

Proverbs 18:21 (Speech) - DiCicco

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[0:00] Well, I remember the summer that they decided to throw me off the dunes. Every year we would go camping.

This year we were by Lake Michigan, up in Sheboygan. And one summer, one Saturday, we decided this would be pretty fun for my brother, my cousin, and our friend to grab me, one at my wrists and two at my ankles, and heave me off the top of the sand, dude.

I mean, it's four feet. It wasn't anything crazy. Honestly, I wouldn't remember this. It probably wouldn't stick out in my head, given all the normal shenanigans we had. Except, I remember this moment in particular, because in the middle of our fun, maybe mostly their fun, in the middle of this whole thing, my oldest brother runs up and he's yelling at them like, hey, what are you doing? You're going to break his legs. He needs those. He needs to get into college. I mean, my eighth grade cross-country season, my track record was all right.

It probably wasn't anything to get that excited about. But I think this, you know, what my brother said has lodged this memory into my brain. It wasn't the, you know, the four-foot fall or rolling down the rest of the dune.

[1:18] But as teenagers, the relationship between me and my brothers was also going through some growing pains. And so to hear him at this point in our relationship run up and sort of defend me, to hear this love from him, even like a recognition of a gift maybe that I had was like, was awesome.

And so I think his speech, there was something life-giving in this small moment, something that was transformative for me in hearing those words from that person.

I wonder, what do you think about words? I know Pastor Papendorf reads books that are all about words and they go on for a long time thinking about nothing.

But actually, the book of Proverbs has a lot to say about words, even if we don't think about speech as an act or any of those fun things.

The short answer of what Proverbs has to say is sort of hard to distill in a sermon. But the short answer is, in a sentence, that wise speech cultivates life.

[2:27] It's not shocking. I don't think we're exactly going to break down the doors of this warehouse and pack out this whole space making provocative truth claims like that.

Wise speech cultivates life. Isn't this what the world believes? Isn't this what you believe? Wise speech cultivates life.

Isn't this the idea that sort of sits as the bedrock of the First Amendment in our Constitution? Why is it that people protest?

Why is it that so many people take to social media to comment on all of the latest events that are happening all around the world? Why is it we call our friends and family in times of need or grief or pain if not that we know somewhere that the right words, the right speech can bring life?

It can do something. Wise speech cultivates life. Now, if that's the content of what Proverbs has to say about speech, what's the intent?

[3:34] What's it getting at? If life and death are in the power of the tongue and those who love it will eat of its fruits, what does that mean for us? Today, we'll see that wisdom trains, sorry, the wise train their tongues toward life.

The wise train their tongues towards life. And we'll look at two reasons Proverbs gives for this and then maybe three ways we can do that ourselves. And as we go along, I have this question in the back of my mind and I hope to answer it as we do our best to take all that Proverbs has to say and distill it into a few minutes.

And the question isn't, does my speech matter? As we've already said that pretty much everyone agrees on this. Speech is important. The question is, is there something unique about the potential for Christian speech?

And if there is, then what does that mean for you and for me? Do you just pray with me one more time as we come to this monumental task?

Father in heaven, would you give me the tongue of one who has been taught by you that I may know with a word how to sustain those who are weary and give us ears to hear as those taught by you that we might love you and one another.

[5:07] Amen. The wise train their tongues towards life because there is something powerful in speech.

And what Mr. Papendorf read for us sort of assumes this, death and life are in the power of the tongue. But what is that exactly? This is sort of the major assumption of what Proverbs has to say about speech because words matter.

Words have in their own way some kind of power. I wonder what comes to your mind when you hear that. Maybe there's some obvious example.

You know, a judge declares somebody innocent or guilty. A pastor pronounces a couple husband and wife. And it's power. It's not unlimited power.

These are very specific words that only do things in these very specific contexts. And Proverbs has a very much more simple kind of power in mind.

[6:10] You can just think of the effect my brother's words had on me that somehow this random thing that he was actually yelling at some other people for has lodged in my brain as a memory of speech giving life.

It's lodged in my head 20 years later. Proverbs chapter 15 puts this truth this way. 15 verse 4. A gentle tongue is a tree of life. Or verse 1.

