

Wisdom in Speech

Proverbs – BPC – 26th June 2022

Talk is cheap. That headline has been used multiple times in the last week alone regarding a number of key issues. Talk is cheap was the cry of protesters challenging gun laws in US after another shooting or even with regard to climate change promises by our own government.

And “talk is cheap” was a slogan of almost all of the campaigns of all the different parties in our recent federal election. Now on the one hand you can kind of understand what they are saying or going for: we don’t just want promises or words, we want action.

But is talk actually cheap? Because although it’s a common headline or slogan, we hear all the time not just that talk and words matter, but they are influential and powerful. We see this in the constant calling out of keyboard warriors or online trolls who slander and anonymously abuse others without accountability or any concern for the effect of their words.

We see it in the ongoing battle against bullying in schools or even workplaces or verbal abuse in the home. We saw this recently when politician Tanya Plibersek was forced to apologise for throw away derogatory comments about the appearance of another politician.

And this is a constant problem in school and for teenagers. Take Olivia for example, a 19 y/o girl from Rowville who took her own life. Her parents went on her social media platforms to let others know of her passing...

only to find out that not only had Olivia been sharing her struggles online for quite some time, but that many of her peers and so called friends had posted hateful comments urging her to just take her life so they didn’t have to hear about it.

Far from cheap and insignificant, words matter. Words are powerful and influential. And this is exactly what Proverbs says. In fact, concern for our words and speech takes up about 20% of the wisdom sayings in chapters 10-31. According to Proverbs, our speech is one the clearest and truest indicators of whether we are wise or not, of whether we fear the LORD.

And so I wonder as we begin tonight, what is your attitude towards your speech? What do you words, whether spoken or typed, say about you, about whether you are wise and if fear of LORD is shaping what you say regardless of who you are with.

And I have put what Proverbs says about wisdom in speech under three headings: The wise know the power of words, what wise speech is, and the way forward for having wise speech.

But as I said, with so much emphasise on speech in Proverbs it is more than we can cover in this talk alone and I’d encourage you to read all of Proverbs slowly and carefully paying attention to all the times the language of words, lips, mouth, speech, or answers are addressed.

But firstly, the wisdom in speech means knowing the power and importance of words. 18:21 *Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.*

Our words have the power of life and death, huge impact for good or ill. Think of the speeches of Martin Luther King and the movement that followed or even Hitler and the devastation he lead.

And we can feel this on an individual level 18:6, *A fool's lips lead to strife, and his mouth provokes a beating.* 18:20, *From the fruit of a person's mouth his stomach is satisfied; he is filled with the product of his lips.* This is what we heard in the James 3 reading. ⁶ *the tongue is a fire... a world of unrighteousness, is placed among our members. It stains the whole body, sets the course of life on fire*

It is remarkable isn't how a reputation, relationship, or career can be built over years yet lost in a moment by words. Think of Adelaide footballer Taylor Walker, whose 14 year career including captancy counted for nothing as he was publically ridiculed and suspended for a racist sledge.

But the wise know that words not only can shape their own lives, but also deeply affect other's – again, either positively or negatively. 11:9 *With his mouth the ungodly destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous are rescued.* 12:18, *There is one who speaks rashly, like a piercing sword; but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

The movie Crazy Rich Asians is one my favourites. It follows the relationship of Nick Young and Rachel Chu. Nick is from a super wealthy family, Rachel is working class with a single mother. As Rachel visits Nick's family, the movie details her struggle as she searches for approval from Nick's traditional and sceptical family, especially his cold and calculated mother.

And there is powerful moment where it seems like there is a breakthrough, after making dumplings Nick's mother shares with a story of her own history and struggle for acceptance.

And as Rachel seems relieved and appreciated, Nick's mother ends the conversation with the words, "But I know this much. You will never be enough." The scene ends with Rachel left standing alone and shattered...

Words can pierce like swords. And I imagine most of us don't need to be given examples of this reality. Where words we've said, whether intentionally or unintentionally, have deeply offended, hurt, even crushed another, and sadly this is often those closest to us.

