July 8/9, 2017

Treasure and Tongue

Skillful Living

Proverbs 15:1-33

Pastor Bryan Clark

In the very beginning of the Bible, in Genesis, God puts Adam and Eve in a garden paradise, and there is a tree of life. *Tree of life* is kind of symbolic of life as God intended it to be. But as a result of sin, Adam and Eve are ushered out of the garden, and the text tells us that God put cherubim with a flaming sword to guard the tree of life. It shows up again at the end of the story in the new heaven and the new earth in the book of Revelation—again symbolic that God will one day redeem the world back to experience life as God intended it to be. So the bookends—Genesis and Revelation—but then there's only one other book in the Bible where the tree of life makes an appearance and that is in the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs tells us that every single person in the room this morning has been given a gift that has the power to allow others to experience just a taste of the world as God intended it to be. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 15.

As I mentioned last week, Proverbs is really hard to organize or outline. It just simply isn't written that way, but there are a couple of characteristics of Proverbs that are helpful to make sense of it. One is to understand Proverbs was written to be understood in community. It's not written to be read in an isolated situation, but it's to understand that the choices I make not only affect me but affects us together in community. Proverbs makes a lot more sense if you understand it that way. Second of all, there are topics that are discussed in the Book of Proverbs, but they tend to run in cycles. What I mean by that is: a subject comes up, a proverb says something about it, then it moves on to another topic—another several topics—but cycles back to that original discussion and fills it out a little bit more. Then it goes on to other subjects, cycles back to that topic, and kind of does that all the way through the Book of Proverbs. So if you look at one proverb and say, "That's what Proverbs says about anger," you'd have to understand, "Well that's *one* place where Proverbs talks about anger," but it actually keeps working its way through and says more and more and fills out the discussion by the end of the book, which raises a question: Why is Proverbs written that way? It seems like it would make more sense to put all the anger verses together, all the money verses together, all the tongue verses together, but you have to wrestle with the question, "Why isn't it written that way?" We have a tendency to kind of reduce life down to these simple discussions, which lead to kind of simplistic solutions, but the fact is these areas of our life are not isolated. If I have an anger problem, I probably have a money problem; I probably have a wisdom problem. These are all interrelated, and one affects the other, so that's how Proverbs is written. It almost forces you to keep interacting with multiple subjects to kind of understand how they all relate together. I want to give you an illustration of that in Proverbs 15 by talking about two subjects that fit together—the *tongue* and *treasure*.

So in chapter 15 it talks about treasure and money, which is a very common discussion in the Book of Proverbs. So, for example, in verse 19 it talks about **the way of the lazy,** the *sluggard*. That's a very familiar conversation in the Book of Proverbs, and the sluggard, **the lazy**, would be put in the category of the wicked because **the lazy** disadvantage the community. You also have verse 27:

> **He who profits illicitly troubles his own house.**

It's referring to, for example, a government official or someone with position and power who basically takes bribes, is "on the take" and uses that power and position to advantage himself at the expense of the community. So it's another example of wickedness and what it does to the greater community. Those are samples that lead us to the verse I want to dial in on: Chapter 15, verse 6:

Great wealth is *in* the house of the righteous,
But trouble is in the income of the wicked.

Now, again, there are several things to understand. Maybe the best way to think of it is down through history people have had lots of theories—social, economic theories—as what's the best way to organize ourselves so everyone thrives. So, in the 20th century you had communism, which turned out to be devastating to people. You had various forms of socialism which did not deliver and was not in the interest of the community. You have more of a democracy—a capitalistic society—and we would say that there have been many benefits—things that we can be thankful for. I would never want to diminish all that we have, but you'd have to admit that it has still not created a society where everyone flourishes. There are many among us who have been disadvantaged and continue to be disadvantaged, and that concerns us all. I would suggest to you that none of these theories will ultimately lead to flourishing unless we take seriously the impact of the wicked and the righteous on a community. God does not divide people up as Republicans and Democrats. He does not divide them up as conservatives and liberals. He does not divide them up by various labels or races. He divides people into two categories. There are the *wicked*, and there are the *righteous*. The wicked devastate communities; the righteous cause communities to flourish. It's very helpful to step outside of the common discussions and rethink some of these things according to God's categories.

So defining the righteous in the Book of Proverbs is referred to as the *tzadik*. It's a Hebrew word that refers to someone who is all about the flourishing of the community. It's someone who understands God's vision for *shalom*—what God has always wanted for the world—and is committed to that vision. The *tzadik* will even disadvantage himself or herself in order to advantage the community. It's a high level of commitment to *shalom*.

