

Part 26: How to Be a Craftsman With Words

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We live in an age which has grown to appreciate goods and services that are crafted with care. When the adjective "craft" is added to our food, our clothes and our furniture we have learned to expect something more.

A factory produced piece of furniture might look the same as a hand-crafted piece of furniture, but the buyer is comforted, and pays, for the assurance that every joint, every seam, every piece of lumber has been inspected--carefully examined--and skillfully honed for quality.

This is contrasted with food pumped out of a pre-cooked assembly line or coffee produced from a small pre-packaged pod brewed for expediency and affordability instead of the actual taste of coffee.

Many of us don't purchase craftsman items not because we don't like them, but because we often can't afford them. Due to the time and energy such detail demands, these products are generally more expensive. But as we have been working through the book of Proverbs we have encountered craftsmanship. In fact the Hebrew word for wisdom, *hoekma*, is a word translated in other parts of scripture in relation to artists and craftsman. There *hoekma* is translated as *skilled*.

What Solomon is showing us is that we have access to craftsmanship without monetary cost. We have access to quality, comfort and value which any of us can afford yet it isn't totally without any cost. It comes at the cost of thoughtfulness. It comes at the cost of considering wisdom, pondering God's truth, and then living in light of that.

Today, we are going to examine what it takes to craft our responses to the world with that sort of quality. Our world is after your words. At almost every juncture of your day we encounter something trying to lure us to respond, to retaliate, to counsel, comfort or comment with our words. But are our words crafted with biblical skill? Do our responses to our world resemble the care and quality of a chef who desires to prepare a finely detailed meal, or is it based off what appears to be most cheap and expedient?

Craftsmanship benefits all who encounter it and God is offering you the wisdom of a craftsman free of cost if only you would take the time to consider, to think, and to ponder God's wisdom when it comes to your words and your responses to our world.

We are going to camp out primarily in Proverbs 15:1-7 this morning, but we are broadly going to reflect on what the whole of Proverbs teaches us about our minds, our hearts, and our mouths. Our primary goal today is that we might learn, through God's wisdom: **How to be thoughtful with our words**. What we will see is that Solomon gives us four points of consideration for us this morning. If we want to be thoughtful with our words we need to first: **Consider the desire of our hearts**, then we must **Consider the wisdom of God**, and then in application of those two areas we **Consider when not to speak** and finally **Consider when to speak**.

Here is why we need the crafted wisdom of Solomon today: When I say our world demands us to respond to it, I mean that our world is constantly seeking to draw us to communicate what is in our hearts and in our minds—constantly. This has led to two intertwined situations in our culture.

First, our technological age has given way to an amount of words which is historically unprecedented. From blogs, to social media, to tik-toks, podcasts and kindles we are surrounded by words. But what is unique to this era is not just that so many words exist, but that anyone has access to publish their words. You don't need to be an expert in an area to gain a following. Your voice isn't limited to only those around you. Through the internet we have an unlimited amount of voices which call us to respond not just with our words, but with our affections.

The amount of words then leads to the second situation and that is the amplitude of the words. Because there are so many words, and because behind our words is ultimately the affections of our hearts, to be heard is therefore to be accepted. Which means that if we want to be accepted we must be heard. So in order to be heard we use our words loudly. We speak in absolutes, leaving no room for nuance or subtlety. This drives our love for false absolutes, driving us to extremes in our opinions with hot-takes and click-bate headlines.

The metrics by which we gauge success in communication is not by the quality of the content, or the truthfulness of it, but instead by affect it has on us and others: Is it liked? Favorited? Shared? Slandered?

If we want to be accepted and validated by worldly standards we learn to play by the world's rules when it comes to our communication.

But Christians are crafted and nurtured by a different wisdom: God's wisdom. There is hope for us in our communication-centric society that we can first find acceptance in the gospel and therefore consider how our words, our responses and our communication is distinct from the world's.

So in order to understand this wisdom, wisdom which James calls "wisdom from above" we must submit ourselves to God's word. What I'm going to do is read for us Proverbs 15:1-7 and I want you to consider what it is saying about our words, our hearts and our God and then we are going to begin to answer the question of how we might be thoughtful with our words.

Proverbs 15:1-7.

