

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Deb Kielsmeier
Proverbs: Words
Proverbs 12:13-14, 17-18**

Good morning! I'm Deb Kielsmeier, one of the pastors here, and I'm delighted to be with you this morning. As you saw in the video, we are diving into Proverbs in order to learn how to live a more Godly life. Today we are going to talk about the power of words, *your* words. I learned a little rhyme when I was very young, and if you know it, would you say it with me. *Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.* Words will what? Never hurt me.

I would like you to turn to somebody next to you. Look them straight in the eye and say, "That is a bold-faced lie!" We know that's true, don't we? I would maybe yell that on the playground in my own defense when somebody was hurling insults at me but the truth is, words hurt. They cut and they destroy. We know that from our own experience and we know it from Scripture. Proverbs 18:21 says this.

21 The tongue has the power of life and death

Isn't that amazing? "The tongue has the power of life and death." Words, your words, have unbelievable power! Think about this. In Genesis 1, the creation story, when God created the world, how did He do it? He spoke it into existence, didn't He? He used words to bring life. Then God made humankind, male and female, in His very own image. In that, different from anything else in creation, He gave us the gift of words. Unlike anything else in the animal kingdom, we are able to communicate with one another. God gave us the gift of words and with that is power. The power to bless or to curse. The power to build up or to destroy. The power to bring life or to kill. Your words have power! This tongue in your mouth is like a powder keg. It's like a stick of dynamite. In fact, other than wisdom itself, the thing the Book of Proverbs talks most about is the tongue and the use of words. We need to learn how to be wise with our words and so today, like in the video, we are going to focus on training this tongue to bring life rather than death. Interestingly, the tongue is the only muscle in your body that is attached on only one end so it gets to wag, and it is harder to train than any other muscle. Proverbs 12:18 says this.

18 The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

"The words of the reckless" or some versions say, "Rash or reckless words pierce like a sword." Now has anybody here maybe uttered a rash or reckless word? Anybody ever been on the receiving end of a rash or reckless word? We know how words can hurt, how they can cut. That's why they call them cutting remarks when you get a tongue lashing. In Hebrew the word for sword is *chereb*. We think of one of these long, swashbuckling kinds of swords Hebrews carried into battle but *chereb* also refers to a curved dagger. If you slice someone with a straight sword, you can imagine that it might go in and nip things but it would come out clean. It would

hurt and you would have a scar there, but you could survive. A curved dagger goes after all kinds of very valuable internal organs and the wound could easily be fatal.

Not only that, as the rabbis tell us, once harsh words are uttered, they are out there like a feather pillow that has been ripped open in a windstorm. Words are very hard to take back, so we need to train our tongues to be very careful about what we say. The truth is, often when we do say rash or heartless things, they are uttered in the heat of passion. Somebody has done something or said something that is just killing us. For me, most often it is with my husband. He is the one I love the most on this planet. He is the one I have said the most endearing, loving things to, but I've also said the most heartless and cruel things to him. I don't know if you are that way, but it seems that the people you love the most, you hurt the most, and I have said things I deeply, deeply regret. Let me tell you, if you have done that, do apologize and ask for forgiveness. You can't necessarily take back the words, but it is important to seek reconciliation. When I've said those words, I want you to know, most of the time, pretty much all of the time, it's been behind closed doors, maybe in the kitchen, maybe in the car. But if I were standing here in front of you on a Sunday morning and my husband happened to say something to me through maybe a microphone or something, do you think I would just spill out those words in front of all of you? No, I wouldn't. This is being recorded. This is going to go online. I would not say those words in front of you. Why is that? Well, between the time that you think something and it comes out of your mouth, there is this tiny, little millisecond. It is just an instant but in that millisecond, you have the ability to bite your tongue, to filter the words, to put a trap on your mouth.

Remember the words *carpe diem*, seize the day, from *Dead Poets Society*? I would suggest in your training regimen, *carpe de millisecond*, seize the millisecond. That very second before what you're thinking comes out of your mouth, stop. Take a deep breath before you say a thing. Send up an arrow prayer, "God, help me. Help me with this." It is hard but I believe you can do it.

