

# Power of Words

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[ 0 : 00 ] So I want to share with you from tonight from Ecclesiastes chapter five and the tradition in our church if you would allow me that privileges out of reverence for the word of God and its inspiration.

We stand for the reading. So would you stand as we read tonight trusting in the Holy Spirit to make infinite truths known to finite minds. We read in Ecclesiastes chapter five verses one to seven. Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools who do not know that they do wrong.

Do not be quick with your mouth. Do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth so let your words be few.

As a dream comes when there are many cares so the speech of a fool when there are many words. When you make a vow to God do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools.

[ 1 : 00 ] Fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin and do not protest to the temple messenger.

My vow was a mistake. Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.

This is the word of the Lord tonight for you as church for the people of God in May the spirit. Plant it in us for the purpose of transforming our hearts and our lives so that we more and more reflect who he is in the world.

The word of the Lord for us tonight. Amen and amen. You may be seated. Regardless of what you may do in the course of your day there are always unique features to any job any vocation.

One of the unique things about what I do is I deal with words. I am constantly talking or I'm writing or I'm reading. You know, and depending on what day of the week it is I am just constantly using words and I traffic in words.

[ 2 : 10 ] It's kind of my currency. I will confess there was a time when I thought words were just sort of insignificant bluster that people used past the time of day. But thanks to my mother's love for literature and a number of English teachers that I had along the way I have come over the years to have a deep love for and passion for words.

And I owe much to my eighth grade English teacher. Her name was Mary Garan. And she required that our class memorize one of Henry Longfellow's classic poems called Evangeline.

And I will confess to you at the time that I despised her for requiring this of us as I spent hours memorizing these insignificant and what I thought at the time were meaningless words.

Why should I spend so much effort in doing this? Today I love her for it because I can still remember the opening stanzas of Evangeline.

And every time I take my family on a hike in the woods I burst out into the opening stanza of the poem. This is the forest primeval, the murmuring pines and the hemlocks bearded with moths and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight.

[ 3 : 28 ] A man like druids of old with voices sad and prophetic. The deep voiced neighboring ocean speaks and an accent's disconsolate answers the wail of the forest.

And every time I say those things my children roll their eyes and say, oh dad, but I'm so glad I know them because in them are beauty.

And there's power in words, words influence us, words shape us, they change us into arranged words in ways that are influential.

To take the time to put words together in ways that possess beauty. It takes time and energy and care and effort and it's why today I'm so distressed by what is so often our glib and casual approach to language and words and how we speak and how we use it, my goodness, today to think that we

could use a subject and a predicate into one full sentence.

Is that too much to ask? That we might use a noun and a verb as we communicate. But instead what do we do? We communicate in little snippets on social media where we don't even spell out entire words.

[ 4 : 44 ] We just abbreviate things and now all of a sudden our language has been reduced to little faces. Emojis that are smiling or crying or somewhere upside down and some have crazy faces.

We've just decided not even to use words or we weaponize our words on social media. Last Sunday someone I was just reading on my Facebook page a thread and someone was unhappy with the decision that we had made at First Presbyterian Church and they said, well those whack jobs down at First Presbyterian Church.

And I thought to myself, I don't even know who this person is. And yet they're choosing to hide behind a screen and use words that are cruel and wounding at different seasons.

So I want to talk to you about the power of language, the power of words. And we shouldn't be surprised by their power because in essence what we learn in the Bible is that God in his nature is word.

Maybe you've heard of the theologian John Frame at Reform Seminary in Orlando. He wrote this, God performs all his actions by speaking. He spoke and the world was formed.

[ 5 : 56 ] He spoke and light came to be. From his words come judgments, blessings, healings. Words reveal God. When God speaks, he reveals his mind, his will, his heart, his nature.

God is distinguished from other pagan gods by the fact that he speaks. Idols are mute, but God in his nature is word.

The word is God, John 1-1. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. And the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

He actually prays this word, Psalm 56-4. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust and I shall not be afraid.

So from the creation of the world to the creation of Holy Scripture, God has always revealed to us that his nature is word. We then, as those created in his image, we are therefore a people of language.