So here Solomon shows us all sorts of contrasts about how our words affect us and affect others but inside this passage we begin to see the first point today which we ought to consider. If we want to be on the positive side of all these contrasts we should first **Consider the desire of our heart.**

Remember the Proverbs read fast but think slow and here we see why this exercise is so important. Notice all the places in this text where communication and words are mentioned: Vs. 1, soft answer and a harsh word, vs. 2., tongue of the wise, the mouth of the fool, vs. 3., a gentle tongue, vs. 4., there is a heeding or listening to instruction, vs. 7 the lips of the wise.

Mouths, lips, and tongues are everywhere and in verse 3 Solomon wants to show that God is concerned with all of it. Now if you wanted to show how someone is concerned about what we say, what body part would you reference? The ear!

But look at what Solomon says in **Proverbs 15:3**.

He doesn't say the ears of the Lord are in every place. Instead he says—in relationship to our words—the eyes of the Lord are in every place.

What is the point he's making? Well if we continue to read portions of Proverbs 15 we get a little bit more clarity. Look at **Proverbs 15:7, 26, 28**.

Are you beginning to see the connection here? Solomon is connecting the external words of our mouths with the internal desires of our heart. Solomon therefore communicates God's knowledge of words with the metaphor of his eyes as if to say God can see your heart before he hears your words.

Our words are an extension of our hearts.

Now this isn't new or novel for most of us. Our culture even affirms this when it uses words like "hate-speech" which connects external words as the result of an internal problem. Jesus himself set this precedent when he said in Luke (6:45) that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

But this where Solomon wants us to consider this all the more. When we talk about the connection between our hearts and our words we often chalk it up to a sort of reactive response we have limited control over.

We can't really change what we love. Now as Christians, we have hope that the Holy Spirit can slowly begin to change our affections and conform them closer and closer to God's affections but this process is not a human powered process. I can tell my kids to eat their vegetables, but I can't send them in their room and say to them, "Don't come out until you love cauliflower."

So when we encounter the word-heart connection we acknowledge its truthfulness, but we aren't quite sure what to do with it in practice. How do we change what we love?

But in Hebrew literature the heart was not simply the seat of affection, it was also the seat of our minds. It was where our thoughtfulness, our volition and our knowledge was stored.

Which means that our words are not simply a knee-jerk reaction to what we love, but our words are also a representative of the discipline of our mind. We might not be able to change what we love in a moment, but we can think about what we love. We can be thoughtful about what we love.

We can choose to think. Look at **Proverbs 15:28** again.

Think about what? Ponder what?

In 1962, J.L. Austin published a book called, "How to Do Things with Words." The thesis of his book was that no one simply communicates. The goal of any sentence you've ever uttered is not simply to put words together which describe reality. Instead we communicate in order to accomplish something.

We see this in our infants. They grunt, and cry, but their goal is not simply to communicate a grunt or a cry. They want those speech acts to cause us to respond and provide for them something. We do similar

things. For example, when I'm in the kitchen and my wife is in the other room she often says, "My water bottle is on the table and it's empty."

She's not merely trying to update me on an accurate description of the space-time continuum. She wants that knowledge to compel me to get her something to drink.

Even a teacher who lectures on a specific subject does so not just to communicate truth but to provide truth which gives the student what they need to pass the test, to build bridges that won't collapse or to cook food that doesn't make us sick.

Behind every act of your communication online, or in person, is a perception of not only what you desire, but what you then think that sentence, tweet, or conversation is going to provide for you in relationship to that desire.

Solomon warns us of faulty, incomplete thought in this area: **Proverbs 29:20.**

When you are about to speak, consider the desire of your heart. What do you think, what does your pondering, tell you that you are going to get from these words? We speak to vindicate ourselves. To comfort ourselves. To destroy our enemies. We speak to be affirmed.

When you are about to speak, do you consider why you are speaking? What do you hope to accomplish with those words or that post. In other words, what does your heart hope to accomplish? Our words don't only communicate what we love they communicate what we want. While we might not be able to change immediately what we love we can begin to think about what we want.

