

So if you'll permit me to begin a sermon from the book of Proverbs with a saying not found in the Bible:

Sticks and stones may break my bones
but names can never hurt me.

Really? Do you believe that? We believe the first part, for sure. I don't want you to throw sticks and stones up here. I've been hit with a foul baseball from behind the plate with no mask on—my jaw still doesn't operate correctly--so I know that physical damage can take place. But I don't believe the second part. I daresay you don't either. I don't believe the second part of the axiom: “words can never hurt me.” In fact I think if we were to try an experiment, if we were to set up a microphone here, if I could get John to come out and hey, I'd like to have a microphone, I'd like to form a line behind that mike, we'll just spread it as far as we need, the line. And we'll take thirty seconds up to a minute where we can use this morning to recount those times where people have used words that have been hurtful to us. I daresay we'd have a line that would stretch around this room maybe twice, and the allotted time would need to be in increments of hours, not minutes, if we were to talk about all the hurt that has come our way via other people's words. But if I would reverse the guidelines on that exercise, I wonder, if I would reverse the guidelines and say, what we're going to do is to stand at the microphone and we're going to give testimony for all the times that we can recount where our words delivered, caused others hurt, emotional distress, pain. I wonder how long that line would be. I wonder if we would need hours.

I played around a little bit, since we're into Hebrew poetry, wisdom literature, I played around a little bit with some Flora poetry on the sticks and stones premise. This is what I came up with based on my personal experiences.

Sticks and stones may break my bones,
leaving wounds that time may heal.
But words can pierce me to the heart,
my joy and strength to steal.
I often wonder as words are spoken,
their messages deployed,
if the sender really understands
his potential to destroy.
Sadly, not as often, but just as true,
this reminder hits my thought...
how many kind and tenderhearted words
have I spoken as I ought?

See, a message on walking wisely with our words is imperative, it's critical for each of us, myself prominently featured among the group, it's critical for each of us to understand how to walk wisely with our words, this message from the Scriptures for us to hear and to heed---and don't take my word for it, take Jesus' word for it. In Matthew chapter twelve, verses thirty-six and thirty-seven the incarnate God in his earthly ministry uttered these words, these words for our hearing and instruction. Listen to what Christ said. “I tell you, that on the Day of Judgment people will give an account for every careless word they speak.” The final judge of all things says that on that Day of Judgment, for every careless word that men may speak, people will give an account. And then Jesus changes from the generalization of people giving an account and in verse thirty-seven to the personal pronoun, “you.” “For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” You see Jesus himself issuing a very stern warning, a stern warning that our words are important, our words reveal something about our hearts, our words matter. Every idle word, every careless word, some translations render. Literally it means, what Jesus is saying, for every word that does not produce an effect—a good, a productive effect. So with this there are no neutral, there are words that build up and there are words that either immediately or over the course of time tear us down—they're discouraging words, they're not encouraging words. Jesus knows best, and he delivers this in love, all commands are delivered in love, all warnings are delivered in love. The judgment rendered on that day, that final day, is and will be in accordance with, or in harmony with, the words that reveal our hearts. Please make no mistake at the outset of the sermon. There is no question in my mind, and should not be in your mind, either, that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in the finished work of Christ alone, to God alone be the glory for all of salvation from start to finish. There is no works, there is no words that we could speak that could bring us a justification in and of

themselves before a holy God. But the words that we speak, the works that we commit, the actions that we do---we in so saying and so doing show forth the evidence of whether or not we are in reality children of God, purchased by the precious blood of God. That's what Jesus is saying. That's how the judgment will be rendered. So you see why it's important to walk wisely with our words, you see from just this preface to the message how imperative it is.

Let me pray for us. Gracious God in heaven, we praise you, the living word. We ask now that you would take your word, preached, and make it for us, Lord, that which challenges our hearts, confronts our hearts, renews our minds, and gives comfort wherever possible, that we walk with you. I pray, Lord, that you take the meditation now of my heart, the words that I speak, that they would be pleasing to you and they would be profitable for your people here. We ask for this in Jesus' name, Amen. Amen.

