

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Everyday Wisdom: Speech Therapy”

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*The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.*

*Proverbs 10:11*

*Lying lips conceal hatred, and whoever utters slander is a fool. When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech. The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; the mind of the wicked is of little worth. The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense.*

*Proverbs 10: 18-21*

Just two more weeks in this series “Everyday Wisdom,” in the Book of Proverbs, so before we get to this week. Quick word on what we’ll be starting in two weeks’ time on August 15, which is also Rally Day. How many of us feel like things have been distant over the past year and a half? You’re not alone. There’s a lot of coming back to things, hoping for normalcy—and God willing we’ll pull through this Delta variant—but as we come back, we discover that either things have changed or we have changed or all of the above. Maybe Jesus feels that way to you. Maybe you sense the need to take a look at this Jesus that your family or your friends seem to talk about. Maybe you feel like you need to come back to a life of faith that had been dormant for a long time. If that’s where you are, who would you discover Jesus to be? That’s what we’ll be looking at in two weeks, spending some time in the Gospel of Mark.

For this week, though, we continue in the Book of Proverbs, this series that Pastor Mark put together, and Proverbs if you’ve never read it is book focused on wisdom. When you take just a verse or two out of it, often it can sound like useful, wise tidbits of advice, ways to lead your life that would be beneficial. And that is part of the purpose of the book: it’s meant to offer practical guidance on our behavior. But if we just left this book to the category of soundbites that might be useful ways for us to lead our lives, we’d be doing ourselves a disservice, because while the Book of Proverbs gets pretty practical, everything it talks about is under the umbrella not just of wisdom, but of godly wisdom, as in, how can we lead our lives in a way that aligns with God’s ways. After all, the way Proverbs puts it, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Every wise action, if its truly wise, has its origin not in ourselves but in fearing the Lord, that is, revering the Lord.

So that’s been the lens through which we’ve been looking at Proverbs as each week we talk about one of the topics that Proverbs can touch upon. Two weeks ago, Mark spoke about anger. Last week we talked about the heart. And today, we look at one of the most common topics that Proverbs brings up: speech. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage.] Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Well, you heard verse 19 same as I did: “When words are many, transgression is not lacking.” There’s really no point to beat around the bush: this is a call for shorter sermons. Really is kind of a convenient way to approach preaching: the longer you talk, the more sinful it becomes.

I’m joking of course. This is going to be a very long sermon. But you could hear what these proverbs are saying about speech. They kind of have a similar structure. In the first half of each verse, there’s an example of either wise speech or foolish speech, and then in the second half, the opposite, juxtaposing the two, asking us to judge between them. Verse 19: “When words are many, transgression is not lacking,”—that’s the unwise version—“but the prudent are restrained in speech.” Verse 20: “The tongue of the righteous is choice silver;”—the wise version—“the mind of the wicked is of little worth.” Or verse 21, “The lips of the righteous feed many,”—that’s the wise version—“but fools die for lack of sense.” Or back in verse 11, the first verse we read: “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.”

These proverbs are obviously talking about how we speak, how we interact, and because Proverbs is all about godly wisdom, it raises the question, what makes for *wise* speech? Sure, everyone would agree that wise speech is better than unwise speech, but just what gives speech wisdom in the first place? Adding on to that, and kind of the point of Proverbs, what gives speech *godly* wisdom?

You could probably hear some of the threads in there. Some characteristics of foolish speech: “conceals violence” (v. 11), “conceal hatred” and “utters slander” (v. 18). But then wise speech, on the other hand, “is a fountain of life” (v. 11), is “restrained in speech” (v. 19), “choice silver” (v. 20), “feed[s] many” (v. 21). Seems kind of obvious, honestly. I mean, if someone were to offer you the choice, in which you could choose how you would speak, and that choice was between, on one hand, concealing violence and hatred and uttering slander and, on the hand, feeding many and being fountain of life, how many would say, “You know concealing violence sounds pretty great”? It’s kind of obvious that the way Proverbs presents wise speech is better, but what’s more compelling to me is the qualities that Proverbs lifts up as what makes speech wise in the first place: speech that gives life, speech that nourishes, speech that is restrained, speech that is valuable.

Those are fine qualities, to which I say, Amen, and all the while I’m trying to avoid thinking about the question that comes next: “Is my speech wise?” And by that I’m asking, “Does my speech give life? Does my speech nourish? Is my speech restrained? Is my speech valuable?” Is yours?

Thinking about speech in terms of its value is kind of a foreign notion these days, perhaps just because speech is so prevalent and readily available that it’s hard to notice much value in it at all. You’ve heard the phrase “Talk is cheap.” Even though this isn’t exactly what that phrase means, I wonder if talk is cheap simply because of supply and demand. With a limitless supply of speech out there, of course it’s not going to be worth much.

