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MANAGING SPEECH

Proverbs Series

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, I'm just reflecting in my own heart about Ezekiel 36:26 which talks about you giving us *a new heart*; changing a *heart of stone* to a *heart of flesh*. It's a miracle when that takes place. Hearing this story is an amazing one and I thank you for this man who at his age has committed himself to you. I pray that you would continue to make that heart of his soft. But it's not only his heart we pray for. We pray for our own hearts, that we recognize our own weakness, we see our own sins, we see our own hardness of heart and the tendencies we have to do the things that are not the best and to live lives that are not the best. So Lord, we ask that you would make our hearts soft. Give us new hearts. We want to love you. We want to love you today. We want to serve you today. In Jesus' name, amen.

Turn your Bibles with me to the book of Proverbs. Over the last several weeks in the book of Proverbs (and if you haven't been with us during the study I'd go back and listen to it because all of the studies we've done up to now will prepare you for what we're going to talk about today) we learned about all the different things behind the scenes in chapters 1-9, about what makes wisdom works, what wisdom is, and what the fear of the Lord is. All of those things are helpful so that now when we take a topical study in the book of Proverbs (today we're going to look at speech) when we look at that speech and we start understanding what it means, we are drawing on some of the things we've already learned about how what proverbs tie into wisdom and what they are together.

I've given you a handout and today in that handout I want you to follow along there. The handout is designed to take a topical study through the book of Proverbs on this one subject, the subject of speech, and give you the tools that you will need in order to move your speech in a better place.

Notice at the top it says – "I want to manage my speech better." The idea here is that I'm going to make some assumptions. I'm going to make some assumptions, number one, that you recognize that your speech is important. I think that's a safe assumption to do here. I'm not going to go into the passages in Proverbs that say speech is important. I'm going to assume you believe that. I'm also going to assume you want to grow in your speech. I think we can safely assume that because you're here today you want to grow in your spiritual life. So I want to take you to a path here that's going to help you improve your speech.

I think this is important for all of us to do because speech is so much a part of everything we do. We're talking all the time. How we talk and what we say communicates a very important

message about who we are, but it also does something to the other people around us continually. So we need to know and understand that.

I want to draw a connection or a contrast between two kinds of speech just to start out with. One is described in Proverbs 11:9 which says, *With their mouths the godless destroy their neighbors.* Notice how the speech is attached to destruction. The other is the verse that says *the righteous nourish many.* In both cases you've got the mouth of the lips and one is destroying and one is nourishing.

What I want you to do is take the space on the line there and I want you to write a word that describes one of those, a word that might work for you. I could give you words to write there. I could make some suggestions actually, but I want you to think if you're going to improve your speech, what word connects with you on the negative side of something that's bad and the positive side to something that's good.

Maybe you would say toxic versus nutritious. Or maybe you say bad versus good. Maybe you'd say unhelpful versus helpful. Maybe you'd say negative versus positive. Discouraging versus encouraging. I don't know what you'll say, but write something up there that will describe for you what it means for you to move in a positive direction in regards to your speech.

As we look at the book of Proverbs I would suggest that the goal that we see in our speech is found in Proverbs 16:24. *Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.* So if you're writing, you might write on that line "gracious." Being gracious. That's what we want our speech to be characterized by – being gracious.

Notice this – *gracious words are a honeycomb.* They're *sweet* like honey. *Sweet to the soul*, not just the body. *Sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.* That's what gracious words are.

Those are the words I want to have. I want to be a gracious person. A gracious person does more than just talk graciously, but we're going to talk about the gracious words that could help to have today. Think about your words. How could we make them more gracious?

If we're going to make our words more gracious I think we're going to have to define what graciousness is. I would suggest graciousness is made of three parts. If we look at graciousness we see that those three parts are these.

Patience, which has to do with the timing of our words. Knowing when to speak and when not to speak. Bringing the words out at the right time. Timing is very important with our speech.

The second word has to do with gentleness. Gentleness has to do with an approach. If patience has to do with timing, then gentleness has to do with approach, the way that we present those words. Sometimes it's the words themselves, sometimes it's the tone of voice associated with them. But gentleness has to do with approach.

Then self-control is the third word that has to do with constraint. Knowing when to speak and when not to speak, being careful about our tone and so on. Restraint is going to be necessary if they're going to be gracious.

So I want to take those three words and I want to take them now into Proverbs. I want you to see how Proverbs talks about all three of those words so that as you're attempting to be gracious with your words, you can be spurred on by the Proverbs we see in these three areas.

First of all when we look at patience or timing, we have a couple of Proverbs that I'm drawing your attention to. One is Proverbs 15:23 which says, *A person finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!* A timely word. A word that fits in at the right time.

