

Fostering Friendship

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn to our Bibles now, to our reading this morning, which once again is in the book of Proverbs. Last week Paul was looking at getting wisdom for life and finding friendship.

And he's taking it a little further today in thinking about fostering friendship. And we're going to read once again Proverbs chapter 12, although we will be dotting around at other places in Proverbs. And as I read, just look out particularly for verses that speak about our words, our speech, our tongues.

Because of course the tongue is the great organ of friendship forming and fostering. So let's read together Proverbs chapter 12.

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge. But he who hates reproof is stupid. A good man obtains favor from the Lord, but a man of evil devices he condemns.

[1 : 07] No one is established by wickedness. But the root of the righteous will never be moved. An excellent wife is the crown of her husband.

But she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones. The thoughts of the righteous are just. The counsels of the wicked deceitful.

The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood. But the mouth of the upright delivers them. The wicked are overthrown and are no more.

But the house of the righteous will stand. Man is commended according to his good sense. But one of twisted mind is despised.

Better to be lowly and have a servant than to play the great man and like bread. Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast.

[2 : 06] But the mercy of the wicked is cruel. Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread. But he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense.

Whoever is wicked covets the spoil of evildoers. But the root of the righteous bears fruit. An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips.

But the righteous escapes from trouble. From the fruit of his mouth, a man is satisfied with good. And the work of a man's hand comes back to him.

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes. But a wise man listens to advice. The vexation of a fool is known at once.

But the prudent ignores an insult. Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence. But a false witness utters deceit.

[3 : 13] There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts. But the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Truthful lips endure forever. But a lying tongue is but for a moment. Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil. But those who plan peace have joy.

No ill befalls the righteous. But the wicked are filled with trouble. Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord.

But those who act faithfully are his delight. A prudent man conceals knowledge. But the heart of a fool proclaims folly.

The hand of the diligent will rule. While the slothful will be put to forced labor. Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down. But a good word makes him glad.

[4 : 19] One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor. But the way of the wicked leads them astray. Whoever is slothful will not roast his game. But the diligent man will get precious wealth.

And in the path of righteousness is life. And in its pathway there is no death.

Amen. May God bless us his word. Amen. It will be a help to have Proverbs 12 open in front of you.

And we'll be dotting around a little bit in Proverbs. I don't feel you have to turn to every reference. But if you keep on chapter 12. We'll keep coming back there. So keep that open in front of you. That'd be a great help.

Now, we're thinking a bit last week about friendship, and in particular, finding friendship, finding good friends, choosing friends wisely. And at the heart of friendship is, of course, relating, relationship. And there can be no relationship without communication. That's an obvious thing to say, isn't it? An obvious statement. But it is key. For friendship to exist, there must be words, communication. And the book of Proverbs has an awful lot to say about words, about our speech. After wisdom itself, speech, words, our tongues, is the topic that Proverbs speaks about more than anything else, really. Words is one of the great themes of the book of Proverbs. As we thought about last week, friendship is powerful.

[6:12] And friendship is powerful. Friendship influences hugely because at the very heart of friendship is speech, our words. And our words, my words and your words, are powerful. Proverbs 18, verse 21 says, death and life are in the power of the tongue. Proverbs knows the power of the tongue.

How you speak will make or break your life. Your words can build or break a relationship. Your words can win you or lose you a job. Your words, says Proverbs, can bring life and death. Proverbs has a lot to say about the tongue, about words. And so that will be our focus this morning. We're thinking about friendship, but particularly how to foster friendship and particularly how to build friendship through our words. The human tongue, so I'm told, weighs about 0.4% of the total weight of our bodies. I dread to think how someone calculated that. But 0.4% of our total body weight is in our tongues. On that level, pretty insignificant. But it wields huge influence, doesn't it? For something so small, it has huge capacity for good or for ill. Huge capacity to influence, to direct, to build up, and to cut down. Our tongue is, as James writes in his New Testament letters, like a rudder on a ship. Those ships are large and driven by strong winds, yet they're guided by a small rudder. So also, he writes, the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

Given the power of our tongues, we would do well, wouldn't we, to listen to God's wisdom on the subject. As I said, there's so much to say. Proverbs is full of stuff about how we speak. Just in chapter 12 this morning, there's so much about it. Just go through the book of Proverbs and underline every single reference to speech or our tongues or how we say things, and your Bible will quickly become thick with underlining. It's full of it. Just look at chapter 12. Look at verse 6.

