

Proverbs 24-10-16a

Greetings, welcome to Wednesday night Bible study at Grace and Truth Bible Church. We're continuing in Proverbs, we're at chapter 15. This is a fascinating section.

The lines here are going to discuss the Lord more than we have seen in past sections. We are going to see truths about the heart and about the tongue, about being foolish and being wise. They weave together in an extraordinary and effective fashion.

It is useful, it has traction, it will move us down the road. And we're going to have a good time looking at it together. Let's take a moment to ask God's blessing on our fellowship and study, and we will begin.

Father, what a wonderful truth of your word that says it is not by might nor by power, but by your spirit. You have provided everything that we need to accomplish your plans and purposes in our life to become what you would have us be, to represent the Lord Jesus Christ as his body on this earth, to reflect the light of your glory so that others can be drawn to you through the Lord Jesus Christ as they see the presence and the power of divine activity in our lives. We pray that as we look at this portion of your word together, that the Holy Spirit will bless it to each of our hearts, help us to see its pertinence and its application as we negotiate the challenges and the opportunities of each day.

In all things, may the Lord Jesus be glorified. We ask it in his name, amen. Let's read our passage.

One of the verses I learned as a child, we used to go to Child Evangelism Fellowship Camp in the summertime, and they had a competition, which I always really enjoyed, called Quote Down, which was the memorization of passages of scripture, and then it was like a spelling bee. And you would have two lines, there was teams, they would name these teams each year after animals or after tree species or something. So you'd have the oaks and the elms standing against each other, and you would come up and somebody would cite a reference, and you had to quote the verse, and it had to be perfect, from the original Apostle Paul, King James, had to be exactly right.

And if you missed a word, if you muffed it, if you forgot it, you had to sit down, and the last team that had anyone standing would win. This was one of those verses, Proverbs 13, 1. I remember it to this day. A soft answer turneth away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger.

And what a helpful concept, if we can remember it. It isn't that we don't think it's true. It isn't that it doesn't make a big difference, and it doesn't reflect one of the heartwood truths of God's plan and purpose.

It's that we can't remember it when we need it. The opportunity to put in a zinger, to

crack the whip a little bit in a conversation, and deliver a grievous word instead of a soft answer, especially when we feel like we are being criticized, judged, unappreciated. There's somehow someone steps on the corner of our garment there, and we respond with a grievous word, and we don't just take a beat, and let the Holy Spirit supply us with a soft answer.

God the Holy Spirit will draw from the reservoir of truth, wisdom, self-control, love, joy, and peace, that God has emplaced within us. It is there, and it's ready, and it's abundant. But the old saw that you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink, you can supply this wonderful water of life, this wonderful beneficial supply of blessed words, and forget to dip the bucket in, and make that a part of speech.

This is where praying in advance. This is why Psalm 55, 17 is so important. "Evening and morning and at noon, "I will pray and cry aloud, and he shall hear my voice.

"It is well-nigh impossible when we are surprised, "when we trip over an IED that someone has emplaced, "we wander into a field of landmines, "and all of a sudden, grievous words "want to emanate forth from our face. "It's almost impossible to think in that moment." So what do you do? You have to be prepared in advance. So particularly if this is a known problem, if we have failed in the past, in the morning prayer, we get up in the morning, we're cycling recent things that we've learned from the word of God.

We spent some time reading something that partakes of God's word, the word itself, or a devotional, or some thought, and we start cycling the word of God, which has the power. This is the power. If we rely on willpower, if we rely on our ability to perceive that a conversation may go in a direction where we wanna respond with a grievous word, we will fail every time.

It's a recipe for disaster. We have to anticipate. Sometime between now and noon, I am probably going to be surprised, overtaken, undercut, something's going to happen, and my mouth is going to be a machine gun with a worn sear.

It's just gonna start spraying bullets everywhere. Lord, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight. Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Lord, enable me to bridle my tongue, like it says in James. Then I can bring my whole body into subjection. Pray in advance.

I can tell you from experience, both positive when I remember this and negative when I fail to do it, this is the only way to avoid sins of the tongue. It's too short a span between someone saying something or you see something and your gut reaction, your knee-jerk response, you don't have time to stop and think. And we don't have the discipline to force ourselves to stop and think.