I think that we have tendency sometimes to speak whenever something comes to our minds. If we do that then we've got a problem. Because sometimes the things that come to our minds may be good things, but they're not timely. And so we need to think of the best time to share those things with our child or our mate or at work or with a friend. We choose the right timing.

I think to a great extent we need to pray for the right timing and our speech needs to be thoughtful. We need to be able to consider the timing. Because I think then that, for example, if you're annoyed with someone you can be quick to speak. It can come out very quickly and sometimes that quickness to speak ends up not being very gracious. So the patience that we need involves the timing.

Notice the second verse. It says, *Fools show their annoyance at once, but the prudent overlook an insult.* We have to be ready for the right timing. I would suggest there are some things you may not ever say because the timing just isn't right. But I would also suggest that there are things that you have waiting to share with someone just so when the timing is right you can pass that word on. There has to be some sense of care in when we present the information.

Let's go to the how now, which is the gentleness part. Because the gentleness deals with the way we present this information to someone.

A verse that describes this pretty clearly is in Proverbs 15:1 where it says, *A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

We're going to see that word *stirs up* some more. You've got to remember there is stuff going on in other people's hearts and the words that we use and the way we say them sometimes can stir up negative things in others. So we have to be thinking, "What is our goal?" Is our goal just to speak truth? Because I don't think we just speak truth. I think we speak truth, but we do it in a gentle way because we're not trying to stir up conflict, we're not trying to stir up anger. We're trying to bring about change in that person. We're trying to help them see something different. It's the gentle answer that often diffuses the anger or gets around the roadblocks, so the way our approach is very important.

I would call this the gentleness advantage. In our world of rough and rugged individualism I would suggest that gentleness is often considered a sign of weakness. It means that we're soft or

spineless. But I would say that's not true. I would suggest that the gentleness is really a sign of strength, the ability to have the right timing and then to approach it in the right way means we have the strength under control. We're not just lashing out. We're not just saying something that's unhelpful. We're trying to speak into a heated atmosphere.

That's what it's talking about. Anger. A heated atmosphere. We're bringing calm and peacefulness into that. We're doing it with a soothing effect. That's the approach, the way that we approach it. So Proverbs is giving us some wisdom here in our speech about how. Patience talks about when, gentleness talks about how.

Now let's go to self-control because self-control talks about 'if.' There are times that we don't share at all because self-control involves restraint, being able to slow it down.

The verse that I want to draw your attention to is Proverbs 17:27, which says, *The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even-tempered.*

The words that I'm sharing with you in this particular teaching today come right out of the Bible. So I try to look at the scripture and say, what is the Bible telling us about words and speech and so on? So I took all the scriptures that talk about speech and tried to organize them in a way that would help us move forward in a systematic way.

But notice that in this passage in verse 27 it uses the word *knowledge* and *understanding*, two of our words that we already saw earlier in our book of Proverbs. God speaks into the noise of our lives and moves us to knowledge so then we have this greater knowledge that's helpful for us. Then it moves to understanding and into wisdom. Well here it uses two of those words. *The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even-tempered.*

As I study these words, patience, gentleness, and self-control, and I see them as part of graciousness then I am really excited when I look at the fruit of the Spirit because when I look at the fruit of the Spirit I see that all of those words are present in the fruit of the Spirit. Notice the verse as you see it in Galatians 5. It says, *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, **patience**, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **gentleness**, and **self-control**.* The three words we're talking about.

You know what that tells me? It tells me this. You can have patience, gentleness, and self-control with sheer will power from a human perspective. You can develop those in your life, but the beauty of this is that God empowers us. He gives us supernatural strength inside of us because as the Holy Spirit lives within our heart, He empowers us to do the things we need to do so we can rely on Holy Spirit's strength in order to be more patient and gentle and kind and self-controlled in our lives.

Now that's significant because I think that the most effective way that we're going to improve our graciousness in our speech is to be Holy Spirit-filled and controlled. That takes place every day, every hour of our lives.

If you spend time every day in the word and every day you're praying and you're asking God to control you, then you will see the results of that. You're going to see that God is going to empower you to do what's right. He's going to empower you to move forward in those ways. That's what's exciting about this.

I find that so inspiring to know that God wants those things in me, having His Holy Spirit inside of me with His fruit basket, handing those things out to guard my heart and move forward is great.

