

THE ART OF WORDS

John Tucker, Mt Albert Baptist Church, 4 November 2007

We're looking today at the art of words, the art of speaking well. Let's start by listening to one of the greatest speeches of the twentieth century... **[Show clip of the speech, "I have a Dream" at 10.30am and 7.17pm services?]** These words by Martin Luther King inspired, convicted, transformed a generation of Americans. They transformed the world. Words have power.

This last fortnight you may have read in the news about James Watson. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for discovering the structure of DNA. He's one of the greatest scientists of the twentieth century, enormously respected. But last month he said in an interview that he is "inherently gloomy about the prospect of Africa" because (in his words) black people are genetically inferior – less intelligent – than white people. Needless to say, that one sentence has caused a furore. Watson says now that it was a throwaway line, that he didn't really mean it. But it's too late. He's lost his job at one of the premier research institutes in America. His career is in tatters. And his reputation has been stained forever. Words have power.

The writer of Proverbs knew this. **[Slide 1]** That's why he said this: "The tongue has the power of life and death" (Prov 18:21). The right words bring life. The wrong words bring death. Sticks and stones may break bones, but words have the power to destroy a career, a reputation, a relationship, a family, a whole community. With our words, when we're careless, we can crush someone's spirit, destroy the dreams of those we most love. "Reckless words" the writer says, "pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (Prov 12:18). That's why in the Book of Proverbs there are probably more proverbs devoted to human speech than to any other aspect of life. That's why the writer of Proverbs says this: "Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity" (Prov 21:23). Guard your mouth. Well how do you do that? This morning let's extract a few principles from this book.

1. The gushing tap principle

[Slide 2] Proverbs 10:19 (NLT) says: "Don't talk too much, for it fosters sin. Be sensible and turn off the flow." I'd call this the gushing tap principle. Like water gushing out of a tap, words can so easily flow out of our mouths. Would you agree? The average person spends a fifth of their life talking. It's been calculated that in one year you will use enough words to fill a 66,800 page book. The average man speaks 20,000 words per day. The average woman speaks 30,000 words per day. We talk a lot. The problem, according to this proverb, is that the more you talk the more likely you are to say something you shouldn't. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, said that in his opinion, "It is impossible to hold a conversation lasting more than 30 minutes without saying something that shouldn't be said." So, in other words, don't be too quick to speak. Turn off the flow.

[Slide 3] Proverbs 15:28 says: "The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil." In other words, think before you speak. One reason why wise people think before they speak is because they understand the enormous potential for words to be misunderstood. There's a story about a minister who decided that a visual demonstration would help get his point across in a sermon. He put four worms in four separate jars. The first worm was put into a container of alcohol. The second in a container of cigarette smoke. The third, in a container of chocolate syrup. And, the fourth, in a container of good, clean soil. Then, at the end of his sermon, he reported to the congregation the results. The worm in the alcohol—Dead. The worm in the cigarette smoke—Dead. Worm in the chocolate syrup—Dead. But, the worm in the good, clean soil was thriving. Then, the minister asked his congregation, what have you learned from this demonstration? And a little old lady in the back raised her hand and said: "As long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you will never have worms." What we say can so easily be misconstrued. Disastrously. So the writer of Proverbs says that whenever the subject gets sensitive – when you're in an argument, or you need to give advice – pause before you speak, and think. Say a little prayer. Either way you're going to have to pray. If you pray first and speak second your prayer will be: "God, help me to say the right thing." If you speak first and pray second, your prayer will probably be: "God, why did I say what I just said?!"

2. The rolling stone principle

A second principle for guarding your mouth might be called the rolling stone principle. **[Slide 4]** Proverbs 26:27 says this: "If you dig a pit, you will fall into it; if you roll a stone, it will roll back on you." The writer is talking here about deceit. He's saying if you tell lies, like a big stone, they will eventually roll back onto you. A friend emailed me a story a while back about an old man who lived alone at his family home. He wanted to dig his kumara garden, but it was hard work. His only son, who used to help him, was in prison. So the man wrote a letter to his son and described his predicament: "Son, I am feeling a bit down because it looks like I won't be able plant my potatoes this year. I'm just getting too old to be digging up a garden plot. If you were here, I know you would dig the plot for me." A few days later he received a letter from his son. "Dad, whatever you do, don't dig up that garden, that's where I buried the money." At 4 am the next morning, the CIB showed up with a search warrant and dug up the entire area without finding any loot. They apologized to the old man and left. That same day the man received another letter from his son. "Dear Dad, hopefully you should be able to plant the potatoes now. That's the best I could do under the circumstances. Lots of love, your son." Sometimes it might look like a few porkies will help us in the short term, but the writer of Proverbs says that in the long run the lies we tell will roll back onto us. **[Slide 5]** Proverbs 17:20 (CEV): "Dishonesty does you no good, and telling lies will get you in trouble." Do you ever shade the truth? Do you ever tweak the facts to make yourself look good or to evade the long arm of the IRD? The truth is this: either your lies will be found out, to your shame or, worse, they won't be discovered, and you'll have to live with pretence and hypocrisy, an injured self-esteem, and a reduced capacity to trust others. Lying affects our relationship with everyone, and not least our relationship with God.

