

## **Your Dangerous, Life-giving Tongue**

Evolutionists have debated for decades just when humans began to speak but the common view has been that Neanderthals absolutely could NOT speak because they lacked the vocal hardware to do so. But this past March, Prof. Stephen Wroe of the University of New England in Australia, basically proved them all wrong. Using 3D X-ray imaging technology, his international team of paleontologists proved that the hyoid bone in a Neanderthal skeleton “is basically indistinguishable from our own, strongly suggesting that this key part of the vocal tract was used in the same way” that we use it – to speak! The team therefore concluded that “...it’s likely that the origins of speech and language are far, far older than once thought.”<sup>i</sup>

Well, if you’re a God follower, you could’ve saved these researchers a great deal of time and effort by simply pointing them to Genesis, chapter 2, where it says that, immediately after God created the first man and the first woman, they spoke with one another. What is obvious, then, is that language was part of the miraculous creation of human beings from day one. So, because we are created “...in the image of God...” we have been able to speak from the beginning.

So, how have you been using this incredibly unique and powerful gift of God? That’s what we need to examine in our study of Proverbs today. We begin by examining...

### **I. Speech As a Gift of God.**

There’s an old saying that parents use to help their children not be afraid of other children’s criticisms. It says, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” Is that true? I don’t think so. I don’t know about you, but I’ve certainly been hurt by words! I’d even say I’ve been hurt by words more often and more severely than I’ve been hurt by sticks and stones. How about you?

The Bible seems to teach just the opposite of that old saying. In the first chapter of Genesis, what do we see? How did God bring all matter into existence? He “spoke it” into existence!

**And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. (Gen. 1:3)**

**And God said, “Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water...” And it was so. (Gen. 1:6, 7)**

**And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures...” And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas...” (Gen. 1:20-22a)**

God created the entire physical universe by using what power? The power of speech! And of all that creation, which creature is the only one that He granted the right to use this incredible power? And don’t say, “The parrot!” Parrots use words but they can’t talk. Do you know what I mean? No, only people have been given the authority AND the responsibility to use the godly gift of speech. This is why Solomon says:

**The tongue has the power of life and death... (Prov. 18:21a)**

That's what we need to spend the rest of our time considering. So...

## II. How Is Speech Used for Good and Evil?

Well, let's start with the positive – how speech can be used for good. In Prov. 10 and 25, wise words are compared to gold and silver:

**The tongue of the righteous is choice silver... A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.** (Prov. 10:20; 25:11)

In other proverbs it says that good words are nourishing and healing:

**The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life...** (Prov. 15:4)

**Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.** (Prov. 16:24)

Have you experienced that? I know you have! And you can give and receive nourishing, healing words in any context. Max Lucado was participating in a triathlon. That's where you swim and bike and then run for miles and miles. When Max got to the running part, he pulled up alongside another participant and asked, "How are you doing?"

The guy said, "This stinks! This race is the dumbest decision I've ever made. My feet are killing me, my back hurts, my..." He went on and on. Max just said, "Good luck" and moved on because he said, "I knew that if I listened much longer, I'd start agreeing with him!"

Next, he came alongside a 66-year-old grandma. Her tone was completely different. She said, "Well, it's hot but at least it's not raining. One step at a time... don't forget to hydrate... stay in there... you'll finish!" Max ran next to her for as long as he could keep up! He said, "While I was with her, my heart was lifted." <sup>ii</sup>

In the triathlon of life, which of those runners would you rather be running with? More importantly, which runner is most like you? They were both running the same race, right? But one was full of despair and the other was full of hope. This book of Proverbs lists multiple ways that words can be used to do good.

1. **Our words can instruct the ignorant.** *"The wise in heart are called discerning, and pleasant words promote instruction."* (Prov. 16:21)
2. **Our words can encourage those who are burdened.** *"An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up."* (Prov. 12:25)
3. **Our words can bring peace to volatile situations.** *"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."* (Prov. 15:1)
4. **Our words can rescue the perishing.** *"Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, 'But we knew nothing about this,' does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?"* (Prov. 24:11, 12)
5. **Our words can help restore those who have sinned.** *"Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear."* (Prov. 25:12) Speech isn't good only if it is complimentary. A rebuke can be good if it is done in a humble way that promotes godliness.