I think some of us when we don't have the Holy Spirit at work in our lives because we haven't come before Him, we haven't dedicated ourselves, we haven't bowed the knee before the Holy Spirit today, we haven't had our quiet time today, then we're out of grace. We're just stuck. I think we may as well just hold up a sign that says, "I didn't have my quiet time today. I don't have any more grace. I'm stuck." I would suggest the opposite is true too. When we come before the Lord and we say, "Father, I need your help today. I need the power of your Holy Spirit in my life to do this," that God empowers us with grace to be gracious people.

If we're going to develop graciousness in our speech I think we can get some guidelines. I'm going to form them in the form of rules for you. When I suggest rules, I'm suggesting put these three rules into practice and they're going to help you measure your speech better as you're working with your children or you're working with your parents or you're working in the classroom or you're working with your husband or wife or you're working with your friend. Whoever it is that you're working with and your words are coming out of your mouth, you want to be governed I think by these three rules that I'm going to share with you.

These rules are summaries of several Proverbs, so let me take you through the rules and point you to the proverbs. These are on your handout that you can see on the back side.

This first rule, rule number one is this: If you can't say it nutritiously, don't say it at all. I don't know, maybe you heard that as you were growing up. I certainly heard it from my mom and dad who said something like that. If you can't say something nice, don't say it at all. I find that to be a great rule, but it really comes out of this understanding of what Proverbs is saying to us.

One of the Proverbs I would point to is Proverbs 13:3 which says, *Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin.*

The idea of guarding your lips is a very good picture of having someone standing guard at the doorway. If you go into many businesses today often they will have a guard present that you have to get past in order to get to the office you're trying to get to. That guard's job is to prevent the wrong people from getting in and only to let the right people to get in. Now this is the opposite where we want to have a guard on our mouths and only let the right words out, the nutritious or encouraging things out. That guard is an important one that stands there at our lips.

Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin. So the opposite of guarding your mouth is just to speak rashly. Whatever comes to mind you say it.

And if whatever comes to mind you say it, you end up causing some trouble. Notice it says you *come to ruin*. I would suggest it causes problems, as we'll see in our next verse.

It says the same thing about guarding your mouths. *Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keeps themselves from calamity*. Calamity is problems. How many times have I misspoken or spoken out of turn or said something and then it turns into a calamity of sorts where I'm embarrassed by what I've said. So having the guard on our mouths as we move forward is going to be strategic as we try to help move ourselves in the right direction.

The next verse that describes this idea of the heart and talking about our speech is in Proverbs 15:28 which says, *The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil*.

Gushes has the implication that there is no stopper on there. So when in the Gulf we had the trouble with the pipe, the drilling that went down, and they had the oil gushing, they had tremendous trouble capping that. The oil spewed all over and created all kinds of havoc in the Gulf. I would suggest that the alternative to that is that we weigh our answers. You see that, right? We weigh our answers because as we weigh the answers, we're able to decide which ones we're going to release and which ones we're not. We put a cap on our speech instead of letting it gush forward.

Another proverb in Proverbs 10:19 says, *Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues*. I like this verse because it implies that those who talk a lot get themselves into trouble.

There are some people who dominate conversations unnecessarily. If you find yourself talking more than other people in the conversation, maybe you need to ask yourself if that's the right thing to do because maybe just the sheer volume of your words, although you didn't curse, or although you didn't swear, although you didn't use any foul language, maybe the sheer volume of your words is a sin in itself because it's dominating the conversation and hindering other people from being able to speak. So your volume, your multiplying words puts a damper on the conversation. It's discouraging to other people.

My favorite one in this regard when that rule talks about if you can't say it nutritiously, don't say it all, is this one: *Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues*.

There's some times when I'm in a situation I feel like I am so inadequate to be here, I feel foolish. And sometimes just being quiet people will think you're wise. That's the idea here.

I like that if you can't say it nutritiously don't say it at all. That's rule number one. I think there is much to be said about being quiet, that quietness is a form of ministry to someone in and of itself. Sometimes we need to cap our mouths a little bit before we move on. We don't have to give our opinion. If we're going to correct a child, we don't have to do it in a moment. Sometimes we do it later at a more effective time. If you can't say it nutritiously don't say it at all.

If I'm working with someone who has a problem in this area, they're harsh or they're mean or they're angry, sometimes I say, "The first thing you need to do is pull back and just be quiet. Let it go. Think about what should I have said there? Don't say anything. If you can't say it well, don't say it. It's okay. Your children will be fine if you delay and you don't discipline them for this event. You have another event. If they have a problem, you'll be able to deal with it later. Best deal with yourself. Get it together so that you can move forward."

Rule number two, be especially cautious when emotions are volatile. When emotions start getting into the picture I think that's when our mouths lose their restraint. That's when our mouths start going forward rashly or gushing, as we've seen already in these words. It could be a number of different emotions.