Verse 17. The words of the wicked lie and wait for blood, but the mouth of the upright delivers them. Look on to verse 13. An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips, but the righteous escapes from trouble. Verse 14. From the fruit of his mouth, a man is satisfied with good.

[9:19] Verse 17. Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness utters deceit. Verse 18. There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Verse 19. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment.

Verse 22. Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight.

Verse 23. A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims folly. They could go on, just keep going through each chapter, underlining every single reference to speech and what we say. There's so much that Proverbs has to say about our words.

But this morning we're trying to restrict ourselves a bit. There's so much you could say. But thinking about when it comes to friendship and fostering friendship and our words, let's think about three things. First, about the consequences of our words.

Secondly, the content of our words. And then thirdly, the source. The source of our words. So first, we're going to think about the consequences of our words because our words have power.

[10:47] There is great power in our words. That's the consistent message, not only of Proverbs, but the whole Bible. Our words are powerful to build up and to break down. Powerful for good or for ill.

And our words have great power over other people. Our words have great power over others. They have power to wound. Look at verse 18 there of our chapter.

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

You see, our words leave a permanent mark on the world, don't they?

As soon as we've uttered them, as soon as our words are out there, we can't take them back, can we? They have their effect. Like a sword thrust into someone's body.

It's going to have an impact, isn't it? You can withdraw the sword, but it leaves damage behind it. At the very least, there'll be a permanent mark, a permanent scar left behind.

[11 : 54] And our words are like that. Our words are like a sword thrust if they're rash. Once they're out there, the damage is done. We can't undo them.

Of course, we can repair some of the damage, but not all. Chapter 18 says that death and life are in the power of the tongue.

Our tongues not only have the power to wound, but says Proverbs to kill. Words can do that. The child's Proverbs, sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.

That is not true, is it? You know that. As soon as you can start to understand and speak, you know that words can do real damage. You know that words can cause real harm.

It's not so much what is done to you that matters, but what is done in you. And words penetrate our skin. They get into our very hearts and minds, don't they? Sticks can't do that.

[12 : 59] But words, they get right into our hearts. They get into our very souls. And words do things. And they can do real damage.

In particular, words that are written down and not merely spoken can allow that damage to live on, to linger on. When words are written down, the impact can be multiplied because their message is repeated over and over.

Every time you look at your computer screen, there it is. You open your mobile phone. There are those words. Just think about that last difficult email you received.

How many times have you read it? More than once, I can guarantee it. Probably ten times. You keep going back to it. I remember often, and often encourage people to heed wise words from Alistair Berg.

He said, you've got something difficult or critical to say. Do it in person. Don't fire off an email. On the other hand, if you have something encouraging and positive to say, write that down.

[14 : 06] Send that in an email. Why? Because you can read over it. Over and over. Words have power. Great power over others.

So take care of the words you write down. Don't fire off that hasty email. Sleep on it.

Speak in person. Be careful what you put in the public domain. Proverbs 18, verse 2. A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.

There's a proverb for Twitter. Have that in mind next time you take to social media. Our words have real power to wound.

But they can have a positive impact as well, can't they? The second half of our verse there in chapter 12, verse 18. Yes, one whose rash words are like a sword thrust, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

[15 : 14] Or chapter 15, verse 4. A gentle tongue is a tree of life. Now you'll know that, I'm sure, yourself.

A good word of encouragement can bring great healing, great encouragement, can't it? Our words can do great good to others and be a source of great encouragement.

That's the first key thing to think about. As we think about the consequences of our words, thinking about the consequence on others. But there's another key consequence of our words.

Our words also have not just great power over the person we're speaking to, but over the speaker themselves. They have power over us. Your words have power over you.

