

## PROVERBS 18:21 THE POWER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Do women talk more than men?

Some studies have claimed that women use about 20-thousand words a day, while men use about 7-thousand words a day.

But now we have a new study. It informs us that men and women each use about 16-thousand words a day.

I don't know which study is right, but I do know this: no matter how many words you use each day, they are important.

As we read through the Old Testament, we are in the book of Proverbs. Last week, we learned about wisdom in general:

\* What is wisdom? Wisdom is what is real: living in the world as God really made it. Wisdom is what is right: following what God says is true and just.

\* What does wisdom give? Wisdom gives true wealth, which is far better than money or stuff. Wisdom gives true life, which is far better than death.

\* What does wisdom call? She calls, seek wisdom. Seek me. We learned that wisdom is ultimately found in knowing, loving and following Jesus.

Today, let's learn the wisdom of Proverbs, in a specific area. Let's see how the wisdom of Proverbs, guides our thousands of daily words.

But first, let's remember this:

\* This is not legalism. Legalism is when I try to show God how good I am. The hope of the Old Testament, and the joy of the New Testament, is that Jesus has come to make us good before God, for we can't do it ourselves.

\* This is not moralism. Moralism is when I try to show you how good I am. We must shape our words, out of love for Jesus, who lived, died and rose from the dead, that we might know and serve God forever.

So what about our words? What about my words?

The wisdom of Proverbs is captured well in two phrases: I must slow down, and I must build up.

**I MUST SLOW DOWN.**

Proverbs 18:21 declares the "power" of the tongue. As I relate to you with my words, my words are powerful.

Today, the "words of the tongue" are more than just the words that come from my tongue itself. I might write lots of words in emails, in text messages, or in blogs. Those expressions are powerful, too.

I am reminded of the words of a teacher, who told of using the saying in her first-grade classroom, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." A little girl raised her hand and said she had made up a new ending to that expression: "Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can break your heart."

Spoken or written, words have power, so I must slow down.

But I don't want to slow down. I WANT TO get going, and keep going.

I want to get going. I want to get talking. I want to say, what I want to say, to your face or on my computer.

But hear the wisdom of Proverbs 29:20: "Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him."

What strong words! Solomon is not easy on fools in his Proverbs. But at least a fool might quiet down and learn something. But if I get going with my words, I will never learn anything.

That's because once I get going, I keep going.

Proverbs 10:19: "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise."

Why do many words, lead to sin? Because I am a sinner! The more I open my mouth, the more likely I am to sin in what I say to you.

I get going, and I keep going. Why do I do this?

It's partly a natural pride. I think I am smarter than you. I think what I have to say, is more important than what you have to say.

It's partly a cultural problem. I live in a loud culture, with very little silence. So I get going, and keep going, just to avoid the silence.

I want to get going, and keep going. **BUT I MUST** slow down.

I must listen first.

Proverbs 12:15: "The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice."

A wise man listens. He listens to advice, but he also simply listens to people. He wants to understand people he knows, before he speaks.

Do I know how to listen? It is easy to talk. It is not easy to listen.

\* I have to take the effort to ask questions. I must be interested enough in you, to ask questions that will help me know you.

\* Then I have to take the effort to listen to the answers. I must focus my mind and heart on you, so that I may hear you and know you.

Pastor and writer Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them..."

"Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening."

I must listen first, then speak. Yet even as I speak, I must slow down.

Proverbs 15:28: "The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes folly."

What do I do when I weigh something? I am evaluating it, so I can know what I need to know about it. When I weigh my words, I am considering how my words will affect the person who hears me.

So what am I weighing?

I am weighing, when I say it. Is now the best time to say this?

Maybe I need to challenge you. Is now the time? Or are you already beaten down, and just about out?

Maybe I want to add some humor. Is now the time? Or are you hurting so much that humor would just make it worse?

Proverbs 10:32: "The lips of the righteous know what is fitting..."

What is your situation? What is your attitude? Will I be adding hurt to hurt? Or will I be helping you by saying what I want to say?

I am weighing, when I say it, and I am weighing, how I say it. What would be the best way to say this?

Do I need to speak strongly? Do I need to use very descriptive or even graphic words? Or should I speak gently, and calmly?

Proverbs 15:23: "A man finds joy in giving an apt reply."

What will fit the situation? What will be best, for you?

My words are powerful. When I have spoken or written them, I cannot take them back. They will do their good, or they will do their damage.

I remember when I was young. Ready. Fire. Aim. What destruction came from my words?

I know how quickly I can put words together. Boom! Boom! Boom! What destruction comes from my words?

I must slow down. I want to get going and keep going, but I must listen first, then speak, weighing when and how I speak to you.

So when I do speak, what do the Proverbs guide me to say?

**I MUST BUILD UP.**

"The tongue has the power of life and death." As we learned last week, wisdom pursues life, while folly seeks death. In Jesus, who has given me new life, I want to offer you life, through my words. So I strive not to tear you down with death-dealing words, but to build you up with life-giving words.

With thousands of words coming from me each day, there are thousands of examples! But let's ponder three ways I build you up with my words.

First, **WITH HONESTY.**

Proverbs 12:22: "The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in a man who is truthful."

Honesty is a huge subject! But if I am building you up with honest words, I will speak honestly to you. I will...

\* Not lie or deceive.

