

31 Days to Wisdom: Proverbs
Week 4: January 19, 2014
Proverbs 15: Wise Words

Welcome/Intro stuff

I'm so glad that you've joined us this morning, especially if you're new
it's a new year and last week we kicked off a new sermon series to get us off
to a great start in 2014

We're calling this 31 Days to Wisdom: 2014 Without Regrets—and you caught a
little taste of what we're doing during the worship earlier as we shared how our
reading of Proverbs together is speaking to us.

Here's why we're doing this: when it comes to the category of "things people regret"
the way it sounds is like is this: "I regret that I DID or DIDN'T DO something."

"I REGRET that I got into that relationship to start with OR that I stayed in it as long
as I did."

"I regret that I got into that marriage."

"I REGRET that I took that job. I REGRET that I made that business decision."

"I REGRET that I didn't take more time to spend with my kids when they were
younger."

The emotional baggage of regrets is usually based on a decision that we made,
something that we did or didn't do

The Scriptures have a vaccine for regret, something that helps us to fend off regrets,
and that vaccine is WISDOM.

Biblically, Wisdom is knowledge and information put to good use at the right time
that leads to human flourishing and honors God

Not just intelligence—lots of smart people who aren't very wise and lots of people
who aren't book-smart but who have lots of wisdom

Wisdom is the bringing together of right information and knowledge at the right
time and THAT is the vaccine, the protection against a life full of regrets

And one of the most practical and compelling books of wisdom is the book of
Proverbs: 31 Proverbs and 31 days in January

So we're reading 1 Proverb a day on our own, talking about it in small groups, and talking about it here on Sunday mornings as well

To help us in our study of Proverbs, we've also got a book over on our resource table to go along with this study:

It's called Making Life Work and it's all about taking the practical wisdom of Proverbs and applying it to your life

We'll be having the book-club discussion of this on February 9th

so you've still got a couple of weeks to buy this and read it if you haven't picked up this book yet there's still a few copies left on the resource table

This week we're going to pick up on a favorite theme of the writer of Proverbs and that is words and how we use them.

Last week we talked about sex and sexuality and we talked about how that's a gift that comes loaded up with much power that will either be used for good or for evil

Our words are similar—words have tremendous amounts of power, it's by our words that we build relationships:

marriages and parenting, friends and family, business agreements and contracts, getting a job or not getting a job, getting into trouble and getting out of trouble

Wars have started over an angry exchange of words, peace agreements are built on words and promises of peace and respect and honor;

Marriages start with astronomical promises and great and big words; and they have ended over lies, which is simply the power potential of words turned toward evil

Our national obsession with Facebook and Twitter and texting is mostly built on using words in some way to communicate, gain a following, connect more easily and quickly

and to utterly abuse all the rules of grammar we all learned in elementary school!

Words are powerful! And our experiences with words often leave their mark.

I remember about two years ago the Sunday that this church was voting whether or not to bring me here to be the lead pastor

I was teaching a Sunday school class at my former church and I got a text mid-class from someone on the search team telling me that the vote was 97% yes!

I remember pulling up my phone and seeing that and just thinking my life just took a totally different turn with those incredible words!

How many of you can vividly remember where you were when someone telling you some great news or speaking words that produced overwhelming joy?

And of course, words also have power to do incredible damage—can inflict pain and fear and self-hatred and create all kinds of deep, deep emotional and relational and spiritual issues.

How many of you can remember something painful a parent or teacher or other authority figure said to you as a kid that left a mark?

You know what happens if you hear something that's either painful enough or you hear it often enough that it sticks with you

Is it becomes something of an MP-3 track that gets stored in your brain—and you find yourself playing that same track over and over and over again in your head

The voices in your head tell you words that have stuck with you over the years: I'm stupid, I'm ugly, I'm whatever—fill in the blank

Words are powerful—the words ***directed at us*** have shaped us and impacted us in ways that we can't even begin to fathom, for good or for evil

And the words that ***we've spoken*** have had enormous impact

Have you ever had information that you KNEW someone else was going to LOVE to hear about and you just couldn't wait to tell them? To be the one to deliver good news?

