

**First Baptist Church Merritt Island**  
**Senior Pastor Titus Green**  
**August 31, 2025**  
**SCHOOL OF WISDOM – Life Lessons from Proverbs**  
**Words are a Matter of Life and Death**  
**Proverbs 18:21**

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I heard a story about a pastor who was struggling to communicate clearly with his congregation. It seemed like no matter what he said, people kept misunderstanding him and even taking things in the completely opposite way of what he intended. So, he decided he would try a visual demonstration to help get a point across in one of his sermons. He was preaching on the importance of taking care of your body. So, at the start of his sermon he put four worms in four separate jars. The first worm was put into a jar of whiskey. The second worm was put in a jar of cigarette smoke. The third worm was put in a jar of chocolate syrup. And the fourth worm was put in a jar of good, clean soil. When he got to the end of the sermon, he showed the results to the congregation. The worm in the whiskey was dead. The worm in the cigarette smoke, dead. The worm in the chocolate syrup, dead. But the worm in the good, clean soil was alive and well. The pastor thought, "There's no way anybody's going to misunderstand me this time," so he asked the congregation, "What have you learned from this demonstration?" A little old lady in the back raised her hand and said, "As long as you drink, smoke, and eat chocolate, you'll never have worms."

I'm pretty sure she's part of our church. The point is that it is very important and often difficult to communicate effectively. It takes a lot of wisdom to know what to say and when and how to say it. Thankfully, we are in a study of the book of Proverbs – a book filled with wisdom about our words. Proverbs talks about communication more than any other topic it covers. So, like we did last week in our study of the proverbs about money, this morning we are going to get an overview of the teaching of Proverbs about words.

***Proverbs 18:21***

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

Death and life are in the power of the tongue. Our words have the power to bring death, and our words have the power to bring life. You know the saying - Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. What a lie! Few things in all this world are more powerful than our words.

Patrick Henry's speech, "Give me liberty or give me death," changed the course of world history. His words compelled Virginia to join the Revolution...and two of Virginia's favorite sons were in the room where it happened – George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. The impact of Patrick Henry's words is impossible to measure.

In 1987, Ronald Reagan stood in West Berlin and gave a speech in which he directed the leader of the Soviet Union to give way to freedom by releasing the grip of communism on Eastern Europe. All of us old people vividly remember his words – "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" That speech is considered a pivot point in history and helped bring an end to the Cold War.

Death and life are in the power of the tongue. And it isn't just the words of world leaders. Our individual lives are formed by impact of seemingly simple words.

Many in this room still carry the scars of words spoken decades ago by an angry parent, or a rebellious child, or a careless teacher or classmate. Words that cut you to the heart back then and can still bring you to tears today. You died inside at the words that were spoken over you. Death is in the power of the tongue.

And then there are the words that bring life. Relationships have been restored, families have been reconciled, lives have been saved by the power of words. "I'm sorry." "I love you." "I love you, too." "Will you marry me?" "Yes." "We're going to have a baby." "Dad, I've decided not to leave the state to go to college and am staying here in Central Florida and promise to marry someone who will never want to live more than 30 minutes from you and mom."

The wisdom of God in Proverbs reminds us that our words are powerful. That's why, throughout the Bible, our words are compared to things like swords and fire. James 3 says the tongue is like an open fire that burns down entire forests...it's like a rudder that steers giant ships. We are constantly in possession of something that has the potential for doing great good or great harm. And just like a weapon should be handled with great care and fire isn't something we should play with, our words are to be chosen very carefully. And that's our Big Idea for today.

**Big Idea: Because your words are powerful, they should be chosen wisely.**

As I was studying for this morning, that not only seems to be the point of Proverbs 18:21, it seems to be a good summary for the rest of what Proverbs has to say about what we say. Most of the wisdom principles in this book are basic instructions on how to choose our words wisely.

So, in the rest of our time together, I want to walk through 3 choices you can make every day that will help you use your words wisely.

### CHOICE #1 - CHOOSE FEWER WORDS

*Proverbs 10:1*

*When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.*

*Proverbs 17:27-2*

*Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.*

If you want to use your words wisely, then learn the art of closing your mouth. Choose fewer words. And I know you are praying I'll practice what I'm preaching this morning. So do I.

