

Sticks and Stones...

Proverbs about Our Words

Intro

- Next week we will get back to our study in the Gospel of John, but today is one last sermon in the miniseries of being like Jesus rather than like his religious opponents.
 - o Being the kind of church that respects & studies the Bible as the Word of God and uncompromisingly holds sound doctrine is not enough.
 - o We looked at the seven woes against the hypocritical scribes & Pharisees in Matthew 23
 - These men knew the Scripture very well and were respected as spiritual leaders, but their religiosity was just a mask for their ungodliness.
 - This was our anti-checklist...we don't want any of those 7 woes to be true of us.
 - I especially emphasized mercy/compassion because there is a political ideology-driven sense within our society that certain people are unworthy of mercy or compassion and many professing Christians have adopted that way of thinking.
 - o For the flipside of Matthew 23, We looked at 1 Corinthians 13: the love chapter.
 - These are the things that should be true of us if we are living in Christlike love.
 - And if we are not showing true Christlike love, nothing else that we do matters (no matter how doctrinally sound or spiritually impressive it seems).
 - o Today, we're going to focus on one specific part of life in which we can be loving and holy like Jesus or self-centered and ungodly like his opponents: our words.
 - This is a revised and expanded edition of a sermon I preached a couple summers ago when our VBS centered around Proverbs.
 - It is an important topic to revisit regularly because Scripture indicates that our speech is an area where all of us struggle to some degree (James 3:2).
 - o Today we'll be mostly in the book of Proverbs, seeing what God has to say there about our words.
 - Our friends at *Answers in Genesis* have broken Proverbs about words down into 5 helpful categories.
 - I'm sure we could come up with a few others, but five is enough for today.
- There is an old rhyme that most of us learn as children: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me."
 - o Whoever came up with this may have meant well, but they were either incredibly naïve or just straight up lying.
 - In fact, when you chanted this at someone as a kid it was usually to try to hide the fact that they *had* just hurt you with their words.
 - The same goes for the adult version: It's just words; they don't mean anything.
 - o A few more biblically correct versions according to Proverbs would be something like: "Sticks and stones may break my bones..."
 - "...but with his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor." (11:9)
 - "...but the words of the reckless pierce like swords." (12:18)
 - "...a perverse tongue crushes the spirit." (15:4)

- ...but the tongue has the power of life and death.” (18:21) – and that’s the one we’re going to start with.

(Words of) Death vs. Life (18:21)

- Solomon isn’t being melodramatic or exaggerating for effect here.
 - The words we speak can have profound impact on the lives of others.
 - All too often we see headlines about young people who commit suicide and one of the main contributing factors was hurtful things that others said to them or about them.
 - We also know of people whose loving, passionate words have made a positive difference
 - A parent who encourages their child to excel.
 - A person who is willing to stand up and publicly speak out against injustice.
 - A Bible teacher/author who encourages & equips people to love and serve God.
- In the second half of the verse, we are told that our words impacts *us* as well as our hearers.
 - The more we like to speak and the more we use our words to influence others, the greater our responsibility.
 - An extreme example from a few years ago: Michelle Carter convicted of manslaughter for convincing her boyfriend to commit suicide.
 - James 1:26 – Considering the impact of our words before we speak them is a crucial part of being a follower of Jesus Christ.
 - Matthew 12:35-36 – Jesus taught that this is something for which we will answer to God himself because our words show what is in our heart.
 - James 3:1 – Those who take on a teaching role are held to a very high standard by God.
 - Deliberately seeking to influence people’s thinking with your words brings greater potential for good/harm...“With great power comes great responsibility.”
 - This is true of those who have an official teaching position and of those who informally take it upon themselves to inform, instruct, or influence others.
 - ...so take care if you use the internet as a forum to air your beliefs, thoughts, and opinions. Seeking to inform and persuade an audience is not to be taken lightly.
- The other categories that we have kind of fill in details for words of death vs. life; for speech with harmful consequences vs. speech that pleases the Lord.

Harsh vs. Gentle (15:1)

- *How* we speak to others can be as important as *what* we say. This is especially true when addressing someone who is upset or who strongly disagrees with us.
- When we speak gently (even in the face of anger or insults), we are probably going to have a better conversation, say more profitable things, and sin less than if we are harsh.
 - Gentle speech is soft (as opposed to loud), calm, controlled, and kindly intended.
 - Gentleness takes into account the second commandment: to love others as ourselves (aka to treat others how we would like to be treated).
 - “How would I like to be spoken to (or listened to) by someone who has a problem with me?”

