

Words Matter

Proverbs 10:19-21, 31-32

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Having read these proverbs, I bet you've already figured out what we are going to be working with today. That pesky little piece of muscle that hides behind our teeth, causing all sorts of trouble. Yes, we are going to be talking about the tongue, or more specifically, words. Words that, once spoken, cannot be taken back. Words that start chain reactions and events, leading to incredible joy or incredible pain. Such far reaching effects for something as ethereal as breath and vibrations on the wind!

I've had many memorable moments in cross cultural situations. Participating with the church, and seeing what God is doing through the lens of another culture is eye opening, expands your mind and your horizons, and provides deep and lasting spiritual development and appreciation. Some of my most treasured growth moments have happened because sisters and brothers from other cultures have shown me a different way.

Travel has also given me many of my most embarrassing moments. At other times, I've shared about winding up in a women's bathroom during the intermission of a ballet production of Romeo and Juliette. Today, I wanted to share about the difference between two words, shto and kto. These two

innocent sounding words mean who and what, in Ukrainian. That, it turns out, is an important difference.

Just as a random, hypothetical example, one should never, ever, under any circumstances, look into a baby stroller, and then look at the new, first-time mother, and ask with incredible sincerity, “What is that?”

It doesn't go well. It also leads to one's hypothetical friends crying with laughter, while trying to mollify the offended mother, explaining that the poor Canadian doesn't speak enough Ukrainian to know exactly how far into his mouth he has inserted his foot. It also turns out that the mother spoke English, so the whole thing was absolutely avoidable. I discovered what I was actually after eventually, which was the baby's name.

This is just one of a long list of things that I've learned should never be said. We try to bring people up to be socially acceptable. We teach our young ones that it is not polite to talk about religion or politics in social gatherings. There's just too much at stake in those topics for light conversations. Some other examples?

Never, ever, ask a woman if she is pregnant.

Never ask a couple why they don't have children. You don't know their story, and that can be quite painful!

Never comment on someone's weight! Neither weight loss nor gain. Just don't!

Don't question someone's clothing choices. They might not have as much choice in outfits as you do!

These things used to be the simple, unwritten rules for polite society, and yet, over the last several years, it seems that people need a bit of a reminder to be polite to each other. More and more, I find that people are willing to boldly say things that should not be said. Every one of those examples are things I've heard about in the last couple of years. We need to reign in our tongues.

Because words matter!

We have modern proverbs about this basic truth. See if you can finish these lines:

Those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all.

These reflect our readings of Proverbs today.

It is worth asking ourselves, Why do we say these things? I think that there are several reasons.

First, we might simply be trying to be funny.

Once, when I was a child, I'd just learned a joke that I found hilarious. And I couldn't wait to try it out on someone. So I waited patiently, biding my time.

I judged, in all of my 5 years of wisdom, that the perfect time to share my joke was as my Sunday School teacher, a venerable pillar of the church, was coming up the stairs on the way to worship. I ran over to her, planted myself in front of her, and loudly asked, "Is that your nose, or are you eating a banana?"

My mother, understandably, was horrified! In the midst of her apologies and dire promises of retribution on my heinie when we got home, my teacher had incredible grace. After all, children say the darndest things, the saying goes.

Needless to say, this wasn't funny, or witty, or appropriate. It was rude, potentially hurtful, and needed to be corrected.

Often what we think is funny gets lost in translation. Many of my multilingual and multicultural friends tell me that the hardest thing to do in another culture is humour – because every culture has different assumptions of what is funny and what is not.

Best to hold the humour until you know your audience, as they say. Remember, "like a maniac shooting flaming arrows of death is one who deceives their neighbor and says, "I was only joking!" (Proverbs 26:18-19)

Another reason that we might say something that should not be said is to try to pressure someone to change their behaviour. Someone comes to church who looks different. Perhaps their hair color is a shade never seen in nature. Or their t-shirt bears a slogan for a beer company. Or they have tattoos. Or hardware in their faces. Or a head covering. Or not. Or facial hair. Or not. Or someone comes to church who disagrees with us. Or their life choices or lifestyle are not what we agree with. In these situations, words become tools of shame or guilt, passive-aggression or bludgeons, designed to bring someone in line with how we think they should behave.

Friends, these things are not what should concern us about people. Remember, “Man looks at outward appearances, but God looks at the heart!”.

A final reason that we might say something offensive is that we find ourselves confronted with something that makes us uncomfortable, and so we want to relieve the pressure, not for the improvement of the other person, but for our own comfort.