[ 7 : 08 ] We're a people of words and sin corrupts our use of words so that it can be used either for the good or for the evil. And just a quick cursory look at what the Scriptures say about the power of language in our lives.

And I'll give you the reference. You can look at these later. Proverbs 12-18. Words have the power to wound or to heal. Proverbs 15-4. Words can be a tree of life or they can break the spirit.

Proverbs 21-23. Our words can keep us out of trouble or they can lead us to ruin. Matthew 12-34. Our words reveal what are in our hearts, what's in our hearts.

We realize today that what you speak and your use of language says something about who you truly are inside. Your words reveal your heart.

We are also encouraged in Scripture to avoid the following. A lying tongue, crooked speech, gossip, a flattering mouth, talking too much, speaking rashly, swearing, speaking hastily, or using harsh words.

[ 8 : 22 ] So with all of that as background and information, let me ask you this evening, how do you feel right now as you reflect on your life about your use of words?

How do you feel about the way you're speaking? Are you using words and language in ways that edify and encourage and reflect the presence of God in you? Or are there times when perhaps your words and your use of words fall a little bit short of that ideal?

Well, that's kind of where I found myself as I was doing this research and study. The good news for us is God gives us some very important guidance in Ecclesiastes chapter 5.

Just a quick background on Ecclesiastes. We believe that it's largely written by Solomon, King Solomon. And Ecclesiastes is part of a group of books in the Bible known as wisdom literature. So Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, those are all considered to be wisdom literature, less theological and doctrinal, and more practical guidance for living.

[ 9 : 27 ] So Solomon comes along, and the Hebrew word that runs all throughout Ecclesiastes is the word, Hevel. And Hevel means meaningless. So Solomon's looking back at his life and he's realizing that there are so many things that in the end are meaningless.

Your work, your money, your pleasures, all of the things that you pursued in this life that you thought were going to make you happy, they're Hevel. They're meaningless, but it's not completely hopeless, though you can read a few chapters and feel sort of down about things. But he says there are things that do have meaning, and in chapter five he reflects one of those, and that is both our relationship with God, our trust in God, and then the relationships that we have with each other.

These are the places that Solomon begins to say are what give life, form, and satisfaction, and meaning, and he starts with our relationship with God. And in chapter five he says when you begin to have relationship with God and you're approaching the mysterium tremendous, the majesty, the glory, the holiness of God, then you should consider how you address such a being. You should consider your words, and what I want you to then understand is the way that you speak to God actually influences and shapes and changes how you will then speak to each other, both in Christian community and to those who are lost and who are in need of the gospel.

[11:03] So let's just reflect a bit on some of what Solomon reveals to us in Ecclesiastes. So first thing, he says you need to think about your approach. Okay, so you think about it in our own lives, we do this with people. If you plan to have coffee or lunch with someone, you know who that person is, and as you're driving or walking to meet them, you think about, well, what am I going to say?

What are the things we're going to talk about? You think about your approach. Well, in verse one, Solomon says guard your steps when you go to the house of God. So God in the Old Testament was spatially defined. He was in the temple.

So you would go to the temple to be in the presence of God. And so as you were going, you would be thinking about your preparations, your approach. When I get there, what am I going to say?

What are the sacrifices I'm going to make? What are the vows that I may make in the presence of God promises that I will make to him because of the relationship we share?

You think about your approach, and yet I'm not so sure that we spend a lot of time considering our approach, the words that we will use in the presence of Almighty God.

So let me just poke a little bit. You know, I get to come in and talk to you and then leave, and if you're mad at me, then it won't matter because you'll never see me again, likely. So I can say some of those hard things, but I want you to think about your favorite football team. I was talking to Tom and he said there were two teams here in Edinburgh and their rivals.

[12:31] And so whichever one is your favorite, imagine you've got great seats to see your favorite football team in a match. And you think it's the day of, and maybe it's a critical game, what are you going to do? How are you going to behave?

You're going to be thinking about that game most of the day. You're likely going to find a shirt in your team colors. Perhaps you have a scarf that you will wear. Maybe you'll carry a sign and you'll get to the game in plenty of times so that you can see your team run onto the field.