One of them that talks about words is the emotion of anxiety. In Proverbs 12:25 it says, *Anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up.* You know this. When you're feeling anxious about something, you just feel weighed down by that.

I have to confess that when I see someone who's anxious my tendency is often to problem solve for them so that they don't have to feel so anxious. "If you would just do this, you wouldn't have to feel so anxious," or "we could solve your problem this way," or "don't worry about it," or something like that. Sometime those kinds of words come out too quickly and probably provoked by my own discomfort because I don't like to see someone else upset. If I can solve their upset, I can feel better. So I want to solve their problem so that I can feel better about them feeling better.

I would suggest that sometimes when emotions are high it's an opportunity for us to minister to someone else's heart since that's where emotions take place is inside the heart. One of those emotions is anxiety. So we might think about the words that we say that I mentioned here is *a kind word cheers up the heart.*

There are other kinds of emotions that our children experience or we experience too or other people that we're trying to help. One of those has to do with conflict and anger. I like Proverbs 26:21 which says, *As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife.*

If the fire's burning down in the fireplace or you've got the campfire in the woods turning down embers, you can throw some wood on it then the fire will be inspired a little bit more. It will grow.

In the same way when there's tension involved in a relationship, there's conflict and someone starts the conflict and even says something to you that's inflammatory, hurtful, a put-down, sarcasm, mean, what they're doing is they are throwing wood on a fire. The question is, what are you going to do in response? Are you going to be a quarrelsome person by adding to that and throwing more wood on the fire so that now we're back and forth, back and forth, and now we've got this full engaged argument in place? Or are you going to be the kind of person that's

the fire extinguisher on the fire that's able to pull the energy back down to something where we can talk about it more effectively?

Again, I think we're evaluating our words when emotions are high to know are we like the wood that we're throwing on the fire as this passage suggests. Are we kindling strife? Are we bringing peace? The opposite, of course, is being a peacemaker instead of being a troublemaker, so Jesus talks about that, being a peacemaker, in the Sermon on the Mount.

Another time that it talks about this idea of conflict or emotions rising in the book of Proverbs is in Proverbs 16:28. It says, *A perverse person stirs up conflict, and a gossip separates close friends.*

This idea of stirring up conflict is important. If we choose our words carefully, if we have a guard on our mouths then we can be more careful about what comes out and hopefully not be stirring things up.

This is why the motto, I think, to the book of Proverbs is so important that we've chosen – that it's not good enough to be right; we also need to be wise. Some people think that if they're right then it's okay to take the guard off and just let people have it because they're wrong. I think what Proverbs is saying here is that there's a way to be right and wise at the same time. Because there's a lot of people who are right and not wise. They're right and under their banner of being right they're throwing wood on the conflict. They're stirring up that conflict in a way that's unproductive. So when emotions happen and you see them in the environment, be careful because those emotions can draw us into the fray in ways that are not the best.

The third rule, if we're going to develop gracious speech, is to look for ways to encourage others. We ought to be on the lookout for encouraging continually. Looking for ways to encourage others.

Here are several proverbs. Each one of the proverbs I'm going to share with you now gives some kind of a picture which is helpful for me because it helps me identify how I want my words to appear to others.

In this idea here – *A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones.* In the same way the health makes you physically healthy, a good word or good news gives health to the bones. So the words that we use are going to be very important.

Good news. Are we sharing good news? Or are we the ones that like to report all the bad news? It's really easy. Bad news travels fast. "Hear the latest story about this that happened here or this that happened there. Or this about this person. Or did you hear about that person?" That travels pretty fast, but that really weighs a person down. A person who's able to bring the good news to other people brings health to them is what it's saying. It's nutritious; it's encouraging for them.

The next verse, Proverbs 25:25, says this: *Like cold water to a weary soul is good news from a distant land.* Good news from a distant land. Words that are coming, good news when they come

to you, even if they're from a distant land, are like drinking a glass of cold water. An important idea that just brings refreshment.

Think about the emotional environment when you're in a room. If you're in a room at work and people are starting to spout off it just starts to bring the emotional climate down. If you're in the house and someone's starting to talk negatively, it raises the emotional tension and brings the climate down. There are some people who walk inside the room and when they walk in the room it's as if a cloud comes in with them and they just put a damper on the whole environment in the room. We don't want to be that way. We want to be the people who are bringing sunshine into the room. We are the ones who are bringing the cold water, the refreshment that people are so much in need of.

The next one is in Proverbs 15:4. It says, *The soothing tongue (wow, a soothing tongue) is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.* Wow.

