

The Lord's Sovereignty and Human Speech

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[0 : 00] Let's pray for the reading and preaching of God's Word. Heavenly Father, we humble ourselves before You again, before Your Word.

We incline our ears to You and open up our hearts toward You. Because we know that we often sin and err, and we need the constraining power of Your Word.

We are often downcast. We need Your Word, which rejoices our hearts. We are often blind, and we need Your Word, which illuminates, enlightens our eyes to see.

So God, open up Your Word to us this evening, as we humble ourselves before You. Amen. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Please turn with me to Proverbs chapter 16, verses 16 to 30.

[1 : 34] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Whoever guards his way preserves his life. Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.

It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoiled with the proud. Whoever gives thought to the word will discover good, and blessed is he who trusts in the Lord.

[2 : 46] The wise of heart is called discerning, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness. Good sense is a fountain of life to him who has it, but the instruction of fools is folly.

The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips. Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. A worker's appetite works for him, his mouth urges him on.

A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.

A man of violence entices his neighbor, and leads him in a way that is not good. Whoever winks his eyes, plans dishonest things.

[3 : 55] He who purses his lips brings evil to pass. This is God's holy and authoritative word. Just a couple chapters later, in Proverbs 18, 21, it says, Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.

We know from experience that words have the power to heal, to hurt, to affect good or evil. And for this reason, a significant portion of the book of Proverbs is devoted to the topic of human speech.

And wise, winsome speech, the way, manner of speaking, the kind of things we say, it's a hallmark of the mature Christian. And our passage, Proverbs 16, 16 to 30, is also devoted to that topic, and it teaches us that those who trust God's word give thought to their words.

Those who trust God's word give thought to their words. And first, we're going to talk about listening to God's word in verses 16 to 19, and speaking good words in verses 20 to 24, and then speaking evil words in verses 25 to 30.

First, in order to speak good words, it says we must first listen to God's word. And that's what verses 16 to 19 are about. It begins in verse 16, How much better to get wisdom than gold?

[5 : 24] To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver. And it ends in verse 19, It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.

So both verses speak of it being better, right? Of the superiority and desirability of wisdom. And the word better in these verses are the exact same Hebrew word that's translated as good in verse 20 and verse 29.

Whoever gives thought to the word will discover good. And a man of violence leads a neighbor in a way that is not good. So verses 20 to 24 are about speech that does good to others.

And verses 25 to 30 are about speech that does not do good to others. And the difference between the two outcomes is determined by whether or not we acquire that which is good.

Which in this context is the wisdom of God. Understanding. Which is better than gold and silver. If we want to speak well. If we want to do good with our words.

[6 : 28] We need to acquire the wisdom that is good. And gold and silver were the medals that were most highly prized in the ancient world. And if you want the good life.

This passage teaches us forget gold and forget silver. Seek wisdom and understanding. That comes from God's word. A little sparse this evening maybe because of.

Definitely because of COVID. But I think maybe also because of the heat. And. But I could guarantee you. If I were giving away gold and silver this evening.

This place would be packed. But this verse teaches us that God's wisdom. His word.

Is better. Do we approach the reading and preaching of God's word with a special expectation.

[7 : 31] That the God of all creation will speak to us. He will impart his infinite wisdom to us. God's wisdom. I'm grateful.

That we have a church that's eager to hear God's word. And this is a comment that I received from all the guest preachers that come to preach for us. That you have a very attentive congregation.

And I know that though many people are not able to make it in person because of the circumstances. Many are listening right now. Online. Virtually as well. But there are millions of people out in the world.

Who are not listening to God's word. We're not paying heed to God's word. Because. They don't know that it's better than silver and gold. They don't know that it's better to seek God's wisdom.

Than these things. And we are the ones who are to tell them. Do we really believe that it is better to get wisdom than gold? Verse 17 continues this exhortation.

[8 : 35] The highway of the upright turns aside from evil. Whoever guards his way preserves his life. According to archaeological evidence. Ancient Israel during the time of Solomon had highways that would run by cities.

But not through cities. And so the way you enter into these cities would actually be by turning aside from the way. In order to go in. And so the point that he's making here.

Especially since the word upright in Hebrew also means straight. He's making the point that the upright. The righteous should stay on the straight path of the Lord.