So much fun, isn't it?

On the other hand, ever said something that you regretted or did damage to an important relationship?

Yep, that's pretty miserable, isn't it?

Three things are true in our relationship with words:

1. Words have tremendous power for good or for evil
2. We are invited to use words for good—and most of us do that at least some of the time!
3. We all use words to control and manipulate

We use words to control what people think about us, we use words to control and manipulate and get things moving

We hide behind our words, we create spin or an image of ourselves with our words

We use words to control and manipulate our kids, our spouses, our co-workers, our neighbors, our parents

Sometimes we tell people whatever they want to hear just so that they'll go away or be happy

Sometimes we intentionally pick a fight just because we're ready for a fight

We use words all the time to illicit some kind of reaction from other people to like us or do what we want them to do

I've got 3 elementary school aged kids, do you know how long it took them to learn the power of words and how to use words to try to get out of things?

Just a couple of hours!

If they were born in the morning, it was about lunch time when they figured out that words could be used this way

So words are powerful, and we figure out rather quickly that we can use them to our advantage

and sometimes we leverage that power to bless people

and sometimes we use that power to manipulate or control other people

Words are powerful instruments and the problem is this—and nobody really teaches us how to use them

We get that we're not supposed to say certain words when we're kids, but that's hardly a compelling and comprehensive understanding of the proper use of words

And yet, consider the ramifications in our lives and what happens if and when we mis-use our words!

Think of the situations that you've either caused by your own words or had to clean up from someone else using words in ways that were just devastating

Life just won't work if we don't know how to steward and handle words rightly.

We will regularly hit landmines and have these blow-ups in our lives and cause pain and damage and distress

if we don't know how to leverage the power of words in ways that are good

If we don't develop significant skill at handling words appropriately, we will suffer significant consequences in our lives and end up in the land of regret

If we DO develop a skillset with words, it can serve to bless us and everyone around us all the days of our lives

Solomon who's the writer of Proverbs totally gets this.

He knows that if his son is to be a good king, then he's going to have to learn not just to avoid saying certain words but to understand the real power of words for good

And this morning we're going to benefit from his wisdom—that we might get some much-needed training in how to handle our words in ways that are wise and good

If got a Bible turn with me to Proverbs 15, no Bible/no Bible at all. Just going to pull from Proverbs 15 all the Proverbs that relate explicitly with the words that we say.

These are the “words highlights” from Proverbs 15:

***A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.***

***² The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,
but the mouths of fools pour out folly.***

***⁴ A gentle^[a] tongue is a tree of life,
but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.***

***⁷ The lips of the wise spread knowledge;
not so the hearts of fools.***

***²³ To make an apt answer is a joy to a man,
and a word in season, how good it is!***

***²⁶ The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord,
but gracious words are pure.***

***²⁸ The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer,
but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.***

***³⁰ The light of the eyes rejoices the heart,
and good news refreshes^[c] the bones.***

***³¹ The ear that listens to life-giving reproof
will dwell among the wise.***

***³² Whoever ignores instruction despises himself,
but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence.***

Let's start with that first verse: A soft answer turns away wrath

I've got three elementary school aged kids and one of my regular parenting mistakes that I make

is getting overly-engaged and hooked into an unhealthy interaction where all I'm doing is matching the kids anger or frustration level with my own

They get frustrated at or with me or their siblings and I get in there and end up escalating the emotional intensity level with them

Last week I went to the Parenting Class kick-off, which was incredible, by the way, if you're a parent of any aged kid, this class will be of enormous help to you, Traci Paxson is ridiculously wise

And Traci was talking about the work of behavior management and she's got some great strategies and tactics to help parents thoughtfully work with their kids and set good boundaries

But part of what she models even as she talks about or gives examples of how an interaction might play out is an even-ness, a calmness in demeanor.

"We need to hold hands as we cross the street. I know you're not that excited about it, but you can have a choice: the right hand or the left hand."

