

Lifecraft from God – Speaking Wisely

Throughout this series we are exploring the book of Proverbs and its many themes. Proverbs is like a compass that helps us navigate the murky waters of life. It provides wisdom and instructions for living, and guidance for achieving strong character. Proverbs tells us how to succeed in any situation by remaining calm-headed in a crisis, patient when pressed, gentle when challenged and firm when confronted with temptation. It is an active book, like Ben helpfully put it a few weeks ago, it should perhaps be called ‘pro’ - ‘verbs’. ‘Pro’ for professional and ‘verbs’ for action. However, above all, the book of Proverbs shows us that the source of all wisdom is in a right and close relationship with God. My prayer for you this morning is that you will leave here inspired to delve deeper into a relationship with God, that you will continue exploring how you can become more Christ like in the way we live our lives and interact with others.

“Sticks and Stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me”. Who remembers being taught this by their parent as a child, or having a fellow student sarcastically say it across the playground as you impatiently wait for your turn on the hopscotch? As a child, for a while it acts as a magic shield and protection as you seem invincible and above the name calling of other children. However, in reality this relatively modern proverb is far from true. It’s actually complete rubbish. Words can hurt, words do hurt and often far, far deeper than the breaking of bones or the scratching of skin.

Words therefore can hurt, but they can also heal, and bring about amazing change. Fortunately for us the book of Proverbs talks a lot about words and speaking wisely. Unlike the sticks and stones proverb the book of Proverbs speaks incredible truth into our lives and provides a series of simple messages on how to go about living a life that pleases God.

In general, the writers of Proverbs tell us that our words should be honest and few. The book of Proverbs lifts up the virtue of calm words that are apt to the occasion or circumstance. Encouraging us to make a study of life in order to develop and establish a Godly character. The goal of that study being that we become men and women of honour and integrity. How we use words is an important facet of that project of becoming Godly men and women.

To be honest most chapters in Proverbs offer some insight into this topic. In an attempt to summarise some of what it says together, we’ll look at five key points and see what Proverbs has to offer us in when and how we should speak. We’ll be jumping about a bit so feel free to use the bibles in front of you or the various verses will also be on the screen behind me. I’ve tended to use The Message translation as I have found when studying Proverbs it acts as a useful interpretation of the images used. As we explore this topic I would encourage you to be thinking about the different contexts and relationships you find yourself in on a regular basis. Whether it is work, family, friendships, school playground or church, allow the wisdom of proverbs to speak to you on how we can become more Christ like in speaking within those relationships. Also let

it open our eyes to the power that well timed appropriate words can have on others. So let's start by looking at what Proverbs has to say as to when we should speak.

1. When to speak?

I suspect we can all imagine times when we have sent an email or said something too quickly that we can regret a few hours later. I love technology. I use it a lot at work to teach. The internet has radically changed the way the world operates probably more than any other invention in the last 100 years. However, there is no doubt that the speed that it operates at can cause major challenges and difficulties when it comes to the speed that we speak. Whether it's through email, texting, facebook or twitter, people now say things in the very public domain that previously they would have had time to think twice about. In James 1:19 it says that everyone should be "quick to listen and slow to speak". When we are quick to speak, we can often end up speaking incorrectly or inappropriately. With that in mind I think I shall stop there... You should be so lucky.

In Proverbs chapter 25 verse 11 the author places high value on the timing of our speech. It says;

*The right word at the right time
is like a custom-made piece of jewellery,
And a wise friend's timely reprimand
is like a gold ring slipped on your finger.*

Proverbs emphasises here the incredible value of timely speech. Whether it is positive praise or criticism to help one improve, the richness of it being timed well is of most value. A few verses later in verse 15 it says "Patient persistence, pierces through indifference; gentle speech breaks down rigid defences." Emphasising the power of appropriate speech when timed well can overcome even the most stubborn or hard hitting of managers, if you stay calm and stick to the rational argument. Proverbs 16 v 23 it states that "they make a lot of sense, these wise folks; whenever they speak, their reputation increases". This reminds me of one of my favourite stories in the Bible, the story of Joseph.