A soft answer turns away wrath. Have you ever wondered why your ability to speak matters? I would guess it's something most of us take for granted.

But this matters at the very least because some people can't speak. And so having a voice is a gift to be grateful for. But even more than this, doesn't the existence of speech itself point us to something significant?

Our ability to speak doesn't simply exist. It was made. God has made the world in such a way that speech itself is powerful.

[7:13] As we go through Proverbs, we'll see that the wise people who have written this stuff down, the sages, they look to creation all the time to discern the wise way to walk.

And speech is no exception. God has made the world in such a way that speech itself is powerful. It does something. Speech moves.

Words drive. Speech is what we might call a created good. Can you imagine a world without words? That's one way to prove how good speech is.

It just doesn't work. It's like imagining a world without air or math or, I don't know, some of the other things we can't live without. In the same way God has created other goods for a purpose like food and work and rest.

I heard about sloth last week and how that's a distortion of two goods, of work and rest. Like these other goods, God has created speech for a purpose. It's created after a design by its maker.

[8:21] But does this really matter? We live our whole lives without really thinking much about the air we breathe or the math that makes things run that we depend on every day. I have no idea how my phone works, but I can use it.

So does it really matter that there's a purpose to speech? We all know how to talk. Let's think back to what Proverbs is doing. If you were here for our first sermon in Proverbs a couple weeks ago, we sort of asked and hopefully answered the question, why was Proverbs written?

It was written to form those who will listen. Those who have ears to hear will be formed by its words into the kind of people who fear the Lord. Fearing the Lord, we said, is simply the knowledge that we live our lives in the presence of God.

In the presence of God, seeking to reflect in our actions the perfections of God. Things like his goodness, his mercy and righteousness. So fearing the Lord is life in the presence of God, lift after the perfections of God, enjoying the provisions of God.

And speech is one of these good provisions. So I think it matters for us that speech is something made for us because God has done so. And it's a good that we can use.

[9:37] So shouldn't we care how we use this gift God has given? After all this gift was given because it does something for us. Just a couple of examples.

Most basically, speech has the power to reveal. The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of fools pour out folly. A fool opens his mouth and everybody can tell.

We've all met those kind of people. Speech reveals the wise as the wise and the fool as the fool.

Chapter 15, verse 2 says, On the lips of him who has understanding, wisdom is found.

Speech has power very simply in the fact that it reveals something about the speaker. Speech reveals, but it also persuades. This is part of what speech does.

Chapter 16, verse 23 says, The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips. Gracious words are like the honeycomb.

[10:38] The sweetness to the soul and health to the body. The tongue is a tool that has power in it, whether you use it or not.

And the wise will train their tongue toward life. Again, why? What makes Proverbs teaching on anything important?

Why should we listen to this book? The short answer is because Proverbs, remember, wants us to train us to reflect the perfections of God. The wise train their tongue toward life because that's how God uses speech.

Isn't this like one of the first things we know about him? I want to say the first, but we could infer a whole bunch of other things from the beginning of the Bible. But Genesis 1, 3, what's the first thing that verse says is, And God said.

One of the first things we learn about God is that he speaks. And with his word, he created the world. And the world was good. The world was full of life. As the story of the Bible unfolds, we see God speaking again and again and again.

[11:48] And always his speech is directed towards life. If you're with us this fall, we went through Deuteronomy. And even in the law, God's speech is directed at life for his people.

Even when he's giving warnings, when he's telling them not to sin because it will bring punishment for disobedience, that's not telling them this is going to happen. That's saying, please don't choose this.

Go towards life. He does the same thing through the prophets. When God speaks through them, it's a warning to choose life before death comes. There is power in speech, especially in God's speech. Maybe most dramatically, we know we've been singing about it and rehearsing it throughout this service. God has spoken through his son, Jesus. And the message about his life, his death, his resurrection, the message that in Jesus, God has secured life for all who will turn from trusting in their own effort and rely on his work for them.

This message, a spoken word carried by the people who have Christ dwelling in them by faith, this is the means God chose to spread his kingdom.

