

“Babbling Lips”
Proverbs 10:6-14
June 21, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

As we continue looking at the little sins of Proverbs, we come today to one that is called a “babbling fool” in verses 8 and 10. Literally, it is the “fool of lips” or the “lippy fool.” The idea behind this is that the fool will expose his true nature by his words, either their quantity or their quality. The fool will make himself known by the large quantity of his words. He just talks too much. And we know that **“When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent”** (10:19). I have been guilty of this myself many times. When I’m feeling uncertain or insecure, I will sometimes respond by talking too much. Maybe someone has asked a question that I feel I should have an answer for, but I don’t. So I will just start talking and try to bluff my way through it. In doing so, I am being a babbling fool.

The focus of our passage, however, is not so much on the error of too much quantity in one’s words, but rather on the error of too little quality. When quality is lacking in our words, we bring ruin both upon ourselves and upon others. So we read in verse 8 that **“a babbling fool will come to ruin.”** The ruin also spreads to others, as we discover in verse 14: **“the mouth of a fool brings ruin near.”** In a collection of short stories, Walter Wangerin says that we are often like the female spider, who eats those who come near, including other male spiders. He explains that spiders have no stomach and are incapable of digesting food inside themselves. So they inject digestive juices inside their victims and wait on these enzymes to break down all the tissue inside the victim, turning it into a warm soup. “This soup she swills,” says Wangerin, “even as most of us swill souls of one another after having cooked them in various enzymes: guilt, humiliations, subjectives, cruel love—there are a number of fine, acidic mixes. And some among us are so skilled with the hypodermic words that our dear ones continue to sit up and to smile, quite as though they were still alive.”

Words of quality are ones that bring great benefit instead of great harm. I love the powerfully positive image of verse 11. **“The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life.”** The image here is that of a well that has such an abundance of water that the water flows out over the lip of the well, making it a fountain. In our modern suburban lives, we rarely get to experience the feeling of an inadequate supply of water. Several weeks ago, there was a water main break in our neighborhood, and we were out of water for about six hours. Though it was a very short period of time, I can still remember the experience of feeling vulnerable and helpless when such a basic need was not available. In times before water was distributed through water pipes to every home, people

gathered around community wells to get their water. In an arid climate such as that of Israel, the well was even more highly cherished. Just as it was a pleasant, life-giving gathering place for a community, so the speech of the wise gives pleasure and life to an entire community.

These proverbs clearly state that high quality words lead to life and low quality words lead to ruin. They also state with equal clarity that it is the character of the one speaking that determines the quality of the words spoken. So it is the mouth of the *righteous* that brings life. We are going to look today at four character qualities that result in high quality words that bring life to others.

I. Teachability

Verse 8 says, **“The wise of heart will receive commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin.”** Hebrew poetry uses a device called parallelism, just as English poetry uses such devices as rhyming and meter. Parallelism is a device in which two phrases appear side by side and are in a relationship to one another that is either the same or opposite. Synonymous parallelism uses two phrases that say the same thing in different ways. For example, in the previous chapter we read, **“For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life”** (9:11). Both phrases say the same thing in different ways, and that is synonymous parallelism. Most proverbs, however, use what is called antithetic parallelism, where the two phrases state contrasting truths. Verse 8 is an example of this antithetic parallelism, and the opposite parallels increase the range of meaning because of their relationship. So we learn from verse 8 not only that wise people receive commandments and babbling fools come to ruin, but since these are opposite one another we also learn that we avoid the ruin of babbling lips by receiving commandments.

Let’s think for a while about this area of receiving commandments. Consider first the word *receive*. The Bible emphasizes repeatedly the importance of receiving God’s word. **“Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation”** (1 Pet. 2:2). And there is the parable of the sower and the soil, where the good seed is received by the good soil. Jesus applies that by saying that it speaks of **“the one who hears the word and understands it”** (Matt. 13:23). This stance of receiving God’s word will all by itself reduce the number of our words, for the simple reason that listening requires the opening of the ears and the shutting of the mouth. Have you ever noticed how much more difficult it is to receive instruction from another than to spout forth our views on different issues? The path of wisdom requires that we have the humility to be listeners, convinced that our opinions may be wrong and as a result that we need to listen to God.

Notice that we are to receive commandments. To receive a commandment means to obey it and submit to it. We tend to view the receiving of commandments far more negatively than it is viewed in the Bible. Our memory verse this week talks about the very positive emotion of delighting in the law of God. Most of the time we think about obeying God's law in more negative ways, similar to paying taxes. We are motivated to obey, but it is largely a motivation from fear—we fear the consequences of not doing so. The presence of some fear in our motivation is not inappropriate, but there must also be an attitude that is more positive in nature if we are to receive God's commandments. There must be a heart of delight. Where does such delight come from? I think it requires faith in the fact that God enables us to do whatever he commands us to do.