On the face of it, he didn't always speak well and what he said led him to danger. Although this was clearly part of God's plan, his early years seem to be him landing himself in trouble left, right and centre, as he went about openly sharing the dreams he had. However, he did follow what God was saying and didn't shy away from difficult

conversations. As he grew older he became wise at speaking with patience and appropriate timing. When he gave the baker the news of his imminent execution he didn't pretend differently, but said it gently and with an element of please don't just take my word for it. Later when he interprets Pharaoh's dreams he showed his wisdom. Explaining that 7 years of plenty would be followed by 7 years of famine. He spoke wisely to Pharaoh. I particularly liked how he suggested Pharaoh needed a man, a very wise man to look after Egypt. I can just imagine the large wink that followed that. I can certainly remember a number of managers I have worked under where you have to present them with an idea in a way that they think it's their idea and plant the seed that you would be the right person for the job. Gentle speech breaks down rigid defences. Knowing when to speak is important, but often the hardest thing is knowing when not to speak.

2. When not to speak?

The book of Proverbs also offers us insight into when not to speak. In Proverbs 10:18-21 it offers some fairly hard hitting advice of having discipline in our speech. It says:

18 *Liars secretly hoard hatred;
fools openly spread slander.*

19 *The more talk, the less truth;
the wise measure their words.*

20 *The speech of a good person is worth waiting for;
the blabber of the wicked is worthless.*

21 *The talk of a good person is rich fare for many,
but chatterboxes die of an empty heart.*

In the first few years of our marriage I quickly learnt that there was a time not to speak. Not every problem need solving in an instant, even if in my eyes I thought there was a simple solution. I had to learn to listen and measure my words. Learning not to speak is one of the wisest and Godliest things to learn. Yet if you are like me, and like a good ramble and a good voice of your opinion, it can be one of the hardest things to develop.

When I think of the wise people in my life. Those people I rely on for good advice, they often say little, but what they do say holds truth and is powerful in its accuracy. We are called to measure our words and to be wise in how much we say.

As a teacher words are the tools that I use. I am entrusted by God and by my pupils, parents and colleagues to communicate well and in truth. I have to be constantly on my guard to what I say and how I say it. When we speak it is impossible to get our words back. Whilst I can correct an error on a spreadsheet or fix a piece of equipment at work quite easily, I can't as easily take back the words I say. It's like trying to get toothpaste back into it's tube, it's impossible. Toothpaste flows one way out of a tube, as does speech. With that in mind let's explore what Proverbs has to say on how we speak. Firstly...

3. Positive Words

As we explored at the beginning of this talk with the modern proverb, sticks and stones may break my bones, words really do have the power to hurt and damage people. In the book of James it describes the tongue as a wild beast that needs to be tamed. The tongue is described like a rudder on a boat, or a bit in the mouth of a horse, something so small that can control something huge. Satan can use our mouths to create all kinds of havoc; it's like a wild beast. We will never master our tongue but we need to keep it in check. With encouragement we can build up and bless our children, spouse, friends and colleagues. Proverbs 10 v 11 describes that the mouth of the righteous is the fountain of life. Our words of positivity and encouragement can bring about amazing change. However, our negative words can bring about all sorts of trouble. Churchill had an incredible ability to galvanise people through words, in the same way Hitler used words to bring about devastation and hell to earth.

In Proverbs 18 v 21 it says 'The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit'. Our words being positive about, and to each other, not only stop people from biting the negative fruit, but also have the incredible power to build up others. In professional sport the most successful coaches and leaders are the ones that communicate well and encourage others. In leading the England Rugby team to World Cup success in 2003 Sir Clive Woodward reflects that his great team was made of great individuals. In combining them into a successful team his role was not to teach them how to play a game, but individually encourage and build them up.

Words can also be confusing or easily misunderstood, and should therefore be chosen wisely. I remember in the only stages of our relationship Nomi and I would communicate a lot via MSN. MSN was effectively an internet based messaging service whereby you could talk via text over the internet. For many years teenagers up and down the country would sit at the computer, convincing their parents they were doing homework as they spoke to their friends in these chat rooms. So powerful, that specific language was developed such as 'lol' and 'brb'. To the day both of our mothers still believe that 'lol' stands for 'lots of love', this has obviously brought about some unfortunate texts as we ask for advice at troubled times, ending 'lol mum x'. In one of our early msn conversations as boyfriend and girlfriend, we had been chatting away when suddenly Nomi explained she had cold feet. I sank in my chair, the relationship was over, before it had really began. I nervously typed my reply... "what do you mean..." and awaited her reply. I could see she was typing as it always told you when someone was typing. It felt like hours, before she just said that her feet were cold even with her slippers on. 11 years later I am now far too aware of her remarkable ability to have cold feet, yet at the time and in the emotion of a new relationship it meant something completely different. Misinterpretation or translation of words can have catastrophic consequences with wars and battles fought under the misunderstanding of a message or religious text. As we pray and ask God to become wise stewards of speech, we should ask that he blesses us with the right positive words to ensure we are not easily misunderstood. As Proverbs says our tongue has great power so let's ensure we use it wisely.