This is the first step. But it's only the only step. Considering what our hearts want, and what our minds are thinking is only half the battle. The other half is to consider what we want in light of the wisdom of God: **Consider the wisdom of God.**

At this point you've thought about what you think of something, but what does God think about that and how do God's thoughts on this matter shape your words?

This is what we see the wise man doing in this text. Verse 3 exists to show us that God cares about every word, every tweet, every article shared and comment posted. But the wise man, knowing this, turns then to God's wisdom.

Look at **Proverbs 15:2.** The wise man doesn't point to his own wisdom. He points to God's wisdom. He commends it to us. It's as if the wise persons tongue is the world's most prolific Yelp reviewer. It says at every step: God's wisdom is sure. His perception of the world is always accurate. His goodness is always good. His word never fails.

Each of us faces a natural tendency when the world draws words from us. We generally communicate about something from the primary perspective of that subject. When someone talks to us about sports, we gauge it through the lens of our favorite teams. When someone speaks to us about children or marriage, we respond as either married or single, kids or no kids. When someone speaks politically we respond out of our general disposition to whatever party we align with or oppose.

But the challenge of thoughtful wisdom is that we challenge these identity categories as the primary identity we have. The goal of the wise man is to view all of our responses not through the preprogrammed language of our tribes but through the wisdom God gives us as Christians through his salvation.

Wisdom seeks to think primarily, and therefore speak primarily out of our relationship and identity before God.

Where do we find this sort of vision correction? Look again at **Proverbs 15:4**. A gentle person's tongue is a tree of life! Where have we seen this theme before in the book of Proverbs? In speaking of Lady Wisdom in chapter three look at What Solomon says about God's wisdom: **Proverbs 3:17-18**.

How does our tongue become a tree of life? How is it gentle and not broken? By turning to God's wisdom.

Look again at **Proverbs 15:5**. God's wisdom is God's instruction. Just as we don't speak arbitrarily, God doesn't speak arbitrarily. His words are meant to curb us, to challenge us, to make us disciplined and principled in how we think and respond.

When it comes to our words, God's word in the gospel of Jesus Christ is the primary shaping influence. Why? Because the gospel of Jesus Christ reminds us of all that redemption in Jesus has already given to us.

We say quick tempered and slanderous things to vindicate ourselves before others. Brothers and sisters, if Jesus has taken all of your sin by faith and paid the punishment for it on the cross we are vindicated before God himself. We don't need to sin in order to vindicate ourselves because in Christ we are vindicated.

We say hateful and mean spirited things because we want those who have done us harm to suffer. But brothers and sisters, Jesus calls us to love those around us because he himself has promised to judge and condemn all those who do evil. Your words will not out punish the justice of God!

We pander and present in order to be accepted, but when we are robed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ through faith you are accepted, loved and cherished by God himself.

When we consider the word of God in the gospel of Jesus many of the motivating reasons behind quick, thoughtless words are eliminated because we realize everything we are trying to gain by our words has been given to us in the word of Jesus Christ.

To ponder our hearts before we answer is to ponder the gospel and how Jesus is the answer!

What this consideration does is it eliminates the desperation of our words. It gives us space to think, and even worship all that Jesus has done for us and it frees our words to be in service of others and in worship to God.

Charles Spurgeon once said, "To be burning at the lip and freezing at the soul is the mark of a one far from God." Look again at **Proverbs 15:7**. When we stop and ponder the implications of the gospel on our

words, what Christ has given to us, we are able to spread knowledge from our hearts and not foolishness for our own ends.

But even here, after we have considered our hearts, and considered God's instruction for us in the gospel, we still haven't even communicated. We still have to choose what to say, or not to say and this demands wisdom as well.

In other words God gives us the book of Proverbs, not the book of policy. If it was book on policy we could look up a flow chart and say: If situation "x" then words "y." But that's not what God gives us. Why? Because he wants us to do the work of a craftsman, he wants you to exercise wisdom by being thoughtful of all that is going on.

For instance look at these two back to back verses in **Proverbs 26:4-5**.

Don't you love Proverbs! Answer the fool and be wise! Answer the fool and you'll be a fool! You might see that as a paradox, I see this as proof that God's word holds up in a world where life is not always black and white. God's wisdom is wisdom for life in a world where sin often confuses and convolutes things.