[13:03] This is God's chosen tool for displaying his glory among the nations. He could do it a lot more simply. You know that the God of all power who created everything could do it a different way, but he's chosen speech in the mouths of his people to proclaim his glory, to bring life in this way.

So Proverbs presses upon us, just as God speaks with life in mind, so too the wise will train their tongues toward life.

All right, maybe this is way too positive. Maybe you know people, maybe you know preachers who use words and twist them.

Maybe people have twisted your words, and speech is actually a really horrible tool in the hands of some people. Speech has power, but all power can be turned toward evil.

Doesn't this happen like all the time? Humans abuse power. What's so different about the power of speech and the power it holds? What does Proverbs have to say about that?

[14:13] Well, Proverbs is more than aware of this problem. God made the world in such a way that speech is powerful, yes, but the second reason the wise train their tongue toward life is because the power of speech is often abused.

It has potential to be abused. Proverbs wants to train us to make us aware that, like all goods, speech can be disordered and abused.

What examples come to your mind? I'm sure it's not hard. What examples come to your mind of how words might be abused, how speech, especially the speech of the powerful, might be twisted? How is it that we turn this good gift from God and use it against this purpose? Two ways, I think, in Proverbs stand out as we read. The first is simply to use speech against its design.

For lack of wood, the fire goes out. But where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.

[15 : 22] Our fighting between brothers and sisters at home, or brothers and sister floors at school, or brothers and sisters in a community like this, this fighting is stirred up by words whispered to others, about others, without seeking the good of others.

Or listen to Proverbs 26, 28. A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.

Quarreling, hate, and ruin come from whispering and lying and flattery, using the tongue against its purpose.

Not meant to speak lies, but to speak truth. So let me talk to the teenagers in the room for a second. Pull the page from Pastor Godoy's book.

Any of you who have siblings, especially who here is between 12 and 20. Do you ever say things to your siblings, or to the people around you, when you're angry or upset?

I would guess yes. That's when I said most to my siblings. We talked most when we were not doing well. I remember saying horrible things to my brothers. Let me give you this from Proverbs.

[16 : 43] It'd be a good verse to memorize, maybe to call to mind the next time you want to say something when you know you shouldn't. There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

It's Proverbs 12, 18. Proverbs 12, 18. Rash words are words you say before you think about what's going to happen after you say them.

They just come out when you're angry or you're upset. Maybe you can be like this, saying words like sword thrusts, words that stab, speech that hurts.

Wouldn't you like it if your words were healing and not hurting in those moments of anger or frustration or disappointment? Learn to train your tongue for life because it's so easy to use it in a way it's not intended.

James calls it a restless evil. So for the teenagers, but for all of us, do we ever use our words in a way against which they were intended, our speech, toward death instead of life?

[18 : 06] God made the world in such a way that words have power. Speech, like all goods, can be distorted and abused not only by using it in a way against its design, like lying, that's pretty obvious, but using the good of speech toward evil ends.

Right? Not just using it in wicked ways, but using it for wicked reasons. Maybe a slight distinction here, but it's pretty important. One of the goods of speech is that it can persuade.

Some of you were at a debate yesterday. One of the awesome things about words is you can just stack them up on top of each other to influence people. Some of us do that for a living.

But this good that we mentioned before, it's just a part of how language works. God made speech to work a certain way, just like he made math to fit together or music to work in harmony.

But this good design can be put towards wicked purposes. Again, I'm sure you can come up with your own examples. How is it that someone can use speech maybe in the way it was designed, but not towards the purpose it was designed?

[19 : 26] Do you know what example Proverbs uses over and over again to warn us? It's temptation. We saw it a couple weeks ago in chapter 1 of Proverbs when the parents warn their son to avoid sinners.

They point out what the sinners will say to convince the son to join them. We also pointed out that these sinners use goods that God created like community or prosperity as reasons to sin. They're using speech. They're doing what speech was made to do to persuade, but they're doing it to draw someone from the path of life to the path of death. Do you remember what the wise does to his words to make them sweet?

He adds persuasiveness. The trouble is persuasive words can make almost anything seem like a good idea. So the father warns his son in chapter 5.

He says, The lips of a forbidden woman drip honey. Her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end she is as bitter as wormwood and sharp as a two-edged sword.

