

Answer Softly
(Proverbs 15:1-4)
4/19/20

Be careful how we use our tongue because God is watching us and holding us accountable for both the bad and the good words that come out of our mouth. Therefore, let us use soft words that calm, sage words that make knowledge appealing, and sweet words that heal.

INTRODUCTION: Last weekend, I officiated a funeral. Ellie gave me some wise instructions before I left for the funeral. She handed me a mask and gloves. She asked me to get a change of clothes and put it in the car. When I got home, I was to change my clothes in the garage and leave it in the car. When I came inside the house, I wasn't supposed to touch her or touch anything; but go directly to the shower. Although I did not agree with all that she said, I complied because they were wise instructions.

During the past months, we have been studying Proverbs, the book of wisdom. Solomon, the author, has contrasted the wise and the fool. If we want to live a fulfilled life, it is prudent to follow the wise man instead of the foolish man. In our passage this morning, we will cover the first four verses of chapter 15. Solomon contrasts how a wise man uses his tongue versus how a foolish man uses his tongue. Our tongue can be used to bless others or it can be used to curse others.

As we are in this pandemic, it probably drives many of us up the wall because we have been stuck at home all day long. We develop cabin fever. If we are living by ourselves, we can feel pretty lonely; we are aching to connect with others because we created for relationships.

Because we are cooped up at home all the time, it is common to be impatient with each other and be misunderstood, which can create discords and tension. Anger flares. It is not a matter of if it will happen, but when it will happen. When it does take place, how do we respond? It is during these trying times that we see who we really are. Unfortunately, many times we react negatively. Our natural impulse, led by our sin nature, goes to work. Unfortunately, we allow our emotions to take over, which leads us to a bad place. Can we control our tongue or does our tongue control us? If the latter, we will face a lot of trouble. That is the difference between a wise person's tongue and a foolish person's tongue.

From our passage, we will look at the words of the wise man. These are the words that God wants to hear. There are three characteristics that stand out. God wants to hear soft words that calm, sage words that make knowledge appealing, and a sweet words that heal. [Let us take a look at the first characteristic, soft words that calm. Let us read Proverbs 15:1, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."]

A. God Wants to Hear Soft Words That Calm (15:1)

What do we say when we are approached by an angry person and he says some angry words at us? We probably instinctively defend ourselves by reacting with harsh words. Our natural response is to let our emotions take over by seeking to retaliate, which only escalates the matter. In this verse, Solomon gives the right response in contrast to the wrong response.

Solomon **advises** us to use a gentle answer to handle an angry person. The word “gentle” literally means soft. You might not know why this person is upset, but how you respond to him is most critical. A wise person will use a soft answer or gentle answer. This does not imply weakness. In Proverbs 25:15b, it says, “A gentle tongue can break a bone,” which is the most rigid part of the body. Soft and gentle words can break down the hardened spirit of an individual. It takes much more self-control and maturity for one to use soft or gentle words in a heated situation. Gentle words can deflect anger and calm the situation down. Prov. 15:18, “A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel.” Gentle words often disarm most ill-tempered people.

That is easier said than done. When someone is mistreating us or judging us unfairly, we tend to be tempted to let our sin nature take over. For a short period of time, we feel good when we give that person a piece of our mind. If we embarrass him or humiliate him, then we feel we have succeeded. It might feel good for a moment, but it only compounds the situation. We see this recorded in the latter part of verse 1. “A harsh word stirs up anger.”

I am sure we all been there and done that. It is a terrible way of reacting. It is getting down in the mud and slinging mud with the other person. When we use harsh words to respond to wrath, it only adds more fuel in the fire. When we get emotional, we say things before we think it through. We react out of anger and many times, we regret what we have said. Notice the article in this verse, “a harsh word stirs up anger.” A harsh word is singular and stresses how dangerous even one word can be. It can stick in the mind and heart of a person forever. Relationships can be broken and it will take a long time to restore that relationship.

ILLUSTRATION: There was a family with two children. One child got upset because she was not getting her way and she confronted the parents making various demands because she felt that she deserves it. The parents did not appreciate the tone and the disrespectful attitude. Instead of listening, they got into a shouting match. Anger flared as they attacked each other with nasty degrading name calling. Both sides were deeply hurt with those piercing verbal darts. Afterward, both sides regretted what had taken place. Unfortunately, they could not take the words back. It had already done terrible damage.