But which response ought you to practice? This is the work of gospel centered reflection and wisdom.

So by way of application we are going to spend time in closing on each of these considerations. First, **Consider When Not to Speak**.

Look with me **Proverbs 17:27-18:2**.

For the Christian, restraint, a cool spirit and a desire to better understand is to be preferred over a quick worded, fast flowing opinion.

Can you imagine what the witness of our church would be like if only we were able to model this kind of posture online? I think of how different my interactions would be if I sought to apply wisdom like this.

Look at the additional warning Solomon gives later on in chapter 18: **Proverbs 18:6-7**.

In our culture, we are goaded all of the time to communicate in ways that are scintillating and scandalous in order to garner attention or audience. The truth is for people who are often quick with words, which I myself am included, we know how easy and cheap it is to interact in such a way.

But this way doesn't please God and it doesn't benefit us. It is a snare to your own soul! It is the perverseness of tongue which breaks our own spirit.

I am like you in that I often speak when I should not. Or I speak with a tone and a desire that the gospel would weed out if only I would give it some thought. I speak not to win people, but to win an argument. I speak as if God needs my biting rhetoric more than my gentle witness.

So what I have done is I often allow my wife to read the tweets, emails and texts I'm going to send in times where I'm debating if I'm speaking out of a holy passion or a selfish one. More times than not she

graciously says: "I think you should sit on it a bit longer." Or sometimes she says, "This might be better as a private conversation with this person."

But here is why we need to gospel to have the freedom to say something by saying nothing. Our culture promotes the idea that silence is always violence. That if you aren't the first to respond, or if your response is not emotive enough, then you are either of little value or even on the wrong side.

But look at what silence actually promotes in scripture: **Proverbs 17:27**. Christian silence, when bathed in gospel wisdom doesn't point to what we don't know, but it points more clearly than quick words ever could, to the knowledge we do know.

It points to the knowledge of God. It trusts in what we know about Jesus Christ providing for us our comfort, our acceptance, our vindication, or peace and our love. It refuses to think that God needs you and instead relishes the idea that we need God.

Look at how Solomon closes **Proverbs 15:33**. We cannot apply the freedom of silence unless we fear the Lord. Our world says that honor in communication comes by our own words, but the gospel tells us that humility before God is what gives us the honor we seek.

Before you speak, before you post, before you tweet, consider how humility and the fear of God might give you pause.

Now after we looked at these passages in staff meeting this week we joked that it's probably safer in life to just say nothing! But the beauty of God's wisdom is that it frees us to say nothing when the world calls us to say something and yet it empowers us to say something when the world wants us to say nothing!

This is our final point this morning: **Consider when to speak**.

Look at what Solomon says in **Proverbs 15:1-2, 7, 23**.

Sometimes we must speak. Sometimes for the good of the other person, for the benefit of society, and for the glory of God it would be wrong of us to be silent.

Yet when we do speak our words are to be noticeably distinct from the words of culture. Why? Because our words are shaped by our wants and needs being satisfied in the gospel. Our words, even in debates, even in correction, are shaped by the profound reality that God saved us when we were in the wrong. We realize that behind desperate words is desperate hope, hope answered ultimately in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Where it is cheap and easy to talk when we probably shouldn't, it's often quite costly to speak up when we should. It demands gospel boldness and also gospel posture.

Look at how James speaks of this in **James 3:13-18**.

When you think, when you ponder and consider your words, the extension of your heart drawn out into the world, does it sound like these things?

Every rotten log echoes with the same hollow thud. Every Christian living in Christ should carry the note of heaven when struck by the world.

We speak not out of our own righteousness, but out of God's righteousness. Not out of our own pride or cultural position, but from God's glory and an eternal perspective. Solomon warns us in **Proverbs 21:29**, "A wicked man puts on a bold face but the upright gives thoughts to his ways."

We do not act out of a superficial boldness, but we speak out of a boldness which can only come when we are thoughtful on the gospel which saves us.

So which are we to do? Speak or not speak?

Regardless of how you respond the world might rail against you. But when our words are bathed in the reflection of God's words our tongue is a tree of life that brings us shade and relief in the gospel, enduring us and reminding us of all Jesus has given to us by grace.