This year, the University of Arizona published a comprehensive study on how many words people speak each day. They found that people between the ages of 25-65 average about 20,000 words a day. Men average just over 18,000 and women average almost 22,000 – with occasional gusts up to 120,000.

We use 20,000 words a day. And that doesn't count emails and text messages and social media posts. That's 20,000 things a day that are either being used for good or harm. 20,000 things a day that are either under control to bring life or out of control as instruments of death. And the wisdom of God in Proverbs starts off pretty simple. If you want to make your words count for something good, then choose to keep your word count lower.

Now, be careful not to hear what Proverbs isn't saying. It isn't saying we should stop talking. If we did that, we would fail to bring about good things God desires to accomplish through us. The point isn't to stop talking. The point is to think before you speak and choose in advance to place a limit on what you will and won't say.

*Proverbs 16:23*

*The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips.*

Listen to how the New American Standard Bible translates that verse.

*Proverbs 16:23 (NASB)*

*The heart of the wise instructs his mouth and adds persuasiveness to his lips.*

The picture here is that we are teachers and we have to teach our mouths how to speak. For some reason, when I was thinking about this, I was reminded of my Driver's Ed course. Before we ever hit the road, our instructor instructed us. He made sure we knew how to keep the car in middle of the lane. He went over scenarios like driving in the rain and navigating a four-way stop. He instructed us in advance and identified the things that are off limits as we drive. And that's sort of what Proverbs is saying here. Essentially, before we have conversations with other people, we have a conversation with ourselves. We say, "Here are the kinds of things I am going to say and here are the kinds of things that are off-limits." We choose fewer words when we choose in advance the kinds of things we simply won't say and the kinds of things we will.

And that brings us to the next choice we make. It's a choice of the kinds of things we will say.

## CHOICE #2 - CHOOSE RIGHTEOUS WORDS

*Proverbs 10:19-20*

*When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent. 20 The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; the heart of the wicked is of little worth.*

Righteous words are the kinds of words that are right in the sight of God.

And there are lots and lots of Proverbs about the kind of speech that is righteous and unrighteous.

- Honest words are righteous. Deceptive words are unrighteous.  
*Proverbs 4:24; 12:22*
- Faithful words are righteous. That includes being a faithful friend who is willing to say hard things out of love. Flattering words and kissing-up-to people are unrighteous.  
*Proverbs 27:5-6 Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.*
- Pure words are righteous. Perverse words are unrighteous.  
*Proverbs 16:28*
- Grateful words are righteous. Complaining and grumbling words are unrighteous.  
*Proverbs 27:15-16*
- Gentle words are righteous. Harsh and angry words are unrighteous.  
*Proverbs 15:1*

- Unifying words are righteous. Divisive words are unrighteous.  
*Proverbs 6:19*
- I could add “NECESSARY AND UNNECESSARY”

You are shooting off 20,000+ words a day and each of them are in one of those categories – rather than hearing what I have to say about all of them, I want us to take a moment and look at that list and ask God to impress on your heart where your words might be landing.

It would take far more time than we have this morning to focus in on all those examples of righteous and unrighteous speech. But what I most want to show you about righteous speech is its source. We just read Proverbs 10:20 but listen to it again.

*Proverbs 10:20*

*The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; the heart of the wicked is of little worth.*

Do you see the parallel that is given to us here? This proverb is comparing the tongue of the righteous with the heart of the wicked.

*Proverbs 15:7*

*The lips of the wise spread knowledge; not so the hearts of fools.*

This verse does the same thing. The mouth is parallel with the heart.

*Proverbs 15:28*

*The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.*

Once again, the mouth is parallel with the heart. They are used interchangeably. The words we use are simply reflections of the heart we have.

That’s exactly what Jesus said in *Luke 6:45: The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.*

Your words don’t just come out of your mouth; they come out of your heart. A preacher named Vance Havner used to say, “What’s down in the well will come up in the bucket.”

