

Speak Wisely

Introduction: *Words video followed by Words drama.* Conversations like that, word exchanges like that happen everyday in our lives. Thousands and thousands of words pass between us and our spouses, our family, our co-workers, our friends, our classmates, and our roommates everyday. And within those exchanges there are moments reminiscent of what we just saw, maybe we've even had some this morning.

I know that I have those kinds of moments. When I see some of my words expressed like we just did, I cringe a bit because I know that intentionally or unintentionally, knowingly or unknowingly, I dole out words like that. In my mind, there is a sort of a Tivo that plays back some of my conversations over the past week whether they are those face-to-face conversations with my family or friends, or those stilted emails with colleagues, or those awkward phone exchanges with the telemarketers and I just think, "**Ugh.**"

We all have those moments where our words are sloppy and careless and even reckless. But why do you think that is? Of course, none of us are perfect, but why do you think we so easily slip with our words?

I'm sure some of it has to do with the sheer volume of our words we speak each day. I heard recently when my family and I were at family camp that women speak about 25,000 words per day while men speak about half that each day. Sure some of it has to do with the sheer number of our words.

But I wonder whether part of it, has to do with the fact that we underestimate the power of our words to others and in others. Somehow, we have a tendency to downplay the impact our words can have.

Think about some of our common sayings about words for a bit here. "**Sticks and stones will break my bones, but what?**" Right. Words will never hurt me. Really? Some of my most painful wounds came from words, not sticks or stones.

Or how about this one. "**A picture is worth, what?**" Right. A thousand words. Really? Descriptive words, yes, but all words, really?

If you really believe that, try an experiment men and specifically husbands. Take one month to give your wife pictures of "**I Love You.**" Maybe you could give her a picture of a heart or a handmade drawing or a picture of the wedding cake topper with a groom and bride. Give her those pictures all month long. But here's the catch: never say it or write it once. Just let your pictures of "**I Love You**" be all your words of "**I Love You**" for her.

Now, if it is true that a picture is worth a thousand words, then she should feel a thousand times more loved with those pictures. Your love will be expressed a thousand times more powerfully in her life. So go ahead and try it.

But just let me know so that I can keep some space open in my calendar some time open next month for some marriage counseling or better yet a funeral because she might kill you.

You see, my words, your words are powerful, very powerful. Granted, our words are no substitute for actions and they're unable to alter facts. But nonetheless, our words are influential and strong and potent in the hearts, minds, souls and lives of people all around us whether we realize that power or not.

But that's just inherent in the nature of words. The very origins of our words and the power of them lie in God's words themselves since we are made in his image and reflect God's DNA.

Think of the power within God's words for a second here. Genesis 1:1 says, "**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.**" That just about sums it up. The rest of Genesis 1 could be completely deleted from the Bible. But somehow, that one verse, the one concept needed to be expanded and because it just doesn't capture what really happened. So the author unveils this rhythmic story of God creating through his words.

"**Let there be light,**" God says and it was so. "**Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water,**" God continues to say and it was so. And on and on God speaks words until the universe and creation is complete and full. Words, God's thoughts expressed, were the creative origins of our world and universe.

And so by virtue of being God's image-bearer and possessing God's thumbprint, our words possess power greater than we might think. Human words are powerful.

How powerful? To what extent do our words have power? A surprising amount of power. If you have your Bibles with you, I'd like you to turn to Proverbs 12:18 as we look into the extent of the power of our words in life.

We're heading into the final two weeks of this series that we've called LifeWorks where we've been studying the book of Proverbs to uncover wisdom and skills for our real, everyday lives.

The Extent of the Power of Our Words: Notice our words have the power to heal others or to crush others. Look at Proverbs 12:18. READ PROVERBS 12:18. Turn over to Proverbs 15:4. READ PROVERBS 15:4. Turn over to Proverbs 16:24. READ PROVERBS 16:24. Our words have the power not only to heal people's hearts and souls but also the power to crush their spirits and their lives.

Illustration – Think about our own experience for a second here. Have you ever been really down in life about your job, some relationship, or school and you really just want to quit? But just then someone comes to you and says, "**Keep going, you can do it,**" or they say, "**I really appreciate all that you are doing here.**" Doesn't that bring healing to your heart and spirit so that you can press on? Aren't those words of encouragement and appreciation just renewing?

Or think about the opposite here for a bit. What happens to your heart and soul when you hear stinging criticism, whispered gossip about you, or a secret you told to someone gets out into public? Doesn't that just sting and in some measure crush you at least little bit on the inside?

And our words have the same power to do that to others. You see, our words have the power to crush and also to heal.

In fact, Proverbs go so far as to say that our words have the power of life and death in them. Turn to Proverbs 10:11. READ PROVERBS 10:11. Turn over to Proverbs 18:21. READ PROVERBS 18:21. The power of our words can revive others' hearts, minds, lives and souls and so bring out life within them. But that same power can turn and deaden and kill others' hearts, minds, lives and souls within them.

