

# Wise and Foolish Speech

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## Introduction.

In the book of Proverbs, there are some things that seem anachronistic to most of us. For instance, the various writers of Proverbs spend a lot of time warning young men not to join gangs of bandits and make their living by robbing and murdering others. I grew up as a child of the suburbs, and to be quite honest, that was never a temptation for me.

However, even though we may not be tempted to embark on a life of crime, just about everything else that Proverbs says has just as much application to us today as it did to people 2500 years ago. A case in point is the advice that Proverbs gives us about our speech. Since the days of Solomon, we've made tremendous advances in communications technology. Today, I can reach just about any of my family and friends at any time, simply by punching a few buttons on my cell phone. I can have a conversation with people in Texas as though they were standing in front of me.

Sadly, though, despite these great gains in our ability to communicate, we haven't made similar gains in our ability to communicate wisely. In the time of Proverbs, the young king Rehoboam lost most of his kingdom because of a few foolish words, and foolish words today still create just as much disaster. Technology tries to help us with that. I've read about smartphone apps that prevent phone users from calling or texting when they're drunk. Though I've never been drunk, I can see how that would be a good idea. Ultimately, though, no smartphone can save us from ourselves.

The solution, then, is not to change our environment, but to change ourselves. If we can train ourselves to be wiser in speech, our speech will become less of a problem. To this end, God's word can help us more than any smartphone app yet devised. Let's look at what Proverbs has to say to us about wise and foolish speech.

## Wise Speech.

Let's begin by considering the category of wise speech first. Under this heading, we need to begin by remembering to **THINK FIRST**. Solomon counsels us to do this in Proverbs 15:28. I'm here to tell you, folks—this is not something that comes naturally to me. When somebody's talking to me, I'm far more naturally inclined to just blurt off the first thing that comes to mind, rather than taking a moment to consider what I should say and what impact it will have on my hearers. Sometimes that works out OK; sometimes, though, it's made me wish that I had a Control-Z button on my mouth, so I could erase the last few sentences that I said from everybody's minds and not get in trouble. Of course, I don't have a Control-Z button on my mouth, and neither does anybody else. That means that talk-thinkers like me need to learn, slowly and painfully, to be think-talkers instead, or at least fake it. It might not be as satisfying as just spouting off with whatever comes to mind, but well-considered speech will keep us from a world of hurt.

Second, once we've censored out all the hasty, ill-considered responses, we must train ourselves to **BE HONEST** in our speech. This is not just because lying is bad, although that's certainly true. It's also because lying is ultimately foolish. Look at the warning given in Proverbs 19:9. The thing about lying is that lying doesn't actually work. Sure, it might get us out of trouble a time or two, but lying never really avoids the day of reckoning. It just postpones it. Sooner or later, our families or our bosses are going to find out the real truth, and then the truth is going to nail us.

I went through this myself when I was a kid in junior high school. Like a lot of junior high-school kids, I got to the point where I lied just as naturally as breathing: about how I was doing in school, about what I was up to with my friends, and about anything else where I thought the truth would cast me in a bad light. Eventually, I tripped myself up enough that my parents told me, "We're not going to believe anything else that comes out of your mouth until you show us that you're not a liar anymore." It took me years to regain their trust. I would have been much better off just being honest about what I was doing, or better still, living in such a way that I didn't have anything to hide.

Of course, that doesn't mean we should just go around telling everybody everything we know. It's important for us to learn to **KEEP SECRETS**. This is particularly important with things that are told to us in confidence. Consider what Solomon says in Proverbs 11:13. Much like telling lies, this is a question of trust. Those close to us need to know that what they tell us won't go any farther. Sadly, that's too often not the case. One Christian confesses his sins to another Christian, and in five minutes, Christian #2 is on the phone with half the congregation. That's sinful and wrong. Of course, there are limits to this. We can't become parties to someone else's bad behavior. If a brother comes to us confessing his adultery, if he won't tell his wife, it's our responsibility to do it. Generally, though, we need to keep secrets.

Finally, we must teach ourselves to **ANSWER SOFTLY**. Solomon describes the effect of this skill in Proverbs 15:1. This is not a hard concept to grasp. All of us can envision what it would be like to have someone come to us angrily, yet be able to answer them moderately and softly. However, it is an extremely hard technique to master. Whenever somebody comes to us with a raised voice or a harsh tone, it seems like there's this cut-out in our brains that

drops our IQ by about 100 points. From there, the situation goes nuclear. That's a terribly destructive reflex, and we must learn to control it. The key is to remember where our value comes from. Our worth as human beings is not something that can be damaged by another's angry words or hot temper. Instead, it is based on the blood of Christ that purchased us, and no words spoken by human lips can diminish the value that God has assigned us. Once we realize that, we're able to return a soft answer for an angry one, because we're no longer afraid of being damaged by the anger. Let's work on seeing ourselves, then, as God sees us, so that we can have the inner strength to return a soft answer.

