

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(August 14, 2016)

Sermon Series: *Proverbs: On Words*

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Poisonous Words

Various passages in Proverbs, Matthew 12

Introduction:

A. Words matter enormously

Our words matter. For they can bring enormous blessing. We could spend the morning sharing times when someone else's timely words brought us encouragement, comfort, and healing. And times when we shared just the right word with someone else. It doesn't happen that often for me, but every once in a long while I'll share something helpful with someone struggling, and it brings joy to both of us. As the Bible book of Proverbs (15:23) says it, "A person finds joy in giving an apt reply - and how good is a timely word!"

Now unfortunately, our words can also cause enormous harm. Just one "little" word like "stupid", "loser", "ugly", "wimp" can cause so much damage. We could probably spend all day together shedding tears and sharing stories of ugly words from family, teachers, friends, painful words that are our unwelcome companions to this very day. Words that have not only harmed us, but can even cause harm to others when we allow our interactions with people to be hindered by the wounds of our past.

Despite our best efforts, at times we are the ones speaking poorly, and it can cost us dearly. Poor words have the potential to cost us a job, a friendship, a marriage. Poor words even have the potential to split apart a church. Death and life really are in the power of the tongue. As our memory verse says it, "²¹ Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit—you choose."

B. Background on Proverbs

Because our words are so important, we're going to spend the next two weeks exploring what the book of Proverbs has to say about our words. So if you've got a Bible, please turn with me to the book of Proverbs, chapter 26. Proverbs 26. Proverbs is in the Old Testament, right after the book of Psalms.

Now the book of Proverbs, along with the books of Ecclesiastes and Job, are described as Old Testament wisdom literature. And to understand the wisdom literature, we need to understand all three books. For Proverbs, the majority of the book was written or compiled by

King Solomon of ancient Israel. It is meant to help Solomon's sons, and us, to understand how life generally works and invite us to live with wisdom. And Proverbs starts by noting that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. So biblical wisdom is not just applying principles to life, it is living skillfully in relationship with God in light of His ways.

And it is important to understand that the Proverbs are not unconditional promises. In other words, the Proverbs do not guarantee that if we live wisely that everything will work out well. Remember, we need to understand all three books, and the other wisdom literature, Ecclesiastes and Job, show us that as broken people in a broken world, sometimes there are exceptions to how things should work and sometimes we suffer unfairly.

So when the book of Proverbs says, “⁶Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” (KJV) it is describing how life generally works and inviting us to wisely choose to train our kids in God's ways. However, Ecclesiastes and Job show that sometimes things do not work out as they should, so this proverb is not an unconditional guarantee. Similarly, when we speak wisely, life will typically work better, but godly words don't guarantee either that everything will always turn out well.

The most common theme in Proverbs is living with wisdom rather than folly. Because Proverbs was written initially for Solomon's sons, the book describes both wisdom and folly as women. The beautiful lady wisdom calls us, inviting us to follow her and feast on the banquet of true life in God. In contrast, the prideful woman of folly also calls us, tempting us to follow her to that which leads to death.

Like Solomon's sons before us, we can choose to listen to lady wisdom or lady folly. And interestingly, as Proverbs outlines the ways of wisdom and folly in various spheres of life, the subject covered most frequently is our use of words. In preparing I was overwhelmed by the number of Proverbs on our use of words. Apparently our words really matter. So today we're going to look at the way of folly with our words, considering the effects of some types of poisonous speech. Next Sunday we'll talk about life giving words. These proverbs on poisonous words have been challenging and convicting me this week, and if that's your experience this morning, may we heed the call of lady wisdom, staying engaged and setting aside our poisonous speech.

I. Effects of poisonous speech

A. The harm of lying (Prov 6:16-19, 26:28)

Now the first type of poisonous speech we'll explore is lying. Please turn with me to Proverbs 26. We'll be looking at many proverbs this morning, and the ones we are focusing on will be up on the screen.

Now when it comes to lying, we already know that it's wrong and we shouldn't do it. So as we briefly look at the subject, let's notice together how seriously God takes lying and its harm. Please follow along as I read verse 28 of Proverbs 26, which says, "A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin."

Lying is described here in verse 28 as a way to hate others as you do them harm. For lies work ruin, in the lives of others and ourselves. Perhaps this is why lying is condemned so strongly in Proverbs chapter 6. Please turn there with me, to Proverbs chapter 6, verse 16. Proverbs 6:16 says, "There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: ¹⁷haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, ¹⁸a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, ¹⁹a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community."

