

The Power of Words

James Haddell

We are currently working our way through a sermon series on the Wisdom Literature of the Bible – the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job and Psalms.

Today we're looking specifically at a selection of Proverbs that deal with the topic of the words we speak and the effect they can have.

We've also had a reading from the book of James that deals with the same subject and I will draw on a few other verses as well to try and pull together an overall sense of what the Bible has to say about the power of words.

And Words are powerful.

Have you ever said something and immediately wished you could take it back? Or perhaps someone once spoke a single sentence that encouraged you so deeply it changed your entire outlook on life?

Our words carry immense weight.

Words shape our lives.

They can lift us up, bring healing, and inspire hope, or they can wound, discourage, and divide.

James uses a couple of vivid images in the first verses of our reading to illustrate how our words, though seemingly small, direct the course of human lives – not just our own.

I don't know how much you know about horses,

but a *bit* is the piece of (usually) metal attached to the bridle and reins that goes into the mouth of the horse, and it is through this that the rider is able to steer such a powerful animal, often at incredible speeds.

Likewise, ships—

especially vast ocean-going vessels—are steered by a relatively tiny rudder, and that has been the case for thousands of years.

Now there is of course a lot more to riding a horse and sailing a ship than this, but the fact remains that it would be difficult to control a horse at speed without a bit, and completely impossible to navigate the oceans in a ship without a rudder.

Yet these are seemingly tiny things compared to the size of what they steer.

Similarly, many factors will influence the life of a human being but the tongue and the words it forms will have a disproportionately massive impact in the journeys we take.

At this point though the image of the bit and rudder are not enough. A bit will only control the horse that is 'biting' on it, and a rudder will only steer the ship of which it is a part.

But the words we speak will not only direct our own path – they also have the power to influence others, and other people's words will have an impact on our own lives.

The words someone speaks can breathe life into another person's soul or crush their spirit.

A single word of encouragement—"You've got this," "I believe in you," "God is with you"—can transform someone's day, even their destiny. On the other hand, a careless snip or sharp criticism can leave lasting wounds.

Think about your own experiences. Have words spoken over you shaped the way you see yourself?

Perhaps a teacher, mentor, or friend once said something that gave you confidence and purpose. Or maybe harsh words created self-doubt and insecurity.

Our words matter far more than we often realize. We must use our words with wisdom and grace.

Fire is one of the most powerful forces in nature. It can provide warmth and light, but it can also destroy entire forests in moments.

James uses this image to warn us: "The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire" (James 3:5-6).

We've all seen this in action. A single careless comment can spread like wildfire, damaging reputations, relationships, and even entire communities.

Harsh words spoken in anger can burn bridges that may take years to rebuild. Gossip, slander, and lies can destroy trust in an instant.

Proverbs 16:27 echoes this: "A scoundrel plots evil, and on their lips it is like a scorching fire."

In this verse it sounds very intentional, but James talks about the tongue more like a potentially volatile animal, often bucking and snarling out of our control.

He says that while humanity has tamed all kinds of animals, the tongue remains untamed.

"No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison" James 3:8.

That's a slightly scary thought isn't it—our words can be toxic!

Have you ever experienced the destructive power of words? Have you ever seen how negativity, gossip, or harsh criticism spreads in a family, workplace, or church?

It seeps in and poisons relationships, creating division and hurt.

Perhaps you've spoken in frustration and later regretted the pain you caused.

Proverbs 10:19 gives wise counsel: "Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues."

Sometimes, the best thing we can do is simply remain silent. Holding our tongue in moments of anger or frustration can prevent untold harm.

Words, once spoken, cannot be taken back. Proverbs 15:1 reminds us, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

James challenges us: "Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be." (James 3:10).

Our words should not be inconsistent with the faith we profess.

Proverbs 4:23-24 tells us, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips."

Now much of the scriptures mentioned so far have perhaps been a little negative. They have talked mostly about how we *shouldn't* use our words and if we only consider these, we'd probably draw the conclusion that we shouldn't say anything at all.

To be honest, sometimes saying nothing is the best thing to do and we probably should consider that option more often.

But here's the good news:

While words can destroy, they can also heal.

Ephesians 4:29 urges us, "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."

Proverbs 12:18 says: "The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."

We don't have to let our words be a destructive fire

We can instead choose to use them to restore and redeem.

Proverbs 4:23 from our reading presses the point that our words are connected to the state of our hearts.

Jesus also reminds us that our words reveal what is in our hearts: "For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of" (Luke 6:45).

If our hearts are filled with bitterness, anger, or pride, it will inevitably show in our speech.

But if we fill our hearts with God's truth, love, and wisdom, our words will reflect those virtues.

If we find ourselves constantly speaking in ways that tear down rather than build up, it's time to examine what is in our hearts.

Are we harbouring bitterness, jealousy, or pride? The solution isn't just trying harder to control our tongues—it's allowing Christ to transform our hearts.

If we want to change the way we speak, we must start with what we feed our hearts.

Are we meditating on things that are true, noble, and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8)? If so, our words will naturally become more life-giving.

Proverbs 16:21 tells us, "The wise in heart are called discerning, and gracious words promote instruction."

Then, in verse 24, we read, "Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones."

Have you ever received a kind word at just the right time? A simple compliment, a heartfelt encouragement, or a gentle reassurance can bring deep comfort and healing.

Words have the power to nourish. Just as honey is both sweet and medicinal, our words can bring both joy and restoration.

However, wise and gracious words do not always come naturally. It is often much easier to speak rashly, harshly, or carelessly.

That's why we must seek God's wisdom and discipline our speech.

If we are to honour God, we must strive for consistency in our speech.

