

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(August 21, 2016)

Sermon Series: *Proverbs: On Words*

Pastor Jeff Harrison

Life-giving Words

Introduction:

A. Poisonous speech review

Our words matter. Last Sunday, as we studied the Bible book of Proverbs, we explored the harm words can cause. Just one “little” word like “stupid”, “loser”, “ugly”, “wimp” can cause so much damage. Proverbs describes this harm by saying, “The words of the reckless pierce like swords.” And like a sword thrust, the damage from poisonous words can scar for years, and even spread from person to person, multiplying the harm. 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.

And last week we saw that poisonous speech is not only a huge deal because of the harm it causes, but because our speech reveals what is in our hearts, and because our words are spoken in Almighty God’s presence, to His children. If you weren’t here last week, I encourage you to go to nwchurch.org, and listen to last Sunday’s message. For 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. Intro to Proverbs

Because our words are so important, we’re continuing to explore this morning what Proverbs has to say about our words. So if you’ve got a Bible, please turn with me to the book of Proverbs, chapter 17. Proverbs is in the Old Testament, right after the book of Psalms. The majority of Proverbs 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 to invite us to live with wisdom.

And interestingly, as Proverbs calls us to live with wisdom and avoid folly in our various spheres of life, the subject covered most frequently is our use of words. Apparently our words really matter. Last week we focused on poisonous words, and today our focus will be on life-giving words.

C. Teacher video illustrates life-giving words

Now as we begin, in honor of the Sunday School volunteers getting new kids today, the parents who homeschool, and the teachers who are starting a new year, we're going to start with a video of a teacher speaking life-giving words.

Play video - <http://www.worshiphousemedia.com/mini-movies/12872/deidox--lindsay>

Wasn't that great? I love what Lindsay tells her kids on the first day. "I've been thinking about you all summer. I love you already. You may not believe this, but you can't earn my love. You could make straight A's all year and have perfect behavior all year, or you can get detention three times a week, and I'm going to love you the same." Then Lindsay tells us, "And then I spend all year trying to prove it."

All of us have opportunities to speak words of life, at our work or school, with our family and friends, and with our church family, so let's get started looking at what Proverbs has to say.

I. Impact of life-giving words

A. The blessings of restrained words (Prov 17:27-28; 18:2, 13; 21:23)

First, life-giving words are restrained. Look with me at Proverbs 17. Please follow along as I read verses 27 and 28, which say, "²⁷The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even-tempered. ²⁸Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues."

Look back at verse 27 with me. Notice that the one with knowledge uses words with restraint. In verse 28 the author makes the point again by ironically noting that even fools can be thought wise if they are restrained in their speech.

Now I used to think that restraint merely meant that those who talked less were somehow more virtuous than those who talked more. And as somebody who's not that talkative, I liked that simplistic interpretation. But, before the quieter among us start patting ourselves on the back, let's explore the concept of restraint in Proverbs.

Restraint can mean not speaking that many words, but at its heart, it is really more about taking seriously the power of our words and thus being thoughtful with their power, doing things like listening and thinking well before speaking. Turn now with me to Proverbs chapter 18. Look first with me at verse 13, which says, "To answer before listening — that is folly and shame."

When we are restrained in our speech, we are free to actually listen to the other person before we respond. And as we really listen, we show honor to the person we are speaking with.

And in our hectic, distracted world, we are in desperate need of more good listeners. For good listening can change the world. And so as the verse says, it is a folly and shame to fail to listen.

Look now with me at verse 2 of Proverbs 18, which says, “Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions.”

The fool not only misses out on the opportunity to bless the other person by listening well, the fool also misses out on the opportunity to learn. For the fool is not really interested in a meaningful relationship, as the verse says, they’re just interested in expressing their opinions.

Turn now with me to Proverbs chapter 21, as we explore another blessing of restrained speech. Please follow along as I read verse 23, which says, “Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity.”

