

SELECTED PROVERBS

[PRELIMINARY REMARKS]

- We're in a series called *Foolproof: God's Wisdom for Your Life*.
- **Last Week:**
 - We said that wisdom is NOT a mystical/enigmatic/Yoda-like quality.
 - Instead, it's very practical: An understanding of how real life can work really well—or **skill in living**.
 - But more than that, we said it's **skill in living—in light of the gospel**.
 - That's where wisdom begins.
 - With **reverence** and **awe** for God—because of who he is and what he's done for us.
 - That's how the Book of Proverbs must be read:
 - Not as a self-help guide—full of hacks and protocols.
 - But as a rich resource that shows us how we can live to the fullest in **joyful obedience** to God.
- **This Week:** We come to our first topic—Wisdom and WORDS.
 - Let me read you a collection of Proverbs.
 - And then we'll get into it.

[SCRIPTURE READING]

9:10: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*

10:19: *Where words are many, sin is not absent...* (NIV84).

12:18: *There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

12:19: *Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment.*

12:22: *Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD...*

15:1: *A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

15:23: *To make an apt answer is a joy to a man...*

16:23: *A wise man's heart guides his mouth...* (NIV84).

17:28: *Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.*

18:21: *Death and life are in the power of the tongue...*

25:11: *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.*

25:15: *With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone.*

27:6: *Faithful are the wounds of a friend...*

31:8: *Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute.*

Mt 12:34: *For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.*

[INTRODUCTION]

- How many words do you think you speak on an average day?
- Researchers at the University of Arizona have studied this question for years.
- In 2025 they published their latest findings:¹
 - They analyzed more than 630,000 recordings from over 2,000 people.
 - And they found the average person speaks about 12,700 words a day.
- That's a lot!
 - Almost 90,000 words a week—and more than 4.6 million words a year.
 - That's like writing about 75 books every year!
- And all of these words matter...
 - To us, to our loved ones, to our communities—and to God.
 - Such is their importance to him that Proverbs has more to say about words than any other topic.²
- That's why we're starting with them today: To be wise—to live skillfully in light of the gospel—we have to think deeply about how we use our words.

[Transition]: Today, we'll get our arms around the Bible's teaching under three headings, starting with:³

THE POWER OF WORDS—*Your words are powerful*

- **18:21: Death and life are in the power of the tongue.**
- Two ideas here:

1. Death: Your words have tremendous power for HARM.

[State]: Words are **small** but can be **hugely** damaging.

- **12:18: There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts.**
 - Reckless speech—planned or blurted out in the heat of an argument—can do lasting damage.
 - Once it's said, it can never be unsaid—the sword has been thrust.
 - We may want to take it back, but it's too late—the damage has been done.

[Illustrate]: Most of us experienced this...

- **We've been hurt** by careless/angry words.
 - The **kid** on the playground who called you fat.
 - The **parent** who said you don't have what it takes.
- **And we've said hurtful things too:**
 - The **line** in the argument you'll forever regret.
 - The **angry text** you wish you could pull back.

[Apply]

- The word was small. The wound wasn't.
- And that's the point: *Words have tremendous power for HARM.*

2. Life: Your words have tremendous power for GOOD.

[State]

- **18:21:** Death and **life** are in the power of the tongue.
- **12:18:** There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings **healing**.

[Illustrate]: Most of us experienced this too...

- **I've been** down—then moved to persevere by the words of those who believe in me.
 - It's the **teacher** who saw something in you that you couldn't see.
 - The **parent** who said, "I'm so proud of you."
- Words can harm but they can also heal.

[Apply]

- And don't you want to use words like that?
 - What's it like to talk to you?
 - Death or life, hurt or healing?
 - Do people leave feeling smaller, or do they leave feeling more alive?
- We can have that kind of impact.
 - The word may be small. But the life isn't.
 - That's the point: *Words have tremendous power for GOOD.*

[Transition]

- Well, if our words are powerful—with such potential for harm or for good—then what kind of words should we speak?
- That takes us to our second point: 1) The **Power** of Words; and now...

THE BEST WORDS—*How to use your words for good*

- Proverbs tells us **what kind** of language we should use.
- I've found Derek Kidner—an Old Testament scholar—helpful in gathering together Proverbs' teaching here. Building on his work, let me give you 5 ways we can use the best words.⁴

1. The Best Words Are... HONEST words

[State]

- **12:22:** Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD.
- **12:19:** Truthful lips endure forever...