We have to pray in advance and ask God to enable us by the presence of the Holy Spirit and the power of his word to have a heart. This is why when David prays and he says, and he says, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, the way to avoid a hair-trigger mouth is to have a heart that is already at peace, that doesn't react, that doesn't generate anger and bitterness and invective or defensiveness and insecurity. And well, you're hurting my feelings, a prepared heart.

And this is why prayer is so important. Prayer plows the word of God into the soil of our heart. And we don't have a reactive heart.

We don't have bitterness. We're not on edge. We're not susceptible to insult or defensiveness or insecurity or whatever else it is that drives us to blast words out.

A soft answer turns away wrath. Not having a soft answer, having grievous words, this stirs anger. Anybody that's burnt a brush pile knows that you could think the fire is out, but you take a stick and you poke and you stir it, you can get more flames.

There's unburned stuff just under the layer of ash. And this is the problem. When we have unresolved anger, unresolved issues, and we've got a veneer of ash over the top, a grievous word will poke that fire like poking a bear.

And the reaction is devastating to our purpose. We are not here to act like the world. We are not here to let our fallen, sinful nature express itself.

We are supposed to be different. We are supposed to represent the Lord Jesus, who when he was vilified, he didn't answer back. Self-control starts with a prepared heart.

So prayer, first thing in the morning, if we're able to make it all the way till midday without messing up, at noon, take a break, find a quiet three minute space, shut the office door, go into the echo room that has metal doors that close, whatever place you can find to go into your closet, so to speak, get away from distractions and just spend a couple of minutes reviewing the morning, ask for God's forgiveness where we fail, ask for his provision and grace and blessing. Remember, be strengthened. We saw in 2 Timothy, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

We don't have the strength. So we must appeal. We must know where to look.

We must expect it, draw upon it. And we've got to break up our day into smaller sections. And remember who we are and why we're here.

Prayer is the best way. As we pray, we pray the truth of God's word into our day, into our circumstance, into our conversations. This is where the power is.

All of the good intentions of the world will not do. All of the good intentions of our nature will not do. The road to Hades is paved with good intentions.

Our intentions have no power. God's spirit and God's word strengthen us with might in the inner man. And that's where we need it.

So prepare the inner man because that's what controls the tongue. That's what controls the attitude. Have you seen where scientists have determined that there is a link, an actual physical communication pathway between our digestive system and our brain.

And once the digestive system develops a craving for certain foods, maybe it's fats, maybe it's sweets, whatever it might be, it will send signals and the gut can control the brain. And you have a resolve, no more ice cream for me, no more donuts, no more whatever it is that's causing a problem. But it isn't enough for your brain to say, here's six rational arguments why I shouldn't eat this little confection here.

The gut sends these subliminal messages, eat the donut, eat the candy, Halloween is coming, you need to sample it before you distribute it to children, whatever it may be. Rational arguments can't always overcome this instinctive craving. Well, God has provided power to strengthen us with might in the inner man and the inner man controls the tongue.

So it's wonderful to understand that a soft answer turns away wrath, it is the generating of a soft answer that is the challenge. I don't think you could find anybody who would disagree with the truth of this verse. Anybody on any area of the political spectrum, the social spectrum, rich, poor, happy, sad, do you believe this? Of course, can you do it? Of course not.

So we need to know how to live in the light of this truth, how to make this truth breathe and live and let the word of God crack the rocks. I love that verse in Jeremiah, "'Is not my word like a fire,' saith the Lord, "'and like a hammer that breaks the rocks in pieces?' The rocks are in our soul, the rocks are in the soil of the field and for the word of God to bear fruit, we've got to let the word of God smash those rocks into pulverized granules. A soft answer turns away wrath." And implicit in this is wrath is not a good thing for us.

Even science notes that a state of anger, stress releases cortisol and adrenaline and things that when they persist in our body for very long, they're only supposed to be there momentarily for fight or flight. But when there is a boiling ongoing resentment, anger, disappointment, these various facets of wrath, this eats at our physical body just as it eats at our soul. So a soft answer turns away wrath.