- A gentle answer shows that you actually care about the other person rather than just about trading insults, “winning” the argument, or scoring point with people who already agree with you.
 - It can show that you want to engage in an actual conversation rather than just a self-serving performance.
 - A gentle answer in the face of anger, false accusations, and insults shows that you are like Jesus who trusted God to make all things right in the end (1 Peter 2:20b-23)
- Harsh words could be angry words spoken in response to angry words, but they could also be:
 - Accusing words that show you assume the worst about someone’s actions, motives, or character, thus making them feel that they must defend themselves.
 - Dismissive words that show you aren’t really listening and couldn’t care less about what they think or feel as long as you get to have your say (talking “at them”).
 - Deliberately insulting words that show that you regard them with contempt and malice, seeking to humiliate and/or hurt them.
 - Whatever form harsh words take, they merely escalate the situation and make sure that everyone involved is angry and not really listening to anyone else.
- 2 Timothy 2:24-26 – This principle is extremely important in how we interact with those who are not Christians in discussion of biblical truth.
 - The belligerent “fighting fundamentalist” spirit that has become second nature to many conservative Christians very often turns people off to the truth that it seeks to defend.
 - It treats those who disagree as enemies to be battered into agreement.
 - Rather than recognizing them as victims of the great enemy in need of prayer because only God working in their hearts can bring them to faith & repentance.
 - Gentle, respectful conversation on spiritual topics that flows out of genuine friendship is usually going to be a lot better received than points made in a vicious no-holds-barred argument.
 - There are times that spiritual truth is going to be offensive no matter how gently put...
 - The Gospel starts with the bad news that none of us are good enough.
 - Biblical teaching on gender, sexuality, and marriage are very out of step with the values of our society.
 - It is sometimes necessary to warn that [this specific person or this group] is teaching things that are false and dangerous.
 - ...but when someone is offended by what we say let it be because they disagree with God’s Word, not because we are harsh, arrogant, or deliberately insulting.
 - We are called to “speak the truth in love” not to deliberately anger people and then mock their anger while self-righteously claiming to be “just telling it like it is.”

Gossip/Complaining vs. Edifying (16:28)

- Definition of *gossip* (from AiG): talking about someone with bad intent
 - Possible bad intent:
 - to make others think less of them (malice)
 - to make myself look good in comparison to them (pride)

- to get others on my side when they know how much I've been wronged (anger & an unforgiving spirit)
 - to fit in with a group and/or have something sensational to say (self-centeredness)
- "If it's true, it's not gossip" is a lie.
 - If you wouldn't say it in front of the person you are talking about, it's probably gossip regardless of whether or not it is true.
 - If you know (or suspect) that the person you are talking about doesn't want it talked about it's probably gossip regardless of whether or not it is true.
 - This is just as true of prayer requests as it is of any other form of talking about someone. Tacking "pray for" onto the front of information that would harm, shame, or embarrass someone is still gossiping.
- Definition of *complain*: Expressing annoyance/dissatisfaction with an event or with the way things are.
 - Usually without any desire to personally do anything about it.
 - The complainer just wants everyone to know that they are unhappy and probably hopes that others will join them in their discontent against whoever is in charge.
- (16:28) What both of these have in common: they stir up conflict (between individuals or within a community/church) – just a few related Proverbs (and you can find many more):
 - 6:16-19 – One of the things on the list of things that the Lord *hates* is "a person who stirs up conflict in the community" (we'll come back to some of the other things in a little bit).
 - 11:13 – Gossip causes a breakdown of trust between friends or within a community (if a person gossips to you, they probably gossip about you as well).
 - 26:17 – Taking sides in someone else's quarrel (usually due to gossip or complaining) is going to end as well for you as going up to a feral stray dog & giving its ear a good yank.
 - There are times to intervene in a situation that is dangerous or unjust...
 - ...but rushing into a conflict based on rumors & complaining is generally unwise.
- (10:19) We must guard our speech.
 - People who feel the need to share every juicy thing they hear or rehearse every way that they think they've been wronged usually end up saying things that they shouldn't.
 - A prudent person (one who thinks ahead) knows when to keep quiet or even leave a conversation that is turning harmful/sinful.
- Ephesians 4:29-30 – our words should be used to build others up and help them.
 - To do otherwise grieves the Holy Spirit who indwells us.
 - Tearing others down is the exact opposite of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.
- Three questions to ask before talking about someone:
 - Is it true?
 - Speaking the truth in love is a mark of spiritual maturity (Ephesians 4:14-15).