As we look back at these verses together, notice that two of the seven things God detests relate to lying – a lying tongue in verse 17, and a false witness who pours out lies in verse 19. Scripture talks nothing about "little white lies." Rather, it describes lying as a hateful thing that hurts ourselves and others, and is such a huge deal that God detests it.

B. The harm of gossip (Prov 16:28, 17:4, 18:8, 20:19)

Look again at verse 19 with me. Here we see another type of poisonous speech that God detests, the sin of stirring up conflict. From the Bible's perspective, there's no such thing as a little gossip that's no big deal. Rather, like lying, God detests it when we stir up conflict, whether through gossip or any other means.

Now one reason why gossip is so dangerous is because of its appeal. There's something in our base nature that likes being in the know and hearing a juicy story. Turn with me to Proverbs chapter 18, verse 8. Proverbs 18:8 describes gossip's appeal in this way, "⁸The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts."

Gossip is dangerous because we are often drawn to it, tempted to just scarf it down. And not only is gossip appealing, it is impacting. Look back at verse 8 with me. Notice that the gossip is described as going down to our inmost parts, deep inside us. In other words, this proverb is saying that gossip has the power to really affect our thoughts and feelings about the

person we've heard the gossip about. I can certainly think of times when someone has told me something bad about a person, I don't even know for sure if it's true or not, the person gossiping to me may not even know for sure if it's true or not, yet it colors my perception of the person gossiped about. I am now tempted to interpret their words and actions in a more negative light than I did before hearing the gossip.

Flip back with me to chapter 16, as we continue to consider the harm of gossip. Let's look together at verse 28 of chapter 16, which says, "A perverse person stirs up conflict, and a gossip separates close friends."

Gossip is perverse and it kills community, as the verse says, having the potential to stir up conflict and even to separate close friends from one another. Gossip is the sort of insidious sin that can even split a church, a verbal cancer that breaks ties as it spreads suspicion and hostility. No wonder Proverbs 20:19 advises, "A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid anyone who talks too much."

Look now with me at Proverbs chapter 17, verse 4. At this point a few of us might be thinking, "Ok, I get that lying and gossip are wrong and destructive, but I don't think they're really big sin issues for me." If that's you, I invite you to look with me at Proverbs 17:4, a verse that's been challenging me this week. It says, "A wicked person listens to deceitful lips; a liar pays attention to a destructive tongue."

Notice here in verse 4 how the one who merely listens to deceitful lips or to a destructive tongue is described. Verse 4 is saying that if we merely listen and tolerate poisonous speech like lies and gossip, we have involved ourselves in the evil as well. Again, "A wicked person listens to deceitful lips."

So when someone starts gossiping to us, let's not allow ourselves to become involved in the evil, remembering that merely listening and saying nothing is wicked too. It isn't easy, at least for me, but when someone starts gossiping, let's move things in a more positive direction. We could change the subject, or politely say we'd like to talk about something more positive, or suggest that we really aren't the right person for this conversation. And if all else fails, let's at least excuse ourselves from gossipy conversations.

And if the gossip is about someone in our church family or about the church as a whole, may we have the courage to speak the truth in love to one another. To kindly say something like, "Brother, that sounds like gossip, so please talk with God and that person about it, not with me."

For only as we lovingly confront any gossip in our midst can we please God and foster an environment where all of us feel safe sharing our struggles, not having to worry about what might be said behind our backs. So may we all have the courage to lovingly protect our culture of grace if someone slips up and begins gossip about our church family.

C. The harm of angry speech (Prov 15:1, 29:11)

Now please turn with me to Proverbs 15:1, as we start to explore the harm of angry words. Please follow along as I read verse 1 which says, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

Notice here the destructive potential of angry words. If we speak harshly, it can stir up anger in the other person, and soon, if we’re not careful, both of us will be bringing accusations that start with, “well you always...” or “well, you never...” And once things are spoken rashly in anger, they can never be taken back. If we allow our anger to control our speech, we are playing the fool, and the relationships most important to us will begin to tear apart. It’s why Proverbs 29:11 instructs that, “¹¹ Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end.”

And these days, angry speech is not limited to face-to-face interactions. There is an abundance of it online, and perhaps some of us have contributed to it by the words we type or the articles we post about people whose politics, race, or religion differ from ours. Or even, God forbid, by the way we speak of or interact with a brother or sister in Christ whose theology does not align perfectly with ours.

