

## **Life and Death Are in Your Words**

Proverbs 15:1; Matthew 12:34

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The God given ability to form syllables and words with our tongue is a most precious gift indeed. Unless we actually slow down and realize how much of our life revolves around our ability to express our thoughts with our tongue, we are likely to continue in a thankless attitude for this undeserved mercy of God. There are millions around the world who can neither hear nor speak due to various disorders. They must communicate by sign language or by the written word. But, dear ones, we who enjoy this capacity have been blessed with this gift by God to use for His glory and for the profit of others. How are we using this amazing ability? When Moses had been called by God to speak with his mouth a message of deliverance unto Pharaoh, king of Egypt (“Let my people go”), he gave various excuses why he couldn’t do what God had commissioned him to do (Exodus 4:10). But the Lord reminds Moses that He, the Lord God Almighty, is the one who gives to all people the ability or the inability to speak (Exodus 4:11). When is the last time you sincerely poured out your heart in gratitude to God for His abundant mercy to use your tongue to express your thoughts and desires to others? Today would be a very good time to do so.

Dear ones, as the eyes are said to be the mirror of the soul, so is the tongue the interpreter of the soul. If there is godliness or ungodliness in the heart, it will be known and discovered by the tongue. If there be a love of Christ, a love of one’s neighbor, a love of holiness, or a love of God’s truth in the soul of a man, it will be found upon the tongue. Or likewise if there is a love of greed, a love of pride, a love of lust, a cherishing of a grudge, an embracing of retaliation against others, or a nursing of a lie, that too, the tongue will discover and make known. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matthew 12:34). If you want to know what is truly important to a person, simply listen to that which he/she talks most about. The very depths of a man’s soul are revealed by a man’s tongue. What is your tongue telling others about you as to what is most important in your life: The latest movie or song, a hobby or entertainment, your car or home, the health of your body or the health of your soul, the kingdom of this world or the kingdom of Christ? For you can rest assured that your speech is definitely telling everyone around you something—one way or another. The only question is, What is it telling them about yourself? For the tongue is the interpreter of the soul.

The main points of the sermon this Lord’s Day are as follows: (1) Our Tongue May Be Used to Diffuse Anger (Proverbs 15:1a); and (2) Our Tongue May Be Used to Provoke Anger (Proverbs 15:1b).

### **I. Our Tongue May Be Used To Diffuse Anger (Proverbs 15:1a).**

A. Dear ones, let us first realize that these inspired words from King Solomon are not mere advice or even a prudent suggestion. Death and life hinge upon the use of our tongue. For Solomon likewise makes clear in Proverbs 18:21 that “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” Though a very small member of the body, it may be used to edify or to destroy, to bless or to curse (James 3:9-13). Your tongue may be used to praise God or to curse God—to pour forth refreshing kindness toward our neighbor or venomous anger. It may be used to protect one’s character or to assassinate one’s character. It may be used to teach what is true or what is false. Death and life are indeed in the power of the tongue. Let us, therefore, listen carefully to the words of wisdom found herein and live.

B. The first line of Proverbs 15:1 tells us that a soft (or gentle) response will generally have the effect of turning back the anger in others so that anger does an about face rather than an in-your-face. A gentle response tends more to disarm the aggressor; it tends to suffocate the anger so that it cannot breathe out its fiery threats. It is very difficult to fight with someone who does not fight back with the same vengeful

anger. It is more difficult to fight with someone who does not want to fight than with someone who does want to fight. In fact, a soft answer is a greater shock to the system than a glass of cold water in the face.

1. Consider some of the biblical examples of soft answers subduing mighty Goliaths of anger with a smooth stone of kindness. I had a wise baseball coach in my high school years who knew the human psyche well and when we found ourselves playing in the finals against a team notorious for their bloodthirsty tactics, he told us to KWK—Kill With Kindness. We were able to focus our attention on what we were doing rather than becoming caught up in an angry response to the dirty tactics of the adversary. The last time that Jacob had seen Esau, his brother, Esau wanted to kill him for having taken the birthright by deception. But now (some 21 years later) as Jacob approaches nearer and nearer to Esau, he doesn't defend himself with haughty words, but rather appeals to his brother as his master (Genesis 32:17-18; Genesis 33:4). Consider also the words of David to King Saul in 1 Samuel 24:8-16. Or what about Abigail who turned away the anger of David against her husband, Nabal, with gracious words (1 Samuel 25:24-34).

2. The one who turns away the wrath of others by a gentle response ought not to be viewed here as a weak and cowardly person who simply becomes the doormat upon whom everyone wipes their feet. To the contrary, here is one in whom true strength resides. It is easy simply to allow our emotions to rule over us in hitting back with the same anger that was hurled at us. It is our sinful nature to do so. Where's the strength of character or the fruit of the Holy Spirit in that kind of a response? That is simply fulfilling the lusts of the flesh. However, when one can harness by God's grace his emotions and offer a gentle answer with the intention of diffusing the short-fused bomb that is ready to explode, such a one actually demonstrates a tongue that is under the powerful control of the Spirit of God (that is the grace of self-control, discipline, or temperance spoken of in Galatians 5:22). A tongue that lashes back like a whip is out of control, but a tongue that is seasoned with grace is in control. What about your tongue? Is it out of control or in control?