For example, let's say your little boy just hauled off and punched his baby sister in the nose with all of his might. You are angry enough to spit nails and rightly so. What do you do? Well, your inclination in this scenario is to say, "Johnny, you are a bad boy. You never learn, do you! Why can't you be nice like your sister? I am so sick of you. You get out of my face right now." Those are dagger words, words that maim and kill. They bring death. But if you seize that millisecond—will you say that with me? *Seize the millisecond*. Good. Again. *Seize the millisecond*. Take a deep breath, breathe in, say an arrow prayer and replace "You are a bad boy" with an I-am statement. So instead of saying "You are. . . .," you say "I am so angry. I am so frustrated." Have you heard this before? Not to use you-are, blaming, maiming, shaming statements but to say "I am" and own your own anger.

You might say, "I am so frustrated with you right now." Rather than attacking the child, condemn the behavior. "Do not hit your sister. Hitting is very hurtful. Hitting is violent. It is bad." Do you see the difference there? Bill Hybels, who heads up Willow Creek Church in Chicago, has a great example. Let's say you are at work as a mid-level employee so you've got a boss and somebody underneath you. Your boss is raving mad because one of your employees did something incomprehensible and ended up losing \$200,000 on a bad deal. Now your inclination would be to go into this guy and say, "What were you thinking, Einstein?" But rather than that, Hybels says what you might do is say, "Help me understand why you made this decision?" Do you see how that protects the integrity of the other but opens up the conversation? You can still be pretty mad, pretty angry about what happened, but you are not degrading and shaming that person.

Now here is another thing. I know it is popular psychology that it is unhealthy, unhealthy, unhealthy to repress your emotions, to push down your feelings, to squish them all down because they are going to come out in other ways. You are going to get sick if you do that, and that is true, but it is important to express them wisely. If you are angry or raging at someone, it does not give you the license to spill out whatever you are thinking on them. You do not have the right to make destructive, reckless and cutting remarks. It is much better to take a breath and use I-am statements.

You know, the gift of words is amazing for us because we are able to take feelings and thoughts and just kind of close them with words. This is really helpful I think. When you confess before God, when you go to God with that anger, you might say—and believe me, God can take this. David in the psalms said all kinds of things to God. So you might say, “God, I am angry at You.” Or you might say, “God, I am really feeling very hateful toward this person.” Put words to it. Confess it to God out loud and then say, “I don’t know how to deal with this, God. Help me see this person the way You do. Please change my heart and give me understanding.” Or find a counselor or trusted friend and talk about your feelings. It is amazing how once it is out of you, whatever it is, and it becomes clothed in words, it loses a little bit of its power. With someone less infused, it becomes something you are able to manage. Have you ever noticed that? So I encourage you to go to safe places to express what you are feeling.

The first thing in our training regimen today is to know that rash and reckless words pierce like a sword. They can kill, and to manage them, seize the millisecond. Think before you speak. In Proverbs 12:18, first it says “The words of the reckless pierce like a sword” but then the second part, “the tongue of the wise brings healing.” Isn’t that wonderful? Here’s the thing. Your words can be not only extremely damaging, they can also bring life. They can bring strength to the weak. They can bring healing to those who are wounded. They can comfort those who are grieving and those who suffer. They can encourage people who are downtrodden. Your words have power and they matter. They matter to God and they matter to the people around you. Your words can set someone’s heart soaring and can encourage a spirit and fill a soul. Words like these:

- “I believe in you.”
- “I trust you.”
- “Do you know that God has gifted you and called you to do good works?”
- “You are so precious to me.”
- “I love you.”

You just can’t say them enough. People need to hear them. There are people around you who absolutely need to hear these things from your lips, and they also need to hear what God thinks about them. People are dying because they do not know that they are valuable children of God, accepted and loved just as they are. “You are accepted and loved just as you are. You are chosen, redeemed, and forgiven through Christ and you are, indeed, gifted and called to good works.”

Here’s the thing. If in your past, you were told things like “You are lazy. You are never going to amount to anything. You are no good.” Whatever you were told, “You are not good enough,” “You are not pretty enough,” “You are not smart enough,” “You are not successful enough,” if you were told these things, they are lies from the pit of hell. But we have been wounded by them, haven’t we? And we keep hearing them over and over again. I would encourage you to name them for what they are. They are lies! And just take out the trash! Take them out and

replace them with the truth of what God has said about you. He has chosen you. He loves you and you are precious in His sight. Would you do that when you hear those negative thoughts? It will change your life, and the thing is, it is just not fake, positive self-talk. It is true!

