

Pearls from Proverbs

A Word Fitly Spoken

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In the beginning, God created Adam and Eve as intelligent adults who were able to logically formulate speech, to express ideas and thoughts to one another and to God. God had designed their bodies perfectly so that when a thought crossed their incredibly complex brains, they could put together random symbols to form ideas that could express the thought with their tongues and lips—all in a split second. We know that from the very beginning, their vocabulary was incredible, since Adam could name all the animals on the same day that God had created him. Our ability to speak intelligently is one of the things that sets us apart from animals. Animals may respond to human voice, and some may imitate it, but they do not have the ability to formulate speech on their own or to read or write.

God could have created Man and Woman without tongues, without the ability to put ideas and thoughts into spoken words. After all, humans are very adept at body language. We shrug our shoulders, wink, frown, and express all kinds of emotions and ideas with our hands. And people did learn to communicate through “written” language made up of symbols scratched onto tree bark or animal skins with sharp stones, sharpened animal bones or sticks. (In fact, the English word *write* first meant “to scratch.”) I believe that God gave us speech and the ability to use it because words were (are) His way of communicating with us. From Genesis 1:3 through

Revelation 22:20, God used words (either directly or through chosen spokesmen, either spoken or written) to communicate with the only creatures on earth that have immortal souls. Inspired by God, John described the Son of God as “the Word” (John 1:1, 14) and “the Word of life” (1 John 1:1-2). Jesus was God in the flesh, giving human voice to the thoughts and desires of God the Father. God still speaks to us today through His written Word.

Surely God knew that the gift of speech would be both a blessing and a curse. Surely He understood the value of words and the likelihood that they would be misused. Of course He did! There are many instances in Scripture where “death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov. 18:21). In Genesis 3, the devil misused speech to deceive; then Eve used persuasive words to mislead her husband (Gen. 3:17), and they lost everything. In the days of Noah, there were many hateful, arrogant, blasphemous words spoken by the people whose intentions and thoughts “were only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). The people who decided to build the great tower on the plains of Shinar talked a great deal, but for the wrong purposes. When God confused their languages and forced them to spread all over the world as He had earlier commanded, He made a huge statement about Man’s arrogant misuse of the divine gift of speech.

With spoken and written words, our challenge has always been to say the right things in the right ways at the right times. Solomon wrote, “He who guards his mouth guards his life. But he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction” (Prov. 13:3). “Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles” (Prov. 21:23). [All Scripture references are taken from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.] We can bless ourselves and others or do untold damage by the ways we use our

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God-given abilities to communicate verbally. Whoever said, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," was lying or so hard-hearted that he or she was past feeling. Words can and do hurt us and other people. "Words are like medicine; they should be measured with care, for an overdose may hurt" (Jewish proverb).

Discouraging words, gossip, lies and angry words hurt individuals and families and congregations. The devil has used these tools very effectively for thousands of years. I doubt that there is any among us who has not been hurt by them.

To discourage someone literally means to deprive him or her of the courage and confidence they need to face daily circumstances; by extension, "discourage" means to deprive someone of hope, to dishearten them. **Peninah** was a master of discouragement. "And [Hannah's] rival [i.e., Peninah] also provoked her severely, to make her miserable, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it was, year by year, when she went up to the house of the Lord, that she provoked her; therefore she wept and did not eat" (1 Sam. 1:6-7). Because of Peninah's words, Hannah was extremely depressed, overcome by feelings of inadequacy and failure. Yet she did not allow herself to be drawn into the same kind of speech. Instead, she directed her words to God in prayer. Then there was **Job's wife**, who used discouraging words to add to her husband's suffering. "Curse God and die!" she said (Job 2:9). Was she so overcome with watching him suffer that she just wanted his suffering to end? Or was her faith stretched to the limit so that she saw no relief in sight and blamed God? After all, *she* had lost everything too! Whatever her reasons, **Job** reprimanded her. "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from

God and not accept adversity?" (2:10). "In all this *Job* did not sin with his lips" (Job 2:10b), implying that his wife certainly had sinned against God, as well as adding to her husband's burden.

