

Deceit

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Date: 28 August 2022

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- [0 : 00] Each week, the summer, we've been looking at the biggest challenges that we face as human beings that Proverbs especially talks about.
- And so we've looked so far at pride, envy, anger, lust, unbelief, sloth, greed, and today we end this series by looking at deceit.
- Why the reason we're doing this series is because the gospel, we believe, changes all of who we are. It changes first our relationship with God Himself, but then it turns around and makes a claim on our lives and changes us from the inside out.
- We become new selves, new people, and learning to put away the sins that we've been looking at through Proverbs is part of that life. And the word, there's a word for the Bible for this.
- When Christians grow and learn to make decisions that aren't full of pride and envy and anger and lust and sloth and greed and lust and deceit and all of it, and that's the word wisdom.
- [1 : 01] And Proverbs is the book of wisdom and James is the New Testament book of wisdom. And so we've been looking at, and here we are at the last week, you've probably gathered by now that we've been doing a sort of seven deadly sins type of thing, although there is not actually, the classic seven deadly sins aren't actually printed anywhere in the Bible.
- But the one place where there is a list of seven deadly sins, we read it, Proverbs 6, seven things it says that the Lord hates, haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, devising wicked plans, feet that run to evil, false witness who breathes out lies and one who says discord among brothers.
- Now you could take those seven and whittle them down to five, and that would be pride, anger, violence, quarreling.
- And then the fifth comes up in the twice repeated lying tongue and false witness that breathes lies. And so in the seven things that the Lord hates, two times we get lying tongue and false witness that lies.
- And so there's a huge emphasis in these lists on the problem of speech and the sins of speech. And the word in Proverbs to describe the sins of speech is the word deceit.
- [2 : 25] It's the shorthand for sins that come from the mouth. And actually the word deceit in Hebrew is a word that really refers to not the speech itself, but the heart that underlies sinful speech.
- So deceit in other words is the condition of the heart that produces the sins of speech, which are lying, flattery, boasting and all sorts of other things. So why does it repeat it twice?
- Proverbs 6, why does it say that God hates both lies and false witness that breathes out lies? Well, it's talking there about the judicial setting, bearing false witness, which is courtroom lying, and then breathing lies in normal life.

So that God, when you're in the courtroom or you're in normal life, there's two ways to lie and God hates both of them and both of them come from the heart of deceit. All right, so let's think together this morning about the power of deceit, the origin of speech, and the wise tongue.

So first, the power of speech. Oh, sorry, the power of deceit. We read from Proverbs 12, 17, and it says this, that speaking rash words is like a sword thrust, a dagger wound.

[3 : 46] It's a mortal blow to people. And that means that Proverbs consistently gives the metaphor that harsh words, words of sinful words are like the sword that kills.

And that words that are kind and encouraging and full of love are words that heal, they bring life, they're like medicine. And so that's a metaphor that runs all throughout Scripture, that there's words that bring death and there are words that bring life.

And the main idea in Proverbs is that deceitful speech, speech that comes from a deceitful heart, it can wound to the point of death and it can also bring life and heal.

It's like a medicine. So we all know this pretty intuitively, I think. If you're in the courtroom and you breathe out lies, what God talks about here in this text.

And imagine, just imagine, you don't have to imagine because you've seen it happen many times. There's corruption in the judicial system.

[4 : 51] And the guilty man walks free because of lying. And the innocent man gets put in prison for life because of lying.

And Proverbs comes and says, remember it's written to young men. Proverbs comes and says, young men, but of course it's for all of us, young men and everybody else, never lie, never lie.

Because little lies snowball into deep patterns of deceit where all of a sudden your speech is out of control and you can't stop to the point where deep injustices are born from it.

Like an innocent man going to prison for life. And Proverbs is saying those sorts of things are actually the product of little lies becoming big lies.

That they're the product of a deceitful heart giving in to deceit all the time and it gets bigger and bigger. And so the point is that speech is powerful. That deceit has an immense amount of power to kill, but that words of life have an immense amount of power to bring life.

[5 : 58] Now there's a New Testament equivalent where I think James, the New Testament Proverbs, is actually taking the book of Proverbs and reading it and just writing out his own thoughts inspired by the Holy Spirit for what he reads about in the book of Proverbs.

So James 3 we read, our New Testament reading is the famous section on this. James gives us three metaphors to think about to understand the power of speech. It's always lovely when the Bible gives the preacher the metaphor, the illustration so that we don't have to think of any.