We do have a choice. We can use words that turn away wrath or use words that will stir up wrath. Therefore, it is wise to use gentle words instead of harsh words. Let us use soft words that calm. An angry person wants to fight, but if the other person does not want to fight back, it is no fun fighting alone. After a little while, he runs out of steam. Let’s give the angry person the benefit of the doubt that he might have had a bad day or had some misunderstanding. Let’s not jump to conclusions.

[God wants to hear not only Soft Words that calm, but also Sage Words or wise words that make knowledge appealing as recorded in verse 2. “The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.” The literal translation is “The tongue of the wise makes knowledge attractive, but the mouth of the fools blurts out foolishness.”]

B. God Wants to Hear Sage Words That Make Knowledge Appealing (15:2-3)

This verse compares the speech of a wise person and the speech of a foolish person. A sage or a wise man takes knowledge seriously.

1. We must be accurate (15:2)

Before he speaks, he wants to get all the facts. Too often, we jump the gun and start spewing out of our mouth without thinking. It is totally reactionary. That is what a fool would do. The mouth of a fool gushes folly. Gushes give me a picture of a fire hydrant. I visualize water bursting out rapidly with great force without control. A fool unleashes his words without filtering it. He is not thinking before speaking. He speaks foolishly disregarding of time, place, or circumstances. The fool probably does not have all the information, but is spouting out all kinds of negative conclusions. Abraham Lincoln once said, "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt."

ILLUSTRATION: A good example of a fool is Job's three friends. Job had lost everything and they came to sit and empathize with Job's suffering. But when they started speaking, it was like the mouth of the fool gushing folly. They made accusations and hotly defended themselves without knowing all the facts.

When a fool hears some rumors, he becomes critical right away, shooting bullets at the accused. Fools cherish gossip. When he hears it, in no time he would spread it all over the place. Let us be wise, when we hear a rumor, please ask if he is an eye witness or has talked to the person accused personally. If he has not, walk away because they do not have first hand information. It is just a rumor. Tell that person to stop gossiping.

When we speak, it is imperative that we want knowledge or all the information. We must be accurate. The wise not only has knowledge or all the facts, but also their use of it makes it appealing or attractive. Put knowledge to a right use.

What kind of knowledge do we need before we speak? It is critical that we have good knowledge from Scripture, which provides godly guidance to what we say. A good verse that ties verse 1 and 2 together can be found in (Prov. 17:27), "A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered." A person with knowledge and understanding is cautious in what he says. He takes into consideration the information carefully before speaking out. He is even-tempered, which literally mean "cool in spirit." He does not allow his emotions to take over the situation.

[The reason why our words need to be accurate is because we will be held accountable. Let us read 15:3, "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good." God wants to hear soft words that calm and sage words that make knowledge appealing. We do this because we are all accountable to God.]

2. We must be accountable (15:3)

God makes it clear that He is omnipresent, which means that God is present everywhere at the same time. God sees all that we are doing and hears all that we are saying. God not only sees all, but judges all fairly because He understands the motive and purpose of what we do and say. We can hide from others, but we cannot hide from God, who examines our heart.

ILLUSTRATION: Various times when I am flying on an airplane, I would like to engage in a conversation with the passenger next to me. I could be having a great conversation until they ask me what I do. When I tell them that I am a pastor, I notice

our conversation changes. I could tell that he is much more conscious of what he says to me.

God is there by our side all the time. Therefore, we can find security in Him. We are never alone. We can go to Him at any time and at any place for help. On the other hand, because he is all present, we cannot hide from God because he is there and he knows what is in our heart. People cannot talk behind God's back because He is here with us. One day in the future, we will all stand before God where He will give an account for all of our words. (Mt. 12:36) "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken."

God makes it clear in verse 3 that he is keeping watch and He will hold us accountable whether we know it or not. If we know that God is sitting next to us, how would we speak differently? Well, He is sitting next to us. He not only keeps watch of the wicked, but also the good. When we stand up for what is right and we get judged negatively or treated unfairly, God is watching. God does not miss any good work done or spoken by His people. He will remember the good that we have done.

