

**Get Smart**  
Studies in the book of *Proverbs*  
**Known for Words**

July 31/August 1, 2010

**Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)**

*Get Smart: Known for Words*

Written by: Robert Ismon Brown (bbrown@chicagofirstnaz.org)

## Background Notes

**Scriptures:** Proverbs 16:21-32; 10:6-32

## Introduction

“What did you say?” “I can’t believe she said that!” “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never harm me.” Take a few moments to think about those statements, the last time you heard them, the last time you *used* them, and then reach deep insider for a little wisdom to weigh their truth or falsity.

Emily Dickinson once wrote:

"A word is dead when it is said. Some say. I say it just begins to live that day."

Imagine a world without words. Quieter, perhaps. More meaningful? We’d need to invent another form of communication or rely on less used methods to communicate, I suspect. Isn’t speech a crucial distinctive of being human? Of course, some words are spoken, others written, and more of them merely thought. The language philosopher, J. L. Austin, wrote a book called *How to Do Things with Words* in which he advocated a *pragmatic* understanding of language. He points out the many other things people do with words. They do not just represent how things are, they ask questions, give commands, make suggestions, give advice, tell jokes, make promises, even insult, persuade and intimidate. This led Austin to draw a three-fold distinction between different kinds of "speech-act":

- Locutionary Act** - First, words have a distinct, conventional, meaning. The expression "The cat sat on the mat" refers to a cat, a mat and a relation between them, one sitting upon the other. This ordinary sense of meaning constitutes the "What is said" of any particular speech act.
- Illocutionary Act** - Secondly, in saying certain words one actually commits an act. For example, in saying "I do" at a wedding, one makes a promise, in saying "Will you?" one asks a question, and saying "You will!" one gives an order.
- Perlocutionary Act** - Finally, he points out that by saying something, one performs an action, by saying "I do" one weds, by saying something like "I will give you a better deal than the competitor," may cause a buyer to be persuaded, and so on.

Toastmasters International, founded by Ralph C. Smedley, made its mission “to make effective communication a worldwide reality.” One of their leaders, Heather Godsey, told a gathering in October of 2006, that the 3% are known for words of edification while the 97% are known for negativity.

Words and speech have to do with more than just stating the facts. What we say *does something*. Words change things, whether we like it or not, and whether we are aware of it or not. Since that is true, what responsibility does speech place on us every time we speak? In light of our study of *Proverbs*, we ought to look for *wisdom* in our use of language. This week’s study focuses on the inescapable fact that, like it or not, we are *known for our words*. Take a few moments to list some of the things you *said* to others or about others recently. Pay special attention to words that you intentionally formed in your mind and heart, to be followed by the tone of your voice and the attitude which accompanied your speech. What purpose did you have for using those words in the precise way that you did? Can you trace them back to a personal desire, plan, effect, or response?

Did you look for something to *happen* after you spoke, and, if so, what was it? How successful were your words in doing what you expected? Did you feel a certain way after you spoke them? Were those feelings satisfying, disappointing, depressing, or joyful? Finally, what do your words tell others about who you are?

After this little exercise, you might want to recall everything you know about how Jesus used words when he spoke to others. What specific occasions can you remember when Jesus' words accomplished something, created a fresh opportunity, provoked reactions (friendly or hostile), and clarified things?

We have chosen two chapters in *Proverbs* to supply main texts for our study this week: Proverbs 16 and 10. They make use of the Hebrew word for "lips" to discuss the power and importance of words.

## The Proverbial Lips

If you study a Hebrew lexicon, you will discover that the Hebrew word *s<sup>e</sup>phāṭayim* and its variant forms appear from 46 times in the book of *Proverbs*, some 176 times in the Old Testament. Statistically, *Proverbs* has the plurality of the occurrences (26%), with *Psalms* a near second (16%). The most common literal translation is simply "lips." The most common form is known as the *dual*, meaning "two of them." The singular is rare — for good reason! In the Hebraic way of thinking, the lips are *the gates of speech*: the heart sends forth words which pass through these gates. Further, the word is used symbolically for the "edge, border, brink, brim, bank, shore, or binding" of things. So, we might read about the "lips" of a river as its banks, those *defining boundaries* which *contain* the river. Or, the *binding* sewn on the priest's garments, *reinforcing* the edges so that they do not fray.

If lips are *gates*, then human beings must be the *gatekeepers*. The concern is not with what comes in but with what goes out. Jesus spoke colorfully of this in the following New Testament account:

18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. 19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person (Matthew 15:18-20; Mark 7:20-23).

Then, with even greater consequence, comes this teaching:

34 You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. 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 (Matthew 12:34-37).

When Jesus spoke about speech in this way, he was in complete agreement with the Old Testament wisdom literature as we find it in *Proverbs*. The mouth/lips function as a gateway for the heart as they allow words to make their way into the world. Because words have power to change things, Jesus tells his audience, human beings will one day be judged by their words. That is a sobering thought.

Positively, Jesus taught that his own words brought blessing:

It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life (John 6:63).

If the words of Jesus are the source of life for us, properly responding to them carries deep responsibility:

47 If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. 48 The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. 49 For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment— what to say and what to speak. 50 And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me (John 12:47-50).

Remember the words of Jesus! He weighed his words carefully, and when he spoke, he intended for people to hear the word of God, since it was God who told him "what to say and what to speak." Further, "What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me." Persons who heard the words of Jesus knew that what he had to say was entirely different from what they were accustomed to hearing:

And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's son? (Luke 4:22).