The wicked are the contrast to that. It's very important to understand when we use the term wicked in the Book of Proverbs, we are not talking about people that kill, steal, and destroy. When we define it that way, most people would say, "That's not me," but the wicked in the Book of Proverbs is referring to those that are selfish, self-centered or greedy. They basically are in it for themselves, and will advantage themselves and, if necessary, disadvantage the community in order to do that. They're in it to win; they're in it to prosper at the expense of the community. Many more people fit into that definition.

So, go back to chapter 11. We covered this earlier in our study of Proverbs, so verse 10:

When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices,
And when the wicked perish, there is joyful shouting.

Again, remembering our definition, this is a consistent message in the Bible. It's very consistent in the Book of Proverbs that when the righteous do well—when they succeed, when they flourish—everyone wins. Because the vision, the passion of the righteous is to want *shalom*, is to want flourishing, is to take the resources and put them back into the community in such a way that everyone *flourishes*. **When the wicked perish,** there is rejoicing because the wicked do great violence to *shalom*. The wicked are selfish and greedy, and they are in it for themselves, and when they prosper, everyone else loses. That's kind of the idea in chapter 11.

That cycles back, then, to a discussion in chapter 15, verse 6:

> **Great wealth...** the word for **wealth** there includes produce (so food) as well as treasure—money, gold, silver, that sort of thing.
> **Great wealth is *in* the house.**
>
> It's actually the storehouse. We would probably use the word warehouse. This is talking about when the righteous flourish—when they do well, when they succeed—they have produce and wealth in their warehouse and that is a good thing. Why is it a good thing? Because their heart and their passion is to turn around and put it into the community so everyone can flourish. The better they do, the better chance everyone will flourish. You say, "But what if the righteous are wildly successful and keep it?" Then they aren't righteous. The righteous by definition are the ones that turn around and pour into the community in order for others to flourish. That's the best-case scenario.
>
> **But trouble is in the income of the wicked.**
>
> This indicates when the wicked succeed and flourish, everyone else loses. They are selfish; they are greedy; they are in it to win. They are in it to stockpile more and more for themselves, so when the wicked succeed, it is to the disadvantage to the community.

This is a very different way of viewing the world, society, and a culture. God does not divide between Republican and Democrat, between right and left, or conservation and liberal. God divides the world between the *righteous* and the *wicked* and in His system, both socially and economically, for there to be true *shalom*, there has to be the prospering of the righteous and the diminishing of the wicked. It's helpful to stop and think about whether your role as a businessman or woman, in the government, as a consumer, as a neighbor, as a part of the community whatever we can do to create an environment where the righteous are wildly successful, it gives us the best chance for everyone to flourish. Whatever we can do to marginalize and minimize the success of the wicked also creates an environment where others can flourish.

Look at what it says then in verse 9:

> **The way of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,**
> **But He loves one who pursues righteousness**.

If that's how God feels about the righteous and about the wicked, then that's how we should feel about the righteous and the wicked. It moves then to another discussion that's related in verse 15:

> **All the days of the afflicted are bad,**
> **But a cheerful heart *has* a continual feast.**
> **Better is a little with the fear of the LORD**
> **Than great treasure and turmoil with it.**
> **Better is a dish of vegetables where love is**
> **Than a fattened ox *served* with hatred.** (Vs. 15-17)

Now that discussion starts with the idea that **all the days of the afflicted are bad.** The **afflicted** are those who are afflicted financially, maybe afflicted with a disease or some other circumstance. The Bible is realistic about the world in which we live. Jesus said, *"The poor will always be among us."* Because there will always be wicked who disadvantage the community to advantage themselves, there will always be those who are disadvantaged and afflicted. The text is not saying that's okay. The text is not saying that's good. It's actually bad. It grieves the heart of God; it should grieve us. The Bible does draw distinction about those who are poor and afflicted because of their own foolish

decisions versus those who are poor and afflicted through no fault of their own. This carries the idea of those who are afflicted because they've been mistreated, disadvantaged through no fault of their own. That is part of the world in which we live but—and this is a really important *but*—it does not have to affect the joy and satisfaction we experience in life. It's what the second part of verse 15 says: **But a cheerful heart *has* a continual feast.**

