

Introduction

I'd like to begin by asking you an instructive question. How many words do you speak in a normal day? One study found that males speak 6100 words a day and females 8800. Another found that it's 7,000 for males and 21,000 for females. We may not know specifically how many words we speak a day, but there's one thing we do know. It's a lot.

Which makes what I'm going to preach about today one of the most critical issues in our lives generally and, on this Mother's Day, in our home lives particularly. That issue is the power of words.

The Power of Words

Solomon reveals just that in the hard-hitting observation he makes in Proverbs 18:21a, **"Death and life are in the power of the tongue."** Let those words sink in. They teach us two things.

First, death is in the power of the tongue. Stop for a moment and consider what it is that wounds or kills. It's weapons like guns, knives, clubs, and swords. But words can be just as destructive in their own way as weapons are. Solomon makes that perfectly clear in Proverbs 12:18a, **"There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword."** Words can be like a clumsy sword that's thrust into a person's body over and over again. They can wound or kill in their own way, in other words, just as weapons do. They have the power to work death.

Proverbs 18:21a teaches us a second thing. Life is in the power of the tongue. Stop for a moment and consider what it is that soothes or heals. It's medicines like antibiotics, ointments, and more. But words can be just as vitalizing in their own way as medicines are. Solomon makes that perfectly clear in Proverbs 12:18b, **"But the tongue of the wise brings healing."** Words can be like penicillin for strep throat or pain killers for a toothache. They can soothe or heal in their own way, in other words, just as medicines do. They have the power to work life.

That then is the power of words. They can work death and life.

The Power of Penetration

But in what way can they? Solomon tells us.

In 18:14, he writes, **“The spirit of a man can endure his sickness, but as for a broken spirit who can bear it?”** Notice his simple point. A person can endure a sickness, a broken body, easier than a broken spirit. The word **“spirit”** refers to the non-material aspect of human beings: feelings, attitudes, self-concept, morale, and moods. Solomon clearly implies in that regard that what is done **to** a person (to the body) isn't as important as what is done **in** a person (to the spirit).

Which is precisely why words are so affecting. It's because they do or work **in** the people to whom they're spoken. We see that in identical verses, Proverbs 18:8 and 26:22, **“The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of the body.”** Notice where words go when they're spoken, **“into the innermost parts of the body.”** That's a Hebrew idiom that means into a person's spirit. Words, in other words, possess the power of penetration. Yes, it's true. They can't harm or heal the body. But they can penetrate into the depths of a person and harm or heal the spirit.

First, they can harm the spirit. They can work death to a person's feelings, attitudes, self-concept, morale, or moods. They can distort, diminish, or even devastate them.

Christian author April Lorier wrote an article about her physically and verbally abusive mother. Her mother not only beat her but derided her as well. She describes the effect of that on her as an adult this way: **“The physical abuse, though it was bloody and painful at the time, was now only a fact like any other fact in my life. I no longer felt the pain of the physical abuse, nor did I have any emotions (or dreams) associated with it. It was those words that still stung, all these years later. Words have enormous power, either positive or negative, but never neutral.”** She goes on to explain why the words of parents are especially impacting: **“God's words are omnipotent, and our words are potent because we are made in the image of God.**

And to a child, the parent *is* God. If Mama or Daddy says a child is stupid, it is gospel to that child that he or she is."

She's right. Negative words harm the spirits of people. They work death to their feelings, attitudes, self-concept, morale, or moods.

But positive words heal their spirits. They work life to them. They correct, enhance, enliven, or strengthen them.

A woman named Mary was born with a cleft palate. As often happens, children verbally teased her as she grew. That, as you'd expect, worked death to her self-concept. She became convinced that she was worthless and that no one, outside her family, could ever love her – until she entered Mrs. Leonard's 4th grade class. Mrs. Leonard took an interest in Mary and constantly encouraged her, which climaxed in a life-defining moment on "whisper test" day. It was common for teachers in the 1950's to give their students an annual hearing test. They gave it by having the student walk to the classroom door, turn side ways, close one ear with a finger, and then repeat something the teacher whispered. They would whisper things like **"The sky is blue," "What color are your shoes,"** and so on. But when Mary's turn came, Mrs. Leonard whispered these poignant words, **"I wish you were my daughter."** Those words penetrated into Mary's spirit and worked life there, to her self-concept. They were a turning point, she says, that propelled her to become the confident and successful adult she is today.

The message is clear. Words have a life-altering psychological impact. They possess the power of penetration. They reach into the depths of a person and harm or heal the spirit. They work death or life to the feelings, attitudes, self-concept, morale, or moods.

