

Proverbs
The Fool and His Words

Sunday, May 16, 2010

Proverbs has a great deal to say about the words we speak, and this is to be expected because there is nothing we do so much as *talk*.

Perhaps we could say without too much exaggeration that the ability to communicate *verbally* forms the very essence of what it is to be human. Verbal communication is so important to life, that about the only thing we do without it is sleep. And some of us even talk in our sleep!

We ought to expect Scripture to deal with something as fundamental to human experience as speech. And, in fact, in many places throughout Scripture we are instructed and admonished with respect to the words of our mouth.

Jesus said,

³³ Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. ³⁴ You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵ The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. ³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless

word they speak, ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned (Matt. 12:33-37)

This is pretty potent stuff; and if it doesn't scare you, nothing will. "On the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak."

Perhaps the most significant thing we learn from this passage is the fact that our words reveal the character of the hearts so well, that they serve as an adequate basis upon which we may be judged. Jesus said, "...by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

Why is this? Jesus tells us. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (v. 34). Do you want to know the condition of your heart? Then examine the words that come out of your mouth.

If biting, hurtful, sarcastic words consistently come from your mouth, guess what? You have a biting, hurtful, sarcastic spirit.

If angry words are consistently coming from your mouth, you are an angry, hot-tempered man.

If you're always speaking of the faults of others, your words reveal a judgmental spirit.

On the other hand, if you are reluctant to speak of other people's faults, that fact reveals a gracious and forgiving heart.

If you are always talking about yourself and your accomplishments, it reveals the fact that at heart you are selfish and proud. On the other hand, if you talk more about others and their good points, you reveal a heart that is humble and selfless.

If you're always speaking about money and how to make more of it, chances are that you have a greedy heart.

If you are always making sexual innuendos or telling off-color jokes, it reveals a lustful and impure heart.

Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." If you love sports, you will talk a great deal about them. If you love politics, you will talk a lot about that. If you love God, you will talk a lot about him. On the other hand, if you do not speak much about God, perhaps it's an indication that your love for him is small. Whatever is in your heart in abundance will spill out at the mouth.

Nothing reveals a man's character any more than his words. Nothing serves as a greater test of character than listening to what regularly passes through his lips. If the eyes are the windows of the soul, the mouth is surely its door. Whatever is in the heart comes out at the mouth.

Now the reason why the words of our mouths so accurately reflect our moral character is because it is much *easier* to sin in word than in

deed. It is much easier to strike a man with our tongue, than to strike him with our fist—not only easier, but safer, too.

It's easier to kill our neighbor's reputation with our word—to assassinate his character—than it is to kill his body with a gun (although it might be argued that the latter is more merciful).

It is easier to *speak* obscenely than to *act* obscenely. And it is precisely because it is so easy to sin with our lips, that the real test of our character is the words of our mouth. "By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." The man who has mastered his tongue shows that he has mastered his heart as well. A disciplined tongue reveals a disciplined heart.

In another place, Jesus said:

One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in very little is also dishonest in much (Lk. 16:10)

Words are seemingly *little* things. If we prove to be conscientious about them—if we are mindful of them, and responsible with them—it's an indication that we are responsible with greater things. On the other hand, if we are careless with our words, that's an indication that we cannot be trusted with more important things either.

James said:

We all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body (Jas. 3:2)

Nothing reveals the heart quite like the mouth. You put a person into a tense situation and you will find out by what he says what his true thoughts are and where his trust lies. Put him in a situation of sudden danger, for instance. What does he say *instinctively*—reflexively, without thinking? Does he cry out to God for help? Is that his instinct? Then it reveals that his trust is in God. The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. Does he curse and swear? If so, it reveals what's going on in his heart.

Put him in a competitive environment. A close game. The official's call goes the other way. How does he react? What does he *say*?

As Jesus said, "A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit." It's not bad *fruit* that makes the *tree* bad; it's a bad *tree* that makes the *fruit* bad. The bad fruit is only the proof that the tree is bad.

On the other hand, it's not good *fruit* that makes the *tree* good; it's a good *tree* that makes the *fruit* good. Good fruit is only the proof that the tree is good.

In the same way, it is not the words of a man's mouth that make a good or bad man; his words simply *reveal* whether he is a good or bad man.

Paul, too, addressed the subject of our words. And he did so on a number of occasions. For example, to the Ephesians he wrote,

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear (Eph. 4:29)

Do your words build up and give grace to those who hear? *Do they?*
He says a few verses later,

Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving (Eph. 5:4)

To Timothy, he writes:

But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness (2 Tim. 2:16)

Irreverent babble is ungodly in itself, and it leads to further even ungodliness.

James gives us the most extended discussion in the New Testament concerning the words of our mouth.

James 3:1-12 [elaborate]

In Proverbs, we find many instructions concerning the words of our mouth.

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding,
but only in expressing his own mind (Prov. 18:2)

A fool is more interested in telling others what he knows (or *thinks* he knows) than in learning from them the knowledge which they have to offer.

