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# Wise Words

## Practical Wisdom for Interpersonal Communication

*By Devon Berry*

**Introduction** This Sunday evening we begin what will be at least a four-part series from the book of Proverbs. Over the next month, we will be covering the topics of communication, anger, relationships, and folly as they are addressed in the book of Proverbs.

Before we begin talking about communication this evening, I would like to spend a little bit of time thinking about the *book* of Proverbs and its relevance for today. I thought it might be interesting to listen to a number of what are considered “modern proverbs” on the topic of communication.

Let’s take a quick listen to what “modern proverbs” have to say on the topic of communication:

- **Give every man thy ear but few thy voice – William Shakespeare**
- **I don’t let my mouth say nothin’ my head can’t stand – Louis Armstrong**
- **I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen – Ernest Hemingway**
- **I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So if I’m going to learn, I must do it by listening – Larry King**
- **If you have nothing to say, say nothing – Mark Twain**
- **Electric communications will never substitute for the face of someone who with their soul encourages another person to be brave and true – Charles Dickens**
- **English is the perfect language for preachers because it allows you to talk until you think of what to say – Garrison Keillor**
- **Kind words can be short and easy to speak but their echoes are truly endless – Mother Teresa**
- **The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightening and the lightning bug – Mark Twain**
- **Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind – Rudyard Kipling**

You may find that there are actually some rather wise words about communication here in these modern day proverbs. You may even note that there are some common characteristics among them: They are short. They are pithy (brief yet forceful and to the point, often with an element of wit). They vividly communicate general truths in a memorable way. These proverbs also have “popular currency,” that is, most people would agree with these statements regardless of their religious persuasion. So are there any differences between what we read here and what we find in the book of Proverbs in the Bible? Or are the Proverbs of the Bible on par with the proverbs of modern men? This question is important in and of itself, but it becomes even more important when we consider that if we don’t understand the biblical (or

Hebrew) idea of a Proverb, we may be mistaken and disappointed when we try to utilize our contemporary idea of a proverb when we approach the Proverbs in the Bible. So let's take just a few minutes to get a few of the basics about Proverbs under our belt so that we might better understand, interpret, and apply them. However, let me warn you that the few questions we answer here about the book as a whole, are barely adequate to even begin to communicate the simplicity, beauty, complexity, and profoundness of this book

## Introduction to Series on Proverbs

### What is a Proverb?

The Proverbs are a form of Israel's wisdom literature, which includes other books such as Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. Wisdom literature was written in two forms, poetry and prose. Proverbs happens to be a book of poetry, an important point to keep in mind as we read. More specifically, the Proverbs were NOT written for "popular currency" but rather for those who *fear the Lord*. Consider Proverbs 8:8-9, "All the words of my mouth are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them. They are all straight to him who understands, and right to those who find knowledge." But what about those who are not righteous? Proverbs 26:7 reads, "Like a lame man's legs, which hang useless, is a proverb in the mouth of fools." Therefore, the proverbs of the Bible may have little appeal to the world. The word Proverbs itself, means "to be like." One aspect of this meaning is the constant call throughout Proverbs for the reader to see what it is "to be like" the wise person, or "to be like" the fool, this should naturally compel the reader to form a judgment of his or herself.

### Why are Proverbs so different than the rest of the Bible?

There are some who would go as far as to say that the Book of Proverbs was written by the wise men of Israel to try and "fit" their culture into those of the people groups around them and that the Proverbs do not, therefore, fit very well into the Bible. Is this so? Consider the following facts:

- Proverbs consistently calls the reader to the fear of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:5, Joshua 24:14, Proverbs 1:7, Isaiah 29:13); Proverbs complements and does not contradict the theology of Moses and the prophets; Proverbs ascribes the same attributes and actions to God as Moses and prophets.
- Expresses enduring and eternal truths, certified by the Holy Spirit's inclusion of it in the Canon of Scripture, and is repeatedly referenced in the New Testament (consider esp. Hebrews 12:5-6 and Proverbs 3:11-12 where the Church is addressed as the son).

So, while the Proverbs may sound and feel a bit different than the rest of Scripture, we must as heartily endorse this book as being God-breathed and useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16-17) as all other books of the Bible. Proverbs are not simply short, pithy, statements which have popular appeal – rather, they are the declared Word of God, able to impart life to man.

Lastly, let's ask ourselves how the Proverbs fit into the rest of Scripture.