[Illustrate]

- In our culture, we have a pretty **high tolerance** for dishonesty—we've even come up with nicer names for it: a white lie/stretching the truth/spin.
- And we're guilty of it in our own lives too.
 - *I'm almost there*, when you haven't even left.

- The detail you conveniently leave out when talking to your boss.
 - The technically true answer you know gives someone the wrong impression.
- It's helpful to think through when we are personally tempted to lie—and why.
 - To avoid conflict, appear competent, because I want people to like me?
 - What's that about?

[Apply]

- **Whatever the case**, God calls us to a **higher standard**...
 - To a truthful life—***where we live w/o pretending.***
 - **Where we're real** with people and **prove ourselves** worthy of trust.
- We are an honest community of truth-tellers.

2. The Best Words Are... COURAGEOUS words

[State]

- **31:8:** Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute.
- **27:6:** Faithful are the wounds of a friend.

[Illustrate]

- If you're going to speak truth, you'll need to have courage.
- Sometimes that means having the courage to **speak up** for someone.
 - When a classmate is being **bullied**—do you speak up?
 - When **gossip** starts—do you speak up?
- Sometimes it means having the courage to **speak to** someone.
 - When a friend is neglecting his **marriage**—do you speak to him?
 - When you see **dysfunction** in a loved one's life—holding onto bitterness or constantly blaming others—something everyone notices but no one mentions—do you speak to them?

[Apply]

- Sometimes it takes courage to be honest.
- We are a community that doesn't avoid hard things.

3. The Best Words Are... GENTLE words

[State]

- **25:15:** With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone.
- **15:1:** A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

[Illustrate]

- Some of us don't have a problem being courageous—we have a problem being **obnoxious**.
 - We pride ourselves on speaking the truth, but neglect to do so in love.
 - Proverbs calls us to gentleness and tenderness.
- Think about this in the places where emotions run hottest:
 - When a **friend** has let you down.
 - When your **kids** have disobeyed again.

- When your **spouse** refuses to change.
- In those very moments, remember **James 1:20 (NIV84):** Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

[Apply]

- Anger isn't persuasive, gentleness is. Harshness isn't compelling, tenderness is.
 - When we respond in kind, we tend to make things worse.
 - BUT when we are kind, our words can disarm/defuse.
- Such words have power:
 - *Nothing is more persuasive than grace.*
 - We are a community who speaks the truth in love.

4. The Best Words Are... FITTING words

[State]

- **15:23:** To make an apt answer is a joy to a man.
- **25:11:** A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

[Illustrate]

- The best words say the right thing—*in the right way*.
 - We shape our communication to the person we're speaking to.
 - Which enables them to hear us.
- I had to learn this early in my marriage.⁵
 - **I grew up** in family that dealt with conflict by putting everything on table, hashing things out, and then moving on.
 - **Rosie grew up** in a... let's say—a less direct family.
- When we were **first married**:
 - **I'd** put everything on table, and she'd think I was mad.
 - **She'd** be more reserved, and I'd think I was getting the silent treatment!
- It took us an embarrassingly long time to figure this out—and to start saying the right thing in the right way.

[Apply]

- In challenging conversations, we put the **communicative burden** on ourselves.
- Am I saying this in a way that they can hear it?
- We are a community who says the right thing in the right way.

5. The Best Words Are... FEW

[State]

- **10:19:** Where words are many, sin is not absent.
- **17:28:** Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.

[Illustrate]

- Generally, we cause more harm by *speaking* than by keeping *silent*.
- It's better not to speak than to stop talking too late.

[Apply]

- And I suppose there's a practical necessity here:
 - By the time we've thought about whether our words are **honest** enough, **courageous** enough, **gentle** enough, **fitting** enough...
 - We'll find we say less than we used to...
- We are a community who knows when to stop.

[Transition]

- The BEST words are **honest... courageous... gentle... fitting... and few.**
- How does that hit you?
- I think it's kind of DEPRESSING...
 - Think about yesterday: How many of your 12,700 met those criteria?
 - Most of us know the answer: We don't speak as we should.
- Which takes us to our final point: 1) The **Power** of Words; 2) The **Best** Words; and finally, our need for...