And as we seek to avoid angry words, it is worth considering the media we consume. To reflect on if we’re exposing ourselves to online articles, TV shows, talk radio, that encourage in us a spirit of fear and expose us to rants about groups we already disagree with and are tempted to dislike. For the more we expose ourselves to these kinds of perspectives, the more likely we are to join them in speaking in harsh ways that violate the most important responsibility we have to others, to love all our neighbors as ourselves.

D. The harm of careless words (Prov 12:18)

Now please turn back with me to Proverbs 12, as we begin to explore the harm of careless words. Let’s look together at chapter 12, verse 18, which says, “¹⁸ The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

Here we see that even careless words are a big deal. For merely reckless words, even if there's no harm intended, can still penetrate us like a sword, harming us deeply, on the inside.

Early in our marriage Stephanie and I read a very helpful Christian marriage book entitled *A Lasting Promise*. Drawing on decades of university based research on couples, the Christian researches identified some negative communication patterns. And they found that one of the best predictors of future problems and even divorce was when a couple frequently invalidated each other.

Invalidation is when you put down the thoughts or feelings of the person you're talking with. And before reading the book, I did not even recognize many of the careless ways I invalidated others.

Let me illustrate invalidation with an example from the book. Imagine someone close to you shares that they are sad and frustrated about a bad evaluation they got at work today. And they give you some details about how their boss was being unfair with the eval. If you or I was to respond, "It doesn't sound to me like your boss was being that critical. I'd actually be happy to have that positive of an evaluation at my job, you're just overreacting. And besides, why don't you just give it to the Lord?"

Now is there anything in this response that might help the person feel like we understood their sadness and frustration about their unfair evaluation? Probably not, because the response did not acknowledge their feelings or the injustice they perceived in any way. Rather, we immediately suggested that their perspective and feelings about the situation were invalid (*doesn't sound to me like your boss was being that critical... you're just overreacting*) and we even managed to get in some unsolicited advice that suggested they were unspiritual (*why don't you just give it to the Lord*).¹

Now we might have been trying to help as we attempted to minimize the seriousness of their bad evaluation and their reaction or as we gave unsolicited advice regarding their need to take it to God. But if those are the first and only things we've said, we've probably been careless. And the more we speak in careless ways that invalidate the thoughts and feelings of others, the more likely it is that those close to us will decide that it's too risky being real with us. And when we're all covering up our true selves, everyone loses.

¹ Stanley, et al, *A Lasting Promise* (original edition), 32-35.

Recently I heard Pastor Ray Orlund Jr. give another example of careless speech. He warned parents to be careful what we say about our kids to another adult, especially when our kids are present. I've certainly been guilty of this.

But think about it, if you and your spouse had a really rough morning, and this time it was mostly your spouse's fault, and then the two of you visit a friend together, hopefully you're not going to say to your friend in front of your spouse, "My spouse's bad mood and misbehavior have been driving me crazy this morning." It's not a good idea to dishonor one's spouse in this way, and it's the same with our kids. So let's make sure our kids don't hear us airing their dirty laundry to a friend, or see us posting unflattering things about them online for all the world to see.

E. Internal harm (Prov 12:13)

So far we've explored how we are hurt by poisonous words, as well as the damage we cause when we speak poisonous words. But did you know that the damage we cause through our poor words is not limited to things outside of us? Our poisonous words also cause us internal damage. Let's look together at chapter 12, verse 13, which says, "Evildoers are trapped by their sinful talk, and so the innocent escape trouble."

Verse 13 shows that when we speak sinfully we can end up trapped by our own words. To illustrate, think about a parent with a child going through a rebellious stage. Imagine the parent says to themselves, "My child is always rebellious, they are so ungrateful and disrespectful to me." While the parent is understandably frustrated, the way they are talking to themselves about the situation is harming the relationship. Their words have handicapped their ability to forgive and have a good attitude. Their words could even encourage them to view their child's behavior with suspicion, seeing rebellion even when it is not there. And you can imagine how the parent's attitude and words could influence the child's perspective and self-talk about the parent in negative directions too.

Now imagine instead that the parent talks to themselves about their child's rebellion in this sort of way. "My child is struggling to grow up, just like I did and still do, and one way that struggle is now manifesting itself is by opposing me a lot. I'm frustrated, but I'm also concerned that if my child doesn't grow, this character flaw will hurt themselves most in the long run." This parent's words are preparing the way for them to respond to their child's expressions of

rebellion with wisdom, maturity, and love, increasing the chances for a healthy relationship and growth in the child's character.

If we don't watch out, any of us can be entrapped by our negative talk about others. To have a bad experience with someone and then label someone as "selfish" rather than to think "I think they acted selfishly there, which I sometimes do too."