[20 : 33] The good design of persuasion is perverted by sin. In these early chapters this sort of forbidden woman is a picture of sin, not because she's a woman, because it goes against the

design of what God has intended.

This young man isn't supposed to grow up into Mary, maybe to be the king. We'll get there in a couple weeks. But this woman is forbidden because she is not the one to whom he is married. But her speech is like honey. In the end, she's bitter. The power of speech has a potential for abuse. The same power of speech that reveals wisdom or folly can conceal wickedness or lies. The same power of speech to build up one another can tear down someone else. Persuasion can manipulate even a wise person and cause them to stumble into the traps of sin.

So how then does Proverbs want us to speak? Clearly, Christians should avoid lying and gossip, but what about persuasion? Should Christians use rhetoric?

[21 : 47] Is it right to manipulate with our words for any reason? Well, Augustine, among one of the more important thinkers in the history of the church, to say the least, asked this question himself.

He was thinking particularly of teachers. Should they use the persuasive power of words when they teach the Bible? Some people would say no. God's word will not return to him void?

And what do we think we would gain by adding to God's good word? Maybe a small illustration.

There's a van that drives around Moody's campus blasting preaching from 20 years ago and with a bunch of Bible verses taped to the side.

I've never seen anyone stop and pray after that vehicle passes. I've seen a lot of other reactions, but is that the sort of position we should take in using speech, in using God's word?

Proverbs would seem to suggest at this point that persuasion is a bad thing, maybe, because it can be twisted. It does twist words. Well, Augustine's answer is this.

[23 : 03] He says, since persuasion can be picked up to defend either what is true or what is false, why then would Christians, the defenders of truth, take their stand unarmed against falsehood?

If wicked people are going to use one of God's goods toward wicked ends, why would Christians stand unarmed against falsehood? So Proverbs stands, I think, with Augustine.

The wise train their tongues toward life. Death and life are in the power of the tongue and those who love it will eat of its fruits. It's hard to love one of the goods God has created if you don't use it in the way it was intended.

After all, it is the wise man who adds judiciousness to his speech, who adds persuasiveness to his words. So Proverbs teaches the wise to train their tongues towards life in the first place because speech has power.

Secondly, the wise train their tongues toward life because speech does have the potential to be abused. And the wise train their tongues toward life so that they might eat of its fruits.

[24 : 22] The wise train their tongues toward life and that includes a careful use of persuasion. I think the question stands about how. how can you and I learn to pick this fruit?

Here's three ways Proverbs encourages us. The first way to grow into someone who uses speech wisely is to shut your mouth.

the first nine chapters of this book have on repeat over and over again my son, my daughter, listen to my words. They will be life to you.

Learn to listen to wise counsel. Wise speech starts on either side of your head by listening to wise speakers. This was almost the shortest sermon in Holy Covenant church history.

I was going to stand up and simply read chapter 17 verses 27 and 28. Whoever restrains his word has knowledge and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.

[25 : 24] Even a fool is considered wise. When he closes his lips he is deemed intelligent. Saved us a lot of time. So do you want to grow in wisdom?

Do you want to get better at speaking? Do you want your words to bring life? Step one. Shut your mouth. Secondly, pay attention to the effect your words have and choose them carefully.

Proverbs 18.6 A fool's lips walk into a fight and his mouth invites a beating. That was very true growing up in my house. I was a fool and I have bruises.

One side of being quiet or the effect of being quiet and listening first is that you get to watch others put their foot in their mouths and you get to see what happens when you just start talking.

But the wise train their tongues not only to know when to speak but what to speak. In 1528

Proverbs says the heart of the righteous ponders how to answer but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.

[26 : 34] Learn to train your tongue toward life by considering before you speak what you want the outcome to be. And this may sound beyond basic but can't you think of a time this last week maybe

even since you woke up this morning that you spoke without thinking how the other person might hear what you're saying.

So Proverbs would encourage us before you open your mouth ask yourself what do I want to happen and how can I make it happen? It's worth repeating what we read earlier chapter 15 verse 1 a soft answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger.

So learn to think before you speak. There's a non-proverbs proverb for us. Thirdly as we learn to train ourselves to use our tongues toward life embrace persuasion.

