

The Wise Use of Words

Proverbs 15:1

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If there is any member of our body that we must train by God's grace to be gentle, surely it is our tongue. Even when we are able to restrain our hands and our feet from angry responses, it is that small, little member in our mouth that yet reveals the anger that is in our heart (James 3:5-8).

A harsh and angry tongue reveals a harsh and angry heart. A kind and gentle tongue reveals a kind and gentle heart. For the tongue is the interpreter of the soul (Matthew 12:34). "I didn't mean it." Yes, we did mean it..

What characterized Jesus was a gentleness and kindness toward the undeserving, toward sinners, and toward His stumbling and weak disciples. We may be exemplary in walking the narrow path of doctrinal purity, but are we also exemplary in gentleness by not breaking the bruised reed and by not quenching the smoking flax at home, at work, in our neighborhood, and in the church?

Let us consider today the inspired words of the wisest mere man that ever lived (Solomon) and what he teaches in regard to the tongue. The main points are: (1) Gentle Words Quench Anger (Proverbs 15:1a); (2) Harsh Words Provoke Anger (Proverbs 15:1b).

I. Gentle Words Quench Anger (Proverbs 15:1a).

A. The adjective used by Solomon in Proverbs 15:1 to describe the answer/response of the Christian to some form of provocation is "soft" ("a soft answer"). This Hebrew adjective (*rak*) means tender or gentle. Thus, it is a gentle word that turns away the wrath of others, rather than insulting them as they insulted and offended us.

1. A gentle response will generally have the effect of pouring water on the fire rather than pouring gas on it. A gentle response tends to disarm the aggressor. It tends to suffocate anger. It's a mighty blow that silences with a feather rather than with a club. It's very difficult to fight with someone who does not fight back in anger.

2. This is not pious advice or just a suggestion issued by Solomon; it is the way of life to those who are wise. A wise person is revealed by the way he/she uses the tongue to turn away anger.

3. **Jacob** turned away the wrath of his brother, Esau, with kind words, though Esau had wanted to kill him. **David** subdued the anger of King Saul who sought to destroy David with a tender words from the cave of Adullam. **Abigail's** gentle words quenched the hot anger of David against her husband, Nabal.

B. The one who turns away the wrath of others by a gentle word is by no means weak or cowardly. To the contrary, this is one in whom true strength resides in controlling his tongue (Proverbs 16:32).

1. It is easy for us to allow our emotions to rule over us in fighting back with the same anger that was hurled at us. That's our sinful, natural response. That's simply doing what comes naturally to us all. However, when we can harness by God's grace our emotions and offer a gentle answer with the intention of diffusing a bomb that is ready to explode, we demonstrate the supernatural strength of the Holy Spirit.

2. Solomon states in Proverbs 15:4 that "a wholesome tongue is a tree of life" (it gives life not destruction to others).

a. Remember how Israel (after God had powerfully delivered them from Egyptian bondage) came to a place called "Marah", which means bitterness (Exodus 15:23), where all of the waters in that place were undrinkable due to bitterness. There was no life in those waters—only death. But the Lord commanded Moses to cut down a certain tree and to cast it into the bitter waters that they might become

living waters—the tree of life made the bitter waters sweet.

b. That pictures so clearly our problem—the wells and springs of our nature are corrupted with bitterness and death that spew forth from our mouths. And the only remedy to that bitterness is the cross of Jesus Christ. Only Jesus Christ through His atoning death, only the gospel of Jesus Christ can take those bitter, resentful, angry waters in our soul and upon our tongue, and make them gentle, tender, and kind. No self-help program in the world can change the heart and sanctify the tongue; only the power of Christ (which is ours in the gospel and through the Holy Spirit) can accomplish that. That which was a cross or tree of death and cursing to Christ has become a tree of life and blessing to all of us who trust alone in Christ alone for our eternal salvation.

3. We can make all the excuses in the world and seek to justify ourselves for a tongue that returns anger for anger and that returns insult for insult, but God through Solomon says that our tongues are to be as a tree of life to others, not as a raging fire of destruction (whether in the home, in the church, or at work). Is our tongue harsh and bitter? Or is our tongue through gentleness bringing life/health in our marriages/families? Young people learn/practice this before marriage.

C. The sin that prevents us from even desiring (let alone offering) a gentle answer is our pride which has been offended by the way one has spoken to us in anger/disrespect. “How dare you talk to me that way!” Our pride and feelings are hurt/insulted and seek their pound of flesh.

1. We thus justify our angry words because of how we were treated. And a war of words ensues with painful wounds suffered by all who witness it (whether they are words that proceed from our mouth or words that proceed from our phones or computers).

2. If we will subdue our pride by looking to Christ’s death (where our pride was nailed to the cross) and replace it with Christ’s love which is not easily provoked (1 Corinthians 13:5) and which suffers long with others and is kind (1 Corinthians 13:4), Jesus will tame our tongue and make it a tree of life rather than weapon of mass destruction.

