WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD

Keeping Silent
• God has designed speech to play a central role in His creative and redemptive activity.
  
  ▪ **Genesis 1:3** – “Then God said, ‘Let there be . . .’”
  
  ▪ **John 1:1** – “In the beginning was the Word . . .”
  
  ▪ **Hebrews 1:2** – “In these last days he has spoken to us in His Son . . .”
  
  ▪ **1 Peter 1:23** – “You have been born again . . . through the living and enduring word of God.”
  
• As His image bearers, we are made to use speech.
  
  ▪ According to statistics, the average person speaks between 7000 and 20,000 words per day.

• Understandably, *speech* is a significant theme in the book of Proverbs.

• Proverbs has more to say about *words* than many other topics, addressing it 150 times in its 915 verses.

• Summary statement: “**Death and life are in the power of the tongue**” (Prov 18:21a).

• Words are powerful tools—for evil or for good; for destruction or for edification.

• Words also vividly reveal the state of the soul.
“You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

—Matthew 12:34-37

Nine Kinds of Speech That Proverbs Commands You to “Put Off”
1. Put off speech which is false.

- What is a “lie”?
  - A “lie” or “falsehood” is a statement that directly contradicts reality as determined by God.

- God does not relate to such statements with ambivalence:
  - 6:16-19 – “There are six things which the L ORD hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers.”

  - 12:22 – “Lying lips are an abomination to the L ORD, but those who deal faithfully are His delight.”
• The basis for God’s hatred of lying or falsehood is that it directly contradicts His character.

• God can never lie or speak falsely.
  - **Numbers 23:19** – “God is not a man, that he should lie . . .”
  - **1 Samuel 15:29** – “Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.”
  - **Titus 1:2** – “God cannot lie.”

• Lying and falsehood, however, are the essence of Satan’s nature:
  - **John 8:34-35** – “Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me.”
• Lying always destroys the liar and his victims.

  ▪ **14:25** – “A truthful witness saves lives, but he who utters lies is treacherous.”

  ▪ **25:18** – “*Like* a club and a sword and a sharp arrow is a man who bears false witness against his neighbor.”

  ▪ **26:18-19** – “Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows and death, so is the man who deceives his neighbor, and says, ‘Was I not joking?’”

  ▪ **26:28** – “A lying tongue hates those it crushes, and a flattering mouth works ruin.”

  “If you want truth to go round the world you must hire an express train to pull it; but if you want a lie to go round the world, it will fly; it is as light as a feather, and a breath will carry it. It is well said in the old Proverb, ‘A lie will go round the world while truth is pulling its boots on.’”

  —Spurgeon, “Joseph Attacked by the Archers”
• Where to keep watch:
  
  ▪ **Official documents** (insurance claims, employment records, tax returns, etc.)
  
  ▪ **Employment** (timecards, work reports, calling in “sick,” etc.)
  
  ▪ **Neighbors**
  
  ▪ **Family** (conversations with your parents, wife, or children)
  
  ▪ **Church** (conversations with your pastor, other members, small group, etc.)

“Therefore, laying aside falsehood, **SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE of you WITH HIS NEIGHBOR**, for we are members of one another.”

—Ephesians 4:25
2. Put off speech which is misleading.

• A lie or falsehood (#1 above) is a statement that directly contradicts reality as God determines it.

• Misleading speech is speech that distorts this reality.
  • It is more subtle than an outright lie. It takes the truth and perverts it.

“There are, of course, other forms of lying. We usually think of it as making a false statement, and probably most of us tend to guard against such speech. However, we are apt to lie by exaggeration, by failure to tell the whole truth, or by indulging in what we call a “little white lie”—a lie that we think is of no consequence. Whatever form it takes, a lie expresses an intent to deceive.”

—Jerry Bridges
• **4:24** – “Put away from you a deceitful mouth, and put devious speech far from you.”

  - The word “deceitful” refers to that which is *crooked, twisted, distorted*; it describes “a departure from the norm, since the form is generally used to refer to defects.”

• **6:12** – “A worthless person, a wicked man, is the one who walks with a perverse mouth.”

