

The Power of (Our) Words

Proverbs 18:21

In 1983, President Ronald Reagan gave what came to be known as the "Evil Empire" speech. Many of you remember it. In that speech he called the Soviet Union an "evil empire" and he said that they were "the focus of evil in the modern world." A lot of the press said that Reagan had gone too far, that he would make the Soviets angry, that he was a "reckless cowboy."

Some years later when Reagan was visiting Poland and the former East Berlin after the fall of the Soviet Union, he received a hero's welcome. Several dissidents told him that when they heard that he had called the Soviets an "evil empire," it gave them hope to continue their struggle against communism because they realized that an American President understood the true nature of communism. Reagan's words were powerful. Václav Havel, who was a communist-era dissident and later the Czech president, once was reflecting on Reagan's "evil empire" reference and he said that it illustrated "the power of words to change history" (Dinesh D'Souza, *Ronald Reagan*, p.135).

Our words are powerful. They can change history; for most of us, not the history of nations, but the history of the people around us. The book of Proverbs has a lot to say about the power of our words. This morning I'd like to think primarily about one proverb and hopefully implant it on the pages of our minds that it might serve as a constant reminder of the power of our words. The proverb is Proverbs 18:21. Listen to what it says:

*Death and life are in the power of the tongue,
And those who love it will eat its fruit.*

Death and life are in the power of the tongue. Death and life are in the power of YOUR tongue. The words that you speak can be destructive or they can be life-giving. They literally have the power to change history.

This morning, I want to consider both the potential to do harm by the words we speak as well as the potential to do good. After that, I'm going to offer some suggestions on how to grow as a person who more consistently brings about life through your words.

And so, first, let's consider our word's potential to do damage.

I. Our Words Can Produce "Death"

I want to simply read a number of passages from Proverbs that illustrate how our words can produce death.

⁹ *With his mouth the godless man destroys his neighbor,
But through knowledge the righteous will be delivered.* (Prov. 11:9)

¹⁸ *There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword,
But the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Prov. 12:18)*

*A gentle answer turns away wrath,
But a harsh word stirs up anger. (Prov. 15:1)*

⁴ *A soothing tongue is a tree of life,
But perversion in it crushes the spirit. (Prov. 15:4)*

²³ *The north wind brings forth rain,
And a backbiting tongue, an angry countenance. (Prov. 25:23)*

These passages suggest that gossiping words destroy; rash words inflict wounds; harsh words stir up anger; deceitful words can crush another's spirit. These are just a few of the kinds of words that produce death. They're destructive. They are the kinds of words that should not come out of our mouths.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:29 that we should "*let no unwholesome word proceed from [our] mouth.*" There are all sorts of words that can come out of our mouths that are unwholesome and which produce death. Death and life are in the power of the tongue. We need to be careful what comes out of our mouths.

For many years, I've coached my kid's baseball or softball teams. I've seen the power of words in that context. I remember one night out at Cico when we were waiting for Philip's game. One of the other dads was standing by me and he pointed out a boy and said to me "That boy is my son's step-brother. I can't stand him." He then went on to talk about how on the previous day this step-son, who was older than his son, had been bragging about how good he was at baseball and that if he was on the team he would be doing really well. This dad told me that he had pointed out to his step-son the older boys that were playing on the field next to where they were and he something to the effect, "See those guys. If you were playing, that's who you'd be playing with. You wouldn't be so great."

Death is in the power of the tongue. You feel it in those words don't you? Do you think that maybe those words might change that step-son's history? Maybe our words are not so harsh, but if you are a parent have you ever said something like this to one of your kids:

- Why can't you be like your brother?
- Couldn't you have gotten all A's? B's?
- Are you stupid.
- Can't you do anything right?

Or have you ever said anything like this to a spouse or maybe a friend?

- You never listen!
- What were you thinking? That was stupid!

- I can't trust you.
- You're more trouble than your worth.

Death and life are in the power of the tongue. Our words have the power to crush the spirit of another person. Obviously, God does not want us to use our tongues in this way. Instead He wants us to speak words that produce life.

II. Our Words Can Produce “Life”

Again, I'm going to just read a few verses out of Proverbs that illustrate this truth.

³¹ *The mouth of the righteous flows with wisdom,
But the perverted tongue will be cut out. (Prov. 10:31)*

³² *The lips of the righteous bring forth what is acceptable,
But the mouth of the wicked, what is perverted. (Prov. 10:32)*

¹⁸ *There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword,
But the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Prov. 12:18)*

²⁵ *Anxiety in the heart of a man weighs it down,
But a good word makes it glad. (Prov. 12:25)*

¹ *A gentle answer turns away wrath,
But a harsh word stirs up anger. (Prov. 15:1)*

⁴ *A soothing tongue is a tree of life,
But perversion in it crushes the spirit. (Prov. 15:4)*

These proverbs speak of wise words, helpful words, words that heal, encouraging words, gentle words, life-giving words. These are the kinds of words that are to come off of our lips.

