

BLING, NOT SWORDS

8th in a Series on Proverbs titled, “Mastering Life”

Passage: Proverbs 18:21 – Topic: How We Use Our Words

I read a story recently about a somewhat cocky young guy who got a job working in the produce department of a grocery store. One day an older lady told him she wanted to buy half of a head of iceberg lettuce. He explained they only sold them by the head. But she was insistent that she only wanted half a head. Finally he told her, “I’ll have to go talk to the manager and see what he says.” He tracked down the manager and when he found him he said, “There is some stupid old bag in produce who insists that she wants to buy a half a head of lettuce. What should I do?” The horrified expression on the face of his manager gave him a clue about what had happened. He turned and saw that the woman had followed him and was standing right behind him. He quickly pointed at her and added, “Fortunately this very nice lady here said she would like to buy the other half. Would that be okay?” Obviously relieved, the manager said, “Yes, that would be fine.” Later the manager found the young man and said, “That was some pretty quick thinking on your feet.” The young man thanked him, then the manager said, “Where are you from?” The kid said, “I’m from Toronto, Canada, the home of beautiful hockey players and ugly women.” The manager said, “My wife is from Toronto.” The kid replied, “Really? What team did she play for?”

That young man needed to learn to control his tongue. He may be an extreme case, but unfortunately he has plenty of company. Proverbs is about mastering life, and one thing it communicates clearly is that if we want to master life, we will have to master our tongues. Let’s start with Proverbs 18:21.

WE HAVE ENORMOUS POTENTIAL TO DO DAMAGE BY WHAT WE SAY
Laurie and I have been struck by some of the things our son, Toby, is dealing with. I knew there were going to be some hard things about his job as a doctor in an emergency department. I’ve been to the ER and know that no one is happy to be there. But I envisioned he would have to be stitching up wounds, treating broken bones, dealing with people who had flu like symptoms and other fairly routine, though difficult health issues. He does deal with such things, but what I did not anticipate is how often he is dealing with people whose lives hang in the balance. He is faced often with life and death matters. It hit me that this is about as serious as it gets. What a thing to have to face that on a regular basis.

Proverbs 18:21 says, “The tongue has the power of life and death; and those who love it will eat its fruit.” Life and death is usually an expression we use for something that

is the most serious that a human can face. This verse says when we speak, every time we open our mouths, it is a matter of life and death. Let's start with the idea that we have the power of death by what we say. In other words, we can kill with our words. That is a profound statement. This Proverb claims that we can use our words, our speech, to actually bring death to people. Dr. Larry Crabb wrote in his book, *The Safest Place On Earth*, "we all carry with us a few deep pockets of hurt, vivid memories of painful moments when our self worth hit the skids. Those moments taught us to define 'life' as whatever experiences provided us with a sense of self worth. 'Death' is whatever took it away."

His point is that a sense of our value as a human being plays such a huge role deep in our souls that whenever we receive a message that we have no value it feels like death. We can communicate to people that they are insignificant, that they don't matter, or we can communicate that they have immense value. By so doing we either give them death or life.

Proverbs 16:27 say that the lips of a scoundrel are like a scorching fire. The next verse says that gossip separates close friends. In other words, loose lips sink a lot more than ships. They also destroy relationships. Proverbs 12:18 says, "The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."

We don't have a lot of experience with swords in our culture. Mostly we see them only in movies and TV shows. Our son in law, Michael, has one because he is a former Marine officer. It is traditional for them to have one as part of their dress uniform. That's kind of funny because there's not much use for a sword in modern combat. Bringing a sword to a gun fight is a really bad idea.

My dad served both in Europe and in the Pacific in World War 2. His final assignment was to be part of the occupation force in Japan after the war finally ended. He brought home souvenirs from both theaters of operation. From Japan he brought home a couple of swords, one of which we still have. I don't think much about swords, but I have looked at those swords and imagined what it would be like if someone used it on me. It would be horrifying. It would be incredibly painful and potentially fatal. Proverbs tell us unkind, thoughtless, insensitive words are as dangerous as a sword and can inflict just as much damage. We need to be ever aware when we open our mouths that it is potentially as damaging as flailing around with a sword.