Without turning aside to the left or to the right. And this is something that takes vigilance. When I first started driving here in Massachusetts. I learned very quickly.

That my GPS's direction to keep straight. Is actually not very straightforward. Because when you're driving on highways here in New England. You know you could be driving very straight.

[9 : 36] And then it could veer off into an exit to the right or to the left. And it just changes on you. The roads diverge. And so in order to keep straight. You actually have to pay attention and be very vigilant.

And similarly keeping to the highway of the upright takes vigilance. We must turn aside from evil.

We must guard our ways. We must follow God's word carefully. In order to preserve our lives.

Are you being vigilant in your spiritual walk? Or are you coasting? Or are you on autopilot? Are you on cruise control?

Are you paying attention to ensure that you are keeping on the straight path of God's wisdom? And the primary obstacle to keeping straight on this highway of the upright is pride.

Verse 18 says, Pride goes before destruction. And a haughty spirit before a fall. Pride makes a person deaf to correction.

[10 : 39] Pride convinces a person that his way is always right. And figuratively speaking, The prideful driver ignores the honking cars around him. And does not pay attention to his car vibrating as it crosses over the rumble strip into danger, into an accident.

He thinks that he cannot possibly be heading toward a fatal accident. And likewise, the prideful person does not pay attention to the exhortations and warnings of God's word.

He assumes that since he is in the right, God's word must be in the wrong. Pride goes before destruction. And a haughty spirit before a fall.

This doesn't mean, however, that every prideful person will be destroyed immediately. In this upside-down world, justice sometimes isn't served until God's final judgment. So verse 19 serves to qualify verse 18. It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.

[11 : 45] In this upside-down world, the proud sometimes divide the spoil. Meaning they conquer and exploit others and divide the plunder among themselves.

That's the reality. In this upside-down world, the humble who should be exalted are sometimes found among the poor and the afflicted. They don't have much material wealth or social prestige. As Bible commentator William McCain puts it, Poverty and humility are natural allies. And impious pride goes with ill-gotten gain. But still, verse 19 says, It is better, it's better still to be humble among the poor than to be rich among the proud.

Because as verse 16 said, How much better is wisdom than gold? Being wise and poor is better than being foolish and rich.

Being humble and poor is better than being proud and rich. And this is because, like water, the grace of God always flows downward. As Jesus said in Matthew 23, verse 12, Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

[13 : 01] Though we might not see this reality, this God's reality yet in our upside-down world, it will ultimately come true at God's final judgment. Because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

This is why those who wish to speak good words must first listen to God's word. Best-selling author Stephen King once wrote that, If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time or the tools to write.

Simple as that. In a much more profound way, it is true that if we don't have time to listen to God's word, we have neither the time nor the resources with which to speak the good word that brings life to people.

So let me ask you, what is most often in your ears? Who are the people, the voices that are most frequently in your ears? Is it the voice of God? Is it the word of God?

We must pay a heed to God's word above all else. And verse 20 serves as a transition to the next section about speaking good words. Whoever gives thought to the word will discover good.

[14 : 17] The first half of this verse is intentionally ambiguous. What does Solomon mean by the word?

Usually in Proverbs, the word refers to a wisdom saying, a proverb. So for example, chapter 1 verse 6 says that the purpose of this book is to help people understand a proverb and a saying.

The words of the wise and their riddles. Chapter 13 verse 13 says, whoever despises the word brings destruction on himself, but he who reveres the commandment will be rewarded.

So if that's what word means here in verse 20, it means that whoever gives thought to the word of God will discover good. Whoever contemplates and heeds the word of wisdom contained in the Proverbs will discover good.

And that fits the parallel line well. Blessed is he who trusts in the Lord. To trust in the Lord is to give thought to his word. If this is what the verse means, it's continuing the theme of verses 16 to 19, that we should pay, humbly pay attention to God's word.

[15 : 24] Give thought to his wisdom. But it could mean something else also. In many other places in Proverbs, the word could also refer to a person's speech. So chapter 15 verse 1 says, A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Similarly, chapter 15 verse 23 says, To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season how good it is. So if word here in verse 20 is a reference to a person's speech, then verse 20 means whoever gives thought to what he says will discover good.