Isn’t that the truth? When our speech is restrained, we save ourselves from much trouble. Last week I mentioned that 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 positive and negative communication patterns that were strong predictors of the future health of the marriage.

And one of the key positive communication patterns they discovered is the importance of separating issues from triggering events. And whether you are married or not, if you learn to restrain your speech in this way, you and your loved ones will benefit greatly.

In the way the authors are using the term, your “issues” are just the things that matter to you. It could be handling your money in a certain way or communicating well. Events, on the other hand, are the day-to-day happenings of life. And sometimes we have an event that triggers an issue that matters to us. And right when we have been triggered by that event is often the worst time to have a conversation about the issue.¹

Let me illustrate with an example. Early in our marriage, being on time was important to me. These days I still seek to be on time, but it is not as big of a deal as it once was. Maybe having young kids has something to do with it, that I’ve given up on the idea of always being in control of when I arrive somewhere, and hopefully I am quicker to extend grace to others when they are running late.

¹ Stanley, et al, *A Lasting Promise* (original edition), 117.

But back then, being on time was important to me. So early in our marriage, around Easter-time, my aunt, uncle, and cousins came in town to visit. They were staying with my parents, and all of us planned on meeting at church on Easter.

Since it was Easter Sunday, I figured we needed to get to church pretty early if we were going to get a whole row of seats together. And that morning, my wife Stephanie happened to be running slightly late.

So we get in the car to drive to church, and I'm frustrated. Here we have my triggering event - we're running slightly late to church on a very busy Sunday where we want a large group of seats. And foolishly, I start expressing my frustration, about how I can't believe she's running late on Easter when we need a whole row of seats and how my aunt and uncle and cousins live overseas and we don't get to see them that often and now we won't get to sit together. And then my brain, which doesn't have that great of a memory, suddenly takes on elephant-like powers, as I proceed, with frustration in my voice, to bring up previous times when she ran late.

Oh, the ugly irony. We had just left our seminary apartment, where I was studying to become a pastor. And here we are driving to church, on Easter Sunday of all days, and I'm speaking hurtful words to my wife. You might say that someone in that car was not in the Easter spirit. And because of the time and manner in which I approached the conversation, I doomed it from the beginning.

Now the wise husband would have separated his issue of valuing being on time from this triggering event. That guy would have restrained, realizing that on the way to church to celebrate the resurrection and see family, while still feeling frustration, was not the time to share his displeasure. And it was certainly not the time to bring up other instances when his wife had been late. That wise husband would have restrained, praying and reflecting before speaking, perhaps even realizing in the process that he had contributed to his own frustration by failing to communicate his desire to get to church early.

Again, as chapter 21, verse 23 says it, "Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity." So may we all, by God's grace, guard our mouths, separating our conversations about our issues from their triggering events.

And this vital principle of restrained speech applies not only to our in-person relationships, but to those online as well. So before we send that angry email or text or post that hurtful comment, let's walk away first, pray about it, maybe sleep on it. And then once we're

calmer, prayerfully assess the draft of what we've written. Maybe it is too extreme and needs to be adjusted, or maybe it shouldn't be sent at all, or maybe it needs to be said, but in person is the right way to go about it.

Now restraint not only helps protect us from saying foolish things, it also gives us time to assess the situation and our audience and respond wisely. For example, someone shared with me recently how the verse in Proverbs that says, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him." (26:4) has revolutionized one relationship at work. This person has a coworker who enjoys making inflammatory statements that rile people up and he used to get sucked in to stupid debates with him. But after reading this verse, he now pauses and thinks about how he doesn't want to be fool too, and keeps himself from responding to his coworker's nonsense, and it has made a huge difference.

B. The blessings of edifying words (Proverbs 15:4, 16:21-24)

Further, as we restrain in our speech, it gives us time to think about how we can speak our second type of life-giving words, words that edify. Turn with me to Proverbs chapter 15. We're going to read verse 4 of chapter 15, which says, "The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit."