And as she's sort of role-playing this scenario two things come to mind:

1. I've had that conversation before but I've not been nearly as nice
2. Her gentle but firm demeanor actually puts HER in control of a situation that might otherwise escalate out of control

Step back and think about this for a second: when anyone's angry with you, a toddler or a boss or a neighbor or whoever, what's our natural response?

We match their anger with our own anger and defensiveness. Why do we do that?

We feel threatened, and when we feel threatened the adrenaline kicks in and we feel the need to assert ourselves

It *feels* powerful to act out of our anger, doesn't it?

And yet, when I'm engaged in a screaming match with a 4-year-old about holding my hand across the street, who's actually in control and setting the emotional agenda at that point? The 4-year-old!

They have totally set the emotional agenda, I have allowed them to drive the bus in terms of what kind of conversation we're having.

When an irate boss or neighbor or co-worker is angry at you and you respond exactly in kind, who's in control at that point? Who's setting the agenda?

They are!

See, we think that real power comes in matching anger with anger—that's who's in control of the situation

But real power comes in NOT matching or getting hooked into their emotional unhealth but rather in rising above it.

In de-escalating, in maintaining some measure of control over your own responses, you do not allow the other person to over-run you

You put a boundary around the power that the 4-year-old or the 40-year-old has over you when you can firmly and calmly hold your ground over and against the onslaught of their emotions.

That's not to say that there aren't reasons to be mad or get angry or that we shouldn't be passionate about situations or issues in our world or even with people

But it is to say that Solomon here is helping us to see an important principle: there is power in surprising ways that can bless and benefit all parties if we will choose the way of God and his Spirit.

Throughout the Proverbs there's lots of sayings that sound a lot like this one and it sound like this is just sort of placating or soft

But what this is really about is living wisely and understanding that to get emotionally hooked into someone else's unhealthy anger just makes you unhealthy.

It FEELS like the path to control and power but it turns out to be just the opposite.
This is just what he says in the passage that follows it:

***4 A gentle tongue is a tree of life,
but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.***

The tree of life in the Scriptures is something that looms over and in the background and in many imaginations throughout the Scriptures as

The tree of life in the garden of Eden had fruit on it that if you ate it you lived forever.

At the end of the Bible in the book of Revelation, the tree of life appears again in the great city of God as God comes to make his dwelling among the people

The Biblical story is a story that runs between the two trees, with the tree of the cross right in the middle of it.

Here, Solomon draws on the great Old Testament understanding of the tree of life as life-giving, fruitful, powerful and he says we have that power with our words—to give life to all those around us

And conversely, if our tongue is perverse, if we speak wickedly and angrily and destructively, what does it do? It breaks the spirit.

It breaks the spirit of the people around us, for sure, but you know who's spirit is most crushed by a perverse tongue? Yours!

If you allow acerbic, angry, critical words to spew out of your mouth over and over again, you break and destroy your own spirit

Everywhere Jesus went, there was life in his wake: even when people hated him and pushed back against him, they were hating and pushing back against life.

His words and his tongue were a tree of life and everywhere Jesus left there was person after person who was more alive and thriving having heard him teach

Here's my question: what's in your wake? If we walked through the story of your life, is there life in your wake?

Are your words words of life? Is your tongue a tree of life bearing all kinds of good fruit?

Or is your tongue perverse, harsh, proud, critical
or even just fearful and anxious and always afraid?

The God who made your tongue and gave it to you with tremendous powers for good or for evil

offers you HIS power to redeem it and to use it for your good and for the good of others around you
as a tree of life that blesses and honors and gives life for others.

His desire is for your tongue to be a tree of life, that everywhere you went there would be life in YOUR wake, just like it was for Jesus.

A number of years ago I was in a hard stretch with my work and my job, kind of a 1/3 life crisis

And a man who I really respect and love and is someone who has encouraged and blessed and mentored me over the years

Buzzed through and tried to talk me out of where I was and talk me into taking a new job

And as he was sitting there talking to me about this stuff, I wanted to be able to hear what he had to say, I thought there might be some wisdom in it

But I was just in no place to be able to hear or receive it or even to process and pray about it to see if it was from the Lord or not.