Unfortunately, good speech isn't the only form of speech, even among God followers! There's also evil speech. What is evil speech? **Evil speech is any speech that promotes the opposite of God's will.** So, just as it's not only compliments that are good, it's also true that it's not only complaints that are evil. A compliment could

be evil if it draws you away from the will of God. This is what men are being warned against regarding the woman of ill-repute:

**For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword.** (Prov. 5:3)

Just as words can be used to bless and heal, they can also be used to curse and hurt. Proverbs lists at least six ways:

1. We hurt others by lying. *“Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is the man who gives false testimony against his neighbor.”* (Prov. 25:18)
2. We hurt others by gossiping. *“A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends.”* (Prov. 16:28)
3. We hurt others by flattery. *“Whoever flatters a neighbor is spreading a net for his feet.”* (Prov. 29:5) The English word “flatter” comes from a French word that means “to stroke or caress with the flat of the hand.” The flatterer is petting you only to find a soft spot to plunge his knife. Satan flattered Eve by saying, “...you will be like God.” (Gen. 3:5) I received this fax in May:

Dear Jay,

Since we last spoke (I’ve never heard of these people) our analysts recently conducted a review of your business profile and standing in your industry (this person obviously knows nothing about me) and have determined your eligibility for a working capital loan. Now, because your business profile meets our qualifying attributes, you have been PRE-APPROVED for a capital infusion of \$48,862.04 with underwriting authorization of up to \$250,000.00. ...if you activate your application before 10 days we will wire funds to your operating account by 3 days.

You might say, “Who in their right mind would fall for a trick like that?” Last year, Americans lost 240 million dollars in Internet scams alone. Most of it is done through false promises, ego-stroking and flattery. Flatterers are not your friends.

4. We hurt others by talking too much. *“When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.”* (Prov. 10:19)
5. We hurt others by speaking in anger. *“As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.”* (Prov. 26:21) Is speaking in anger always wrong? No, God sometimes spoke in anger to Israel but it was after a long, long period of calling them to repent, sometimes hundreds of years! God never spoke angrily at anyone’s first offense or impetuously.
6. We hurt others by talking but never doing. *“All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.”* (Prov. 14:23) <sup>iii</sup>

So, most of this we already know, right? Words can heal, words can hurt; words can build up, words can tear down. But let’s ask one more question...

### **III. How Do We Discipline Our Tongue to Do Good and Not Do Evil?**

If you’re honest, I think you’ll have to admit that, at some time, you’ve sinned with your words. You’ve hurt someone, you’ve gossiped, you’ve lied and afterward, if you were a Christian, you said with the apostle Paul: (Rom. 7:15, 18, 24)

**...what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out...What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?**

So, when it comes to our words, how do we change things?

Jesus made a very profound statement concerning our speech. He said:

**...out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.** (Matt. 12:34)

What was He saying? The Greek word translated “overflow” is *perisseuma*, which means “the fullness, the abundance.” Words come spilling out of your mouth from whatever is filling you on the inside.

Has anyone ever said something shocking in your presence and then said, “Oh, I’m so sorry. That just slipped out.” It’s as if what they said were an aberration, not a real representation of what they believe. That’s not true, not according to Jesus. Jesus says that the words that come out of us are an “overflow” of what we’re full of on the inside. So, your mouth is like a spigot. What comes out is what’s inside. If you don’t like what comes out, there’s only one thing to do. Don’t change the spigot! Don’t tighten the nozzle! That’s not the problem. The problem is what’s inside. You’re going to have to change what’s inside your heart.