We've all experienced words that crush our spirit. And as we deal hurtful speech, along with all the other difficulties of being broken people in a broken world, we long for edification. We need healing words that speak life to us. Look back at verse 4 with me. Notice that the soothing tongue is described as being like a tree of life. You may recall that the tree of life was in Paradise, in the Garden of Eden. And at the end of the book of Revelation, when we are with God and without sin, the tree of life shows up again, described as a source of healing. So the tree of life here is a powerful metaphor for the life-giving potential of our words, that as we speak words that edify, and as others metaphorically "eat" those words, we can enjoy healing, and a glimpse of paradise.

Turn now with me to chapter 16, where we will see a few types of edifying speech. Please follow along with me as I read, starting in verse 21 through 24. "The wise in heart are called discerning, and gracious words promote instruction. ²² Prudence is a fountain of life to the prudent, but folly brings punishment to fools. ²³ The hearts of the wise make their mouths prudent, and their lips promote instruction. ²⁴ Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones."

Look back at verse 21 with me. Here we see that those who speak wisely grow in influence, being described by others as discerning. And their wise, gracious words bless others by promoting good instruction. Verse 23 makes a similar point, where the lips of the wise are said to promote instruction. So may we all share truth in edifying ways that spread wisdom, nourishing many in the process.

Now look back at verse 24 with me. Notice how edifying words also encourage. That as we hear gracious words, those words nourish our insides. In the ancient world, honey was considered very sweet and was used as a healing remedy. And so the honeycomb of gracious words is both sweet to our soul and healing to our bones.

Now as school starts back up tomorrow, here's the story of a student, Mary Ann, sharing about her teacher's sweet and healing words.

Mary Ann says, "I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started to go to school, my classmates -who were constantly teasing - made it clear to me how I must look to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and hollow and somewhat garbled speech... When my schoolmates asked, "What happened to your lip?" I'd tell them that I'd fallen as a baby and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different.

By the age of seven I was convinced that no one outside my own family could ever love me. Or even like me. And then I entered the second grade, and Mrs. Leonard's class. I never knew what her first name was -- just Mrs. Leonard. She was round and pretty and fragrant, with chubby arms and shining brown hair and warm dark eyes that smiled even on the rare occasions when her mouth didn't. Everyone adored her. But no one came to love her more than I did. And for a special reason. The time came for the annual "hearing tests" given at our school. I was barely able to hear anything out of one ear, and was not about to reveal yet another problem that would single me out as different. And so I cheated. I had learned to watch other children and raised my hand when they did during group testing. The "whisper test" however, required a different kind of deception: Each child would go to the door of the classroom, turn sideways, close one ear with a finger, and the teacher would whisper something from her desk, which the child would repeat. Then the same thing was done for the other ear. I had discovered in kindergarten that nobody checked to see how tightly the untested ear was being covered, so I

merely pretended to block mine. As usual, I was last, but all through the testing I wondered what Mrs. Leonard might say to me. I knew from previous years that she whispered things like "The sky is blue" or "Do you have new shoes?" My turn came up. I turned my bad ear to her, plugging up the other solidly with my finger, then gently backed my finger out enough to be able to hear. I waited and then the words that God had surely put into her mouth, seven words that changed my life forever. Mrs. Leonard, the pretty, fragrant teacher I adored, said softly, "I wish you were my little girl."

"I wish you were my little girl." This loving teacher saw a child in desperate need of an encouraging word, and she gave that word, making a life-changing impact. And we have that same opportunity to change lives through our words.

C. The blessings of winsomely challenging words (Proverbs 25:15; 27:5-6)

Further when our speech edifies, it also opens up the listener to receive the last type of life-giving speech we'll cover, winsomely challenging words. Turn now with me to Proverbs chapter 27; Proverbs 27, verse 5. Please follow along with me as I read, starting in verse 5, which says, "5 Better is open rebuke than hidden love. 6 Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses."