Because words mattered, Jesus used them with wisdom, skill and God-directed purpose. He also had confidence in the words he spoke — that they would have a permanent consequence for human beings:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away (Matthew 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33).

47 Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: 48 he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. 49 But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great (Luke 6:47-49).

Words will either lay the foundation for a sturdy house, or they will become the sandy soil which falsely promises to support when, in fact, it will allow the house to collapse.

In the book of *Proverbs*, the use of the lips follows several themes which we list below:

1. Keep corrupt talk from the lips (4:24).
2. The lips guard knowledge (5:2).
3. The lips of a forbidden woman drip honey (5:3).
4. The lips of a woman are associated with “smooth talk” (7:21).
5. The wise person is confident that “from my lips will come what is right” (8:6).
6. Wickedness is an abomination to the lips of the wise person (8:7).
7. The lips of a fool lead to ruin (10:8, 10).
8. The wise has “lips of understanding” (10:13).
9. Dangers of “lying lips” (10:18).
10. The wise person restrains his lips (10:19).
11. The lips of the righteous feed many (10:21).
12. The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable (10:32).
13. The evil person is ensnared by the transgression of his lips (12:13).
14. Truthful lips endure forever (12:19).
15. Lying lips are an abomination to Yahweh (12:22).
16. Contrast between: guarded mouth and wide lips (13:3).
17. The lips of the wise preserve (14:3).
18. The fool has no lips of knowledge (14:7).
19. Wordy lips lead to poverty (14:23).
20. The lips of the wise spread knowledge (15:7).
21. The lips of a king speak oracles [inspired words] (16:10).
22. Righteous lips are the delight of a king (16:13).
23. Sweet lips are persuasive (16:21).
24. Wise heart → judicious speech → persuasive lips (16:23).
25. Worthless person plots evil and his lips are a scorching fire (16:27).
26. The tight-lipped person brings evil to pass (16:30).
27. Wicked lips (17:4).
28. Fine spoken lips do not belong to a fool (17:7).
29. Close lips; be silent; ne wise (17:28).
30. Lips invite a fight (18:6).
31. Lips are a snare to the soul (18:7).
32. Lips like a fruitful field (18:20).
33. Crooked lips belong to a fool (19:1).
34. Lips of knowledge are a precious jewel (20:15).
35. Don’t make deals with a talker (20:19).
36. Grace of lips, purity of heart, friends of the king (22:11).
37. Wise words in the heart are also on the lips (22:18).
38. When lips speak right, the inmost being exults (23:16).

39. Hearts, violent lips, trouble (24:2).
40. Honest answer is like a kiss on the lips (24:26).
41. Do not deceive with the lips (24:28).
42. Fervent lips and an evil heart are like the glaze of an earthen vessel (26:23).
43. Lips disguise hate and deceit (26:24).
44. Do not use your lips to praise yourself (27:2).

We reiterate the root idea behind the Hebrew notion of “lips”: they are the gatekeepers of the heart.

### **First Main Text: Proverbs 16:21-32**

<sup>21</sup> The wise of heart is called discerning, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness. <sup>22</sup> Good sense is a fountain of life to him who has it, but the instruction of fools is folly. <sup>23</sup> The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips. <sup>24</sup> Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body. <sup>25</sup> There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. <sup>26</sup> A worker's appetite works for him; his mouth urges him on. <sup>27</sup> A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. <sup>28</sup> A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends. <sup>29</sup> A man of violence entices his neighbor and leads him in a way that is not good. <sup>30</sup> Whoever winks his eyes plans dishonest things; he who purses his lips brings evil to pass. <sup>31</sup> Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life. <sup>32</sup> Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city (Proverbs 16:21-32).

Human beings, as creatures of this world, are unique in their use of language and speech. While other higher primates can be conditioned to respond to verbal stimuli, they do not use speech in a creative or proactive fashion as we do. On the so-called “tree of life,” words spoken by human beings are a rich fruit. The writer of this section of *Proverbs* is keenly aware of this fact. Proverbs 16 belongs to “Proverbs of Solomon, Part 1: 10:1-22:16), and it is undoubtedly traceable back to Solomon himself. Wisdom, as we have already noted in the previous studies, belonged to Solomon’s reputation as a good king. In the ancient world, the king was not just a ruler (executive), but he also had legislative and judicial functions. Serious legal cases came before the king for a wise verdict, and Solomon dealt with such cases constantly as king. The following passage illustrates Solomon’s use of wisdom in a judicial matter:

<sup>16</sup> Then two prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. <sup>17</sup> The one woman said, "Oh, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house, and I gave birth to a child while she was in the house. <sup>18</sup> Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. And we were alone. There was no one else with us in the house; only we two were in the house. <sup>19</sup> And this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him. <sup>20</sup> And she arose at midnight and took my son from beside me, while your servant slept, and laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. <sup>21</sup> When I rose in the morning to nurse my child, behold, he was dead. But when I looked at him closely in the morning, behold, he was not the child that I had borne." <sup>22</sup> But the other woman said, "No, the living child is mine, and the dead child is yours." The first said, "No, the dead child is yours, and the living child is mine." Thus they spoke before the king. <sup>23</sup> Then the king said, "The one says, 'This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead'; and the other says, 'No; but your son is dead, and my son is the living one.'" <sup>24</sup> And the king said, "Bring me a sword." So a sword was brought before the king. <sup>25</sup> And the king said, "Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one and half to the other." <sup>26</sup> Then the woman whose son was alive said to the king, because her heart yearned for her son, "Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and by no means put him to death." But the other said, "He shall be neither mine nor yours; divide him." <sup>27</sup> Then the king answered and said, "Give the living child to the first woman, and by no means put him to death; she is his mother." <sup>28</sup> And all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice (1 Kings 3:16-28).