If I lie to you, I am asking you to live your life, while believing a lie. If I deceive you, I am shading the truth, so you don't really know all the truth.

"I don't know what happened"... "I just forgot"... "She didn't say anything to me"... "I didn't do that."

Are my words true, or am I lying to you or deceiving you? I honor the God of truth, by giving you the truth.

In speaking honestly to you, I will also...

\* Not flatter or shatter.

If I flatter you, I am giving you empty praise, just to make you feel good. But I don't believe it. I just want you to believe it, so you will like me.

If I shatter you, I am harshly criticizing you, just to make you feel bad. I want to hurt you. And I will get what I want.

Am I just flattering you? Are my words shattering you?

I want you to know the truth. I want you to live in the truth. I want you to deal with the truth. So I build you up by speaking the truth to you.

I build you up with my words, with honesty, and with WISDOM.

Proverbs 15:2: "The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of a fool gushes folly."

One of Aesop's fables is the story of two frogs, who lived in a marsh. The summer was hot, and the marsh dried up, so they went to search for another damp place to live.

They came to a deep well. One frog said, "This looks like a nice, cool place. Let's jump in and live there." But the other replied, "What if this dries up like the marsh? How will we get out again?"

One frog spoke wisdom to the other. I should speak wisdom to the people around me, to build them up.

What does this look like in my life?

\* Here is one example: correction. The wise frog corrected the other frog, because he was about to leap into huge trouble.

If I am going to build you up, I will offer wise words of correction. I am not just trying to criticize. I want what is best for you. I want life to grow in you. So I will correct you.

"I am really concerned, that you are getting deeper and deeper into a relationship that you will regret."

"I wonder if you have thought carefully about how you are going to approach your boss on this question."

"I fear you are living to acquire more and more stuff, and you will soon find yourself hopelessly in debt."

The tongue of the wise commends knowledge.

\* Here is another example: humor.

I think of myself as a young person, more than a few years ago, and I think especially of young people.

Laughter is a great blessing. It is good to laugh. But humor can lead to foolish thoughts, and foolish actions.

When I laugh with you, I must do more than laugh with you. I cannot simply be silly with you. I must encourage you to live with wisdom.

Young people, as you mature, my hope and prayer is that you will be able to commend knowledge to each other.

"Have you ever thought about what a fool that singer is?"

"I know that's funny to some, but it's really hurtful to others."

"I hope we are smart enough to stay away from that."

I build you up, when I speak with wisdom.

Then I build you up, when I speak WITH ENCOURAGEMENT.

Proverbs 12:25: "An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up."

What is encouragement? How do I encourage? What encourages me?

Encouragement is more than praise. Praise is when I tell you how great you are. "You are such a great..."

That's nice, but when I receive praise, I am usually not built up.

Why not? I know it's overblown. I know my failings. I know my weaknesses. Too often, praise rings hollow in my heart.

Encouragement is also more than happy talk. Happy talk is when I just try to say something positive, to make you feel good. I might make a joke. Or I might say something to try to get you to look on the "bright side."

That's nice, but when I receive happy talk, I am usually not built up.

Why not? I know it's empty. I know reality. I know the situation. You can try to pump me up with positive thinking, but nothing has changed.

Encouragement is more than praise, and it is more than happy talk.

So what is it? It is the giving of courage. Your heart is anxious. Your heart is heavy. Your heart is weighed down. You need courage to go on.

I give you courage, when I reassure you that God is still there, and God still cares, and God is still working in your heart and your life.

Praise focuses on you. Happy talk focuses on good things. Encouragement focuses on God.

I say, "My friend, it may be rough now. Or maybe you just can't make sense of how your life is going. But God has not given up on you. He is still actively shaping your life, for his glory, and your good.

"Be of good courage now, for God the Father is for you, Jesus the Savior is with you, and the Holy Spirit is in you."

That's encouragement! So I must ask myself, how can I build you up, with more than praise or happy talk, but with encouragement?

Honesty. Wisdom. Encouragement. I build you up.

Maybe I have told you the story of a famous scientist, who lived in the Alps as a young boy. His mother said, "There is a boy in the mountains who will speak to you, if you call to him."

The boy called, "Are you there?" The voice echoed, "Are you there?"

The boy yelled again. The voice echoed again.

The boy didn't understand what was happening, and he grew irritated. He said to his mother, "That is a very disagreeable boy."

The pastor who recounts the story writes, "He was listening to his own words, and it was his own heart he was evaluating."

My words reflect my heart. What is in my heart, and what is in my words? Listen to these Proverbs, which paint pictures of our words.

\* Proverbs 10:21: "The lips of the righteous nourish many." Do my words nourish people, as food nourishes our bodies?

\* Proverbs 10:20: "The tongue of the righteous is choice silver..." Are my words valuable, offering true wealth?

\* Proverbs 25:11: "A word aptly chosen is like apples of gold in settings of silver." Are my words beautiful, like gleaming precious metals?

"The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit." That last phrase is a little hard to understand, but it seems to say that what we say, will bear fruit in our lives.

What do I say? Do I slow down, and speak with honesty, and wisdom, and encouragement? If Jesus is Lord of all, is he Lord even of this? If his Spirit is in me, can his Spirit help me with this?

Yes, Jesus is Lord. Yes, his Spirit can help.

Even with thousands of words.