And here are three great illustrations for the power of the tongue. He says in verses 3-5, the tongue is small, but it can do really great things. Number one, it's like the rudder of a ship.

So you think about a huge ocean liner out in the Firth of Forth. And the rudders by proportion are tiny compared to the ship, but yet they can turn the thing.

They can turn the giant vessel. And so the mouth can control you. It can actually control your heart the way you speak. Secondly, he gives us that the mouth, the power of speech is like the little metal bit that we put in the mouth of the horse.

[7 : 08] And it's this big, but when it goes in the horse's mouth you can turn a giant horse of 20 hands. But the most important illustration he gives us is the last one, which is he talks about the tongue being like a campfire.

He says that the tongue has the power of just a little spark, a flint going off in the woods. We went camping two weeks ago, the family first family camping outing ever.

And I bought a little flat pack campfire that is really nice. It folds out and you can put charcoal in it. You can burn wood in it.

And so we did that. And of course, if you've all had an experience like this where you're there, you're building a campfire. And you know that while that thing is running, especially in some type of public property, you are vigilant.

You don't leave it for very long. You're nervous about the brush on the ground all around it. You come back, you clear the area. You don't want dead leaves and things like that all around it.

[8 : 10] Because a campfire can become a forest fire very quickly. And a forest fire can become a city fire. And a city fire can become a national fire. And it can burn all the way from top to bottom.

And that's what James says. James says that the tongue has the power of a little spark. And you know, when a campfire is burning in the area it's supposed to burn in, it is heat in the midst of Scottish cold.

And it is the source for food that you really need. It's so many good things when it's where it's supposed to be and doing what it's supposed to do.

But as soon as it hits the forest, it tears down the whole nation. And that's the power of speech. For were, did you know, did you know that your words have the power to minister death and life to human beings?

And all of this is coming in James 3 from Proverbs 18:21 where we get that powerful one line, death and life are in the power of the tongue.

[9 : 16] Did you know that you have that power? And so the question today that confronts every single human being. And all of us here is how do you minister to other human beings with your speech?

Do you minister regularly death or life? How are you using this great instrument that God has given us? And oh boy, Jesus speaks up about this in the Gospels.

Jesus very famously in Matthew 12:36, he comes and puts a bow on it. And this is what he says, I tell you on the day of judgment, people will give an account for every careless word that they've ever spoken.

For by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned. Oh boy, oh careless speaker, are you like me?

What are we to do with ourselves in the midst of a text like that? Secondly, the origin of speech.

[10 : 21] We've already seen very clearly from Proverbs and James that our words are immensely powerful. But there's a question underneath that which is why are words so powerful?

What is it that gives words such gravity? How is it that it's true that our words can be ministers of death and life at the same time? And I'll add that at this in James chapter 3 verse 9.

James says, with our mouth we bless God one day and then the next day we curse people. And it says, who are made in the image of God?

And so James is immediately telling us that he's reading a passage as he writes that. What passage is it? He's reading the first page of the Bible. Genesis chapter 1.

He says, with our mouths we curse people who are made in the image of God. And so he's taking us back to the very beginning of human history, to the very beginning of history period, to Genesis chapter 1 and in verse 26 to 28 we're told in Genesis 1, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God.

[11 : 27] And you see what he's doing? You see what he's doing? He's saying, he's thinking about what makes us the image of God. And what is it that makes us the image of God? And what does it mean to be the image of God?

And in Genesis 1.1 the very first thing we see is God creating the world in what way? Well, the very first thing God does is he opens his mouth. He speaks.

God speaks the world into existence. His word goes forth and from nothing there becomes something. And so that means that God is the speaking God.

He is divine communication. He speaks from the very beginning of history. And so when you ask the question, well, what does it mean for me to be made in the image of God?

One of the first things you have to say if you're reading Genesis 1 is, well, if God is the great divine speaker, the communicator, the one who speaks, then at least the image of God must mean that I'm distinguished from the animal kingdom by my speech, that God has given humanity a gift and that is to be like God and being able to speak words.

[12 : 37] That's one of the things that it means to be in the image of God. And so what is in the image of God? It's at least that we're human speakers, like the divine speaker. And that simply means this, that this is what we can say.

We can say that that means we are made to image God in the way that we speak. In some sense, you are being like God every time you speak words to people that give them life.