“The wisdom of God was in him to do justice.” With those words, the historian summarizes the role of wisdom in the life of king Solomon, especially as it influenced *what he said*.

Proverbs 16 suggests the role of speech as the king rules his people. Just prior to the section we are examining, the writer says:

1. “The lips of a king speak as an oracle, and his mouth should not betray justice” (16:10).
2. “Kings detest wrongdoing, for a throne is established through righteousness” (16:12).
3. “Kings take pleasure in honest lips; they value a man who speaks the truth” (16:13).

4. A king's wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it" (16:14).
5. When a king's face brightens, it means life; his favor is like a rain cloud in spring" (16:15).

Some thirty-two times in *Proverbs*, the king has a central role in the application of wisdom to his kingdom. Among the frequently used instruments of government is language. Kings regularly spoke to their people, whether by decree, law, judicial ruling, command, or celebration. What the king said was the law of the land. How a king spoke about someone in his kingdom affected how the kingdom looked at that person. Reputations could be made or broken by the word of the king. The king made promises to his subjects — words he said he would fulfill. Did he always keep his end of the bargain? Wise kings knew the benefit of using words carefully, since through them his people would form an opinion of his character.

In the examples above — in the section preceding the main text — we learn the value of a king's words, and how he uses his lips. *People treated the king's words like an oracle* (16:10). What does that mean? The word for "oracle" is *qesem* and normally has to do with "divination" or "sorcery," and its use here is odd. However, what the writer seems to be telling us is that people consider the words of the king much like someone might view a magical spell: full of power to change things. Since a king's words are accorded this honor by his people, he must be very careful how he manages them. Of special importance is that his words not distort the aims of justice — they must support a fair, equitable, and wise decision which furthers the interests of justice in his kingdom. For those of us who are not kings (!), how does this apply? When people respect, trust, and reply on us to always do the right thing, we must be careful that we do not undermine with our words the good intentions of our hearts. As Christians who represent the Lord Jesus Christ in this world, we must never allow what we say to contradict what we claim to believe.

*Righteous lips speak righteous things* (16:13). The connection between honest speech and truth ought to be permanent. The phrase "honest lips" is literally, "lips of righteousness." That is, they are straight and reliable. Righteousness is not just a word which describes how things are, it also points to how things ought to be. Righteous lips are those which want righteousness to prevail over the twisted, broken, and distorted state of affairs. Truth, in this passage, refers to "right things" (*y<sup>e</sup>shārîm*). Wisdom loves such things and uses words to implement them in the world. Notice how "love" figures into the work wisdom does. Wisdom doesn't just *know* right things, it actually *loves* them, and that is why it so passionately crafts what it says to bring them about. When a wise king speaks, he should have the welfare of his kingdom always in mind. When we speak, relying on God's wisdom, the result should be a changed state of affairs in the world around it. Our words should improve what we encounter, not devalue it.

As we approach our first main text, let's examine some of the insights Solomon give us into the proper use of speech.

1. "Sweetness of speech" (16:21). Hebrew poetry frequently combines qualities of the five senses with intellectual and spiritual activity. By mentioning "sweetness," the writer creates an image in the mind of his audience of a sweet thing so that they will imagine its taste. Once they have that firmly in mind, he now invites them to think about speech in the same way. As we discover in 16:24, one of the sweetest foods known to the Hebrew people was honey from the honeycomb. The land of Canaan was nicknamed, "the land flowing with milk and honey" (Numbers 13:27, and elsewhere). The power of this comparison is enhanced by the simple fact that honey touches the lips before it enters the mouth. In the case of the metaphor, words exit the mouth and cross the lips. The question is: Will the words you speak with your lips be received with the same sweetness by those who hear them as the honey which touches yours lips when you eat it? Wisdom of the heart discerns this connection, we are told, and sees the power of persuasion in the sweetness of our words. Behind the Hebrew word for *persuasiveness* is the idea of something that "takes hold of" the one who hears it. That is, it "grabs" the listener much like the honeycomb endears itself to the one who eats from it!

A word of clarification is in order here. We are not told that our speech should be “sugar-coated” so as to be watered down or compromised. The truth of our words must always take center stage when we speak them. There is, however, an effective way to speak in contrast to a way that is not compelling in the least! Truth can be disrespected because it appears ugly to those who hear it, having been spoken badly. Speech is powerful, and we ought to use it effectively, clearly, simply, and colorfully. Jesus sweetened his speech, not by mincing his words, but by the plainness of his language. By telling stories, using simple comparisons, and addressing people respectfully, Jesus used sweetness of speech. The results were apparent as people followed him.

2. “Judiciousness of speech” (16:23). Coupled with sweetness of speech is its *judicious* use. Sweetness has to do with the style, tone, texture and emotional aspect of speaking. Things like warmth and excitement accompany sweet speech. Yet, if speech is only sweet, it lacks depth and content. The writer chooses the Hebrew *sākal* which we have encountered previously in this series. What is in view is the *skillful* and careful selection of words, choosing those which most accurately communicate the meaning. Coincidentally, *proverbs* themselves are just such forms of speech, crafted concisely to produce the greatest impact on the audience. Our English word “judicious” points to making a sound judgment when doing something of a practical nature. In this case, it means paying attention to the right handling of language. “Say what you mean, and mean what you say” might be a fitting dictum in this case.

