

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Proverbs 10:6-14, “Wise and Foolish Speech”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 7/30/2024**  
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Our words – whether wise or foolish – are powerful.  
Words create the content of our thought life  
and generate the substance of our world and its relationships.

Mahatma Gandhi led the people of India in the face of  
British occupation and rule in a very strange way.  
Rather than attack the British head on, he called attention  
to the Dalit class known as the “untouchables.”  
Instead of untouchable, he called them “Harijans” or “Children of God.”  
His approach was to use nonviolence to build the country’s identity  
from the bottom up – an approach that seems to come  
from Jesus’ own teaching.

Speaking of the unusual nature of his strategy, Gandhi said,  
“First they ignore you, then they laugh at you,  
then they fight you, then you win.” [REPEAT]

Gandhi lived these words and demonstrated the power  
of nonviolent political change.

Wise words, like Gandhi’s, have the power to explain complex realities  
in a way that anyone can understand – if they have the right  
disposition to receive that wisdom.

Proverbs calls that disposition, “The fear of Lord.”

Proverbs 10:6-14 may look like a random collection of sayings,  
but in fact they are carefully ordered to help us understand  
the way that wise and foolish speech works among  
the righteous and the wicked both individually  
and communally.

The first thing to notice is that these verses fall into  
two sets of four proverbs each.

Verse 6 begins the first set of four,  
and verse 11 begins the second set of four.

In the big picture, both verses are talking about  
the effect of wise speech (from the righteous)  
compared to the effect of foolish speech (from the wicked).

These binary categories are extreme,  
and we know that people don't only exist in one or the other.  
But they provide clarity at the big picture and when read  
in conjunction they allow for substantial nuance.  
Let me read verse 6 aloud,  
and we can take note of what the first set is focusing on.

**Blessings crown the head of the righteous,  
but violence overwhelms the mouth of the  
wicked.**

In the language of this book, blessings always find their source in God,  
even if they come through other people.  
So the righteous are blessed by God.

This stands in contrast to the wicked.  
Because of what the wicked have spoken,  
violence comes *over their mouths*.  
The implication being that  
as they have used their mouths to speak evil things about others,  
or perhaps to plot violence against others,  
now that same violence comes back to them  
and shuts them up.

(PAUSE)

So this verse is referencing the effect of wise living  
*on the person who lives that way,*  
and the effect of foolish living  
*on the person who lives that way.*

The emphasis is on the individual,  
the kind of returns that one can expect  
from a wisdom filled life or a wickedness life.

And that emphasis carries through the proverbs that follow—  
v. 7 the righteous will have their name used in blessings,  
v. 8 they accept God's commands,  
v. 9 they walk securely.

These are good things that come to  
the individual people who follow God into the radically right life.

By contrast, the name of the wicked will rot,  
their fraudulent practices will be discovered,  
and their talky-talky-talky brings about ruin.

These are all negative things that come  
to the individuals who do not follow God into the radically right life.  
A significant shift takes place in verse 11, which says,  
**“The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life,  
but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.”**

This verse gives us a transition between proverbs  
focusing on how an *individual's* speech impacts themselves  
to a focus on the effect of righteous or wicked living *on others*.

In today's world, you can go to Home Depot  
and get a fountain to put in your back yard  
that is only accessible to you.  
Or, you might put it in your front yard,  
but nobody's going to be taking water from it on a hot day.

But imagine on a hot day like this if we had a fountain with fresh cool water  
that we could all fill our cup with after the service.  
That's the Proverb's fountain!  
In the world which this proverb was written to,  
fountains were public sources of blessing.

Bruce Waltke notes that in the Middle East,  
**“Flowing well water is particularly precious,  
and people gather around it.  
The open, benevolent speech of the righteous  
is just as necessary for a community,  
offering everyone abundant life –  
temporal, intellectual, moral, and spiritual.  
The right word, spoken at the right time and in the right way,  
supports or corrects a community in a way that promotes its life.”**

And so this image of the fountain introduces  
a big shift in emphasizing the impact our words have *on others*.