And you are at the same time being less than the image of God every time you speak words to human beings that bring death to their lives. Now there's a great illustration of this that comes along with Proverbs in the Bible.

In the Old Testament, the way the Old Testament was framed and formed in the time of Jesus, known as the Tanakh. It has three parts. It's just an Old Hebrew word for the Old Testament.

And in it, there's the writings. The writings are books like Psalms and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, all the songs that we sing from the Old Testament. But the writings also included four other books.

[13 : 45] And those four other books were meant to be illustrations of the wisdom, the life of wisdom. And so you've got the Psalms and you've got Proverbs and you've got Ecclesiastes giving you, hey, this is what a wise person looks like.

This is how a wise person worships. But then there were four books that came with that right after that were meant to illustrate the wise life. Two male, two female illustrations.

Job and Daniel, Ruth and Esther. So when you're reading the Old Testament and you say, well, what does a life well lived according to Proverbs look like? If you're a woman, read Ruth and Esther.

If you're a man, read Job and Daniel. That was the point. It was the illustrative of true wisdom. But in each of those books, there's also an anti-wisdom character.

What does it look like to be the opposite of wisdom? And Daniel is the great example. I've mentioned this, I think, three times in the past four months, but we'll do it again. It's in the Bible we can say it as much as we want.

[14 : 42] Daniel chapter four, Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar is the great figure of anti-wisdom, of what it looks like to be an evil speaker, according to the book of Proverbs and Daniel.

So Nebuchadnezzar and the great king of the world in chapter four of Daniel, he comes out onto his balcony and he says, is this not Babylon the great which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my own power and for the glory of my own majesty?

And the text tells us this, while the words came out of his mouth, he was driven away from humankind to dwell with the beasts, to eat grass like the cattle, to grow hair like a bird, to grow nails as long as bird claws.

And in James three seven, I think, what is James doing? James three seven, James says this, we contain all the beast of the earth except for one beast and that's the tongue.

And I think he's got, I think he's thinking about Nebuchadnezzar. You see, as soon as Nebuchadnezzar speaks the words of divine attributed selfish ambition, like he's his own God, he speaks the words of arrogance and pride.

[15 : 53] God sends him into the field to live like a beast. Why? Because to be in the image of God is to be a speaker that speaks words of life.

And when we speak words of death, sinful speech, just deceitful speech, you see what it's saying? It's saying that deceitful speech, if I can get that out. Sinful speech, it dehumanizes.

It desecrates the image of God. It makes us beast like, it makes us more like a beast than like a human. And Nebuchadnezzar is the prime example of that. It sends us out into the wilderness to be less than the image of God.

And so we say sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can never hurt us. And the exact opposite is the reality.

Words kill. They make us beastly when they're full of deceit and evil. And so when we speak sinful words, it not only dehumanizes us, it desecrates the image of God in us, but it also is intended to desecrate the image of God in others.

[16 : 58] And so here's an example. You turn to your friend to talk about your other friend and you say things that might be accurate but are meant to bring them down.

We call it gossip. And what are you doing in that? You're trying to say, I want them to be cut down a level. I want them to be seen as less than the image of God than I am.

And that's exactly the character of deceitful and sinful speech. We were made to speak words that give life. And when we speak words that bring death, we dehumanize.

We desecrate the image of God. Now, back to Matthew 12, 36. We speakers of careless words. If today you have ever spoken a careless word, a word that has brought death not life at all, Matthew 12, 36 says that we will be judged for every sinful word that we've ever spoken.

Oh boy. What are we to do? And if you're like me, I'm a speaker of careless words.

[18 : 09] What are we to do? And John's gospel opens, page one, connecting to Genesis one.

And the very first thing that we learn in the gospel of John is that into the midst of sinful humanity, people full of broken speech, deceitful speech, the word, the very speech of God himself became flesh.

And you see, there's a reason that connecting to Genesis chapter one, John opens his gospel by saying, do you understand that God become man is actually the very speech of God that has gone forward into the world?

That when you see Jesus Christ, you are seeing the divine communication at the center of all of history that he is, he is the word of God that's going forth into the middle of human history.

And that means that Jesus, John wants you to say, John wants you to know Jesus Christ must be an instrument of life. He is the very communication of God.

[19 : 15] And every time God speaks, God makes something from nothing. He breathes life into reality. That means Jesus Christ must be a life breather. He must be life giving.

