

TRAINING YOUR TONGUE

Selected passages from Proverbs
Treasuring Christ Church – Pastor Boyd Johnson
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INTRODUCTION

God's gift of speech truly is an amazing thing. If you're a parent, you remember eagerly waiting for your child to say his first words. You wondered what her voice would sound like. And before you know it, almost without training, they've learned to talk.

God's Gift of Speech to Man

The Bible teaches us that the capacity for language is innate in humans. Humans have always had this ability. When God made man, he made man with the immediate ability to speak. Adam and Eve didn't have to learn language, they already knew how to speak and understand words. The evidence for this is plain: God *spoke* to them both in the garden and they understood. Adam *named* the animals. He *described* his bride. Eve *persuaded* her husband to eat the fruit. Speech is a gift from God that he gave immediately to the earliest man and woman and speech is a gift to us.

The Lord said to Moses in Exodus 4:11: "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?"

Since speech is a gift from God, then it requires that we be good stewards of his gift. We are to use his gift as he would have us. The Apostle Paul made it his aim that all his speech would be pleasing to God.

He says in 1 Thessalonians 2:4: "We speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts."

Some in Christ's body have even been given a spiritual gift of speaking, such as teaching or encouragement. Peter exhorts those in 1 Peter 4:10–11: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God."

But not all speech pleases God. So Jesus warns in Matthew 12:36: "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak." The gift of speech must be stewarded for God's purposes and not for sin. All of us, then, are to be careful with our words and speak to accomplish God's aims and not to promote sin.

Speech in the Church

Nowhere is speech more important than within the church. I don't mean merely within the church service, but within the church—among the people who make up Christ's body. Among God's people, speech has the greatest power because through speaking the gospel, the unconverted who believe are transformed from death to life. And through exhortation, correction, and rebuke believers are sanctified into Christ's likeness.

Our words are used by God to supernaturally transform others. At the same time, nowhere is speech more dangerous than within the church. Speech not only can build up and transform, it can destroy. The speech sins of gossip, complaining, badmouthing, unrighteous criticism, and slander break friendships, sow distrust, cause divisions, and lead Christians into all kinds of other sins.

To sin with the mouth among God's people is to oppose Christ himself. The sins are against *Christ's* body. They are against the people *Christ* died for and loved. And you can be sure that God will discipline or judge mightily those who trifle with the church—whether by word or deed. So we ought to be especially careful how we talk to one another in the church. The Apostle James reflects on the destructive power of the tongue, particularly among believers in James 3:

vv. 5-10: “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”

Isn't it interesting that James says that “no human being can tame the tongue”? He means that no human being—Christian or non-Christian—can tame the tongue on his own. We can only tame the tongue with God's help. Take notice that without the work of grace in our lives, our tongue *will* speak evil. Our natural bent is to do evil with our speech. The destructive capacity of our tongue coupled with our natural bent toward sin is a powerful combination.

Therefore, learning to do righteous with our mouths deserves our focused attention. We must be taught how to do right with our speech. Parents: you must train your children's speech. How will they learn to praise God unless they see it modeled by you and, especially when they are young, are given the words? How will they learn to pray unless you help them with the words to say? (memorized mealtime prayers are good for this) How will they learn to compliment and encourage their siblings unless you train them.

And Christian: you must train your speech too. You must cultivate the practice of gracious and encouraging speech. You must cultivate the practice of speaking the truth in love. These are not natural dispositions. The maturing Christian is one who is learning to tame the tongue and use it for God's good through intentionality and discipline. Undisciplined speech is a mark of immaturity.

One of Satan's chief strategies within the church is to stir the flesh and unleash the tongue. He understands the tongue can destroy. He'd prefer to corrupt the pulpit of the church. But if he can't get through the pulpit of the church, he will work through the people of the church. So it is vital to the health of every church to learn how to speak to one another.

Treasuring Christ Church will fall ill fast, if our tongues are not tamed. You can be sure of this: hell has taken notice of this church. Satan and his henchmen know our address and are at the door waiting for someone to let them in. They are ready to pounce on the weakest.

Will you give him a foothold, will you allow him an easy victory? Or will you fight back by committing to training your tongue?