Do you know anyone who, on a consistent basis, when you start to speak on a subject, cuts you off and starts telling you everything he knows about it? Or perhaps he changes the subject to something he knows a great deal about, or thinks he knows a great deal about, and begins to run on and on at the mouth? Are *you* such a person? “A fool takes pleasure in expressing his own mind.” If he took pleasure in *understanding*, he would listen rather than talk. He would receive the benefit of listening to others share their knowledge. Of course, it’s not as though there is never a time to speak. But a wise man listens *more* than he speaks. A fool speaks more than he listens.

Do you remember what we read last week from the book of James? In James 1:19 we read, “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.” Typically, we reverse this. We prove to be slow to hear, quick to speak, and quick to anger.

Someone once pointed out that God gave us two ears and only one mouth, which is perhaps an indication that he intends for us all to listen twice as much as we speak.

Proverbs mentions in a number of places the fact that it is a distinguishing mark of a wise man that he shows some restraint with respect to his speech. In other words, doesn't talk a lot.

Whoever restrains his words has knowledge... (Prov. 17:27)

The context shows that this has to do specifically with restraining our words when we are provoked to anger.

Whoever restrains his words has knowledge,
and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding

He restrains his words *because* he has a cool spirit. And he has a cool spirit *because* he is a man of understanding. In other words, wisdom leads a man to control his passions; and because he has control of his passions, he doesn't speak unadvisedly in the heat of anger.

Now consider this. The tongue is the most uncontrollable member of the body. The ease with which it is used, and the *apparent* insignificance of its sins makes us less inclined to attempt to restrain it. But if we wish to grow spiritually, we must make every effort to do so. We can do this not only by not speaking in anger or not jesting coarsely or speaking in a filthy manner, but also by simply *limiting the number of words we speak in general*. Scripture has a great deal to say about those who are given to *excessive talk*, and the danger they are constantly in of sinning.

When words are many, transgression is not lacking,
but whoever restrains his lips is prudent (Prov. 10:19)

“When words are many, transgression is not lacking.” Why is this the case? Because he who speaks much cannot give much time to thinking about what he says. A wise man doesn’t speak whatever just happens to pop into his head. But he considers, first, whether what he says is *true*; and second, whether it is *fit to be spoken*. Not everything that comes to mind should be verbalized. A wise man considers whether it is wise and good to speak. He considers what effect his words will have upon those who hear them. Those who speak *much*, often speak *thoughtlessly*, and say many things that should not be spoken. Their mouth is in motion before their mind is in gear. Their policy seems to be: Speak now, think later.

The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer,
but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things
(Prov. 15:28).

Think how many things are said in haste, without enough thought. Think of the rash promises that are made. Think of the spiteful words that are said in a moment of anger, and are regretted later. Think of the words that are spoken in fun, but thoughtlessly, and cause hurt feelings. There is no end to the damage we do by speaking carelessly. Matthew Henry wrote:

Usually, those that speak much speak much amiss, and among many words there cannot but be many idle words, which they must shortly give an account of. Those that love to hear themselves talk do not consider what work they are making for

repentance. (Matthew Henry on Prov. 10:19)

How many sins are committed by the tongue: blasphemy, cursing, gossip, lying, mocking, obscenity, perjury, quarreling, slander. James, the brother of our Lord, said:

The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness... a restless evil and full of deadly poison (Jas. 3:6, 8)

Because sins of the tongue *appear* so trivial when compared to what are called "grosser" sins we are inclined to think that they are not all that important. But have you ever noticed that sins of the tongue are listed in Scripture alongside things like murder and adultery? Jesus said:

Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immorality, thefts, *false witness, slander*" (Matt. 15:19).

Likewise, Paul mentions deceit, gossip, and slander along with those who hate God and who commit murder (Rom. 1:28-31).

Let me ask you, how often have you said things which you later came to regret? When a man speaks hastily, he foolishly sets a trap for himself, and he will surely be caught in it. Proverbs tells us,

A fool's mouth is his ruin,
and his lips are a snare to his soul (Prov. 18:7)

The negative consequences of our words often serve as the very

chastisement we deserve for speaking them. A liar, for instance, will find that no one trusts him. Someone who is bitter and sarcastic in his speech will find that he has no friends.

By the mouth of a fool comes a rod for his back (Prov. 14:3a)

On the other hand,

The lips of the wise will preserve them (Prov. 14:3b)

Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue
keeps himself out of trouble (Prov. 21:23)

How many of our troubles in life are the result of our own ill-considered words! It is wise, then, and for our own good, that we consider carefully what we say. And in order to do this we must think more, and speak less. Remember, "The heart of the righteous *ponders* how to answer." That is, he *thinks* before he speaks.

In 18:13 it says, "If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame." Do not speak before you think.

Those whom I have regarded to be among some of the wisest people I have known, have also been, on the whole, *quiet* people. They haven't talked much. It's not that they're rude, or unsociable. It's that they are thoughtful and reflective, and prefer not to talk unless they have something worthwhile to say. This is so much a characteristic of a wise man, that Proverbs says, "Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent" (Prov. 17:28).

The final verses we will consider this morning are found in chapter 18.

From the fruit of a man's mouth his stomach is satisfied;
he is satisfied by the yield of his lips.
Death and life are in the power of the tongue,
and those who love it will eat its fruits (Prov 18:20-21)