

## GUARD YOUR SPEECH

Proverbs - Selected Verses

I guess that most of us have had instances in which we suffered from “foot in mouth” problems. In the politically charged environment of our nation, the media are quick to pick up any gaffes made by those who are considered to be newsworthy and they make a big deal of it. Even for those of us who are not famous, we are at risk of saying something that is not “politically correct.” In a work environment, we don’t usually have reporters listening for something that is inappropriate, but there are people around who are looking for opportunities to sue an employer for “allowing” what may be considered “hostile” speech in the workplace.

Many times we are totally unaware of what is appropriate and not appropriate since the rules are constantly changing. I remember in the early 1990s, the company I worked for had a laboratory in Japan to provide customer service for those who bought our products in that area of the world. The head of that lab was a middle-aged Japanese fellow who was extremely polite and thoughtful. However, he was not “up-to-date” on what was considered politically incorrect phrases in the workplace. He was visiting our lab and I was introducing him to people in the area. When I introduced him to my secretary (who was an attractive young lady), he felt prompted to pay her a compliment by saying “Your husband – a very lucky man.” You cannot say that! She was also a very understanding person and was not bothered by what he said.

Since a lot of our interpersonal relationships are carried out by what we say or what we write, we have a multitude of opportunities for making errors **and** for doing good as we interact with others. Many of us are prone to using a lot of negatives when interacting with others or when giving feedback since we have learned to look for flaws rather than look for what is going very well. Even when providing corrective coaching, we many have a tendency to say “don’t do this or that” rather than saying “do it this way.” We might advise a child who is learning to ride a bicycle to “don’t run into that rock on the path” rather than saying, “look for a way around the rock.”

### Think Before You Speak – 17:27-28; 21:23

<sup>27</sup> He who restrains his words has knowledge, And he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. <sup>28</sup> Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; When he closes his lips, he is *considered* prudent. Proverbs 17:27-28

<sup>23</sup> He who guards his mouth and his tongue, Guards his soul from troubles. Proverbs 21:23 (NASB95)

You can’t control what happens to you; but, you can control your reaction. Maturity and responsibility are evident in our lives when we can handle the pressures and pains of life without becoming stressed out, angry, bitter and blowing up. The way we usually express our emotions is through our words and actions. Sometimes the best comment is “no comment” or even silence.

We can learn a lot from the example that Jesus gave us. He was falsely accused but He did not engage in a lot of rhetoric in rebutting accusations or arguing to show that He was right. When He was before the Sanhedrin, He was very restrained in His responses and only answered a direct question such as “Are you the Son of God?”

He showed this same type of control before Pilate which was very frustrating to Pilate. These actions were in fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 53:7 which reads “He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth.”

In the second part of verse 27 in chapter 17 we find why or how a person is able to restrain his or her words. It is a result of having a “cool spirit.” Elsewhere in the Scriptures we see that we should be fervent in spirit. The word “fervent” has the idea of being hot, zealous,

energetic, and persistent. Can we have all these good, intense characteristics and still have a “cool spirit?” The driving force for being hot, zealous, energetic, and persistent originates in our emotions. However, we are not to be controlled by our emotions. If we allow our emotions to run freely or uncontrolled, then our lives can become chaotic and we lose that peace that passes understanding.

There are several keys to making these seemingly opposing forces work properly. It begins with knowledge and understanding of God, human nature, and how the “world, the flesh, and the devil” influence us. The characteristics and attributes of God and what pleases Him is not hidden but has been revealed in nature, in the written word of God and in the Living Word of God as seen in Jesus Christ. The triune nature of humans is that we have body, soul, and spirit. We know that man apart from God (his spirit being dead) is rebellious and will behave in a way that is in opposition to what God wants. After we have experienced the new birth, then our spirits are made alive and can interact with the Spirit of God. As we are transformed by the renewing our minds, then our wills should be aligned with what God desires.

In volume 2 of *The Spiritual Man* by Watchman Nee, we find the following regarding how Christians should live:

“Fervency is what our will desires, but so is coolness. We should never permit our spirit to be in such a condition as to extend beyond the control of the will. We must will both to have a fervent spirit toward the Lord’s work and to maintain a cool spirit in executing that work.”

This balancing act of being powerfully energetic and serenely calm at the same time is a good description of the idea embodied in the work “meek.”

How do we usually determine whether people are foolish or wise? Typically it is by what they say (or write in emails or social media) and to a lesser extent by what they do. In many areas of life, there is a lot more said than is ever done. Those who are impetuous will have a tendency to give their opinion without hearing or learning all the facts. A thoughtful person will tend to listen more and talk less until the various aspects of what is being considered can be discovered.