Rather than being discouragers, the writer of Hebrews says that we should "encourage one another day after day" (3:13), considering how we can "stir up" one another to "love and good works" (10:24). To encourage someone means "to inspire with courage or confidence" (Webster's). **Noah's wife and daughters-in-law** were not discouragers, else the ark would not have been finished—much less finished in less time than God had allotted. Though we do not know the names of these brave women, we can appreciate their efforts to support Noah and his sons and, ultimately, save the human race. **Naomi's** words after the deaths of her husband and sons, were full of discouragement and lost hope. **Ruth's** words were a sharp contrast, expressing love, loyalty, respect and confidence in Naomi and in her God. Without Ruth's devotion and constant encouragement, Naomi might have died a bitter old woman who thought she had nothing to live for.

Barnabas is probably the best known encourager in the Bible, helping Paul and John Mark. In spite of setbacks and disappointments and incredible bad choices, Saul of Tarsus was accepted by the early church rather than permanently shunned, and John Mark could take on the task of writing one of the inspired gospel accounts of Jesus' life—largely because of the encouragement of Barnabas. Then **Paul** became an encourager, too (Christians in Philippi—Acts 16:40; Christians in Macedonia—20:2; men on a doomed ship—27:36; Christians in Colossae—Col. 2:1-2; Christians in Corinth—2 Cor. 12:19; Timothy and Titus). Christianity is "an unending ministry of dispensing hope," helping others to

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see “beyond the rubble at their feet” (Johnson 48). The Royal British Navy has a rule which states, “No officer shall speak discouragingly to another officer in the discharge of his duties” (Wiersbe 117). How much better our homes and congregations would be if we practiced that same rule!

God made it clear that **gossip** (“tale bearing,” literally, being a peddler or merchant of tales) was not to be part of the daily life of His people under the Old Law (Lev. 19:16). The Israelites would have enough challenges to their survival in the wilderness without the strife and divisions which gossip would cause. The early church had similar challenges. The congregation with which Timothy worked in Ephesus was apparently struggling with **young widows** who were “idle, wandering about from house to house.” They had become “gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not” (1 Tim. 5:13). We probably are not wandering from house to house sharing things we should not repeat (since most of us do not spend much time at home any more), but are we “wandering from phone to phone” or from e-mail to e-mail? Dealing with 700 wives and 300 concubines, Solomon surely knew firsthand about the divisive, destructive nature of gossip. “An ungodly man digs up evil, and it is on his lips like a burning fire. A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends” (Prov. 16:27-28). Paul expressed concern about the spiritual maturity of **the Corinthians** several times, saying that he was afraid he would find them participating in, among other things, “whisperings” (2 Cor. 12:20). He said gossip would be one of the indicators that the Corinthians had not truly repented of sin which they previously practiced. We need to be very careful not to repeat everything we hear, even things that are true, because of whom the words might

hurt. We should, in fact, stay away from gossipers (Prov. 20:19, NASV). How many reputations, marriages, churches have been severely damaged—even destroyed—by gossip? The numbers would be staggering, assuming we could count them. Solomon had the right idea when he wrote, “Where there is no wood, the fire goes out, and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases” (Prov. 26:20).

Lying has always been unacceptable to God while Satan, the “father of lies,” encourages it. God is the author of all truth and is, by His nature, completely incapable of lying (Tit. 1:2). Lying is one of the six things Solomon said that the Lord hates (Prov. 6:16-19), along with “a proud look” and “hands that shed innocent blood.” In fact, in those four verses, Solomon specifically targets “a lying tongue” and “a false witness who speaks lies.” **Abraham** lied about Sarah being his sister and insisted that Sarah lie for him; many people suffered because of their conspiracy. **Jacob’s** lies to his father split his family; he never saw his mother again. **Laban’s** lies and broken promises to Jacob created a family full of jealousy and rivalry. **Jacob’s ten oldest sons** lied to him about Joseph’s death and caused him indescribable pain for almost thirty years. **Ananias and Sapphira’s** lies cost them their lives. Their immediate punishment sent shock waves through the early church. Lying destroys trust, and trust is one of the most difficult things to rebuild. Think about what can happen to you personally and to our society in general when we do not believe we can trust others. Friendships dissolve, marriages come apart, churches divide, contracts are not kept, partners and teammates do not work well together because they have little confidence in one another. Because we are not to be like those of the world who lie with little or no thought, Paul tells us, “Therefore, *putting away lying*, let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor, for we

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are members of one another” (Eph. 4:25, emp. added). “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who deal truthfully are His delight” (Prov. 12:22).