Most of us have numerous examples of words we have regretted or wished we could take back. This is clearly such a common experience that Apple have put the ability to edit or unsend messages in their new operating system. Which of course sounds great but it cannot undo someone reading it!

The wise know that words really have the power of and life and death. And of course, as Christians, people who know the true and living God, we especially know this! Our God speaks, he spoke all creation into being, and even now, he continues to give people eternal life through the life-giving words of the Gospel – the proclaimed good news of Jesus.

Faith and salvation come from hearing words. And so wisdom in speech, fear of the LORD, will take our words and speech seriously. 8:13, *To fear the LORD is to hate evil. I hate arrogant pride, evil conduct, and perverse speech.*

As Jesus says: *I tell you that on the day of judgment people will have to account for every careless word they speak.* ³⁷ *For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.*" (Mt 12:36-37)

And so are you taking seriously the power and importance of words? Words are how we enter relationship with God and with each other then deepen our relationships.

Our words can bring healing and profoundly benefit others, or they can pierce like swords, crush, and create controversy.

A conviction that words matter may mean there are many here tonight who need to significantly change the way we speak: where our words are too often hurtful, thoughtless, worldly, or just superficial. And yet for others we need to value words by being better listeners!

James 1:19 *Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak.* And yet there will be others still who just really need to start speaking up! Who just leave it others to fill the blanks of what they are thinking or how they are going, who never encourage, never challenge, never apologise.

Because what wise speech looks like is both broad and deep. #1 Wise speech is discerning.

The wise know if they need to speak at all. 13:3 *The one who guards his mouth protects his life; the one who opens his lips invites his own ruin.* 17:27 *The one who has knowledge restrains his words, and one who keeps a cool head is a person of understanding.*

There is a time for silence. It's often said that one the best things Job's friends do, perhaps the only good thing they do, is sit in silence as mourn with him as he grieves the death of his family and devastation in his life. It's actually when they open their mouth to give advice that things go wrong!

10:19 *When there are many words, sin is unavoidable, but the one who controls his lips is prudent.* If ever there was a motivation for a short sermon, it is this! As Abraham Lincoln said, "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak out and remove all doubt!"

The wise know there is a time for silence, holding our tongue to just listen or especially being someone that doesn't share everyone else's information! 11:13, *A gossip goes around revealing a secret, but a trustworthy person keeps a confidence.*

The wise are discerning about if they should speak, but also when and how they speak. 27:14, *If one blesses his neighbour with a loud voice early in the morning, it will be counted as a curse to him.*

This needs little explanation and is all too familiar I suspect! Especially where young children are involved! But the wise must be discerning about when is the right time to have a conversation, especially if that conversation will be hard or perhaps address hurt or a difficult subject.

And sadly it has been all too common for Christians to be poor at this. Quoting Romans 8:28 that God all works things for good, even though true and good news, might not be the best thing to say as someone is grieving the bad news of a health diagnosis or unemployment or death of loved one...

Now there is of course a word of warning to those who conveniently find that the right time never comes up! We never find the right time to address that someone deeply hurt us, the right time to apologise and acknowledge the hurt we caused them, to seek reconciliation or to talk about Jesus!

The wise are not to be passive or cowards or people-pleasers, but think before speaking (15:28) knowing that, 25:11, *A word spoken at the right time is like gold apples in silver settings.* The right word at the right time is of great value.

So the wise are discerning in their speech, and secondly, honest. 12:22, *Lying lips are detestable to the LORD, but faithful people are his delight.* This of course should come as no surprise to God's people. Jesus tells us in John 8 that lies are the domain, the native language of the devil, the Father of lies.

Honesty is to be the hallmark of God's faithful people in Zephaniah 3 and Revelation 14. Yet I'm sure that many of us have become completely comfortable with lying. It is convenient, enables us to escape conflict or consequences, and so easy and seemingly so insignificant.

We easily justify it: we call it selective sharing, withholding information, or just slightly misleading.

So what's the big deal then? Paul Tripp asks and answers this exact question: "Why is lying such an abomination to the LORD? Because every lie is rooted in idolatry. I lie because there is something more important to me than the honour and will and plan of God."