Part of our mission as a church family is to have life changing relationships with each other. And as we see in these verses, winsome challenge is a part of that. All of us have weaknesses and blind spots, and we need loyal friends who are devoted enough and brave enough to speak hard words when we need them.

And may we also be that kind of friend, rather than one who fearfully avoids the risk of having a hard conversation that could benefit the other person. It sounds a little paradoxical, but as the verses say, at times we need open rebuke, not hidden love; at times we need friendly wounds, not wounding kisses. For open rebuke and friendly wounds are powerful, having the potential to heal us and to restore what is broken in our relationships. We can't flourish without them, and its why Proverbs 24:26 tells us that "26 An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips."

Now obviously we shouldn't challenge every weakness or offense. As Proverbs 19:11 tells us "A person's wisdom yields patience; it is to one's glory to overlook an offense." This verse reminds us that sometimes the wisest course is to patiently overlook an offense, especially if it is minor. But as chapter 27 showed us, there is a time and place to challenge those we are in relationship with. For some of us, its uncomfortable to challenge others, and that isn't helped by

the fact that some in our culture define anything short of full affirmation of another person's lifestyle as "hate speech." But again, there is a time and place where an open rebuke is better than hidden love.

Let's now turn to chapter 25, as we consider how to challenge others in winsome ways. Chapter 25, verse 15; please follow along as I read verse 15, which says, "Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone."

Look back at verse 15 with me. Notice first that patience can persuade even with a ruler who doesn't have to listen to you. This part of the verse reminds us that we need to have the right disposition in our heart before we can winsomely challenge. After all, if we impatiently challenge, the other person is going to sense that our heart is not for them. That our challenge is arising out of our frustration, rather than out of a desire to help them to flourish, and so they probably won't listen.

And similarly, harsh speech can lead to closed ears, which is why the second half of verse 15 notes that a gentle tongue can break a bone. So the starting point is having a heart for the person we are challenging, but then we must also speak gently. For when our speech is sensitive to the feelings of the other person, then we are far more likely to persuade with our challenge. One commentary I read noted that our bones are the most rigid parts inside our body. So when verse 15 talks about a gentle tongue breaking a bone, it is saying that it is gentle words that have the ability to break down "the deepest, most hardened resistance to an idea a person may possess."²

And so much of the confrontation that takes place face-to-face, as well as online, violates these principles, and fails from the beginning. But may we challenge in a way that is winsome. I heard another pastor describe it in this way. That hopefully the listener to our challenge is able to say, "I don't want to hear what this person is telling me, but it's very obvious that this person loves me, and it's painful for this person to say this to me."³

When this can be said about our challenge, we are well on our way to being winsome with it. Now the exact right words to say when challenging someone will obviously vary depending upon the specifics of the situation and the people involved. However, let me give you

² Quote of Garrett in Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 15-31*, 324-25.

³ Tim Keller in a Proverbs sermon on our use of words.

one basic suggestion that you could use as a starting point to help you formulate your words. It comes from the marriage book I mentioned earlier, *A Lasting Promise*. They call it the XYZ technique. The structure of it is: when you do X in situation Y, I feel Z. So for example, “When you made fun of my weight (X) when we were with our friends last night (Y), I felt attacked (Z).” When you do X in situation Y, I feel Z. Hopefully you can use that as a starting point as you think about how to challenge in a winsome way.

II. Growing with God and godly people

A. Growing with God

Now it is not easy to winsomely challenge, not to mention also have our speech be edifying and restrained. It is the rare person who has speech that is consistently restrained, and who frequently edifies through encouragement and instruction, and is also comfortable with and good at winsomely challenging others. And lest we forget, that are additional aspects of life-giving speech in Proverbs that we didn’t have time to get to. And even then, we’re called not just to speak in life-giving ways, but to avoid the poisonous speech we discussed last week – things like lies, gossip, angry, and careless words.