You will learn the songs and the chants, and I would imagine that you will also teach those to your children. Very specifically, you're going to pass on those loyalties. You wouldn't say, well, goodness, the match begins at one. Let's go down about 130.

Nobody does that. And yet, when we come weekly into the presence of Almighty God to worship, we haven't done any of those preparations.

When we think about coming into worship, we should be eager to be here 15, 20 minutes, perhaps. Maybe I'm going to change the whole ethos of St. Colombs where everyone comes 30 minutes before the service so that you can prepare.

[13:49] You can think about your approach in verse one. What am I going to say to Almighty God about who he is and how my life in this last week and the praise that he is worthy to receive?

What is the approach that you have with God? And then that should begin to shape once you have focused on that, that should begin to shape and change. How will I approach others? And what will I say? How will I encourage them? And if there are tensions between us, how will I bring reconciliation?

Because one distinctly shapes the other. Then Solomon goes on to provide some other insight.

Verse two, he says, He says, Don't be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart hasty an utter word before God, for God's in heaven, and you're on earth.

Therefore, let your words be few. So the picture of somebody is of someone who runs into the temple and they hastily make a sacrifice because they're supposed to.

Right? And they kind of rush through it and they say the words so they can check the box. I fulfilled my duty to go to church today. I'm done. And then they rush out. But what do they not do? They don't listen. They don't listen. And God says in verse two, he says, Hey, I'm in heaven and you're not.

[ 15 : 20 ] Are you really going to come in here and yakety yak talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk and never listen to me who created you?

And you think in our culture, we're so bad. At least I am. I'm bad at creating space to listen to Almighty God. And the only problem with God's words is that God's words are so bad that it's hard to understand.

And the only problem with God's words is that God's words are so bad that it's hard to understand. Through reading His word, through conversation with others that you value their words and their relationship with God, God's word will increasingly rest and settle in your heart such that His words become your words.

And as His words become your words, as you're listening to Him, then you become the one who speaks those words into the world. You begin to experience healthier relationships. Why? Because you know how to listen.

See, vanity is often expressed as an excessive use of words. But oh, to listen. I found a great article by Brenda Euland who wrote, listening is a magnetic and strange thing.

[ 16 : 43 ] A creative force. The people who really listen to us are the ones we move toward. Ever notice that when someone really listens to you? They try to understand you. You move towards them.

Because you know they care about you. God's trying to say, if you want to be my people, listen to me. And then listen to one another. Give them that gift where you're not constantly being the one to talk.

Talk less and listen to others because that's what communicates the love and the care of Christ for others in our lives. And then Solomon gets into the whole dynamic of speed or haste.

He says, don't do things that are hasty or rash or in chapter 7 verse 9 out of anger. Don't be quickly provoked in your spirit for anger resides in the lap of fools.

But see, here's what can happen to us. We live at such a pace in our lives that we grow accustomed to everything happening quickly. We want our shipping fast. We want our downloads fast. We want our food fast.

[ 17 : 56 ] And then we come into our relationship with God and it doesn't happen anything like that. And because it doesn't, then what happens we grow impatient with God. Impatience breeds irritability and irritability, anger and anger never leads anywhere good.

How many of you all have ever used words and said things or wrote things, emails perhaps? And if you wrote them in haste, if you wrote them quickly and rashly and out of anger, how many times did that work out well for you?

Yeah, I'd really like to meet the person that that worked out well for. I've asked that in several churches and never gotten a positive answer. It never leads anywhere good. In fact, most of the time it takes you more time and effort to go clean up the mess that you made because you acted too fast. Right? So I'm in this fitness center, kind of like a workout room in my neighborhood in Orlando.

And it's Saturday afternoon and I'm doing my kind of my running workout and I'm probably 20, 25 minutes in. I'm about halfway done and I am just full on. It's going well. I feel good.

Got a good sweat going. You know, you feel like you're being healthy and there's a woman on the treadmill next to me. We haven't spoken because you don't talk in fitness areas. So I'm just running along and then all of a sudden the cleaning crew comes in and they go, sorry, it's time to clean. We have to shut the place down.

[ 19 : 17 ] It's one o'clock in the afternoon who closes a fitness center in the middle of the day. And so of course this nice lady next to me dutifully turns her machine off and begins to gather her thing.

