

## **Introduction**

How many of you are Steelers fans? Please raise your hands. In order to be loyal to your state, I want you who are Steelers fans to become Browns fans. How many of you who raised your hands as Steelers fans are now Browns fans because of what I said? It's none of you. That's no surprise though because all of us know by experience what I'm going to preach about today – the weakness of words.

The Book of Proverbs has eight major themes. One of those is words. It teaches us two contrasting truths about them. The first is the power of words. They can work life or death in people – to their attitudes, feelings, self-esteem, morale, and moods. But there's a flip side to the coin. Proverbs also teaches the weakness of words. Words are as weak on the one hand as they are powerful on the other. There are three weaknesses of words, each of which we need to address.

## **Words Cannot Do**

First, they cannot do. We see that in 14:23. The wise man writes, **"In all labor there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty."** Notice the contrast between talk and toil.

Toil creates profit because it does. It generates crops because it plants and harvests. It beautifies a home because it paints and fixes. It strengthens the body because it works out. It fosters knowledge because it studies, and so on. Toil creates profit because it does.

In contrast mere talk creates poverty because it cannot do. It doesn't generate crops because it cannot plant and harvest. It doesn't beautify a home because it cannot paint and fix. It doesn't strengthen the body because it cannot work out. It doesn't foster knowledge because it cannot study, and so on. Mere talk creates poverty because it can't do.

That contrast between talk and toil makes the wise man's call clear. Words are no substitute for deeds. So, don't be a talker, but a doer.

Don't be the kind of person who just says it. Be the kind who does it. **"Practice what you preach," "Walk the walk" and "Put your money where your mouth is."** That's what the wise man's teaching us here.

I knew a self-proclaimed patriot, for instance, who had an **"I love America"** bumper sticker on his car. He hadn't voted though in several years. Just saying **"I love America"** doesn't do America any good. But voting, the fundamental require of citizenship, does. He needs to grasp that words are no substitute for deeds. He must do not just talk.

But it isn't just him. It's everyone in every realm, especially professing Christians. The Greek word translated **"Christian"** is used three times in the New Testament. It means literally one who adheres to the anointed one, Jesus. Almost all of us profess that we're Christians. But as 14:23 reveals, words are no substitute for deeds. What we profess, we need to do, which is **"adhere to Jesus."**

**"Adhere"** is a strong word that suggests two things. First, we devotedly learn what Jesus says. And second, we try and train our best to do it. We do that with all the issues of life beginning with the most relevant and urgent of those. Those issues in our current culture, for most people, include money, sports, tattooing, hunting, work, aging, dress, Face Book, entertainment, and more.

Take sports for instance. Is winning a valid goal? Is the competitive spirit Christlike? How much money should we spend on sports? Should games and practices trump church, family, and academic events? Should churches use sports to evangelize? I say I'm a Christian, an adherent of Jesus. But words are no substitute for deeds. So, I do two things. First, I learn what He says that's relevant to those questions and based on that, objectively answer them. Second, I try and train the best I can to live out the answers. If I choose not to do that with sports, money, tattooing, and all the other relevant issues I face, then I'm not a Christian in the true sense of the word.

That proposition illustrates the first weakness of words. They're no substitute for deeds. They cannot do. So, let's do not just talk.

## Words Cannot Alter Facts

28:24 reveals a second weakness of words. They cannot alter facts. The wise man writes, **“He who robs his father or his mother and says, ‘It is not a transgression,’ is the companion of a man who destroys.”** This verse pictures a son stealing something from his father or mother. But notice what he says about that, **“It is not a transgression.” “Taking this property without my parent’s consent isn’t wrong,”** he declares, **“because I’d inherit it anyway.”**

This is a timeless verse because people still do what this son did 3000 years ago. They try to use words to change something bad into something neutral or even good. We call that today, **“doublespeak.”** The *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak* give us some vivid examples of that. In some schools, students don’t **“fail,”** but **“achieve a deficiency.”** Or in some prisons, inmates aren’t put in **“solitary confinement,”** but in **“involuntary administrative segregation.”** Or in the Department of Defense, soldiers aren’t **“outnumbered”** but **“operate in a target rich environment.”** Or in some hospitals, patients don’t die but **“experience a negative patient-care outcome.”**

That’s doublespeak and the fact is most people do it. They doublespeak. They try to use words to change the bad things they are or do into neutral or even good things. So, I’m not **“angry,”** but **“righteously indignant.”** Or I’m not **“cheating on my spouse,”** but **“enlarging my options.”** Or I’m not **“a materialist,”** but **“a King’s kid who lives like it.”** Or I’m not **“retaliating,”** but **“teaching someone a lesson.”** Or I’m not **“gossiping,”** but **“venting.”** Or I’m not living a **“perverted lifestyle,”** but an **“alternative lifestyle,”** and on it goes.

