

# 10. The words we speak

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Date: 31 July 2011

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, now we come to our reading from Scripture, and we turn again to the book of Proverbs, tonight, chapter 25. Proverbs 25, and if you have one of our church Bibles, you'll find this on page 546 and 547. Proverbs 25, and in just a moment I'm going to read from verse 7, the end of the verse, through to verse 28 at the end of the chapter.

Let me just say a little word about Proverbs 25 before I read. This chapter, and really we're going to be looking just at the second two-thirds of it from verse 7 onwards in the sermon tonight, but this chapter really divides into two main sections. First of all, we have verses 1 to 7, which is about the power and influence of kings, rulers. In fact, kings and government are one of the big themes of the book of Proverbs, and if we ask why that should be so, I think the answer is that the Lord is concerned for the world as well as for the church. And because God is the governor of the world, he wants those who exercise authority under him to exercise their authority wisely and well. Then we have the second main section of the chapter from verse 7 through to the end, and that is really about personal integrity.

It's going to be raising the question, we're going to be looking particularly at the use of the tongue tonight, our words. But it's going to raise the question, are we honest and truthful and straightforward with other people in the things that we say? Or are we cunning and slippery, dealing in half-truths and misrepresentations, trying perhaps to appear better than we really are? I guess most lying stems from the desire to appear better than we really are.

As I say, it's the second section of the chapter which I'm going to read. In the sermon, I'm not going to attempt to engage with every verse. There's far too much for that. But I want to draw out Solomon's teaching on the use of our tongues. What do we say? Why do we say the things we say? What damage can our words do? And what good things can we achieve by our words? Do our words express personal integrity? Or do they reveal personal disintegration? It's not simply a chapter of do's and don'ts. Thou shalt do this and thou shalt not do that. Proverbs is not that kind of a book.

This is a description of the believer's life, the godly life, lived under the sovereignty and the grace of God. And it's delightful teaching because it's helping us to know him better and to know better how we can please the one who himself is our rescuer and our savior. So let me read from the end of verse seven. What your eyes have seen do not hastily bring into court. For what will you do in the end when your neighbor puts you to shame? Argue your case with your neighbor himself? And do not reveal another secret, lest he who hears you bring shame upon you and your ill repute have no end.

[ 3 : 20 ] A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reprover to a listening ear. Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest is a faithful messenger to those who send him. He refreshes the soul of his masters.

Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of a gift he does not give. With patience a ruler may be persuaded and a soft tongue will break a bone.

If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, lest you have your fill of it and vomit it. Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house, lest he have his fill of you and hate you.

A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club or a sword or a sharp arrow. Trusting in a treacherous man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips.

Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day and like vinegar on soda. If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat and if he's thirsty, give him water to drink for you will heap burning coals on his head and the Lord will reward you.

[ 4 : 53 ] The north wind brings forth rain and a backbiting tongue angry looks. It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife.

Like cold water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country. Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked.

It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glorious to seek one's own glory. A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord and may it be a blessing to us from him this evening. Well, let's turn up our Proverbs chapter 25 again, if we may please, page 547.

Now, I said a moment ago that we would be thinking particularly about the teaching in this passage about our words. The words we speak is the title for tonight's sermon. So I want to begin with the simple question, what is the place of human words in the purpose of God?

[ 6 : 23 ] It's a kind of theological or biblical question, really. What is the place of words, our words? Now, the fact that we use words at all, whether they're spoken words or written words, is a remarkable phenomenon.

The fact is that we speak to each other and communication takes place. So Mr. A makes noises with his throat and his tongue, and Mr. B listens to these noises with his ears and his brain, and he understands, more or less, the message that Mr. A is getting across to him.

Now, members of the animal kingdom also have powers of communication by making certain noises. So, for example, the old cock blackbird that sits up on your gable end in March, April, he's still just about singing even in July, isn't he, but certainly in the spring.

That cock blackbird is communicating. Do you know what he's communicating? It's not just the joy of the spring. That's a warlike message that he's communicating to all other male blackbirds in the vicinity.

He's not interested in the male song thrushes or the cock robins, but the male blackbirds, and he's basically saying to them, this is my patch, and this lady is my wife, so kindly keep off.

[ 7 : 37 ] In the same way, the old lady pig grunts to her piglets, and it means something. The dog growls to a strange dog in the park, and that means something as well. Whales practice their baritone solos under the water.

There's a lot of vocal communication by the lower orders of creation, but human beings alone communicate with words, and our words are so expressive, so diverse, and so versatile that we are able to communicate with each other to an extraordinarily sophisticated degree.