And then we have to ask the question, well, how does he do it? How does the word himself, the speech himself, the word of God? Give life. And do you remember Isaiah 53?

We can sum it up with Isaiah 53, the great prophecy. It's said that in his life, the Messiah, he would be so disfigured by suffering that he would look like a beast to our eyes.

It says that he would be like one of the animals, like a sheep led to the slaughter, that he would be crushed. That he would be ultimately dehumanized.

He would be treated like a beast because of our sinful speech. That our beastly tongues turned him into that. That he, you see, you see what the cross of Jesus Christ says to you?

[20 : 20] That the word of God, the one who created the world, the one who can do nothing but create life, he chose to go to death. He chose to go to death for our sinful speech.

Speech himself, speech incarnate at the cross, the word of God himself heard nothing but divine silence. His father silenced himself, forsook him because of what our tongues do and say.

Because of what our, you see what you see at the cross, this is what the tongue costs, our sinful speech. And at the same time, this is the extent of God's love for people who have beastly tongues.

And so today, if you have ever spoken a careless word, you know, one word that has hurt, one word that has crushed, one word that has brought death, maybe there's some of you in here that have done that less recent than yesterday.

For any of you, for all of us, what do you do with Matthew 12, 36? The first thing you do is Jesus Christ says, do nothing.

[21 : 28] Receive, receive the speech of God at the cross to you, which is that the speech of God himself, the word, died in love for you so that your sinful speech might be forgiven.

You know, we could ask the question, James, to go to the last point, James says that our words have the power to set hellfire. He uses the word, Gehenna, from the Gospels that our tongues can even set a hellfire.

Has your tongue ever set a hellfire? And if you receive Christ today, that means yes, your tongue set the sacrificial fires of hell that consumed him.

And he walked through it in victory so that you might not be judged by them. So there's forgiveness for everything we've ever said in Jesus Christ today. Now lastly, let's close with this then, how then should we live the wise tongue?

Very briefly, there's a matrix in the Bible for growing and the way we speak. And the matrix is very consistent from the old to the New Testament. It's a framework that you see it in Ephesians 4, Ephesians 4, 15 and 25, 1 John 1, John 14 to 17.

[22 : 42] And even in James 3, 14 to 17, we didn't quite read that far. The matrix is this, that wise speech, speech that looks like a heart affected by Jesus is speech that always puts together truth and love.

Never one without the other. Truth and love must always be together if there is to be righteous and wise speech. And so in James 3, verses 13 and 14, it says that truth must be accompanied by righteous motivation, love.

Let me explain this in a couple minutes. Truth is not enough. True and accurate speech is not enough. It's not enough to speak in the light of Christ by just telling the truth.

And it's not enough to just be truth tellers like you're standing in a judicial courtroom swearing and saying, well, I'm going to tell it exactly as I remember it, like a video camera, an iPhone camera, re-spouting everything that you've seen.

That's not the matrix. The matrix is more than that. And you know this because I can ask you one simple question. Have you ever spoken the truth, the accurate reality in the wrong way at the wrong time?

[24 : 00] You know, husbands and wives, have you ever spoken accurately to your spouse at the wrong time and in the wrong way? Friends, have you ever done that?

And of course you have. And you know what it costs. It costs 24 hours of struggle, perhaps, or maybe less, maybe more. And all of us have done that.

And we know in that moment that righteous speech is not just accuracy. And James comes and says, truth with improper motivation is evil, is wrong.

And so we can ask the questions that are super important. And that's when are we speaking? To whom are we speaking? But ultimately, why are we saying what we're saying? And he calls out most importantly, is there selfish ambition, selfishness, self-centeredness in any of your speech?

There's a striking example in Proverbs 27.6, wounds from a friend are faithful, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

[25 : 05] Wounds from a friend are faithful, but an enemy multiplies kisses. See what that's saying? When a friend speaks the truth to you in love, it's like a wound that cuts you in order that you might heal, that you might grow.

But the kisses of an enemy, an enemy comes to you. This is your enemy, the person who's constantly coming to you and kissing you on the cheek, not literally, but in words of flattery.

Somebody saying the best things about you all the time, you see what it's saying? It's saying that that is love without any truth, that you're really not that great. That's flattery.

You're really not that great. An enemy treats you as if you're great all the time, but that's not really you. And that means that we need both neither flattery nor spite.