In the time that Proverbs was written a sword was the most advanced weapons technology available. To get the picture of what this means, think in terms of

weapons technology today. When you open your mouth and launch words, they are like bullets. You fire them off and they can do enormous damage. Unfortunately words can be like automatic weapons firing out a stream of bullets. When we launch them without thinking it is equivalent to just randomly opening fire in a crowded room with a gun. People are going to be hurt and may be destroyed.

We can do damage with words that are cruel, unkind, critical, discouraging, untrue or simply thoughtless. And like bullets once we have launched them we can't get them back. Perhaps you've seen the TV show *Mythbusters* during its 14-year run on the Discovery Channel. They used scientific testing to determine the validity of rumors, myths, urban legends and scenes in movies. They examined things like the claims that humans only use 10% of the brain, the black that athletes apply to their cheekbones cuts down glare, and many others. In December 2011 they ran an experiment in Dublin, California that involved firing a cannonball. They did the test at a sheriffs' bomb disposal range, so they felt they were in a safe location where there was no threat to anyone. However, when they fired the cannon, the cannonball went way higher and farther than expected. It hit a hill behind the target that was the secondary safety barrier and just skipped up and over the hill. It continued on into a housing area and bounced into home on a quiet street, ripped through the front door and bounded up the stairs of the house. It blasted through a bedroom, exited the house, leaving a hole in the wall, crossed a sizable road, hit another house in the roof, removing several tiles and finally slammed into a minivan parked in a driveway. Unfortunately, our words can be like that cannonball. Once we fire them off, there's no getting them back. They can go careening off into the world and do incredible amounts of damage to other people.

Kevin Miller, the executive vice president of *Christianity Today*, has a story about the potential danger of careless words. He was about to fly home to Chicago from San Francisco. He had boarded his plane, was in his seat with the flight about to leave in 5 minutes. But then a gate agent from the airline came on board, found him and said, "Collect your bags and please come with me." He has never had anything like that happen before and wondered what was going on. As he followed the agent up the jetway he asked, "What's going on? Is this some sort of random security check or something?" The agent said, "The captain refused to have you on this flight." Uh oh. In the terminal the agent pointed to a black vinyl seat and said, "Sit there. A supervisor will come talk to you." He sat there perplexed, watching as his plane was

towed back from the gate and then headed for the runway without him. After 10 minutes or so he asked the gate agent, “What is going on?” The agent merely said, “A supervisor will come talk to you.” As he sat there he realized what had happened. He was traveling with a friend who had been pulled out of the security line for a random check. When the friend finally got on the plane Miller said to him, “Why were you stopped? Was it your beady terrorist eyes? Explosives?” His friend quickly shook his head trying to get him to shut up. Miller realized those careless words were likely the problem. Soon four San Francisco PD officers showed up and asked, “Do you know why you are here?” He said, “No, I was hoping you could tell me.” They said, “Is there anything you said to cause you to be here?” He answered, “Well, I did make a comment to my friend about him looking like a terrorist. I was just making a private joke.” One officer said, “You can’t joke about those things.” They took his driver’s license and ran a background check on him and then they called the FAA to see what they wanted to do. At this point he was thinking, “Are they going to take me into custody? Am I going to have to buy another ticket on another airline for tomorrow?” Finally a senior airline representative came and said, “Tell me what happened. What did you say?” He explained, then the rep said, “What’s your friend’s name?” More consultation took place. One cop said, “So they let your friend go on the flight ...but not you, huh?” Miller said, “Well, he didn’t say something stupid. I did.” Finally the airline rep said to him, “You realize that you can’t even joke about things like that, right?” Miller said, “I know. It was stupid and I shouldn’t have said it.” The rep said, “Another passenger heard you and refused to go on the flight. The captain was told, and he made the decision to remove you from the flight. But we are going to let you go on a later flight. It doesn’t leave until 11:30 PM, so you’ll get into Chicago at 5:30 AM.” Miller learned a very important lesson about flippant, careless words.

And this point is not limited to our words, it is about communication. We can inflict pain with our facial expression or with a harsh or impatient tone of voice as well as with our words. And when we do we are using our communication as an instrument of death.

