

A Good Word

Proverbs 25.11

Words. “Handle them carefully, for words have more power than atom bombs,” so said Pearl Strachan.

The biggest headline of this past week is testament to the truth of that statement. The whole world saw our prime minister’s undignified escape from an angry mob on Australia Day. What was it that incited those activists to besiege our prime minister? Words. Words that were intentionally and recklessly misquoted from Tony Abbott.

There is great power in words. Someone has said, “[Words] lift us up, drag us down, wound us deeply or heal our hearts. Words have the power to break confidences, build lifelong alliances or start wars.”¹

Earlier in the service, we heard about the power of words from the book of James. The tongue, though small, is as mighty as a bit in a horse’s mouth, or a rudder on a great ship. And it is as vicious and devastating as a wind-whipped bushfire.

By God’s grace, we must harness the power of our words.

In our studies last week, we touched on the power of words for evil. We learned from Proverbs that gossip, profanity and lying are all contradictions of integrity. Listen to a few additional proverbs about the perils of an undisciplined tongue:

Proverbs 10:19 (ESV)

¹⁹When **words are many**, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.

Proverbs 18:2 (ESV)

²A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in **expressing his opinion**.

In the same vein, Margaret Millar said, “Most conversations are simply monologues delivered in the presence of a witness.” We’ve all experienced that, haven’t we? We’re talking to someone, but they aren’t actually listening to us.

Proverbs 18:6-8 (ESV)

⁶A fool’s lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating. ⁷A fool’s mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul. ⁸The **words of a whisperer** are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.

I think we are all well aware of the deadly poison that comes out of mouths. We’ve felt the sting of an unkind word . . . and we’ve let out a few barbs of our own. James was right, the tongue is a “restless evil”.

¹ Amy Jane blog

But it doesn't have to be. The tongue, under the control of the Holy Spirit, is a power for enormous good. That is our topic today. The language of the Good Life builds up; it doesn't tear down.

Sermon in a sentence: **Put in a good word.**

[Pray]

Proverbs 25:11 (ESV)

¹¹A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

This short proverb identifies three qualities of a good word. Firstly, as apples of gold and a setting of silver are **precious and valuable** metals, so a good word is precious and valuable – it has the power to turn someone's life around for the best, as we'll see in a moment. Secondly, as apples of gold and a setting of silver are **beautiful**, so a good word is beautiful to hear. We admire it by letting it play over and over again in our memory. Thirdly, as apples of gold and a setting of silver are **rare**, so, too, is a good word. Every day we hear far more negative messages than positive.

But this sermon is not about what we hear, it is about what we say. As much as it depends on us, let's put in a good word.

There are four good words that Proverbs urges us to put in:

1. A Loving Rebuke

A loving rebuke? Isn't a rebuke negative? Don't rebukes hurt?

Yes. But only in the way that a scalpel hurts when it is used to cut out a deadly cancer. We all need a loving rebuke from time to time.

It is not coincidental that the apples of gold proverb we just quoted flows into a rebuke.

Proverbs 25:11-12 (ESV)

¹¹A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. ¹²Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise **reprover** to a listening ear.

Rebukes are good words . . . but there are two qualifiers.

A. "Fitly spoken"

Just as a scalpel must be used with care, so must a word of rebuke. It takes a "wise reprover" to do it correctly – at the right time, in the right tone, and with the right intention.

The right time is as soon as practicable – so that the matter doesn't fester – and as discreet as possible. A loving rebuke is rarely given in public.

The right tone is a fine balance between being direct and being judgemental. I have found that "I" statements – as opposed to "you" statements – help to preserve this balance. For example, a rebuke that sounds like this: "you're always dismissing me when I say something, and I'm sick of it" is attacking and punishing, not loving. But the same rebuke expressed as "I feel like my thoughts are being dismissed when I see you roll your eyes. Is that what's

happening?” keeps the focus on the issue, and leaves open the possibility that it might just be a misunderstanding.

The right intention is the benefit of the person being rebuked. It is corrective, not punitive.

Proverbs 12:18 (ESV)

¹⁸There is one whose rash words are like **sword thrusts**, but the tongue of the wise brings **healing**.

B. “listening ear”

Not all rebukes deliver the desired result – even when given at the right time, in the right tone, and with the right intention. It takes two to tango, and it takes two to resolve an issue.

It is good for us to remember that we cannot control what another person decides to do or not to do. We are responsible before God for ourselves – that we should be loving and forgiving and gracious without exception. And just as importantly, that we should have a listening ear for the times when we don’t get it right.

Christian rebuke is always about restoration, not prosecution. When we make it a point to listen, we often find that we have more in common than we thought.

Proverbs 25:8-10 (ESV)

⁸do not hastily bring into court, for what will you do in the end, when your neighbour puts you to shame? ⁹Argue your case **with your neighbour himself**, and do not reveal another’s secret, ¹⁰lest he who hears you bring shame upon you, and your ill repute have no end.

In a 2011 **Leadership Journal** article, Gordon MacDonald shares the moving story about his friends Dr. Paul and Edith Rees. When the Rees's were in their 90s, MacDonald asked if they still fought after 60-plus years of marriage.