Lying is about idolatry. A self-serving form of speech that has no concern for God or others. 26:28, *A lying tongue hates those it crushes, and a flattering mouth causes ruin.* Lying conceals hatred in 10:18.

Lying should have no place among God's people. Not to each other, your employer or the tax office, whether in person, online, or on a form, the wise are honest, even if there is cost, or especially if what needs to be said is hard or confronting.

28:23, *One who rebukes a person will later find more favour than one who flatters with his tongue.* 24:26 *He who gives an honest answer gives a kiss on the lips.* The wise speak the truth out of love and concern for one listening.

Think of the countless people who have gone on TV shows convinced they are the next Beyonce or Gordon Ramsey, only to be rejected by the judges or beaten by another contestant! And so often they are baffled or angry because their mum or sibling or partner or friends never spoke up and told them they can't sing or their cooking isn't that great!

Honesty would have prevented learning that in such a public and probably humiliating situation! The wise are honest, not blunt or thoughtless, but discerning, gentle, and honest. And honesty is vital to our life together:

It's not saying your fine then complaining no one knows how you're really going, it's telling people when they've done a good job or have encouraged you.

Honesty doesn't just call out the fault or sin in others but admits fault and the wrong we have done. Honesty acknowledges when we've been greedy, harsh, or selfish. And we are to be committed to this honesty with each other because the wise speak not simply what is easy, but #3 to build up others.

Because words are so powerful and important, the wise know this and wield their words for the good of others. 31:8-9, *The wise speak up for the those who have no voice, for justice of all who are dispossessed. To defend the cause of the oppressed and needy.*

Our words are to be used for those who need it and can't speak for themselves or voices aren't being heard. Whether the unborn or refugee, the abused and manipulated or marginalised in society, those suffering and persecuted around us or overseas.

But using words to build up others especially should take place in our regular relationships. 12:25, *Anxiety in a person's heart weighs it down, but a good word cheers it up.* 15:23, *A person takes joy in giving an answer; and a timely word—how good that is!* 16:24 *Pleasant words are a honeycomb: sweet to the taste and health to the body*

Help for anxiety, calming and comforting, health giving: words given for others truly can build up and encourage profoundly. Wisdom in speech is not simply about holding our tongue to avoid saying the wrong thing, but taking the initiative to speak words that build up.

Have you ever met someone that gets tired of being encouraged or acknowledged, is there a Christian that doesn't need a reminder of God's goodness and grace, or presence and love?

It's why this form of wise speech is urged in the New Testament, in Ephesians 4:29, (a fav of parents!) *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen (NIV).*

But we have to see that this takes thought and intentionality! Most of us know and have experienced, that offending and hurting others often happens without us realising or intending it. Thoughtless or inappropriate words easily slip out with no awareness of the damage they've done.

Yet most of us know that rarely does it go the other way. Where our words have unintentionally encouraged, built up, and spurred on. In God's kindness it can and does happen, but as Ephesians tells us, speaking words that build up others takes into account their needs.

It's why the author to the Hebrews tells us not to spur each other on, but to consider *how to* spur each other on. There is intentional effort to know and understand each other so that our words may benefit those who listen. There has to be a depth and authenticity to our friendship and words.

As God's people we won't use our words to be sly attempts to veil our frustration or use passive aggressive texting. We won't use our words to vindicate ourselves and lower others. And this is especially the case where there is already hurt or conflict. Because as a community of believers and in our friendships or marriages this will be a reality. Whether words or actions, or even lack of words and inaction, there will be tension, conflict, and the need for apologies and reconciliation.

25:15 *A ruler can be persuaded through patience, and a gentle tongue can break a bone.* How many conflicts and heated arguments could be softened by the simple initiative and words of: "I am sorry." Yet far from simplistic this is powerful and effective. "I was wrong, I was in the wrong, I am sorry."

Yet so often this is a last resort or foolishly qualified as I am sorry *you were hurt*. I am sorry *you took it that way*. The wise know the power of a gentle tongue and don't speak to vindicate our behaviour or justify sin, but acknowledge and confess it – to God and to each other.

And I suspect many of us here right now this is far from hypothetical. We have been more concerned for our reputation or just being right that we have refused to apologise, refused to acknowledge our own fault and sin, and refused to reconcile. But we need to see this is sub-Christian.