From the spring of 1904 until 1905, the Holy Spirit of God visited the coal mining region of Wales in Britain. These were hardcore, blue collar workers who dug the coal from the mines with their picks and shovels and hauled it out with horse-drawn wagons. But when one of them, a man named Evan Roberts, committed his heart to Christ, a wave of spiritual revival swept through the mines like wildfire. Over a six-month period, 100,000 men committed their lives to Christ. And their lives were radically changed! Alcoholism, a very real problem, was cut in half. Day after day, judges had nothing to do because no crimes were being committed. One mine manager said that production in his mine actually dropped for a time. The problem was that, before the revival, the miners directed their horses with kicks and profanity. But after the revival, the miners had to retrain their horses because they didn’t understand the commands without the profanity!

<sup>iv</sup>If you want to change your words, you’re gonna have to change your heart.

After Jesus explained where our speech originates, He then said something that was even more attention-getting. He said:

**But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.** (Matt. 12:36, 37)

The Greek word translated “careless” is the word *argon*. It means “lazy, undisciplined.” If judgment day were today, how many careless words would you have to explain to Jesus before you pass into heaven?

Now, the very next verse explains what to do about any careless words that the Holy Spirit points out to you. You see, this is another genius part of God’s grace. Do you see it? Here it is: you can cancel out a “careless” word with a “thoughtful” word. Another time, when Jesus was speaking about the power of words, He said:

**...anyone who says, “You fool!” will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you,** (probably because you

called him a fool!) **leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.** (Matt. 5:22-24)

Here's the principle: asking forgiveness of the person you wronged with words, will acquit you of those sinful words. It actually doesn't matter if they forgive you or not! You did what was right and you canceled out your careless words by your thoughtful words. But you know what? There's only one kind of person who will ever do that. It's a person with a changed heart. And it wasn't just Jesus who taught this. Proverbs teaches it as well: (Prov. 16:23 NIV alternate reading)

**A wise man's heart guides his mouth, and makes his lips persuasive.**

Do you have any "careless" words that you haven't canceled out yet with "thoughtful" words?

When I was in grade school, I committed perjury. I think it was in third grade. One day was show-and-tell day and someone was showing a special penny. I really don't know much about the penny because I wasn't paying attention. After the "penny kid" spoke, he passed the penny around the room. It was almost lunchtime, (which is what I was probably focused on!) so when the bell rang for lunch, I looked down on my desk and there was... a penny! I didn't know where it came from so I put it in my pocket and lined up for lunch. The student, of course, said, "Hey, I didn't get my penny back?" The teacher said, "Who's got the penny?" Well, I wasn't gonna fess up in front of the whole class! So, she dismissed us with the promise that we'd figure it out after lunch.

This gave me time, with my third-grade mind, to devise a third-grade plan! I'd come back early and slip the penny in another student's desk before everyone got back! "Oh, the tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive." Well, all was going according to plan until God turned the Hounds of Heaven loose upon me. I was a Christian third-grader. The Holy Spirit turned up the heat on my heart until I went to the teacher and admitted what I had done. I had to stand before the whole class and confess my crime and ask forgiveness of both the student who owned the penny and the student I had embarrassed by putting it in her desk.

You know something? I can still see that room in my mind. I even remember what color the walls were painted. I don't think I'll ever forget that day. But you know what else I know? God can't see that room. He doesn't remember that day. Why? Because I used thoughtful words to confess my public sin, publicly; so God has removed that sin from my permanent record:

**As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.** (Ps. 103:12)

On judgment day, I may have other words for which I must give an account, but I know this: I will not have to give an account of the "penny episode" in third grade. I've been acquitted by my words of confession.

How about you? Got any words you need removed from your permanent record? This would be the time to do it. Let's pray...

---

<sup>i</sup> “Talking Neanderthals challenge the origins of speech,” *Science Daily* Mar. 2, 2014, University of New England, Armidale, AU

<sup>ii</sup> Max Lucado, *Facing Your Giants* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006), p. 65

<sup>iii</sup> The lists of teaching points from Proverbs of both speech that does good and speech that does evil are from:

Warren Wiersbe, *Be Skillful* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2004), pp. 114-122

<sup>iv</sup> “The Welsh Revival of 1904-05” [www.openheaven.com](http://www.openheaven.com)