- We should not pass along things we hear or read just because they sound sensational or conveniently match our opinion or feelings of the moment.
- We have a responsibility to be truth-speakers, not rumor-spreaders.
- Giving a little disclaimer like “I haven’t checked this out personally, but...” or “this is just my opinion...” does not magically give us permission to gossip”.
- Is it kind?
 - Will it do good to the person I am talking about? Does it treat them how I would want to be treated if I were in their situation? (Matthew 7:12)
 - If my goal in saying something would be primarily to harm someone or to elevate myself at someone else’s expense, I need to keep quiet.
- Is it necessary?
 - Is there a good, godly reason for saying this about them? (Ephesians 4:29)
 - Will this help them accomplish something good?
 - Will this shield someone else from harm? (warning of genuine danger from another person is a form of speaking the truth in love as long as it is true).

Boasting vs. Humility (27:2)

- Definitions:
 - Boasting (from AiG): to talk about yourself (your abilities or things you’ve done) with too much pride, making yourself look good.
 - Humblebrag: to make a modest-sounding or self-deprecating statement with the intent of drawing attention to something you are proud of.
 - i.e., false modesty
 - E.g., “I barely managed my 5-mile jog this morning...I’m so out of shape.”
 - Closely related: fishing for compliments by making sure that people notice the good things you have done.
- (27:2) Self-praise (whether outright boasting, humblebragging, or fishing for compliments) is unacceptable and unnecessary.
 - Self-praise is unacceptable because it is a display of sinful pride.
 - 1 Corinthians 4:7 – we must recognize that every good thing we have (including opportunities & ability to do good) is ultimately a gift from God.
 - James 4:6 (which paraphrases Proverbs 3:34) – Failing to humbly recognize God’s grace puts you in the category of proud people whom God resists.
 - That is why pride is so often followed by catastrophe (Proverbs 16:18)
 - ...and practically speaking when catastrophe befalls a braggart there isn’t usually a lot of sympathy from society in general.
 - Self-praise is unnecessary because God ultimately rewards truly good deeds whether anyone else notices or not.
 - It is certainly a good thing to thank and praise people who are wise, godly, and skillful (*cf.* Proverbs 31), but we must not do good with the goal of human praise.
 - God does not reward good deeds done as a form of fishing for compliments (Matthew 6:1 and following).

- If you are angered or discouraged if no one praises or thanks you for the things you have done, you are doing them for the wrong reason...check your pride and think of yourself less.
- Matthew 25:21 – faithful service to God is rewarded with praise, honor, and joy in God’s perfect kingdom...even though he is the one who enables our faithful service.

Bullying vs. Protecting (6:16-19)

- Definition: Using superior strength or influence to hurt, humiliate, and/or intimidate someone.
 - We may think of bullying as primarily a kid/teen problem, but that is not the case.
 - Adults are every bit as capable of taking satisfaction from wielding power over others in ways that hurt them.
- 6:16-19 gives a list of behavior that is disgusting to God, and a lot of it could fall under *bullying*
 - A show or feeling of superiority
 - Making others look bad through lying, slander, and stirring up conflict
 - Manipulation of people and circumstances (usually for personal gain)
 - An enjoyment of evil and violence (especially inflicting suffering on weaker people, whether through actual physical pain, character assassination, or other deliberately hurtful speech).
- We must never let these kinds of things characterize us as individuals or as a church.
 - Power games, intimidation, slander, and insults have no place in the body of Christ.
 - Nor should we admire, celebrate, or encourage anyone who engages in this kind of behavior even if they claim to do so for our benefit.
 - Be careful what kinds of things you condone, excuse, or imitate in people who might claim to be on the same side as you in politics or “the culture war.”
 - These things disgust God, and they should disgust us as well.
- (17:5) Taking satisfaction in the distress of other people (especially those less fortunate than you) is a serious insult to God who made them.
 - James 3:9-10 – Treating others poorly is completely inconsistent with claiming to love God who made them in his image.
 - 31:8-9 – On the contrary, God’s people should be the ones speaking on behalf of those who are poor, weak, and oppressed.
 - There are a lot of good Christian organizations that we can work alongside to help do this (e.g. *Spero*, *Women at Risk International*, *Baptist Children’s Home*, *Samaritan’s Purse*).
 - This can also include, closer to home, not being involved in gossip, complaining, factions, etc. but speaking up for those who are being maligned.

Conclusion/Applications

- Back to James 1:26 – What do your words say about the value of your faith? Jesus tells us that “the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Luke 6:45)

- Ask yourself: Do my words bring the light, life, and love of God or the darkness, bitterness, and conflict of human pride?
- Guard your speech – use it wisely.
 - Is it true?
 - Is it kind?
 - Is it necessary?
- We know that none of us are perfect in this yet.
 - James 3:2 tells us that if you have perfect control of your mouth, you must be a perfect person.
 - If you have trusted Jesus as your savior, you should be making an effort and with the help of the Holy Spirit making progress in this area.
 - Thankfully, God willingly forgives us when we fall short in this or any other area and seek his forgiveness.