Earlier we read the first part of Ephesians 4:29. Let me read the whole verse. It says:

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.

The only words that are to come out of our mouths are words that are good for edification – that is the building up of each other. Our words are to give grace to those who hear.

As a sophomore in college, I was asked to give my testimony at our state Campus Crusade for Christ fall retreat. I remember spending hours and hours working on that thing, but never feeling that I had much that was interesting to share. I became a Christian at

a young age and never really rebelled. I felt like my testimony was boring. Well, the big day came and I stood before about a hundred other college students and Campus Crusade staff. The only real memory I have of giving the testimony is how nervous I was. But I have a very clear picture of what happened after the testimony. After the meeting was over, I was walking back to my cabin and the ministry director from the University of Nebraska came up to me and said, "That was one of the best testimonies I've ever heard in explaining what it means to walk in the Spirit." Those words imparted life to me. They helped me believe that God could use me.

Many years later, when I was on staff with Cru here at K-State I was asked to be the main speaker for Faith's men's retreat. This was probably in the mid-90s. A couple of weeks after that retreat, I was in Steve Ratliff's office and Ken Goodyear stopped by. Ken had been at the retreat. And one of the comments he made to me in the interaction was that he thought I had the spiritual gift of teaching. I had never thought that before. His words imparted life to me.

God has used the words of people like that Cru director and Ken Goodyear and others in my life to change my history. Literally, I'm in the place I am today in large part because of such life-giving words. Their words helped me to know that God could and wanted to use me. Their words produced life in me.

Death and life are in the power of the tongue. Our words really can change history. What kinds of words do you speak? Are they life-giving? Are they good for edification according to the need of the moment? Do they give grace to those who hear?

For most of us there is a need to grow in this area of our lives. I know there is in my life. How do we do that? Is it just a matter of determining that we will only speak life-giving words? Certainly, commitment is part of it, but I think you will continue to be frustrated if you do nothing but make a commitment. I'm sure there are many things that could be part of growing in this area, but let me suggest four very practical things that you can do to develop a life-giving tongue.

III. Developing a Life-giving Tongue

The first thing is probably the most important of the suggestions I'm going to give you. You need to **understand that your words are a matter of the heart**. In Matthew 12:34 Jesus says this to the Pharisees:

³⁴ "You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart."

When we speak words that produce "death" we need to understand that it reveals a heart issue. It's not just a matter of "slipping up." The *mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart*.

One of the areas of speech that I have struggled in is how I talk to my kids sometimes. This was especially true when they were little. There have been times where out of anger I have spoken to them with force and harshness. My words have hurt them. I've seen the look in their eye . . . the hurt caused by my words. When those kinds of words come out of my mouth, I need to realize that my words reveal what is in my heart. If I speak angry words, that reveals that there is anger in my heart. This isn't just a matter of slipping up in my speech.

And so if you find words coming out of your mouth that are producing death, don't make excuses like: "I don't know what I was thinking" or "I guess I was just tired" or "That's just the way I am." And don't just make commitments to try harder to not do it next time. Those things don't deal with the heart issue that is being revealed by your words.

Here's how you deal with a heart problem: you confess your sin and you trust God to transform you. Instead of making excuses for your words, acknowledge to God the condition of your heart - that it is angry or harsh or impatient. Whatever the condition of your heart is confess your sin to God and know that in Christ it is forgiven. And then trust God to transform your heart. Ask him to replace your anger with love; to replace your impatience with patience. Ask Him to fill up your heart with the very life of Christ.

Galatians 5:22-23 says that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. What kinds of words do you think you would speak if those qualities filled your heart? They'd be life-giving words.

So, the first thing we need to do to develop a tongue that speaks life-giving words is to understand that our words are a matter of the heart and we need to deal with it at a heart level.

Here's a second thing you can do to develop a life-giving tongue: You can **invite feedback**. Sometimes the quality of our words is a blind spot and so let me encourage you to ask the important people in your life about what they observe about your words. You might ask a friend, a spouse or even your children to give you some feedback. Ask them if they have heard you speaking in ways that are hurtful. Of course this is risky; you're laying your heart out there, but if you are serious about growing in this area, this kind of feedback can really help.

One of the things you might have to do to follow this up is to ask for forgiveness for hurtful words that you have said to someone.