In other words, this is a consistent message in the Book of Proverbs: my circumstances do not have to define my joy. We make a serious mistake when we think because we've been disadvantaged, because we've been victimized, that my life is going to be unhappy and miserable. The message of the Proverbs would be that your circumstances do not have to define your happiness and your joy and your satisfaction in life. When you understand God's path, when you understand surrender to God, when you understand what Jesus has done for you, when you understand what you have in Christ, when you understand what matters, when you understand the hope of the gospel to a glorious future, even when life is hard and you've been disadvantaged, you have every reason to be joyful, to be cheerful, to be satisfied, to be at peace, to be at rest! You can choose that. The Proverb also talked about:

> **Better is a little with the fear of the LORD**
> **Than great treasure and turmoil with it.**
> **Better is a dish of vegetables where love is**
> **Than a fattened ox *served* with hatred.** (Vs. 16-17)

I actually see this all the time. I see families in our church who have very little. Life has been very hard for them, but they're happy; they're satisfied; they're peaceful; they're at rest. They love each other; they live in peaceful homes; they understand what matters; they serve and pour themselves into the lives of others, and for them life has deep meaning. This compares to others who have so much yet they're so unhappy...so dissatisfied...so restless. Once you understand what it means to be deeply satisfied and at rest, your heart is in a position to affect what comes out of your mouth.

Notice the very next thing discussed in verse 18, right after the **fattened ox *served* with hatred** is: **A hot-tempered man stirs up strife.** If I am unhappy, if I am miserable, if I am dissatisfied, if I think I've been disadvantaged—we talked about this last week—if I choose to go my own way, how dare somebody question that! I become defensive. I become reactive to that. I become incredulous that someone would actually question my path! But the problem is I'm lost in the jungle; I can't find my way out. I'm deeply dissatisfied; my way's not working and that ticks me off. Therefore I'm mad; I'm angry, and my anger comes out everywhere. One of the obvious signs that a culture has drifted from God is it's a culture defined by its anger. We talked about this last week. How do I prevent myself from entering into that and being part of the problem? The answer is: first deal with my own perspective. When I understand what it means to submit to God, when I understand His path, when I understand, regardless of my circumstances I can be content, then I can be at peace; I can be at rest. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul was the model for this. No one in the room would long to have the life of the Apostle Paul. He was consistently beaten; he was thrown in prison. He was disadvantaged; he was mistreated—he had a very, very hard life, yet he consistently said, "I've learned to be content in whatever circumstances I'm in." I've *learned* to be happy. I've *learned* to be joyful in the most difficult moments of life.

So that leads us to the discussion about our tongue—what comes out of our mouths. Chapter 15, verse 1:

A gentle answer turns away wrath,
But a harsh word stirs up anger.

Now, this is not talking about someone who goes into an otherwise peaceful environment and creates conflict. If that's you, you're living at a very high level of foolishness; I mean that's almost off-the-charts foolish. This is talking about a much more complicated situation. This is talking about someone living in an angry culture. The wrath is coming at you. The question is whether or not you have the skill to diffuse it—the skill to deescalate it, the skill to respond in such a way that you actually make a situation where people are responsive to the message of truth. **A gentle answer** carries the idea of both what I say and how I say it. Rather than being reactive to the anger that is coming at me, I turn away wrath; I defuse it. There's a tendency when someone comes at us with anger, we react in kind, and then we excuse it by saying, "I didn't start it." You can say to God, "I didn't start it," and God would say, "but you're a fool because a fool responds with like anger." Someone of wisdom, someone with a high level of skill, has the ability to turn the wrath, to defuse the situation. The second part of verse 1 **...But a harsh word,** that word **harsh** is the Hebrew for an inflammatory word. A fool throws gas on the fire, just adds to the conflict, and makes it worse. **A harsh word stirs up anger.** Verse 2:

The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable,
But the mouth of fools spout folly.

Basically the imagery of the fool is every time the faucet opens, out comes foolishness, and it just creates more conflict. The contrast is: **The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable**. It's the Hebrew *makes it desirable*. Now this is quite a remarkable turn. The word **knowledge** in the Proverbs is a little bit different then what we think of as knowledge. *Knowledge* in the Proverbs is really an understanding of the world as God intended it to be. It's an understanding of *shalom* and *flourishing* and what it takes for that to happen. It's understanding the way that leads to life. So what the Proverb is saying is **The tongue of the wise makes knowledge** *desirable*. So when someone comes at you with anger, rather than reacting to that as a fool and making it worse, I have the skill to defuse the situation and to create a context where someone actually desires to hear more of what I have to say about another path that actually leads to life.