Transition to texts

Turn with me to the book of Proverbs. We need to live in the Proverbs because the days are evil and we need wisdom. The wisest man ever to walk the earth aside from Jesus was Solomon. That came to be because God granted Solomon's prayer for wisdom as he ruled Israel. Proverbs is a book mainly of the wise sayings he wrote down. Many of these proverbs have to do with speech. In this book, there are more than 170 verses that deal with our speech. If we want to learn to train our tongue, we can start no better place than the proverbs. We all have a responsibility to use our speech to build and protect the church. As I've sorted through these 170+ verses, I've organized a handful of the proverbs into four principles that we as a church must follow in the way we talk to one another. From Proverbs, I want you to see four ways to train your tongue to build and protect the church.

I. TRAIN YOUR TONGUE TO BE RESTRAINED IN YOUR SPEECH

The wisdom of the world says speak your mind. Vent. Get it off your chest. Unload. Tell them off. Make your complaints heard. To the world, these behaviors are treated as virtues, as therapeutic, as healthy, as indications of inner strength.

But look at Proverbs 17:27: "Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding."

Those who are truly wise restrain their words. Wise people know that they don't have to say everything on their mind. They don't vent. They don't unload. They don't believe every complaint must be heard. Wise people have a cool spirit and aren't hot tempered.

The opposite of a wise person is a fool and look what it says about a foolish person in Proverbs 18:2: "A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion." One commentator says that fools have a closed mind and open mouth. They are forever making their opinions known. They are forever talking without restraint.

One reason to be cautious with your words is that words can get you into trouble.

Proverbs 21:23: "Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble."

Our words can stir up trouble. We can all think of times when our words got us into trouble. We have said what we knew we shouldn't have said and we bore the consequences. Another reason to be cautious with your words is that more words increase our likelihood of sin.

Proverbs 10:19: "When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent."

In general, the more you talk, the more risk of sin. The reason is that the more you talk the more your heart is exposed. So David said in Psalm 39:1: "I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue." He understood the importance of guarding his tongue.

How do you become more restrained in your speech? David gives us the first step in another of his psalms, Psalm 141.

In vv. 1, 2 David pleads with God to hear his prayer: "O LORD, I call upon you; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to you! Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!"

Then in v. 3 comes the first of his prayer requests: "Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!"

So prayer is the first step in restraining your speech. You look to God to change your heart so that pure speech comes out and that he would convict you of what would be sinful speech even before you say it. That requires the training of your conscience. Your conscience is God's warning system that something is wrong. But your conscience has to be trained through the Word.

As we saw last week, the Scriptures are profitable for teaching, reproof, correcting and *training* us in righteousness. A conscience trained by the word of God functions to alert us of temptation and convict us of sin. Another step in restraining your speech is by giving more thought to what you say.

Proverbs 15:28 tell us: "The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things."

It's good to think carefully so that we can speak carefully. The heart of the righteous has a spigot. But the wicked person gushes.

Similarly, Proverbs 29:20 warns: "Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him."

Where the potential for harm or misunderstanding is high, we need to be more thoughtful in what we say. And almost always being more thoughtful ends up meaning we say less, not more. When we must communicate difficult words, think of what's the simplest, clearest way to tell the truth. That doesn't make you inauthentic or deceptive but wise.

A second principle for building and protecting the church is to . . .

II. TRAIN YOUR TONGUE TO BEWARE OF DIVISIVE SPEECH

Divisive speech is not only hurtful to others but it is hateful to God.

Proverbs 6:16, 19: "There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him. . . a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers."

One of the primary ways that discord or dissension is sown in the church is gossip. Jerry Bridges in his book "Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate" defines gossip as spreading unfavorable information about someone else, even if the information is true. At its root, gossip is designed to disparage someone else. Gossip is related to another sin—the sin of slander. Slander is to say something untrue about a person.

Gossip is related to slander in that gossipers are not truth-seekers. Gossipers aren't concerned so much with the truth—the information might be true or might not be true—instead they desire to spread secrets and play off suspicion and rumors. Some of the older translations call a gossiper a “tale-bearer.” The imagery is one who takes a tale or a story and carries it along to others. That's what gossipers do.

One of the Hebrew words for slanderer or gossip is related to a word for a merchant or trader. The gossiper trades in secrets. Proverbs sometimes calls gossipers, “whisperers.” They crave secrets so that they can repeat them to others. It's for this reason that gossipers are always addicts. Without the work of God in their life, they can't stop.

Proverbs 18:8: "The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body."

