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Back to School: The Power of Words

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TEXT: Proverbs 15:4 (ESV)

Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.

There are some things in life that can be both exceptionally beneficial and yet perilous and harmful. Take, for example, a car. A car can serve numerous positive purposes, such as swiftly transporting people to their destinations or moving goods from one place to another. It can be employed in the service of others. However, when it falls into the hands of a careless individual, a car can turn into a lethal weapon. How about a power lawnmower? It keeps our lawns looking pristine, offering more convenience compared to old-fashioned push mowers. But if used thoughtlessly, it can mar a flower bed and even cause harm to someone in proximity. What about a rifle? A rifle is valuable for hunting to provide food or for enjoyable shooting competitions, as well as for defending one's country in the military. Nonetheless, when handled carelessly or with malicious intent, it can result in the loss of innocent lives. All these items have incredible potential for good but can also pose a grave danger. The same principle applies to words.

Words can be employed to uplift, encourage, inspire, provide guidance, offer comfort, correction, and praise. Yet, they can also be wielded as weapons to deceive, threaten, harm others, and disrupt relationships. Words are our primary means of communication, and they possess the power to either boost or shatter confidence, forge lasting alliances, or incite conflict. We are well aware that careless words can lead to disastrous consequences, intentionally or unintentionally slipping off our tongues. Our

teacher, the Holy Spirit, has some wisdom to share with us today regarding the use of words.

This wisdom can be found in the proverb we explored earlier: "A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit." This proverb vividly illustrates the influence of our words. What exactly is a gentle tongue? It's a tongue that delivers words aimed at assisting, healing, and uplifting others. Use words that are wholesome, conveyed not in a harsh manner but tenderly, sincerely, and kindly. A gentle tongue is akin to a tree of life; it nurtures and promotes life in others, providing fruit or shelter. It is beautiful in the eyes of God and a joy to behold. I'm reminded of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden in Genesis and the Tree of Life promised in the new heaven and New Earth in Revelation 22, which brings healing to all the nations of the world. A wholesome tongue encourages and fosters life. When a person is beaten down by disappointment and discouragement, there's no better remedy than words like, "I believe in you," "I love you," "God loves you," "I'm praying for you," "How can I help?" "I've missed you," "I'm sorry," "Well done," "Don't give up," "I'm with you," and "Tell me about your pain." These kinds of words are like gentle rain on parched soil, offering energy like the renewing shade on a scorching day, or a refreshing and satisfying apple. They provide shelter and refuge, shielding individuals from the sun or rain.

I'm reminded of a story in the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel, chapter 25, about a woman named Abigail. Her gentle, wholesome words saved a future King David from committing a terrible wrong in the eyes of God—an act of vengeance prompted by an insult that wounded his pride. Abigail, upon hearing about the incident, intercepted David and his troops and humbly reminded him of his identity, his purpose in God's plan, and God's promises to him. David chose not to proceed with his vengeful plans and instead left the matter to the Lord, and it was resolved. David later expressed his gratitude to Abigail, saying, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me... Blessed be your discretion and blessed be you who have kept me from bloodguilt and from working salvation with my own hand." Abigail's gentle tongue rescued David that day, serving as a tree of life for him. This story brings to mind another proverb that states, "Soft speech is like oil on bruised skin, softening and healing it."

On the other hand, the second part of this proverb illustrates the opposite scenario and its consequences: "But perverseness in it breaks the spirit." So, what constitutes a

perverse tongue or perverse words? These are deceitful, misleading, cruel, and cutting words intended to harm, control, and undermine confidence, tarnishing reputations and breaking the spirit of the recipient. You may have heard the old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." In reality, words have the power to wound and cause considerable distress. Words spoken angrily or disapprovingly toward others, such as "stupid," "idiot," "dumb," "ugly," "worthless," "tramp," "loser," "untalented," or vulgar and hurtful nicknames, can be deeply hurtful and demeaning. After uttering such words, the person might attempt to backtrack, claiming they were only joking or caught up in the heat of the moment, asserting that they didn't mean it. Nevertheless, the psychological impact endures in the mind of the recipient. The nagging question in the back of their mind is whether the speaker truly believes they are stupid or ugly, eroding their self-esteem. For example, a friend of my wife has been facing severe health issues lately, making late-night trips to the E.R. due to her reluctance to inform her husband and ask him to take her there. This reluctance stems from an incident years ago when her husband impatiently responded, "What is it now?" upon hearing of her need to see a doctor. Those words have remained etched in her memory ever since.

It's interesting how words, whether spoken impatiently, laden with lies, gossip, rumors, or innuendos about others, tend to linger in a community, tarnishing reputations and driving individuals to despair, or even worse, suicide. Consider this story: She was new to the church, a friendly, outgoing high school girl who quickly made friends and became active in the church youth group. However, rumors about her began to circulate. It was falsely rumored that she had loose morals, had become pregnant, and had an abortion before joining the church. Some of her new friends began to distance themselves from her, while others treated her condescendingly, and some felt uneasy around her. Throughout this ordeal, no one had the courage to confront her directly about the false stories. Towards the end of the year, it was revealed that the rumors were entirely untrue. The person who started the rumor had confused this girl with someone else. However, the damage was done. Her reputation had been marred by a baseless rumor, and that damage could never be fully undone.

