

# Words (Part 1)

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     Okay, this week, as I said, as we continue through the book of Proverbs, as we continue in this kind of really different, kind of strange book, but hopefully a book we're starting to get to grips with and feel a bit more familiar with as it spells out to us what the wise life looks like.
- This week we're focusing, what does it say the wise life looks like in the area of our words. I'm sure you've all heard the old rhyme, sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.
- I hope you're also completely aware that that is rubbish as well and belongs in the bin. A terrible rhyme. Whoever thought of that? Our words have an incredible effect.
- I read an article this week. It began by saying words are singularly the most powerful force available to humanity. And if you think about it, it's hard to argue with that opening statement.
- Our words carry great weight. Our words carry great power. Our words can harm. And our words can help. I love the Spider-Man films, or most of them.
- [ 1 : 0 5 ]     And the kind of recurring theme or motto in those films is this, with great power comes great responsibility. You hear it time and time again. And it can be a scary thought if we stop and think and consider actually the power that our words have.
- And that motto is true. With that power comes that responsibility. It's so important. We have that responsibility to use our words well.
- Even in the last week or so, there's been so much talk, hasn't there, about Caroline Flack's death, her suicide, that tragic, really complex situation.
- I don't know an awful lot of details about it. But I do know a huge focus has been on the words that were said about her, on the things that were written about her, and on the terrible effects and consequences that they had on her.
- And we're reminded week by week that words are so important. Spoken words, written words, texted words, tweeted words. We use words in so many different ways across so many different means of communication, so many different platforms.
- [ 2 : 1 3 ]     But I think really the principles that we're looking at this morning of how we use our words should be the same in all those areas. We don't have, or at least we shouldn't have, should we? One way of speaking to someone while they're there.
- There may be a different approach if we're sending them a text or if we're talking about them on social media or something. It's so important that we have this consistency and this integrity.
- It's so important that this wisdom is the hallmark of all of our words. And the book of Proverbs, I really think this morning is going to help us in how we do that.
- Of all the topics covered in Proverbs, it is words, it is speech. It is the tongue that comes up most frequently. That's why, kind of as I was looking at these over the last week, there's so much here that we're going to split it over the next two weeks.

Otherwise, we'd have either been here for hours and no one wants that, or we'd have had to leave out so much kind of good and practical and useful stuff. So we're going to come back and revisit this again next week.

[ 3 : 12 ] This week, we're mostly focusing on what our words are like. And next week, we'll come back and pick up this same idea to think more, I suppose, what our words are for. So please do, yeah, come back next week as we finish that off.

But the first thing that I wanted to get us to get to grips with, something really foundational for all of the Bibles teaching about words is really a question of order, I suppose.

If the book of Proverbs that we keep saying is all about wisdom, is it that speaking well, is it that saying the right thing makes us wise, or is it that wise people speak well?

You see the difference there? Which comes first? Which is the cause and which is the effect? Well, the consistent teaching of the Bible here in Proverbs and elsewhere is that what we say is a result of who we are.

Proverbs 15, verse 2 there on the sheet, the tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly. Ultimately, it's our heart that determines what our mouth is going to say.

[ 4 : 21 ] It's the one who is wise who will speak well. That wisdom comes first. Have a look there in particular at chapter 10, verse 20, up at the top of that sheet.

If you were here a couple of weeks ago, you'll remember we spoke about parallelism, about how the two lines that you so often find in these Proverbs kind of correlate. They work together as a pair.

The tongue of the righteous is choice silver. The heart of the wicked is of little worth. See there how the tongue in the first line, the heart in the second line, they're in parallel.

They're kind of held together. The point is, this verse isn't saying, well, here's something interesting about the tongue, oh, and here's something unrelated about the heart. No, it's saying the tongue and the heart are two sides of the same coin.

The tongue reveals the heart. In a righteous person, it says, a wise person, that is positive, it's valuable. In the wicked person, the foolish person, that is not of value, it says, that is not helpful.

[ 5 : 20 ] But that link from heart to tongue, from who we are to what we say is so clear. If you want to see it even more clearly, if you want to see how the Bible is so consistent in what it says, we can move forward into the New Testament.

We could move into Matthew's Gospel, recording the words of Jesus, who says in chapter 12, verse 34, out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.

Or a couple of chapters later, Jesus again, what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart. One of the reasons that our words are such a big deal is that they show what we're truly like inside.

One of the reasons that our words are so hard to control, so hard to change, so hard to fake, is that they reflect what we're truly like inside. Our words reveal our hearts.

Now, why is it so important to get to grips with this before we carry on? Well, it's because I think it takes us, again, straight back to the heart of the book of Proverbs. It reminds us that this morning we're not looking at some quick tips to change how we might use our words.

[ 6 : 28 ] You know, the idea of this hashtag telling us to be kind, that might be a good reminder, that might be very true. And yet, actually, if we want real change, Proverbs says, the Bible says, we have to go much deeper than that.

Now, we need to deal with the real heart change that is the foundation of the book of Proverbs. We need that foundational change in who we are to be able to change how we speak.

Now, remember back in chapter one, that kind of introduction to the whole book of Proverbs, to the whole idea of biblical wisdom. It told us the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

That the real wisdom comes from a right understanding of who God is and who we are in light of that. In chapter three, again, that key verse we looked at, trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.

And this huge kind of shift in the book of Proverbs, which means that rather than life being all about me, all about what I want, what I do, what I know, what I'm capable of, that actually my life is all about God.

[ 7 : 35 ] That it's recognizing my true dependence on him. It's recognizing that he knows best. Now, we said week by week that ultimately this finds its fulfillment in us putting our trust in Jesus.

That it's the rescue that God has offered. It's not about, wisdom is not found in us kind of reaching up. It's found in God reaching down. And it's only as we grasp that, as we accept that, as we trust that, that our hearts then are truly changed.

That we're able to live this life of wisdom that God calls us to and commends to us. And this life of wisdom of which our speech is such a big part.

And so really that's, I suppose, the big picture. That's us plugging again this kind of specific topic into the big kind of main power of Proverbs and biblical wisdom.

To change our words, we need to change our heart. To change our hearts, we need to fear God, to trust him, to accept Jesus. To turn from our self-dependence and self-centeredness.

[ 8 : 40 ] And instead rely fully on him and live fully for him. And that then changes everything. So that's the kind of, the headline, that's the big picture. And let's turn now to some real practical differences that this wisdom, this heart depending on Jesus makes to our words.

Again, I've tried to pick out some major themes that are repeated throughout these Proverbs. Again, next week we'll be coming back and looking at this a little bit more. But this morning I want us to look at two big things.

And you'll see them again there on the sheet with the verses underneath. First, the words of the wise are true. And then second, the words of the wise are few. That's another reason we had to split it over two weeks.

It stopped rhyming if we carried on. So that's why we'll come back next week and pick up some words that don't rhyme with few or true. But first, that foundational distinctive that shows itself in these Proverbs is that the words of the wise are true.

It's very simple, isn't it? We're supposed to tell the truth. Maybe that just sounds very basic. And yet actually we know it's not that easy. We live in a world where truth is taken less and less seriously.

[ 9 : 49 ] We're told that we live in a post-truth society. That we're surrounded by fake news. That you can't believe everything you hear. So often we're told that kind of the end justifies the means and the truth can be a kind of a victim in that battle.

Collateral damage so long as people in the end get the result they want. I read an article this week. It said we accept truthiness. Which it's kind of defined as a general sense of something being plausible often because it fits with preconceived ideas.

That we accept truthiness instead of requiring the truth. In the world we live in it's harder and harder to find what is true and what is not.

But in this kind of world the church and in this kind of world Christians should really kind of stick out as people who are serious about the truth. People for whom the idea of truthiness is not enough.

Who want the truth? Why is that? Why is the truth such a big deal? Well these proverbs tell us that above all it is because God is serious about the truth. Proverbs 12.22 there it says lying lips are an abomination to the Lord but those who act faithfully are his delight.

[ 11 : 03 ] The Bible elsewhere describes God as the one who never lies. Jesus himself it is who says I am the truth. Again wisdom which is living well in God's creation.

It means modeling ourselves on him as the creator. The most simple test of anything that we say or type or text or post has to be is it true?

And the truth is important to us because it's important to God. So then how does real wisdom, how does this change in our hearts that we've just been saying is kind of foundational to the book of Proverbs and everything that we build on that.

How does it lead to us telling the truth? Because again as always it's really important that we don't just sit here thinking yes there are lots of people out there who are not telling the truth.

Or there are lots of people out there who we shouldn't trust and they are bad. Instead it's really important that we recognize that we are tempted not to tell the truth. That we tell lies. That we are part of the problem here.

[ 12 : 05 ] And so how does wisdom help us in that rather than just saying well don't do that anymore? I think perhaps the easiest way to answer that question is kind of to turn the question around and ask this.

Well when do we lie? When are we economical with the truth? That's kind of the polite way of saying it isn't it? Where does that temptation come from? I think very few of us are kind of compulsive liars who just lie for the fun of it.

So why is it that we lie? Why are we tempted? Well I think it's usually because of two things. Number one it's because we lie because we want people to think well of us.

We don't want to admit our weaknesses or mistakes and so we deny them. Or number two it's because we're trying to avoid a difficult situation. It seems easier just to kind of mislead someone and no one will ever really know than actually to deal with the consequences of speaking the truth.

One way or another we lie to kind of promote ourselves or to protect ourselves. And so how then does wisdom, how does the gospel, the ultimate fulfillment of this wisdom affect us in these situations?

[ 13 : 14 ] Well it affects us like this. Ultimately if our foundation is this fear of the Lord that the book of Proverbs speaks about. If that is our solid ground, this right understanding of God and this desire to live for him rather than ourselves.

Well then what God thinks about us is much more important than what other people think about us. When I see that choice, will I tell a lie? Excuse me.

Will I kind of fudge the truth because it will make people think better of me? Or will I be clear about the truth even though it doesn't reflect well on me? Will I be clear because that pleases God?

Well it's a no brainer then that I would choose to please God and be clear about the truth rather than look good in the sight of others. It means too that what God thinks about us, that pleasing him, living for him is much more important than an easy life or avoiding inconvenience.

We face up to the truth and its consequences because that pleases God. And we then have that confidence that even if that makes our life more difficult, we go through those consequences with him by our side.

[ 14 : 23 ] So the words of the wise are true because we want to please God with our words. Just before we move on, I think sometimes that means we need to work to make them true as well. We have to back up our words.

A great example in the church, we're always really quick to tell people, Oh, are we praying for you? Oh, I'll pray about that. It's really good that we're quick to say that because it's important that we do pray for people.

We are dependent on prayer as individuals and as a church. But saying that we'll pray about a situation doesn't actually change that situation. Praying for that situation is what changes things.

And when we say that, I'll pray for you. Maybe even more simple, I'll be in touch. When we say those things, wisdom motivates us to carry that through, to make sure that it's true.

That we would become people who are reliable and trustworthy because we have a God who is reliable and trustworthy. Only what is true is of God. Only what is true is pleasing to him.

[ 15 : 24 ] And so the words of the wise are true as they are modeled on the creator God who is that ultimate source of truth. And we could talk much more about that, couldn't we, this idea of truth, the importance of truth.

But actually I want to move on now from where things go from being, I suppose, black and white, true or false, into what is maybe more of a gray area. These kind of areas where the book of Proverbs, this kind of wisdom really comes into its own.

Where there are not hard and fast rules, but there are principles for us to follow. So the words of the wise are true. Next, the words of the wise are few. And the idea here that we can't miss in Proverbs is that just because something is true, it does not mean we have to say it.

It does not mean it is wise to say it. Just as last week that the wise are slow to anger, well this week the wise are often slow to speak. Now when it comes to our words, the Bible emphasizes quality over quantity.

Let me highlight a few of the verses there for you over the page. We could again have picked many more along these lines. When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.

[ 16 : 40 ] And down near the bottom there, whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble. And that last one, do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

And there are many more. The words of the wise are few. The wise are slow to speak. I grew up watching at least one episode of The Simpsons every day, and so I've got many quotes from it.

One of my favorite bits is where Lisa, the very kind of intelligent daughter, quotes it. I think it's Abraham Lincoln. She says at the beginning, it is better to remain silent and be thought the fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.

And then the scene kind of cuts to Homer, the dad, not the sharpest tool in the box, his kind of internal monologue, his brain saying, what did that mean? Quick, better say something or they'll think you're stupid. And he just kind of blurts out the first thing that comes to mind.

It's a great picture of the fool in Proverbs, just desperate to speak. Better say something. But the wise, we're told in that proverb there, restrains his lips. And so why is that?

[ 17 : 46 ] I wanted to see, I think, three reasons that we see for being slow to speak in Proverbs. Three of the things that are highlighted. Three really practical things. Number one is because our words can get us into trouble, especially hasty words.

Again, chapter 21, verse 23. Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble. Now, this came up again last week when we spoke about anger.

These things overlap so much, don't they? But so often we say things and we regret it if we've said those things when we've not been in control. If they've not taken that time to think about it or to pray about it.

It's like they say, isn't it? Words are like toothpaste in a tube. Once they're out, you can never put them back in. In the heat of the moment, the moment that we hear something, the second something happens, it's so rarely the best time for us to vent what we're thinking or to fire off that text or that email.

Much better, the book of Proverbs says, to take some time. To pray. To arrange a specific meeting with someone to speak about something rather than kind of ambush them and unload everything on them at once.

[ 18 : 57 ] To leave an email overnight and see if we still think in the morning whether the tone as well as the words that we've used are the most helpful. When words are many and quick, so often we get ourselves into trouble.