• **10:32** – “The lips of the righteous bring forth what is acceptable, but the mouth of the wicked what is perverted.”

• Distorted speech is antithetical to the speech of Lady Wisdom:

  - **8:8** – “All the utterances of my mouth are in righteousness; there is nothing crooked or perverted in them.”

• Believers often comfort themselves by the fact that they do not tell lies. Meanwhile, their speech is still filled with distortions of the truth.

• These “crooked words” harm relationships, destroy trustworthiness, and dishonor the Lord.
• Where to keep watch:
  - Exaggerating
  - Understating
  - Withholding
  - Misconstruing
  - Obscuring

“A lie consists in speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving.”
—Augustine

“Whatever is only almost true is quite false, and among the most dangerous of errors, because being so near truth, it is more likely to lead astray.”
—Henry Ward Beecher
“Think about how much falsehood and deceit there is in the world! How much exaggeration! How many untruths are added to a simple story! How many things are left out, if it does not serve the speaker’s interest to tell them! How few are there around us of whom we can say, that we trust their word without question!”

—J. C. Ryle

3. Put off speech which is harsh.

- Harsh speech is speech spoken without grace and gentleness, with the deliberate intent to tear down rather than to build up.

- Such speech does not necessarily contain falsehood or deceit, but it does contain malice.
• **12:6** – “The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood, but the mouth of the upright will deliver them.”

• **12:18** – “There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

• **15:1** – “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

• **15:4** – “A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but perversion in it crushes the spirit.”

Harsh speech erupts from a **proud heart**—from a heart that believes “I am better that you” and “You are not worthy of kindness.”

The harsh person comforts himself in the fact that he “has courage to speak truth” and “does no physical harm.”

But he has harnessed the power of words to inflict a different kind of harm—one that demeans the truth and immeasurably harms his victim.

It pierces, wounds, cuts, crushes, and destroys.
• Some are convinced that such speech is part of their “gift of confrontation.”

• A lady once said to Spurgeon, “I have the talent of confrontation.”

• Spurgeon replied, “That is one talent the Lord wants you to bury in the field!”

  “No matter what good truths you have to teach, no one will thank you if you do not speak kindly.”

  —Spurgeon

• Where to keep watch:
  - As a husband (1 Peter 3:7)
  - As a father (Ephesians 6:4)
  - As a manager (Ephesians 6:9)
  - As a suffering Christian (1 Peter 2:21-23)
“Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.”

—Ephesians 4:15

4. Put off speech which is degrading.

(1) Gossip/Rumors

• “Rumors are negative reports about other people that are based on uncertain evidence. They are spread to injure the person, not to help. Gossip may ultimately turn out to be true, but that does not exonerate the person who speaks it to others. If true, then the report is being given to in appropriate people at an inappropriate time” (Longman, How to Read Proverbs, 150).
• **11:13** – “He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy conceals a matter.”

• **17:9** – “He who conceals a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends.”

• **18:8** – “The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of the body.”

• **26:22** – “The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of the body.”

“Let’s all admit it. We love gossip. We love negative information about other people. We love controversy. We find it delicious. It is a delicacy—to our corrupt hearts. We gulp these words down with relish.”

—Ortlund, *Wisdom that Works*, 134
(2) Slander/Insults

- Direct, verbal attacks on the character and honor of another person—to his face or behind his back.

- **10:18** — “He who conceals hatred has lying lips, and he who spreads slander is a fool.”

- **11:9** — “With his mouth the godless man destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous will be delivered.”

- **16:27-28** — “A worthless man digs up evil, while his words are like scorching fire. A perverse man spreads strife, and a slanderer separates intimate friends.”

- **20:19** — “He who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets, therefore do not associate with a gossip.”

- **Psalm 101:5** — “Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, him I will destroy; no one who has a haughty look and an arrogant heart will I endure.”
“But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.”

—James 3:8-12

“Let ears and lips be closed against him. If there be no vessel to receive his base matter, his words will fall to the ground, and die away.”