I just wasn't in a good head-space to hear his word to me, even it was a good word.

Ever happen to you? Ever have someone speak something to you and maybe it was wise or right but you just couldn't process it at the time?

Or on the flip side, ever offer someone a word of advice and wisdom but they just weren't in a place to receive it?

Solomon talks about this beautifully in verse 23:

23 ... a word in season, how good it is!

A word in season, how good it is!

There are specific seasons for different words—and to speak a bad word out of season sometimes is worse than saying nothing at all.

Solomon here celebrates the life-giving power of a wise word in season—have you ever had someone speak to you a wise word in season?

They speak a word of encouragement just when you need it, they correct you at a time when you Isn't that glorious?

Ever had an experience like I had, where someone might be offering you wisdom, you're just in no place to hear it?

Let's grid this for us, shall we?

There's Wise words and foolish words and in season and out of season

	Wise Words	Foolish Words
In Season		
Out of Season		

1. Foolish Words Out of Season:

Painful—to get a foolish or harsh word at the wrong time can just be devastating or painful

One mistake people make when someone loses a loved one is that they don't know what to say and so they just say stupid stuff.

Someone has a spouse or child die and we don't know what to say or how to handle it so we just blurt out something dumb like:

"I know how you feel, our pet hamster died a couple months ago and it was miserable!"

Let me help you with this one: when someone dies, the only appropriate response is NOT "I know how you feel" or anything else other than "I'm so sorry."

Practice that at home next time before you go over to someone's house who's grieving

"I'm so sorry" is the best and often the only word in season in the immediate aftermath of someone's death.

A foolish word out of season, is just painful, discordant,

It adds insult to injury or your confusion and foolishness to a time that's already confused and difficult.

2. Foolish Words In Season

Distracting or Mis-leading:

if you're in a season where you need wisdom and maybe direction or help what happens if someone offers you foolish words? Not helpful!

But we don't always know that, do we? Sometimes we get bad or foolish advice or words and we think it's good and so we act on it.

Some of us have wasted years of our lives because we got a foolish word in a season when we were open and needing direction or help and we followed the path of fools and ended up at a dead-end

2. Wise Words Out of Season

Unhelpful:

I talked last week about how I don't expect Jesus-following behaviors and ethics from people who aren't following Jesus

I think God's wisdom IS good and wise, but I don't expect you to know or understand or agree with that if you don't know God!

So Christians will sometimes do silly things like say to someone who's not a Jesus-follower who's living together before they're married

"That's just not right! You shouldn't do that! That's not God's best for you!"

Is that true? Yes!

Is that the most important thing for someone who has zero relationship with God?
NO!

Is that the first place to start talking to someone about life in Christ
to say that they need to abide by some moral standard completely removed from
a trusting relationship with a God who they're trusting and have realized is good to
them and is all-knowing and all-wise and true?

So is that a word in season? NO?
We start with God's great love, AND certainly his great holiness and perfection; we
talk about his great work for us in Jesus to die for our sins that we might be
reconciled to him.

And then YES, being reconciled to him means that he's God and we're not and he
gets to call the shots in our lives, all of them.

But we start with the main thing because apart from the main thing, the rules aren't
going to make a whole lot of sense and it's not following the rules that saves us

Of course, there are other ways that we speak wise words out of season—my story I
told you about the guy who tried to talk me out of my 1/3-life crisis in my job

But speaking wise words out of season is just not helpful

3. Wise Word in Season

“How Good it Is!”

Wise words, whether they're hard to hear or kind and encouraging
When they're spoken in season, they bear tremendous fruit:
love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and
self-control

Sometimes it's hard to know if it's the right season to speak a word to someone, isn't
it?