Being a pastor is interesting because you are very much in the public eye, yet the public isn’t the audience for your life, God is. Nevertheless, you get lots of feedback. You have to be careful because if you lap up all the positive feedback, you are likely to become overly impressed with yourself. But if you pay too much attention to the negative feedback, it can totally defeat you. I remember one specific Sunday in my previous ministry where, for whatever reason, my sermon seemed to resonate with a lot of people. That morning, six different people specifically sought me out and said that they felt like the sermon was intended just for them, that it was exactly what they needed to hear. That week I received two notes in the mail that expressed much the

same thing in written form. I also received a note that took issue with one minor point I mentioned in passing during the sermon and criticized me for it. Of all of that feedback, which do you suppose had the most effect? That one negative comment rankled. It was so loud it drowned out all the others. As much as I reminded myself to keep it in perspective, it kept coming up in my mind and nagging at me. One negative comment, one that I actually knew intellectually was not really valid, outweighed eight positive comments. You might say I'm unusually thin skinned, but I assure you that I am not. I would not have survived almost 40 years as a pastor if I were. What I am is human, and for all of us, negative, critical words, hurtful words, strike deeper and last longer than others. We need to understand that our death-dealing, negative, hurtful words do an enormous amount of damage, more than we imagine.

WE HAVE ENORMOUS POTENTIAL TO BLESS BY WHAT WE SAY

Fortunately that coin has a flip side. Proverbs 18:21 says in addition to having the power of death, our words have the power of life. They can be life affirming, life giving words. Remember Proverbs 12:18 said that reckless words can be horribly cutting, but it also said, "the tongue of the wise brings healing." Proverbs 15:4 says, "The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life." We can bring healing, and to actually be a tree of life with our positive, affirming, encouraging words.

Proverbs 16:24 says, "Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones." Did you know that chocolate was not known to the Old World until the 16th century? It was known in the Americas before that. The Aztecs believed that their god Quezalcoatl came to earth bearing a cocoa plant. They believed power and wisdom came from eating chocolate. Maybe that's my problem. I don't like chocolate. So my powerlessness and my stupidity are a result of my diet. I know all women aren't like Laurie, but for those who are, having to survive without chocolate...well...life might not be worth living. When Proverbs was written the sweetest food they knew was honey. This Proverb says gracious words are like honey. They are the sweetest thing that one can ever receive. They are better than chocolate.

Proverbs 25:11 says, "A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver." I'm not a bling guy. The only bling I wear is a wedding ring, and I don't wear that for the bling effect. I wear it as a symbol of my devotion to my wife. A couple of years ago I bought a new wedding ring. It's made of koa wood and titanium. It replaces the gold ring I wore for 37 years. I like the look of it, but one reason I got it is that it's actually more comfortable than my old one. I'm very different from Laurie. She loves anything shiny. She loves bling. I know Laurie loves the stuff, and so I'd like to get some for her because it makes her happy, but then they tell me the

price. I start hyperventilating. I want to say, “For that? That tiny little piece of rock stuck on a piece of gold? That’s outrageous.” Outrageous it may be, but it is how the world is. Those stones and precious metals are rare, they are hard to come by, and so they are some of the most valuable things on the planet. That Proverb says aptly spoken words, gracious words, healing words, are like that. They are some of the most valuable things on the planet. Perhaps because they are so rare.