So how do we train our tongues to bring healing and life? We need to be very intentional and remind ourselves to take that step forward. I would challenge you this week to find the good in a situation and when you think something positive about someone, would you tell that person? It can be as little as, "Wow! I love your smile today." Or as deep as "You are so precious to me. Thank you for the gift of your friendship." I think we kind of rob people of blessings because we keep our mouths shut too often. People need to hear those words of love and encouragement, and here's the amazing thing. If you go around this week and do that, you are going to find that you are smiling as much as anybody else. When you bless others, the blessing comes back to you.

Here's something I just have to share with you. Last night after our service, I was laughing with John Crosby because, I mean, this is a sturdy little sermon but it is not going to win any preaching awards. But after the service, you would not believe the amount of encouraging comments I got. Seriously, when you bless, you will be blessed.

I would like to close with this. Some of you know who Art Buchwald was. He was humorist and columnist for *The Washington Post*, and he wrote a lot of books. He told this story, a true story. He was in New York City. Anybody here ever been in New York City? Okay. I grew up outside of New York, and I can tell you, when you walk down the street in New York, people just kind of pass you by like you aren't even there. The density of population makes it, I don't know, just rather cold. Don't get worried about it. It's not about you. It's just kind of the way New York is. A lot of good things in New York, but no one on the sidewalk smiles.

So anyway, Art Buchwald is in a taxi cab in New York with a friend of his. They come to the end of their ride and the friend pokes his head up toward the front and says to the driver, "Thank you for the ride. You did a superb job driving this cab." Well, the taxi cab driver, as you can imagine in New York, kind of sat there stunned for a minute and then said, "Are you being sarcastic or something?" "No," said the man, "I'm serious. I admire the way you keep cool in heavy traffic. Not many cab drivers are able to do that. I'm glad I rode in your cab today." The cab driver goes, "Yeah, sure," and he drives off.

Buchwald turns to his friend and asked, "What was that all about?" "I am trying to bring love back to New York City," said the man. "I believe it's the only thing that can save New York City." Buchwald says, "Seriously? You think one man can save New York City?" "It's not one man," the man says, "but I believe I made that taxi driver's day. Suppose he has twenty fares. He's going to be nice to those twenty fares because someone was nice to him. Those fares will in turn be kinder to their employees, shopkeepers or waiters, or even their own families. Eventually the encouragement could spread to at least a thousand people. Now that isn't bad, is it?"

Buchwald says to his friend, "I think you're crazy." They continue walking down the street and notice five workmen eating their lunch in front of a construction site. The friend stopped and said, "That's a magnificent job you men have done. It must be difficult and dangerous work." The workmen looked at Buchwald's friend suspiciously. The friend continued, "When is the project going to be done?" "June," growled one of the workmen. "Ah, that is really impressive. You must be very proud of what you are doing here."

As they walked away, Buchwald said, “I still don’t think you are doing any good. You can’t do this alone. You’re just one man.” “But I’m not discouraged,” the friend said. “I’m hoping to enlist others in my campaign.” They continued walking down the street. “You just smiled at that woman passing by,” the man said to Buchwald. “Yes, I know,” Buchwald replied. “And if she is a schoolteacher, her class is going to be in for a fantastic day!”

The truth is words *are* like feathers shaken out of a pillow. Somebody needs to hear a word of encouragement from you today. They need to hear that they are valued and they are loved. You have that power because you have the gift of words. Will you tell them? “The words of the wise bring healing.”

As we said, we are going to share our *know* and our *do* statements in each sermon. Here is what I want you to know. **Know that your words have the power to hurt or to heal.** And then for the do statement. **Think before you speak.** Seize that millisecond. Send a prayer up during that millisecond and think before you speak, and then let the positive words fly. Will you pray with me?

Lord God, we thank You that we have been created in Your image. We thank You that we have been given the amazing gift of language but with it, there is such a responsibility to use our words wisely. Help us, Lord, to be disciplined about what we say and how we encourage. We pray in the strong Name of Jesus. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.