Whoever is thoughtful in his words will discover good. In this case, verse 20 would fit well with the theme of verses 21 to 24, all of which is about speaking good words.

So then I think the ambiguity here is intentional, and the word is doing double duty. So it serves as a transition from verse 16 and 19 to 21 to 24. It's saying that only those who give thought to God's word will give thought to their word.

In other words, those who trust God's word give thought to their word and speak good words. And then verse 21 to 24 describe what that good word, the good speech, looks like.

[16:41] Verse 21 and 24 bracket the section, and both speak of the sweetness of good speech. The wise of heart is called discerning, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness.

Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body. Wisdom in the heart is evidence in the sweetness of speech, which increases persuasiveness.

This is corroborated by verse 23. The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious and adds persuasiveness to his lips. So first, the sweetness of speech makes one's words persuasive.

The gracious words of the wise are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul. So words of the wise then are not only sweet in its character, in the way it's communicated, but also in its effect.

It's sweet in both its beginning and its end. It's persuasive to one's ears and instructive to one's soul. That's what God's word is like. Those who speak good words are like.

[17:50] And this is to be contrasted with the sweet speech of the strange woman that we saw earlier in Proverbs chapter 5 verse 3. It said, For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil.

But in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. The speech of the forbidden woman also is sweet and persuasive, but her speech is only sweet in the beginning.

It's bitter in its end. The forbidden woman's speech is sweet in order to get people to swallow poison. But the wise person's speech, in contrast, is sweet in order to have people swallow medicine.

God's healing is sweet both in the way it's communicated and in its effect. So we should ask ourselves, is our speech persuasive, and is it edifying?

Is it instructive? If what we say is instructive and good in its context, but we are not persuasive, we are not winsome, we are not gracious in the way we say, we are not being wise.

[18:56] But likewise, if we are persuasive in what we say, but what we say is not good and edifying and true, that is not good either. The sweetness must have both, like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul, health to the body.

So honey was a precious commodity in the ancient world because it was prized both as a sweetener and as medicine. Because people didn't discover how to crystallize sugar until the 4th century AD.

So honey was really rare and it was a coveted sweetener that you can add to all kinds of foods and drinks. Not only that, honey in the ancient world was used often for medicinal purposes.

Because it contains just the right amount of hydrogen peroxide and because it lacks moisture and it sucks out moisture, honey was great for sanitizing and healing wounds.

Even today, you can actually buy this thing called Medi honey. I think they use it for medicinal purposes. It's a... And gracious words, it says, are like a honeycomb.

[20:00] Not a drop of honey, but like a full honeycomb dripping with honey. Sweetness to the soul and health to the body. So the word soul is the same word that's sometimes translated appetite in Hebrew.

So it's a double meaning, has a double meaning. Just as honey is good for taste, it is good for the soul, sweet to the soul. And gracious words are both good for the body and the soul.

Verse 22 elaborates on this truth. Good sense is a fountain of life to him who has it, but the instruction of fools is folly. To the person who has good sense, his wisdom becomes for him a fountain of life, nourishing and prospering him.

But for the fools, even their instruction is folly. The fool should not presume to instruct anyone. But precisely because they are too prideful and foolish to know this, they instruct others in their folly.

And their pride goes before destruction. The wise person's good sense, on the other hand, brings life. He humbles himself and heeds the word of God, which brings life.

[21:11] And that's what it looks like to speak good words. And then verses 25 to 30 teaches what it looks like to speak evil words that we should avoid. Verse 25 introduces the section this way.

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. This is a word-for-word repetition of Proverbs 14, 12, which we looked at a few weeks ago.

It teaches us that it's not always wise to follow our own hearts, because our hearts can be deceptive. It's not always wise to obey what you think is right, because our consciences can misfire.

But the fact that the way seems right to us does not mean that we are right. No matter how right and true and good a way of life might appear to us, if it is not the way of the Lord, it leads ultimately to death.

This is why the humble listening posture that verses 16 to 9 call us to is so important. Those who do not humble themselves and trust in God's word will stumble headlong into destruction.

[22 : 18] But in this section about evil speech, we find a curious digression in verse 26. A worker's appetite works for him. His mouth urges him on.

