

## Proverbs 15 – The Nuances of Words and Wisdom

There are many verses in Proverbs that instruct us about the wisdom we need in our words. In chapter 10, for instance, we read several verses that teach us to talk less and listen more so that we might receive correction and store up wisdom.

In chapter 15, there are numerous other verses that specifically address our speech. Verses 1 and 18 remind us that the delivery of our words can either cause anger or turn it away. Verses 2, 7, and 14 explain that the way we communicate can either invite discussion and knowledge or impart ignorance. Verses 4 and 23 teach us that our words can either encourage someone or break his or her spirit altogether. And verse 28 warns that we can either think and carefully speak words of righteousness or we can blurt out wickedness.

Besides the fact that our words matter and have great effect, we can sum up the wisdom of this instruction about words in this way-what we say is no less important than the way we say it. The nuances of communication are vast! We've all misinterpreted the heart of an email, text message, or social media post or had our words misinterpreted by someone else. Even in face-to-face conversations, we need to show wisdom in the way we speak. Our body language, expressions, tone, and timing all communicate a message that either invigorates the message of our actual words, confuses them, or diminishes them entirely. If we want to walk in wisdom, then, we must invite God to help us give careful attention to our words and how we communicate them.

Which of the verses about words in Proverbs 15 stands out to you the most? Why?

*<sup>1</sup>A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. <sup>2</sup>The tongue of the wise adorns knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.*

When people come to us in wrath, we are often tempted to be harsh in response. Wisdom shows us the value of a soft answer, one without sharp edges or points. That kind of answer can actually turn away wrath. *“Soft speech is like oil on bruised skin to soften and heal it* (Judges 8:1-3); *painful speech has the effect of oil poured on fire* (1 Kings 12:1-16).” Speech has the potential to quiet a riot or to fan the embers of anger ([Prov. 12:18](#); [15:18](#); [25:15](#)). A ‘gentle’ word is the way to respond to a threatening situation. The word ‘gentle’ means soft, tender or delicate.

The wise man or woman will show their right use of knowledge by the words they say. The words of their tongue demonstrate their wisdom. Taking due care both what, and when, and to whom, and in what manner he speaks. It is difficult to know when to speak, and when to be silent; what to speak, and what to leave unspoken; the manner that is best and most suitable to the occasion, the subject, the circumstances, and the persons.... Even wise counsel may be foolishly given.” The heart of a wise and good man is filled with useful knowledge, civil, moral, spiritual, and enthusiastic; so he takes care to communicate it, at proper times and seasons, in proper places, and to proper persons; adapting it to their case and circumstances, so as it may be for their comfort, edification, and instruction, and minister grace unto them.

A fool will be revealed by their words. It isn't enough for a man or woman to claim they have wisdom in their heart or mind; what they say proves either their wisdom or folly.

*<sup>3</sup>The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good. <sup>4</sup>The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.*

Wisdom understands that we are always under the eye of God. He sees us in every place, even when we are hidden to human eyes. The eyes of Christ are ‘as a flaming fire.’ [Revelation 1:14] God takes

note of *both* the evil and the good. He will deal with the evil according to His righteous judgment, and He will bless and reward the good. Among men, evil is often unpunished and good is often unrewarded – but God sees and notes all. [2Chr 16:9](#) *“For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.*

In this age of electronics, we have all become aware of recording devices and cameras. A person's office, hotel room, or telephone can be monitored so that every sound is picked up. This is accomplished through highly sensitive equipment. Heads of state, government officials, and business people in strategic positions must be exceedingly careful of what they say, especially when entering a strange setting. The awareness that they might be overheard is sure to make them think twice before they speak.

Good words are like a tree that brings life from its shade and fruit. Our words have the power to do more good than we think. If someone's tongue is perverse instead of wholesome, their words will break the spirit of others.

*<sup>5</sup> A fool spurns a parent's discipline, but whoever heeds correction shows prudence.*

Proverbs is written as advice from a father to his children. A fool would despise the wisdom that comes from a godly parent and God's word. One's attitude toward parental teaching will determine one's lifelong attitude toward authority and instruction. Learning wisdom is more than learning facts; it is to receive correction. If what we learn only confirms what we already know, it probably isn't wisdom we are learning.

*<sup>6</sup> The house of the righteous contains great treasure, but the income of the wicked brings ruin. <sup>7</sup> The lips of the wise spread knowledge, but the hearts of fools are not upright.*

Because wisdom and godliness tend to bring prosperity, this is generally true of material treasure. Thankfully, the treasure in the house of the righteous isn't only material; the greater treasure is spiritual.

Even what the wicked man or woman earns can be a problem. Instead of treasure, they have trouble. Though he may obtain great revenues, they come with trouble because they are never enough and they are prisoner to their own insatiable desires, or tormenting cares and fears, or guilty consciences.