Now, why is this? The answer, surely, is that we have been made in the image of God who is himself the speaker of words. Human beings, male and female, reflect his nature.

He speaks, and we speak, therefore, because we imitate him. The animals are not made in his image, so they can do no more than grunt and roar and quack.

But human beings have the power of speech, because our very nature reflects the nature of our creator who speaks. Now, you'll be aware of the great emphasis that the Bible places on the words of God.

[ 8 : 52 ] God spoke the universe into being in the first place, and he continues to speak right through the Old Testament. He's constantly speaking to his people. So he speaks to Adam, he speaks to Noah, he speaks to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob, he speaks to Moses, and through Moses to the people of Israel.

He continues after Moses' day to speak through the Old Testament prophets. And then finally and fully, he speaks to us in and through the person and the words of Jesus.

And that's why John the Evangelist begins his gospel not by saying, in the beginning was the power, but in the beginning was the word. Of course, there was power in the beginning, but the emphasis is on the word.

So if God's characteristic activity is to speak, and if we are made to reflect his image, it follows that one of our most important characteristic activities should be to use words.

Not all the time. We would drive each other up the wall if we did. But frequently, and that's exactly what we do. Just think of it, each person in this building this evening has probably spoken, well, between several hundred and several thousand words already today.

[ 10 : 14 ] And as soon as we've sung the last hymn, and the last prayer has been said, you'll be speaking a few thousand words more. It's what we do, and it is what we were created to do.

But, and here's the snake in the grass, and it's a pretty big snake, and it's a venomous one. The words that we use are not always good words. We have a great capacity to use our words well, and helpfully, and lovingly.

But equally, we have a great capacity to use words badly. That is to say, spitefully, deceitfully, and destructively. So our words can build up and bless other people, but they can deceive and hurt, and even destroy other people.

And why are we like this? Why is there that snake in the grass? The answer is because we are fallen human beings. The fall of man brought about by Adam and Eve's rebellion has tainted and corrupted us in every faculty of our being.

So we still reflect the image of God, which is why our words can be so good and loving and true, but it's the corruption of our fallenness. It's our indwelling sinfulness that causes us sometimes to use words destructively and deceitfully.

[ 11 : 28 ] And there's a further twist in this rather uncomfortable business, and that is that not only do we sometimes misrepresent the truth in our words, we often cannot understand each other properly.

Now, the Bible explains this in the account of the Tower of Babel, in Genesis chapter 11, where you remember the story, man's pride causes men to get together and to build this great tower in honor of themselves.

And God responds by stopping the building of the tower and scattering human beings across the face of the earth and mixing up their language so that they could no longer communicate with each other.

In doing this, God was restraining and restricting their pride. That's why, if you go to Paris or Dubrovnik for your holidays, you can't make out what people are saying to you, unless you happen to have studied the language concerned.

When I was a teenager, I went with a couple of my school friends to the Republic of Ireland. I was an English boy brought up in the London area, and Ireland, the Emerald Isle, seemed to be a wonderful romantic place.

[ 12 : 38 ] And my friends and I wanted to find out about Ireland. We wanted to look at the Blarney Stone and see if there was such a thing. We wanted to discuss leprechauns with the locals and see if we could spot a shamrock.

So we took the boat from Hollyhead across to Dun Laoghaire. And then we took a little train, I think, into Dublin itself. And then we found the main railway station and we hopped on board a train for the southwest of the country.

We wanted to get down to Kerry and places like that. Now, these were the old-fashioned trains that still had compartments and a corridor running along the end. And my two friends and I got into this corridor with two or three elderly Irish men.

Now, we enjoyed the company of elderly Irish men. I still do. You never quite know what's going to happen when you're in the company of an elderly Irishman, do you? So anyway, we got talking, and one of these old men looked at us with a twinkle in his eye.

He was amused to see these three young English boys. We weren't men. We were boys, about 16. He was amused. So he looked at me and he said, and where is it you're going? And I said to him, I'm going to Cork.

[ 13 : 46 ] He looked at me as if he couldn't understand what I was saying, which he couldn't. He was bemused. He said, I haven't heard of that place. Where is it? So it was my turn to be rather bemused at this point.

I said, well, Cork, it's a big city in the south of Ireland, isn't it? Second biggest city only to Dublin, isn't it? There was a pause of two or three seconds. Then he said to me, Cork!