There is a great example of God's enabling of that which he commands in the story of Peter walking on water. The disciples are in a boat on rough seas in the middle of the night, and Jesus comes to them walking on water. They don't recognize the figure as Jesus and think he's a ghost, which frightens them nearly to death. But Jesus speaks to them, saying, **"Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid"** (Matt. 14:27). Peter responds by asking for a command from Jesus. **"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water"** (v. 28). Jesus responds with a command that delighted the ears of Peter—**"Come."** Peter received that command not as yet another burdensome obligation, but as a powerful promise. When Jesus utters a command, it is very different from you and I uttering a command, because our words lack the power to enable what we command. But Jesus is the one who spoke the command in Genesis 1, **"Let there be light, and there was light"** (v. 3). He is the one who spoke to the wind and the waves during the storm, commanding them to be quiet, and immediately the sea became still. God's commandments become a delight to us when we read them not just as obligations, but also as promises. When God commands us not to be anxious, we should picture the mighty Jesus speaking to the winds and waves of our lives. When Jesus tells us to love others and fear him, we should picture him speaking the word, "Come" to Peter.

The opposite of this kind of teachability is spoken of in verse 13. **"On the lips of him who has understanding, wisdom is found, but a rod is for the back of him who lacks sense."** Derek Kidner titles this verse, "Man—God's mouthpiece or God's mule." Mules are famous for their stubbornness and must be beaten in order to be made to obey. If our lips are to bring life to others, we must be teachable and receive God's commands with faith and delight.

II. Integrity

The personal character that delivers us from the ruinous words of the babbling fool and results in our words giving life to others is also characterized

by integrity. **“Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out”** (v. 9). The contrast is between integrity and crookedness in one’s life. A person of integrity has a consistency about his life, such that he can be counted on to do the right thing even when no one is looking. The crooked lack such consistency, because it always depends on the situation. It may be advantageous to tell the truth one day, but to bend it a little the next day.

Some translations have the word “upright” in place of integrity. The idea is that of building a wall that is plumb versus one that leans. If a wall is to be strong, it is important that it be upright or plumb. A leaning wall will get weaker the higher it is built, until it will finally collapse under its own weight. It works the same way with personal integrity. So the student who purchases a paper off the internet is behaving crookedly by his dishonesty, and the skill of good writing is never learned. The exaggerator bends the truth to make a better story or to prop up a weak argument, but loses credibility in the process. God often allows the crooked to keep going until the wall reaches the level of collapsing under its own weight. The crooked always battle insecurity, because every apparent victory, won by the aid of their crookedness, only makes them weaker.

Those with integrity, on the other hand, can grow larger and more secure at the same time. They don’t have to be covering their steps, trying to remember the spin put on something previously so they won’t get caught in dishonesty. I remember reading a story years ago about a young boy who was called on to testify as a witness in a court of law. His testimony would hurt significantly the plaintiff’s case, and the boy’s father knew that his son would be viciously treated by the plaintiff’s attorney in an attempt to discredit his testimony. So the father tried to help his son be prepared for what would happen. As the boy was being questioned by the attorney trying to discredit him, the attorney became frustrated because he didn’t seem to be getting anywhere. Then he asked the witness, “Your father has coached you about what to say here today, hasn’t he?” The young boy admitted that he had. Sensing victory, the attorney asked him to tell the court what his father had said to him. “He told me,” replied the boy, “that you would try to trip me up and confuse me, but that if I would just tell the complete truth in answer to every question, that I didn’t need to worry about a thing.” Such integrity brings security and results in life-giving words to those around us.

III. Forgiveness

Verse 12 describes a clear contrast. **“Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.”** Hatred is personified here as awakening strife from a state of dormant slumber. Or to use the phrase we normally use, hatred knows how to push another’s buttons. By contrast, love covers all offenses. Love takes

a veil and covers over the offenses of another. I like what one commentator, Bruce Waltke, says about this. “Instead of placing the transgressor on stage and withdrawing the veil to expose his faults and so exact revenge, love endures his wrongs to reconcile him and save him from death.”

The babbling fool brings ruin by his lips, and one of the ways he does so is by his failure to have a forgiving spirit. On the contrary, it is life-giving to cover the sins of others through a forgiving spirit. This doesn't mean that we become soft on sin, any more than Jesus was soft on sin when he cried from the cross, **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”** (Luke 23:34). Those words from Jesus are made far more striking by their contrast with his silence up until that moment. Throughout his trial and sufferings, Jesus had not raised his voice to defend himself against the most outrageously unfair accusations. I don't know about you, but I often raise my voice to defend myself against charges of which I am guilty, not to mention the less common situation of sins of which I am innocent. But Jesus was silent until he spoke these words of prayer. I like what J. C. Ryle says about Jesus' prayer. “These words were probably spoken while our Lord was being nailed to the cross, or as soon as the cross was reared up on end. It is worthy of remark that as soon as the blood of the Great Sacrifice began to flow, the Great High Priest began to intercede.” Jesus wasn't being soft on sin, because he was taking the loss upon himself that is brought by sin. When we cover the sin of others, we are doing the same, taking the loss upon ourselves that is brought by sin. We can never take the loss of another's sin until we have had the experience of seeing Jesus take the loss that is due to our sin. We need to hear his prayer for us, “Father, forgive him” before we can forgive others.

IV. Wisdom

Finally, life-giving words come from those who are wise. We read of the wise in verse 14, **“The wise lay up knowledge.”** Wisdom and knowledge are two different things, but they are inseparable from one another. Wisdom is the skillful use of knowledge. You can have knowledge without wisdom, but you cannot have wisdom without knowledge. So wise people store up knowledge like a person laying aside money in a savings account.

CONCLUSION:

We want God to use us to be this fountain of life. Jesus is the real fountain of life, and our need is to find life in him, and then to point others to it. Our character is changed as we come to him and as we point others to him. May God help us to do so!