Additionally, threatening and unfounded critical words, used as tools for control, can cause severe harm. I recently read an interview with a well-known female singer whose spouse, also a famous singer-songwriter, would belittle her talent and manipulate her by suggesting that she'd be lost without him. All these tactics were meant to control her.

She described how this experience shattered her spirit and eroded her confidence. In today's world, with the prevalence of technology, this proverb also applies to texting, emailing, and social media platforms like Twitter, which is now often referred to as "words." Words can be wielded to inflict pain on others through cyberbullying, harassment, anonymous threats, mean-spirited criticism, or hasty, angry responses in written messages. It's all too easy to vent behind a keyboard, saying things that one would never dare to say face to face. This behavior is cowardly, unkind, and hurtful, and it can have dire consequences. Tragic stories of teen suicides are the result of such hurtful words. Words spoken or written from the heart or through fingertips are a serious matter, and they carry consequences. Dr. Tremper Longman, in his commentary on Proverbs, notes that this proverb highlights the book's concern for the psychological impact of words and actions. Words have the power to give life or break a life.

Remember, Proverbs addresses people who have a right relationship with God, emphasizing that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, as stated in the opening of Proverbs. As we seek to lead a life that pleases God within the faith community and beyond, this proverb emphasizes that how we talk to and about others matters. Words are powerful; choose and use them with care. For example, as a parent, be aware of how your words shape your children's lives. If they consistently hear you being critical of others or constantly complaining, they will learn to criticize and complain. If you apologize when you make a mistake, they will learn to apologize sincerely. If you speak to them without courtesy or respect, they are likely to do the same with others. If you describe them with unkind words, they may carry that self-image throughout their lives. Passing on unhealthy advice or morals may harm them in the long run. If you use vulgar language around them, they are likely to do the same with others. This principle also applies to coaches; how you speak to your young athletes matters. A friend of mine mentioned that her son quit playing soccer because the coach constantly yelled and said hurtful things to the players. The boy lost his joy in the game. This coach was clearly not in the mold of a Tony Dungy type, who challenges and instructs players with love and respect. As a boss, the words you use in your communication with your team, be it through spoken or written communication, can significantly impact morale. If you have ever worked for someone who used words as weapons to control, you understand how low morale can be in the workplace. When you're a customer, the tone and words you use with those serving you can make a significant difference. Being polite and respectful is always preferable to rudeness and disrespect. The same goes for teammates and competitors; how you speak about them

or to them has the power to either build them up or tear them down, to love or harm, to respect or trash talk. According to this proverb, using words to demean or insult is not acceptable.

In marriage, constant criticism or teasing that belittles your spouse in public can have lasting effects. Instead, words should be used to uplift and encourage your spouse, not just in private but also in the presence of others. Are you laughing with them, not at them? It's important to understand that God takes words seriously. The power of words is evident in the creation of the world. God spoke words of judgment and grace through his prophets, and they came to fruition. The Bible tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. The book of Hebrews opens by saying, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets."

But in these last days, He has spoken to us through His Son, whom He appointed as the heir of all things, and through whom He also created the world. Ultimately, God's gentle and healing word was spoken at another tree – the cross. The apostle Paul, or rather Peter, wrote about Jesus's death on the cross, saying that "He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds, you have been healed." The Word made flesh, nailed to that tree, speaks words of life to us: "I love you. You are forgiven. Come home."

In the New Testament letters, the importance of words is also addressed when written to the church community. For instance, the apostle Paul writes to the congregation in Ephesus, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is a need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear." Words have the power to strengthen a church or tear it apart. James, the brother of Jesus, emphasizes the difficulty yet importance of controlling one's tongue so it doesn't harm people. He writes, "So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God."

You might be thinking, "I've been careless with my words in the past, and even now, they just slip out." While it's true that you may struggle on your own, the good news is that in Christ Jesus, you're not on your own. You can change, starting with a commitment: "I will, with God's help." It begins with repentance, turning around and walking by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, our counselor and helper who empowers

and shapes us into the image of Christ, bringing forth His fruit in the life of every believer: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

This proverb might also serve as a convicting reminder. If you've spoken unkind, untrue, or hurtful words to others or about others, or if you've withheld needed encouragement, it's time to make amends. Approach the person you've harmed and say, "I'm sorry. I was mean, unfair, and wrong. Please forgive me." These are healing words. Let us keep this verse from a Sunday school song in our hearts, a reminder for our self-talk: "Oh, be careful, little tongue, what you say. Oh, be careful, little tongue, what you say. For the Father up above is looking down in love. So be careful, little tongue, what you say."