It's Cork you're going to, isn't it? Cork, what did you say, so boy? Now just think of that situation. There we were speaking the same language and we couldn't understand each other. Well, that's what it's like, isn't it?

That's what it's like. There are even cities in Scotland, one particularly that I can think of, where an innocent fellow from the south of England can find it very hard to understand what is going on. Now, it's into this situation of words, some of which are sinful and deceitful, and this situation of sheer misunderstanding, whereby people find it so hard to grasp what each other are saying.

[ 14 : 50 ] It's into all this rather mixed situation that King Solomon speaks in Proverbs 25. And the purpose of his teaching here is to help us with our words. He's helping us to grow in stature as Christians, to be more truthful, to be more honest and loving and more constructive in the way that we use our words, and also to be less deceitful and less damaging and less destructive in the things that we say.

Now, we all acknowledge that we do some pretty nasty things with our tongues at times. So let's open our ears to King Solomon, and I'm sure he can help us to grow in godliness in the use of our tongues.

Now, I want us to look at this passage under two headings. First of all, bad words that cause trouble, and secondly, good words that bring blessing.

So first of all, bad words that cause trouble. I've got four subsections here. First of all, there are words that destroy friendships and reputations. Let me read again verses 7 and 8.

What your eyes have seen do not hastily bring into court, for what will you do in the end when your neighbor puts you to shame?

[16:05] Now, this surely is a timely message for a generation like ours, a generation which is becoming very quick to take people to court. Isn't that right?

We live in a generation which is constantly covering its back so as to protect itself against litigation. This is one reason, perhaps the main reason, why we have to produce so much paperwork these days.

Do you know, in so many professions, people feel they've got to document their work to the nth degree so that if they should be accused of malpractice or negligence, they can produce a thousand pages of written record that proves that they've ticked all the boxes and done the right thing.

I hope this makes you weep. It makes me weep because it's indicative of a breakdown of trust in society. And that breakdown of trust between people is itself a consequence of our society departing from the gospel standards of honesty and truthfulness.

Now, Solomon is saying to us in verses 7 and 8, don't rush to court, my friends. Don't rush to litigation. Why not? Because you may be mistaken.

[17:15] For, verse 8, what will you do in the end when your neighbor puts you to shame? Now, I think the scenario is something like this. You have Mr. X who suspects Mr. Y of wrongdoing.

Mr. Y could be a neighbor, could be a colleague at work, but Mr. X suspects Mr. Y of some kind of criminal practice or serious negligence. He has seen Mr. Y doing certain things.

And he says to himself, uh-uh, that is criminal malpractice. I must sue Mr. Y and take him to court.

Now, Solomon is saying, don't be hasty to take him to court because you may find that when the case is tried and all the evidence is presented, Mr. Y is completely exonerated and you will be put to shame.

People will say, that's silly, intemperate Mr. X. He completely misinterpreted Mr. Y's actions. He rushed Mr. Y into court without being in possession of the full facts.

Mr. Y is innocent and Mr. X is a fool. So what is Solomon's advice? Let's look on to verse 9. He says, instead of rushing your neighbor into court, go and talk the matter over with your neighbor personally.

[18:32] Meet him face to face and resolve this difficulty and come to a proper understanding in a friendly way if you possibly can. And another thing Solomon adds at the end of verse 9, don't reveal another person's secret.

Don't betray a confidence. You know how people sometimes tell us very sensitive and painful, difficult things. When they do, they may well say to us, it's fine for you to share this with this person or that person.

But sometimes they may not want us to talk to any other living soul about what they've just passed on to us. There are some secrets passed on to us which we need to lock up in our heads and take with us to the grave.

Not even to tell our husbands or our wives about. Now I'm not talking here about criminal law breaking. I mean if somebody comes to you and tells you they've just killed somebody, you need to go to the police.

I'm talking here about those deeply painful personal secrets that people can lock up inside themselves for years and years and then eventually they feel they've got to unburden themselves and share it with somebody and you're the person they share it with.

[19:46] What if we then blab? Verse 10 tells us, we shall be shamed and for the rest of our lives people will not trust us. Oh, don't you speak to Mr. Lobb about that.

He's a blabber. You can't trust him. So there's the first thing. Solomon warns us about words that destroy friendships and reputations and also destroy our personal credibility and trustworthiness.

Now secondly, from verse 14, he warns us about words that promise but don't perform. Let me read verse 14.

Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of a gift he does not give. Now this gift which is promised but not given, it could be money, it could be time, it could be some material thing or perhaps a gift of work.