A quick note on the type of sermons that could come from Proverbs. We have two types of sermons. For the most part from this pulpit and from pulpits around Christendom you hear expository sermons. Expository sermons are derived from the text. We preach through books of the Bible. We let the text determine what our outline is. We let the text determine for the preacher what the emphasis is, what is being emphasized in God's word. The preacher has a responsibility to bring that to God's people. I don't have the luxury to create my own opinions about God, I am bound by God's word. It is the role of the shepherd in Christ's church to make the voice of the Chief Shepherd known so that his sheep might hear and follow. But in this type of sermon we have a topical sermon, and topical sermons are not the majority report that you hear from this pulpit, but they are not *verboden*, they're not prohibited. They are derived also from the word of God, but the pressure on the preacher---that's probably why we don't do a lot of topical preaching---the pressure for a topical sermon is on the preacher to construct an outline, and to base that outline on the text of Scripture. So we have a topical message before us, walking wisely with our words. But I will give you a clear warning in advance: I plan to cite a whole lot of Scripture. I tried to include some of those references in the outline before you, and the ones that I quote I'll try to make known to you, and if you want further clarification or follow-up that you don't write down please come see me

The four points I would like to make: The birthplace of our words, the power of our words, the picture that our words paint, and the part that our words play in our salvation.

I think it's important to establish where our words come from. Where do they originate? The Bible is very clear on that answer. Proverbs 15:7 says, "The lips of the wise spread knowledge; not so the hearts of fools," and here we encounter Hebrew poetry. There's several devices that the Hebrew poets used, mostly parallelism. You'll see synthetic parallelism--they'll take things that are similar and they'll just build on those things in these couplets and the axioms throughout the book of Proverbs. But what you see here, what we derive from this, is an antithetic parallelism. It takes two contrasting things, but shows in that contrast the point being taught. In this case the lips of the wise are the ones spreading knowledge, these words spreading knowledge, and then in contrast, not so the heart of the fool. So you see lips, and then heart being associated with each other, and the contrast is between the way of the wise and the way of the fool. Foolish and wise contrast. Then again Proverbs 15:28. "The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things" where the righteous heart is that which ponders and considers, deliberates over what is to be spoken, but the wicked mouth blurts out all kinds of stuff. Do you see what's going on with Hebrew poetry? Where do our words originate? Our words, the words we speak, come from within each of us. Now, you missed it, come on, it's a silly exercise, stop, move on to Part Two, we've got it. But I think it is also imperative that we understand from where our words originate because it removes all of our excuses. If these words that I speak are the words that this heart produces, then my excuses in the heat of a war of words are gone. Oh, I didn't mean it that way, and oh, hold on, that's not what I meant to say. Wait, wait, you're not understanding what I'm trying to say. Wait I would never say something to hurt you. You see, we offer those excuses very quickly. They're at our ready. I have a whole arsenal of excuses because I don't want to come to terms with the fact that the words that I've spoken, that the hurt that I've caused came from here. Just a couple of verses earlier in the passage that I began the sermon with in Matthew chapter twelve, Jesus gives the clearest description of this of all time. Listen to Jesus Christ's own words on the matter: "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of the good treasures brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil." What Jesus is making very clear is that which we've heard many times...the sobering truth that everything we do out here that is available to be seen is produced by that which is only seen

by God. We're sobered by the truth that we've heard many times from the prophet Jeremiah, Jeremiah seventeen. If these words are produced by this heart and the prophet Jeremiah is accurately depicting for us God's truth on the matter, he says this: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" We're sobered by that. It's a reminder we need assistance with these hearts. Verse ten in Jeremiah seventeen immediately brings the reminder of the omniscient, righteous, Creator God: "I the Lord search the heart, I test the mind, and I give to each man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds." See what Christ is doing when he talks about the heart? When Christ says, in that day of judgment, he's simply picking up the theme of Scripture. Our words originate from our hearts, and we must own those words.