Grievous words do the opposite, they stir it up. This is followed by another speech stitch, two line proverb. And we're going to see here that there is a structure and it centers on the Lord.

I can't think of a better way to find the center of a chiasm than to see that the Lord is mentioned right there in the middle. And we're going to see that verses one and two

correspond to verses four and five. But don't worry about that right now.

Let's just look at the content because this next one continues with truths about our conversational interactions, our speech, what we say. So what kind of answer do we give? And notice it is a soft answer. Someone has created the opportunity by saying something.

It doesn't say a soft speech, a soft oration, a soft question. This is an answer. Someone has initiated an idea, brought up an issue, raised a criticism, stepped on one of our hot buttons and what kind of answer are we providing? We have been provoked to respond in some way.

But look at verse two. The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly. We can know things about our interlocutor, the person we're speaking with.

We can have past history. We can have information that someone else has shared. A third party has interacted with this person or has experience and has said, well, you've got to watch out.

You know, here's a little tidbit. We have knowledge and you can use knowledge in a number of ways. You can use it as leverage to try to motivate someone in a direction you want them to go.

You can endeavor to hurt them. You can try to silence them. You can try to revenge speak.

They've hurt you. I'm going to hurt you back. I know something about you.

And a great and common means of deflection in the human realm is if you hear something negative, you fire back with something negative. And usually there is an escalation and an acceleration. Well, you didn't do something I think you should have done.

Well, you haven't done anything in such and such a realm. And once again, it goes back to verse one. The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly.

And combined with the soft answer, you can gently provide counsel or an observation. Do you notice how, whenever this comes up, this takes place, a soft answer and using the knowledge that we have rightly instead of to beat someone over the head. People do this with scripture, that how can you vote for this? How can you support that? Don't you know what the Bible says? Whack, whack, whack.

We know what the Bible says, but there is a time and a place to invoke the authority of scripture. And if we are wise, we will be sensitive to whether we are actually going to drive someone away from scripture by quoting it or by invoking it instead of having a

soft and gentle speaking of the truth in love that doesn't immediately raise defenses. I think of cornstarch.

If you've ever made cornstarch in a pan, and you can, if you do it right, and there's the right amount of water in cornstarch, you can take your fist and pound it, and it won't penetrate hardly at all. But you can take your finger and slowly push and sink all the way in. I saw myth busters or someone fill an entire swimming pool with cornstarch, and by running quickly, they were able to run clear across.

But if Adam or whoever it was ran and stopped halfway, he sunk all the way to his neck. And the quick force has this immediate pushback where gentle pressure will penetrate. And the tongue of the wise will use knowledge rightly for good, looking at the higher objective.

Do I want to just defend myself? Do I want to win an argument? Do I want to score a point? Or do I want to encourage someone, especially a fellow believer, a one another, to love and good works and to express this notion that we feel we need to communicate in a way that is team building and not team dividing. You can speak to a fellow teammate, all of us that have ever played a sport. You know, you can harangue somebody and say, what's the matter with you? You were supposed, I played competitive volleyball, and there's nothing more frustrating when you're a team than to have the ball come and hit the deck unimpeded because everyone was standing expecting someone else to pick it up, and we're all looking at each other.

The ball, any one of us could have gotten it, and none of us did. And we're looking at each other, and you can either say, what can we do to fix this? And we actually had a great strategy. We developed a triangular formation and said, anytime the ball is heading for the center, the man at the point of the triangle at the rear, that's his ball.

And we almost never had another ball fall unaddressed. Because we knew that was a problem, and we spoke in a positive way. Let's not let this happen.

Instead of, I can't believe you didn't hit that. So this tongue of the wise using knowledge rightly will be an up-building. Let's draw the team together and cooperate together so that we don't have this kind of failure in the future.

If we have a problem with arguing or getting bitter over an issue, this is true with couples and in families. And instead of, well, we're just never going to talk about that again, because that always leads to strife. We can calm down and say, we need to find a way to talk about this where we don't wind up strangling each other.