This one is tricky, because it is so subtle. We have an uncanny ability to ignore our inner turmoil, and tell ourselves that we are looking out for someone else’s discipleship or improvement, when in reality, we are simply trying to feel comfortable and safe. Yet often the result is the exact opposite, and it builds into a confrontation, argument, or broken trust. Remember, “There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.” (Prov. 14:12). Better to take the time to ask yourself, “what about this situation makes me uncomfortable, and why?” Once you know yourself, you can engage without judgement with another.

Why should we care? Isn’t this all just political correctness run wild? Isn’t this just people being woke? Why should we not be able to express ourselves freely and without restraint? People should just grow thicker skins, and not be so easily offended!

That would all be true, if we were being held to the standard of the world. But we aren’t We are held to a higher standard because what we say reflects on the God that we claim to worship and represent. So, we need to take it seriously when James says,

“Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, and sets the course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.” (James 3:5b-6).

This wisdom from James is not literally about a person spontaneously combusting from their mouth outwards. Rather, this is a dire warning. It tells us that the words that we say will communicate our true beings. Further, remember that the body is a common image in the bible for the church – we are the body of Christ. What we say has a huge impact on those around us. What we say can burn down

everything that we are looking to build. It can alienate people, divide friends and families, and worst of all, drive people away from God.

Instead, Colossians 4:6 tells us, “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” What does this tell us?

In this New Testament pearl of wisdom, we need to understand that salt represents a purifying, preserving agent, a seasoning that flavours the whole meal. Here Paul is telling us that our speech needs to preserve the purifying truth of the gospel of Jesus, our words need to reflect the new and amazing flavour of his sacrifice for our sins, and a new way of living life in fullness and freedom, love and joy, and kindness towards our neighbour!

But too much salt kills all chance of life. Think of the salt marshes in a farmer’s field. Or the salt flats of Utah. Or the Dead Sea in Israel. Too much saltiness is deadly.

Just so, Paul tells us that salt is the seasoning of our speech, not the main dish. It is meant to enhance the flavour of the grace that we are speaking. To draw it out, make it explode on the tongue. Just enough so that grace explodes into people’s lives with a compelling, irresistible flavour that instantly creates a desire for more.

With this in mind, let’s read again the proverbs for today:

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Our first reason for saying things, to be funny, is dealt with here. Humour that shames or is hurtful is not funny. Giving offense, even if it is unintended, or in the

name of “just telling the truth,” is of little value, because it only sets people against our real intention, which is to show people how much God loves them.

Our second reason for saying things, that is to change how others behave with either shame or guilt, doesn't work. Better to hold our tongue, and let the Holy Spirit do that.

Our final reason for saying these things, so that we can protect ourselves, similarly doesn't work. No one is nourished by hurtful, divisive speech.

But how? How can I know if what I am saying is wisdom, lifegiving, and gracious?

Look at the past several months. Remember the conversations that you've had with friends, colleagues, waiters and children. Do useful conversations or divisive arguments follow your words?

No one likes to be the one that hurts someone else. Thank God that the gospel includes grace for our mistakes. Friends, if you have hurt someone, I encourage you to make it right with them. Words have amazing power, and some of the most powerful words in the English language are, “I am sorry.”

If someone comes to you, and apologizes, then another powerful phrase is, “I forgive you!” Friends, let us never fail to extend the actual words of forgiveness to those who humble themselves enough to repent!

How can I prevent myself from making these mistakes?

Here, I present to you, the Prior question of trust.

Those of you who have gone to Cuba on a team that I helped prepare will recognize this one. The prior question of trust takes a moment to think before speaking (that in itself is good advice for those of you who are like me, and you often speak before thinking!). In that moment, ask yourself,

Is what I am doing, saying or thinking, building up or undermining trust?

When we fail to build people up, when we fail to have language full of grace and seasoned with the flavour of Jesus' gospel, we break trust with people, and they will not listen to what we have to say.

Even worse And I cannot stress this enough,

They will not respect the gospel of Jesus Christ that we talk about.

Words matter. They have incredible power to show those around us the love of Jesus and our hope in him that gives us life. We close with the words of Peter:

“Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For, ‘Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.’” (1 Pet 3:8-12).

Father, please harness the power of my speech today, and use my words for your glory. Father, make me gracious, and just salty enough. Let my words be a source of wisdom, life, and encouragement. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my rock and my redeemer.