THE GREATEST WORD

[State]

- Here's the hard truth: ***our problem is far deeper than mere words.***
 - **16:23: A wise man's heart guides his mouth...**
 - **Mt 12:34: For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.**
- Author Paul Tripp puts it very simply: **"Word problems are heart problems."**⁶

[Illustrate]

- Tripp tells story of being at **family gathering** as child.⁷
 - His uncle got drunk and started making sexual comments about women in the room.
 - As soon as Tripp's mother heard it, she threw the kids in the car.
 - Before driving off she turned to them and said: ***"There's nothing that comes out of the mouth of a drunk that wasn't there in the first place."***
 - Alcohol didn't create the problem.
 - It just loosened the lips so that what was in his heart came out.
 - And the same is true for us: Ultimately, the problem isn't with our words, but with the hearts those words reveal.
- [Hold up bottle with lid on]: Here's another illustration from Tripp—What will happen if I shake this bottle?⁸
 - [Shake bottle]: Nothing much. Why? Because the lid's on.
 - [Remove lid]: What will happen if I shake it now?
 - [Shake it/get a little wet]: Water comes out!
 - Why? You could say, "Because you shook it."
 - True—but the shaking didn't put the water in there.
 - The shaking just revealed what was in there in the first place.
 - Jesus says that's how our words work:

Mt 12:34: For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

- Life shakes you—you're criticized, your kids push every button, someone cuts you off—and suddenly words come spilling out.
- But Jesus says the shaking just revealed what was already in the heart.
- ***You have never spoken a word that did not come from your heart.***
 - **Cutting** words because I wanted them to hurt.
 - **Defensive** words because there's pride in my heart.
 - **Foolish** words because there's folly in my heart.

[Apply]

- All this points us to another word—the greatest Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, even Jesus.
 - He is the only one whose words were perfectly honest, courageous, gentle, fitting, and few.
 - Even his enemies said, **Jn 7:46: No one ever spoke like this man!**
 - And yet this perfect Word went to the cross to take the punishment our failed words deserve.
- And what does he promise to those who put their faith in him?
 - Not self-help or some lifehack for better speaking.
 - No—a **new heart** from which **new words** can spring.⁹
 - **I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you (Eze 36:26).**
 - He changes us from the inside out.
- Which takes us all the way back to last week:
 - **9:10: The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.**
 - Wisdom begins not with getting our words under control, but with bringing our hearts to Jesus.
 - In **daily dependence**: *Jesus, give us grace like manna!*
 - In the **moment of temptation**: *Jesus, give me grace now!*
 - In **every situation**—acknowledge him!

[CONCLUSION]

- Take all the wisdom Proverbs gives about the **power** of words—*Your words are powerful*; and the **best** words—*You can use your words for good*.
- But first, come to the **greatest** Word—*Jesus, who gives us new hearts*.
 - As his grace changes your heart, his grace will change your words.
 - And you'll find your words—12,700 a day, 90,000 a week, 4.6 million a year—start to become wise.
- The heart that experiences grace will speak words of grace.
That's how we can be wise with our words.

RESOURCES AND ENDNOTES

Resources

This list contains some of the resources that were used to prepare this sermon series. Check them out if you want to dig a little deeper.

- Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*.
- Tim Keller, *Proverbs: True Wisdom for Living*.
- Ray Ortlund, *Proverbs: Wisdom That Works*.
- Logos Bible Software.

Endnotes

¹ See Colin A. Tidwell et al., “Are Women Really (Not) More Talkative Than Men? A Registered Report of Binary Gender Similarities/Differences in Daily Word Use,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 128, no. 2 (2025): 367–391.

² See Ray Ortlund, *Proverbs: Wisdom That Works*, 132.

³ The basic structure of this sermon is indebted to Tim Keller’s sermon, “*Proverbs: True Wisdom for Living—Words*,” which organizes the material under three headings: (1) “The Power of Our Words,” (2) “The Character of Our Words,” and (3) “The Healing of Our Words.” I have adapted that framework here as “The Power of Words,” “The Best Words,” and “The Greatest Word.”

⁴ See Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, 44–45.

⁵ Keller illustrates this principle by describing differences in communication styles within his own marriage; his example prompted me to reflect on similar dynamics in my own. See Keller’s sermon referenced above.

⁶ See Paul Tripp, *Getting to the Heart of Your Words*, accessed [here](#) 9/17/26.

⁷ Tripp tells this story in *Getting to the Heart of Your Words*, referenced above.

⁸ This illustration is also adapted from Tripp’s teaching on the relationship between circumstances, the heart, and our words. See, for example, *How To Be An Everyday Evangelist (Part 4)*, accessed [here](#) 9/18/26.

⁹ The new-heart language is biblical (cf. Eze 36:26–27), but the progression from our words revealing our hearts, to our need for heart transformation, to the transforming grace of Jesus is also characteristic of Tripp’s treatment of this subject. See, for example, *The Root of Words*, accessed [here](#) on 9/17/26.