D. There are those occasions in which our tongue ought to be used to rebuke, correct, and even to show a righteous anger (not a sinful, proud, or uncontrolled anger, Ephesians 4:26). However, this is quite different from letting someone have it because they’ve offended you or hurt your feelings.

1. A righteous anger does not seek to destroy, but seeks out of love the repentance of the offender (with reconciliation as the goal).

2. A righteous anger is not motivated by a selfish pride that has been hurt, but is rather motivated by a holy and merciful God that has been offended.

3. A righteous anger loves what God loves and hates what God hates (and is righteously angry with our own sins first).

4. A righteous anger is not out of control, but is in control of both words and actions.

5. Let us carefully consider whether our anger is righteous indignation by evaluating HOW we have spoken and WHAT we have said.

II. Harsh Words Provoke Anger (Proverbs 15:1b).

A. The second line in Proverbs 15:1 affirms what is a sinful response when we are offended: retaliating with grievous (or harsh) words which fuel the anger of others even more.

1. In this case, the bomb in a person is ticking—we can hear it and see it. But rather than acting like a bomb squad in dismantling the bomb, we act more like terrorists in pushing the button that sets off the bomb. And then we wonder what happened?

2. We cannot excuse/control the angry/bitter words of others (it is sin), but we can by God’s grace control our response so that it is not a further provocation (in pushing the right buttons), making

us a party to a more intense/aggravated conflict.

B. The Lord warns us fathers not to provoke our children to anger by our own sinfully angry words (Ephesians 6:4). What about the words of Rehoboam, son of Solomon, who listened to the counsel of the young advisers rather than to the counsel of the elderly sage advisors of his father in 1 Kings 12:12-16?

1. But are we responsible for the further wrath and anger of others if we sincerely seek to win them over by speaking the truth in love? No, for in such a case our very silence or the truth we speak may reveal their hardness of heart and obstinacy of will in closing their ears to the truth and in lashing out at us with angry words and deeds (as the Pharisees did with Christ and as the Jews did with Stephen). In offering a soft answer to those who are angry, we must never sacrifice the truth, but must always speak the truth in love to others, not in selfish anger.

2. What about those who repeatedly take advantage of our gracious responses to their angry attacks? Is there not a time to set a person straight for their own welfare? Absolutely! There will be times when we must be very firm with those who repeatedly offend and will not listen nor learn by a gentle answer. But even on those occasions, we do not use our firmness to retaliate, to avenge ourselves, or to get even with them, but rather we speak the truth in love and humility, to show them love and mercy, to edify them not to destroy them, to show the kindness of God (Luke 6:35).

C. How do we practically prevent our own harsh response when we are attacked with arrows from the tongue of another which have hit their target in our own heart? We **STOP, LOOK, and LISTEN**.

1. **STOP** the mouth and say nothing in retaliation (James 1:19-20). That's not easy, but the fruit of self-control is ours in Christ.

a. God has given us two bars to keep in angry words: our teeth and our lips. Seal them both, count to 100, cry out to the Lord, but stop the flow of words (whether spoken or written on the computer).

b. We are not enslaved to an angry response (we don't have to respond in anger), but have been set free by Christ's death and resurrection—we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us.

2. **LOOK** in faith to Jesus Christ who was on the receiving end of many angry words and who did not respond in like manner.

a. Look to Christ who has not repaid us as our sin deserves, for all our angry words spoken against Him and others.

b. Look to Christ to use the angry words we have received to humble us. Even when we are treated unjustly, we can use that unjust treatment to foster retaliation or humility.

3. **LISTEN** to the God's Word (Proverbs 18:19).

a. Listen carefully to the words of the one who is angry to see if there is any truth in what is said. We may find out that there is some truth mixed in with all that anger that we should hear.

b. If there is some truth (even if it is not spoken in love but in anger), let us acknowledge it. That will be helpful in lowering the volume, and in leading to a conversation rather than a shouting match.

D. The issue is ultimately not our tongue, but our heart—for there is where the battle is either won or lost. If our heart has been humbled by the amazing grace, gentleness, kindness, and love of Christ which has so abundantly and freely been poured out upon us, we will likewise approach our neighbor with Christ's humility, gentleness, kindness, and love in seeking to help others by what we say. It all begins with our earnest desire to use your tongue to profit others, not to destroy others.

1. The grace to speak with a gentle tongue has already been purchased for us by Christ and implanted in us. We do not have to ascend into heaven to obtain it. We do not have to go to the remotest

parts of the earth to secure it. It is ours in Christ. Believe it and practice it. For our religion is worthless and vain without it (James 1:26).

2. What will you find if you turn to the Lord today in faith and repentance to be right with God or to subdue a harsh tongue? You will find a God of “great kindness” (Jonah 4:1-2). You will find a God who delights to show His “great kindness” to undeserving sinners and even to the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). There is always hope in Jesus!

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