"O, sure we do," Dr. Rees responded. "Yesterday morning was a case in point. Edith and I were in our car, and she was driving. She failed to stop at a stop sign, and it scared me half to death."

"So what did you do?" MacDonald asked.

"Well, I've loved Edith for all these years, and I have learned how to say hard things to her. But I must be careful because when Edith was a little girl, her father always spoke to her harshly. And today when she hears a manly voice speak in anger—even my voice—she is deeply, deeply hurt."

"But, Paul," MacDonald said, "Edith is 90-years-old. Are you telling me that she remembers a harsh voice that many years ago?"

"She remembers that voice more than ever," Rees said.

MacDonald asked, "So how do you handle that driving situation from the other day?"

"Ah," he said, "I simply said, 'Edith, darling, after we've had our nap this afternoon, I want to discuss a thought I have for you. And when the nap was over I did. I was calm; she was ready to listen, and we solved our little problem."

MacDonald concluded: "These are the words of a man who has learned that conflict is necessary, can be productive, but must be managed with wisdom and grace. By the time I reach 90, I hope to be just like him."²

Proverbs 15:23 (ESV)

²³To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!

The first good word is a loving rebuke, the second is . . .

2. A Gentle Reply

We've learnt that we should never attack someone with our words – even when bringing a rebuke. But what do we do when someone attacks us? A gentle reply.

Proverbs 15:1 (ESV)

¹A **soft answer** turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Proverbs 15:4 (ESV)

⁴A **gentle tongue** is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.

Proverbs 25:15 (ESV)

¹⁵With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a **soft tongue** will break a bone.

Proverbs 16:21 (ESV)

²¹The wise of heart is called discerning, and **sweetness of speech** increases persuasiveness.

Our telephone rang late at night. I picked it up and had barely gotten out a "hello" when the man on the other end launched into a tirade of profanity and threats. He was furious. I could tell that it would be useless to try and interrupt the man, so I let him blister my ear with his abusive words. At last he paused for a breath and I quietly said, "Now, what is the name of the person you wanted to talk to?" I don't know if it was my gentle reply, or the sudden realisation that I had an American accent, but the man on the phone could not have changed his tune more dramatically. He was suddenly falling all over himself to apologise.

A gentle reply is a good word. A loving rebuke is a good word. And . . .

3. A Truthful Report

There are two proverbs that speak vividly to the beauty of honesty. The first is . . .

Proverbs 24:26 (ESV)

²⁶Whoever gives an **honest answer** kisses the lips.

² Gordon MacDonald, "When Bad Things Happen to Good Relationships," Leadership Journal (Winter, 2011)

A kiss on the lips is a wonderful and exclusive thing. Do you remember your first kiss? Do you remember how special it was – edgy as well as vulnerable?

A straightforward honest answer is as attention-getting as a kiss, and it exposes a degree of vulnerability. In the same way that we would only accept a kiss from someone we trust deeply, so an honest answer is intertwined with trust.

In the Hans Christian Andersen tale, **The Emperor's New Clothes**, dishonesty is the rule until a child breaks through with a candid remark. The emperor, who is overfilled with his own self importance, demands a new suit. Two tailors propose to make a suit that is invisible to anyone who is **unfit, stupid or incompetent**. As the tailors mime fittings, the emperor's advisors praise the new suit – even though they can see it doesn't exist. The emperor, too, is quite pleased. It seems that he is so pompously arrogant that he will not admit to seeing nothing, lest he be labelled unfit, stupid and incompetent.

The story climaxes when the emperor parades his new suit before his subjects. All he hears is adoration from the crowd, though inwardly the crowd is amused at how silly the emperor really looks. It takes a little child to pierce through the nonsense: "He's wearing nothing at all!"

A little honesty earlier on would have spared the emperor a lot of embarrassment.

Here's another vivid expression of the beauty of honesty:

Proverbs 25:13-14 (ESV)

¹³ Like the **cold of snow** in the time of harvest is a faithful messenger to those who send him; he refreshes the soul of his masters. ¹⁴ Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of a gift he does not give.

This is not picturing a snow storm at harvest time – that would be disastrous. Rather, the illustration is about men working in the heat of the day bringing in the harvest and then having a kind person come with a cup of ice cold water to quench their thirst. To put it more bluntly, honesty is like a Slushee on a 40 degree day. It refreshes and re-invigorates.

A careful look at Proverbs 25.13-14 reveals another important dimension to honesty: a promise kept. Do you see the contrast in verse 14 to a man who promises a gift, but doesn't deliver?

Do we keep our promises? Dr Lewis Smedes elaborates on the beauty of an honest promise:

What a marvellous thing a promise is! When a person makes a promise, she reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: she will be there even when being there costs her more than she wants to pay. When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be. With one simple word of promise, a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty.³

³ Lewis Smedes, "The Power of Promises," A Chorus of Witnesses, edited by Long and Plantinga, (Eerdmans, 1994)

So let's put in a good word of honesty. Let's concern ourselves with telling the truth, rather than just saying what we think people want to hear. Let's commit ourselves to keep our promises, rather than making excuses.

