

Study Guide
Series: The Power of Our Words
“Tearing Down or Building Up”

Monday - Proverbs 15:1-4. In these four verses, the Hebrew sages put together four wise sayings that address the quality of human speech, both in its ability to wound and damage, but also to heal and give life. The Common English Bible translates the Hebrew word in Proverbs 15:1 as “sensitive,” and other translations use “soft” or “gentle.” For some, such words give an impression of weakness. But a later proverb said, *“A commander can be persuaded with patience, and a tender tongue can break a bone”* (Proverbs 25:15). When have you seen wisely chosen words break down barriers that harsh speech would only have made higher and more rigid? Professor Paul Koptak wrote, *“These proverbs do more than simply urge us to watch what we say and how; they also inspire us to examine the intentions of our hearts.”* Have you ever found, when you were (maybe reluctantly) honest with yourself, that the inner sources of your “righteous indignation” were not as “righteous” as you at first thought they were? Does responding to anger with more anger usually make things better or worse? Ask God to help your mouth not to “gush” with foolish words and to make your speech more like a “tree of life” for the people you meet.

Tuesday - James 1:19-21. James, Jesus’ half-brother, apparently became a Christ-follower when Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:7). He became an influential leader in the early church. In this short letter, he linked hasty, angry speech with “moral filth.” To James, a cutting outburst was no small matter, but something hurtful and wrong. Early Christians faced social exclusion and legal persecution. The historian Josephus said James himself was stoned to death in Jerusalem about 62 A.D. It must have been tempting and easy for Christians in those conditions to rage against people who treated them so unjustly. How does James 1:19-20 speak to us, who face much milder tests of our faith and temper, when we find ourselves becoming angry and eager to denounce some person or organization? Scholar David Allan Hubbard wrote, *“Harsh, vindictive speech—even though apparently based on God’s Word—is not the way to accomplish God’s justice.”* How can the “humility” of which James wrote move us away from destructive speech, toward living into what James called “the word planted deep inside you”?

Wednesday - James 1:22-25. After describing the danger of hasty, ugly words, James moved on to describe “the word planted deep inside you” (James 1:21) that we should follow. He called it “the law of freedom,” God’s wisdom, as Jesus taught it. He did not drop the subject of wise speech in these verses. He highlighted the wisdom and freedom of making all of our actions, including our speech, to align with God’s directions for optimal living. James’ words about the law of freedom were rooted in Jesus’ teaching. Jesus said, *“I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other”* (John 13:34-35). In what ways have you found greater freedom as you’ve grown in your ability to love even those you dislike or disagree with? We see James’ basic harmony with Paul’s words to the Galatians: *“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this”* (Galatians 5:22-23). Picture how much better

your days, and those of people you affect, would be if your speech more and more reflected the qualities Paul said the Spirit will grow in our lives. Ask God to fill your life with his fruit.

Thursday - James 1:26-27. James used strong language—not angry, but strong. He said if people don’t control their words, “their devotion is worthless.” Some people were using angry, ugly criticisms of “the wicked” to try to show everyone else how devoted they were to God. It didn’t work, James said. Speaking that way was disobedience to God, not devotion. True devotion, he said, shows when we care for and help the weak, not in reckless speech. Ordinary Christians suffered from the social and legal persecution they faced. But those things were even harder on orphans and widows, who had no family and no legal standing to protect them at all. James asked, which would help them more—a biting, angry tirade against the oppressors, or a tangible act of love and assistance? How can we apply the principle behind his words to the situations we face today? We live in a world where tweets, anonymous comment boards and a 24-hour news cycle seem, at times, to bombard us with contentious, belittling speech. James wrote that one aspect of devotion to God is “to keep the world from contaminating us.” How do you actively seek to keep our world’s barrage of negativity from contaminating you? What choices help you do that?

Friday - Colossians 3:8-10. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Colossae, he recognized that there is an unbreakable connection between who we are on the inside and what we say for others to hear. He named anger, rage, malice, slander, obscene language and lying as things to “set aside.” The first three are attitudes, but they inevitably show themselves in the harmful kinds of speech the apostle named in the last three items on the list. Scholar William Barclay said we can turn the items in this list about speech into positive commands. The first two, he said, tell us that a Christian’s speech must be KIND, and it must be PURE. How easy or hard do you find it to speak in those ways if you feel anger, rage or malice toward someone? How can we be kind in our speech even when it is necessary to make an honest appraisal of another person? Barclay added that a Christian’s speech must be TRUE. He noted, *“It is easy to distort the truth; an alteration in the tone of voice or an eloquent look will do it; and there are silences which can be as false and misleading as any words.”* In what ways can the standard of “true speech” help us avoid sweeping generalizations or statements about people’s inner motives? When have you been the receiver or the giver of false statements made in anger? Ask God to help you set aside this kind of speech.

Saturday - Ephesians 4:25-32; Psalm 19:9-14. Ephesians 4 and Psalm 19 contain the theme for this sermon series. We will read these passages often during the series. As we do this, consider memorizing at least Ephesians 4:29 and Psalm 19:14, and if possible other parts of the passages. Changing our speech requires letting God change the inner sources from which our speech springs. We want the words of our mouth, AND the meditations of our heart, to be pleasing to God. We aim to be a community in which we “Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say.” Scholar N. T. Wright, commenting on Ephesians 4:25-32, said, *“Living as a Christian demands that we grow up in our thinking: you have to learn to identify your own moods and behavior patterns, to see which ones are going in the right direction and which ones in the wrong direction ... we should regard our moods, and the speech which flows from them, as we might a strong but willful horse, which needs to be reminded frequently of the direction we’re supposed to be going in.”* When

did you last say words that hurt, and then ask yourself, “Why did I say that?” What helps you to understand your “interior landscape” better, to keep you from blurting out words you regret and wish you could take back?