And that's important because the second point today is our words are not neutral. Our words carry with them power: power to hurt, power to heal, power to tear down, and power to build back up. Proverbs 12:18 says, "There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." See the comparison again. Proverbs 15:1-2, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly." Proverbs 25:11-12 tells us that "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reprover to a listening ear." You see the power of words is contained in the beauty or the ugliness of the words spoken. The power of words is contained in the beauty or the ugliness of the particular word spoken. And then Rick read for us already from James chapter three. Just a reminder: James, this book in the New Testament that most scholars consider to be the wisdom literature of the New Testament, and James talks about our tongue. Reading from chapter three again, just verse five and following: "And the tongue is a fire. It's a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, it stains the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and every bird and reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue." It's particular, to listen: No human being can contain the tongue and that is why we need the conquering power and grace of God Almighty. He alone can tame the human tongue. "The tongue, it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Father and Lord, and with it we curse the 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" James says. Now I'm sure you've never done this, but picture, if you will, Christian Carl driving down the road, just streaming along with the contemporary worship tunes coming out the speakers, and he is praising God at the top of his lungs, just a-singing away, with his mouth he's praising God. And all of a sudden in front of Christian Carl's car, somebody decides that that lane should be theirs, and they come over leaving just enough room to get safely in that lane but not enough room for Christian Carl's opinion, and all of a sudden the same mouth that was just minutes earlier proclaiming the glories of the crucified and risen Savior for the salvation of all who believe is now the same mouth disparaging and discouraging the anonymous person who had the sad misfortune to actually believe that he or she had the right to the same stretch of public highway that Christian Carl was traveling down. A person, by the way, who is made in the image of God. A person, by the way, who has a soul that will last forever. A person, by the way, who will exist in eternity in either heaven or hell. You see the importance of our words? James points that out. Our words have power, and the power of our words is contained in either the beauty or the truth with which those words are delivered. We should not wield them lightly.

Our words also present to the world around us a realistic picture of what's going on inside. The picture our words paint is sometimes of fearful fright. We are born as the foolish. The book of Proverbs is actually constructed that way. It shows that the journey from the fool to the wise, walking in the way of the fool to walking in the way of the wise. We are the foolish. We are the ones who don't have any wisdom in and of ourselves. We are by nature not able to understand who made us or what that Creator God would have us to be or to do. We are ignorant to the truths of God's ways. But as God intervenes in our lives and he begins the process of sanctification he brings us from a place of self-centered ignorance into a place of other-centered service as we grow and walk in the way of the wise. The book of Proverbs is constantly contrasting the way of the fool, the way of the wise. We heard last week Pastor Randy introduce us to Lady Folly and Lady Wisdom, the contrast between destruction and life. That is our journey. Wisdom is not just good principles to incorporate into our lives in order to better the society that we live in, although that is a benefit, to be sure. Wisdom is actually the revealed character of God. I like to read movie reviews. I like to read TV show reviews, keep up with, you know, stuff. And every so often in the reviews there will be capital letters in bold: **SPOILER ALERT**. That way you know if you don't want to see if Matthew Crawley and Lady Mary end up together in marriage,

then don't read further (Downton Abbey reference point). The spoiler alerts are there because the whole picture is presented. The spoiler alert for the book of Proverbs is this: Jesus is wisdom and wisdom is Jesus. Everything about the book of Proverbs reveals the character of God. It reveals Christ. It reveals what it is to walk in the way of the wise. Walking in the way of the wise is to walk in the way of God's will. Walking in the way of the wise is to walk in the way that Jesus would have us to walk in this life. To the extent that we are walking in the way of the wise we are revealing the life of Christ in us. That's the picture our words paint. It shows something that is hidden to others until it comes spilling out.

In the same relationship that those of us who are saved by grace have with the law of God we have with the truisms of Proverbs. We know that we are not able to be justified before a holy God by obeying the law. We know that. Those of us who have believed have admitted openly and confess publicly, I'm unfit and unable to come to a holy God on my own, and in order to be saved, I must have the finished work of Christ and his righteousness as my covering. We know that we can't justify ourselves before a holy God. We know that Christ has kept the law on our behalf. But we also profess openly we don't think that God throws the law away. The law is good, the law reveals who God is, and the law gives us now the guideline by which we live. That's what walking in the way of the wise is all about. We delight in keeping the law, we delight in not letting any unwholesome talk come out of our mouth because we delight in Christ. The characteristics of walking in the way of the wise are many. But for the purposes of our time here together which is crunched always, one example to give. There are many characteristics, but one example that the writer of Proverbs speaks to. The quantity of the words that we speak reveal something about the heart within. When words are many, Proverbs 10:19 says, "When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent." Proverbs 13:3, "Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin." "Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding," Proverbs 17:27. And then Proverbs 17:28 says, that "Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent." You see the principle there that the quantity of our words has something to do with the character of our words. Ecclesiastes 5:2 says, "Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth." Therefore if God is in heaven and you're on earth, the writer of Ecclesiastes says, therefore, let your words be few. Proverbs 21:23, "Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble." We get the point. But again, James, the brother of our Lord, is very informative here. James chapter one, verse nineteen. Upward coaches, we memorized this verse with our teams in the fall, but we memorized the Upward paraphrase, which I actually love, "Everyone should be slow to speak, everyone should be quick to listen, and everyone should be slow to become angry, because man's anger doesn't produce the righteousness that God requires," James 1:19b and 20. To all the girls on my G3 team, I said, listen, how many 'should's' can you point out in just those little twelve words? And of course they're wise and wonderfully smart girls and they said, three 'should's' we see. And I said, now when you hear the word, 'should,' I want you to think this way. When somebody brings a 'should' your way, they love you, and they want to protect you, and they want to provide for you. And I said, what if Coach Tim said, you should tie your shoes before we played the game. Now would you think that Coach Tim was nasty and capricious and all up in your grill and he wants you to be, you know, not thinking that you are old enough to know how to tie your shoes? No, you would assume that Coach Tim, who wants you to tie your shoes, doesn't want you to get on that court with laces flapping, tearing it off full speed for a fast break and then tripping, hitting your face, albeit on the soft, rubbery floor. Coach Tim wants to protect you. Usually behind every 'should' is someone who loves you and wants to provide for you and wants to protect you. Everyone should be slow to speak, quick to listen, and slow to become angry. It's protection for you, from you. It's protection for me, from me. God knows my heart. Jesus said let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no.' So I wrote myself out a set of guidelines. Prayerfully think about what to say. Say what you mean to say. Stand by what you say.