You might see something that needs correcting or a place where someone you love
is struggling and you might be able to help but it's not always clear if it's the right
time

And this is where the New Testament concept of being in step with the Spirit is
important

We are called and commanded to speak words of truth and grace to one another

It's almost always open-season on positive encouragement, you should just do that all the time

But it's harder to know about correction, isn't it?

And this is where it's important that we be in intentional prayer in order to do what the New Testament calls us to do which is to be in step with the Spirit

When I was a campus minister for many years I got to train brand-new campus ministers as a part of their first-year internship

And often these new hires were very insightful in terms of seeing patterns of brokenness or dysfunction in people's lives.

And I would tell them: Just because you see something broken or dysfunctional doesn't mean it's time yet to bring it to their attention.

God sees all our faults right now, some of which we are blind to, and he is good to reveal them to us slowly—thank goodness!

When you see something that is off or wrong or needs correction, start to pray about it.

And try to look for and listen for that moment when it's clearly time to speak that word in season.

It's a bit like double-dutch—anyone ever do that back on the playground in elementary school?

If you jump in at the wrong time, what happens? Get all tangled up!

You jump in right, hit the rhythm of it right, it can be pretty cool to watch

Some of us feel very free to offer words of help or instruction, I want to encourage you to be prayerful and attentive so that it is a word in season

Others of you are very, very closed to this or very scared to offer anything, positive or negative

I want to suggest to you that you're forfeiting the work God would have you to do of being a tree of life, of helping and encouraging and even re-directing someone who really, really, really could use a good word in season.

And bringing together these two big threads of *a soft answer and a gentle or healing* tongue

coupled with a ***word in season*** brings me to something that I think is really an important issue in our time and culture

And that is electronic media.

When we sit behind a computer screen rather than face-to-face, this weird psychological thing happens where we use words in ways that we would never do if we were face-to-face.

Let me ask you something: are your Facebook status updates, your emails, your electronic disagreements

are they driven by the axes you want to grind or the anger that you feel at some other person or political party

are they driven by your need to grand stand and make a name for yourself in a culture that celebrates celebrity and doesn't really get the wisdom of humility?

Or are you cultivating words even and especially electronically that are wise, soft, gentle, that are trees of life?

Are your electronic words words in season?

Words are powerful. Words can do serious damage or do serious good—it's all in how we use them—are you and I learning to use them wisely and carefully and thoughtfully?

I used to blog really regularly and of course I post Facebook status updates occasionally

and I've had a handful of occasions where I've just realized that I used words in ways that were destructive, that were provoking and mean-spirited

And I've removed stuff and apologized to people for the ways that my words did damage

I've had to repent and ask for forgiveness from the Lord and from them for what I said and what impact my words had on them

And sometimes it was true and even wisdom, it was just a word out of season. But most of the time, I was just being an idiot and it was the wrong words, foolish words, out of season.

My friends, what's your relationship like with your digital words? Any of you need to apologize today for something you've said digitally? Any of you need to grow in wisdom here?

See, what we find is that there's a larger reality that we tap into about how we use words—whether it's verbally or written

There's either a vicious cycle or a virtuous cycle that connects our hearts and our words—see how Solomon talks about our mouths and our hearts and thoughts:

⁷ *The lips of the wise spread knowledge;
not so the hearts of fools.*

²⁶ *The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord,
but gracious words are pure.*

²⁸ *The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer,
but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.*

As Solomon writes this, he uses almost interchangeably thoughts, heart, and lips or words

And what you've got is the reality that who we are shapes what kinds of words we use

And what kind of words we use shape and re-shape our hearts

Ever been on a road trip and think that you might need to go to the bathroom?

And you wait a bit and wait a bit and then you say out loud "I might need to go to the bathroom."

What happens once you say that out loud? YOU REALLY NEED TO GO!