Sandwiched between 16:21 and 16:23, we have a reminder why the *sweetness* of words and the *judiciousness* of words are both important: “Good sense is fountain of life to him who has it.” Words either contribute to life or to death; to wisdom or to folly. The word “fountain” also appeals to the sense of taste, since one can easily imagine a cold, bubbling fountain shooting from the ground, inviting the lips of the thirsty soul. Further, in 16:24, the theme is developed by reminding that words affect both “soul and body.” Combining those two words is the Hebrew way of talking about *the whole person*. Moreover, the ideas of *sweetness* and *health* are also combined, and applied to soul and body respectively. It becomes evident that *words fitly spoken* are not only sweet in some purely aesthetic sense, they are actually capable of improving health. The term for “health” is *marpē*. By using this word, the writer is not only referring to the *present state of health* he is also promising *improvement of health*. Forms of the word can mean “to cause health, to make healthy.”

God wants His people to speak words which bring healing, not only to themselves, but to others. This was, of course, a significant part of Jesus’ ministry: he brought sweetness to the soul and health to the body by the words which he spoke: “Spirit and life” is how he described them. By his words, water turned into wine, lepers were cleansed, the blind saw, the deaf heard, and the dead came to life again. Those who experienced his words said, “What authority and power this man’s words possess! Even evil spirits obey him and flee at his command!” (Luke 4:26).

3. “Destructiveness of speech” (16:27). There is a dark side to the use of words, as illustrated by someone the writer calls “a worthless man” who “plots evil.” His speech is compared to a “scorching fire.” Who is the so-called “worthless man”? The Hebrew word for worthless is *b<sup>e</sup>liyya’al* based upon the root idea that someone or something is “without” (*bēleth*) combined with the term for “use” (*ya’al*). It has to do with being “worn-out” or having lost its intended usefulness. The Old Testament has a phrase of derision, usually translated as “the son of Belial” (see Deuteronomy 13:14; Judges 19:22; 1 Samuel 2:12) which refers to “base persons” who *lack* sense, moral compass and basic goodness. The book of *Proverbs* also uses the term elsewhere to simply mean a “wicked person” (6:12). We might also identify such a person as “wasted”! How does such a person, without a moral compass or good sense, try to repair his situation? According to this passage, he “plots evil” and then tries to implement his plan through speech that burns like a devastating fire. The phrase “scorching fire” is actually only one word in Hebrew (*tzāraāb*) and appears only here in the Old Testament. Some scholars suggest that it is really a mistranslation of another word which means a scab or scar of a sore associated with a skin disease. In 16:28 seems to confirm the disease connection as it tells how such a man “spreads strife” in much the same way an infectious disease might

spread. Persons who lack a moral compass will stop at nothing to advance their cause, including fueling the rumor mill, even to the point of driving a wedge between friends. Further, 16:29 tells us, the speech of the immoral person produces violence and enticement of good persons to do wrong.

According to 16:30, the irresponsible use of speech involves not telling the whole story, as captured in the words “purses his lips.” We would say such a person is “closed lipped,” cagily plotting evil against others, seeking allies along the way, and in the end “bringing evil to pass.” Half-truths are lies, for they involve a calculated deception. Language in the mouth of a person bent on mischief must be screened carefully by those who listen to him. Nothing can be taken at face value, and most things have double meanings. Wisdom counsels us to beware of such persons, but also not become like them. When we find ourselves choosing our words in order to distort reality, then we are acting dishonestly and will become allies in the production of evil.

4. “Slow to Anger” (16:32). A final thought from this passage has to do with speech as an instrument for the expression of *anger*. The common way of talking about anger in the Hebrew language is to make reference to the “nose”! Here, the word *'appayîm*, meaning “nostril, nose, or face,” and doubles as the term for “anger.” Often the term appears with the word “red” or “hot” to indicate the physical appearance of a person’s face who is angry. Anger is rarely merely an internal state of the emotions, but has to do with the way anger expresses itself *physically*. Since this passage has been examining aspects of speech, it is likely that angry *words* come into play also. Being “slow to anger” is the better part of wisdom. This simply means not to immediately allow anger to burst forth in physical or verbal expression.

To better explain this concept, the writer places the second clause in parallel to it: “he who rules his spirit” as better than “he who takes a city.” Anger has much power behind it, and not all of it intended to make things better. Mighty persons who lack self-control also lack wisdom. Kings who rule their domain are considered skillful. However, there is a more difficult form of “rule”: the control of spirit. In Hebrew terms, the *rûah* refers to more than just the immaterial part of human beings. It has to do with the essential inner life: mind, heart, and will. Included in that cluster of personality features is the life of feeling as well. The ancients wrote about “spirited” animals, such as the horse, but also saw the same flicker of energy inside human beings. Allowing the unbounded power of the spirit to direct actions is not wise. That is why the writer praises the person who is able to bring his spirit under control. Since taking a city was a great feat in ancient times (as it is today), the comparison is apt.

The New Testament expands on these themes. Consider the words of *James*, as he counsels Christians about the power of the tongue. He writes in ways reminiscent of *Proverbs*, especially in his appeal to “the wisdom which comes from above” and which is able to bring the power of speech under godly control.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. <sup>2</sup> For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. <sup>3</sup> If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. <sup>4</sup> Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. <sup>5</sup> So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! <sup>6</sup> And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup> For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, <sup>8</sup> but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup> With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup> From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup> Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? <sup>12</sup> Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. <sup>13</sup> Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. <sup>14</sup> But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. <sup>15</sup> This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. <sup>16</sup> For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. <sup>17</sup> But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle,

open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. <sup>18</sup> And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace (James 3:1-18).

