

DAMAGE CONTROL OF THE MOUTH

Scriptures: Selected Proverbs; James 3:1-10

There is an inscription on a gray slate tombstone at a country church in England which says,

Beneath this stone, a lump of clay, lies Arabelle Young,
Who on the 24th of May began to hold her tongue.
(Charles Swindoll, *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*, p. 21)

I have not actually counted, but I would say there are more proverbs in the book of Proverbs about how we use our mouth and our tongue than any other faculty we possess.

Proverbs 10:11—“The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.”

Proverb 18:21—“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.”

Our tongues have great potential for blessing or destruction depending on how we use them.

One obvious way to use our tongues destructively is by lying.

Proverbs 12:19—“Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.”

Proverbs 26:23—“A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.”

Lying, whether out of a desire to be cruel or a desire to manipulate people, is inherently destructive.

But that is not the only problem. According to Proverbs you can use your mouth to hurt people, even when telling the truth. An example mentioned several times in the book of Proverbs is gossip.

Proverbs 11:13—“A gossip goes about telling secrets, but one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence.”

Proverbs 16:28—“A perverse person spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.”

When I went to my first pastorate in Potlatch, Idaho, I was warned not to talk about anyone because they were probably related. Which I discovered was true. But I also discovered that I did not need to talk about anyone. They were all quite willing to talk about each other. All I had to do was listen. One of them told me, “I don’t gossip, I just report the facts.”

Well, according to Proverbs, even reporting the facts can be destructive if you are using the facts to cut people down rather than to help them or build them up. Gossip sets up barriers between people. Two people talking about a third inevitably makes the third person into an

outsider. Of course, it makes the two people sharing secrets feel closer. But it is an artificial closeness. For the person who will gossip with you about another is the same person who will gossip with another about you.

The key to building relationships is to talk to people rather than about them. Gossip is talking about people. Communication is talking to people—sharing with them directly your concerns and hearing their story first hand.

But there is another problem with how we use our mouths. More often than not, words become destructive when they are spoken without thought. You can talk directly to people and still be destructive, if you talk before you think.

Notice how many Proverbs on the insert have to do with restraint:

Proverbs 13:3—“Those who guard their mouths preserve their lives; those who open wide their lips come to ruin.” (In other words, watch what you say.)

Proverbs 15:28—“The mind of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil.” (The best way to guard your mouth is to think before you speak.)

Proverbs 17:28—“Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent.” (The best way to show how stupid you are is to open your mouth. So stop and think before you do.)

Proverbs 29:20—“Do you see someone who is hasty in speech? There is more hope for a fool than for anyone like that.”

As many of you know, I write out my sermons word for word before I give them. I do this so I can read back through what I am about to say and eliminate the parts that are stupid. You will never know the things I thought about saying in a sermon but didn't. They are permanently deleted. Sometimes before you say something you need to use the delete button. And that requires using your head before your mouth.

One more point. Proverbs is concerned not only that the words we speak be true but that they be appropriate—that they be helpful to the situation and person to whom we are speaking. Look at Proverbs 15:23—“To make an apt answer is a joy to anyone, and a word in season, how good it is!” Notice: Proverbs does not say that a true answer is a joy to anyone, but an apt answer. Proverbs 25:11 makes the same point: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.” The point is not just to say what is true but to say what is appropriate, what is genuinely helpful to the person in that situation.

This does not mean avoiding all confrontation. Proverbs 28:23 says, “Whoever rebukes a person will afterward find more favor than one who flatters with the tongue.” It is not wrong to use our tongues to confront people, but before we do we need to think carefully about the person and the situation and choose words that have the potential to heal rather than destroy.

Let me close with an example. Paul Larsen, the former pastor of a Covenant church in California, tells of a man in his congregation whose wife was having an affair. Not only the

woman's husband but other members of the congregation came to talk to him about it. Since the woman was a member of the church, Pastor Larsen felt he needed to talk to her directly. So he made an appointment to visit. He went to her home, was invited in, sat down, and hesitantly he began to say, "I have talked with your husband, and he has told me" He never got to finish the sentence. Immediately the wife launched into an hysterical tirade about that "hypocritical church and those self-righteous people who think they are better than everyone else." "And you," she said pointing to the minister, "you are the worst of the bunch."

The minister listened in silence until she was finished, then he said to her, "I think you will find that your best friends are not those who always agree with what you have done, but those who have the courage to look you in the eye and say, 'You're wrong.'" Then he excused himself and left.

After that, Larsen said, he waited. He did not talk to anyone about the woman. He did not denounce her from the pulpit. He did not ask the elders to remove her from the church rolls. He just waited. Even when the woman started calling her friends to tell them what an awful minister he was, he did not say anything. He just waited. Finally, several weeks later, he received a letter from the woman which said, "Dear Pastor Larson, I have severed my relationship and am back with my husband. It was not easy for me to hear what you had to say, but I am at last convinced that you are indeed a man of God. Thank you for the courage to speak" (Paul Larsen, *Wise Up and Live*, pp. 185-187).

Notice the principles from the book of Proverbs at work in this story. First, Pastor Larson talked to the woman rather than about her. Proverbs 16:28—"A perverse person spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends." Second, he listened before he spoke. Proverbs 18:13—"If one gives an answer before hearing, it is folly and shame." Finally, he thought before he talked. Proverbs 15:28—"The mind of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil."

Think before you speak, listen before you answer, and talk to people rather than about them. That, Proverbs says, will save you from the fate of Arabelle Young, who too late in life learned to hold her tongue.

- Ken Onstot