## How do Proverbs “fit in” to the redemptive-historical flow of Scripture?

Can you answer the following questions? What does Proverbs have to do with Adam and a horse? What part of the biblical narrative do the Proverbs supply? Are they simply neat but true sayings that help us live better before God? Are the themes common to all of Scripture found in the Proverbs too? Are the Proverbs Christocentric? Who or what is Lady wisdom? And what about this father and the lectures he delivered to his son? When were the Proverbs written and how did they fit into the historical storyline of Israel? Do the Proverbs have anything to say about the redemption of man? What is the connection between the books of Wisdom and the gospel? Do the Proverbs really have anything to do with my life today since I do have the New Testament which has a lot to say about practical living? What does Ecclesiastes and Oprah have in common?

All of these questions certainly cannot be answered this evening – if ever at all! If you really want to dig deep into the Wisdom literature of Scripture and learn to understand them well – you’ll need to go somewhere else...that’s right, somewhere else. Where?, To Adult Sunday School in the fall where we will be taking a more in-depth study approach to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes when we consider Christ, our Wisdom for living. Our study will consider Christ as the Wisdom of God himself and how we incarnate Christ in becoming wise decision makers.

For tonight, let’s simply make one connection: Turn to 1 Corinthians 1: 24, 30. We see that Christ is the wisdom of God. In Proverbs 1:1-4, we see that the purpose of the book is to know wisdom and instruction. So, may knowing Christ have something to do with knowing Proverbs? I assure you it does, but I leave it to others to draw that truth further out.

So we see that the Proverbs are indeed Scripture and are therefore important for our understanding and growth. We also see that the Proverbs are written in a manner that “shows us” what it is “to be like...” the wise person or the foolish person. Lastly, I hinted that Proverbs may well inform and be informed by our reading of the rest of Scripture, even as that pertains to the person of Christ. With all this said, let’s transition to discussing the topic of communication in the Proverbs.

## Proverbs on Communication

### Introduction

Beth and I have been part of an engaged couples mentoring program for a number of years. This program is a combination of classroom-like training sessions and more informal meetings between the young couples and their supposedly wiser and more experienced mentor couple! While we are relatively new at the marriage effort ourselves, we do our best, and have seen many couples benefit from the program. A number of the couples we have mentored have become personal friends.

At least one of the training sessions has traditionally focused on communication. And the introduction is usually along the lines of, “One of the biggest problems in any marriage is communication...” Many good words of advice are given for communicating in a manner that enhances and enriches marital harmony, thought provoking examples are often

shared, and tips on how to “fight fair” are even supplied. The focus is on communication techniques and improving your marriage.

Beth and I have come away from this particular session encouraged by the good and wise advice that is often provided to these young and aspiring couples...however...we’ve also come away with the sense that something is missing or that something has been mis-focused...call it the “Clearcreek curse.” Now if we were in the classroom I would pester you with questions and relentlessly goad you toward discovering what it was that bothered us – but we’re not in the classroom and many of you may already have a good idea of where I am going to head in my next few sentences. The main difficulty we identified, among what were many good and wise words, was the absence of a recognition of *where* “communication” comes from. What is its source? Its wellspring? Consequently, by failing to recognize that communication is not simply a source-less neutral expression, originating in our brains and mouths, for the purpose of sending and receiving messages, one is left with the sense that communication itself is somehow a technique to be mastered for the achieving of marital bliss versus an expression of the heart characterized by foolishness or wisdom, sin or obedience, a desire to please God or a willingness to rebel against God.

## The Source of Communication and the SOURCE of Communication

So what is communication if not a technique? Where does it come from? It is my contention, and I believe the Scriptures as well, that **communication is nothing more than an extension of *who we are in a manner accessible to others***. Although it may take on many forms, literature, non-verbal movement, all forms of media, etcetera, it is **most often in the form of speech**. And on speech is where the authors of the Proverbs spend most of their time when addressing communication. Let’s consider a few passages that begin to establish this idea for us:

### The Source of Communication

The close knit relationship that the Scriptures portray between one’s heart and their speech is evidenced throughout all of Scripture. The easiest way to see this for yourself is to do a search on your Bible software for the words heart and speech or heart and words or heart and lips, and you will begin to see how frequently what we say is connected by the Scripture to who we are. Similarly, you will also note the connection between what is said, and how it shapes who we are.

Consider Proverbs 4:20 – 27. Here we can note that healing and life-giving words can be “kept” (v.21) in a heart. What does it mean to be “keep” words in a heart? Simply that we dwell upon the words, that we allow the words to penetrate us deeply, or perhaps, most simply, that we *believe* what the words say.