Notice the references to speech as a “fire” that is kindled from hell which is able to spread and infect other people. James counsels Christ followers to see speech as a means to grow a harvest of righteousness, filled with mercy and good fruits. He tells his audience that wisdom and understanding leads them to good conduct and works marked by meekness. In contrast, speech which is laced with bitterness, jealousy and ambition will result in being “false to the truth.” Such wisdom finds its origin not “from above” but from below — earthly, unspiritual and demonic. Things like disorder and vile practices spring from the misuse of speech. This is precisely what the *Proverbs* is saying in chapter 16.

### **Second Main Text: Proverbs 10:6-32**

<sup>6</sup> Blessings are on the head of the righteous, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence. <sup>7</sup> The memory of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot. <sup>8</sup> The wise of heart will receive commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin. <sup>9</sup> Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out. <sup>10</sup> Whoever winks the eye causes trouble, but a babbling fool will come to ruin. <sup>11</sup> The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence. <sup>12</sup> Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses. <sup>13</sup> On the lips of him who has understanding, wisdom is found, but a rod is for the back of him who lacks sense. <sup>14</sup> The wise lay up knowledge, but the mouth of a fool brings ruin near. <sup>15</sup> A rich man's wealth is his strong city; the poverty of the poor is their ruin. <sup>16</sup> The wage of the righteous leads to life, the gain of the wicked to sin. <sup>17</sup> Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof leads others astray. <sup>18</sup> The one who conceals hatred has lying lips, and whoever utters slander is a fool. <sup>19</sup> When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent. <sup>20</sup> The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; the heart of the wicked is of little worth. <sup>21</sup> The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense. <sup>22</sup> The blessing of the LORD makes rich, and he adds no sorrow with it. <sup>23</sup> Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool, but wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding. <sup>24</sup> What the wicked dreads will come upon him, but the desire of the righteous will be granted. <sup>25</sup> When the tempest passes, the wicked is no more, but the righteous is established forever. <sup>26</sup> Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him. <sup>27</sup> The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short. <sup>28</sup> The hope of the righteous brings joy, but the expectation of the wicked will perish. <sup>29</sup> The way of the LORD is a stronghold to the blameless, but destruction to evildoers. <sup>30</sup> The righteous will never be removed, but the wicked will not dwell in the land. <sup>31</sup> The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but the perverse tongue will be cut off. <sup>32</sup> The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable, but the mouth of the wicked, what is perverse.

Another passage from *Proverbs* with an especially high concentration of material about speech is Proverbs 10:6-32. Scattered throughout this chapter are several proverbial sayings about the wise use of language. We'd like to consider these in what follows. Remember that the book of *Proverbs* is not written like a systematic work of theology, with ideas arranged under neat little headings. The writer wanted to package his material in short pithy sayings so that it could be easily memorized and recalled at the appropriate time. Making an outline of this book is difficult if not impossible. However, embedded within these longer sections are recurring themes which the patient reader is able to ferret out. That will be our attempt here.

1. “Words which conceal violence” (10:6). We hide things for all sorts of reasons. If they are valuable to us, hiding them is good, for it keeps the clever thief from finding them. Sometimes, hidden things need to be brought out into the open where they can be enjoyed, shared, or evaluated — are they worth keeping? Wicked persons conceal wicked intentions, such as violent actions plotted against the unsuspecting. By contrast, righteous people “live under the blessing,” and believe that God's plans — His covenant plans — are more than adequate as the source of their lives. “Blessings on the head” suggests that God is the *source* of what the righteous possess. Opposite this is the scheming of the wicked who use words to hide their true intentions. A further explanation appears in 10:11, but this time the focus falls on the “mouth of the righteous.” Rather than concealing violence, the words of the righteous which are informed by wisdom become a “fountain of life.” The image is of an artesian well shooting upward, a source of refreshment and renewal to all those who drink from it.