And then I recognized that with those three principles I needed one more principle added to it, and that is, this side of heaven affords me the option that when I recognize that something I said was wrong, I need to repent of what I say and realize it was wrong. I asked my girls this morning at breakfast, if I said the word, 'Fonz,' what would they think of? And they were like, 'Narnia' and 'fauns' and I said, no, I'm not pronouncing that right. I mean, 'Fonzi.' I mean Arthur Fonzarelli. I mean *Happy Days*, Gary Marshall's sitcom of the seventies and eighties. Now you may know Henry Winkler now, because he's selling reverse mortgages with gray hair. But at the time Henry Winkler was a teen heart-throb, believe it or not, and he represented a character named Arthur Fonzarelli who was The Coolest Guy. He was absolutely cool. There was no one like him. In fact,

Joanie, the character on *Happy Days* was the first person on TV to utter the accolade, 'nerd.' I found that out after the first service. Fonzi was cool. Everybody else was a nerd. But when Fonzi would have to go to Richie Cunningham after Fonzi had royally messed up, which he did quite frequently, not just jumping the shark on water skis, Fonzi couldn't bring himself to pronounce the word, 'wrong.' "Richie, I was wr-rrr-rrr-rrr..." "Richie, I was wr-rrr-rrr-rrr..." There was something about the coolness of Fonzi that he couldn't even fathom the idea that he could be wrong. Fonzi was a perfect picture for your heart and mine. You remember Pastor Randy's words, I wrote it down, we talked about it Tuesday. Last week, he said, speaking of this perilous self-justification that many of us wrestle with, he said, do you doubt yourself enough to recognize that you need wisdom? Do you believe that your heart is deceitfully wicked and desperately sick? Do you believe that no human being can tame the tongue?

I'll close the message with another axiom that's not found in the book of Proverbs. You've heard it said, if you can't say something nice about someone, then don't say anything. But I wonder if that's a helpful axiom, because we don't get to see the ugliness of our hearts unless those words actually do make it to the airwaves. We know what's inside, and we rehearse those speeches, but oftentimes in my office with a couple or with people in relational strain somebody will just stop short. And I'll say, wait a second now, what were you going to say? Help us here, because I think it's important. I don't want you to be brutal, and I don't want you to be nasty, but I think it's important for you to speak what you just stopped yourself from saying. And more often than not what happens is, when they say that, yes, the person receiving it probably get some insight into their heart and the way their heart sins against that person, but the person who said it gets incredible insight as well, because they see it. If we were to set that microphone up, and we were to line ourselves up, and we were to give testimony to the times that our words have been used to tear others down, I wonder if we'd see the gossip and the slander and the lies and the back biting. Or would we justify the words and the angry hearts that have produced those words. I think we'd catch a glimpse once again of the truth of the book of Proverbs, that we'd catch a glimpse of our hearts that are continually in need of a heart-conquering, soul-cleansing grace of the Word who became flesh, so that, according to 1 Corinthians 1:30, he might become for us our source of life, even Jesus Christ, whom God has made for us our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification, and our redemption. Praise be to God.