3. The sin that prevents us from even desiring (let alone offering) a soft answer is our pride which has been offended by the way one has angrily spoken to us. "How dare he talk to me with such anger or painful words!" And so our pride seeks its pound of flesh. And a war of words (or even violence) ensues with painful wounds suffered by all who witness it. If we would but subdue the pride by looking to the death of Christ (where our pride was nailed to Christ's cross) and replace it with the love of Christ which is not easily provoked (1 Corinthians 13:5) and which suffers long with the short fuses of others, Christ would begin to tame our tongue and make it an instrument of healing rather than weapon of mass destruction (put off the old man and put on the new man). If we give way to a sinful anger when we are reviled, we acknowledge we are not trusting in the Lord, but rather trusting in our own strength and resources to get the job done. Whenever we do that we are doomed to failure.

4. I do want to make it clear that there are times in which the tongue may be used to show a righteous anger (Ephesians 4:26; Mark 3:5). However, this is quite different from letting someone have it because they've stomped all over you. A righteous anger does not seek to destroy, but seeks repentance with reconciliation as the goal. 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. A righteous anger loves what God loves and hates what God hates (and is righteously angry with his own sins first). A righteous anger is not out of control, but is in control of both words and actions. Dear ones, let us not so easily dismiss our anger as righteous indignation without carefully evaluating our motives, actions, and consequences.

5. Let us now move from how the tongue may be used to diffuse anger to how it may be used to provoke anger.

## **II. Our Tongue May Be Used To Provoke Anger (Proverbs 15:1b).**

A. The second line in Proverbs 15:1 simply affirms what is the natural response of sinful men: to

utter grievous (or harsh) words which only tend to fuel the anger of others all the more. In this case, the bomb in a person is ticking—you can hear it and you can 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? Yes, the hostile anger or bitter words of another who comes at us may not be excused (it is sin), but our provocation (in pushing the right buttons with perhaps even a smile on our face) also makes us a party to his/her further anger (for we may not yell, shout, and scream, but our calculated response to push buttons that provoke the other party are not a soft or gentle answer in such a case).

B. Let us consider once again some of the biblical examples of how the tongue may sinfully provoke others to anger. The words of Saul provoked Jonathan, his son, to a fierce anger (1 Samuel 20:30-34; 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. Are you responsible for the further wrath and anger of others if you should sincerely seek to win them over by your gentle words? No, for in such a case either your very silence or the truth which you proclaim and defend may so incite others that they reveal their hardness of heart and obstinacy of will in closing their ears to the truth and in laying in to you with words and deeds (as did the Pharisees with Christ and as did the Jews with Stephen). In offering a soft answer to those who are angry, you must never sacrifice the truth, but must speak the truth in love—not in selfish anger and bitterness of spirit.

2. What about those who repeatedly take advantage of your 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 you must be firm with those who repeatedly offend and will not listen nor learn by a gentle answer. But even on those occasions, you do not use your firmness to retaliate, to avenge yourself, to get even, but rather to help them, to show them love and mercy, to edify not to destroy. That is why you must be in control rather than out of control, so that you do not respond (even when being firm) with vengeance but with humility and love.

3. How do you prevent your own harsh response when you are attacked with arrows from the tongue of another which have hit their target in your very heart?

a. You stop, look, and listen before you say anything.

(1) Stop your mouth and say nothing until the anger of the other person has finished erupting. Ask the Lord to give you a quiet, peaceful heart rather than a warring spirit. Call upon the Lord to use this trial for His glory and for the good of all those involved. Put your hand over your mouth, for once words have left your mouth, you cannot retrieve them. How many words have we uttered in anger that we have lived to regret? They may be forgiven, but they may never be forgotten because they are so painful. God has given us two bars to keep in angry words: our teeth and our lips. Seal them both, count to 100, but stop the flow of words.

(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. Look to Christ who has not repaid you for all your angry words spoken against Him and others. Look to Christ who freely suffered the eternal wrath of God against you in order that He might show you His eternal mercy. Consider that you are no more deserving of Christ's mercy than the other person is of your mercy and pity. Look inside of yourself and reflect to yourself ("Who do I think I am that I do not need this dose of anger for my own sanctification—I am suffering with Christ if I am suffering for righteousness and truth").

(3) Listen to the Word of God in seeking to diffuse the bomb, rather than to explode the bomb. "A soft answer turneth away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger" (Proverbs 15:1). "A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city" (Proverbs 18:19). "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God" (James 1:19-20). Listen carefully to the words of the one who is angry in order to see

whether there is any truth to what he says. Even if anger and malicious words may make it difficult to hear what is being said, try to look behind the anger to see what is truly bothering this person. You may find out that there is some truth mixed in with all that anger that you should hear and repent of. If that is the case, the first thing out of your mouth should not be a rebuke of his sinful anger, but a sincere and genuine expression of your sorrow in offending him and seeking his forgiveness. This can only be realized in the life of one who stops, looks, and listens.

b. Dear ones, the issue is ultimately not the tongue of man, but the heart of man—for there is where the battle is either won or lost. If your heart has been humbled by the amazing grace and love of Christ, you will approach your neighbor with the same humility and love in seeking to help him by what you say and do. It all begins with your earnest desire to use your tongue to profit others rather than to destroy others. If that is your sincere desire (as it must be if you call yourself a Christian), you must realize that self-control is not a grace which you must earn or deserve any more than the forgiveness of sins. Everything you need to be justified and sanctified before the Lord has already been purchased for you by Christ. You do not have to ascend into heaven to obtain it. You do not have to go to the remotest parts of the earth to secure it. It is yours in Christ. Believe it, receive it, pray for it, and practice it. For your religion and mine is worthless and vain without it (James 1:26).

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