2. “Words which never end” (10:8). Some people never stop talking. The writer describes them as those who “babble.” Words become a weapon which keeps truth away. On the other hand, “the wise of heart” know what it means to be quiet and “receive commandments” rather than constantly dishing out words. Wise people believe that they have a lot to learn, and in order to do so, they must close their mouths and open their ears. This reminds us of an old adage: The reason God gave us two ears and one mouth was to make sure we listened more than we speak! According to 10:10, a person who can’t listen but is always talking is engaged in highly destructive behavior.
3. “Words of wisdom or a rod of correction” (10:13). God’s perfect plan is to make us wise through giving us the ability to understand His word — His wisdom. A willingness to seek insight into what God says is the true mark of a wise person. Remember, the word “understanding” is based on the Hebrew which has to do with getting at the heart, meaning, and inner truth of things. The opposite method of instruction is painful, for it does not involve having understanding but, instead, having the “rod” applied to the back! God would rather not communicate His truth in this way, but for those who “lack sense” — who refuse to be taught or to learn — harsher measures are often required. Think about the severe consequences people experience in their lives because they refuse to open their hearts to what God wants to teach them. The phrase, “lack sense,” in Hebrew literally says “lacking a heart” (*hāsar-lēb*), an idiom which means that a person refuses to open their heart to what they are being told.
4. “Store or spend” (10:14). The writer uses a “treasure” metaphor to contrast the way wise persons and foolish persons manage words. To the wise, knowledge and the words used to express it are like a treasure, stored up and then spent only when necessary. By contrast, the fool spends words carelessly, leading him to moral bankruptcy.
5. “Conceal and spread” (10:18). The wicked person hides his anger — his *internalized* violence — behind a string of lies. Words to him have nothing to do with truth but are, instead, instruments for “spinning” his private evil intentions. He is a “wordsmith,” a cunning manipulator of ideas through words. At the same time, in the outside world, the person without wisdom, uses words to slander others in an attempt to neutralize any who would oppose him, giving opportunity for his anger to be released in subtle and devious ways.
6. “When words are many...” (10:19). This is a warning about uncontrolled speech. Excessive words result in careless speech. Careless speech leads to sin. The wise person sees words as the carefully chosen vehicles for the helpful communication of knowledge. Self-control applies to speech as much as it applies to anything else. Speech sets in motion a series of events. Too many words sets in motion more events than the speaker can possibly control. Therefore, says the writer, “he who holds his tongue is wise.”
7. “Valuable words” (10:20). Rare things are frequently deemed of greater value than common things. This proverb compares the words of the righteous to “choice silver.” The Hebrew word for “choose” is *bāḥar*, a term often applied to God’s choice of His people. Generally, choice implies selection of the best. A righteous person — one who values *doing right* and *making right* above all else — chooses his words with care, because he wants those words to accomplish the righteous purposes of his heart.
8. “Words that feed others” (10:21). So valuable are the words chosen by the righteous (to continue the theme of #7) that they are nourishing food *to others*. The wise speaker uses words, not for his own sake, but for the well-being of others. Looking back to what the writer has told us about the wicked person, we see that he only has himself in view, and his words are intended to harm others. Ironically, the wicked person proves himself to be the fool — his words cannot even nourish himself, as this proverb suggests: he “dies” from spiritual starvation.
9. “Words that give birth to wisdom” (10:31). This proverb uses a reproductive metaphor, specifically, one from the field of horticulture. The Hebrew root, *nûb*, means “to bear fruit,” with the additional thought of “flourishing.” In this proverb are echoes of Psalm 1 where the righteous person, “brings forth fruit in his season,” since he is like a “tree planted by rivers of water” — a tree with leaves that do not wither. Where does this fruitfulness originate? The implication is that wisdom comes from the heart where God has placed it through His word. It is only natural for the seeds of God’s truth which find friendly soil in human hearts to sprout forth and bear fruit. What this proverb tells us is that the fruit takes the form of words. By contrast, like the tree which does not bear fruit and is cut down, the tongue of the wicked will be “cut out.”

By using this metaphor, the writer sends a strong message about the consequences of the fruitless life. A good New Testament parallel is found in John 15 — Jesus’ allegory of the vine. Words in that case are the ones spoken by Jesus, and they have a powerful role in the fruitfulness of his followers.

10. “Words that are fitting” (10:32). From another wisdom book, *Ecclesiastes*, we hear the words, “a time to be silent and a time to speak...” (3:7b). In what sense are words “fitting” or not “fitting”? This proverb affirms that “the lips of the righteous know what is fitting...” Behind this term is the Hebrew *ratsōn* which means “good will, favor, acceptable, or will.” It can also mean “pleasure, or delight.” When the word has to do with sacrifices, the emphasis falls on their acceptance by God — the fact that He is pleased with them. What the proverb seems to be saying is that righteous words (wise ones) create a favorable situation when they are spoken. By contrast, wicked words (foolish ones) engender all things perverse. Combining the thought of #9 with this proverb, we hear the ancient truism, “by their fruits you will know them” (see Matthew 12:33; Luke 6:44).

## Words Don’t Lie

Of course, people lie, and they often use lies to cover up their sins or to mask their plans. However, words are much more resilient than people. Once spoken, they cannot easily be taken back. Like an animal released from its cage, words burst from our hearts and go in search of prey. We use words not only to communicate ideas, but to change the state of the world. With words, we try to make things happen. The question posed by the *Proverbs* is “what kind of things?” Cleverly crafted words may temporarily conceal a bad conscience or an evil plan. Sooner or later, however, they take on a life of their own and betray their masters. Even the smallest word carelessly uttered, like a renegade cell in the body, divides and multiplies until its alien form does damage to everything it touches. “Too late!” it cries back at us as it spins off in an uncontrolled direction.

Other wisdom books of the Old Testament dwell on this theme. Among them, the book of *Job* accents the painful effects of ill-advised speech. Recall that Job eventually lost his health and experienced excruciating pain. The wisdom writer records several speeches by Job in which he castigates his friends for being miserable comforters in the midst of his suffering.

Behold, my eye has seen all this, my ear has heard and understood it. <sup>2</sup> What you know, I also know; I am not inferior to you. <sup>3</sup> But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God. <sup>4</sup> As for you, you whitewash with lies; worthless physicians are you all. <sup>5</sup> Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom! (Job 13:1-5).

Then Job answered and said: <sup>2</sup> "I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all. <sup>3</sup> Shall windy words have an end? Or what provokes you that you answer? <sup>4</sup> I also could speak as you do, if you were in my place; I could join words together against you and shake my head at you. <sup>5</sup> I could strengthen you with my mouth, and the solace of my lips would assuage your pain (Job 16:1-5).

