

SERMON TITLE: Words of Life

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SCRIPTURE: Selected Scriptures from Proverbs

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Not a day goes by that we aren't shaped by words—words spoken to us, words on the news, words on social media, our own words. We're shaped by words because there is a mysterious and yet certain power in them. The Bible says that there is life and death in the power of the tongue. Words are used to build up and give life. Or, sometimes, they're used to tear down and take life. So, how can we be sure that we are speaking life to others? How can we avoid words that cut and tear down? How can we know we are honoring God with what comes out of our mouths? Answer: God himself is not silent. He is the God who speaks. In Scripture and ultimately in Jesus, we have God's holy communication to us. His word should be the primary thing that shapes our words so that others might find life in him.

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The fact is, we are living in discouraging days. There's nothing good on the news. The whole Covid thing is heating up again. We are facing the probability of Federal vaccine mandates and mask mandates, and possible lockdowns. Violence, crime, and murder in major cities are up. Substance abuse is up. Suicides are up. Anxiety disorders are up. People have lost their businesses. Some people who lost their jobs and want to work can't find work that fits their expertise. And, some people are being paid not to work, and businesses are suffering from not having enough workers. It's crazy! Day by day, it feels like our freedoms are being chipped away. Day by day, we are more divided as a nation. Day by day, inflation creeps higher and higher. Day by day, the insanity continues. And on top of all that, most of us have personal problems and relational problems that weigh on us. We face roadblocks and setbacks and dead ends and we don't know which way to turn. Anxiety weighs us down. Anxiety weighs heavy on our hearts. The question is, "Is there anything we can do that will enable us not just to survive these discouraging days, but to thrive in these discouraging days? Is there anything we can do that would cause all this anxiety to lessen, even a little bit?"

According to Scripture, there actually is something that can help lift our spirits. It's found in Proverbs 12:25. "Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up" (NIV). I know, I hear you, you're like, "Really? Seriously? That's it? That whole build-up about living in these discouraging days and anxiety weighing so heavy on our hearts, and that's all you got? ...a kind word? ...Yep. The biblical authors tell us that words are very powerful. So, rather than push back against the wisdom of this proverb, we need to lean in and let the truth of what God says here change us and renew us.

Here's my "Big Idea" for this message: "The right word, spoken in the right way, at the right time can breathe life into other people." The right word, spoken in the right way, at the right time brings healing. See Proverbs 12:18. What kind of words bring healing? Words of encouragement, words of blessing, words of praise and affirmation, words of support and appreciation, words of comfort, words seasoned with grace (as Paul puts it in Colossians 4:6), and words that build up rather than tear down. God says, these kinds of "kind" words bring healing and wise people know this. The problem is, we don't really believe proverbs like this. Well, we say we believe them (after all, they're in the Bible, right?), but if we don't put them into practice, do we really believe them?

According to the Gottman Institute, the conversations most of us have with other people carry a ratio of six words of criticism to every one word of encouragement. This explains why work environments can become toxic. This explains why marriages can become toxic. This is why so many adults struggle with the words they heard as children. They were "named" stupid, slow, dull, hopeless ("you'll never amount to anything"), and the wounds from those words are still distorting you and polluting the way you see yourself, and the way you see others. Another problem is that most of us would agree that encouragement is important—it's a nice thing to do—but it's not 'that' important. We don't want to be a 6 to 1 criticism-to-encouragement kind of person, but that is how we naturally drift. Think back to last week. What was your ratio? 6 to 1, 4 to 3, 2 to 5? Anxiety from the world around us and criticism from the words directed to us weigh a heart down. But, a kind word of encouragement cheers it up. This is God's word. This is wisdom from above.

So, how do we bring our lives more in line with the words of Scripture and more in line with words born out of the fruit of the Spirit? *First, you need to understand the scope of these words of life.* The simple fact of the matter is that since every one of us is plagued with self-doubt and insecurity and anxiety of some kind or another, we all need to hear words of life spoken to us. Many people don't feel good enough about themselves to let you feel good about yourself. So, it's natural for us to hear six criticisms to every one word of encouragement.

*Second, you need to understand that how you say what you say is as important as what you say.* And there are two aspects of “how” we say that can help season our words with grace. In other words, what do we mean by right words “spoken in the right way, at the right time?”

*The right word, spoken in the right way:* READ Proverbs 15:1 — Words of life are “gentle” words. Gentle words are not gutless, wishy-washy, namby-pamby words. No. Read Proverbs 25:15. In Hebrew, “to ‘break a bone’ means to break down the most hardened resistance to an idea a person may possess.” Gentle speech can be bold, direct, pointed—it can be respectfully argumentative (cf 1 Peter 3:15). We are talking about tone here. And, the tone of your voice sometimes speaks louder than your words. A second aspect of *how* we say what we say is *timing*. Read Proverbs 15:23 and 25:11. The word “apt” or “fitting” has to do with timing. Your words may be gentle and kind. They may be true enough, but spoken at the wrong time, they can add more weight to an already heavy heart. Read Proverbs 24:26. The words you say and how you say them—the *tone* you use—the *timing*—both these things can determine whether your words will be heard as words that heal or words that hurt, whether they will be words that weigh down or cheer up, whether your words will bring life or death. Read Proverbs 16:23, “A wise person’s heart guides his mouth...” This lines up with what Jesus said in Matthew 12:34ff. Jesus says what fills the heart determines what and how you speak. He says that all our mouth problems come from heart problems. The heart is the control center of your entire life. So, a change in our words has to flow out of a change in our hearts. And, a change of heart will only occur with an encounter with the Gospel.

*Third, you need to understand how the Gospel reshapes our words.* On the Cross, Jesus received the ultimate silent treatment from his Heavenly Father. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And because Jesus received that silent treatment, we can now receive God’s words of life from outside that brings life and healing to our hearts. And what are those words? The same words Jesus heard at his baptism: “You are my dearly beloved child. I am very pleased with you.” Read Romans 8:16. If you hear those words, to the degree that those words of life resonate with your soul—to that degree you won’t need to put people down anymore—you won’t need to gossip anymore—you won’t need to tear people down to build yourself up. Remember I said—*many people don’t feel good enough about themselves to let you feel good about yourself*. If you let God’s words of life define who you are—if what he says about you sinks deep into the core of your being so that his affirmation of you means more to you than the approval of others—*then finally*, you will be free to encourage and affirm others. You will be free to speak graciously to others because you have heard God’s personal affirmation to you, “*You are my beloved child.*” And, the more that Good News rules in your heart, the more your words will bring healing and life to those you rub shoulders with every day. Your words will be the right words; your tone will be gentle and respectful; your timing will be guided by the Spirit. Yes, a new heart means a new mouth.

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### Discussion Starters

1. Open your discussion time with this question: When you think back on your conversations since the last time we met, I’m sure that many of the conversations you had with people went pretty well. But, if there were conversations that got derailed, what kinds of things derailed those conversations?
2. Discuss Proverbs 12:25, “Anxiety weighs the heart down, but a kind word cheers it up.” Could navigating these dark, discouraging days we’re living in be as simple as speaking words of life into the people we live and work around?
3. In what areas of your life do you need to be more encouraging? To whom do you need to express more encouragement?
4. Proverbs 11:25 says, “The one who refreshes others will be refreshed.” In other words, there’s a positive kickback coming your way when you speak words of life to other people. How have you experienced this truth in your life? How have you seen the benefits of “refreshing others” be a source of “refreshing” for you?
5. How does the Gospel speak to all this? How does hearing and being convinced of God’s positive affirmation to you (“You are my beloved child. I am very pleased with you.”) help heal our words?