You all know that I love sports. It has mostly been an unrequited love. I always wanted to be an athlete, the guy that was a difference maker on whatever team I played on, the guy whose teams always wins because he is able to carry the team on his back. That basically never happened. You name the sport, I wasn’t very good at it. So through the years I didn’t get a whole lot of positive affirmation about my athletic endeavors. There was a time when I used to play hockey with a number of guys from our church. But eventually I gave it up. That team kind of disbanded, and I simply wasn’t good enough to get on a team based on my ability. At the time I was coaching our son’s high school hockey team. At one game a few months after I had hung up my skates, I was pleased to learn that one of the referees for the game was one of my former teammates, a brother in Christ and a really good guy. At one point during warmups he stopped by our bench and chatted with me. He asked me where I was playing. I told him my playing days were over. He said, “Hey, the team I’m on could use you. We need some more guys. Why don’t you come play with us?” I said, “I’m too old, too slow and too bad. I’ve given up playing because I just can’t keep up.” He said, “Rick, I’m serious. You should come play with us. We could really use a good defenseman like you.” He thought I was good! Man, did that feel good. Maybe I wasn’t as bad as I thought. I briefly thought, “Hey, maybe I could still go.” Those affirming words felt like a balm to my soul. It was only later after I got home that I reflected on that conversation and it hit me that the crucial words were, “we need some more guys.” He needed guys to play for his team. So what if you are a miserable excuse for a hockey player, if you can exchange oxygen for carbon dioxide and you can skate even a little, you qualify. We just need bodies.

That was one of 5 moments in my life going all the way back to when I was 13 years old when I heard people say positive things about my athletic abilities. One in junior high, one in high school, one in college, two much later in life. Two of them I actually just overheard people saying something positive to someone else, all of them were unbidden. The fact that I can recall each one of them specifically, can tell you exactly where I was when they happened, says those moments were powerful. I can remember hardly any conversations or words said to me from my days in junior high, high school and college. But I remember those, and I remember them very clearly,

even after decades have passed. My memory seems to tightly hold onto them like a drowning man would clutch a life preserver.

When I was in seminary I had two semesters of a class called Sermon Preparation. It was basically speech for pastors. It focused on both content and delivery. It included assignments that involved preparing and delivering a number of sermons to the class. One day near the end of the second semester a friend told me that he and a couple of others were talking to the prof of that class. He said, “Rick, the prof told us that you were the best he’s ever had at making biblical truths come to life.” Wow, did that feel good. Of course I didn’t know he’d only had 15 students his whole life. Just kidding. That encouraged me, and it was important to remember in later years when I encountered people who had a vastly different estimation of my abilities, who in fact didn’t feel I was much good at anything. The thing is, there was no need for my friend to pass that professor’s comment on to me. He gained nothing from it. He did it purely to encourage me.

Has anyone ever made a specific effort to tell you how important you are to them or what a blessing you are to them? Has anyone ever thanked you for being in their life? Has anyone ever told you how rare you are as a person and how much they love you? What does it do to your heart when they do that? It fills it with healing, joy, and love. What we all need to know is that every day we are encountering people and all of them are desperate to hear those kinds of words of affirmation and encouragement. I think of the peach tree in our back yard. Last summer during one hot spell we had not watered it as diligently as we should have. One morning we looked at it and we could see that it was drying up. Its leaves were starting to wither. Laurie promptly went out and gave that tree a good soaking. Almost immediately you could see the leaves changing. The change was dramatic. The tree perked up right away. All around you there are people who are thirsting for affirmation and encouragement. They deal with a steady stream of criticism or neglect and their souls are withering like the leaves on that tree. Your words of love, affirmation and encouragement are like water to that thirsty tree. Share those words and you will see those people perk up in a hurry.

APPLICATION

REMEMBER YOU HAVE GREAT POWER

Never forget that you are literally powerful. You are full of power that you wield whenever you speak. Every time you speak you are exercising incredible power. The power of your words is like nuclear power, able to do incredible good, but also able to wreak unimaginable devastation and destruction in other people.

Jonathan Sutherland, a London police officer, gave a powerful talk at the TED conference in which he talked about Locard's Exchange principle. This is a crucial principle in forensics that was first described by Dr. Edmond Locard, a pioneer in that field. He said, "A perpetrator will bring something into the crime scene and leave with something from it. Every contact leaves a trace." Sutherland talked about how that principle is relied on in finding evidence and solving crimes, but then he said the principle also applies to our interactions with each other. He said, "Every time two people come into contact with one another an exchange takes place. Whether between lifelong friends or passing strangers, we encourage or we ignore, we hold out a hand or we withdraw it...We bless or we curse...And every single contact leaves a trace. The way that we treat and regard one another matters."