Look again at verse 13 and 14 of chapter 12. An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips. But the righteous escapes from trouble.

[16 : 21] From the fruit of his mouth, a man is satisfied with good. And the work of a man's hand comes back to him. See the image there.

In verse 13, the evil man makes a trap designed to snare the righteous. But unwittingly, he made it for himself. His sinful talk will trap him instead.

So our words don't just bring healing or hurt to others. They have consequences for us too. A babbling fool, Proverbs 10, a babbling fool will come to ruin.

Proverbs 18, verse 6. A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating. A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul.

Or if you're in chapter 12, just look over to chapter 13 there, verse 3. Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life. He who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.

[17 : 33] You see, our words, they've got power over our own lives. Our words give rise in the end to our destinies.

You cannot separate a man's words from his future destiny in the end. Foolish speaking will not lead to a fruitful life. I'm speaking life in its Proverbs sense here.

In its fullest sense. Life in communion with God for all eternity. Foolish speaking won't lead to a fruitful life. But wise speaking, wise words will generally, in the main, more often than not, wise words will give fullness of life.

As one writer put it, the fruit of the lips, for good or ill, ripens unavoidably. Unavoidably, you will see the fruit of your lips in your own life.

So that's the first key plank in the teaching from Proverbs about our words. Our words are powerful and they have consequences.

[18 : 48] Our words do things, positive and negative, for those you speak to and also for yourself. And so that leads naturally to think about the second key thing this morning, the consequence of our words.

But secondly, we need to think about the content of our words. Because our words are powerful, because our words do things, think about the content of what we say.

What is the character of our words? Proverbs would urge us, implore us, to speak the truth, to speak kindly, to speak wisely, to speak appropriately, to speak directly, to speak in a measured way.

Before we delve in further to the specifics of what Proverbs says about how we're to speak, it hardly needs to be stated that we, of course, none of us, are perfect when it comes to our words.

Far from it. Already this morning, I've uttered words I've regretted. And it's only 11 o'clock. I'm sure you're the same. I'm sure you've been recalling, as we've been thinking about this, moments from the past when you've spoken and said terrible things, things you regret.

[20 : 04] You've left a trail of disaster in your wake because of what you said. We're not God, are we? We do not utter perfect words. But there is hope.

We'll see that on our final point. So I just want to flag that up. We are not called to perfection. We cannot on our own be perfect. But we are called to faithfulness, to the way of wisdom, which is a set orientation in life towards goodness, a life in relationship with our God.

Not perfection. That's beyond us. But what does Proverbs teach about our words? Well, three things in particular.

First, we are to speak the truth. We are to speak truth, not deception. Look there, chapter 12, verse 17. Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness utters deceit.

If you are a person who deceives, then you are not someone who speaks the truth. If you do not give honest evidence, you bear false witness.

[21 : 16] Now, this thing, this seems like a very obvious thing to say, doesn't it? It's not difficult to understand. Of course, the person who gives honest evidence is speaking truth.

Of course, someone who speaks deceit is a false witness. That's obvious. It's easy to understand, but not something to take for granted.

It's easy to speak deceit. It's easy to say the easy thing, isn't it? To say what people want to hear. We dare not take it for granted in our culture that people will give honest evidence and speak the truth.

That's not a given. Many of you will have seen or heard perhaps Lawrence Fox, an actor, torn apart on social media last week for daring to speak truth on a whole range of issues on Question Time, including the scandal of the grooming gangs in Greater Manchester.

Now, the Home Office have refused to publish their reports into those gangs for fear of being deemed racist just by publishing the evidence they've uncovered. It's not a given that honest evidence will be proclaimed, is it?

[22 : 30] It's easier sometimes to hide the truth than to speak it. It's easy to understand, but something not to take for granted.

It's easy to understand, but sometimes costly to do. It's hard, isn't it, to present the truth if, you know, it's going to be hard for somebody to hear.

It takes courage. I'm sure many of you have seen those classic X Factor auditions when little Johnny comes in and Johnny cannot hold a tune, and so he stands there and sings away.