The wise man or woman will spread knowledge and wisdom. It is within them and will be given to others by the words they say. Lips are the gates that either contain or release words. In this proverb, the lips of the wise are open: they are speaking words and sharing knowledge. The words themselves-the knowledge-come from a heart that has been filled with God's Word

*<sup>8</sup> The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.*

*<sup>9</sup> The Lord detests the way of the wicked, but he loves those who pursue righteousness.*

Without godliness, religious ritual, such as sacrifice, can be an abomination to God. As Samuel said to Saul, *Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice* ([1 Samuel 15:22](#)). Sacrifice without righteousness is worthless! *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.*" ([Ps 51:16-17](#))

The prayer of the upright is His delight: The godly man or woman delights God with their prayer. The wicked one goes to the trouble and expense of offering a sacrifice, but it does not delight God in the way the prayer of the upright does.

The way of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD: God rejects the religious ceremonies of the wicked ([Proverbs 15:8](#)) and consider the sinful life of the wicked as an abomination.

He loves him who follows righteousness: The one who lives and follows righteousness does so in surrender and love to God, and they do what Jude advised; they keep themselves in the love of God ([Jude 1:21](#)).

*<sup>10</sup> Stern discipline awaits anyone who leaves the path; the one who hates correction will die.*

When a man or woman departs from God's path, in mercy God will send them harsh discipline. This discipline is a warning and opportunity to change one's ways. The one who rejects God's loving and merciful correction seals his own fate and sets his own course. They are on the way of death and will remain there.

That sweet command, '*Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden,*' shall one day have no other voice to obey but that terrible word, '*Go ye cursed into everlasting flames.*'"

*<sup>11</sup> Death and Destruction lie open before the Lord—how much more do human hearts! <sup>12</sup> Mockers resent correction, so they avoid the wise.*

These two destinies are symbolically pictured as persons who are before the LORD to serve His purpose. The sobering truth is that God has a plan and a purpose for both Hell and Destruction. (Sheol and Abaddon represent the remote underworld and all the mighty powers that reside there).

God can see what we cannot. Hell and Destruction are presently invisible to us, but they are before the LORD. If we *could* see Hell and Destruction, we would think and live much differently. God's surveillance extends to the realm of the dead in the depths of the earth, as remote from heaven as possible, and he will be met in every corner of this pitch-black place shrouded in mystery and secrecy and of no apparent value to humanity or God.

*<sup>13</sup> A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit. <sup>14</sup> The discerning heart seeks knowledge, but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly; <sup>15</sup> All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast.*

If someone has happiness and joy, it should be seen on their face. They should have a cheerful countenance. This cheerfulness, however, is very different from the noisy mirth of the ungodly. By sorrow of heart the spirit is broken: Those who have deep sorrow of heart will display their broken spirit. We can observe both the happy and the sad with understanding and sympathy for both the merry heartland those with sorrow of heart.

To live in days of affliction is to know the trouble and evil of life and this fallen world. When a merry heart instead of an afflicted heart marks our attitude towards life, there is a sense of enjoyment. It is a full feast, a lasting feast; a durable continual feast, without intermission of relief.

*<sup>16</sup> Better a little with the fear of the Lord than great wealth with turmoil. <sup>17</sup> Better a small serving of vegetables with love than a fattened calf with hatred.*

Especially in our materialistic and consumer age, we constantly want *more*, and we fear living with little. Yet life is better with little if lived with reverence and honor to God. To have great treasure and great trouble is not a good life. Because the fear of the LORD spares us from much trouble, it is better to have that than great treasure. Riches are like manna. Those that gathered manna wanted more not less but to gather more brought trouble to them.

The presence of love makes up for a lot. We can live on a humble diet but can never flourish without love. One may enjoy the abundance of a fatted calf, but hatred will spoil it all. Nothing really makes up for a lack of love.

*<sup>18</sup> A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel. <sup>19</sup> The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns, but the path of the upright is a highway. <sup>20</sup> A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish man despises his mother.*

When strife is stirred up, it doesn't happen by accident. Usually, the cause is a wrathful man or woman who stirs up strife. The wise man or woman is slow to anger, and they have a way of bringing peace and smoothing over disagreements instead of stirring up conflicts.

Those who are lazy may not see it in themselves. Often, they may more easily see the result of their laziness, which is a life filled with constant trouble and irritations. Because he is slothful, he imagines ten thousand difficulties in the way which cannot be overcome; but they are all the creatures of his own imagination, and that imagination is formed by his laziness.

The wise man or woman – upright and hardworking before the LORD – does not know the same troubles and irritations of life that the lazy man must endure. Life for the upright is much smoother and more efficient in its progress.

A father is made glad by a wise son, both for the blessing of knowing there is good for the son, and because it vindicates the father's trust in God and training of the son in wisdom.

The foolish man or woman brings disgrace to his parents, and their rejection of the parents' wisdom shows they despise their parent. Tragically the person who needs their instruction feels that he is knows better than his godly parents.

What does the fact that God wants us to turn away from anger, invite knowledge and discussion, encourage others, and speak words of righteousness teach us about his ultimate purpose for speech?