Three good words: a loving rebuke, a gentle reply, a truthful report, and now the fourth,

4. A heartening remark

A heartening remark is another way of saying encouragement. There are so many ways that something encouraging can be said, yet so seldom are encouraging words heard. We must be intentional in giving out heartening remarks.

In Proverbs, we find various words that encourage.

A. A word of consolation

Proverbs 12:25 (ESV)

²⁵ Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but **a good word makes him glad.**

Have you ever been weighed down with stress or sorrow and had your burdened eased a bit by a kind word? Perhaps it was someone just letting you know that they cared.

A young seminarian was working his way through by driving a bus. There as a polite boy who rode his bus home from school every day. On one occasion, the seminarian finished his route and return to the bus depot only to discover the little boy sleeping on a seat in the rear. He woke the boy up, and turned the bus around to take him home. Being from a single parent home, the boy had a house key on a necklace around his neck to let himself in. He said he was going to a party at the YMCA that night.

The next day was Saturday. The seminarian turned on the news as he sat down to relax. A tragic story was told about a boy who was killed when exercise equipment fell on him at the YMCA. The bus driver recognized the boy as the one who had fallen asleep on the bus.

He felt that he should go to the funeral home to give his condolences to the mother. When he arrived, there was no-one there but a couple family members. He told the mother about how polite the boy was, and how he had fallen asleep on the bus. The mother laughed through her tears. She then began to sob with a wave of grief, "He was such a good boy." The bus driver cried, too.

Then, on the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the driver said, "God knows how you feel. He lost His only son, too."

Several months later, the bus driver saw the mother at the hospital. He was a patient, and she was his nurse. "I want to thank you for being there that night," she said as she tightened the strap, preparing to draw blood. "I can't tell you how much your words about God understanding have helped me over these past few months." She slipped the needle in—I

never even felt it. "But the fact that you cared enough to cry with us meant more than anything."⁴

Is there someone you can give a word of consolation to?

B. A word of congratulation

Proverbs 16:24 (ESV)

²⁴ **Gracious words** are like a **honeycomb**, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.

This is a word of praise. How wonderful it is to hear something nice about ourselves.

There is a little-known congressional program in the United States that awards internships to young people who have aged out of the foster care system. These are kids who were never adopted, and are no longer eligible for state support.

[A senator] employed one such man as an intern. One morning the senator breezed in for a meeting and discovered that his intern was already in the office, reorganizing the entire mailroom. The senator said to the intern, "This is amazing—the mailroom has never looked so clean. You did a great job."

A few minutes later the senator saw that the intern had tears streaming down his face. [He] said, "Son, are you okay?"

"Yes," the intern answered quietly.

"Did I say something to offend you?"

"No, sir."

"Well, what's wrong?"

The young man said, "That's the first time in my life anyone's told me that I did something good."

A little bit of attention and a kind word—that's how little it takes to affect someone's life for the better.⁵

Edvard Greig, the nineteenth century Norwegian composer, wrote his parents concerning the encouragement he received from famous Hungarian composer-pianist Franz Liszt, who had just played Greig's *Piano Concerto in A Minor*. Greig writes:

Finally, as he handed me the score, he said, "Hold to your course. Let me tell you, you have the talent for it, and—don't get scared off!" This last is of infinite importance to me. It is almost what I will call a sacred mandate. Time and again when disappointments and

⁴ Ed Rowell, "When the Bus Driver Cried," *Today's Christian* (November/December 1997)

⁵ Men of Integrity, "How Little It Takes," (November/December 2010)

bitterness come I shall think of his words, and the memory of this hour will have a wonderful power to sustain me in days of adversity; that is my confident hope.⁶

Are you an encourager? Who might you encourage with a kind word today?

C. A word of appreciation

Watchman Nee told of a woman whose husband never expressed appreciation for anything she had ever done. She worried constantly that she had failed as a wife and mother. Possibly this is what caused her to develop tuberculosis. When she was dying, her husband said to her, "I don't know what we are going to do. You have done so much and done it well." "Why didn't you say that sooner?" she asked, "I have been blaming myself all along, because you never once said 'Well done.'"⁷

Harriet Beecher Stowe said, "The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone." Let's be sure to tell those near to us how much we appreciate them.

Put in a good word. There are so many ways we can do just that. We can give a loving rebuke. We can give a gentle reply. We give a truthful report. And, most of all, we can make a heartening remark.

In closing, let me remind you that the same thought is echoed in the New Testament.

Colossians 4:6 (ESV)

⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Ephesians 4:29 (ESV)

²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

Put in a good word. God is listening.

Matthew 12:36-37 (ESV)

³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

Who can you be a blessing to with your words today?

⁶ Greg Scharf; source: Ravinia magazine (August, 2008), p 160

⁷ Watchman Nee, *Do All to the Glory of God*, p. 55. as quoted in MacDonald, W., & Farstad, A. (1997, c1995). *Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments* (Pr 16:24). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.