But it's absolutely terrible. And so Simon Cowell, to his credit, gives honest evidence and tells little Johnny the truth. You cannot sing. It's terrible. Cue hysteria from little Johnny.

He's distraught. Up until now, no one's had the courage to tell him the truth. His family have said, you're wonderful. He's been surrounded by those who utter deceit.

[23 : 35] He's been told he's the best singer since Michael W. Smith, or whoever your family favorite singer is. He's not been told the truth. That's a trivial example, isn't it?

But it is hard, isn't it? It is hard to speak truth. It can be very difficult to speak with a friend and give honest evidence, to point out a difficult truth.

truth. We must speak truthfully, says Proverbs. Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness utters deceit.

So we must speak truthfully. But we do so bearing in mind the next thing that Proverbs tells us about the content of our speech. Yes, we're to speak truth, but we're to speak kindly and gently, not harshly.

Proverbs 15, verse 1. A soft answer turns away wrath, but a hard word stirs up anger. We are to speak the truth.

[24 : 46] But how we do so is just as key, isn't it? We are to speak kindly, not harshly. And sometimes if a friend is to be a true friend, a difficult truth needs to be pointed out.

And that may be painful. But it's pain that's inflicted in order to save the friend from perhaps even greater pain or even great danger. We are to speak the truth kindly.

The Apostle Paul in Colossians 3 says that we are to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom. So there's Paul talking about in a corporate setting how we're to speak.

And we're to speak. We're to teach one another. We're to admonish in all wisdom. I think the way that Willie puts it in his chapter on friendship and aspects of love is just very helpful.

When we're thinking about speaking the truth to a friend, a good test of a right attitude is to ask yourself, do you in any way feel any eagerness to correct your friend on this matter?

[25 : 55] Do you feel in any way satisfied confronting your friend about something? If you do, then you're probably not the person to speak to them. But if you do feel that hesitation, if you do feel that weight on your shoulders, agonizing over it, then it probably is the time to speak.

And you're probably the right person to do it if you feel that weight, that hesitation. Because you're going to speak gently, aren't you? You're going to speak the truth, but you're not going to do it harshly.

You'll speak words motivated by love and kindness. You may take no pleasure whatsoever, no pleasure at all from speaking those words, but the end goal, the outcome, that's what you're aiming for.

So we're to speak kindly, gently, not harshly. And so thirdly, it follows that we are to speak thoughtfully, not rashly.

Chapter 15, verse 28. The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil.

[27 : 15] Chapter 18, verse 13. If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame. Hasty speech can land us in hot water, can't it?

I'm sure we've all been there. The times we've spoken too soon. Proverbs would urge us to bide our time, to think carefully before we speak, to ponder how to answer, to properly listen to someone before we offer our opinion.

Think about what we're to say and how to say it. Proverbs 17, verse 27. Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.

Beware rash words, says Proverbs. Remember also who you're speaking to. Speak thoughtfully. Take time to think about the right words for this particular person.

It may be that in your job you've got two people who you're responsible for, and they've both made the same mistake in the workplace.

[28 : 30] Now the end goal is identical, isn't it? You want the same outcome. Stop making that mistake in the future. But how you speak to each person may be completely different, because they're different people.

You know their temperaments. You know how they're going to hear things. So you're essentially communicating the same thing, but the words you use may be different. Proverbs 10, verse 32.

The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable. So the wise person will speak with great thought, adapting, crafting their words to the person who's hearing them.

As we speak, we've got to make sure that we're hearable. The same way of speaking to one person might not work with somebody else. Although you're essentially communicating the same thing, speak with great thoughts.

And if you're in a CU situation at university, you've got folk from all sorts of backgrounds, haven't you? They're in the CU with you. People from difficult theological backgrounds. It could be a whole bunch of issues you want to go and speak to and put them right on.

[29 : 38] But that is not thoughtful. That's rash. Unhelpful. If you're in a CU, focus on the main thing. What are we here for? What's our mission? Talk about that.

Don't get sidetracked with all sorts of other things. The wise person will speak with great thoughts. So there's some key principles in terms of the content of our speech.