*<sup>21</sup> Folly brings joy to one who has no sense, but whoever has understanding keeps a straight course. <sup>22</sup> Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed. <sup>23</sup> A person finds joy in giving an apt reply— and how good is a timely word!*

For the fool, his foolishness is something to take pleasure in. He only hates his folly when they have to pay the bitter consequences of it. Otherwise, it is joy to him. With wisdom, our life is ordered and upright. The wise man or woman finds joy in what is good and upright.

The difference between success and failure can often be found in those who plan with or without counsel. Wisdom understands that other people also have wisdom. Our wisdom lies in self-distrust, or at least allowing for the possibility that we may often be wrong! So it is appropriate, especially in important matters, to seek experienced counsel." Normally there is more insight from many people than from one. Getting many eyes to see and many minds to think about plans can often see those plans established and successful.

Right and wise words have the potential and power to bring great joy to one's self and to others. The value in a good word is found in its content but also in its timing. The right word at the right time is a powerful force for good.

*<sup>24</sup> The path of life leads upward for the prudent to keep them from going down to the realm of the dead. <sup>25</sup> The Lord tears down the house of the proud, but he sets the widow's boundary stones in place. <sup>26</sup> The Lord detests the thoughts of the wicked, but gracious words are pure in his sight.*

One of the great benefits of a life of wisdom is that, generally, life gets better as the years go on. The progress of their life winds upward and not down; they move from glory to glory ([2 Corinthians 3:18](#)). The progress of a wise life isn't just in what it heads toward but also in what it moves away from. Heaven becomes closer and hell becomes further distant behind.

Those who choose pride set themselves against God ([James 4:6](#) and [1 Peter 5:5](#)), and God will set Himself against them. They and their house will be targets of God's destruction.

The widow is the picture and representative of a humble, needy person who looks to and depends on God. She represents the opposite of the proud, and God takes special care of those who humbly depend on Him.

Wickedness doesn't begin with actions; it begins in the heart and thoughts. There is certainly a sense in which our actions are more important than our thoughts, but our actions *begin* in our thoughts, so what we think is also important to God.

*<sup>27</sup> The greedy bring ruin to their households, but the one who hates bribes will live. <sup>28</sup> The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil. <sup>29</sup> The Lord is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.*

Many of those who are greedy for gain justify it with the excuse that they do it for their family. This is not wise, because being greedy for gain will ultimately bring trouble to one's house. The 'greedy man' is the one who wants a big cut, who is in a hurry to get rich, and who is not particular how it happens.

The one who hates bribes is a contrast to the one who is greedy for gain. The greedy man or woman will do anything for more money and loves bribes if they can bring more money. God's blessing is on men and women of integrity who hate bribes and other dishonest ways of doing business.

The idea behind the phrase "how to answer" is simply what one says in response. God's righteous ones – men and women of wisdom – think beforehand what they should and will say. Their words are not based only on impulse and reaction. There is little self-control when it comes to the mouth of the wicked. Evil words and ideas simply pour out of their mouth, with no wise thought beforehand.

Men and women who are wicked do their best to separate themselves from God, and in this sense, God is far from them. There is another sense, especially in light of the work of Jesus, in which God draws near to the wicked to offer redemption and wisdom ([Romans 5:8](#)). God draws near to those who draw near to Him ([James 4:8](#)). The prayer of the righteous man or woman is effective before God ([James 5:16](#)).

**Who can pray to God? What does true confession look like?**

*<sup>30</sup> Light in a messenger's eyes brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones. <sup>31</sup> Whoever heeds life-giving correction will be at home among the wise. <sup>32</sup> Those who disregard discipline despise themselves, but the one who heeds correction gains understanding. <sup>33</sup> Wisdom's instruction is to fear the Lord, and humility comes before honor.*

The eyes are something like a lamp to the whole body ([Matthew 6:22-23](#)). When the eyes are full of light it brings happiness and contentment to the heart and the whole body. The light of the eyes may perhaps refer to the radiant face of a friend (cf. [Proverbs 16:15](#)); if so, the two lines of the proverb will be speaking of the heartwarming effect that persons and facts, respectively, can bring.

A good report makes the bones healthy: Good news cheers the spirit and brings health to the body. The ultimate fulfillment of this is the gospel – the good news, the good report of what God did in Jesus Christ to demonstrate His love for us and to rescue us ([1 Corinthians 15:1-8](#)).

Not every ear will listen to correction, but there is a blessing to those that do. Also, life has its own rebukes for those who have the ear to hear. In general, life rewards wisdom and rebukes folly for those who receive it gratefully and obeys it. Advice is for them that will take it.

The way we receive a rebuke tests our character. It reveals if we possess the graces of humility, sincerity, and self-knowledge. One of the more important aspects of wisdom is the simple ability to hear and learn. If we can't learn, we can never abide among the wise.

To refuse wisdom and the instruction that comes from wisdom is to hate one's own soul. Those who reject wisdom hurt many people, but most of all themselves. To hear and heed rebuke is to get and grow in wisdom (understanding). Receiving rebuke is rarely pleasant, but it is worth it for the wisdom it brings.