Friend, if you want to know what’s really in your heart then examine what is coming out of your mouth. If your words are harsh and angry and not gentle, that’s because your heart isn’t filled with gentleness. If your words are marked by complaining and criticism and not gratitude, that’s because your heart isn’t thankful. Sin in your heart will eventually make its way out of your mouth. So, if you see patterns of sin showing up in your speech, that indicates a root of sin in your heart.

And that’s why we need Jesus. Only Jesus can cleanse our hearts from sin and give us the power to live in righteousness. Only Jesus can transform us from the inside out. So, the only way we can choose righteous speech and lay aside unrighteous speech is to rely on Jesus to change our heart.

### CHOICE #3 – CHOOSE ENCOURAGING WORDS

*Proverbs 12:25*

*Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad.*

## *Proverbs 16:24*

*Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.*

Do you remember when Moses sent 12 spies into the land of Canaan? The people of Israel were on the verge of the Promised Land. They were so close, they just had to reach out and grab hold of it. But the spies came back to the people and 10 of them had nothing encouraging to say. All they could talk about were their doubts and their fears and their skepticism. They could only talk about how big the giants were and how little the people were in comparison. Do you remember what the Bible says happened? It says their words made the heart of the people melt. Have you ever had that happen to you?

But there's another side of that same coin. The life-giving power of encouraging words.

Larry Crabb was a notable Christian counselor, author, and conference speaker who passed away several years ago. He wrote a book on encouragement (*Encouragement: The Key to Caring* by Larry Crabb Jr. and Dan B. Allender, Zondervan). In it, he talks about a turning point in his life.

When Larry was young, he struggled with a stuttering problem. It was a terrifying and humiliating thing for him to have to speak in front of people. When he was in the ninth grade, he was elected study body president of his Junior High School. Unbeknownst to him, that meant Larry had to repeat a pledge in front of the entire school. As he attempted to say the pledge, he nervously stuttered through most of the words. The room was filled with awkward, pitiful silence that was only broken up by a few students laughing at him. Larry "died a thousand deaths that day" and decided public speaking was not for him.

A short time later, Larry was in church. The pastor encouraged some of the young men to stand and lead in prayer. Larry felt a social pressure come over him and found himself standing up to pray in front of the entire church. Listen to his account of that day...

Filled less with worship than with nervousness, I found my theology becoming confused to the point of heresy. I remember thanking the Father for hanging on the cross and praising Christ for triumphantly bringing the Spirit up from the grave. Stuttering throughout, I finally thought of the word "Amen" (perhaps the first evidence of the Spirit's leading), said it, and sat down. I recall staring at the floor, too embarrassed to look around, and solemnly vowing never again to pray or speak aloud in front of a group. Two strikes were enough.

When the service was over, I darted toward the door, not wishing to encounter an elder who might feel obliged to correct my twisted theology. But I was not quick enough. An older Christian man named Jim Dunbar intercepted me, put his arm on my shoulder, and cleared his throat to speak. I remember thinking to myself, "Here it comes. Oh well, just endure it and then get to the car." I then listened to this godly gentleman speak words that I can repeat verbatim today, more than thirty years later.

"Larry," he said, "there's one thing I want you to know. Whatever you do for the Lord, I'm behind you one thousand percent." Then he walked away.

Even as I write these words, my eyes fill with tears. I have yet to tell that story to an audience without at least mildly choking. Those words were life words. They had power. They reached deep within my being. My resolve never again to speak publicly weakened instantly.

Since the day those words were spoken, God has led me into a ministry in which I regularly address and pray before crowds of all sizes. I do it without stuttering. I love it. Not only death, but also life lies in the power of the tongue.

Imagine the impact on this community today if every person in this room took that truth to heart. Imagine if you left this room as an army of encouragers who refused to partake in sinful words of complaining or gossip or the kind of anxiety-inducing words that make the hearts of people melt. Imagine if we brought our hearts before Jesus so that He could transform our hearts in a way that

revolutionize our speech. Imagine if we lived by faith in the power of Jesus and trusted His work more than our words in a way that freed us to use fewer words and choose only the ones that honor God and reflect His gospel. Imagine how that might change your life and your marriage and your school or workplace. Can you imagine?

We don't have to imagine it. We can realize it. We can choose it. By choosing fewer words. Righteous Words. Encourage words. By choosing to live by faith in the power of Jesus in us.