Also note Proverbs 15:20 and 16:23 (Read). And then come to the New Testament with me to see this even more clearly in Matthew 12:33 – 37. Not only do words go into a heart, but words come out of a heart and evidence what is in it.

Be clear that the Scriptures do not allow for a separation between what we listen to (or keep/store up in our heart), what we say, and what is in our heart. Your words be-

tray you, whether they are words said in the quietness of your own mind or heart (communicating to yourself) or aloud (communicating to others) In health care, a good diagnostician will rarely put eyes on the actual source of a disease or disorder, but he or she will quite often draw the right conclusion about what the diagnosis is by studying the symptoms. Our words are often symptoms that point to the diagnosis of our heart – full of good treasure or full of evil treasure. (see also: Matthew 15:10-20).

## The SOURCE of Communication

But we are not unique in this use of words to communicate what is in our heart. In fact, it reflects just one more way in which we are created in the image of God. God has chosen to use words as His primary form of communication to man, and thereby establishes the importance of words for the purpose of communication.

In Genesis 8:21 shortly after the flood, Noah builds an altar to the Lord. When Noah offered up his burnt offering, the Lord was pleased by the aroma and *said, in his heart*, “I will never again curse the ground because of man...” Early in Genesis, the power of words is demonstrated as a sovereign God speaks by divine fiat and what we know as the material world comes into existence. And God said, “Let their be light,” and there was light (Genesis 1:3).

Further, God expects us to take His words into our heart, just as the father in Proverbs urges his son to “keep his instruction” in his heart. In Deuteronomy God repeatedly, through the preacher Moses, tells the Israelites to “take,” “lay up,” to allow to be “on”, in and upon their hearts His words (6:6, 11:18, 32:46).

And I must briefly point you forward to the most potent example of God using “the Word” to communicate. John in the New Testament tells us that Christ, in the incarnation, became the living Word (John 1). God has communicated most potently in Christ, the Word (Logos) of God, made flesh. Although we carry the Gospel message in the form of words today (Romans 10:14-15) today, we call people to Christ, the Word in the flesh, for it is through Him, this Word from God, that man’s greatest need is met. When the Proverbs speak of words giving life – at least in one respect, they point us directly to Christ, the True Life-giver.

So the Scriptures continually links these ideas of words and heart together. Words come out of our heart and words go into our heart. They are both an expression and a influencer of hearts. This basic concept is key. No amount of tips & tricks for improving communication will enable us to better please God until we understand that our speech cannot be disentangled from the beliefs and desires of our hearts. Words are the expression of God’s heart

## The Value of Wise Communication

Although it should be growing clear that words are a powerful force in life, lets look at a few Proverbs that will impress upon our minds how powerful they are – for both good and evil.

First, Proverbs tells us that words can impart life and death. While this is true in an eternal sense, we are also caused to see this in a temporal sense: Proverbs 18:20-21, 10:11 <Read>. Need an example? See v.12. (see also: 10:19-21, 11:30, 13:14)

Second, Proverbs tell us that words can heal and destroy. Consider these several passages with me <Read> Proverbs 11:8-10, 12:18, 16:24. These verses make it clear that our words, both their content and the manner of delivery, can profoundly effect and influence those around us. Do you view your words as merely impotent sounds which pass information along? Or do you view them as daggers, swords, salves, medicines? (see also: 10:8-14 [esp. 14])

Third, Proverbs makes clear that words can reward or damage oneself. Let's look into a few more passages <Read> 6:12-15;, 12:13-14, 18:2-7 (esp. 6-7). You yourself will be effected by what you say. It is not only that others can be given life or death, healing or injury, it is also that *you* will be rewarded or damaged by your own words. Many of us speak sinfully at times and regret the damage we do to others. Do we realize that with our words we invite consequences, lay traps for ourselves, and invite fights and quarrels. This is probably nowhere more easily seen than within the family unit. Consider words and their effects in the parent-child, husband-wife, and sibling-sibling, interaction. One commentator has noted that, sticks and stones may break the bones, but names will never hurt you is not true for what is done to you is of little account besides what is done in you (Kidner).

Words are powerful. What you say *will* effect both you and those around you. To think otherwise is foolishness. Each one of us, therefore, is accountable for our words – ALL OF OUR WORDS – those spoken (spoken) and those thought (said in the heart). If we truly regarded our tongue as James describes it (James 3) a bit, a rudder, a fire, we would walk around as if we were in a very dry forest carrying a lit torch extended out in front of us. And in this forest are people who are cold and in need of having their campfires lit for warmth, protection, and comfort – but it is a dry forest, and a misplacement of our torch, or use of the torch with evil intent, can set the whole forest ablaze, bringing harm and death to all within, ourselves included.

Understanding the power of speech, is just the beginning to understanding all the Proverbs has to say about communication. As we move toward concluding, let us briefly consider several characteristics of the communication of the wise and the communication of the foolish.

## The Characteristics of Wise Communication

In its most basic form, the process of communication can be broken down into two parts, sending messages and receiving messages. Proverbs uses many words to capture these two ideas. What we *say* is often indicated by words such as “speech,” “mouth,” “lips,” “tongue,” “words,” or “speaks.” How we *listen* is often indicated by words such as “hears,” “listen,” “receive,” “be attentive,” “keep,” “apply,” and “ear.” Whenever you read words like these in Proverbs, know that you are being cued to think about communication. We can get a limited overview of these the characteristics of the wise and foolish by arranging them in a table:

	Wise/Righteous	Foolish/Evil
Speaks	Gentle (15:1) Commends knowledge (15:2) Boasts not (27:1-2) Restrained (10:19, 17:14, 27, 28) No Gossip (11:12-13) Right timing, right way (25:11-12) Thoughtful (15:28, 18:13) Honest (8:7, 12:17, 19, 22) Wisely reproves (25:12, 24:25-26) Graciously (22:11-12)	Harsh (15:1) Pours out folly (15:2) Exalts self (30:32) Speaks hastily (29:20) Flatters (28:23, 29:5) Deceitful (26:20-28, 20:17) Lies to prosper (21:16, 19:9) Slanders (20:19) Mocks justice (19:28) Crooked, without integrity (19:1) Causes fights (18:6-8)
Listens	Listens and accepts the words/instruction of the wise (22:17-19, 19:20) Hears, heeds reproof (1:23, 13:18) Hears advise (12:15) Seeks knowledge (18:15)	Ignores, despises, hates reproof (1:25, 12:1, 15:5, 13:1) Listens to the wicked and liars (17:4) Does not listen to advice, instruction (12:15, 19:27)

*\*This table is not exhaustive*

## Observations & Applications

So what applications and observations can be drawn from the material presented this evening?

1. Teach your youth Proverbs. One of the main purposes of Proverbs is to give knowledge and discretion to the youth (Proverbs 1). Hopefully in listening this evening you have already sensed the value of Proverbs for this purpose. Your children are naturally prone toward the right column (foolishness and evil). Proverbs is designed to call them left. Use them for such a purpose.
2. Evaluate your communication. Communication issues forth from the heart, is powerful, and can be differentiated as being wise and righteous or foolish and evil. Within the family unit is an ideal place to see these truths played out. Consider this exercise after the next major parent-child, sibling-sibling, or dare I say, spouse-spouse argument. Sit down and write out what was said, word for word. Then ask, what was in my heart when I said this? In what way did the power of these words influence their audience, influence me? Were my words wise/righteous or foolish/evil? For extra insight, write out what you were saying in your heart/mind but not voicing.
3. Through the mouth, you can see the heart. Proverbs is helpful because often the meaning is very accessible – this wise will be this way, the foolish will be this way. As water reflects a man’s face, so a man’s heart reflects the man, for instance. Do not divorce what you say from who you are. If you often say nasty, evil, hurtful, divisive, and false things, your heart is foolish and evil and you must repent and perhaps be saved. Likewise, if your communication is characterized by the truth, is gracious, speaks against evil, refrains from gossip and slander, lis-

tens to and heeds advice, then there is the fruit of righteousness in your life. Continue to grow in wisdom.

4. Christ is God's communication in flesh. There is no communication more important than that of the gospel, and there is no communication more glorious than that of the Word incarnated in our Lord Jesus Christ, praise His name.
5. Finally, I have taken a very traditional approach to the Proverbs this evening by hovering over the surface of the book and plucking verses topically out from it. While this approach is not necessarily invalid, if done with the whole of Scriptures in mind, it does ignore the fact that the Proverbs were not written to be read in this way – although that is how we most often read them. I am just learning that the Proverbs are written as poetry and therefore are not simply short pithy statements meant to stand alone and communicate unrelated morsels of truth, but rather are written as poetry is – with a beginning, an end, and meaningful progression of ideas and relationships in between. I am just barely beginning to see this and it changes the way you read this book, particularly, you see the book as far richer, deeper, and instructive. I look forward to learning with you to read Proverbs this way, especially as we move toward the fall Sunday School class.

Let's Pray.