So left to ourselves, I’ve basically invited us to try and do the impossible. But thankfully, we are not left to ourselves. As we observed last Sunday, the book of Proverbs starts by noting that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And chapter 3 verse 5 calls us to “⁵Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”

So biblical wisdom is not just applying principles to life, it is living skillfully in relationship with God. So if we are to speak life-giving words, we must be relating with God, the author of life-giving words. Are we listening to His Word, reading and meditating on the Scriptures every single day? And are we listening to the work of the Spirit in our lives? And not only are we listening, but are we also responding, conversing with God every day in prayer and submitting to His will for our lives? For only as we are in intimate, dependent relationship with God will we be able to really speak in life-giving ways. There is no substitute.

Remember Lindsay, the teacher in the video. Early in the video she said, “I treasure my morning commutes on the subway, it’s my time with God... In those moments I know His love for me and I know that’s going to carry on throughout my day and I know it’s going to help me to do my job well.”

B. Growing with godly people (Prov 13:20)

Turn now with me to Proverbs chapter 13. Proverbs 13; we're going to read verse 20. Verse 20 says, "Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm."

Here is another key to speaking life-giving words. We have to not only grow in relationship with God, but also with godly people. We really need each other to learn together how to speak in life-giving ways. You could start practicing by asking someone here to grab lunch this week and begin to grow together.

And I know it's not always easy to develop purposeful spiritual friendships, and that's one reason why we have small groups. Perhaps this very week it is time for you to check out a small group. I'd love to talk with you about the small groups at Northwest. About our care groups, Adult Bible Fellowships, the new women's group, prayer group, young adult groups, Spanish speaking groups. They are wonderful places to learn together how to speak in life-giving ways.

Conclusion:

A. We need life-giving words

Look around you, you are surrounded by people in need of life-giving words. And in the words of Pastor Craig Barnes, weighty things like despair are not going to go away through a new strategic plan or through the elders creating a task force to address despair, it's just not going to work that way. Nothing less than words of life will suffice.

Barnes goes on to say, "One day a woman is at home vacuuming, she's lost in her thoughts about what it's going to take to get a promotion at work. As she vacuums back and forth she's thinking about the office politics and if she's going to get the promotion this time. She glances up, looks out the window and sees her five-year-old son throwing a ball up in the air and trying to catch it. He keeps dropping it clumsily. And she sees him like she's never seen him before. She doesn't know why, but she can't stop crying.

An exhausted man is driving home late from work, again. He sits at the stoplight, exhausted and tired and suddenly his cell phone rings. As soon as it rings he remembers that he forgot all about his daughter's piano recital, again. He picks up the phone, the first words he hears are, "Where are you, Daddy?". He apologizes profusely and tells her how much he loves her and promises to make it up to her. She seems satisfied, so he hangs up the phone. He looks

at his own eyes in the rear view mirror, and he is haunted by her question that will not go away, “Where are you?”.

Another man from out of town is sitting beside the bed of his father who is now in a coma. He stares long and hard into the tired old face and he remembers how many times his dad asked to see him. How much his dad wanted to see him, but there was never time. There was always one more deal that had to be made. All his dad ever wanted was just to talk to him, and now that his dad is in a coma, he would give anything if he could just have the old man hear him say, “Thank you for being my Dad, I love you.” But now he’ll never get to say that to him, and so he curses himself and maybe he tries to pray.”⁴

B. Seek God and speak His words

These are the people who sit in these chairs on Sunday morning, who lead ministries, who serve our kids. They need life-giving words, which means they need people around them who really know God and how to speak His words of life. Nothing less will do.

Let’s pray...

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

⁴ Craig Barnes, *The Preacher as Minor Poet* lecture. Accessed online on 8/19/16 at <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/audio-sermons/the-preacher-as-minor-poet/>. Words slightly modified.