Today we continue the sermon series for this Summer, “Life Lessons from Proverbs through Disney’s Magic.” These messages focus on learning life-giving lessons from the Book of Proverbs, such as wisdom, justice, foolishness, pride, friendship, diligence, humility, patience, kindness, honesty, and more. We have covered the themes of wisdom and righteousness in two different sermons, and today the topic is The Power of the Tongue.

Do our words have power? There is an old saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” If this was true, we could affirm that our words have no or little power. No matter what we say to or about others, it will not affect their lives. Yet, in reality, we know this to be untrue. Words can cause enduring pain, create emotional scars, and damage relationships, sometimes irreparably. A careless word can damage a person’s spirit, leaving them feeling rejected, judged, or diminished. Physical wounds may heal with time, but emotional injuries inflicted by words can linger, causing pain that persists for years or even a lifetime.

To speak to this subject, we draw from the wisdom of Proverbs 18:21, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”

According to this Scripture, we can breathe life or unleash destruction with our words. How are we doing with our words? Do we wield this power consciously, responsibly, and righteously?

Many of us may recall an event, a moment in time when a spoken word caused deep pain or distress. It may have happened yesterday, last week, or a decade ago. We know how our words can nourish the spirit but also inflict wounds deeper than any physical injury.

Do you remember when someone said something to you or about you and hurt you in ways you may still be affected? What about when you said something to or about someone that hurt them, and they may still carry that pain? It does not take much. A careless whisper, a poorly chosen word, or an ill-timed remark can cause hurt and deep heartache. We have all been at the giving or receiving end of such situations. That is what this verse from Proverbs means when it says that we have the power to give death or life with our words.

The apostle James explains this in a compelling way in James 3:5-12,

“How great a forest is set ablaze by a such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of life, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse people, made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes a blessing and a curse. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.”

In this text, James tells us, just as in Proverbs, that our words have tremendous directive power in our lives and relationships. James likens our tongue to a tiny flame that has the potential to ignite forests into a raging inferno. What may start as a harmless spark can soon escalate into an unmanageable blaze. Think of it this way: Harshly critical words can reduce a child’s confidence to ashes. Cynical words can torch a person’s ability to trust others. Friendships can go up in flames from a few words of gossip.

We don’t need to be a genius to figure this out. For example, if we look back on a chain of broken relationships, we should consider the role words may have played in creating that situation. If your spouse is cold and distant, have your words made them that way? If you are estranged from your kids, did your words push them away?

The truth is that our words have a significant role in shaping and directing our life’s trajectory and our relationships. If we are discontent with where we are, we should reflect on how our words may have influenced our circumstances by asking ourselves: Am I excessively critical? Do I have a tendency to express myself harshly when I am upset? Do I dismiss people when they attempt to share their thoughts and feelings? Do I arrogantly presume I am correct and pontificate at people? Do I leap to premature conclusions without fully understanding the situation?

Can you see the significance of what we say? Our words determine the state of our relationships and set our destination for life. Our speech can either guide other people and us towards a journey of despair or a journey of hope, a journey of self-assurance or self-doubt, a journey of embracing God or resenting him.

Consider how parents who consistently affirm their child with words of love and acceptance foster a strong sense of self-assurance in their child, a characteristic they will carry throughout their lives. Will the parents be content when they see their child become a good human being? Or how a teacher who extends kindness to an isolated, unsure child, bolstering them with encouraging words, can genuinely alter the course of that child’s life. Will the teacher feel fulfilled when she sees that child be successful? And how about Sunday school teachers who plant the seeds of God’s words in young hearts, yielding eternal rewards. Will they feel satisfied with their work when they witness those children become godly people?

Our words can crucially affect the course of others’ lives as much as ours. Our words can cultivate robust relationships and draw people toward us or away from us. The manner of our speech can lead us to success or strip us away from blessings no matter how gifted we may be.

My friends, God has gifted us with the power of the tongue not as a tool of destruction but as an instrument to give life. Through our words, we have the power to share wisdom, offer encouragement, express our feelings, and convey God’s teachings.

How many of you have seen the movie “Bambi”? Bambi was first released in 1942, which means it has been out for 81 years. Here is a spoiler: “Bambi” follows the life of a young deer, Bambi, as he grows from a fawn to a strong stag. As he grows up, Bambi forms lasting friendships with Thumper, the rabbit, and Flower, the skunk. These friends supported Bambi during times of change and grief, notably the loss of his mother.

While the movie Bambi is not focused explicitly on the power of the tongue, there are a few scenes that can be used as examples to discuss the impact of words and communication. For example, there is a scene when Thumper is corrected by his mother after he makes a rude comment about Bambi. Here is what happened: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_p9Rzxq_r1Q>

In this scene, Thumper, in a loud voice, said that the Bambi “is kinda wobbly” and that “he doesn’t walk too good.” To which his mom replied, “Thumper, what did your father tell you?” And Thumper answered, “If you don’t have something’ nice to say, don’t say nothing’ at all.”

What if Thumper’s mom did not say anything to him? Thumper would have assumed that it was ok to make fun of others. Perhaps Bambi would have also internalized his friend’s words and felt discouraged. Thankfully, Thumper had good parents who taught him, “If we don’t have something kind to say, it might be better not to say anything at all.”

Jesus taught us this principle when he said in Matthew 7:12, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” This rule, often called the Golden Rule, while simple, is profoundly significant. It is not just about our actions but also about our words. So, this Golden Rule may also be read as, “In everything speak to/of others as you would have them speak to/of you.”

I am confident we know how our words carry a weight that can be heavier than we comprehend; that they possess the power to build up or tear down. And that their power can be harnessed by we following Jesus’ Golden Rule and the wisdom of Proverbs. Here are some other verses from the Proverbs that highlight this power,

“The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.” Proverbs 10:11 

“To make an apt answer is a joy to anyone, and a word in season, how good it is!” Proverbs 15:23 

“Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.” Proverbs 16:24

Again, in our hands, or rather in our mouths, we hold power to uplift or devastate, foster love or sow resentment, guide towards God or push people away. Our words can create, crush, uplift, depress, offer hope, or inflict pain.

The bottom line is that anyone can speak words that rob another of the will to continue in difficult times, but special are those who will take the time to encourage another.

How, then, will you choose to wield this immense power?

Here is the invitation and good news: As we live our daily lives, let us remember our profound power: the power to breathe life or inflict death through our words. We may find ourselves carrying the burden of words spoken to us that erode our confidence, darken our spirit, and tarnish our self-image. But just as words can hurt, they can also heal. Words of affirmation, encouragement, and love can strengthen our spirits, embolden our hearts, and spark hope in our souls. They can rebuild self-esteem, mend broken relationships, and serve as the catalyst for forgiveness and reconciliation. So, “speak to others as you would have them speak to you.”

As we step out of this sanctuary today, let us make this world a better place by being a blessing and planting seeds of life, seeds of love, and seeds of hope with our words, as the apostle Paul said,

“[W]hatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Philippians 4:8