And I, not me, not David Swanson, I just react. I go, no, no, no, no, no, that's ridiculous. I'm not in the middle of my workout. You can't stop me now. Just give me 20 minutes.

Go over there, give me 20 minutes. This is nuts. And so the poor cleaning guy just, you know, tautles off and the woman on the treadmill gives me this look like you're such a rude man. And I was being very rude.

And so God had a conversation with me on the treadmill for 10 minutes during which he pointed out the fact that I was being very selfish, not considering the fact that the cleaning crew had a job to do. And it was about more than just whether I got my workout in.

So I then had to go to the cleaning crew and apologize because I acted hastily and rashly. It never leads to anywhere good. Slow your speech down.

[ 20 : 21 ] Don't send the email until tomorrow. Don't fire off the text at 1.30 in the morning. They generally don't work out or end well, and we use words that don't honor the Lord.

So he says, slow it down. Listen more. Then he gets to the content. He starts talking about, okay, once you've mastered those things, what are you going to say? And Solomon starts to address in particular the vowels that we make or the promises.

Verse 4, when you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it for he has no pleasure and fools. Pay what you vow. It's better that you should not vow than vow and not pay.

Let not your mouth lead you into sin. So he's talking about the vows that people would make when they would go to the temple. They would say, God, I'm going to do this. And then sometimes they wouldn't. He said to be better not to promise something than to promise it and not deliver it.

You see, God is a covenant God. God is a vow making God. Therefore, he wants his people to be a reflection of who he is.

[ 21 : 27 ] In that covenant God, he says, I'm going to be your God and you're going to be my people. And I'm going to demonstrate to you my fidelity. So you too should be reflecting that fidelity to the world that you actually do what you say.

That you keep your promises. In other words, we have to grow up in our language and our use of words. Remember Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 said, when I was a child, I talked like a child.

I fought like a child. I reasoned like a child. But when I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. My old youth pastor in Dallas used to say, you can tell the character of a man by the way in which he keeps the promises he makes in casual conversation.

So if you say you're going to be there at nine, be there at nine. If you say we should have lunch, don't just let that fall into the air. The next thing you do when you get back to your offices, you contact that person and you make a plan to have lunch.

If you say you're going to manage the project, manage the project. Let your yes be yes as Jesus reminds us. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. In other words, have responsibility and integrity in your language and your speech because that's who God is.

[ 22 : 51 ] And as those created in his image, our speech should reflect that same character and that same responsibility. Be careful about the vows that you make.

I'm going to close there. I'm going to read you one of my favorite pieces of prose to close. But just remember that if you feel like, you know, I could do better in how I use my words, then the first thing that you should focus on, what are my words to God?

And as his words begin to be shaped and formed in you, then your words to others will also naturally be shaped and formed. Such that you become the living presence of his revealed word in the world.

Norman McClain wrote a great book that became a movie called A River Runs Through It. It's about a Presbyterian minister and his two sons. You're going to understand why I love the movie. But at the end of it, he writes, this is the words of the oldest son, Paul.

He says, of course, now I am too old to be much of a fisherman. And now, of course, I usually fish the big waters alone. But then in the arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise.

[ 24 : 18 ] The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops, under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

I do believe that ultimately all things merge into one. They merge into the unity of God's redemptive plan and purpose for the world when we will all be gathered around his throne.

And until that time, it's our use of language. Some of the words will be ours. Some of the words will be yours.

What will they be? And will they reflect the true nature of God as Word made flesh for our salvation?

Let us pray together. Lord God, in the course of our day, we all use many words, but we also confess that sometimes those words are used quickly and rashly, sometimes in anger without much thought.

[ 25 : 36 ] Lord, we confess that we have used words that have wounded, that have caused pain. And Lord, I pray that by the movement of your Spirit as we reflect on Solomon's word that we would recognize that as your Word comes to take up residence within us, as Jesus, who is the Word made flesh, comes to live in our hearts, Lord, may we become your Word expressed in the world.

May we become those who speak language that honors, glorifies you, and draws people unto yourself.

So teach us, oh God, show us your truth. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.