The other day I was talking to a friend and we were processing some life-issues. He shared about a time when as a boy he asked his dad to buy him something and his dad, through his words, basically shamed him and said, "Why do you need that?" The words that his dad said communicated to him, "you are not worth it." Decades later, those words are still painful in this man's life. I asked my friend, "If your dad would have come back to you later and said he was sorry for what he said, would that have changed the impact of those words?" And he said, that without a doubt it would have.

Admitting when we have said hurtful things and saying we are sorry and asking for forgiveness, those are life-giving words. And so if you get feedback that your words have been hurtful, I would encourage you to go and admit it and ask for forgiveness. God changes our lives as we respond to truth in this way.

Here's the third suggestion: **practice the discipline of silence.** Donald Whitney defines the discipline of silence as “the voluntary and temporary abstention from speaking so that certain spiritual goals might be sought.” Those spiritual goals are many, but one of them is control of the tongue. James says in 1:26 that those who seem religious, but are unable to control their tongues are self-deceived. Practicing this spiritual habit of silence can help us gain control over our tongues.

In your everyday life, the practice of this discipline of silence might look like this: You decide on a particular day that as you move through your day you are going to listen more and say less. And so when you are with a group of friends or at your Life Group, you focus on listening to the others and understanding them rather than speaking. As you are do this you seek to listen to God in the midst of those situation and you check the tendency to say something every time you can and you try to speak only when you should.

You can choose a day or a whole week where you make this approach to speaking your goal. The ultimate goal of this spiritual practice is not silence, however, but control. When you do this kind of thing for a period time it begins to help you develop the discipline of considering what you say before you say it. There is actually heart work going on when you practice this discipline and the fruit of it is that it will help you control the tongue.

Finally, **be intentional to speak words of life to the important people in your life.** It's not enough to just refrain from saying words of death. The tongue has the power of life and we need to be purposeful in speaking words of life.

There are people all around you that need to hear encouraging words, for someone to believe in them, for someone to speak life into them - your friends, your spouse, your kids, your employees, the kids you are coaching on that little league team, that checkout clerk. Maybe even someone whom you will talk to after this service.

Robert Lewis in the Men's Fraternity study that many men have been through here at Faith over the past several years says that there are three things that every child needs to hear from his or her parents: I love you. I'm proud of you. You are good at _____. Be intentional to communicate those things to your kids.

I have so much room for growth, but one thing I've done with my kids is try to be intentional to communicate some things to them at critical moments of their lives. I've sat down and written them a letter to each of them as they head into adolescents. And then before they head off to college, I've done the same thing. In those letters I've been in-

tentional to tell them I love them, I'm proud of them and what I see as their strengths. That's just one example of being intentional.

Who is someone in your life that needs to hear words of life from you? Determine that this week you will either get with them or write them a note to express words of life to them. In doing this, we're not talking about flattery – saying things that aren't true. I'm talking about finding things in that person of worth for which you can praise and encourage them. But don't just do it this once; be intentional about regularly speak affirming words to them.

Death and life are in the power of the tongue,

Jay Mitchell tells this story about Mike Singletary. Some of you know that, Mike Singletary was a great linebacker with the Chicago Bears. He retired in 1992 and was inducted into the Football Hall of Fame in 1998. He was the head coach of the 49ers for a couple of years, but now I believe he is an assistant coach for the Minnesota Vikings.

Mike was the youngest of ten children growing up in Houston, Texas. When he was about 12 years old his father left his mom for another woman. Mike's mom had to work 16 hours a day at two jobs just to provide for Mike and his nine older brothers and sisters. After his father left, Mike's older brother, Grady took on the father role in his life. But that same year, Grady was killed by a drunk driver. Mike was lost, depressed and without direction. One day his mom called him into the kitchen, sat him down and said to him.

Mike, look me in the eye. I want you to know something. I have prayed for you since before you were born. And I have been praying for you every day of your life. Mike, I see greatness in you. You are a child of God and there is greatness in you. I don't know where it will lead but it's there and you will need to discover it. Now I need you to step up now, Son, and take on some responsibility around this house. I need you. Will you do that?

Mike said that day, after that talk, he went to his room. And for the first time, God gave him a vision for his life. He wrote down goals - to make the varsity football team in high school, to get a scholarship to college, to be an All American, to get drafted and play professional football and earn enough money to buy his mom a house. He achieved all those goals. Mike later reflected on that time in the kitchen and said, "My life began that day!"

It's possible that the words of encouragement that you will speak to someone this week will be the words that cause them to say, "My life began that day!" Our words have the power to change history. *Death and life are in the power of the tongue.* Death and life are in the power of YOUR tongue! Amen.