Sometimes the most skillful thing you can do in a given situation is just shut your mouth. This may come as a shock to some of you, but the world does not need to know your opinion on every subject. Standing for Jesus does not mean you have to fix and correct everyone who says something you disagree with. Sometimes you can tell the temperature is such that I think I'll just keep my mouth shut—live to see another day. But if you can respond with a high level of skill, you can actually defuse the situation and move the conversation around to something that could be productive, that you could actually talk about the world as God intended it to be in such a way that that angry person actually wants to hear more of what you have to say. Realize angry people are miserable people. Nobody wants to live that way. They're lost in the jungle; they don't know how to get out. I don't help by reacting. I do help by responding skillfully, and I'll never do that unless there's a quiet peaceful spirit within me. If you have a mouth problem, you have a heart problem. You'll never get it corrected in your mouth until you get it corrected in your heart. There is a direct linkage, which takes us then to verse 4:

A soothing tongue (soothing, healing, encouraging, tongue) **is a tree of life,**
But perversion in it crushes the spirit.

As I said before, the only book of the Bible that mentions the tree of life outside of Genesis and Revelation is the Book of Proverbs. There's virtually no way this phrase is used casually. It is very intentionally used to say this is a way that people can experience just a taste of the world as God intended it to be, which is identifying the great power of the tongue. This is really quite a sobering proverb. Is it really possible in a world filled with so much hate and anger that God has given me a gift, if skillfully used, I can actually give people a little taste of the world as God intended it to be?

The contrast to that is if that powerful gift is *perverted*, if it's twisted, it has the power to **crush the spirit**. That word *crushed* would be used to describe a piece of pottery that is dropped and shattered into pieces. A gift that is so powerful for good is equally powerful for devastation when it is twisted and misused. Here's the sobering reality of it. Some of you this week opened up your mouth and out came foolishness, and it shattered someone else to such a degree that twenty years from now that person will still hear those words and still feel the pain it caused. That is a sobering thought. It is equally true that some of you this week skillfully offered words of healing, words of power, words of life to someone who was struggling and hurting, and it was so powerful in his or her life that twenty years from now that person will still remember those words and still feel the life and the encouragement and the healing that that brought to their soul. There is great power in our words. They are powerful for good or they could be powerful for devastation.

The Proverb then offers verses such as verse 23:

> **A man has joy in an apt answer,**
> **And how delightful is a timely word!**

Verse 28:

> **The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer,**
> **But the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.**

Someone who lacks the skill to live life, the faucet opens and out comes devastation, but people that are wise, people that have skill, understand how to respond even in an angry culture in such a way that it breathes life into someone's soul. Finally, verse 30 kind of brings the two concepts together:

> **Bright eyes gladden the heart;** (what's the result of that?)
> **Good news puts fat on the bones.**

Bright eyes in the Proverbs carries the idea of someone whose eyes are illuminated—someone who gets it...who understands what it means to fear the Lord...who understands what it means to travel His path and submit to Him...someone who understands regardless of my circumstances, I can still be joyful; I can still be happy. I can still be satisfied; I can still be at peace and at rest and that produces within my heart a spirit at rest, which then prepares me to respond skillfully in an angry culture so what comes out of my mouth is good news that **puts fat on the bones.** It's a way of saying that people prosper from the good news that comes out of my mouth.

The truth is every single person in the room this morning has been given a powerful gift by virtue of the fact that you are a person made in the image of God. You have within you the power to speak life into someone who is struggling and hurting and angry, to give them just a taste of the world as God intended it to be, and in so doing, you actually make knowledge of *shalom* and ultimately the gospel something they desire to hear more about. The fool twists that gift and uses words to shatter and devastate lives, simply adding and contributing to the breakdown of *shalom* in our community.

This week every single one of us will demonstrate, without question, whether we should be listed among the fools or whether we should be listed among the wise, simply by what comes out of our mouths. My prayer is that we will demonstrate that we are skillful people.

Our Father, we are reminded today of the sobering responsibility we have to be the bearers of the Good News of Jesus, to make what You have made known to us desirous to those around us that are angry, that are hurt, that are frustrated, that are lost in the jungle. Lord, they come at us with anger. Give us the skill to respond with words of life that those desperate angry people might come to know the life-changing power of Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen.

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2017 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.