That's the model of speech that we are given every day. Just talking, talking, talking. You name the medium. Television, movies, even in things we read, newspapers, magazines, social media, and we haven't even gotten to people actually speaking. Now we have the capacity to pick up a phone or a computer and talk, if not actually see, another human being anywhere on the planet in range of modem or a cell tower. Talk is cheap. In some ways I guess that can be good. Communication and availability of information can be good things. But cheap talk costs us a lot too. How much are we bombarded by cheap talk? Seems constant to me. If we have any exposure to things like television or social media, cheap talk is widespread.

Take television for example. Sure lots of good shows out there, entertaining and all that. But something happened with the birth of the 24-hour TV cycle. Whether it's news, sports, reality TV, once television went to an all-day rhythm, it became harder to fill all of that time with content, and so to fill in the gaps, in came commentary, and then producers discovered that, when it came to commentary, it was the most outrageous or negative commentary that would tend to get the best ratings. We, as viewers, are drawn to it. Not every channel or program or network does this, but there's the incentive to do so.

Similar thing with social media. It didn't take long for those trying to carve out an audience in social media or the blogosphere to realize that it was the most negative or outrageous posts and articles that would generate the most clicks. Not all writers or bloggers or influencers do this, but there's the incentive to.

Add it all up, and when it comes to the "talk" that we absorb and engage in, more and more it's this cheap, inflated outrage, negative brew that gets our attention, talk that is of little worth, at least not according to Proverbs. Because it gets our attention, we end up getting more of it, and because we get more of it, we pay it even more attention, and so on and so on.

And then it seeps into how we speak. How could it not? Sure maybe there's some pressure to stay polite when we're in company, but if all we have is a voice on the other end of a phone or a name on a screen, how tempting is it to dip into precisely the same sort of cheap talk ourselves we hear all the time? How hard is it to actually guard our words so that they are, as the Proverb says, a "fountain of life"?

You know something I enjoy doing? Messing with telemarketers. We all get those spam calls. Extended car warranties. Cash offer on your house. A free hotel stay. That sort of thing. And if I'm in a sort of mood, I actually enjoy messing with them, as in, trying to keep them on the line as long as possible without giving any information before they realize that I'm just wasting their time. And the fact that I actually sometimes pick up the phone on an unknown number only means I'm going to get more of those calls, and therefore more chances to do this, and so on.

One time I got a spam call offering a free cruise to the Bahamas, and I kid you not, I kept this person on the line for fifteen minutes discussing why I was worried about the cruise because of my fear of pirates. Not like the legitimate threat of piracy in East Africa, Strait of Hormuz, Captain Phillips sort of thing. I'm talking Blackbeard, Jack Sparrow. And I got this person to try to convince me that swashbuckling pirates weren't actually a thing to be worried about. The call

ended with me revealing to the other person that I wasn't in fact worried about pirates and that I was just wasting their time. Click.

Now, amusing as that may be, and annoying as telemarketers can be, can I say that my speech toward this other person, this human being made in the image of God, was righteous, wise? Did it feed many? Was it a fountain of life? No, of course not. But it was easier just to take up somebody's time for my own amusement. It's easier for talk to be cheap when we care little about the others hearing it. That's ultimately what it is. Did I care much about that telemarketer? No. How easy is it just to ignore the worth of another person and the effect our speech might have on them when talk is cheap?

That person that you got into it with this past week on social media about, oh who knows, what are the things just in the past week that have gotten us riled up? Simone Biles? Vaccines? SEC expansion? Remember that person. How do you think they felt afterward? Encouraged? Given life? Or were they angered? Belittled? Sure maybe they weren't kind to you in their words, but was our speech in response words that were of choice silver?

The world, it seems, speaks one way. But if we hope to speak in godly wisdom, we must follow another way. So, what is that way? When the world says, belittle one who disagrees with you, godly wisdom is to speak in truth *and* in kindness. When the world says, if you want to be heard say something as loudly and outrageously as you can and say it over and over again, godly wisdom is to let speech be restrained. When the world says, tear others down, they'll just do the same to you, godly wisdom is to let our speech feed many.

Last week, Sonya in our front office led our staff devotional, and she shared a story about a prominent pastor in the Atlanta area. This pastor had apparently had a tough stretch at his church with a lot of internal tension, and long story short, some of that tension was relieved when the pastor was proven right about another person he had been in conflict with. After he got the news, the pastor sat in his driveway and texted a confidant, words to the effect of, "See how right I was." Then he sat there, waiting for a response. A few minutes passed, then his friend texted back words of loving correction. "Don't give the enemy a seat at the Table." And the pastor was stunned, realizing that in his conduct toward this other person and in his communication with his friend, his speech had been tearing down, when it should have built up, and all the while giving a foothold for evil in his life. Don't give the enemy a seat at the Table.

Friends, in a minute we will gather at this Table, eager to share in the bread and the cup that Christ gave for us. It is a table of fellowship, a table of forgiveness, and it is a reminder of how the good news, the message, the grace that should infuse our speech when we part from this Table and go into the world. It is so easy to lose sight of that, when it seems every other nudge we get from the world is to turn away from speech that gives life, that feeds many, but at this Table, we are given a seat by grace in Christ. Let us not give the enemy a seat at ours.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.