

BaptistWay Bible Series for November 26: Wise use of words can bolster relationships

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Wise use of words can bolster relationships

- Proverbs 25:11-23; 26:18-28

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When is the last time you were on the receiving end of a well-timed and appropriate rebuke—a “word fitly spoken” (Proverbs 25:11)? When is the last time you offered a gentle and timely rebuke to someone other than a child?

The Hebrew sages would be surprised and probably chagrined by our reluctance to receive a timely rebuke and by our equal reticence to offer a rebuke to another adult. The Book of Proverbs, as we have seen, is filled with admonitions, and admonitions are sometimes packaged in the form of a rebuke. Perhaps these wise teachers understood something about the value of “a word fitly spoken” that largely has been lost in our Western culture.

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The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Colossians, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom” (3:16). He, like the Hebrew sages and poets, understood that words and wisdom go together, especially in the arena of personal relationships.

Admonitions for leadership

This section of wisdom sayings in Proverbs 25:11-23 is introduced in many translations with a heading that describes them as “proverbs of Solomon that the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah copied.” These admonitions are not only fit for a king but appropriate for anyone preparing for leadership. Any organization, whether secular or religious, is by nature a human organization, and effective leadership requires insight, wisdom and understanding of people and how they relate to one another.

The theme of accurate, honest and prudent speech appears about a dozen times in Proverbs 25 and 26. It occurs in clusters of sayings collected and edited in ways that emphasize different dimensions of the wise use of words.

Teaching through comparisons

Comparisons, a common technique in instruction, are the primary literary form in this section. Through a series of metaphors and similes, these comparisons communicate the importance of prudent, competent and gracious speech. In the Hebrew manuscripts, the comparative particle “like” is not stated explicitly in most of these sayings, but it is implied clearly, leading most translators to include it in English translations.

“Fitly,” used in verse 11, is a rare word in the Hebrew Scriptures that can refer to either timing or form. Through the use of comparison, the value of a well-chosen and well-timed word is celebrated as though it were an exquisite work of art in the form of ornate jewelry. Knowing what to say and when to say it is not only a sign of true wisdom, but also a thing of beauty.

The illustration is extended in verse 12. The pairing of two pieces of jewelry parallels the pairing of the speaker and the listener. Wise counsel and attentive hearing are related qualities. Even the wisest counsel has no value if it falls on deaf ears. The wisdom of a timely, well-aimed rebuke requires a receptive listener who then takes the counsel to heart.

In verses 13-14, the comparison switches from man-made objects to the world of weather. The person who brags but fails to deliver as promised is like clouds and wind that portend rain but never bring a drop. Empty promises compromise the integrity of the speaker and undermine the trust necessary for relationships to thrive.

Effective interpersonal relationships also call for qualities such as diplomacy, humility and patience (v. 15). In approaching a person of authority with a concern or a request, it is helpful to remember that attitude, as well as one’s words, goes a long way toward obtaining a favorable response. Leaders may be strong (like bones), but a soft word and humble tone can have a disproportionate impact. In contrast, pushiness may elicit a positive reply in the short term, but it rarely pays off in the

long run.

The key message in this section is discernment—the wisdom to choose the right words at the right time with the right tone.

Good judgment

Moderation is another principle of good leadership, and wisdom knows when enough is enough. Even a good thing, like honey (v. 16), can lead to a serious stomachache if you overindulge. Good judgment also knows not to “wear out your welcome” at a neighbor’s house (v. 17).

Proverbs 25:21 broadens this wise counsel on interpersonal relationships to include one’s enemies. Even an enemy is to be treated according to his need rather than his disposition.

Power of words

Another cluster of sayings dealing with the power of words occurs in Proverbs 25:18-20. Words can be wielded like weapons in battle (v. 18), inflicting pain and injury. Misplaced trust in a dishonest or “faithless” person during a time of need can hurt like “a bad tooth or a lame foot” (v. 19). Healthy relationships call for sensitive and caring words when a friend or neighbor is in pain (v. 20), a lesson largely lost on Job’s friends in their counsel to a suffering saint.

This theme of the negative impact of words used carelessly or maliciously is repeated in Proverbs 26:18-28. This section features a series of couplets in which the illustration often comes first, followed by words of advice or counsel. The first line creates the tension, and the second delivers the point.

In verse 20, “whisperer” or “talebearer” is more than a teller of tales. The Hebrew noun has a stronger connotation of a person who at best is a teller of “tall tales” and at worst is a slanderer bent on destruction.

The trio of sayings in verses 23-25 addresses the theme of deceit. Use of the number “seven” in verse 25 connotes completeness, portraying a heart crammed full of hatred and deception.

In verses 26-27, the final three sayings focus on the disastrous consequences of evil set loose by the tongue. Yet despite all efforts to conceal and disguise, duplicity and hatred ultimately will be exposed to the light of the truth. Verse 28 serves as an effective summary of this section.

Having just emerged from mid-term national elections in America, the power of negative, exaggerated and careless words has been abundantly illustrated in the daily barrage of “attack ads” in many political campaigns. Yet the admonitions of Proverbs are a clear reminder that politicians are not the only ones tempted to resort to slander, gossip and character assassination.

All of us are called to recognize the power of words and to bear responsibility for the words we use. To do otherwise compromises and eventually destroys the core value of truthfulness essential for relationships, groups and societies to thrive.

Discussion questions

- Do you agree that we have largely lost the “art of rebuke” in our adult relationships? If so, why? What is required for such admonitions to be constructive or helpful?
- Do people in places of leadership bear a greater responsibility for the

words they use? Why or why not?

- What are some steps we can take to “guard our tongues” so that our words bless rather than harm others?

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