We could say a lot more. Just read through Proverbs. You'll find a lot more to say. But there's three key things if we're to build, particularly, and build and foster friendships with one another, with the people in the church, with our friends.

We're to speak the truth, not deception. Speak kindly and gently, not harshly. Speak thoughtfully and not rashly. And no doubt, as we look at the words that we've uttered, if you're like me, you cringe.

You regret. Because inevitably we do. We do speak deception. We do speak harshly and rashly. We do that because we need to remember the third key thing.

[30 : 50] We've thought about our consequences, the content. But thirdly, remember the source of your words. And our words have their source in our hearts.

Our words are inextricably linked to the sort of person we really are. You can't claim to be a wise person if your words are foolish. You won't speak foolish words if you're a wise person.

And so if our words are to be transformed, then our hearts must first be transformed. Proverbs 16, verse 23.

We see this link very clearly. The heart, the heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips.

The heart of the wise. It makes his speech judicious. It's our hearts that direct our speech. And that ought to come as no surprise.

[31 : 59] If you want to know what you're really like, just open your mouth. Stick out your tongue. It will soon reveal what you're really like. You see, our speech clothes our thoughts.

I don't know about you, but until I say something, until I write something down or speak about it, I'm not really sure what I think. As I speak, I'm thinking it through and I articulate it.

If you can't articulate something, then you don't fully understand. Our words clothe our thoughts, don't they? Our words, they reveal what's really in our hearts.

The Lord Jesus is very clear on this, isn't he? Matthew chapter 12. For out of the abundance of our hearts, the mouth speaks. So someone who is, at their very core, wise, will speak wise words. Someone who is at the very core, a fool, will speak foolish words. And so the key to good speech is the heart.

[33 : 08] And Proverbs teaches that to be a wise person, to get wisdom, you must fear the Lord. You must relate rightly with the Lord who made you.

That's the fundamental characteristic of a wise person. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. So fear him. Fear of the Lord. Put your trust in him.

Follow him. Repent. Seek the Lord's forgiveness. Only by submitting to him and seeking to follow him, will he begin to transform your life.

If you turn and follow him, he will be at work in your heart by his spirit transforming you. It's not something we can do ourselves. We can't suddenly make ourselves a wise person.

It's his work, isn't it? So seek to follow him. And he will transform your heart.

[34 : 12] And a transformed heart, a life that is totally shifted in its orientation from self to Christ, a life that is set on following the Lord, that is a wise life.

That is a wise person. And that, and nothing else, is the source of speaking well. Your heart must first be transformed.

So if you realize that your speech is deceptive, harsh, rash, foolish, then let that persuade you of your need to turn your whole life around, to repent and to turn to Christ, to seek forgiveness in him

and start living the way of the wise.

So, to build good friendships, the key to good friendships, the key is good speech.

And the first thing is that right relationship with the God who made you. There's no other way. That's the only way you can get to the very source of our speech.

[35 : 22] It's the heart. And so, firstly, you must have a right relationship with the Lord. And secondly, once you're a follower of Jesus, choose your friends carefully.

Proverbs 13, verse 20. Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise. But the companion of fools will suffer harm.

So if you want to be wise, choose wise friends. And thirdly, immerse yourself in his words.

Proverbs 22, verse 17. Let me read that to you. Proverbs 23, verse 17.

To his knowledge. So pay attention to the source of your words. That's the key to good speech. You cannot separate your speech from your heart.

[36 : 47] And you cannot separate your speech from your relationships. I think Proverbs 22, verse 11, draws it all together. He who loves purity of heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king as his friend.

You see, good speech leads to good friendships. And good speech has its source in a pure heart.

And I don't know about you. But I need the Lord's help if I'm to be one who speaks well, who makes good friendships. And so let's ask him for his help, shall we?

To be that kind of friend with that kind of speech and that kind of heart. Let's pray. Lord, it's beyond our own abilities to be wise speakers.

We need you to transform our very core, our very hearts. So please would you do that. Be at work in each one of our hearts and give us wisdom that we may speak well and so foster good friendships.

[38 : 13] Help us. Because we cannot help ourselves. We ask it in Jesus' name and for his glory. Amen.