F. It reveals your heart (Prov 4:23)

Ultimately, this gets down to issues of the heart. Please turn with me now to Proverbs chapter 4. Please follow along with me as we look at verses 23 and 24, which say, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips"

Everything, including our speech, flows from what's in our heart. Jesus also made this point in the Bible book of Matthew, chapter 12. There some of Jesus' opponents, the Pharisees, said something wicked about Jesus. In response Jesus observed, "How can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of."

So if we find ourselves in a pattern of poisonous speech, let's step back and reflect on what's going on in our hearts. For example, let's say you or I start to notice that we keep gossiping about the same person, or the same group, or even this church. Perhaps we're even starting to steer conversations in a way that gives us an opening to keep sharing the gossip.

If so, it's time to reflect and ask God to help us to see what unhealthy thing is in our heart. The gossip could be revealing an attitude that we think we're better, that we'd never do or think something as foolish as that. Or perhaps instead it reveals some desire for revenge, we've been hurt and rather than forgive we let others know how wrong we think the other party was as a way to indirectly hurt them. Or the gossip could be coming from something else, but whatever is going on, it is worth praying about, reflecting on, and repenting of.

G. It invites God's judgment (Matt 12:36-37)

For poisonous speech not only harms us and others, it is so serious that it invites God's judgment. Turn now with me to the Bible book of Matthew, chapter 12. This is where Jesus said to His enemies that the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. Look now with me at verse 36. Here Jesus goes on to say, "But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. ³⁷ For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

We've been told to be careful regarding what we say on social media because of how it can spread and how long it endures. But what if every word you speak is recorded in God's book, and one day that book will be opened, and you'll have to give an account?

God forbid we speak ill of anyone, for all are made in the very image of God. And if we speak ill towards a believer or the church that Christ died for, the stakes are even higher. Imagine trying to explain to God about the poison we spoke to His daughter, or His son, or about the church He loves so dearly. He hears every lie, every bit of gossip, every angry or careless word, it's all spoken in His presence.

Conclusion: Starting to deal with poisonous speech

A. Receive forgiveness in Jesus

So how do we start dealing with our poisonous speech? Well next week we'll focus on speaking words that give life, but for now let's consider a first step.

If you're not a Christian, I've got some incredible news. Rather than leaving us in a hellish judgment for our sins of speech, not to mention all our other sins, God sent His Son on a rescue mission for us. Jesus lived the perfect life we should have lived, in our place, on our behalf. And then He chose to take the penalty for our sins on the cross, absorbing God's wrath for every poisonous word we've spoken.

Jesus then rose from the dead, and now He invites you to come to Him, in faith, trusting that He died for your sins and rose from the dead. If you acknowledge your need and come to Jesus in faith, God will speak over you, "Your poisonous words are forgiven, you are family now, my child, accepted and loved, forever, no matter what. Now follow Me, and by my Spirit, my Word, and my people I will help you to speak words of life."

B. Enjoy afresh God's grace and repent

And for those of us who believe in Jesus, let's remind ourselves of this incredible news. That Jesus has taken the penalty for every sinful word we speak; that there is no need for guilt or beating ourselves up. Rather, as we marvel at how God always welcomes back in love may we experience a godly sorrow over our poisonous words that leads to repentance.

As the worship song by Rend Collective says it, "Countless second chances we've been given at the cross. Fragments of brokenness salvaged by the art of grace, you craft life from our mistakes. Black skies of my regrets outshone by this kindness, new life, dawns over my soul..."

Oh your cross it changes everything. There my world begins again with you. Oh your cross it's where my hope restarts. A second chance is heaven's heart."

As we return to God after sinning and He says to us, "You are forgiven, accepted, and loved" we will know a godly sorrow over our sin that leads to repentance. We will desire to go and sin no more. So let us marvel at God's grace, and if there's any poisonous speech in us, may we repent of it. Perhaps you've gotten into a pattern of lying, and it is time to confess it to God and seek help from a godly friend. Maybe it's time to apologize for a hurtful thing you said, even if it took place long ago, and seek to make the situation right.

As God's grace impacts you, you may find yourself with a growing desire to honor Him with your speech that leads you to bravely ask someone close to you, "What is talking with me really like?" Do you mostly feel safe or guarded, encouraged or discouraged, challenged in good or bad ways?

Every word we speak matters enormously, for each is spoken in God's presence to people He loves. And they have such power, as our memory verse says it, "²¹ Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit—you choose."

Let's pray...

Dismissal - Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.