The second half of the verse establishes that focus again,  
“But the mouth of the wicked conceals violence,”...*for whom?*

It conceals violence that is being planned, again, *for others*,  
their language hides a trap that has been set.

So we might imagine that beside our communal fountain was  
a loose paving stone which caused people to trip.  
The fountain is like the impact of wise speech, blessing the community,  
but the loose stone like the impact of wicked speech,  
impairing the community.

This theme carries out over the next verses just like it did with the first set:  
vs. 12 - the wicked bring about dissension within the community,  
v. 13 - they require discipline from of the community,  
and v. 14 - the mouth of the fool  
invites the ruin of the community.

By contrast, the words of the righteous  
restore things that have been set wrong,  
they have wise words to share with those who need it,  
and they store up knowledge  
that can diffuse the impact of foolish words,  
they say – watch out for loose stones by the community fountain!

So the message that we're getting from this collection of proverbs  
is that if we allow our character to be shaped by God  
and submit to God's way of life,  
then we will be personally blessed  
*and* we will be of tangible benefit to those around us.

We will be personally kept safe and secure  
because we won't get ourselves into stupid situations,  
but we will also save our community from ruin  
because we will have wise words to speak  
at the appropriate time.

And the reverse is also true.  
If we reject God's way of relating and adopt an a way of life  
that is self-serving, underhanded, or even violent,  
then these things will become traps for us personally.  
Not only that, but when we act in this way  
we also open up the possibility for disaster to those around us.

Now there's a danger here of minimizing these scriptures  
because they use words that we wouldn't use  
to describe our friends or coworkers or civic leaders.  
You wouldn't probably call someone out for a "malicious wink,"  
or warn someone of walking "a crooked path."

We might have a sense that these sayings are out of touch,  
or that they are painting caricatures rather than describing real life.

But these proverbs are not merely painting caricatures  
that have no basis in reality.

The people described in these verses are right in our circle  
and in the people driving by and walking along here  
in downtown McMinnville.

We've all chattered on about something  
that set the stage for another person's detriment.  
We've all made plans that we were ashamed of when they were found out.

And by God's grace there are many here who have trusted God  
enough to speak well, to offer a very timely encouragement,  
to show proper restraint,  
to be a fountain of life to those around them.

None of us want to be the fool. None of us want to be wicked.  
But the sad reality is that we all have parts of our character  
that are foolish and wicked, that need God's healing grace.

We want what we want and we don't care how we have to get it.  
But *if that's who we are*, then what are we supposed to do about it?

You can't just read a proverb and then declare to God and everybody  
that "This is how I'm going to live everyday for the rest of my life!"  
That would be as effective as the New Year's Resolution  
that you already forgot about.

Why?

Because that approach only depends on you.  
*You* can't live a life of wisdom all by yourself.  
Fortunately, God calls us to something else.

God doesn't call us to "try harder,"

or to "follow the rules" more consistently.

The way we are transformed and the way our speech is changed  
from foolish and wicked thoughts into wise and discerning speech

is by accepting God's assessment of us,

immersing ourselves in Christ the Living Word,

relying on the community that is given us.

I'm going to give you an example of one way you can do that.

You can simply take a line like Proverbs 10:11 and meditate on it.

Not "determining" that you will be like this.

But immersing yourself in it every day.

Consider that verse every day at breakfast or at lunch,

or when you watch the local news.

"The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life,

but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence."

If you write that down, put it in your pocket or on your phone,

and meditate on it throughout the day, you *will*

be opened up to new insights about yourself and your world

that you had never seen before. You will.

Then at the end of the week you can pray.

You can Say to God,

"I don't know how to be a fountain of life to others.

And I wonder why sometimes I hurt my family

and my friends with what I say.

But I trust you, and I trust your way of living.

Help me to grow in this wisdom."

When we pray like that, we put ourselves in the hands of God.

The Spirit of God will change us and lead us into the people

we were always meant to be.

## **PRAY**

You have told us that, "**Blessings crown the head of the righteous,  
but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.**"