I'll be along to your garden with my lawnmower, Granny MacKillop, before the end of this week and I'll sort out your lawn for you. What a kind young man, thinks Granny MacKillop.

[ 20 : 53 ] But a fortnight later, she's still waiting and by now, you could take a crop of hay off her lawn. Or somebody says in church, Oh Mr Treasurer, I'll bring you that check I promised by the end of the month at the latest.

But three months later, the gift still hasn't been given. I'll buy you an ice cream when we get to Largs, Tracy. But it never happens.

I'll find that photograph of Great Aunt Mildred when I get home and I'll post it to you. But the postman doesn't get it. Now verse 14 is saying that that kind of behavior is like clouds and wind without rain.

Now just think of what that means. We are not short of rain in the west of Scotland. But you think of a country like Israel, where rainfall is a much more critical thing. And if your crops needed rain and you saw the clouds gathering and the wind beginning to blow, your hopes would be built up.

But if no rain came, you would be very disappointed. In the same way, we disappoint people when we boast about a gift that we're going to give them and then we never give it.

[ 22 : 00 ] And they say to themselves, is that a person of integrity? He doesn't do what he says he'll do. He doesn't keep his word. Then third, there are words that tell lies about other people.

Look at verse 18. A man who bears false witness against his neighbor. Now, of course, this is picking up one of the Ten Commandments, isn't it? A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club or a sword or a sharp arrow.

Now those three weapons, the war club and the sword and the sharp arrow, are all lethal weapons. They're weapons that are designed to kill people, to destroy them. Now we might think, are lies about other people quite as serious as that?

Are they lethal? Surely that comparison is too strong. But the truth is that lies about others can ruin their lives and destroy their reputation and their credibility.

And human beings, somehow all of us, deep inside, know how to use lies with death-dealing effect. For example, if we ask ourselves how much of the content of the news that we've been hearing on the radio and television over the last few weeks is about people in high places telling lies, the answer is a great deal.

[ 23 : 23 ] And why should people in high places in government, politics or the media, why should such folk want to tell lies? Well, it can be to cover one's own tracks, to conceal one's own misdemeanors.

Did you hack into that telephone? No, of course I didn't. Did you, on the quiet, ask one of your employees to do so? Certainly not. I'm horrified at the suggestion.

Now, friends, it's not my wish at all to judge the people in high places who've been involved in all this particular trouble in recent weeks. I simply have no idea myself who's telling the truth and who is not. But I'm mentioning this example simply to illustrate the truth of our verse 18 and to make the point that false witness born against somebody can be lethal to that person's reputation and livelihood.

Very able people, very gifted, energetic people who may be innocent and may be people of great integrity can be ruined by false accusations, ruined to the point that nobody would ever employ them again.

But this verse is not just a verse for people in high places. It's for little people like us too. If you or I put out false information about other people, it can be like rushing at them with a war club or a sword.

[ 24 : 46 ] We can say things or write things that are untrue. We can tweet things and Twitter things that are untrue. And once something is out there in cyberspace, who knows where it may end up.

It could be something completely untrue said about somebody and yet it could end up on the desk of a would-be employer. And it could make that employer say, I'm not going to give a job to him.

Somebody thoughtlessly blackens another person's reputation by telling a lie about that person. And that person's life and prospects might be permanently damaged. Learning to be scrupulously truthful about other people is part of learning the fear of the Lord. Then fourth, we'll look at one more verse in this section and that's verse 20. Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day and like vinegar on soda. These are words that are unfitting and unloving. [ 25 : 52 ] Now let's start at the end of verse 20 and we'll work backwards. Vinegar, when it's mixed with olive oil and a little dash of salt and pepper and Dijon mustard, that makes a lovely salad dressing, isn't it?

That's using vinegar in the best way. But to mix vinegar with soda, that's neither use nor ornament. It's unfitting to mix those two things together. If somebody knows that there's some particular chemical reaction, I'm no chemist, please do tell me afterwards.

But it's obviously unfitting. Then look at the middle phrase in verse 20. Imagine, it's a freezing cold day in the midst of a Scottish winter. You know what that's like, don't you?

And your little tiny boy is outside, out of doors, playing in the snow and the wind and he's all buttoned up in his thickest coat and his gloves and his hat. He comes to the door and he rattles on it.

He says, Mom, I'm freezing. And you take off his coat and you push him back outside. Wouldn't that be cruel? But that sort of behavior, says Solomon, is like the behavior of a person who sings songs to another person whose heart is crushed with sadness.