Life and death hangs in the balance with our words. The emphasis here is the life giving or life snuffing power of our words within others' inner life and soul. But don't underestimate how significant that is because those effects can even ripple into our physical health.

Illustration – Last year *The Week* reported on an English research study of sixty four hundred civil servants in London. And in the study, they asked these civil servant workers questions like: “**Do you get criticized unfairly?**” and “**Do you ever get praised at work?**” When they checked in ten years later with these civil servants, just ten years later, the difference between those men who reported a low score on their bosses’ fairness and the others was stark. Those who reported a lower score were 30 percent more likely to have coronary heart disease in just ten years. Of course, DNA had to have something to do with it, but overwhelmingly, the words these men received from their bosses crushed their hearts and their spirits and literally were giving them heart attacks.

Our words have the power of life and death. We have to the power in our words to enliven the inner life of people or to kill that life one word at a time. Words are not just thoughts expressed, opinions offered, and convictions voiced.

Words shape their recipients by guiding their train of thought that alters the direction of their lives and what they think and believe about themselves and what they think and believe of others. Our words can make or break individual people, interpersonal relationships, families, churches, and communities.

Our words have extensive power. And since our words have such power, speak them well. Ben Jonson said, “**Talking and eloquence are not the same: to speak, and to speak well, are two things. A fool may talk, but a wise man speaks.**”

Speak the kinds of words that will bring healing and life. Don’t just talk. Don’t talk with gossipy words, slanderous whispers and unnecessarily cutting remarks. Speak wisely because our words have such power.

And Proverbs points us to the marks of speaking wisely so as to bring healing and life.

The Marks Of Speaking Wisely: One mark of speaking wisely is speaking words of honesty. Honesty. Turn to Proverbs 12:17. READ PROVERBS 12:17. Turn to Proverbs 12:19. READ PROVERBS 12:19. Now, move down to Proverbs 12:22. READ PROVERBS 12:22. And lastly turn over to Proverbs 16:13. READ PROVERBS 16:13. Speaking wisely means speaking honestly, telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. It means speaking words that correspond to fact and reality in our hearts, minds, lives and worlds.

Illustration – William Lutz wrote a book a few years back called *The New Doublespeak: Why No One Knows What Anyone’s Saying Anymore*. In his book, he defines a few of the more creative doublespeak terms that were in vogue in the mid-90s. What did a “**Meaningful downturn in aggregate output**” mean? A recession. Or how about an “**After-sales service**”? A kickback. And what did a “**Resource development park**” refer to? A trash dump. Or what do you suppose “**Temporarily displaced inventory**” mean? Stolen goods. Or what would you be doing if you had a “**Strategic misrepresentation, Reality augmentation, and Terminological inexactitude**”? You lied.

Don’t doublespeak. Be honest without hiding behind euphemisms, clichés or niceties. Be honest and truthful. Since our words have such power, speak words of honesty. But Proverbs doesn’t stop there because if we only spoke honestly and that’s all, we would definitely bludgeon each other with it.

So Proverbs teaches to not only speak words of honesty but also of tact. Look at Proverbs 15:23. READ PROVERBS 15:23. Turn to Proverbs 25:11. READ PROVERBS 25:11. Keep turning over to Proverbs 27:14. READ PROVERBS 27:14. Speaking wisely means speaking words of tact where we take into account other people’s feelings and how our words will affect them.

Tact means our words should be spoken at the right time when they can truly be heard and understood. Tact means our words should be appropriate and tasteful without bringing undue offense. Tact also means holding a confidence, keeping that secret someone has told you about themselves. And tact means withholding from speaking unflattering truth about someone else behind their back. Speak words of tact. Let's do a case study here on tact.

Illustration – Suppose after your Thanksgiving dinner, you are sitting around with everyone in the living room talking when good ole' Aunt Edna walks in and in the words of John Ortberg summarizing Neil Plantinga asks you, “**How did you like my lima-bean, spam, Velveeta cheese, raspberry jello salad?**”

Pure honesty and truth would produce an answer like this: Aunt Edna, honesty demands that I speak the truth to you. At the very core of my being, in particular this core of my being [MOTION TO THE STOMACH], I am convinced that you should have your keys to the kitchen revoked. You may have heard a calling to cook, but rest assured that it was a wrong number.

But tact demands that we take into account good ole' Aunt Edna and that we're in front of people. Tact seems to dictate that we say something polite and superficial while we're in front of everyone in the living room. Tact dictates further we don't discuss the horrifying experience of eating Aunt Edna's dish with everyone when she leaves the room. Tact even further dictates to us to can get along with good ole' Aunt Edna to express our love for her and our appreciation of her hard work in making such a dish with us in mind and that we really prefer some of her other dishes much more.

Since our words have such power, speak words not only of honesty but also of tact.