### **Foolish Speech**

Naturally, for every wise thing that we can learn to say, there is some kind of foolish speech that we should avoid. Along these lines, we should listen when the Bible says, "**DON'T BOAST**". This advice appears, among other places, in Proverbs 27:2. There are two main problems apparent with boasting. First, it sours our relationships with others. When we go around talking about how good we are and what an awesome job we have and all the wonderful stuff we can buy, our listeners don't appreciate that. It only emphasizes that our main concern in the conversation is us, not them.

Second, though, boasting points to a serious spiritual problem. It shows that we are leaning on ourselves and not on God. When we think about it, we really don't have the right to claim any of our achievements for our own. If we have good things, it's because God gave them to us; if we have useful abilities, it's because God made us that way. All of our possessions and accomplishments glorify Him, not us. When we claim the glory for ourselves, we are denying His. The only reason why we would do such a sinful thing is if we believe that we have to justify ourselves and our self-worth, and so are snatching at any shred of evidence that would seem to give us credit. The problem with that is that sooner or later, the source of our boasting will fail, and we'll be left with nothing. Let's never fall into the trap of boasting.

It's equally important for us to see that the wise **DON'T VENT**. This one is pretty explicitly spelled out in Proverbs 29:11. It's tragic how many Christians, even, justify their unloving, anger-filled speech by saying, "I just needed to vent." Whether we vent at the person who made us mad or to some sympathetic friend, it never accomplishes anything useful. First, it's a scientific fact that angry outbursts actually make us more angry later rather than less. I've read studies on this, brethren, and it's true. We feel better for a time, but soon the anger comes back, made even more intense because of the way we expressed it. Second, when we vent, we're doing it for selfish reasons, not for the good of others, and because we aren't considering the effect of what we're saying, our listeners aren't going to benefit. Third, it shows a lack of reliance on God. When someone angers us, prayer should be our first resort, and if we don't want to express what we're feeling in prayer, that's a sign that we shouldn't be expressing it at all. Now, none of this is to say that when somebody makes us mad, we shouldn't go to them. Instead, this tells us how we should go to them. We should never confront anyone in the heat of our own personal sense of offense. Instead, we should wait until we've cooled down, then, calmly, courteously, lovingly explain our situation and our perspective. If it's a situation where we can't do that, like when our boss at work is a jerk, that's when we need to follow the commandment of 1 Peter 2 and learn to obey and endure even harsh, unreasonable masters. If we can't do that, we need to leave. Regardless, the Christian should never vent.

Third, we should pay attention when the word tells us, "**DON'T ARGUE WITH FOOLS.**" We see the problem concisely illustrated in Proverbs 29:9. As Proverbs informs us elsewhere, a fool proclaims that he's a fool when he doesn't listen. This happens all the time. We've all been in discussions where it was obvious that the guy who disagreed with us wasn't going to be persuaded, but was just using the time we were talking to prepare his counter-arguments. When that point is reached, we just need to stop talking. This has always been important and true, but it's taken on new life with the advent of the Internet, even in places where the clientele is predominantly Christian. I guarantee you that I could go onto Pleonast tonight, go to the right discussion group, spend 30 seconds writing a post, and create a nuclear argument. It'll go on for weeks, involve hundreds of comments from brethren all across the country, cause at least one brother to go over the edge and say evil, ungodly things, and not change a single mind. To me, that sounds like a great way to give Satan the giggles. Instead, let's spare ourselves the pain of arguing with fools.

Finally, we need to recognize that the godly **DON'T GOSSIP**. This one goes hand in hand with our earlier point about keeping secrets, but it's broader than that. After all, we're fully capable of gossiping about things even where we don't have firsthand knowledge, but that's still every bit as destructive as repeating confidences. Consider Hezekiah's wise words in Proverbs 26:20. Sure, it's fun to gossip. It's fun to criticize others for what we know or imagine we know about their appearance, their personalities, their spending habits, or their personal lives. However, all that does is sow hostility in our hearts and in the hearts of our listeners. Then, when the subject of our gossip finds out, as they inevitably do, they become hostile toward us. Note also that when it comes to gossip, truth is not a defense. Simply because some tidbit happens to be true does not make our malicious repetition of it any less evil or any less a tool of Satan. It must always be our role to speak of others with love and understanding, not with spite and glee in their problems. It is never appropriate for a disciple of Christ to gossip, and we must guard our speech against it at all times.