

PROVERBS: ETERNAL WISDOM FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

Growing in the Fear of the Lord and Godly Character for Life in a Fallen World

Using Words Wisely

Key Idea:

The wise person, knowing words hold the power of life and death, uses them with care and integrity to heal, bless, and build up rather than harm, deceive, or destroy.

Key Text:

From the fruit of a man's mouth his stomach is satisfied; he is satisfied by the yield of his lips.

²¹ *Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.*

[Proverbs 18:20–21 ESV](#)

Key Points:

- **Words Are More Powerful Than We Realize** — The Information Age promised that faster, broader communication would reduce conflict and improve human life. That promise has proven false: more words have cheapened rather than elevated our discourse. Yet wisdom teaches us something our culture has forgotten — words are not neutral. [Proverbs 18:20–21](#) teaches that the mouth produces fruit as surely as the hands, and that death and life are literally “in the power of the tongue.” This is not magical thinking — it is the sober recognition that words create real effects in real people and real relationships. Rash words are like sword thrusts; the tongue of the wise brings healing ([Prov 12:18](#)). And James warns that no human being can tame the tongue on their own — it is a fire capable of setting a whole forest ablaze ([Jas 3:2–8](#)). The wise person takes this seriously.
- **Wisdom Knows When to Speak and When to Be Silent** — One of the most countercultural practices wisdom calls us to is restraint. [Proverbs 17:27–28](#) tells us that “whoever restrains his words has knowledge” — and that even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise. The modern world insists we must have an opinion on everything and share it immediately. Wisdom says the opposite. [Proverbs 26:4–5](#) appears contradictory — answer a fool; don’t answer a fool — but it is actually wisdom in practice: discerning when words will help and when they will only produce more trouble. As we grow in wisdom, we learn to make that discernment and act accordingly.
- **Wisdom Listens Before It Speaks** — The fool “takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion” ([Prov 18:2](#)). Giving an answer before truly hearing is “folly and shame” ([Prov 18:13](#)). James draws directly from this tradition: “let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” ([Jas 1:19](#)). Wise speech is slow speech — unhurried, empathetic, careful to understand before responding. This is especially demanding in an age of hot takes and instant reactions, but it is essential if our words are to produce life rather than conflict.

- **Wisdom Avoids Strife** — “It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling” ([Prov 20:3](#)). Our culture rewards harsh words that stir up controversy — outrage generates clicks, followers, and attention. But Proverbs consistently treats this as the way of the fool. The wise person sees when a conversation is escalating beyond what words can heal and stops before the quarrel breaks out ([Prov 17:14](#)). Wisdom never loves strife and enters it only with great reluctance — never to score points or gain an audience.
- **Wisdom Uses Words of Integrity** — “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who act faithfully are his delight” ([Prov 12:22](#)). The language is strikingly strong: lies are not merely wrong, they are an “abomination” — the same word used for idolatry. Our culture has normalized the deliberate redefinition of words, the selective use of half-truths, and the spreading of unverified claims. Wisdom refuses all of this. The wise person does not share what they do not know to be true, does not confirm others in deception to avoid conflict, and does not spin the facts to score points. Clear words produce clear thinking, which produces righteous behavior. And in the end, “truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment” ([Prov 12:19](#)).
- **Wisdom Uses Words of Purity** — Proverbs calls us to “put away perversity” from our mouths and keep “corrupt talk” far from our lips ([Prov 4:24](#)). Paul echoes this: “let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” ([Eph 5:4](#)). The standard is not the culture — which has grown dramatically coarser in language — but Christ. The wise person wants to speak like Jesus, not the crowd.
- **Wisdom Uses Words to Bless and Build Up** — The positive end of wise speech is not merely avoiding harm — it is actively speaking life. God spoke words of blessing over creation to bring forth life and fruitfulness, and we are called to do the same ([Prov 18:21](#)). This is especially critical in the family: words of affirmation, love, encouragement, and blessing breathe life into spouses and children, while harsh and demeaning words breathe death into those relationships. Bret observed that the use of words in the home is one of the single biggest factors he has seen bring blessing or trouble to families. The wise person is intentional about speaking life.
- **We Cannot Tame the Tongue Alone — Christ Must** — James is blunt: “no human being can tame the tongue” ([Jas 3:8](#)). The application of this teaching is not a self-improvement program — it is a call to the Spirit’s transforming work. We are created through Jesus the Word and called to be conformed to His image. At the Lord’s Table, the Law convicts us of our sins in speech, we confess with our words, and God pronounces the word of forgiveness — the pattern of Law and Gospel that is the only path to genuine, lasting change in how we use our tongues.

Discussion Questions:

- Bret opened by noting that the Information Age promised more communication would reduce conflict — and that promise proved false. Has the explosion of communication technology — social media, texting, 24-hour news — made human discourse better or worse in your experience? What do you think went wrong with that promise?
- [Proverbs 18:20–21](#) says death and life are in the power of the tongue. Bret was careful to say this is not magic or prosperity theology — it is the sober recognition that words produce real fruit in real people and relationships. Can you think of specific words spoken to you — for good or ill

— that have stayed with you for years? What does that tell you about the weight of the words we speak to others?