ILLUSTRATION: There was this person I was talking to recently that got laid off because he was not willing to lie for his boss. This person was a man of integrity and he upheld to that strong principle. Although he is laid off, I encourage him that God is watching over him. God is a fair and just God. He will commend us for upholding truth. Therefore, wicked people should be warned and good people comforted by this truth.

[From this passage, we come to learn what God wants to hear from us. There are three characteristics: God wants to hear soft words that calm, sage words that make knowledge appealing, and thirdly, sweet words that heal. This third characteristic is recorded in verse 4, "The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit."]

C. God Wants to Hear Sweet Words That Heal (15:4)

God wants to hear sweet words. In v.4, it speaks of a tongue that brings healing. It is described as a tree of life. What are sweet words that heal? A healing tongue must bring life to others and it provides comfort to them. It focuses on others instead of ourselves. We see another contrast in verse 4. A deceitful tongue crushes the spirit. A lying tongue can do great harm. When your spirit is crushed, you feel worthless and defeated; emotionally empty. There is a sense of hopelessness. Our tongue can bless others or curse others. It can heal or it can harm. Words can destroy a relationship. A wound from a tongue can inflict deeper pain and can be harder to heal than a wound from a sword. Harsh and bitter words as well as mean and untrue words can hurt a person deep in his soul.

May we practice sweet words that heal. Healing words are like a lotion that soothes a burn. Sweet words that heal include encouragement, affirmation, appreciation, support, comfort, thanksgiving that are sincere and genuine. Compliment people in public. Write them a personal note of appreciation. Send them an email of congratulations. It can be like water to a thirsty soul. May we be like a tree of life. This reminds me of the verse in Eph. 4:29, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

ILLUSTRATION: I have been calling all the members in the English congregation to see how they are doing. I have had some amazing conversations with various members. I have been encouraged by some members' commitment to do outreach to their neighbors. As I asked them how I can pray for them? Many shares honestly of their needs. I was taken back when a number of them asked how they can pray for me. I shared my burden and concerns with them and they poured their hearts out praying forme. Those were sweet words that heal and comfort. I challenge you to say a word of encouragement to someone every day.

We all go through troubled times, where we are discouraged and dejected. We all need a sweet word that heals at the right time. These sweet words that heal are described as a tree of life. It provides refreshment, renewal, and strength.

Conclusion: Knowing the right thing to do is one thing, but doing it is another thing. We cannot carry out these instructions regularly by our own strengths. We really need the Lord to work in and through us. We need to understand the bigger theme in the Book of Proverbs: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Wisdom is applying the instruction or knowledge that God has given to us in the Word.

We can have knowledge or instructions, but if we do not practice it, it is worthless. That is the issue with most Christian. We know too much, but do too little. As a result, we do not experience the abundant life that is promised to us. Abundant life is conditional based upon our obedience to God's Word. We rob ourselves of fullness of life because we do not take God seriously.

In order for us to practice wisdom, we need to fear God. God wants us to seek Him and follow Him. WE are motivated to follow and obey Him if we have a proper view of God. God is all present; God is all powerful; God is all knowing. Because of who God is, we should respond in fear.

That is being in awe of God as well as being scared of God. Because we revere God, we want to embrace God and obey Him. Because we are scared of God, we do not want to embrace sin. We need to seek and embrace God and hate sin. The only way that is going to happen is if we come close to God. So knowing God intimately will motivate us to embrace His wisdom, which can give us abundant life. It is all intertwined together.

When we lower our view of God, we lose our sense of being accountable to Him. This makes it easier to excuse all sorts of evil in our lives. We sin more easily when we think less of God. Rather than seeking to know and please God, we become content to fit comfortably within the Christian subculture. As a result, we miss out on the abundant life that God desires for us to have. I plead with you all to come close to God so that you know what a wonderful loving and holy God we worship. When we have a high view of God, then we are motivated to fear Him. Fearing God is the beginning of wisdom, which is applying the godly knowledge that God has given to us in the Word.

Be careful how we use our tongue because God is watching us and holding us accountable for both the bad and the good words that come out of our mouth. Therefore, let us use soft words that calm, sage words that make knowledge appealing, and sweet words that heal.