all doubt.
- Which brings us to the final characteristic of skillful speech that I’d like to highlight, encouragement and exhortation. Instead, of gossiping, flattering, and slandering others, because of the self-righteous, pride, and people-pleasing tendencies of our flesh, the heart of the wise **PP** encourages and brings healing to others because it seeks to love God and to love them instead of itself.
 - We already looked at the first half of **Proverbs 12:18** “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts,” but hear the second part... “the tongue of the wise brings healing.” Skillful speech doesn’t speak rashly or offend, instead it brings life to its hearers.
 - **Proverbs 28:23** “Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue.” The skillful speaker knows how to speak truth in love, and doesn’t seek to please others, but seeks to please God and help others draw near to Him.
 - When we do that, when we encourage others, build them up and graciously help them see the sin in their hearts Proverbs tells us that the wise words flowing from our hearts are like sweet honeycomb (16:24), as precious as choice silver (10:20), and as beautiful as precious gold set in silver (25:11).

Conclusion

- Speaking with wisdom should be a goal for every single one of us because Jesus said in **Matthew 12:36-37 PP** “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” Why? Because out of the abundance of the heart of the mouth speaks.
 - Any you know what? Ultimately, this sermon hasn’t really been about our speech. The proverbs of the tongue are all really just proverbs that reveal our heart.
- And this brings us back to that half-full bus of lawyers who careened off the cliff. We laugh because of the poor reputation of attorneys...but guess what? These proverbs make clear that there is one attorney who we desperately need to clear up the ugliness within our hearts.
- And, do you know who that lawyer is? That’s right, Jesus Christ. Did you know he was an attorney? Yes, its true Jesus was a carpenter here on Earth...but you know his profession up in heaven – He’s a defense attorney. **PP**
 - Scripture tells us that Jesus Christ is sitting at the right hand of the Father interceding on our behalf (**Romans 8:34**), and that he is our mediator so that we can even come before God (**1 Timothy 2:5**). And when the great prosecutor – Satan, the accuser – goes before God the Father, its Jesus Christ who is our advocate, and He pleads his own blood – the blood that he shed for us – in our defense in order to prove our innocence (**1 John 2:1, Revelation 12:10**).
- And that is what these Proverbs of speech are meant to get us to realize. That none of us can tame our tongue and speak wisely without Jesus Christ transforming our hearts. These proverbs of speech are meant to get us to see our hearts and understand our desperate need for Christ.
- So let’s not take the path of the fool, the one who refuses Christ and allows the ugliness in his heart to spill forth and pollute and pervert his speech and produce death.
- But let’s follow the path of the wise, the one who submits to Jesus Christ and recognizes their need for a savior – which transforms their heart and produces speech that spreads truth and builds up those around them.
 - Let’s heed the wisdom of scripture and follow Christ so that our hearts are transformed and our words will be bearers of life and not death. Amen. Amen.