- James says in [James 3:2–8](#) that the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness — and that no human being can tame it. Why do you think the tongue is so uniquely difficult to control? What makes this particular area of sin so persistent even in otherwise mature believers?
- [Proverbs 17:27–28](#) says that restraining words is a mark of knowledge and understanding. Our culture sends exactly the opposite message — silence is weakness, and everyone must weigh in on everything immediately. Where do you feel that cultural pressure most? What would it look like practically to resist it and choose the wisdom of restraint?
- [Proverbs 26:4–5](#) seems to contradict itself: answer a fool; don't answer a fool. Bret said this is not a contradiction but wisdom — the art of discerning when words will help and when they will only make things worse. Can you think of a situation where you spoke when you should have been silent, or stayed silent when you should have spoken? What would have helped you discern the difference in that moment?
- The fool “takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion” ([Prov 18:2](#)). In a world of hot takes and instant reactions, being “quick to hear, slow to speak” ([Jas 1:19](#)) is genuinely countercultural. Which is harder for you personally — listening well before you respond, or holding back your opinion until you've truly understood the other person? What makes it hard?
- Bret noted that our culture rewards strife — outrage generates followers, clicks, and attention. [Proverbs 20:3](#) says it is an “honor” to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling. Where do you see Christians most tempted to chase the culture's reward of attention through stirring up controversy? How do you navigate the line between speaking necessary truth and feeding the culture's appetite for conflict?
- Lying lips are called an “abomination” to the Lord — the same word used for idolatry ([Prov 12:22](#)). Bret observed that our culture has normalized the deliberate redefinition of words, the selective use of half-truths, and the spreading of unverified claims. Where do you see this most clearly? And where are you most personally tempted to shade the truth — to avoid conflict, to go along with the crowd, or to make yourself look better?
- [Ephesians 5:4](#) says filthiness, foolish talk, and crude joking are “out of place” — and that thanksgiving should take their place. Bret mentioned the challenge of maintaining purity of speech in environments like the Marine Corps or workout culture where coarse language is the norm. How do you navigate contexts where the language around you is consistently crude or coarse? What does it look like to speak like Jesus without being self-righteous about it?
- Bret said the use of words — especially words of blessing, affirmation, and encouragement — is one of the single biggest factors he has seen bring blessing or trouble to families. Think honestly about the words you most commonly speak to your spouse, your children, or your closest relationships. Are your words more often producing life or death in those relationships? What specific change would make the biggest difference?

- The Table of Law and Gospel: Bret closed by saying this teaching is not a self-improvement program — James tells us no human being can tame the tongue ([Jas 3:8](#)). The Spirit works through Law and Gospel: the Law convicts us of our sin in speech; we confess with our words; God pronounces the word of forgiveness. How does coming to the Table — where the Law humbles us and the Gospel restores us — reframe the entire project of using words wisely? What do you need to confess and receive forgiveness for today in the area of your speech?

For Further Study:

- Read [James 3:1–12](#) slowly and carefully this week alongside [Proverbs 18:20–21](#). James draws directly from the wisdom tradition of Proverbs. What does James add to what Proverbs says about the tongue? How does the New Testament context — the indwelling Spirit, the new creation — change the horizon of what is possible for those who cannot tame the tongue on their own?
- Study the following cluster of Proverbs on words and speech: [12:14](#), [12:18](#), [12:19](#), [12:22](#), [17:14](#), [17:27–28](#), [18:2](#), [18:13](#), [20:3](#), [26:4–5](#). For each one, ask: what area of speech does this address? What does it commend or warn against? How does it apply to a specific relationship or context in my life right now?
- Meditate on [Numbers 6:24–26](#) — the blessing from Sunday. God commands His priests to speak words of blessing over His people: “The LORD bless you and keep you...” Notice that God’s blessing is conveyed through spoken words. How does this priestly blessing pattern reshape your understanding of why words of blessing spoken over your family and community matter so much? How might you more intentionally speak blessing — not just to avoid harm, but to actively impart life? Watch [After Hours](#) (available Tuesday) for ideas on how to speak life and blessings in your family.
- This week, choose one specific area from the outline — silence, listening, avoiding strife, integrity, purity, or blessing — where the Spirit is convicting you. Write down one concrete, observable change you will make in that area. Pray daily about it and consider memorizing one of the Proverbs from this week’s teaching that addresses it directly.
- For a deep study of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, see the series [Walking the Way of Wisdom](#).
- Visit the church website to explore teachings organized by [series](#), by [Scripture](#), or by [topic](#) for deeper study of [tongue and words](#), [wisdom and knowledge](#), and [integrity, honesty, and faithfulness](#).