4. Wise Words

The book of proverbs is full of wisdom and wise sayings. In Proverbs 8: 7-8 it says:

*My mouth chews and savours and relishes truth—
I can't stand the taste of evil!
You'll only hear true and right words from my mouth;
not one syllable will be twisted or skewed.*

Here we see an offering of how to speak wisely, based in truth and faithfulness. As we speak truth, faithfulness radiates out from our lips. By being engaged in relationship with the father, our words will shine truth and wisdom to those around us. They will not be twisted or skewed with slander or lies but wholehearted truth.

Furthermore, Proverbs 12 v 17-18 goes onto say:

*Truthful witness by a good person clears the air,
but liars lay down a smoke screen of deceit.
Rash language cuts and maims,
but there is healing in the words of the wise.*

Our wise words can bring about healing. We need to pray for discernment and wisdom to lead us in our conversations to bring about amazing miraculous change rather than opening or deepening wounds. Proverbs 15 verse 4 says that "Kind words heal and help; cutting words wound and maim." Again in chapter 16 verse 24 it describes gracious speech as being "like clover honey, good taste to the soul, quick energy for the body." As we build up one another with encouragement and gentle words we will bring about deep healing and renewed life to those we speak to.

Words have amazing influence in our society, for better and for worse. For example, Nobel Peace Prize winner, Malala Yousafzai, demonstrated the power of words over the violence and physical abuse she was subjected to under the Taliban regime. Her words have started to bring about positive change, bringing the right of education to women. History is littered with other like minded people who bring about positive change through words. Our words matter.

Joseph spoke truth to those he encountered, even if that wasn't the easiest thing to say at the time. As I was preparing this I was thinking about what would somebody who had faithfulness abhorrent to their lips look like today? Or more to the point how often do people see me as somebody who speaks truth and wise words? Perhaps in the workplace you find yourself being approached by colleagues to discuss personal matters. Nomi is often surprised to find herself in this situation, and is puzzled by colleagues she does not know that well opening up to her. I think it is because her colleagues notice that she is wise in how she communicates, quick to listen and slow to speak.

Perhaps you take a stance when somebody says something inappropriate to another colleague, but done in the gentle and gracious way discussed before people accept your words and rebuke what they have said. Or on the other hand how often do we respond with the saying 'I don't mind' or 'I'm ok' when really we do mind greatly and rarely are we just 'ok'. Not that we should walk around telling everyone our troubles all the time, but to at least encourage a community where it's ok to be going through a tough time and its ok to question why? These are two characteristics that I hope you would find in this community. I know I certainly have, and there is no doubt that the wise words of people here have help bring about healing to others.

5. Offering Criticism

In speaking truth, we, like Joseph are bound to find ourselves in situations where we need to both offer and receive criticism. We should trust our friends to offer criticism, to correct our ways. A key to a good relationship is the ability to communicate honestly and supportively. Proverbs 27 v 5 explains that 'a spoken reprimand is better, than approval that's never expressed'. Proverbs advises that the openness of the criticism is far greater than anything done in silence or concealment. Even if uttered in public. If writing a school report or speaking to a parent at parents evening, I always start with some praise no matter who the student is, and my criticism is always set in the way to ensure it builds up and encourages the individual to do better and improve. Even our criticism can be gentle, positive and wise.

Moving forward?

So how do we move forward and learn to talk good talk. How do we become better at talking at the right time, with the right amount of words in a way that is positive, gentle, wise and allows us to offer criticism appropriately?

As with all of the talks in this series, a lot comes out of a close relationship with God. Spending time with God and dwelling in his presence will in turn make us more Christ like in our daily lives. God graciously empowers us to speak well. Walking closely with God you will gain lifecraft in speaking wisely. As you turn to him with open hands and in an attitude of worship you will discover that God has a particular plan for your life and that he offers you wise words so that you can handle the various relationships both positive and hard you find yourself in.

If this is something you struggle with, start by praying and asking God to empower your speech each day. If it helps pray Psalm 19:14 at the start of every day; "May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."

Ask God for an increase in patience and more time that allows us to hold our tongues. Rarely will we regret holding back and thinking about things before speak. Yet once those words have left us, it's impossible to draw them back in.

Encourage each other. Let's establish a culture of encouragement and speaking in truth. Remember sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can also hurt you, but they can also bring about incredible, miraculous change.

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