

WORDS OF LIFE AND THE WORD OF LIFE: PROVERBS 18:21,
CHRISTIAN SPEECH, AND THE SINLESS CHRIST*

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There is a difference between knowledge and wisdom. It can be put like this: You are speaking to someone you know well, having a conversation with them. You listen, and they say something that you know is *technically* wrong. Depending on the situation, how well you know them, how their day has gone, how their life is going, even if you have the correct knowledge to speak, wisdom might be to say nothing at all, to be silent. There is a difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is having something in your mind—data or facts you may be able to recite—but wisdom is something more. Put it another way: Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit, but wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.¹

Wisdom in Proverbs

The book of Proverbs talks a lot about wisdom. Is wisdom not given a high place? Proverbs says that wisdom is to be valued (19:8), a treasure (2:1–6), and more profitable than gold (3:13–15). It is a tree of life (3:18) in your own networks and living, something to be sought after (4:5–7), that calls out (1:20–23), something to be found (8:17), to really hold on to (8:34), and a source of blessing and the Lord's favour (8:35).

* This essay is a revised text of a sermon Dr. Greg Davidson preached in chapel at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON, on September 16, 2025.

1. This proverb is often attributed to Miles Kington (1941–2008), though some sources credit it to Brian O'Driscoll. Its origin is not definitively verified.

These proverbs are a different kind of language. They model reality by using analogy or word picture, often in contrast, to connect to everyday life and lead us to understand how life works in God's world.² They are short sentences of wisdom.³ Wisdom given in these proverbs is different from information or data; it is the skill in applying godly knowledge to living. It is the skill in applying godly knowledge to the situations in which God has put me, where I am right now. They teach wisdom, form character, and encourage obedience in our relationship with God (Prov 1:1–7). Their purpose is “to compel the readers or hearers to compare their lives to the truth of the proverb.”⁴ Proverbs are not commands. We are not here reading today from the law of Moses. We are not to approach it as a do-this- or a do-that-kind-of statement. Also used by Jesus, Proverbs is not about making us perfect but about making us wise.⁵

In a proverb, we are looking at a window into how God's world works and how life with the Creator is meant to be lived—in a way that is fruitful, life giving, full of meaning, and wise and that attends to how I am being shaped in daily situations. How do I apply the godly knowledge that I read in Scripture to my life, with a view of my character and formation?

But wisdom in Proverbs is not only the practical skill in navigating daily life. It is rooted in the “fear of the Lord” (1:7) and is therefore profoundly theological.⁶ The fear of the Lord is not

2. McKane, *Proverbs*, 23–33; Waltke and Silva, *Proverbs*, 22–23.

3. Hildebrandt, “Proverb.”

4. Waltke and Silva, *Proverbs*, 37.

5. Jesus himself makes use of proverbial material in his teaching. In Luke 4:23, he cites the proverb “Physician, heal yourself!” (ESV), and in Luke 17:37, he offers the proverb-like saying “Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather” (Note: unless otherwise indicated, scriptural quotations are in NIV). Both reflect the tradition of Proverbs.

6. Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 80–82. Waltke (*Book of Proverbs*, 64–65) underscores this theme: “Their common appeal[s] to their audiences’ ‘fear of the LORD’ (cf. Deut. 6:5; Josh. 24:14; Prov. 1:7; Isa. 29:13 [= ‘worship of me,’ NIV]; passim). The LORD is God's personal name, revealed to Israel in connection with his election of and his covenants with them (Gen. 12:8; Exod. 3:15; 6:2–8). To fear him means essentially to submit to his revealed will, whether through Moses or Solomon (see

cold terror or dread. It is reverent relationship with the God, who speaks and reveals himself. To seek wisdom is to seek after God's order for creation and life with the one who made us. So, wisdom is "a tree of life" (3:18), echoing Eden's unhindered fruitfulness.

The Power of Words

Now, the second most common theme in the book of Proverbs is words, speech, or the tongue. Proverbs is full of wisdom on words and the place of words in our lives. It is full of wisdom that is descriptive and practical but also reveals reverence before the God who speaks. There can be healing in the words we speak (16:24). Words can be harmful (26:28) and at times are meant to be held back and restrained (17:27–28). They should be truthful (12:19), can hold the power of gentleness (25:15) and be used for slander (11:13). Words are many with a fool (10:19) and are linked to the character of God (15:3–4). All through the book of Proverbs, we see what it is to be wise with our words. The same is true for Prov 18: words can be unfathomable like deep waters (v. 4); lips can bring strife to a fool (v. 5); gossip is like choice morsels (v. 8); a quick answer is folly (v. 13); but words can also bring satisfaction to the speaker (v. 20).