It's an issue that needs to be addressed. We want to do better in this area. We're not going to get there by avoiding it.

We've got to use our knowledge wisely when we address it. The mouth of fools pours

forth. Now, Alter has a great translation of this.

The mouth of dullards bubbles with folly. It's just froth, froths foam. It's not good for anything.

And it just bubbles forth. And we have to say, to the extent that I don't control my speech, I am acting like a fool. This, by the way, is also a helpful de-escalation.

If we're in a heated discussion and the temperature is rising, it's one thing to say, you are a fool. Jesus addresses this, the one who says to his brother, Raka, or thou fool, what are you in danger of? And if we discipline ourselves to say, that seems foolish to me, or that sounds foolish, not you are a fool. There's a difference in labeling something as nonsensical and calling someone nonsensical.

I don't see the wisdom in that, instead of that's stupid. There is a soft answer. There is wisdom in the tongue that can be productive and upbuilding and not divisive and ruinous.

The mouth of fools pours forth, bubbles forth, folly. We don't want this to be us. It's fairly obvious.

Now we come to verse three. And the Lord God is mentioned here. The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.

This is at the center of a little symmetrical chunk here that we're looking at. Notice how this reflects back on what we just looked at. The eyes of the Lord are in every place.

It doesn't matter if you're in the house talking to someone that you have an intimate relationship with. It doesn't matter if you're out at work, you're at school, you're interacting with someone in a retail environment or wherever you might be. The eyes of the Lord are everywhere.

And he is keeping watch on the evil and the good. Why does it say the evil and the good? Why wouldn't it, if there's two kinds of people, there's the evil and the good and the Lord is watching them both. Why wouldn't you just say the Lord is watching everyone? Because in the act of watching, God is discerning.

Well, this is good. This is evil. It's beautifully condensed and combined here.

The eyes of the Lord, everywhere he looks, he is identifying that which is good and that which is evil. Anyone at different times, it's not like this person is evil. This conversation is evil or this interaction is good.

The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, in every place, keeping watch on that which is evil and that which is good. Those who are practicing evil, those who are expressing good. But this moral component is everywhere and the Lord is keeping track.

It reminds me, I just quoted this last Sunday, let your moderation be known to all. The Lord is at hand in the King James. At hand means he's nearby.

He is observing. There was a plaque on the wall in the house when I was a child that my mother put up and it said, Christ is the head of this house, the unseen guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation. That is a biblical truth.

The Lord Jesus, especially among believers, where two or three are gathered, he's in the midst. We should be doing everything in his name. So if we are gathered, we ought to be gathered in his name.

And if we're gathered in his name, he is there. The eyes of the Lord are in every place and he is observing, he is keeping watch. This is a vigilant looking.

He doesn't get distracted. He doesn't miss something. We don't sneak it past him.

He's keeping watch on the evil and the good. Therefore, what's the motivation for cultivating soft answers and cultivating wise speech, using knowledge rightly? The Lord is at hand. The Lord is observing, observing closely.

So you might circle that because it's at the center. Now we're going to have two more verses that also reflect the necessity to pay attention to who we are and why we're here. Verse four, a wholesome tongue is a tree of life.

Do you notice that we are back to an observation about the tongue, just like we saw in verse two? This is a pretty easy symmetry to spot. A wholesome tongue is a tree of life. Tree of life? Think about that for a moment.

What do you know about the tree of life? Where's the first mention of the tree of life? Isn't it interesting that in the very first chapter of the Bible, first chapter or two, you have the tree of life that's in the midst of the garden. And in the very last chapter or two of Revelation, you have the tree of life next to the river of life, bringing forth fruit. Want to talk about symmetry, the tree of life, and what is right in the center of that symmetry? The Lord Jesus bearing our sins in His own body on the tree.

And what appears to be death turns out to be life. Well, a wholesome tongue is a tree of life. How exceptional is that? A wholesome tongue doesn't just keep us out of trouble.

It doesn't just prevent us from being judged or disciplined or losing blessing from God. It's a tree of life. What does the tree of life produce? Peace, healing, longevity.