The last mark of speaking wisely is gentleness. Speak words of gentleness. Turn to Proverbs 15:1. READ PROVERBS 15:1. And now, turn over to Proverbs 25:15. READ PROVERBS 25:15. Speak words of gentleness. Gentle words are not weak, feeble and fluffy by any means. Speaking gently means to speak with just enough force and vigor to get the point across but not so much so as to overwhelm and devastate the listener.

Illustration – I love a quote I ran across by Vicki Edwards who said, “**It's nice to talk with people who can make a point without impaling anyone on it.**”

Speak words with enough force and potency to get the point across but not so much that the point bludgeons. Speak words as if you were using a scalpel, not a chainsaw. Since our words have such power, speak words of honesty, tact and gentleness.

But this begs a very important question for us this morning. How do we learn to do that? How do we learn to speak those kinds of words because let's admit that we can't just turn a switch that somehow filters our words to be honest, tactful and gentle? It is hard to speak that way. It is great in theory to talk about speaking honest, tactful and gentle words, but how do you and I learn to do so?

Learning to Speak Wisely: We might be tempted to try to learn to speak wisely by practicing. I mean, when we want to get better at something, usually we have to practice it to get better, right?

If we want to get better at basketball, what do we do? We shoot a zillion shots, dribble using alternate hands and play a ton of games at the gym.

If we want to get better at music, what do we do? We take the instrument and we play scales and songs. We play along with CDs and we play our part alone. We play and play and play until we get better.

That's our typical approach in life in trying to learn a skill. But here's the surprise, here's the twist of Proverbs that is simply brilliant. Proverbs teaches to do just the opposite, directly or indirectly. To learn to speak wisely, we shouldn't increase our word count to practice; we should actually reduce our word count.

Notice that theme as we look at this highly prominent thread within Proverbs, beginning with Proverbs 10:19. READ PROVERBS 10:19. Turn over to Proverbs 11:12. READ PROVERBS 11:12. Keep turning to Proverbs 13:3. READ PROVERBS 13:3. Now turn to Proverbs 17:28. READ PROVERBS 17:28. And lastly, take a look at Proverbs 21:23. READ PROVERBS 21:23. Speaking wisely is all wrapped up in reducing our word count.

Illustration – Proverbs echoes what Calvin Coolidge said when he said, “**I have noticed that nothing I never said ever did me any harm.**”

Lessen the amount of words you speak and you increase your ability to speak wisely. Decrease how much talking you do and you up your ability to speak wisely. Let me put it a different way. To learn how to speak words of honesty, tact and gentleness, practice silence. Practice silence.

Somehow, when we talk less, we learn to choose our words more carefully. Somehow, when we retreat from having to make all of our points count and all of our knowledge understood, we learn which points are worth making. Somehow, when we are silent, we suddenly hear what others are saying and so learn to speak with more understanding. Somehow, when we are silent, we listen to what God says and how he says it and we emulate his ability to speak. Practicing silence teaches us how to speak. So embrace times where you can be quiet and silent to learn to speak words of honesty, tact and gentleness.

Illustration – If you've been around GracePoint the last month or so, you might have noticed that I haven't been preaching. I did that because I just needed a bit of a break. Between the launch of this church in April with everything that went along with that and adopting a boy from Russia shortly thereafter, I just got tired. So I asked the steering team who lead this church whether I could take a bit of break from preaching to slow down a little, spend some additional time with my family, take some vacation, study and plan for the fall, and attend to some additional leadership needs in the church.

And the steering team was really supportive about the idea. They stepped in and led the church during my vacation days. And Ryan and his team as well stepped in and did a great job with Sunday mornings here like they always do. They all have done a great job while I rested and kind of healed up to get ready for the fall, so I'm really indebted to them and to you all for your patience in that as well. Thanks to all of you.

But do you know what was an unexpected gift of not preaching for five Sundays? I talked less on Sundays. Usually I talk a lot, sometimes too much, which you know all too well. But I talk a lot just by virtue of what I do here at GracePoint with teaching and leading. But that break from preaching allowed me to lessen my word count and embrace some silence on Sundays. Sometimes, not being able to teach as much drove me nuts. You know, I wanted to go moonlight somewhere and get my teaching and speaking fix. Sometimes, it was a relief. But in part, I think lessening my word count on Sundays gave me space to be more deliberate with my words in some tough conversations I had to have and to be more reserved with my words in other conversations. In part, I think that silence helped me to measure my words more carefully.

Conclusion: You see, our words have power, tremendous power. The power to heal and to crush. The power of life and death. And since our words have such great power, speak words of honesty, tact and gentleness and learn to do so by practicing silence.

This morning I want us to take a step in learning to speak wisely by embracing some silence before God together. I will pray to lead us into that time of silence. And when that silence comes, don't say anything.

Don't say anything to God, just listen. Listen to the still small voice of God speaking. Listen to noises you often miss like your heart beating or your lung breathing or your body shivering. You may get a little uncomfortable. You may find relief. But embrace the silence now before God as a step toward learning to speak with greater honesty, greater tact and greater gentleness.