Ecclesiastes chapter 6 verse 7 says something very similar. All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied.

It's a very realistic proverb. It's saying that all the work that human beings do, ultimately we do to satisfy our own appetites, to fulfill our desires, to satisfy our hunger.

But what is the connection? What is this proverb doing here in the middle of a section dealing with speech? Earlier in chapter 10 verse 15 to 22, we saw the connection that Solomon made between storing up wealth and storing up words.

He wrote that we should be busy bees, working hard, not busy bodies, meddling in the affairs of others. We should occupy ourselves with work rather than occupy ourselves with talk.

[23 : 25] He taught us there. He wrote that when there are many words, that there is little wisdom. Because words are like money. The more you print into circulation, the less value it has. The more you speak, the less weight it has, the less wisdom it has.

Because when words are many, many are the premature, sinful, imprecise, impartial, out-of-turn words. And so he taught us there in chapter 10 that we should work diligently and speak sparingly. And in so doing, store up wealth. And similarly, chapter 14 verse 23 and 24 said, In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty.

The crown of the wise is their wealth, but the folly of fools brings folly. So quite simply, if you're busy talking, he's saying you're not busy working. And if instead of working with our own hands, we only speak and run our mouths, instead of reaping wealth, we will reap folly.

That was the wisdom teaching of Solomon in the earlier chapters. And he's making that same logical connection here in verse 26. So if we read verse 26 and 27 together, he says, A worker's appetite works for him.

[24 : 35] His mouth urges him on. A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. So there's a contrast. A worker applies himself to useful work, but a worthless person plots evil.

Our mouths should make us put our hands to the plow, rather than being used for plotting and for arson. The wise person puts his mouth to the service of diligent work and doing good to others, not for uselessness and evil.

That's the contrast that he's making. And verse 27, 28, and 29, in turn, each provide us with an example of evil speech. Each verse in the Hebrew begins with the word man.

So verse 27 is about the man of worthlessness. Verse 28 is about the man of dishonesty or perversion. Verse 29 is about the man of violence.

And there's an escalation, a progression of these descriptions. So let's first look at verse 27, which is about the man of worthlessness, the rabble-rouser.

[25 : 40] It says, A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. This is an agitator, a rabble-rouser, a troublemaker, a person who incites discord and disunity against God and humanity.

His words are inflammatory, like a scorching fire. And as the fictional character Alfred Pennyworth puts it, Some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money.

Some men just want to watch the world burn. The man of worthlessness sows discord, incites hatred, and promotes anarchy.

Those who trust God's word should give thought to their words and not speak in this manner. We should consider whether or not our words are inflammatory and speak words that promote peace and unity, not discord and division.

And second, verse 28 speaks of the man of dishonesty or perversion. A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends. Now, this is describing a schemer, a slanderer, a double-crosser, a gossip.

[26 : 56] Such a person sows suspicion between friends through his whispers. He uses his words to spread strife and separate close friends. Third, verse 29 and 30 speak of the man of violence.

A man of violence entices his neighbor and leads him in a way that is not good. Whoever winks his eyes, plans dishonest things, and he purses his lips, brings evil to pass.

This is describing a murderer, someone who hates his neighbor and plots to lead him in a way that is not good, who makes designs to bring evil to pass on another.

It says he winks his eyes, which is a mark of deception. Winking your eyes when you say something, to say one thing while implying another, meaning another. It says that he also purses his lips.

I'm not exactly sure what that looks like. Maybe the meaning of it is not entirely clear, but the verb means to compress or to pinch one's lips closed.

[28 : 03] So maybe like it could refer to withholding, maybe pertinent information that can deliver or help a neighbor. Purcing his lips and acting like he has no idea what is going on, when in fact he has been knowingly misleading his neighbor to death, to evil.

So then in verses 27 to 30, there's an escalation of evil speech. It first describes the rabble rouser, and then a slanderer who separates close friends, and finally a murderer who entices his neighbor toward evil.

And all of these descriptions are contrasted with the person who we saw earlier is wise of heart, who has good sense and speaks gracious words that are sweetness to the soul and health to the body.