Opening our mouths to speak is a matter of eternal impact. We bring a little death or we give life. We need to start by never taking that lightly, never spewing out thoughtless, insensitive words that can destroy.

BE SLOW TO SPEAK

James 1:19 says, "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." The more we say, the more opportunity we have to say something that we wish we hadn't.

Proverbs 10:19 says, "Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues." Proverbs 29:20 says, "Do you see someone who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for them." When it comes to speech, Proverbs says less is more. You and I both know that we all long to be listened to way more than we want to be lectured to. One of the most loving things we can do is to just listen rather than bombard other people with our great wisdom.

Jesus said in Matthew 12:36. "I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken." Yikes. That ought to cause us to be careful when we open our mouths.

AIM TO BLESS

Ephesians 4:29 says, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

Have you ever been around someone who is incessantly negative, who can always find the cloud in the silver lining and is almost invariably critical of other people? I have known some people like that. Here is what I have found. My interactions with

them do not increase joy in my life, they do not give me hope, and they do not inspire love for others. I come away feeling discouraged, seeing only the negative.

The goal here is not to be an airheaded Pollyanna who thinks everything is always wonderful. It's not to go around foolishly singing, "Everything is awesome!" This is not about sticking our head in the sand. It is about believing that God is good, and it is about doing all we can to bring hope, joy and love to people. It is about building them up, and about not saying anything that will not build up.

START WITH YOUR HEART

In Luke 6:45 Jesus said, "A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of." He said something similar in Matthew 15:18-19, "the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."

Imagine holding a bottle. Let the mouth of the bottle represent your mouth. Now tip the bottle over. What comes out? What comes out will always be what was already inside. That was Jesus' point. What comes out of our mouths starts in our hearts. If our hearts are full of self, full of negative stuff, full of criticism and resentment, full of anger at people, guess what is going to come out? Criticism, resentment, anger, negativity. But if our hearts are full of God's grace, full of hope, full of faith, full of love for God, full of love for others, full of appreciation for them, what is going to come out? It will be grace, hope, love, appreciation, and people are going to be helped.

The place to start is to let Jesus Christ rule in our hearts. It is to let them be freed and filled with his grace. It is to let them be transformed by his life. It is to have them be filled with total confidence in God's love and his working and plan in our lives, certainty that he will bring good no matter what happens to us. When our hearts are full of such things, they inevitably will come out of our mouths and bring grace to others. So we start with giving our hearts to God, asking him to transform them and fill them with his Spirit and his grace. Then we must offer God control of our mouths. Desire to have every word we speak give grace, build up others, and bring them life. Do you know who Billy Joel is? Of course you do. He is a famous musician who has been awarded multiple Grammy awards and sold over 150 million albums. He still tours to packed out arenas and stadiums. But there is an interesting fact about him. He has not put out a new album in 25 years. Do you know why? In an interview in *New York* magazine he said, "I never felt as good as I wanted to be." Critics have

savaged his music as sappy and shallow. He says, “Because I studied music I was suspect to critics.” His reluctance to write new music is because of the critics. Their criticism has apparently frozen his creativity. Is that something anyone wants to do? Would you be proud of being a demotivator like that?

The other end of the spectrum is represented by Scott Adams, the creator of the Dilbert cartoon strip. When he tried to break into the cartoon industry he received one rejection after another. Some of them weren’t very gentle. One editor told him he ought to take some art classes. But one day a woman named Sarah Gillespie called. She was an editor at United Media and she told him she wanted to offer him a contract. His experience suggested to him that he was raw and needed to improve and change things. He asked her if she wanted him to work on some things and improve in any particular way. She said, “No, I think you’re very talented and you have great potential. Just keep doing what you’ve been doing. I have great confidence in you.” Adams says, “This may sound bizarre, but from the minute I got off the phone with her, I could draw better. You can see marked improvement in the quality of the cartoons I drew after that conversation.”

Let’s ask God to enable us to, instead of lobbing nuclear bombs that devastate people when we open our mouths, fire off blessing bombs that will bring hope, peace, joy, grace, encouragement, affirmation and love to everyone who hears. Let’s make sure our words are precious life-giving jewels, and are never death-dealing swords.