[ 27 : 00 ] Now just imagine that your neighbor or your friend is suffering from depression, really down. So you think to yourself, I'll go and visit poor old Arthur and I'll cheer him up.

So you go to Arthur's house, you let yourself in, you say, Hello, Arthur. Top of the morning to you, my boy. Feeling a bit blue, are we a bit gloomy? I know what we'll do. Let's stand up and we'll sing The Flower of Scotland together.

Nothing quite like it for cheering a fellow up. Come on, Arthur, stand up, off we go. The Flower of Scotland. Now is that the way to treat your friend when he's miserable?

Of course not. What does Paul the Apostle say? Rejoice with those who rejoice, but weep with those who weep. Show sympathy. So when we're with people whose hearts are heavy and bowed down, let's love them and comfort them and share their difficulty as much as we can because our words can be really supportive to them if we use our words lovingly and carefully.

As Proverbs 15, verse 4 puts it, a gentle tongue is a tree of life. Isn't that a lovely phrase? A gentle tongue is a tree of life. All right, well we've looked at four examples from our chapter of ways in which we can use our tongues wrongfully and hurtfully.

[ 28 : 16 ] And when you look at the hurtful and even wicked and lethal things that we can do with our words, it almost makes us feel as if we ought to close our mouths and keep them closed permanently, doesn't it?

But that's not the answer. The answer from Proverbs 25 is to learn to use our words wisely and well.

We're made in the image of God the speaker. His words bring life and salvation and our words can follow in the same pattern. So let's look now at three examples of using our words well.

First of all, from verse 11, there's the word fitly spoken. Verse 11, a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

Now if you study Proverbs and you read the commentaries, you'll find that on this verse, the commentators point out that apples, as we know them today, Cox's Orange Pippins, Braeburn's, Golden Delicious, apparently apples weren't grown in Israel or even known in Israel in Solomon's day.

[ 29 : 24 ] But we needn't worry too much about that. The point about apples of gold in a setting of silver is that it's a beautiful artistic arrangement where everything fits together beautifully and pleases the eye.

Good craftsmanship by a silversmith or a goldsmith brings pleasure to us as we look at the work and perhaps pick it up and handle it. It's pleasant and it's right and it's appropriate.

And the point is that our spoken words can be like that. You hear something said and you say, that's just right. That's exactly what needed to be said. Now you find numerous instances of this, not surprisingly, in the Bible.

But nowhere more than in the teaching of Jesus himself. Just think of some of his great sayings which exactly fit verse 11. Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.

You're the salt of the earth. I'm the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you. There are so many.

[ 30 : 30 ] We could go on and on. Everything that Jesus says is a word fitly spoken. But here in verse 11, Solomon is not talking about the words of God or of Jesus but the words of believers or in our language ordinary Christians.

And verse 11 is more than a description of something that is true. it's also a nudge to all of us. It's saying to us learn to use words well.

To use them so that they can bring blessing to others. No doubt it's a verse that applies to formal preaching as well. But it's not really about that. It's really about the way that we speak to each other in our informal conversations.

How can we say things which help other people? How can we say things that shed light on a difficult situation? How can we say something which will bring real encouragement to another person or if necessary real challenge?

Just let me give one little example. When I was a young assistant minister down in Manchester I was working with a senior colleague the rector of our church who died one day very suddenly without any warning dropped dead.

[ 31 : 42 ] And you can imagine that was a great shock to the whole church. It was certainly a shock to me personally because he and I were good friends. And a week or two later a friend of mine wrote to me a kind letter in which he included this sentence and I've never forgotten it.

This was 30 years ago but he included this sentence take time to grieve. Just that. Take time to grieve. Now that was very helpful to me at the time. It clarified things for me because it made me realize that it was not wrong to grieve and that grieving was not something you got over in a fortnight.

It was a word fitly spoken. A lovely little message. So the question is how can we learn to use fitly spoken words in our conversations in our letters in our emails and in our tweets and our Twitters. Then secondly there's the wise reproof. Look here at verse 12 if you will. Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold.

Again something beautiful and delightful to look at. Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reproof to a listening ear. Now you'll notice there are two elements in that verse.

[ 32 : 56 ] There's the wise reproof delivering the wise reproof but there's also the listening ear. There's nothing beautiful about the situation where we have the wise reproof speaking to an ear that has no intention of listening to the reproof.

You need to have both sides of the equation. But where you have a wise reproof speaking into an ear that is ready to listen you have a situation which is like a gold ring or a gold ornament.