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? (Job 38:2)

These are wonderful examples of renegade speech as experienced by Job from his friends. Notice his observation: “Oh that you would be silent, and it would be your wisdom!” “...darkens counsel by words without knowledge.” Job is keenly aware how speech can be used either to help or to destroy. Even in his pain, he has the wisdom to teach his friends the blessings of speech, and how they are to be shared.

Written when Solomon was old, his most philosophical work, *Ecclesiastes*, reflected on the work of the master Teacher:

<sup>9</sup> Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. <sup>10</sup> The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth.

<sup>11</sup> The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd (Ecclesiastes 12:9-11).

Words matter, says the wisdom writer. To use them properly, we need to “weigh, study and arrange them with great care.” The handler of wisdom “sought to find words” before he spoke or wrote them.

When the prophet Isaiah faced a crisis, he acknowledged the role of speech in making things worse, and the role of God in setting them right again:

5 And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for (Isaiah 6:5-7).

Since Isaiah was a prophet, *speech* was a crucial part of his work! He knew that, along with the rest of Israel, he had a serious problem with his words — with his lips. Before he could speak God's word, he needed to cleanse his own. Part of God's saving love was to "touch his lips" in order to remove his guilt and sin.

Wisdom should be the master of our words, or our words will become the master of us. Make no mistake: words reveal our character, and they are finger-printed with our intentions. Like a piece of DNA, they carry within themselves a thousand generations of falsity, slander, and lies. Or, they embody across time the health-producing, life-changing wisdom of God. They either preserve truth or they perpetuate error. Above all, we must respect the dynamism of words, and treat them as fragile bearers of truth or frightful beasts of terror.

Much of what Solomon tells us about words grew out of his own experience as king of Israel. He counsels his son to treat words with respect because one day his son will also sit on the throne. When a king speaks, people listen, he tells his son. We all ought to learn from that. What if we viewed our words as though they came from the most powerful monarch on the planet? Would we show greater care in the way we used them? Would we recognize the impressions others form of us by the way we speak? More importantly, when we represent the King of kings to the world, are we aware that people hearing us might also think they are hearing Him? Are we willing to have God judged by the words *we speak*? For many, our words, spoken in the name of Christ, may well be the only words some people associate with what God has said.

The New Testament writer, James, offers us identical advice when he writes:

19 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires. 21 Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls (James 1:19-21).

"Slow to speak" is coupled with "slow to anger," but, more importantly, comes from being "quick to hear." At the root of these wise actions lies the critical command, "receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls." In that statement is the kind of wisdom which *Proverbs* constantly requires of us. Words will either reveal "filthiness and rampant wickedness" in our lives, or else it will show real evidence that God is saving our souls! Far and away, our first attention should be paid to the *implanted word* before we let loose the *spoken word*. The *implanted word* is *the one God speaks*. Scripture is the place where we can hear His voice if we are "quick to listen." Allowing His word to shape, mold, and transform us makes possible the necessary wisdom to responsibly use the *spoken word*.

"Like begets like" — God's word gives birth to our words if we are cultivate its growth in our hearts. Failure to receive the implanted word results in our words running wild and out of control. Worse, we might make the fatal mistake of confusing our words with His word. The words which come from our mouths bear witness to their father. In James 1:18, the introduction to 1:19, the writer tells us:

Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

The first-fruits carry around the tell-tale signs of their source. If our words come from the tree of God's truth, they will have the mark of truth imprinted on them. However, if our words come from our own selfish desires and evil intentions, sooner or later, the fruit which grows from them will point back to "the father of lies" and not to God:

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44).

Whose imprint is on your words? When others hear them, will they be: Blessed or cursed? Helped or hurt? Enriched or robbed? Lifted up or put down? Saved or lost? What do your words tell others about you? About God?

## Concluding Thoughts

In a speech to the Royal College of Surgeons in London (1923), the novelist Rudyard Kipling once said, "Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind." He went to say, "Not only do words infect, egotize, narcotize, and paralyze, but they enter into and color the minutest cells of the brain..." Those of us who spend a lot of time writing discover the elusive nature of words to capture ideas. I claim to know something, but then stumble around trying to find the right words to communicate it. Not all words work well. In writing, "a miss is as good as mile." Words must qualify for the critical positions they hold, whether in speech or in print. A certain chemistry affects the right combination of words. You don't want to make a mistake with the verbal equivalent of nitro!

Our increasingly non-verbal culture, with its strong reliance on images and sounds to convey meaning, creates ambiguity. "What does that picture mean?" is harder to nail down — it could mean a host of things, not all of them things what we intended. Of course, "a picture is worth a thousand words,"<sup>1</sup> and can be a testimony to mysterious beauty. Perhaps we have retreated to pictures because of the treacherous nature of words. Still, we can hardly dispense with words, nor should we. Better to learn their wise use than to lose them altogether.

By contrast, the culture of the ancient world was largely *oral*, and its people had developed competence in creating and preserving speech *orally*. Story-telling relied heavily on "getting it right" whenever a tale was repeated. Audiences were quick to correct the speaker when he "got it wrong." The writer of *Proverbs* shared the value of getting it right, only he re-focused on the telling of sayings which got it right *for the sake of doing it right*. Ethics flowed with right speech in the same river-bed. It matters a great deal when we get the wisdom part wrong, and when we fail to guard our lips, allowing them to be the divinely appointed gatekeepers of our hearts.

Writing in the Huffington Post (January 17, 2008), Dr. Susan Smalley offered these insights:

"Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me." I remember saying those words when young to try and convince myself of its truth in the face of painful words thrown my way. Unfortunately, it is far from true. Verbal insults, verbal abuse, and the power of words to affect your emotions and actions are well demonstrated in science. For example, scientists have found that just hearing sentences about elderly people led research subjects to walk more slowly. In other research, individuals read words of 'loving kindness' showed increases in self-compassion, improved mood, and reduced anxiety.