Your words have taken a thought or a feeling that was floating around inside your head and given it a more substantive reality
saying it out loud makes it more concrete

There's a feedback loop between heart and thought and words and actions that all works together

to either point us toward being women or men of wisdom whose heart and words and thoughts all line up in God's ways

That's the good cycle, the virtuous cycle

OR our heart and thoughts and words and actions work together to mutually reinforce each other in negative ways, the vicious spiral, the decay spiral
so that we're becoming less wise, less whole, less holy

We are always becoming beings—there's nothing static about you, you are always a work in process towards something

And your heart and words and thoughts and actions are all pointing you towards becoming something or someone, either beautiful or corrupt

And the reality for most of us is that our thoughts, hearts, words, and deeds are neither wholly good nor wholly bad, but a mixed bag—aren't they?

We're a conflicted mix of wise and good words and hearts and thoughts and actions and destructive words and hearts and thoughts and actions.

Which is why the writer of Proverbs is so emphatic about how we receive a certain type of word

Because we're almost always a mix of wisdom and foolishness in our lives and in our hearts and thoughts and our words, Solomon is emphatic about our need to be receptive and open to words of CORRECTION

***31 The ear that listens to life-giving reproof
will dwell among the wise.***

***32 Whoever ignores instruction despises himself,
but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence.***

In his book "Not Everyone Gets a Trophy" Bruce Tulgan argues that the American tendency to reward every kid on every team with a trophy has insulated them from being able to deal with real failures and the real world.

He argues that our self-esteem, everyone is fragile and must be doted on at all times to feel good about themselves culture has left us ill-equipped to actually deal with real life

And created a deeply entrenched entitlement culture where I'm entitled to everyone else bending over backward to meet my every need and ensure my success whether I've worked hard for it or not.

He's a little cranky, but I think he's onto something!

To a culture where everyone feels like they deserve a trophy no matter what Solomon is adamant about the importance of correction and reproof:
we must be willing to be corrected or we're dead

This is so what I love about the Bible: here we are, really engaging with the need for gentle and kind and thoughtful words

and just when it sounds like we're all about just passing out warm fuzzies and saying everyone's okay and sitting in a circle and singing Kum-bye-yah

We get an equally firm command that we must be honest about giving correction and direction and discipline

And we must be open to receiving it.

Several weeks ago I asked a group of my friends who I really respect as public speakers to look at one of my talks on-line and give me brutally honest feedback.

And then last week I got a very friendly but brutal email where one of my friends just tore me up.

And all day long it just felt like I was smarting and stinging from this very kind but thorough scorching!

That night, my kids and I were reading one of the many Proverbs that talks about the importance of being able to receive correction

And one of my kids admitted that wasn't easy for her and I said to her,
"You know what, I got this email from a friend of mine that gave me all kinds of correction this morning and I've been having a hard time with it. We both need Jesus to help us have teachable hearts, don't we?"

And we prayed together, my daughter and I, a brother and sister in Christ who both need Jesus to give us teachable hearts
to be able to hear words of correction that we might grow in wisdom.

I want to invite us as a community to be willing to graciously and honestly speak words of wisdom and grace to one another, including occasionally correction

And I want to challenge each of us individually to cultivate teachable and soft hearts.

You know, this person that Proverbs talks about—this wise person whose words are always consistent with wisdom, who never uses words manipulatively or for selfish gain, and who always speaks the right word in season

Becoming that person perfectly at all times is pretty much impossible for any one of us.

But the good news, there is one who was perfectly wise, who was always consistent and loving with his words, even when his words were words of conflict or correction

See, when the time was perfectly right, just right and in just the right season, God the Father sent his Living Word, the perfect Word

The Word who was the perfect wisdom of the universe, came at just the right time, to deliver his people from their sin, to ransom us from sin and death

And to reconcile us to God the Father.

And this perfect word spoke perfect words—every word was perfect, every thought was taken captive to God his Father, every movement, every action all lined up perfectly with the wisdom of God

He was perfectly teachable before God the Father, perfectly obedient, and that led him to the cross and that led him to an empty tomb.

And this morning, the resurrected perfect Word of Wisdom from God is here and calls us to follow him.

He IS our wisdom, the fullness of all of God's wisdom, and he calls us to follow him with all our lives, our hearts, our thoughts, and including and especially our words.

PRAY