For example, a judge would be very foolish to render a verdict after hearing only one side of a case that comes to his court. In the same way even an uninformed person will be less likely to make a foolish pronouncement if he or she will just wait to hear more. Not only will a person who waits to render an opinion on a matter be considered to be wise, he or she will actually be better informed which is a positive step toward being wise.

No one likes trouble and we would like to avoid it when possible. If we realize that what we say or write can create problems for us, then we should make an assessment to determine if the point we wanted to make is worth the trouble it can cause. Some things are so important and the truth is so significant that it must be said regardless of the problems it can cause. (Take the situation of much of what Jesus taught and the claims he made during His earthly ministry.) Many other things are not so important and the value of the information is sometimes worth far less than the cost of the trouble it produces.

### Recognize the Power of Words – 18:19-21

<sup>19</sup> A brother offended *is harder to be won* than a strong city, And contentions are like the bars of a citadel. <sup>20</sup> With the fruit of a man’s mouth his stomach will be satisfied; He will be satisfied *with* the product of his lips. <sup>21</sup> Death and life are in the power of the tongue, And those who love it will eat its fruit. Proverbs 18:19-21 (NASB95)

All of us have probably heard the children’s chant of “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Hardly anything could be further from the truth!

In handling disputes between two parties who have equally good positions and

arguments, we find that those involved will present their cases and many times they can't convince each other that one is right and the other is wrong. When such an impasse is reached, we may find that the two sides will resort to personal attacks on each other since the objective arguments are equally balanced. A good rule to remember is that "it is rare that we ever change someone's mind by arguing with them."

One way to deal with such disputes is to have someone who is not emotionally involved be an arbitrator in the matter. This neutral person would hear both sides and could possibly be able to offer a compromise that both sides could accept. If such a compromise can't be reached, then a better solution than attacking one another is to flip a coin or cast lots as was sometimes done in making decisions when both sides are equally right or wrong. The yes-or-no decision given by casting lots helps avoid ongoing conflicts between opponents who are equally matched. This process is what we see in the two verses leading up to verse 19 which is a word of caution regarding the problems that can come about when people attack each other with verbal abuse.

When a close friend or relative is hurt in such a dispute, it may be as difficult to restore that friendship as it would be to conquer a heavily fortified city. This raises a very important question. Why are we more hurt by what a friend or relative would say than what a total stranger might say?

The first reason is that all of us have an expectation of a positive obligation toward each other in the case of those who are close to us. Consequently, harsh and abusive comments are seen as unnatural and unbecoming to such a relationship where honor and respect should be the norm.

The second, and perhaps more important reason, is that of credibility. When a total stranger says something insulting about our actions or character, then we can easily dismiss the accusation by realizing that the person does not really know us or what motivates us and, therefore, his or her comments have no validity. On the other hand, when something insulting comes from someone who does know us, then we assign more credibility to their remarks than is likely warranted and we feel injured or our pride is hurt.

So, what do we do with such situations? There are two aspects to consider. The first is related to the actions and statements we make toward others. The second is related to how we respond when actions and statements are made toward us by others.

When we find ourselves in disputes, then the first guiding principle for us to follow is to "say or do nothing in anger." This is where having a "cool spirit" (being meek) keeps us out of more trouble. Another principle is to remember that we will never regret being generous, kind and truthful. The third thing to keep in mind is that we should talk less and listen more. These actions will assist in minimizing the resentment and hurt that the other person will experience and make it easier for him or her to be restored to a good relationship.

What about our response when the invectives are directed toward us by either those who do not know us or those who are really close to us? The external response is covered in the previous paragraph. What is more important is what we do internally. First of all, do not ignore what the stranger may say to us even though it may have little validity. A rebuke or harsh response from a stranger may come from a misinterpretation of our intent in whatever we may have said or done. This is really a good learning opportunity. How might we speak or act in the future to avoid such a misinterpretation? In realizing how another person might misread what we intended, we can become better communicators and, thereby, not diminish our influence for good. The other possibility is that what we did or said was, in fact, unkind or uncouth. This too is a learning opportunity and a chance for avoiding such words or behavior in the future.

What about those who know us and accuse us of having either character flaws or poor motivation. Such an accusation should trigger an examination of either our ability to properly communicate what is in our heart or to change a flawed attitude that may have been lying dormant and something with which we need to deal in making progress in the process of becoming more like Christ.

Just as God spoke the world into existence, we speak and situations are created that can be good or evil. Words are very powerful. Deep down inside of us in our consciences (stomach, belly, or gut) we know whether the words we speak make things better or worse. Good results are satisfying like pleasant food is to our physical stomach. Bad results can be very upsetting just as food poisoning can be to us physically. Just as we take great care about the physical foods we eat, we must be even more careful about the words we speak for the harm goes even beyond ourselves and impacts others.

