



Wisdom #5

The Power of Words w/c 23 February 2025

"Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless." (Mother Teresa)

It has long been recognised that we talk too much. Back in the fourth-century BC, the Greek philosopher Diogenes put it this way: *"We have two ears and one tongue so that we would listen more and talk less."* How do we learn to balance these two aspects of conversation? Bear in mind that this all applies just as much to social media, emails and the like as it does to speech.

Read Proverbs 4:23–27; 16:21–24; 18:20–21 (*I've extended the readings from Sunday a little to give us a bit more context for the key thoughts.*)

These proverbs may conclude with the tongue or the words it forms but the root is clearly seen as the heart – the inward essence that makes us who we are. As a dictionary (Chambers) puts it, *"the centre of a person's thoughts, emotions, conscience, etc."*. It's not just our speech that shows who we really are but our actions as well (see the later verses of the first extract, but also Matthew 5:16 and 7:16a). Given that it's the 'inside' which drives the 'outside' why do you think the church has spent so much time lecturing those around us to "behave properly" in one way or another? What should we do instead?

Jesus took this one stage further when (Matthew 23) he referred to the religious establishment of his day as rotten to the core though still superficially attractive (verse 27). Is that how much of society sees the wider church today. What can we do to correct that view?

Read James 3:1–12

James has already touched on the need to control our speech – see 1:19 and also 1:26 which is a rather salutary reminder to us all.

He then opens chapter three by addressing teachers directly and at some point opens up his thinking to include all believers. But when? If you have access to different translations, see where they put the paragraph breaks. How does that affect the impact of the message here? Think through the examples in verses three to six. What help do they give us as we seek to be wise in our speech?

There are two correctives to saying the wrong thing: to either say the right thing or to keep silence. The writer of Proverbs had a take on the latter – *"Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent and discerning if they hold their tongues."* (Proverbs 17:28) The idea has since entered the popular consciousness through words mis-ascribed to either Abraham Lincoln or Mark Twain: *"Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and to remove all doubt."* How do we avoid being seen as fools?

James ends this section with a set of comparisons – there seems to be a clear implication that good should spring from Christians whose heart has been made good. It is important that we actually say the right thing rather than just trying to avoid saying wrong things. It falls within the wider instruction that Paul gave the Colossian church as we saw two weeks ago: *"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus..."* (Colossians 3:17). We can look back to Job's friends as well. Their advice contained many 'right' words but, overall, the 'wrong' message. Any speech must be seen as just one element of our being salt (Matthew 5:13). Read the quotation below: what sort of things should we be saying?

"History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamour of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people." (Martin Luther King Jr)