The Holy Spirit's Work

That's the message and a poem I came across expresses its call: **"Oh, that my tongue might so possess, the accent of His tenderness;* For those who mourn, a word of cheer; a word of hope for those who fear. * Oh, that it might be said of me, 'Surely**

thy speech betrayeth thee, as a friend of Jesus of Galilee.” Our call is to have the tongue of Jesus. We speak like He did. Our words habitually work life, not death in others. Words of life are routine for us. Words of death are rare. We have the tongue of Jesus when they are.

But how do we get His tongue? A critical verse, Matthew 12:34, tells us. It says, **“For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.”** What we are, in other words, determines what we speak. To speak like Jesus, therefore, we must become like Jesus. But there’s only one way to become like Jesus. It’s to follow Jesus. We follow Him by making and, to the best of our ability, carrying out a decision. It’s to arrange all of our affairs around engaging Him and His kingdom at hand.

When we make that decision, the Holy Spirit enters into us and regenerates us. Regeneration is an initial work in which He transforms our mental, emotional, volitional, and bodily processes in necessary ways. *As we carry out that decision*, the Holy Spirit then sanctifies us. Sanctification is an ongoing work in which He continually transforms those processes in all ways. The result is that we become more and more like Jesus on the inside, which makes us more and more like Him on the outside, including the words we speak. Because we *are* like Him, we *speak* like Him. Or as the poem would say it, we have His tongue.

Our Work

We see then that having the tongue of Jesus is *primarily* the Holy Spirit’s work. But it isn’t *only* His work. It’s ours as well. Our work is to cooperate with Him in transforming our tongues by doing three things.

First, think before we speak.

One of the verses we read, Proverbs 12:18a, reveals a problem that many of us have. It mentions one who **“speaks rashly”** - in the heat of the moment, without thinking. One of our biggest problems as fallen human beings is that our tongues are always “going off” on us as we say it. We run off at the mouth, saying things that work death when we do.

We desperately need to think before we speak. To think before we

speak means two things. First, we consider our words fully. And second, we control what we say and when and how we say it.

Doing that requires an inner distance (a presence of mind) that's achieved by practicing the discipline of silence. I've explained this discipline, in detail, before. We practice "not speaking" in circumstances when we aren't on the spot, when we aren't as prone to run off at the mouth. That in turn enables the Holy Spirit to create inner distance in us. We're then able to think before we speak when we are on the spot.

Some years ago, a pastor and I were talking about capital punishment. He believes that it's immoral and perverse and condemned me for believing that it isn't. I was going to condemn him right back by saying, "**You obviously don't know the Bible very well**" but didn't. I've learned, you see, to have inner distance and to think before I speak. First, I considered the words I was going to say. I recognized them, when I did, for what they were - words of death that were meant to hurt him. Second, I controlled what I said. Because they were words of death, I didn't speak them. I kindly spoke words of life instead, "**Please explain to me why you believe what you do.**"

We cooperate with the Holy Spirit by doing a second thing. Think about how we speak. Knowing how powerful words are and how important they are to God, we examine ours. We reflect on our patterns of speech. We reflect on the things that we say and how we say them. Examining ourselves enables us to know ourselves, which is essential to having the tongue of Jesus. It enables us to identify and eliminate words of death and to identify and cultivate words of life.

A psychologist at the Akron Juvenile Detention Center explained to me what he does. When a delinquent is admitted to the Center, he meets with the parents and asks, "**What percentage of your communication with your child is criticism?**" Most answer, "**55%.**" He then meets with the delinquent and asks, "**What percentage of your parents' communication with you is criticism?**" Most answer, "**95%.**" In reality, he said, it's around 88%. He then made the connection. One of

the two leading causes of juvenile delinquency is low self-esteem. And the leading cause of low self-esteem is parental criticism.

I don't know if that's true or not but the lesson I'd draw is this. Parents ought to examine their patterns of speech with their children and determine this: what percentage of what they say are words of death and what percentage are words of life. Then eliminate the words of death.

But it isn't just parents with children. It's all of us with everyone. We need to think about how we speak.

There's a third thing we do to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. Think ahead. I mean by that, to the ultimate consequences of our words. Jesus tells us what they are in Matthew 12:36-37: **"And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the Day of Judgment. For by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned."**

Most people think that the words we speak vanish into thin air. That they dissolve into nothingness. Nothing could be further from the truth. The truth is they will be repeated. They will be heard again – on the Day of Judgment. All of us are going to stand before the judgment seat of God personally and alone. And we're going to give account to Him for all of the words we've spoken. For the words of death, we'll suffer loss. For the words of life, we'll get gain.

I don't know what that fact is to you but I know what it is to me. It's a spur. It compels me, motivates me, to purposely and passionately pursue having the tongue of Jesus.

That then is our work in having the tongue of Jesus: think before we speak, think about how we speak, and think ahead?

Conclusion

I close with an old maxim that all of us know and have used, **"Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me."** The second half of that is dead wrong. Words can hurt us – or help us. They can work life or death. That is their power.