The foundation of our belonging to Jesus and being part of his people is acknowledging sin! Why then will we not do this as a community of his people? 12:18 (Again) *There is one who speaks rashly, like a piercing sword; but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

And so are you in conflict with another believer right now? Is there a hurt or anger or tension that has remained unspoken and unacknowledged? Have you defaulted to avoidance and bitterness rather than honesty and repentance?

Our words can hurt and divide, but they can also reconcile and unite. This is why Proverbs constantly condemns gossip. 16:28 *A contrary person spreads conflict, and a gossip separates close friends.* 26:20 *Without wood, fire goes out; without a gossip, conflict dies down*

Sadly Christian community is rarely immune to gossip or slander. And far from small and insignificant chatter, it destroys churches. American pastor Ray Ortlund says,

“We often see words as little sins, small lapses in concentration – yet the tongue divides God’s people more than adultery or greed. Do you know how many people it takes to split a church? Not half the congregation. Just two. One to start spreading the fiery negativity, and another not to confront that behaviour as the sin that it is.”

So are you engaging in gossip? Seeking it, promoting it, even just uncritically listening to it? It’s not harmless chatter or a bit of fun or necessary venting, but breaks relationships, unhinges community, and damages the church in our life, unity, and witness.

This is especially the case because as Proverbs shows us, we have such better things to say for our good and the good of others. Wisdom herself is constantly seen as speaking and calling out (8:6-9; 22:17-18) and the wise who listen then speak wisdom too.

And as Christians, we know that God’s wisdom has been most clearly seen in Jesus. As Paul says, in Christ *are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* (Col 2:3). As people who know Jesus we should speak of Jesus – this is to be a hallmark of Christian community.

We are to *speak the truth in love* (Eph 4:15), and Paul means here not just true things, but the truth of the Gospel, of who Jesus is, what he has done, is doing, and will do. Speaking of Jesus is how we persevere, how we mature as believers, what unites, encourages, and grows us together.

But especially, the wise speak of Jesus because that’s how people find eternal life and relationship with God. Proverbs gives hints at this but it’s made clear and explicitly in the New Testament. 10:11, *The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life;* 15:4, *The tongue that heals is a tree of life.*

The tree of life takes us back to Genesis 1 and life with God in perfect harmony, a life that our sin destroys and leaves us facing God’s judgement. But now through our words, as we speak of Jesus, speak the Gospel, people can find life, access to God, and forgiveness.

But I suspect that most of know this, it’s obvious, yet find it so unnatural to do. For some reason we naturally default to talk about anything other than Jesus.

We sing God’s praises, we hear God’s word, we pray together, then move into supper and we talk about weather, sport, tea, TV shows...

It was devastating that just a week ago a brother in Christ here at Bundy shared of his grief of not finding people willing to talk about the sermon over a cuppa after the service. Yet Proverbs knows this. 20:15, *There is gold and a multitude of jewels, but knowledgeable lips are a rare treasure.*

Speaking the truth in love, focussing our conversation on Jesus to spur each other on should not be an optional extra from our gathering whether here or at growth group or just having a coffee with a friend. It should be our goal and highlight. Yet so often are content to say “it just never came up.”

Wise speech should be discerning, honest, build others up, and Jesus centred. So how is your speech going? As someone prone to sarcasm and joking this sermon has been humbling, convicting, and exposing to write.

Proverbs 26:18 is often on my mind or even quoted to me: *Like a madman who throws flaming darts and deadly arrows,¹⁹ so is the person who deceives his neighbour and says, “I was only joking!”*

Even in the last week alone I’ve used harsh words with my children, careless with words to my wife, withheld encouragement from many, or just kept things superficial too often. Examples of my failure to have wise speech and conviction of the need to change and repent is in all of these areas.

But I suspect I’m not alone: that conviction and awareness of sin with our words is on many of our minds right now, whether failure in what we have said or especially what should have said but didn’t.

So what is the way forward for the wise? How do we address our words and change? Well though it may surprise us, the answer is not simply change your speech, but diagnose your heart. Proverbs is not advocating for people to just regurgitate the right words like a trained parrot.

