

INTRODUCTION

Two weeks ago, we discussed parenting based on God's instructions in the book of Proverbs. Today we will pick selected verses from the book to talk about verbal communication. The James passage we just read is complementary to what we will learn today. James shared with us some dos and don'ts on how we should use our tongue. Some people called the book of James the New Testament Proverbs. We use words to exchange ideas. If we can express ourselves such that the listener can understand our message, then it is an effective communication. A story was told about little five-year-old Peter. One day he went home from school. He could not wait to ask his mother: "Mommy, mommy, where do we come from?" Mom was shocked by the question. She mumbled to herself: "I don't expect to deal with such inquiry so soon." Oh well, she took a deep breath and told Peter about the birds and the bees. The young child opened his eyes and mouth wide like saucers. "I thought only chickens lay eggs," Peter said, "I don't know that we also come from eggs!" "Thanks, mommy!" As Peter ran off to his room, mom took pride in her Biology 101 answer. Peter returned moments later: "Mommy, I still don't get it. My good friend Henry told me that his grandparents came from Germany. How can we crack an egg and come out from it?" Ops! Miscommunication. We all faced situations where we meant to say one thing but the listener interpreted differently. In other instances, we felt like banging our heads on the wall because we regretted hurting people through our words. How can we improve our communication to help us understand each other better? In the book of Proverbs, Solomon told us that godly wisdom enables us to benefit others in our speech.

EXPLANATION

1. Say the Right Things 講出合宜的話

First, let us think about the positive aspects. We have to say the right things. **Proverbs 12:25** advises us to use our words to comfort those who are hurting: An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers it up. We all have been troubled by various problems. Very often the real issue is the uncertainty about the future. We worry how different the outcome will be if we choose to study this major versus something else, accept this job offer rather than another one or go with treatment plan A instead of plan B for a disease. What we need the most may not be an expert advice. All it takes is a mature Christian to remind us of the truth that God is watching over us and He will show us the way if we rely on Him. Then all of a sudden, the dark cloud in our head disappears. Solomon told us that we also have to be gentle in our words. Let us look at **Proverbs 15:1** - A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Have you met people who get irritated easily? They are like walking time-bombs. If you raise your voice, they may respond with more firepower. Instead, you can calm everyone with your gentleness. Remember that time when David was pursued by king Saul and he went to seek help from a wealthy guy named Nabal? The name means "fool." What kind of parents would give their son such a name? The passage tells us that David's men treated Nabal's shepherds with kindness. But Nabal refused to return the favor as if he did not know David. Therefore, David decided to bring 400 men to attack Nabal. The wife of Nabal, Abigail quickly brought some food to David and pleaded for mercy. Abigail's gentle words neutralized David's anger and prevented him

from avenging for himself. Gentle words saved the day! However, in some cases you have to be stern in pointing out a person's mistakes. **Proverbs 27:5-6** read: 5 Better is open rebuke than hidden love. 6 Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses. Later after David became king of Israel, he devised a wicked scheme to murder a soldier named Uriah in order to snatch his wife Bathsheba. God sent the prophet Nathan to convict David of his sins. Nathan was not afraid to confront the king. As a general rule of thumb, always correct a person in private but praise him/her in public. If you have evidence that someone is at fault, go directly to the person like Nathan did and let him/her clarify the matter. This is to make sure that you would not falsely accuse the person. The goal is to correct the mistake, not to shame the person. A person with godly wisdom knows when to say the right things at the right time. The purpose is to improve mutual understanding and to edify others. Paul summarized it in **Ephesians 4:29** - Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. The Chinese translation for the word "unwholesome" may imply foul language. That is not the case. The term can be understood as something worthless. We should say something that is helpful to others. I do not mean that we should flatter people just to make them feel good. In our speech we have to be truthful and sincere. When I first started my pastoral ministries, I determined to be an encourager. There are many people who live an unfulfilled dream because of what they had been through. I intend to use God's Word to cheer people up, so that they can see themselves from God's perspective. The world evaluates us based on how much we have and what we can do. But God looks at us as His dear children. We need more encouragers in this world. We need to fix our eyes on God's beautiful creation. He enables us to participate in His work. When we see people being effective in their ministries, thank them for their contribution. Even when the outcome is not that ideal, do not be critical. Still compliment coworkers for their hard work.

2. Don't Say the Wrong Things 不講失宜的話

Solomon told us that we should say the right thing to build people up. On the flip side, we should not say the wrong thing to tear people down. Proverbs has a lot to say how we may misuse our tongue. Please look at **14:25** - A truthful witness saves lives, but a false witness is deceitful. You may have heard cases where people went to jail for the crimes they did not commit because of false witness. It was not until the offenders were finally caught, then the innocent people were vindicated. Recently, an attorney asked me to help translate for his client. A restaurant owner was sued by a former worker for under-paying his wage. This malicious guy worked with a bad attorney and made up bogus claims to target people for their money. Their wicked scheme would prevail if the judge believed in their fake stories. As children of God, we should reflect God's glory in being truthful. For example, do not lie about your children's ages when you go to an amusement park or eat at a restaurant just because you want to save a few bucks. Do not exaggerate any accomplishment when you go to a job interview. If you just tightened some screws, do not describe that you built airplanes. Then **Proverbs 18:13** teaches us that we have to slow down in our reply: He who answers before listening - that is his folly and his shame. Some people are impatient to hear what others are telling them. They are too eager to express their own opinions. Most of you should be familiar with **James 1:19** - My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. One reason why some people get irritated so easily is because they have some built-in sensors in their ears. Whenever they hear something negative, they believe people are attacking them. They protest:

“How dare you to criticize me!” You might have heard the saying that the reason why God gave us two ears and one mouth is because He wanted us to spend twice the effort and time in listening rather than speaking. We have to slow down in our speech. Also, make sure you clarify what the other person is saying first before addressing your comment. Often people say that I have good memory in remembering people’s names. In fact, I don’t. But I have a trick to make up for my flaw: pay attention when people introduce themselves. It is that simple! I also teach my boys to listen with their eyes. When people talk, just focus and listen. Next, **Proverbs 26:22** mentions gossip: The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man’s inmost parts. Unfortunately, our sinful human nature always tempts us to gossip. By definition, gossip is the spreading of unverified and damaging information about someone. We heard something from one person, add our own interpretation and comments, then passed it on to the next person. You might have played the following game before. A few people lined up in a row. The game host says something to the first person. The task is to whisper what is heard to the next person. More than likely by the time it reaches the last person the message has been twisted completely. People enjoy a good laugh. However, when the same thing happens in real life, then it is no longer funny. But some people insist: “How can it be false when everybody, including my good friends, said so?” What is the best way to prevent a gossip from flying all over the place? Look at **Proverbs 26:20** - Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down. A forest fire will stop burning when it comes to a rock or a lake. It is because there is nothing flammable that can continue to spread the fire. You can be the person who stops a gossip from passing on. Just interrupt the person who shares the information with you and ask: “Have you checked the fact?” If not, you just turn and walk away. Resist the urge to even listen to a gossip! Recently, I read a wise saying from a WeChat post: “Those who say a gossip sin in their tongues. Those who listen to a gossip sin in their ears.” Which of those two groups of people do you want to be?

3. Don’t Say Anything 閉嘴不要講話

Sometimes we not only have to say the right things and avoid saying the wrong things, in some circumstances the wisest thing to do is not to say anything. **Proverbs 10:19** reads: When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise. Remember the story of Job in the Old Testament? God allowed Satan to test the faith of this righteous man. He lost all his properties and children in one day. But he stayed loyal to the Lord. His wife was not quite helpful in soothing his pain. She told Job that he might as well curse God and commit suicide. Three of Job’s friends came to comfort him. They wept with him, and they sat down on the ground with him and did not utter anything for seven days and seven nights. However, they sinned afterward as soon as they opened their mouths. They accused Job for committing some unrepented sins that led to God’s judgment. They ended up bringing more hurt than comfort. When we try to encourage a grieving brother or sister the wisest thing is not to say anything. That is not the right time to present your logic. Questions like why God did this but did not do that, or how different the outcome would have been if things did not happen in a certain way are irrelevant at that moment. The person might have wrestled with the same thoughts already. The biggest help you can offer is be there to show your support. Once I attended a funeral of a young father. As people lined up to pay final tribute to the deceased, I heard a lady said to the widow: “Please do let me know if you need any help. Anything at all.” Her voice was sincere. She made herself available, stepped back and gave the family room to grieve. That is wisdom. Let us look at another scenario where we should shut our mouths. **Proverbs 13:3** reads: He who guards his lips guards his

life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin. We live in a fast pace world. Very often we feel that we have to come up with an instant feedback. Sometimes a quick answer may not be the wisest answer. A story was told about the wordings on a tombstone in England. "Beneath this stone, a lump of clay, lies Arabella Young, on the 24th of May, began to hold her tongue." Why? Because she passed away that day! A wise person would pause and think for a moment before giving a reply. We can learn from Nehemiah in the Old Testament. He was saddened by the devastation in his hometown, Jerusalem. When the king asked what he wanted to do, Nehemiah prayed silently for a few seconds before making his requests. Pause, think and pray for wisdom before you answer. Your first instinct may not be the best insight. Ask humbly: "Can I think about it and get back to you in a few minutes?" You may be in a store when the sales associate pressures you to buy extra items. You do not need those stuff, but the price is quite attractive. You can tell the person: "Let me think about it." I can guarantee that your mind will be clearer when you walk out the store, or after you consult your friends or family members. Then let us also look at **Proverbs 17:27-28** – 27 A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered. 28 Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue. I always admire people who show their wisdom in merely a few sentences. They do not need to keep talking on and on to prove their expertise. They can explain complicated matters in ways that even elementary school students can understand. On the contrary, some other people reveal their ignorance by trying to come up with something to join a conversation. There is a hilarious quote from great author Mark Twain that says: "It's better to keep your mouth shut and appear (dumb) than open it and remove all doubt." When you approach a group of people who are discussing certain topic that is foreign to you, just stay silent and pay attention. Listen quietly and perhaps you can learn something new. But if you try to tag on the discussion and add something that is irrelevant people will immediately realize that you know nothing about the subject. You display your wisdom by just being there and say nothing.

CONCLUSION

In our lesson today, we learn that godly wisdom enables us to benefit others in our speech. There is no question that our words carry certain power. An old saying reads: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." We all know that it is untrue. Our Chinese ancestors were wiser. They said: "Words that come out from our mouths are like water that is splashed away. You can never take it back." The way we speak may end up in contrasting results. We can either draw people closer to us or separate us apart. We can either gain understanding and trust or cause conflict and doubt. Our words are also like a fire that can be useful or destructive. The fire burning in a furnace is under control, and it keeps your home warm. Whereas, a forest wildfire can destroy many trees that will take decades to replenish. The difference is whether our tongue is being restrained or not. Even as Christians, we can easily resort to our old self and only be mindful of our own gain. What comes out from our mouths reflects our hearts. We have to keep yielding our mind to the Holy Spirit, and allow His power to rule over us. In doing so, our lips will be an outlet for God's wisdom to build people up.