We know that's true. The book of Proverbs affirms that's true. He who opens wide his lips comes to ruin. And so the wise words are few.

Secondly, really kind of building on that, wise words are few because if we have our hearts set on God, is if, as we spoke about last week, our hope, our reward, our security, it is in Jesus and the gospel if we get our value from the fact that God loves us, that loves us so much that Jesus died for us, and that through trusting in him, as Ewan said in his prayer, that we're adopted into his family, and that no one and no thing can ever change that.

If that is our foundation, well, I think then we suddenly find that we don't need to speak as much. And we don't need to jump in and defend ourselves straight away the moment someone is critical or questions our actions or says something about us.

We're able to have our words being few because we're secure in what God thinks of us, not what other people think. We're able to accept, to think, to ponder, to pray, well, actually, maybe I have made a mistake in this area.

[ 20 : 20 ] We're able to accept that because we know the forgiveness that God offers. And we don't have to jump in and defend ourselves immediately with our words.

And we don't need to prove ourselves with our words because our value is in what God thinks about us rather than in the kind of respect that we get from other people. Proverbs 12, verse 23 there, A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims folly.

That verse there is not talking about keeping secrets or not telling people things they need to know. It's saying that the wise person, the prudent person, the person focused on and secure in God doesn't have to show off his great knowledge to everyone who will listen.

So you've met these people. You've only spent a very short amount of time with them, but in that short amount of time, you've heard an awful lot about the great things they have done, the incredible achievements their children have made.

You've probably felt that temptation yourself. I know I have. How can I kind of work this conversation so that I can just casually drop in this impressive achievement which will make people think I'm a good person or a clever person or a kind person?

[ 21 : 32 ] That somehow I need these people to know this about me. We find actually if our value is in God, if we fear the Lord and what he thinks of us rather than people and what they think of us, then our conversations, our social media posts, our words in all the different ways that we use them don't need to be about ourselves or making ourselves look better.

Our words can be few. And thirdly, and I think so importantly, the words of the wise are few because when we're not talking, then we're able to listen.

If we're truly wise, our conversations aren't always about ourselves because actually we're interested in other people. And again on the sheet there, Proverbs 18 verse 13, if one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.

It is not wise. That is not the way to live in God's creation. So often a conversation can feel, can't it, like two or more people just waiting for their turn to speak, waiting for their turn to share what they know or what they do in a situation.

Sometimes not even waiting, just waiting for a breath and then they're in and they're off. But verse, chapter 15 verse 28, the heart of the righteous ponders how to answer. Our words are few because it means we can listen.

[ 22 : 56 ] And I think this is huge. I think in a community, in a world where everyone is desperate to be heard, where everyone is desperate to say their peace, it would make a church community, a radically different community if we all committed that in our conversations with whoever we speak to, in church and out of the church, if we committed that we would be people who are slow to speak, who have few words, because we really wanted to listen to other people.

We really wanted to get to grips with what was happening in other people's lives. We really wanted to hear about what was valuable to them. We really wanted to hear about what was worrying to them, that we were genuinely caring about them and what was happening.

How do we get to be these people who are slow to speak, quick to listen? Again, it only comes with this heart change. It's only when our hearts are in tune with God, when we find our hope, our security, our value in him, that then we see others as God sees them, that we start to value other people as God values them, that we start to value them enough to listen.

And it's actually doing that, that we're actually showing through our words something of God's love to others. If we use our words wisely, we can show God to people. It shows we value them.

It shows most importantly that God values them. And it shows that the invitation, again, that we come back to, right at the heart of Proverbs, is that they can find their value in God too.

[ 24 : 28 ] That the beginning of wisdom, if people want to have a life that runs along the grain of creation, a life that works well, that the beginning of that wisdom is that the fear of the Lord, is that right recognition of God and a right relationship with that God.

And the incredible truth that God has made that possible. God himself has provided that and promised that. Because ultimately, what is more important even than our words are our God's words.

And see that right at the bottom there of your sheet. Proverbs 30, verse 5, every word of God proves true. He is a shield to those who take refuge in him.

And this whole book of Proverbs is all about encouraging us to take refuge in him. And he promises he will be that shield. We can trust in God. This invitation is for everyone to trust in God.

And we do that by accepting Jesus and the gospel. And for those who do that, we can trust his promises that he will be a shield, that he will provide our rescue and our security. And because of that, because of his promises, because of his words, which are always true, then our words and every part of our lives can be changed as well.

[ 25 : 41 ] Our words are true because they are founded on the God who is truth. Our words are few because our value is in him. And that allows us to value others and to show that with our words.

Let's pray together. that. We have to pray together. Absolutely.