Speaking in anger is another use of words that can divide homes, congregations and churches. “An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins” (Prov. 29:22, NIV). Ambrose Bierce wrote, “Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.” There are many instances through the Old and New Testaments where God and Jesus used angry words to admonish, warn and pronounce judgment on those who would not obey their commandments. Their divine words were always *justifiable*. If our words are spoken against sin or false doctrine or injustice, they are also justifiable—if they do not originate from proud, or vengeful, or jealous, or hateful hearts. We must be careful not to let angry words prompt us to wrong actions.

The Bible does not tell us of a single negative word spoken by **Sarah** when she left the comforts of Ur for parts unknown. However, we do know that her total absorption with having a son prompted her to encourage adultery between Abraham and Hagar. And, to make matters worse, her anger and jealousy of Hagar and Ishmael pushed Abraham to literally send them into the wilderness to die. Sarah quite literally started centuries of war between brothers that continues today in the Middle East. In an effort to protect her son Isaac, she kept Abraham’s other son away from his father during his vulnerable and formative teenage years. It is easy to understand why James compared the tongue to a destructive fire, a dangerous beast and a fatal poison (Jas. 3:5-8).

When **David** and his men were hiding from King Saul, they gave protection to a wealthy rancher named

Nabal. David expected some reward or payment for his services at harvest time, but Nabal refused and insulted David. David responded with angry words that incited his men with hateful, vengeful intent. Fortunately, wise **Abigail** intervened and, with calming, wise words, changed a potentially disastrous situation into a time of reflection on the consequences of angry words and planned actions, as well as the power of God to deal with Nabal appropriately (1 Sam. 25:28-31). In one of his calmer moments, David wrote, “Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; do not fret—it only causes harm. For evildoers shall be cut off; but those who wait on the Lord, they shall inherit the earth” (Psa. 37:8-9). Solomon wrote, “Wrath is cruel and anger a torrent” (Prov. 27:4a), and “Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry, for anger rests in the bosom of fools” (Ecc. 7:9).

God’s people are commanded to speak “the truth *in love*” so that we “may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ...” (Eph. 4:15, emp. added). As we walk with the Lord each day, we are to completely put away “bitterness, wrath, anger...malice” (Eph. 4:31) and choose to be “slow to wrath, for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (Jas. 1:19-20). We do not want angry words to damage our relationships with God or with our brethren, or damage our examples to those outside the family of God. And we do not want to have it on our consciences that our angry words incited others to speak or act in ungodly ways.

Words can encourage us to make wrong choices. **Satan’s** deceitful words in the beginning certainly encouraged **Eve** to make wrong choices, but there are plenty of other Biblical examples. **Rebekah** undermined her husband’s authority and goaded **Jacob** into deceiving his father in order to take away Esau’s birthright. What

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was she thinking!? Clearly, she was not thinking about the long-term consequences for herself, her husband, her sons—or for the generations to come who would be divided into two camps that would harbor resentment and bitterness toward one another because of her words and actions. **Jeroboam's** words and actions led the ten tribes of Israel into centuries of idolatry. **Delilah** persuaded Samson to break his covenant with God, ruining his life and depriving the Israelites of their leader. **Jezebel** used words to encourage Ahab's evil desires, ordering the murder of Naboth and the confiscation of his vineyard.

While Moses was on Mount Sinai, the **Israelites** used foolish, blasphemous speech to persuade **Aaron** to make a god for them to worship; they wanted to worship something tangible—an entity they could see—like they were familiar with in Egypt. They were wrong, but so was Aaron when he complied with their wishes and shouted, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" (Ex. 32:4). What had happened to Aaron during those hours of melting down pounds and pounds of gold, then shaping it into the golden calf? He obviously did not use his own words and position of authority to quiet the dissenting voices in the camp or to remind them of the great things they had seen and been a part of during the plagues. He certainly did not remind them of the "hot off the press" Ten Commandments. Instead, he gave in to the pressure; he listened to the words of the crowd instead of the Word of God. Through the centuries, the Israelites chose to listen to the directives and teachings of evil kings and false prophets who encouraged them to sin, who made them feel comfortable in their sins, and who encouraged them to ignore the consequences of their disobedience.