This means choosing words that build up rather than tear down,

speaking truth rather than deceit,

and using our tongues to bless rather than to curse.

By surrendering our words to Christ, we allow Him to shape our speech so that it reflects His character.

I want to just make one more point before briefly discussing some practical applications and then having a moment of reflection as we move into our prayers.

Proverbs 18:21 is perhaps one of the most striking verses in Scripture about the weight of our words: "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit."

What we say doesn't just affect others—it also impacts us. If we cultivate life-giving speech, we will experience the blessing of encouragement, joy, and peace.

But if our words are careless, bitter, or destructive, we will reap the consequences of discord and pain.

Our words affect those to whom they are spoken, but they also affect we who speak them.

Our words flow out of what is in our hearts, but they also affect what seeps back into our hearts.

Every word we speak is like a seed—once planted, it will bear fruit, either good or bad.

If we sow words of kindness, encouragement, and truth, we will reap relationships filled with trust, love, and joy.

If we sow words of gossip, criticism, or deceit, we will eventually face the consequences of broken relationships and regret.

So, what Practical Steps should we take from these verses so that we are able to Speak Life

James 1:19 gives us practical wisdom for harnessing the power of our words: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry."

We must consciously pause before we speak, especially when we are feeling emotional.

We must give ourselves the chance to choose words that build up rather than tear down.

Before speaking, we should pause and ask ourselves: Is this true? Is it kind? Is it helpful? Is it necessary? If you can't say yes to most of those questions then don't say it.

Let's make Psalm 141:3 our prayer: "Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips."

Make an intentional effort to speak words of encouragement daily to develop the habit of uplifting speech.

Listen to those around us who speak life so that their example may encourage us to do the same.

And when we fail—because we all will—we must be quick to apologise, seek forgiveness, and commit to speaking with greater wisdom and grace.

By doing so, we allow God to continually refine us and make our words a source of life and blessing to others.

Similarly, we must remember that others will inevitably speak careless or hurtful things over us at times. We need to forgive and not let those words take root in our hearts.

And we need to listen to the words our heavenly father speaks over us: we need to listen to the God who spoke the universe into existence, who breathed life into us, and to Jesus Christ, the very Word of God who gave up heaven and took up the cross because he loves us so.

Conclusion

Our words hold great power—power to direct, destroy, defile, or bring life.

The passages we've looked at this morning warn us of the dangers of an unchecked tongue, but also encourage us to embrace the opportunities for transformation that our words can present.

They teach us to guard our hearts so that our words will be wise, gracious, and healing.

And they show us that by speaking words that build up, we not only bless others but also create an environment where relationships can thrive.

If we surrender our speech to God, He can use our words to encourage, heal, and strengthen those around us.

Each day, we have countless opportunities to choose life-giving speech over destructive words.

May we strive to speak with kindness, truth, and grace, reflecting the love of Christ in every conversation.

Let us be known as people whose words build up rather than tear down, whose speech reflects the wisdom and goodness of God.

As we go forward, let's pray for God's help in taming our tongues and using our words for His glory.

May our speech always be seasoned with love and guided by His wisdom.

May our words be like honey—sweet to the soul and healing to the bones!

I'm going to transition from Sermon mode into Prayers by way of some quiet reflections.

It may be that some things I've said this morning have stirred up uncomfortable memories and I think it's important that we don't sweep those away and move on too quickly.

So I'd like us all now to take a moment, to quieten our minds, and prayerfully consider these things:

When you think of how you use your tongue, what regrets do you have? Are there words you wish you hadn't spoken? Have you hurt someone through the things you have said?

This may be words you spoke yesterday, or words that have haunted you for years.

Or perhaps what casts a shadow over your heart are words of life that you failed to speak to someone who desperately needed them.

Don't shy away from them now. Take a moment to reflect on any damage you may have caused and ask God for wisdom and grace to make things right.

Vow to seek reconciliation where needed and choose to be a source of healing rather than destruction.

You may be able to reconcile with this other person or perhaps that opportunity has passed.

Either way, you can speak honestly now in your heart to God, knowing that he was there when you spoke or failed to speak those words. He heard them as if they were spoken to or withheld from *him*, and that did nothing to damage the great love he has for you.

Know that you are forgiven, that the past has passed, and it does not need to dictate your future.

Are there any words that have been spoken over you that tore at your spirit and have felt like a weight around your neck ever since you first heard them?

You may have learnt to ignore them but if they still echo in your mind then take a moment now to notice that, however loud those derisive voices may be, there is a louder voice declaring that you are a precious child of our heavenly father, fearfully and wonderfully made because he wanted someone just like you to walk his earth and beautify all the places you tread.

And now, take a moment to evaluate what you are feeding your heart.

Are you dwelling on negativity, gossip, or resentment? Ask God to cleanse your heart and fill it with His truth so that your words may bring healing and encouragement.

Pray for the influence of words in our church, in our homes and in our communities - Peace, encouragement and forgiveness to reign in our words and in our hearts

Pray for the influence of words in our country - Peace, and constructive discussion to reign in our country and in the words of our politicians and the media

Pray for the influence of words in the wider world - Peace, and restoration to reign in the words of world leaders and in all the war-torn and grief-stricken parts of the world.

Christ, as a light illumine and guide me.

Christ, as a shield overshadow me.

Christ under me;

Christ over me;

Christ beside me on my left and my right.

This day be within and without me, lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.

Be in the heart of each to whom I speak;

in the mouth of each who speaks unto me.

This day be within and without me, lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.

Christ as a light;

Christ as a shield;

Christ beside me on my left and my right.

[\(https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/offices/morning-prayer/\)](https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/offices/morning-prayer/)