

6/11/23

The Importance of Speaking Wisely
Pastor Joe Greemore, Brewster Baptist Church

Proverbs 21:20-23

Additional Scriptures: *Proverbs 16:23-24; James 1:2-5, 17-27; 3:9-18, and 4:1-10*

The words of the wise are a world of wealth, worth, and wonder.

This weekend has been full of wise words, from those spoken at the Nauset Regional High School addresses so skillfully given, to Bret Seager's Heart of Hearing jazz quartet at Chatham Congregational Church last night, to this morning's worship liturgists. You know when you're in the presence of wise people because you can feel it in your bones, like the irregular meter of a well-rehearsed jazz ensemble. Something resonates deeply within, moving the listener to a new place or bringing them back to someplace they haven't been in a long time.

The importance of living and speaking wisely cannot be overstated or overestimated. When we join our words with our actions in Christian faith, we accept the invitation of Christ to follow in word and deed. Others know us by our love, yes ("They'll Know We Are Christians", Hymn #429), but also by how we speak, by our tone of voice, by our manner of being, by our deep listening and the earnestness of our heart.

So, what is your life speaking today?

If one were to listen closely, would they hear a message of welcome and peace, of confrontation and conflict, of searching and seeking, of honoring others above self? Perhaps your life features elements of each today.

As we continue our series of "Wise Living" with "The Importance of Speaking Wisely," I'd like to share the Tale of the Two Dishes:

In an ancient, powerful kingdom, the king once asked his master chef to prepare two very different dishes: the first was to be the finest dish in the world, which would symbolize that the king could enjoy all the finery the world had to offer; the second was the worst dish, which would symbolize his ability to overcome the very worst situation.

The chef thought for some time about what to prepare, knowing that his culinary skills surely would be put to the test to prepare both the very best and the very worst dish.

When the appointed day came, with great pomp and circumstance, the chef placed before the king an ornate dish containing but one humble item: tongue. Next to it, he placed a worn looking vessel hardly fit for a king containing the selfsame selection: tongue.

Beginning to think he had been fooled, the king demanded to know, "My chef, I have asked you for the very best dish and the very worst dish. Perhaps you have forgotten or

misheard what your king has asked of you. Why bring before me these two dishes, one the finest and one the worst, both containing the same thing?”

The chef replied with great humility and a twinkle in his eye, “A thousand pardons, your majesty, but I have heard and understood your request and brought what you now find before you. For you see, the tongue, when used lovingly and wisely is the very best of things, and when used carelessly and unkindly, it is the very worst.” (Anonymous)

I wonder if some of us might have listed liver and onions among the best or worst? Or how about pizza? Salad? Hamburgers? Chicken Cordon Bleu?

This story is a reminder of the power of the tongue, not only its abilities for taste, but also of speech and of the great power of our words. That’s what I enjoyed about the Nauset High School graduation ceremony: the power of words chosen and skillfully delivered, and the wonderful feeling of seeing several of our own graduate from this chapter in life and move gracefully into the next. Their accomplished actions spoke as loud as words.

In the journey of wise living, speech is an absolutely essential part.

Proverbs offers several helpful reminders, such as:

Watch your words and hold your tongue; you’ll save yourself a lot of grief. (Proverbs 21:23, The Message)

In fact, let’s listen to that verse in context from the New International Version:

The wise store up choice food and olive oil, but fools gulp theirs down. Whoever pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity and honor. One who is wise can go up against the city of the mighty and pull down the stronghold in which they trust. Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity. (Proverbs 21:20-23, NIV)

Our speech affects everything we do, from how others see us, to what we communicate about our relationship with God and others, to revealing our true motives and intentions (*Hebrews 4:12*).

Let’s look at speech from the perspective of our relationship with the Lord.

1. First, our speech is to be good and gracious.
They make a lot of sense, these wise folks; whenever they speak, their reputation increases. Gracious speech is like clover honey — good taste to the soul, quick energy for the body. (Proverbs 16:23-34, The Message)

We see that our wise speech, in the eyes of the Lord, also enhances our reputation, and is to be valuable, worthy of our listener’s time and attention.