But words are not attended to equally by all. Studies reveal that we place our attention toward words differently depending on our own biological or personality traits. For example, individuals with eating disorders pay greater attention to words reflecting body parts or body image than others, and in other experiments 'taboo' words require more time to reach conscious awareness than words lacking taboo connotations. I notice among my own blogs, those with titles including words like "God" or "abortion" receive many more responses than less emotionally charged words.

... Clearly we are all attending more to the power of words. I see the impact of words I choose on the world around me and my own biases, prejudices, and selective attention in the words I hear. Yesterday, my son detected an unknown prejudice when I was talking on the phone with an auto broker to ship a car from Michigan to LA. The broker's voice, likely of a different racial/ethnic group than mine and speaking with some slang and grammatical errors led me to quickly project an image of a man who might not be so legitimate in business. I dislike that I subconsciously had such a prejudicial view based on the words he used but I realized that biases run deep and likely reflect my 52 years of living (raised in the 50s and living before and after the civil and women's

---

<sup>1</sup> Often attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte.

rights' movements). I was happy to see my son (age 22) free of such conditioning, capable of easily detecting it and possessing the courage to point it out to me.

It's hard to look prejudice in the face - especially in yourself - and particularly in a cultural climate of intolerance for weakness or error of any sort. ... Again, the words and their intent meant different things to different people. But recognition and heightened sensitivity, while important, need to be met by kindness and forgiveness, not self-righteous indignation...

I once read that a word is like a living organism, capable of growing, changing, spreading, and influencing the world in many ways, directly and indirectly through others. I never thought about a word being 'alive' but then I thought of words spoken 3,000 years ago, written down and passed through many generations, and they seem quite alive when read or spoken today, having lived 3,000 years. As I ponder the power of the word to incite and divide, to calm and connect, or to create and effect change, I am ever more cautious in what I say and how I listen to the words around me.

As Christ followers, we can learn a great deal from *Proverbs* in its insistence on the carefully chosen word. Recently, at our District Assembly for the Chicago Central District, we were privileged to hear from the first African General Superintendent elected by the Nazarene Church. Dr. Eugenio Duarte addressed the delegates several times during the course of the weekend. My immediate impression was, here's a man who treats words with respect and chooses them judiciously. Every word mattered, and he was in no great haste to simply ramble on in an effort to get his meaning across. When he was finished, his meaning was clear. As a preacher of the Gospel, he showed the discipline of a disciple who is "quick to hear and slow to speak." He was neither effusive nor beggarly with his words. They were the faithful carriers of his ideas, and, more significantly, of the wisdom God gave him to speak. For a man who knows and speaks more than one language, this is no small achievement. I found myself treating his words with respect, because, in his choices, he did so as well. In his role as a leader, we came to know him by his words. What powerful message does that send to us? Known by words — the challenge of *Proverbs* this week!

Glory to God! Amen.

**Digger Deeper:** *Get Smart: Known for Words*  
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *Get Smart: Known for Words*? carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Give a few examples of the different ways you use words in your daily life. In what sense are words the sources of action? How do words make things happen? What possible dangers are inherent in this use of words? What benefits? Give some examples from your own life.
2. Read the following texts from the Gospels, and then discuss Jesus' teaching about the use of words: Matthew 15:18-20; 12:34-37; John 6:63; 12:47-50. How did people view the speech of Jesus (Luke 4:22)? What did Jesus view as the function of his own speech (Matthew 24:35; Luke 6:47-49)?
3. Scan through the thirty-one chapters of Proverbs, and jot down the references to the use of speech or the power of words. To get you started, look at these: 4:24; 5:2-3; 7:21; 8:6-7; 12:13, 19, 22; 13:3. What role do the "lips" seem to have in these passages?
4. Read and study this week's first main text: Proverbs 16:21-32. List all its references to speech. What different terms does the writer use to refer to speech?
5. Focusing on the following verses, discuss the power of speech for good and also for evil: 16:21, 23-24, 27, 30, 32.
6. What example in the life of Solomon revealed that, as king, he used words for good purposes (see 1 Kings 3:16-28)? Remember that Solomon wrote many of the Proverbs we are studying (1 Kings 4:32).
7. In the New Testament, the book of James handles speech in ways similar to *Proverbs* 16. Read James 3:1-18 and comment on the parallels. Do you see any distinctively Christian "spin" in *James* that is missing from *Proverbs*?
8. The second main text is Proverbs 10:6-32. Focus on the following verses, and discuss the power of speech for good and for evil: 10:6, 8, 13-14, 18-21, 31. Which of these proverbs about the use of words is especially meaningful to you? How might you apply it to your own life?
9. In what ways does the book of Job illustrate what *Proverbs* tells us about the potentially destructive use of words (Job 13:1-5; 16:1-5; 38:2)?
10. Compare the teaching of Ecclesiastes 12:9-11. What key ideas are similar to the Proverbs texts?
11. What speech crisis did the prophet Isaiah face, and how was it solved (Isaiah 6:5-7)?
12. Using these New Testament passages, what practical application do they give us in our use of words: James 1:19-21; John 8:44.
13. Based on your study, comment on the following statement: The lips are the gateway of the heart.
14. In what ways do words reveal the kind of persons we are? What do words tell us about the character of other people?