Today's verse reveals truths about the wisdom of words: "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit" (18:21).⁷ With all that is our minds, all the agendas, activities and deadlines we must meet, what would we say to this? Where is the place of wisdom in our lives today? Where are the place and role of speech in our own living?

1:7). Each in his own way seeks to establish the rule of Israel's covenant-keeping God."

7. The literal organ tongue (לִשָּׁן) is used figuratively for "speech," with the lips and words seen parallel to it (Ps 34:13). Power is from hand (יָד, literally "in the hand"). It carries the meaning of under the control of and reveals words as active agents, suggesting power and authority (Job 1:12). Death (מָוֶת) and life (חַיִּים) are covenant categories and outcomes (Deut 30:19) only physical or psychological. See an expanded discussion in Waltke, *Book of Proverbs*, 101–3.

In Prov 18:21, we see that the tongue, or words, has power. Tremper Longman writes, “The wisdom teachers of Israel fully understand that language is more than mere words but has real effects in the world.”⁸ Words do not simply vanish into thin air. They have power. They leave deep impressions on those around us, build trust or suspicion, life or death. The truth of this proverb is magnified in a world where words are amplified, repeated, and tweeted around the world instantly and stored forever digitally.

The first kind of power of words, speech, and the tongue, is the power of death, where “the deadly tongue destroys a community and its owner.”⁹ We see this in Prov 12:18, where words can be like a sword thrust in one’s soul. Words can damage. Words can wound. Many of us can recall a time when someone spoke against us in a way we will never forget—words that pierced like a sword thrust into our lives.

Words have the power of death. Examples of destruction speech include: *You’re unlovable. That was stupid. You will never amount to anything.* Words have this power in God’s world, a world made by a speaking God. Once we say them, we cannot take them back. They are out there. They can often be forgiven, but can they be really forgotten? Clinical counsellors often meet people who have experienced words that have brought them down and emptied their soul of meaning, worth, dignity, and hope. Such words can rattle around in someone’s mind and heart for a lifetime.

Words have the power of death. We see in Proverbs that words have power not only over the person addressed, but the person speaking words of death is trapped as well (12:6, 13); he is also brought in, brought down, and is undone (18:7). Words can have the power of death, both for the speaker and for the listener.

8. Longman, *Proverbs*, 198.

9. Waltke and Silva, *Proverbs*, 311.

We also see that in God's world and the way God has made this world that words have the power of life.¹⁰ There is truth here. It is a wonderful word in the Bible, the life that God gives. In Gen 1, we see a world filled with life, the swarming, teeming, springing, freshness, givenness, and the growth.¹¹ This summer, I tried to be a gardener. I went down to one of these sales in the Kirkendall neighbourhood, and they had this magic compost from some place. I spread the compost in our planters, and life sprang up abundantly! Green, fresh, overflowing from all over. There is life-giving growth, an aliveness that this proverb teaches us about in our speech of life!¹²

How often do we speak to each other? How often do we speak words of life to people that are close to us? *I see God at work in you. You know, you're making a big difference right now. I can't imagine my life without you. I'm really rooting for you.* How often as Christians do we have those kinds of words on our lips? How often do we say gospel-informed words, life-informed words in the name of Jesus Christ? How often are our words giving life to others and building others up? If we had to do a spiritual audit of our lives, are the words that we are speaking giving life? Are our words making souls around us stronger? This proverb teaches the truth that our words are never neutral: the words we employ carry real power. They can function as instruments of life-giving encouragement, of building one another up. Are the words we speak daily filling souls up or tearing them down, building people up or breaking people down, building

10. I am not preaching here about "the power of positive thinking" or speaking. This sermon should not be confused with the tradition associated with Norman Vincent Peale and later popularisers like Joel Osteen that emphasize self-affirmation or psychological optimism through words. The biblical perspective of Prov 18:21 is rooted not in human positivity but in reverence before the God who speaks, and ultimately in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ.

11. It occurs seven times in Gen 1.

12. Proverbs connects wisdom and words with the "tree of life" (Prov 3:18), pointing back to Eden and forward to the new creation (Rev 22:2). Just as Gen 1 shows life springing forth by God's word, so Proverbs and Revelation reveal that God's wisdom brings flourishing and new creation. See Kidner's subject study "Life" in *Proverbs*.

ourselves up or calling ourselves things that would not be true in the eyes of God? Are our words more like the accuser's (Job 1:6, 9–11)?