2. Next, our speech is to be Godly.

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. (James 3:9-16, NIV)

Rather than being unspiritual, our speech is to give evidence of the character and love of God.

3. The end goal of good, wise, godly speech is to build others up according to their need.

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. (Ephesians 4:29, NIV)

Next, let's look at speech from the standpoint of our relationships with others.

1. It has been said that communication is key to building relationships, and trust is the lock. When our speech is wise, it is to be peaceful, pure, full of good fruit. In this way, through our communication with others we can raise a harvest of righteousness in our relationships (*cf. James 3:17-18*).
2. Sometimes in our conversation, less is more. *James 1:19-20* reminds us of the importance of listening before we speak.
3. If listening is more important than speaking, then even our silence can be a form of speech. Check out *James 1:26-27* for some helpful wisdom about true religion and its relationship to controlling our tongue and caring for others.

Lastly, let's look at our speech and how it affects our psyche.

1. Positive, healthy self-talk is vital. Some examples of positive self-talk are its ability to:
improve self-esteem, stress management and wellbeing
reduce any symptoms of depression, anxiety and personality disorders
improve your body image and can help treat people with eating disorders
reduce your risk of self-harm and suicide
make you feel more in control of your life

*help with chronic pain
motivate you to overcome obstacles
help to calm you*

2. Self-image is defined by words we use to talk about ourselves.
Self-image is the personal view, or mental picture, that we have of ourselves. Self-image is an “internal dictionary” that describes the characteristics of the self, including such things as intelligent, beautiful, ugly, talented, selfish, and kind.
How is your self-talk dictionary? Would others respond well to your glossary of terms?
3. Since positive self-talk is vital, and self-image is defined by how we talk about ourselves, then it is important for us to choose the words we use about ourselves wisely and in love.

We need to be in the habit of speaking kind, honest, loving words about the Lord, others, and even ourselves.

If how we speak affects all our relationships, it is important to use our words wisely and to make sure we use wise words.

Being kind doesn't mean just saying what other people want to hear; God sees the heart and knows when we're being honest and when we're trying to use flattery, misdirection, or using self-preservation rather than speaking truthfully in love (*Ephesians 4:15*). Author and speaker Shane Claiborne writes, “My Goal is to speak the truth in love. There are a lot of people speaking the truth with no love, and there are a lot of people talking about love without much truth.”

How can we speak truth with love, and show love in light of God's perfect truth?

Paul writes to the Ephesians of the importance of speaking the truth in love, as an example to us of wise speech.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. (Ephesians 4:16, NIV)

Friends, we can encourage each other to speak wisely by spending time learning God's Word and reading those words of wisdom, by practicing silence and words of wisdom with each other, and by challenging and inspiring one another with active listening, wise quotes, proverbs, and aphorisms. Instead of tongues being set on fire by hellfire (*James 3:6*), let's set the world ablaze with truth, kindness, compassion, generosity, mercy, wonder, and beauty. In our speech and in our actions, let's make room for God's wisdom that guides us into wise speech and wise living. I invite you to pray with me.

Prayer: Merciful God, nothing can separate us from your love. You have spoken love over us time and time again. Help us to live as your redeemed people, holy, valued, renewed, who speak your words well, who build up others, and who honor the temple of our bodies that you have provided. Help us not to wander far from you in the ways that we speak, but instead, building each other up with kindness, grace, mercy, and love, may we follow closely in your footsteps.

Blessing: As you leave this place, may the peace of Christ go with you. “Publish the gospel, visit the sick, comfort the dispirited, and may the love of God go with us all. Amen.”
(Skoglund/Hall, *A Manual of Worship*)

Questions for Discussion & Reflection:

1. What are the hardest words for you to hear, and why?
2. What are the most difficult words for you to say? Why?
3. When do you find it challenging to “keep your peace” or “hold your tongue”?
4. According to James, which is more important: to listen, or to speak?
5. According to Proverbs, what are some of the benefits of wise speech?
6. Why do you think the tongue (our speech) is such an important part of who we are?
7. How can you pray for patience in your speech?