On the other hand, words can encourage us to make good choices. In sharp contrast to those who allowed themselves to be drawn away from God, **Joshua** was very focused. He made up his mind early in his life that he would serve God, and only God, in his actions and in his words. He used his words to remind the people of their own promises to God and to challenge them to choose to do right (24:14-15). **Nehemiah** and **Ezra** spoke to their countrymen, pushing them to rebuild not only walls but also their lives and restoring their pride in the process. **Mordecai** persuaded his niece, beautiful **Queen Esther**, to use her talents and influence to be at the forefront of social change. He reminded her that her fate would be determined by the fate of her people, and asked her, "Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Est. 4:14). That moment in the history of her people was not the "time to keep silence," but rather the "time to speak" (Ecc. 3:7).

What we say shows if we are wise or foolish, according to God's standards. A foolish person makes his character known when he opens his mouth (Prov. 12:15). **Esther's** words and actions revealed her wisdom and strong character. After **Mordecai** reminded her of her responsibilities to her people, she immediately declared, "I will go to the king, and if I perish, I perish" (Est. 4:16). Then she proclaimed a three day fast for herself and asked all the Jews in the capital city to join her. "The heart of the righteous *studies how to answer...*" (Prov. 15:28, emp. added). "Do you see a man hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Prov. 29:30). Esther took time to think about the best ways to respond rather than react, to plan the words she would use to convey her anguish and expose **Haman** at the same time. Haman had already shown himself to be a fool in regard to Mordecai

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and continued to do so when he bragged to his wife that Mordecai would soon hang. “A fool vents all his feelings, but a wise man holds them back” (Prov. 29:11). Like Nabal before him, and boastful Herod centuries later, Haman’s lips were “the snare of his soul” (Prov. 18:7; cf. Prov. 12:13). A fool has little to no knowledge, and when he opens his mouth, it shows (Prov. 15:7). The contrast between the words of Esther and Mordecai and the words of Haman are described well in Ecclesiastes 10:12-14: “The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious, but the lips of a fool shall swallow him up. The words of his mouth begin with foolishness, and the end of his talk is raving madness. A fool also multiplies words.” “There is gold and a multitude of rubies, but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel” (Prov. 20:15).

A fool uses words carelessly, being ignorant of their meanings or caring more about “fitting in” than pleasing God. Our society is so saturated with blasphemy and cursing that many of us barely twinge when we hear them. And, much to our shame, too many people who call themselves Christians sound like the immoral and amoral people of the world. Paul had a lot to say about bad language in his letter to the Ephesians. “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification that it may impart grace to the hearers” (4:29). “Let all...evil speaking be put away from you” (4:31). In the midst of the condemnation of covetousness, uncleanness and fornication, Paul warned them that “filthiness...foolish talking, [and] coarse jesting [were] not fitting” (5:4). It was (is) “shameful” for “children of light” to even speak of things “done in darkness” (Eph. 5:11-12). He wanted them to be very aware that what they said could prevent them from inheriting their eternal reward just as surely as the “big

sins” he mentioned. Peter reiterated that sentiment in 1 Peter 3:10, “Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil.” James made it very clear that it is *impossible* to praise God and curse Him (or others) with the same tongue (3:9-12). If I choose to believe I am not hurting anyone by my choice of words, I’m purposely deceiving myself. “For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself” (Rom. 14:7a). Paul encouraged Titus to teach young Christian men to have “sound speech that cannot be condemned, that one who is an opponent may be ashamed, having nothing evil to say of you” (Tit. 2:6).

For all the negative things we can say about how we use words, we can say with certainty that **God has given us the ability to speak in order that we may teach His Word to others.** The written Word of God was not available until the Ten Commandments were carved on stone tablets by the finger of God, but He never planned for His words to stay on those stone tablets—or on scrolls of papyrus or leather, or between the covers of a book. The book of Deuteronomy is a treasure trove of references to teaching future generations to love Jehovah and to remember all He had done for Israel (cf. 6:6-9; 11:18-21). **Jochebed** taught Aaron and Miriam well in an environment more hostile than we can imagine. Acting as his nursemaid during his earliest years, her influence and her teaching of Moses provided him with the foundation he would need to be the leader of 2-3 million Jewish slaves. **Hannah** used the short 3-5 years she had with Samuel to train him and prepare him for his lifelong service to God. Along with her husband Aquila, **Priscilla** taught Apollos “the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26b). **Paul** not only taught **Timothy and Titus**, he also reminded them of their responsibilities to teach sound doctrine (Tit. 2:1; 2 Tim. 4:2). Knowing the powerful influence of women,

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Paul told Titus to specifically target “older women” to be “teachers of good things” that they may “admonish” (“train,” NASB) younger women “that the Word of God may not be blasphemed” (Tit. 2:3-5). Our words plant good or bad ideas, instill moral or immoral values, shape good or poor self-images. Florence Shinn wrote, “The game of life is the game of boomerangs. Our thoughts, deeds and words return to us sooner or later, with astounding accuracy.” We will be held accountable for what we teach!