We all go through seasons in ministry and life, and by the grace of God, things are at times up and at times are down. There was a time in my ministry—I can think of one in the last decade—when I was low. I thought I might be going to do something else for a while. That happens, of course, in ministry, in our own Christian vocations. There was this man in our church. He was a retired pastor. He walked with me in this season. And I will tell you what struck me. I will never forget this. First, it was every week, and then it turned into, every month. He was not the best at technology, but he would write these emails. I will never forget this, because his message would arrive in all caps—the entire email written in capitals. Looking back, it is obvious how he had come to understand and live this proverb. Every time, he would start the emails, saying, “Gracious Father.” The top of the email would not even say my name, but it would be to me—in all caps—“Gracious Father, I want to thank you today for my friend Greg. I loved to be in ministry with him.” The message would go on for paragraphs. He is becoming elderly and recently, I thought the emails were over. Then I received one this summer. Even years later, another email arrived—and even in all caps—and his words built up my soul with life.

The second part of this proverb is “those who love it will eat its fruit.” Words have power, and words bear fruit. There are effects. The verse just before, we read, “From the fruit of his mouth a man's stomach is filled; with the harvest from his lips he is satisfied” (18:20). There is a sense here of fruitfulness with the words that we use and speak, how words spoken or consumed have a connection to the path of good in my life and in your life. I should thus pray, *Lord, give me words to speak that are life building*. That bears fruit around me in the people that I meet and interact with. Paul exhorts in Eph 4:29: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up.” Is my speech a mark of my Christian discipleship, bearing fruit? It is through words that the reality of the gospel is communicated and embodied. God spoke

the world into being, and Jesus speaks life to the dead. In the name of Jesus, we speak words that edify and encourage, words that not only sound good but carry real effect in the lives of others.

What does this mean for us in a setting like McMaster Divinity College? Words are our daily bread. We read, write, teach, counsel, debate, and publish. This proverb is therefore extremely relevant. Our words carry weight in shaping theological discourse, spiritual formation, and the witness of our churches. To use words carelessly here is to risk bearing the power of death: misleading others, discouraging ministry partners, or wounding colleagues. Our words by God's grace can also bear life, pointing others to Christ, strengthening the discouraged. We can thus ask: Are my words in class, in writing, in the ministry, and in personal conversations echoing the life of the Word made flesh? Proverbs 18:21 presses this question upon us.

What does this all mean for the theme of chapel this year?¹³ We are made in the image of God. We are made in the image of a speaking God.¹⁴ God did not snap his fingers to make the world; he did not clap or bring down something from the sky. In the beginning, God spoke. God brings people and the world into being through his word. Last week, Dr. Stanley E. Porter led us through the Greek exegesis of John 1. There, we read about God, a God who gives the Word, and the God who gives light. Jesus as the Light of the world, the eternal Word.

The Gospel in Jesus Christ

It may be that we speak words that lead to death or to life. We may, in frustration, choose the wrong words. We may, at times, choose the right words. But what is the gospel in Prov 18:21? It is that Jesus Christ, the eternal Word and the true Light, not only

13. The theme for chapel this year is "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

14. Walton discusses emphasis on God speaking in Genesis, remarking on "the text's interests when he notices the consistent emphasis on God speaking" (*Genesis*, 133).

speaks the good news but embodies it—he brings the gospel to us because he himself is the very good news of God. Notice how this connects to words and Jesus.¹⁵

First, notice the *perfection* of Jesus in his words. In 1 Pet 2:22, the apostle declares, “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” We read “no deceit was found” in his mouth, talking about his journey to the cross according to the Father’s will. There was never one wrong word spoken, never one word misspoken by Jesus. Jesus is completely pure and perfect in his speech and in his words, even when others are hurling insults at him. Peter teaches of “the condition of perfection that Jesus achieved.”¹⁶ Jesus is the morally perfect, suffering Saviour. He is the only perfect person to have ever lived. He never spoke one word out of place, made one error, never made one mistake. Ancient Israel is rebuked for honouring God with lips while their hearts were far from him (Isa 29:13). But Jesus embodies the perfect union of lips and heart, speech and will. Every word he spoke was true and faithful. The perfection is not simply verbal restraint; it is the outworking of his identity as the eternal Word of God made flesh. You and I can walk around and try it. Try to live as Christ would have us live. Try to love your neighbour as yourself when you go home today. Try to love them as yourself for more than five minutes. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind—try to do that for more than two minutes, and soon we are convicted of how perfect Jesus is in every way and in his speech, and how broken we are as people touched and affected by sin and by doubt.