It is the object most devoutly to be wished. The reason Adam and Eve were driven from the garden is lest they stretch forth their hand and partake of the tree of life. They're going to have to look in the spiritual realm for the tree of life.

It's a tree of life until the kingdoms that are to come. So how important is it to have a

wholesome tongue? Is this just kind of, well, that would be a good witness. That's a nice testimony.

People will like you better. God won't be upset with you if you have a wholesome tongue. It's a tree of life.

This is a source of life, a source of health, strength, benefit, reflection of the glory of God. There's nothing God made that was more beautiful or more essential for humanity than the tree of life. This is what sustained Adam and Eve in the garden more than any other.

They could eat of any of the trees, but the tree of life is the one. You could get rid of every other tree, including the one of knowledge of good and evil, but don't get rid of the tree of life. And yet that is the reason they were driven from the garden is that one tree.

It is essential. So to have a wholesome tongue, to be like a tree of life in terms of conferring blessing and health and benefit, to inject eternity and fruitfulness into a conversation, that's to have a wholesome tongue. So this is no light thing.

What better than the tree of life could you reach for in terms of a metaphor talking about the importance of wholesome speech? Perverseness in it breaks the spirit. This is a strange line in Hebrew. Let me give you a literal, there are people who think there's something wrong, that there's a corruption or whatever, because here's a literal translation of the Hebrew words in this second line.

And the reason I'm giving you this is it does not result in the translation you have in your New King James. So the New King James says perverseness in it. So you would say, well, it's perverseness in the tongue breaks the spirit.

That's what the New King James says. Here's what it literally says. And a perversion in it is a break in the spirit.

A perversion in it is a break in the spirit. What's the difference here? A perversion in it, a perversion in the tongue, your translation here says, well, if you use a perverse tongue, you're going to break a spirit. What this says literally is a perversion in it, the tongue, is a break in the spirit.

The reason you have a perverse tongue is you've got a broken spirit. This is why I emphasized at the beginning, because it is a scriptural truth to control the tongue, to have the tongue be a source of blessing and to be a tree of life. You can't start with trying to fix the tongue.

I'm going to speak better. I'm going to monitor my mouth and my lips and my tongue. You have to go to the spirit.

The spirit is the source. A break in the spirit results in a perverse tongue. Do you see the

difference here? It isn't, well, I spoke something perverse and I broke somebody's spirit.

No, speaking perverse words reflects a broken spirit. You are broken inside if you can't speak in a way that is beneficial and is a tree of life. If you are hurting people with your mouth, don't paint over the measles, don't address the symptom.

The cause is a break in the spirit. Something is torn, something is damaged, and we need to go to the grace that is in Christ Jesus to be strengthened with might in the inner man. Fix the heart, fix the spirit, the mouth will follow.

You won't have impulsiveness. You won't have a well of anger. You won't have deep-seated resentment or bitterness or the desire to hurt or to reflect back harsh words from others.

A perverse tongue is a break in the spirit. That's how you know your spirit's broken, your speech is messed up. So important.

The grace of God strengthens us with might in the inner man. That's how to fix sins of the tongue, certainly overt sins. The Lord Jesus said, it isn't what you eat that defiles you, it is what comes out of your heart.

It's what's inside that comes out and defiles a man. God's grace is the only thing. There is no other recourse.

There is no human therapy of any kind that can fix the human spirit. Only God, the maker, can fix it. You've got to send that thing to the manufacturer.

He can fix it. No one else can. The symptom is attitude sins.

The symptom is sins of the tongue, sins of the lips, sins of the mouth, hurting and damaging others. That's a symptom that we need fixing on the inside. So important to get this translation correct.

Perverseness in the tongue is a break in the spirit. That's how you know it's there. Well, that is a useful thing to know.

And it puts us on the course of the remedy of the power of God coming into our life. We pray, we ask for God's grace. We look for the truth of God's word in the hands of the Holy Spirit.

That power mends us, puts our ripped and torn and broken spirit back together in a way that will reflect in great attitudes, soft answers, wise words that heal instead of wounding. That's the solution. And that is this wonderful section in verses one through four.

We will see the conclusion of this in verse five when we come back from the break.