Secrets to a gossip are like delicious chocolate candies. They always crave another. They need more innuendo because it's their trade. The gossip feels empowered by knowing what others haven't heard and often use it to gain power or position or privilege. Gossip is so dangerous because its very nature is to spread. It's unlike adultery, for instance. I've never heard of a wave of adultery sweep over a church. But many times I've heard of the vine of gossip spread over a church.

In the church, gossip is often presented as a “concern” about a person. But it's not a “concern” the gossip is willing to take to that person, but a “concern” they'd rather talk to others about. Someone has said that gossip is when we say things *about* someone that we won't say *to* them.

Even worse, gossip in the church is often dressed up as a “prayer request.” This is an especially insidious or crafty way to gossip. It takes prayer, which is commanded by God and holy, and turns it into one of Satan's schemes.

Related to all this, one of my mentors taught me that whenever you hear the phrase, “Pastor, people in the church are talking. . .” dismiss everything that comes after it. I've found that to be good advice. In every case, I've found that the only people who are talking are the people this person is talking to. Once again, the proverb in 6:19 tells us that God hates the sowing of discord among brothers. Gossip erodes trust in the church. Gossip promotes suspicion in the church. Gossip ruins reputations in the church. Gossip manipulates people into taking sides in the church. Gossip is devastating on friendships and community within the church.

Proverbs 16:28: "A whisperer separates close friends."

Proverbs 17:9: "Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends."

So what is a church to do when the vine of gossip begins to grow? Certainly repentance on the part of the gossip is required since it is sin. But what about for others? What about those who are told gossip?

Proverbs 26:20 gives us the answer: "For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases."

The remedy for eliminating gossip in the church is to starve it of fuel. You kill gossip by refusing to do it and you kill gossip by refusing to listen to it. It is sin both to speak gossip and to listen to gossip.

What about when the gossip or slander is about you? Resolve that you'd rather be slandered than to gossip. If you are slandered, you are in the company of Jesus. But if you gossip, you are in the company of sinners. As we train ourselves to have God-honoring speech in the church, the first principle is to be restrained in your speech. The second is to beware of divisive speech.

Here's the third way to train your tongue to build and protect the church. . .

III. TRAIN YOUR TONGUE TO BE TRUTHFUL IN YOUR SPEECH

Truth is the way that we build the wall and set the guard to prevent unwholesome speech within the church. You'll recall that in Ephesians 6, Paul uses the imagery of "the belt of truth" as a way to say that we prepare for battle by putting on the truth.

Look at Proverbs 8:6-7: "Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right, for my mouth will utter truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips."

Resolve to speak noble things, things that are right, and to speak the truth. One of the reasons why we can rest in restraining our speech and speaking only the truth is that Proverbs 2:7 says that God "is a shield to those who walk in integrity." So you don't have to defend yourself. You don't have to pull people to your side. As you speak the truth and refuse to speak divisive speech and restrain your words, you can rest knowing that God is your shield and your vindicator and the judge who sees perfectly.

One final way to train our tongue to mention. . .

IV. TRAIN YOUR TONGUE TO BE GENTLE IN YOUR SPEECH

The last principle (being truthful in our speech) dealt with the content of our speech. This one deals with the way we speak. Not only do the words you use matter, but so does the tone. Three proverbs that need hardly any commentary teach us this:

Proverbs 15:1: "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

Hurtful words only cause more hurt. Instead, be gentle.

Proverbs 15:18: "A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention."

Derek Kidner in his excellent commentary on Proverbs says, "The point here is that quarrels depend on *people* far more than on subject-matter." Be the kind of person who carries about a disposition that quarrels die a natural death.

Proverbs 25:15: "With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone."

Patience and soft speech are not about content but about tone.

Stiff, insurmountable opposition can often be broken down simply by patience and gentle speech.

CONCLUSION

These four principles teach us how to build up and protect the church. The first two principles help us protect the church.

- Training our tongues to be restrained
- Training our tongues to beware of divisive speech

Let's slam the door shut on Satan. Show that dark angel that he will get to Treasuring Christ Church neither through the pulpit nor the people. Let's be the kind of people who are careful what we say and resolve never to gossip, never to slander, never to have critical spirits toward each other. Let us resolve never to burn this holy house of God down with our tongues.

And the final two principles help us build up the church in love:

- Training our tongues to be truthful
- Training our tongues to be gentle.

Let's be the kind of people, with the help of the Spirit, to, word-by-word, use our speech to build a beautiful temple of God where he is pleased to dwell and the saints are edified.