Learn to use your words to defend the weak to establish justice for the oppressed to bring prosperity to those in need health to a world that needs healing.

A truthful witness saves lives but one who breathes out lies is deceitful. I should go without saying that this one follows the other two these are in order.

[27 : 59] while there's an urgency to our world's pursuit of these things Proverbs cautions a trusting patience in God while pursuing good.

James the New Testament writer preached a great sermon on the wisdom of Proverbs and speech. He said let every person be quick to hear slow to speak slow to anger.

our world seems to be the opposite. So as we embrace persuasion let's embrace it patiently. Still if you would be wise if you would train your tongue toward life embrace persuasion.

I think Christians ought to carefully consider not just what we argue for it's not enough to just like plant a flag somewhere and be on the right side of something but how we argue for it.

Not just what we argue for but how we argue for it. In a media economy where sound bites and social media clips are the rule of the game it's often simply enough just to put other people down.

[29 : 04] Little thought is actually given to how well the arguments work if things actually make sense. And Christians shouldn't simply tear things down or build things up but harness God's gift of speech in such a way that we cultivate life for all who hear.

Embrace persuasion. Maybe you're not somebody who is naturally gifted. You're thinking that sounds fun but I would never open my mouth in public.

Not all have been gifted with natural skill in speaking but if we are each called to live life in the presence of God after the perfections of God enjoying the provisions of God I think each of us ought to do what we can to add some sweetness to our speech.

The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life. So we've seen two reasons why Proverbs encourages the wise to train their tongue toward life.

Maybe three simple ways we can do that. So I'll see if we've answered that question. Is there something unique about Christian speech? Let's assume this book of Proverbs is true.

[30 : 24] Couldn't anyone then just pick it up and put its principles to use? I think yes and no. Much of what Proverbs says is common sense.

Certainly the world would be a better place if we all talked a little less or at least thought a little more before we started speaking. But the wisdom of Proverbs is not just advice. It's a rubric for living in God's world.

And in this way someone who rejects the God of Proverbs cannot actually accept the picture that Proverbs is trying to paint of this world that we live in. Proverbs doesn't just rest on God's character. It hopes in it. Without this hope what is there to fuel any sort of restraint in the face of injustice that Proverbs would call us to?

What is there to promise those who cannot rise from their poverty? What is there to push anyone to live in the way that Proverbs describes if there is no hope in the God behind the book?

[31 : 25] I think when it comes to speech we can read this book without God and at best maybe we can stand our ground. And a famous quote from early early American history give me liberty or give me death.

That's maybe the best our world can say. This is where I stand. This is the speech I believe that is going to bring life. You can take it or leave it. But in God's world we can look to him and say give me liberty and give me life.

Because our hope is in the God who underwrites this whole thing. Whose goodness is reflected in this wisdom. Whose perfections are to be reflected in his people.

Who has created this world with a purpose. And unless we hope in that God we can use his gifts but we'll miss the final end of them. So the Christian really has a different take on speech because it not only has power even if there is potential for abuse.

Speech for the Christian pursues a completely different fruit than those who have their eyes set only on this world. Fruit that outlasts this world. Proverbs 11 7 says that when the wicked dies his hope will perish and the expectation of wealth perishes too.

[32 : 46] So even if we could use our speech to give everyone in this world a significant amount of material wealth there's nothing beyond this world. Christian speech can work for something far greater than this.

It can and should work for human dignity do what it can in its situation but because of the cross we have a far greater message a far greater hope a far greater responsibility as Christians to make sure that how we engage this world will have persuasive power to adorn the gospel of Jesus Christ so that his promises sound sweeter than anything this world offers and offers a lot.

What if when we spoke in public people asked themselves what is it that they have that I'm missing? What if our speech could adorn the gospel in this way? Wouldn't you like to speak like this?

The potential for Christian speech is greater than anything that is of this world because our message promises something far greater. So church if you would be wise train your tongue toward life.

Let's pray. Amen. God in heaven we look to you for every good thing.

[34 : 14] So would you give us tongues that are taught by you and that we might be life to those who hear us. We pray in the name of your son. Amen.