—Bridges, Proverbs, 117
(3) Scoffing

- A frequent title for the fool in the book of Proverbs is *scoffer* (ץֵל). The term refers to one who ridicules, mocks, or derides someone or something else.

- **9:7-8** – “He who corrects a scoffer gets dishonor for himself, and he who reproves a wicked man gets insults for himself. Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you. Reprove a wise man and he will love you.”

- **22:10** – “Drive out the scoffer, and contention will go out, even strife and dishonor will cease.”

5. Put off speech which is *flattering*.

- One the one hand, flattery is the opposite of gossip.

- Whereas gossip is degrading speech spoken about another person *behind his back*, flattery is exaggerated speech spoken about another person *only to his face*.

- Flattery hinges on people’s response to praise—a lie told in order to gain some personal benefit.

- “Flattery is praise insincerely given for an interested purpose” (Henry Ward Beecher).
• **26:23-26** – “Like an earthen vessel overlaid with silver dross are burning lips and a wicked heart. He who hates disguises it with his lips, but he lays up deceit in his heart. When he speaks graciously, do not believe him, for there are seven abominations in his heart. *Though his* hatred covers itself with guile, his wickedness will be revealed before the assembly.”

• **26:28** – “A lying tongue hates those it crushes, and a flattering mouth works ruin.”

• **29:5** – “A man who flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his steps.”

6. **Put off speech which is argumentative.**

“I have once wondered, that persons who make a boast of professing the Christian religion, namely, love, joy, peace, temperance, and charity to all men, should quarrel with such rancorous animosity, and display daily towards one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than the virtues they claim, is the readiest criterion of their faith.”

—Benedict de Spinoza
• Solomon recognized that there are those who can turn any discussion into an argument.

• 18:6-7 – “A fool’s lips bring strife, and his mouth calls for blows. A fool’s mouth is his ruin, and his lips are the snare of his soul.”

• 26:21 – “Like charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife.”

• 27:15 – “A constant dripping on a day of steady rain and a contentious woman are alike; he who would restrain her restrains the wind, and grasps oil with his right hand.”

• 17:14 – “The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so abandon the quarrel before it breaks out.”

• 28:25 – “An arrogant man stirs up strife, but he who trusts in the LORd will prosper.”
“What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel.”

—James 4:1-2

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.”

—Ephesians 4:31

7. Put off speech which is impulsive.

- Impulsive speech occurs when promises or assertions are made in a hasty or thoughtless manner.

- 15:28 — “The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.”

- 18:2 — “A fool does not delight in understanding, but only in revealing his own mind.”
• **18:13** – “He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him.”

• **20:25** – “It is a trap for a man to say rashly, ‘It is holy!’ and after the vows to make inquiry.”

• **21:23** – “He who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from troubles.”

• **29:20** – “Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”

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8. **Put off speech which is boastful.**

• **27:1** – “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.”

• **27:2** – “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.”

• **30:32** – “If you have been foolish in exalting yourself or if you have plotted **evil**, **put your** hand on your mouth.”
9. Put off speech which is excessive.

- **10:8** – “The wise of heart will receive commands, but a babbling fool will be ruined.”

- **10:10** – “He who winks the eye causes trouble, and a babbling fool will be ruined.”

- **10:19** – “When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise.”

- **12:23** – “A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims folly.”

- **13:3** – “The one who guards his mouth preserves his life; the one who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.”

- **15:28** – “The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.”

- **17:27-28** – “He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is considered prudent.”
Putting Off Destructive Speech: Nine Principles from the Book of Proverbs

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“He who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from troubles.”

—Proverbs 21:23

“Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.”

—Psalm 141:3
“You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil.”

—Matthew 12:34-35

“The cure of an evil tongue must be done at the heart. The weights and wheels are there, and the clock strikes according to their motion. A guileful heart makes a guileful tongue and lips. It is the work-house where is the forge of deceits and slanders; and the tongue is only the outer shop where they are vended, and the door of it. Such ware as is made within, such, and no other, can come out.”

—Robert Leighton (1611-1684)