There are some times when we get angry with someone and our words come out so quickly it crushes the other person. We do it under the banner "I'm right. They deserve it." Boy, that's dangerous. We crush the spirit of someone else. We need to be careful about that because just crushing someone's spirit because they're wrong is not wise. You might be right, but it's still not wise. *Crushes the spirit.*

The next one – *The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.* So this idea of being a fountain of life.

I try to help parents teach their children how to use their words and we have a curriculum. One of the curriculum that we've written at the National Center for Biblical Parenting is called the Kids Honor Club. When kids ages 3-12 join the Kids Honor Club then they're doing several things to be part of the club.

One of them, chapter 2, is are you a drain or a fountain? Both have to do with water, but if your words are a drain that means they're sucking the energy out of family life. If your words are a fountain then they're adding energy to family life.

I would suggest that's not just an idea or a truth that's good for children ages 3-12. I would say that 57 year olds need that too. I don't want to be a drain in the environment or the atmosphere, the emotional climate. I want to be bringing solutions that are nutritious. Being a fountain of life.

The next one, Proverbs 10:20 says, *The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value.* Choice silver has the idea of valuable. So the tongue of the righteous just brings valuable things. You just want to listen to what he has to say.

Proverbs 15:31 says this: *Whoever heeds life-giving correction will be at home among the wise.*

Now I put this verse in here although it's not talking about giving correction, it's talking about receiving it. The reason I put it in there is for the three words there, *life-giving correction.*

Because we have to correct other people. It's just the reality. We have to tell them about things they're doing wrong. But the way we do it is really important.

So although it's good for us to respond well to life-giving correction, let's turn the verse around and give the life-giving correction too. Correction that has its design not to straighten someone else but to empower them to move and motivate them in the right direction.

Sometimes people correct us in ways that are hurtful and damaging. We don't feel motivated to change, especially since they just told it to us that way. Correction is one of those things we have to be really careful of. We want to look for ways to encourage people even in the midst of correction.

Well, those are a number of verses that talk about speech in the book of Proverbs. I want to share one more idea, one more picture that the book of Proverbs gives because it will help us, I think, to evaluate our speech and to be motivated or inspired to go out of here today thinking of ways that we could be nutritious. For some of us that's going to be some work. For some of us it's going to mean we're going to have to do a lot of work. We're going to have to take this one step at a time.

I want to take a passage that has in it the word 'wife,' but I want to go beyond the wives part. So let's look at the word 'wife' and then let's get over it, okay? It says, *A quarrelsome wife is like the dripping of a leaky roof in a rainstorm.* Okay so that could be true of a wife that is quarrelsome. But let's just take the word 'wife' out and let's put the word 'person' there. Or even can I put 'Scott' there. A quarrelsome Scott. I want to be very careful about how I respond.

This is a picture of what happens when rain is pelting down. But it says *a quarrelsome person is like the dripping of a leaky roof in a rainstorm.* I mean if there's a leak of water coming in your house, you're going, "I have to go do something about it. Get the bucket. I've got to do something in order to deal with this." But sometimes we've got water pelting in on our lives, in our conversations, in our dialogue. We've got a leaky roof, and it's just coming in and ruining the whole dialogue and everything that's happening.

I would suggest that that's part of what takes place in our speech. We need to evaluate are we a leaky roof that's allowing things to come in that are hindering our speech? How are we going to be gracious in our lives? How are we going to develop the ability to plug up the leaks? I would suggest it takes place one shingle at a time. If we're going to develop graciousness in our lives it's going to grow in our hearts one word at a time. A little bit at a time.

You're going to make some mistakes this week in your words and you're going to say, "Whoops. Thanks Lord, for reminding me. That was the wrong thing to say." And we're going to determine that next time we're going to say it differently. We want to season our words with grace so that the graciousness that comes out of us is markedly different than the other people around. That we're nutritious, we're encouraging, we're moving forward.

I just think we need God to do this. I don't think this is something that comes easily in our lives. I think we need the Lord in our lives to do this. We're needy people and because we're needy,

somebody pushes our button in a way that the words start coming out to justify ourselves or defend ourselves or to blame someone else or to put someone else down, to stay in the dialogue because it just has to come out. I think that in order for us to be successful in this area we must call on the Lord and ask Him to lead us. Call on Him to fill us. Call on Him to inspire us and to empower us to do what's right.

[PRAYER] So Lord, we come before you now and ask that you would take this very common but most difficult area of our lives, our speech, and that you would just motivate us a little bit today in that direction, to allow you to be the Lord of our mouths, the Lord of our speech. Remind us, Father, that we need you. That the mistakes that we say in our mouths would be mistakes that would prompt us to humility and to recognize our deep need for you. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.