God has given us the ability to verbalize words so that we can praise Him. We do have so many things for which we should praise our Creator and thank the great I AM. **Moses and Miriam** praised God after the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 15). **Hannah** praised God when Eli told her she would have a son (1 Sam. 2). And in a very similar song of praise, **Mary, the mother of Jesus**, praised God for choosing her from among all the women on earth to be the mother of the Son of God (Luke 1:46-55). The songs of these two women express such respect and love and awe of God that it is easy to understand why He chose them for such special roles. The book of Psalms is full of songs of praise and thanksgiving to God written by **David** and others. “My tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Your praise” (Psa. 51:14b-15). “Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul! While I live I will praise the Lord; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being” (Psa. 146:1-2). From the many God-fearing Biblical characters who struggled to live for Him, one important lesson we learn is that they were incredibly grateful, and they openly, verbally praised Jehovah in both good times and bad. Directing praise to our Heavenly Father helps us keep our focus on Who and what is most important, rather than

becoming arrogant and self-centered. But the words of praise and adoration must be genuine. In both the Old and New Testaments, the Lord condemns those who “draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me” (Isa. 29:13a), calling them “hypocrites” (Matt. 15:7-8).

Since God gave us the ability to speak, to assemble words verbally and in written form, then it should be obvious that the Creator knows every word I speak, just as He knows the number of hairs on my head. For some of us that’s a frightening thought, is it not? “There is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, You know it altogether” (Psa. 139:4; cf. Ecc. 12:14). Sometimes the opening to a particularly dangerous cave is covered by bars or fencing to prevent someone from going inside and getting hurt. Do you ever feel like you need bars over your mouth? I do! Perhaps a muzzle would be better! David must have felt the same way at times because he wrote, “I said, ‘I will guard my ways, lest I sin with my tongue; I will restrain my mouth with a muzzle...’” (Psa. 39:1), and “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Psa. 141:3). We are no different in our need to restrain our impulses to speak and control our words.

The opening of a cave is often called a “mouth.” We can stand at the mouth of a cave and yell to hear the sound of our own voices return to us in an echo. The echo is an exact replica of what was just said. Likewise, what comes out of our mouths replicates what is in our minds. One unknown author put it this way, “Every time you speak, your mind is on parade.” Charles Spurgeon wrote, “What lies in the well of the heart will come up in the bucket of speech.” I cannot be a counterfeit Christian! Like the special ink pens that store clerks use to check for

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counterfeit paper money, our speech will prove if our commitment to the Lord is authentic – or counterfeit. God will, after all, hold me accountable for every idle word and the thoughts from which they originate (Matt. 12:33-37).

We must be good examples to others in what we say (1 Tim. 4:12). The Greek word for “example” (*hupogrammos*) referred to a stone or clay tablet on which the Greek alphabet was written. To help them learn the alphabet, young students would use the tablet to trace the letters, from *alpha* to *omega*. Jesus is, of course, the ultimate example which we can “trace” to learn how to use our words and train our thoughts. We should strive to speak and live so that others will be able to trace the words *we* say and the things *we* do back to *the* Alpha and Omega, Jesus Christ.

There are an incredible number of verses and passages in Scripture about the gift of speech and how it should be used. We have really only touched “the hem of the garment” in this lesson. As I have been studying, I have been reminded over and over of the power of words. “A judge speaks some words and a guilty prisoner is taken to a cell on death row. A gossip makes a phone call and a reputation is blemished or perhaps ruined. A cynical professor makes a snide remark in a lecture and a student’s faith is destroyed. Never underestimate the power of words. For every word in Hitler’s book *Mein Kampf*, 125 people died in World War II” (Wiersbe 111). That’s a staggering thought, is it not? Too often we do not think about *our* words having much of an impact, but they definitely do. “A word fitly spoken” comes from a discerning mind that is always aware of the power of words, and from a God-fearing heart willing to stay away from every evil thing (Psa. 141:4; 35:14). My daily commitment must be, “Let the words of my mouth and the

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meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O
Lord, my strength and my Redeemer" (Psa. 19:14).

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