But grasp the wise man’s rejoinder in 28:24. Words cannot alter facts. The fact here is that the son is **“the companion of one who destroys,”** that is, one who murders. The murderer violates the Sixth of the Ten Commandments. But the son violates the Fifth and Eighth, which is just as bad. Dishonoring parents and stealing, together, are as sinful as murdering is, the wise man contends, and nothing he can say can

change that. His words don't alter the nature of what he is and did.

We're confronted here with one of the most profound weaknesses of words. They cannot alter facts. There isn't anything we can say that can change the nature of what we are and do. There aren't any words that can change something bad about our being and behavior into something neutral or good.

A professing Christian deeply resented a teacher who embarrassed her son in one of his classes. She didn't feel guilty though about not forgiving as Jesus says. **"I wouldn't be much of a mother,"** she said, **"if I weren't mad at him for hurting my son."** There's an exception to forgiving, she was claiming – when people harm our children. When that occurs, it's noble not to forgive. But words cannot alter facts. They cannot change something evil, resenting, into something good.

28:24 teaches us to be objective and straightforward about what we are and do. We need to be honest and not put a spin on our failures and sins. We need to recognize and confess not deny or excuse them. We need to own up to the painful truths about our character and deeds.

That may seem like the worst thing we can do, but in reality, it's the best. Acclaimed psychiatrist Karl Menninger argued just that in his bestselling book *Whatever Became of Sin*. Menninger was no evangelical but the thesis of his book is true. Psychological health is contingent upon, if not synonymous with, moral health. The first step in curing mental and emotional afflictions, therefore, is confessing sins, not denying or excusing them. There's no hope, Menninger wrote, for those who deny or excuse them.

He was right. 26 years ago, I preached to impress people and excused it. Everyone does. But then I recognized and confessed my sin. I now preach to please God and have far more peace as a result.

I know it by experience and so do all of you. Words cannot alter facts. So, let's not deny or excuse our sins but recognize and confess them instead. Doing so is the first step in achieving moral health and the psychological health that goes along with it.

## Words Cannot Compel a Response

There's a third weakness of words that Proverbs reveals. They cannot compel a response – or you Steelers fans would be Browns fans. In 29:19, the wise man writes, **“A slave will not be instructed with words alone; for though he understands, there will be no response.”** He writes about slaves here for the purposes of overkill. Masters in antiquity had the power of life and death over their slaves. If what the wise man writes about words is true of masters and slaves, it's even truer of others and us. Notice what he observes in that regard. The master instructs but the slave doesn't respond. He doesn't do what the master says to do or does do what he says not to do.

That implies one of the most frustrating weaknesses of words. We want to influence people for good. So, we instruct, exhort, encourage, guide, and command them. But our words fall on deaf ears as we say it and they don't act on them. They ignore or reject them instead. It's the reality that the idiom **“save your breath”** conveys. Words cannot compel a response. If they could, all the liberals I know would be conservatives, my grandsons wouldn't wear shorts, and my wife would have cream style corn at least three meals a week. None of those are the case because words cannot compel a response.

There are two primary reasons that people don't respond to what we say. We need to address both if we're going to influence them for good.

One is that they disbelieve what we say. It isn't true or so, they think. Understanding is the basis of belief. So we need to help them understand. We do that by communicating with them clearly, creatively, thoroughly, and lovingly. That takes time and has to be done in the context of a serious discussion with them.

Another and more frequent reason that people don't respond to our words is that they aren't objective. What we say may be contrary to their desires. Or it may threaten long held assumptions or practices of theirs to which they have emotional attachments. They have biases, in other words, and there's only one way to overcome them. It's the Holy Spirit

empowering our words and us.

We're empowered when we routinely engage Jesus and His kingdom at hand. The Holy Spirit renews the very core of our being when we do. Something winsome and appealing then comes out of us that the people we're trying to influence can sense and feel.

Our words are also empowered – when we pray. In Exodus 4:12, God promised Moses, **“I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say.”** We need to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to be with our mouths, to empower the words that come out of them. If we're intimate with Jesus, He will. He'll quicken our communication in a way that's tangible and real. He'll energize what we say with an influence that's beyond us. Whenever I'm going to counsel or instruct anyone, formally or informally, I pray and ask Him to do just that.

I also pray for *them* – that the Holy Spirit will work in them to make them competent and objective hearers. I ask Him to enhance the understanding of their minds and the openness of their hearts.

I once had the unenviable task of confronting a professing Christian who had just moved in with his girlfriend. I visited him and explained to him why he was sinning and needed to move out. I'll never forget doing that, because he actually responded to what I said. He moved out.

The very novelty of his response illustrates two things. First, words cannot compel a response. And second, to get a response, therefore, we must speak clearly, creatively, thoroughly, and lovingly and be empowered by the Holy Spirit as we do.

## **Conclusion**

I'd like to close with the words of the popular quotation and quip writer Cullen Hightower, **“Talk is cheap – except when Congress does it.”** That quip is cute but not correct. If all Congress does is talk, we're fine. Even Congress isn't an exception to what our verses teach us. Words cannot do, cannot alter facts, and cannot compel a response. That is the weakness of words. Let's live accordingly.