The book of Proverbs often speaks about the blessing of being reproofed and how important it is for believers if we're to grow in our faith to be willing to listen to reproof and to accept it.

Because if we don't accept wise reproof when it's needed we shall never grow and make progress as Christians. Let me give a good and slightly amusing example of this. I have a Christian friend who lives in London.

I'll call him Trevor Monkton though that's not his real name. Trevor was and is a very intelligent man very able person and on leaving school he got a place he won a place at Christchurch Oxford and he started his university career with great promise.

[ 34 : 08 ] He seemed to be the sort of young man who was destined for a first class degree and university honours and all that sort of thing. However he hadn't been at Oxford many months when he heard the gospel and he became a Christian and he was so thrilled with the Lord and with the Bible and studying the Bible with his new Christian friends that he began to neglect his academic work.

He was very young 18 or 19 he hadn't quite got the maturity to hold together the need to do his academic work as well as his Bible study. So his tutor who had such high hopes for him became rather disappointed with him understandably.

Anyway at the end of the academic year the custom was for each student to be presented by his tutor to the head of the college so that the tutor could give a brief report on the student and the head of college could say anything that he wished to say.

Now the head of Christ Church in those days was a man called Henry Chadwick Dean Henry Chadwick an academic theologian who was a warm-hearted Christian and who knew his Bible very well.

So when Trevor Moncton was presented by his tutor to the dean the tutor expressed his disappointment that Trevor was not achieving the expected good results.

[ 35 : 26 ] So the dean who was a canny man and who knew why Trevor was not working up to standard looked at Trevor and said to him rather penetratingly Mr. Moncton from those to whom much is given much will be required.

Good day to you. So you see what he did he took the words of Jesus which he knew that Trevor would have been studying for himself and he applied them like a scalpel to the skin.

They were the words of a wise reprover and fortunately the young man had a listening ear and was able to take it on board. Now I know that you and I are not going to be strutting around the streets of Glasgow looking for daily opportunities to reprove younger Christians.

Of course not. But every now and again the wise reproof dropped into the listening ear can be an excellent way of using the tongue and of using the ear too.

Well now third and last let's notice the word of gentle persuasion the word of gentle persuasion verse 15 with patience a ruler may be persuaded and a soft tongue will break a bone.

[ 36 : 38 ] Now the message here is that gentle patient persuasiveness in our speech is much more effective than loud angry blustering. You know we sometimes think don't we that if we're going to get things changed around here we're going to have to shout and get angry and throw our weight around.

No says Solomon we're much more likely to improve a situation if we present our case patiently and gently. Looking at the second half of the verse you think that something as hard as a bone would need a hammer to break it or the jaws of a hyena but no even a soft tongue patiently wearing away at it will break it down.

Gentle persuasiveness is the way to improve an organization or an institution or a nation. Well we've almost done so let me sum up.

Proverbs is teaching us that godly behavior has a lot to do with the tongues in our heads and the brains that instruct our tongues what to say. Remember how Jesus says out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

In other words our tongues express what goes on deep inside. So if we're to be people of personal integrity we learn to restrain the bad use of our tongues and to promote the healthy use of our tongues by the grace of God.

[ 38 : 07 ] And because we're fallen human beings there will always be times of temptation.

Temptation to bear false witness against our neighbor. Temptations to tell lies so as to promote our own advantage and to make ourselves look better than we really are.

Temptations to bluster and to get angry. But Solomon is teaching us to subdue that side of our nature as we live in the fear of the Lord and to promote the use of words that are fitly spoken.

And the wonderful thing friends is that the Lord God is able and is willing to change us in this part of our life as in every other part of our life too. God is able and willing to train the tongues that have been angry and unkind and untruthful and to make them tongues that bring blessing and joy and truth and mercy and understanding and light to other people.

It is of course a lifetime's training. To be trained by the book of Proverbs is a 70 year project or even a bit longer if you live longer. Rome wasn't built in a day neither is the Christian life.

There's great hope for us. So let's pray to the Lord now and ask for his help. A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

[ 39 : 35 ] How we thank you dear father for the words fitly spoken that we have so often heard in the course of our lives. Sentences and phrases and short conversations that have been such a blessing to us.

And how we pray dear father that as we learn the standards of godly living taught in the Bible you will help all of us to learn how to use our tongues more to your glory and to the help of others so that we can love you and love our neighbor through them.

We thank you for this great gift which you have given to us to express ourselves in words whether spoken or written. And we pray that our words increasingly will be a blessing.

And we ask it in the name of Jesus whose words were and are so wonderful to us. Amen.