

The Tongue of the Wise

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While the servant of Christ is challenged to devote his entire body to God's service (Rom. 12:1), there is no part of his body more consistently emphasized in Scripture than the speaking part (tongue, mouth, lips). Much of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, numerous statements from the Lord, Paul, and Peter, as well as most of a James 3 all teach about the tongue. Each of us has a world of potential in this small member, either for good or evil. How blessed we are that God has defined for us the wise and proper use of the tongue, as well as the foolish and sinful! We will do well to consider the traits of the tongue of the wise.

The tongue of the wise is a **controlled** tongue. "In the multitude of words there wanteth not transgression; But he that refraineth his lips doeth wisely" (Pro. 10: 19). There are some thoughts that should not be thought, but there are many more thoughts that should not be spoken. It is folly to speak carelessly, hastily, and rashly (Pro. 12:18a). Those who loudly boast, "I say what I think!" do not exercise wisdom, neither do they attract many friends. Further, this means that the wise person is not a loud-mouthed know-it-all who is compelled to talk at the expense of good manners, interrupting and rudely dominating every conversation. It is the fool that multiplies words. (Ecc. 10:14.) The wise learns the art of listening.

The tongue of the wise is a **health-giving** tongue. "The tongue of the wise is health." (Pro. 12:18b.) The wise do not use their tongues to tear down, but to edify, not to destroy, but to build, not to weaken, but to strengthen, not to hurt, but to help. The wise tongue does not spread the pestilence of gloom, murmuring, complaining, backbiting, hypercriticism, and bellyaching. Because it is a health-giving tongue, it is a pure tongue: "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but such as is good for edifying..." (Eph. 4:29). As there is life and health in the wise tongue, there is danger and destruction in the tongue of the fool: "The mouth of the foolish is a present destruction" (Pro. 10:14b).

The tongue of the wise is an **informing** tongue, "The tongue of the wise uttereth knowledge aright," (Pro. 15:2a.) The wise person does not hoard knowledges but utters it, shares it, disperses it. The wise are not only interested in speaking knowledge, but in uttering it. It is fools who deal in gossip, rumor, inuendo, unfounded information; the wise are concerned only with correct, true, and dependable words. There is no greater display of wisdom than to

use the tongue to teach or preach the greatest information of all – that Christ died for us and through our obedience to Him we can be redeemed from sin. Indeed, “The lips of the wise disperse knowledge” (Pro. 15:7a).

The tongue of the wise is a **gracious** tongue. "The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious." (Ecc. 10:12a.) Not only are such words pleasant to hear, but they also draw favorable attention to their speaker. Gracious words are well-spoken, convincing and persuasive words – the very kind our Lord spoke: "And all bear him witness and wondered at the words of grace which proceeded out of his mouth" (Luke 4:22). As the Lord's servants, interested in persuading others to follow Him, we need to speak gracious words: “Let your speech be always with grace” (Sol. 4:6).

The tongue of the wise is a **goad** tongue. “The words of the wise are as goads.” (Ecc. 12:11.) A goad was a sharpened pole used to prod the hind legs of the ox as it pulled the cart or the plow. By its use, the driver kept the animal moving and kept it from straying. Wise words serve the same purpose for us. They rouse us to noble, useful, right action. They provoke and promote thought and reflection. They restrain us from error and false ways, and, if heeded, will bring us back to the right way when we stray. Like the goad, wise words are sometimes painful but their hurt and sting is for our good. Jesus often spoke such words, even to his apostles (“...O thou of little faith...” (Mat. 14:31). Paul knew he was speaking goading, but necessary, words of wisdom when he wrote to the Galatians: “So then am I become your enemy, by telling you the truth?” (Gal. 4:16). The Lord's servants must never hesitate to speak words of Truth and wisdom on the excuse that they, like the goad, will be hurtful.

The tongue of the wise is a **peaceable** tongue. “A fool's lips enter into contention and his mouth calleth for stripes.” (Prov. 18:6). There is no delight in the wise person in words of teasing, taunting, quarrelling, and fussing. All strife that comes to blows is first provoked by foolish and contentious words. We will do well to review some warnings from God's word:

- “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Mat. 5:9).
- “Let none of you suffer as a . . . meddler in other men’s matters” (1 Pet. 4:15) .
- “Foolish and ignorant questionings refuse, knowing that they gender strifes” (2 Tim. 2:23).

The Lord's servant must never compromise truth to speak peaceable words, but neither will he lightly speak words that stir up strife.

The tongue of the wise is a **truthful** tongue. "Better is the poor that walketh in his integrity than he that is perverse in his lips and is a fool" (Pro. 19:1). Solomon is here speaking of a man who has turned aside from and corrupted the Truth. Not all fools are liars, but all liars are fools. Sooner or later the liar is self-contradictory because he cannot remember which lie he told to whom. "O what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive." Liars are fools because they advertise their family heritage: the devil is a liar and the father of liars. (John 8:44.) The liar is a fool because his end is certainly foretold – eternal doom in the lake of fire. (Rev. 21:8.) The wise tongue will be equally concerned with speaking only words that are Scriptural Truth and with avoiding all erroneous ways. Only a fool would argue that doctrinal Truth is of no concern to Christ, of no consequence to us, or that it is undiscoverable. It is only by abiding in Christ's Word of Truth that we are true disciples and that we find spiritual freedom. (John 8:31-32.) Servants of Christ have a Scriptural mandate to "speak the truth in love." (Eph. 4:15.) As the church, we are the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). The truth-speaker must sometimes suffer for his true words, but wisdom is on the side of Truth, regardless.

No more fitting words can be found to conclude these thoughts on the wise use of the tongue than the disturbing warning from our Lord:

And I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of Judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified and by thy words thou shalt be condemned (Mat. 12:36-37).

[**Note:** This article is adapted from a radio script I wrote for the Light of Life program on KPAR radio, which aired on May 1, 1980. This daily program was presented by the Granbury Church of Christ, Granbury, TX.

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