Second, notice the *uniqueness* of Jesus in his words. In John 7:46, the empty-handed temple guards report on their encounter, “No one has ever spoken the way this man does.” Andrew Lincoln holds that they witness “to power of Jesus’

15. The wisdom of Proverbs points us toward God’s ultimate wisdom revealed in Christ. Paul proclaims that Christ himself is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24 NIV), and that he “has become for us wisdom from God” (1 Cor 1:30 NIV). In other words, Proverbs finds its fulfilment in the person of Jesus, who embodies perfect and life-giving speech at the eternal word.

16. McKnight, *1 Peter*, 153.

words.”¹⁷ The uniqueness of Jesus in his words is not just their eloquent power but their authority. Matthew tells us that the crowds were astonished “for he taught as one who had authority” (7:28). The uniqueness of Jesus is seen in his speech. There was no one who spoke like he did. No one spoke with the power and authority that he had. Christopher J. H. Wright argues in his booklet *The Uniqueness of Jesus* that the Old Testament prepares us for the uniqueness of Christ “by showing us the uniqueness of God himself, Yahweh.”¹⁸ Peter saw this truth when he said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). Jesus is unique in power to give life: “Lazarus, come out!” (John 11:43). John Stott emphasizes this: “If Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead, then he was beyond dispute a unique figure . . . We do not know of anyone else who has had this experience.”¹⁹ He is the perfect Son of God, Jesus Christ, and the unique one set aside not like any other.

Third, as Prov 18:21 points to Jesus and to the gospel, there are a few times in the New Testament where we hear the audible words of God. One of the places is at the baptism of Jesus, where added to the *perfection* of Jesus and the *uniqueness* of Jesus, we hear about the *identity* of Jesus. The heavens open and a dove alights on him. And a voice (in *words*) proclaims, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17). This was not merely a private word of encouragement but a public proclamation of identity. Craig Keener puts it this way: “What the voice says is most important, for this is what declares Jesus’ identity to the reader . . . as proleptic enthronement.”²⁰ The voice identifies Jesus as the Son of God, divine, begotten, not made, the Light, and the eternal Word. The voice grounds Jesus’ mission in divine love and Sonship. Here his identity, uniqueness, and perfection come together: the beloved Son of the Father is the Word of life sent to speak and to save.

17. Lincoln, *Gospel According to St John*, 259.

18. Wright, *Uniqueness of Jesus*, 87.

19. Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 45.

20. Keener, *Matthew*, 134.

By God's grace and power, I hope that we here at McMaster Divinity College will have on our lips, in our words, and in our speech, Jesus in his *perfection*, in his *uniqueness*, and his *identity*.

But Prov 18:21 speaks of Jesus and the gospel in one last way. Look for a moment to the cross of Jesus. Think for a moment about Jesus dying for us. The apostles in New Testament, time and time again, taught that Jesus dies *for us*. There is a purpose in his death. And on the cross, Jesus speaks, of course. Others speak to him. There are words. But at the very end on the cross when Jesus dies and finishes his work and last breath, when he cries out that he is forsaken, there is a sense that Jesus receives on the cross the ultimate wordlessness. He receives silence in the end—it was divine silence. And Jesus cried, “Oh my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46). Jesus received the silence of the Almighty on the cross *for us*. When each one of us, in our brokenness and sin, is unable to reach out to God and needs God to reach out to us. That is why Jesus died on the cross in *silence*, for us (1 Cor 15:3).²¹ And the gospel in Prov 18:21, in the realm of words and the power of words, with Jesus as the eternal Word and the Light (John 1), is that Jesus died under the deafening noise of divine silence, wordlessness—a place that we in our brokenness and sin deserve (1 Pet 3:18). Put it this way: Jesus died on the cross in silence so that you and I can hear God's benediction, his goodness, his love, mercy, forgiveness, and grace. We do not only hear but also respond, receive, and believe. Jesus is the Word of life (1 John 1:1), the one whose words never deceive, whose words raise the dead, and who can be completely trusted.

So, head out into this year with Words of life because of the Word of life goes with you.

21. Stott summarizes: “The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man” (*Cross of Christ*, 164).

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