3. The golden earring principle

This leads on to a third principle. **[Slide 6]** Proverbs 25:12 says: "Like an earring of gold ... is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear." This is the golden earring principle. There are two sides to truth-telling. Sometimes it means not saying something, because what we want to say just isn't true. But sometimes it means speaking out and saying something that we don't want to say because it is true and someone needs to hear it. When we do that, motivated by love, it's a beautiful thing, like a golden earring. **[Slide 7]** Proverbs 27:6 makes the same point: "The kisses of an enemy may be profuse, but faithful and true are the wounds of a friend". A few weeks ago one of our kids, little two-year-old Sophie, came down with a vomiting bug. She was a sick little girl. Now Lorraine had been carefully nursing her on the couch, surrounded by a perimeter of towels to catch any discharge. But she needed to dash off for something, so she asked me to mind Sophie just for a minute, in case she vomited. Sophie was entrusted to me. So I sat with her, but I thought "I could make a quick telephone call," forgetting that as a male I really only have the capacity to do one thing at a time. While I was on the phone, Sophie dragged herself off the couch. I didn't notice. She staggered to the middle of the house. I didn't notice. And then she proceeded to vomit everywhere. I still didn't fully register what had happened – until Lorraine kindly brought the matter to my attention. She said, "John, I entrusted Sophie to you. You were responsible for her. You said you would look after her. I need to know that if you say you're in charge of the kids, that you will be in charge of the kids." It was good for me. I needed to hear it. I'm a better parent for it. "Like an earring of gold ... is a wise rebuke to a listening ear."

4. The wild dog principle

But sometimes it's not our role to issue the rebuke. **[Slide 8]** Proverbs 26:17 says: "Like one who grabs a dog by the ears is a passer-by who meddles in another's quarrel." This could be called the stray dog principle. We think of dogs mostly as tame pets, but in the ancient world dogs were usually fairly wild animals, kind of like dingos in Australia. Grabbing a stray dog, a wild dog, by the ears is not a great move. Yet we do it all the time. Two people are having an argument. It's their argument. But they grizzle to their friends. And before you know it a third person has jumped in, and a fourth and a fifth, even though it's not their quarrel. Things get said and eventually the whole family or workplace or church is divided up into warring factions because we haven't allowed those two people to resolve their conflict. Do you know someone who's in conflict? Pray for them, support them by all means, but let them resolve it.

[Slide 9] But when the conflict is ours, the Bible says this is how we are to speak (Prov 15:1): "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." I used to work as a solicitor and some of the work involved employment law, defending a company against a former employee, for instance, where that employee was suing the company for unfair dismissal. It was interesting. More often than not, our

clients were perfectly justified in dismissing the employee involved. The problem was that they had gone about it in the wrong way. And so the process they used, the words they had spoken, became the focus of the argument and the court case. The best way to stir up an argument is to speak harshly. The best way to resolve it is to speak gently.

Conclusion

One more proverb. We've talked a lot about the power of words to destroy, but they can also heal. **[Slide 10]** Proverbs 15:4: "The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life." That little phrase, "tree of life", is a very rich phrase in scripture. The Tree of Life was what was God placed in the Garden of Eden to give life to Adam and Eve. It shows up again in the book of Revelation as a symbol of eternal life. And the image is transformed by Jesus who went to the tree on Calvary, and what was intended as a tree of death became a Tree of Life for all of us. The writer of Proverbs says the tongue can be a tree of life, bringing healing and life where there is brokenness and pain. Barbara Glantz is a corporate speaker and consultant. She was talking one time to 3,000 frontline workers for a supermarket chain. She was talking about the power of words. She had all these posters with great sayings on the wall, and she talked about how every interaction they would have with another person was a chance to speak a word of blessing and healing. This is what Barbara writes:

About a month later I got a call from a front line customer contact person, a 19-year-old bagger named Johnny. The caller, who proudly informed me that he had Downs Syndrome, told me his story: "Barbara, I liked what you talked about but I didn't think I could do anything special for our customers, after all, I'm just a bagger." Then he had an idea. He decided every night when he came home from work he would find a really good thought for the day – for the next day. If he couldn't find one some place, he would make one up. Then every night he and his dad would sit down by the computer and his dad would help him enter the saying six times a page on a computer and then Johnny would sit there and print off 50 pages. Then he would take a pair of scissors and cut off 300 copies and then he would sign his name to every one of them. Then he would put the stack of them next to him while he worked the next day and every time he finished bagging someone's groceries, he would put his saying on top of the last bag. Then he would stop and he would look the person in the eye and say: "I put a great saying in your bag. I hope it helps you have a good day. Thanks for coming in." That was Johnny the Bagger.

A month later Barbara got a call from the store manager who said: "Barbara, you won't believe what's happened here. I was making my rounds. When I got to the cashier lines, the line at Johnny's checkout was three times longer than anybody else's. It went all the way down the frozen foods aisle. So I got on the loud speaker to get more checkout lines open, but they couldn't get any of the customers to move out of Johnny's line. They all said, 'That's okay, we'll wait. We want to be in Johnny's line.' One woman came up to me, grabbed my hand and said, 'I used to shop in your store once a week, now I come in every time I go by because I want to see Johnny. I want to get Johnny's thought for the day.'" A few months later the manager called Barbara back. He said: "Barbara, you're not going to believe this, Johnny is transforming our store. He is changing the whole culture here. When the Floral Department has a broken flower or an unused corsage, they used to just throw it away. Now they go out into the aisles and they find an elderly woman or a little girl and they pin it on them. The guys who make our shopping carts are working on wheels that actually work." The whole culture of the store is being changed.

If it can happen in a supermarket, couldn't it happen here among us, among the people of God? We're called to be a community that shows the world how to live. And we could all do what Johnny did. Let's choose today, with God's grace, to become people who speak in a way that our words bring healing.