And this battle between those who speak good and those who speak evil play out in the cosmic scale in God's salvation history as well. If we come to a passage like this in Proverbs, and we walk away with a few self-improvement tips, thinking, well, I better be a little more careful with how I speak and what I say, that's not good enough.

That's not what this passage is ultimately about. This passage ultimately points to this cosmic battle and this redemptive history that God is writing and that he brings about for us in Jesus Christ.

[29 : 22] Because Satan, our nemesis, is called Belial in 2 Corinthians 6.15. That's the same Hebrew word that is used to describe here the man of worthlessness.

Belial, the rabble rouser, in verse 27. Satan is also described as the accuser of our brothers. In Revelation 12, verse 10, his name, Satan, means accuser or slanderer, like the slanderer who separates close friends in verse 28.

And finally, in John 8.44, Jesus says that the devil was a murderer from the beginning and that he is a liar and the father of lies. His purpose is to steal, kill, and destroy.

And Satan came to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in the form of a serpent and he whispered lies into the ears of Adam and Eve, slandering God to them, sowing suspicion that God was withholding something from them, something good from them, and he separated close friends.

And his intention was murder in order to lead them to sin, which leads to death. And we have all, to varying degrees, followed our forefathers' path to sin.

[30 : 36] We have all lied. We have all slandered and gossiped. We have all harbored hatred in our hearts toward our neighbors and spoken ill, which Jesus says in Matthew 5, 21-22, that's tantamount to anger in our own hearts.

Murder in our own hearts, I mean. And as Proverbs 16, 18 said, Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall. Due to our sinful pride, due to our haughty spirit, we were destined for destruction and eternal damnation.

But our God, who had every right to punish us, to reject us, instead had compassion on us, and he sent his only son, Jesus Christ, to deliver us.

And the Gospels frequently comment on how gracious Jesus' words are, how persuasive Jesus' words are. Luke 4, 22 says, John 7, 40-52, described when the chief priests and the Pharisees send their officers to arrest Jesus, they come back without arresting him.

And when they ask him, why did you not arrest Jesus? They respond, no one ever spoke like the man. In Matthew 7, 28-29, it says, Satan was the liar, the slanderer, the murderer, and Jesus is the Word of God.

[32 : 12] Jesus is the truth. Jesus is the giver of life. And it was believing Satan's lies that plunged humanity into this downward spiral of sin and death, and it's by believing the Word of Christ His good news, that we are rescued out of it.

Jesus says in John 11, 24-25, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

Have you believed this? Verse 22 of our chapter of Proverbs 16 said, Good sense is a fountain of life to him who has it.

Jesus is the one who possesses good sense. Jesus is the one who possesses divine wisdom. Romans 16, 27, described God as the only wise God.

Jesus is the son of the only wise God. He's described as the wisdom from God. And he invites us, in John 7, 37, If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

[33 : 21] Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. Jesus is the one who becomes the fountain of life in us, for us.

Paradoxically, he did this by dying on the cross for our sins and being raised from the dead. Jesus, who never sinned in anything he had ever said, died the death of a liar, a slanderer, a perjurer, a murderer.

All the harsh things we've ever said, all the judgmental things we've ever said, all the dirty things we've ever said, all the hateful things we've ever said, all the false things, all the vain things, all the selfish things we have ever said.

How many unfitting words have I spoken just even this day? And all these things that we have done against God were laid on his shoulders, on Christ's shoulders.

And when people brought false accusations to Jesus at his trial, it says he didn't speak a word. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter and he was silent before his shearers.

[34 : 42] He didn't open his mouth. We have sinned in countless ways with our speech. So in order to pay the penalty for the sins of our mouths, Jesus, who had every right to protest and resist, died in silence.

He was raised from the dead by his father. The curse was broken.

Jesus was vindicated and raised from the dead. He humbled himself and so the father exalted him to the highest place. And it's by believing this Jesus that the fountain of life begins to flow.

And it's by believing this Jesus and being indwelt by his spirit that we begin to change, that our words begin to change, that they begin to take on the character of the graciousness of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Please take a moment to think about that and ask yourself what it is that God's calling you to imitate our Savior, Jesus Christ, in.

[36 : 09] And let the gracious words of God, the good news of Christ, minister to you. After a few moments, we'll respond by praying out loud together as a church.