Spite is when there's all truth, no love. You have all truth, no love, that breaks a relationship. You have all love, no truth, and that's not truthful. It's flying, it's deceit.

[26 : 05] Neither flattery nor spite. It's saying that truth, true speech is to speak accurately in love always for the other person's good, motivated by righteousness, not selfishness, not selfish ambition.

That's the fire that ministers life, not death. Now let me close with three comments, three comments, very fast. One, remember this for developing wise speech.

Your words can be forgiven. Jesus Christ died so that you might know that. Your words can be forgiven. And so that means that we've got to all go forth from this place willing to forgive people for what they've said to us.

The Christian life cannot be one of harboring sinful speech that we've received, that we've been the victims of. Because Jesus Christ has died for our sinful speech, we've got to be willing to forgive sinful speech, to not let it fester in our hearts.

Number one, number two, at the same time, we've got to go forward from here being deadly serious about the power of speech. James Webster, James Webster, not James John Webster.

[27 : 19] I think James Webster was the Webster dictionary founder, John Webster. John Webster was a great theologian at St. Andrews who passed away not long ago that many of you actually were aware of the new.

John Webster has a great essay on this topic and this is what he says. He says, he says, words are very serious and this is why. What is said may not be unsaid.

Speech sets up meaning in this world that cannot be retracted. It can be recanted, it can be withdrawn, it can be renounced, but it cannot be unsaid. Because that which has been said is irreversible.

If I am called a fool by someone, I am now the person who has once been called a fool. The person who called me a fool is now that person who once called me a fool. The world that we live in is now a world where I was once called a fool and there is no taking that back.

Your words can be forgiven and so forgive words and words are deadly serious. Even though words can be forgiven, yes, eternal life.

[28 : 22] At the same time, there is lifelong consequences sometimes for the things we say. So we've got to go forward with the dead seriousness about pursuing righteous words.

Then finally, I don't know if you caught this, there's a paradox lastly about speech throughout the Bible. The paradox is this.

Jesus says, out of the heart the mouth speaks. Then the Bible comes and says, and stop lying. Don't flatter.

Out of the heart, in other words, you cannot help but speak the condition of your heart. And yet to fight the condition of your heart, stop speaking poorly.

And you see that paradox? And what it's saying, it says it in Proverbs that out of a deceitful heart pours forth deceit. James, Jesus.

[29 : 14] But what it's talking about there is the plasticity of the heart. The fact that the heart, the soul can change, but it's difficult to change it.

And so how do you change on this? If you say today, I know, I'm not going to say it out loud, but I know I'm a person who struggles a lying. What is the sinful speech pattern that you struggle with?

This is the diagnostic question. What is it? Is it flattery? Is it little lies? Is it big lies? Is it gossip? Is it a prayer in your life that you struggle in your speech?

The Bible says it comes from the heart. And so on the one hand, you can't do anything about it. On the other hand, do something about it. And you see the answer, number one, the Holy Spirit by way of Jesus Christ changes you.

Number two, the plasticity of the heart saying, how do you seek to change your heart condition? What Paul calls the corruption of the flesh.

[30 : 12] And here's how fight to not speak those ways anymore. And then that actually changes the heart over time. That the more you lie, the more you become a liar.

And the less you lie, the less you do. It changes the heart that that's actually part of the path of sanctification. Walking and step with the spirit is to consciously say, I'm going to put this away.

I'm going to fight this. I'm going to be aware of it. I don't want to do it any longer. I want to change. So we've got today then to bathe in the counter habits of sinful speech.

And here's the greatest counter habit of sinful speech as we close with the last word. Bathe in the great speaker himself.

Meditate upon the word. Hear his speech. Swim in the river of his words. It is the word that changes you from the inside out.

[31 : 06] And so if you want to the great counter habit, come underneath the word himself, Jesus Christ, bathe in the word that he's spoken. And you will see the habits of sanctification begin to change you.

Let's pray now and ask for that. Father, we ask that you would change the way we speak. And we come now. I do ask, Lord, that you would give us hearts of repentance for our sinful speech and give us hearts of change and renewal for all the patterns that make us beastly.

We give thanks for the gospel today. There's good news. We know we confess before you. Thank you, Jesus, for what you've done for us that our speech might not judge us forever.

So change us, O Lord, we ask in Christ's name. Amen.