26:9, *A proverb in the mouth of a fool is like a stick with thorns, brandished by the hand of a drunkard.* Just having new words to say is not helpful but dangerous – harmful to us and even others.

Proverbs doesn’t say just change your words because it knows we can’t, our words reflect and come from our heart as a reflection of who we truly are. 16:23, *The heart of a wise person instructs his mouth; it adds learning to his speech.*

This is exactly what Jesus says too. Speaking of the Pharisees he says, *This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.* He has no interest in mere lip service because our words reflect our heart as he says in Matt 12:24, *How can you speak good things when you are evil? For the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart.*

This is so helpful because it means we won’t leave here tonight and simply think, I need better words, but actually ask what our words say about us. Why do we find apologies and reconciliation so hard? Why are we so slow or even unwilling to encourage and build others up?

Not because we don’t know what to say but so often because we just don’t want to. We often enjoy our poor speech. 18:8, *The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts.*

There is a certain joy and excitement to slander and gossip right? Proverbs says it’s like popcorn chicken or aranchini, little satisfying morsels we enjoy so much. It’s quite revealing isn’t it? And so... Far from accidental or a slip of the tongue, our unwise speech is about false loves and priorities. We enjoy hurtful, vindictive words.

We are selfish, self-absorbed, self-seeking: often unwilling to let people know us or be vulnerable to just say that we were wrong or that they hurt us, or even just to say they genuinely encouraged us.

So don't think the way forward is memorising some Proverbs or inauthentic 'good words' - but diagnose your heart to ask what is stopping me from wise speech? It's true isn't it that most of our unhelpful and hurtful speech begins with our uncritical thinking! We brood and stew on things, we convince ourselves of their motives rather than talking to them or seeking counsel from others.

We should ask tonight what are my words saying about my heart? And although far more confronting, it is far more helpful.

Then as we examine our hearts we must #2 guard it by what we let influence us. 17:4, *A wicked person listens to malicious talk; a liar pays attention to a destructive tongue; 19:27, If you stop listening to correction, my son, you will stray from the words of knowledge. 30:8, Keep falsehood and deceitful words far from me.*

As we keep out falsehood and unwise speech, we must let in wisdom. 1:33, *whoever listens to me will live securely and be undisturbed by the dread of danger; 2:2, listening closely to wisdom and directing your heart to understanding; 8:33, Listen to instruction and be wise; don't ignore it.*

That's why I've given you more references in our handout, listen to Proverbs for the good of your heart and be wise! Knowing the power of words means we know we are influenced and shaped by what we watch and listen to or the people we surround ourselves with. We must guard our ears!

But because we live this side cross and have God's wisdom beautifully displayed and lived out in Jesus, we must thirdly and finally run to Him!

Jesus is of course the ultimate example of wise speech. He proclaimed good news, spoke up for the poor and needy, and calmly declared the truth to those in power or even sought to kill him.

But in Jesus we find not simply an example but comfort for our hearts and power that changes us. One who has heard our every word, seen the heart that hates, envies, or is jealous and yet still welcomes us. As we look and listen to Jesus we are not uncritically embraced, but we are embraced and safe.

From the agony of the cross Jesus speaks words of forgiveness, through his living and enduring word we are born again and receive new life (1Pet 1:22-25). Jesus says it is by God's word that we are sanctified (Jn 17:17), transformed to be more like Jesus.

It is as we look and listen to Jesus, his word works in us to renew our minds and conform our character. As we go to Jesus and his word, we don't just find do better – but real forgiveness for the words we shouldn't have said the good words we failed to say.

In Jesus we receive forgiveness for our sin and real power for our transformation. Not the regurgitating of the right thing to say but comfort and change in our hearts by his word and Spirit that then overflows in our speech.

This is not to say it's quick and easy, nor is it transactional is if you put in the right words and out comes new speech. This is the sometimes slow, often difficult, but an always present work God does in us as his people by his word and Spirit.

And as God does his work in us, for us, and then through us, we should regularly pray with the Psalmist, *May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, LORD, my rock and my Redeemer. (Ps 19:14)* So let's pray that now.