### Guard Against Gossip – 11:13; 26:20-24

<sup>13</sup> He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets, But he who is trustworthy conceals a matter. Proverbs 11:13

<sup>20</sup> For lack of wood the fire goes out, And where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down. <sup>21</sup> Like charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, So is a contentious man to kindle strife. <sup>22</sup> The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, And they go down into the innermost parts of the body. <sup>23</sup> Like an earthen vessel overlaid with silver dross Are burning lips and a wicked heart. <sup>24</sup> He who hates disguises *it* with his lips, But he lays up deceit in his heart. Proverbs 26:20-24 (NASB95)

This collection of verses warns us of the dangers of not being careful with confidential information. There are some things that happen involving people who make mistakes or get into trouble that you may learn about. We are all prone to make errors but everyone does not need to know about it. We all need to exercise good judgment in such matters. If we learn something about a friend or neighbor or even about someone who is well known, the decision as to whether to share that information should be tempered by consideration of whether the news is good or bad. If your neighbor's son won a prize for being a good citizen then we probably should pass along that news. On the other hand, if he was suspended for smoking pot at school, then we should not pass that along.

As with anything we do, we need to evaluate our motives for sharing information about others as well as about ourselves. Do we want to create a negative environment or a positive one? Do we want to build up others or tear them down? Do we tell everything we know so that others will think that we are “in the know” which feeds our pride or do we think first as to whether such information is helpful or harmful?

### Guard Against Falsehood – 10:18-19; 12:17-19

<sup>18</sup> He who conceals hatred *has* lying lips, And he who spreads slander is a fool. <sup>19</sup> When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, But he who restrains his lips is wise. Proverbs 10:18-19

<sup>17</sup> He who speaks truth tells what is right, But a false witness, deceit. <sup>18</sup> There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, But the tongue of the wise brings healing. <sup>19</sup> Truthful lips will be established forever, But a lying tongue is only for a moment. Proverbs 12:17-19 (NASB95)

The warning against gossip applies to whether the information we share is true or false. It is especially applicable if the so-called “facts” are not really facts at all but are lies. I get emails ever now and then that tells about some group or some agency of government that is doing something to ruin our lives or limit our freedoms. Most of the time, the facts do not support the story and in many cases the bad information has been circulating for ten to twenty years. That kind of misinformation does nothing but agitate people and if it is done often enough we will become insensitive to such “news” and when a real threat comes along we will ignore

something of actual danger.

These warnings are not to say that we should not communicate with each other and share what we know. We should be talking to others and communicating. The question is what is the message and does that message harm or help.

#### Use Words to Help and Heal – 25:11-13; 31:8-9

<sup>11</sup> Like apples of gold in settings of silver Is a word spoken in right circumstances. <sup>12</sup> Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold Is a wise reprov-er to a listening ear. <sup>13</sup> Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest Is a faithful messenger to those who send him, For he refreshes the soul of his masters. Proverbs 25:11-13 (NASB95)

<sup>8</sup> Open your mouth for the mute, For the rights of all the unfortunate. <sup>9</sup> Open your mouth, judge righteously, And defend the rights of the afflicted and needy. Proverbs 31:8-9 (NASB95)

One of the modern day adages that we hear quoted is “Put your mind in gear before you put your mouth in motion.” That is certainly good advice and many more practice doing that than we realized. Some may argue against this observation by noting that many people say many silly or even stupid or hurtful things. I fear that, even in many of these cases, the person did think about how to say something that would be insulting, degrading, and unkind before they said it. That is worse than “not thinking before speaking.”

The root of the issue of saying or even doing what is right or wrong comes back to what is really motivating us or what is the essence of our basic nature. Thinking before we speak is a tactic and what we think is strategic.

A little self examination or meditation is often helpful. What is our general overall intent in whatever we think, say and do? Are we motivated to make the world a better place, to encourage others, to be helpful, and to get people to see their potential? The other two choices are to be neutral or to make things worse than they are by being discouraging, or to get in the way and even point out everyone else’s limitations.

We may even have an opportunity to use what we say in an advocacy way to help those who can’t speak out. Some people are limited in their resources and abilities and need someone who can represent them when they can’t help themselves. We often quote a nonexistent scripture verse that says “God helps those who help themselves.” The truth of the matter is that God is the “Help of the helpless” as seen the fourth line of the first verse of the hymn *Abide with Me*. Since that is the character of God, then we should follow His way as we are being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ.