

Like the Piercings of a Sword

Proverbs 12:18

“There is that speaks like the piercings of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health.” - Proverbs 12:18 (13:17; 4:22).

There are quite a number of Proverbs that speak to the use of the tongue. Of course, this not talking about what we eat or licking our lips or the like. It speaks of our speech as it is used towards others. That is the case in this verse and is worth thinking of for a moment or two. As it used in the Bible “speaking” can be used in at least three ways:

- It can be used to speak of the normal, everyday thing that all of us do to communicate with others.
- Likewise, it can talk about the use of our ability to speak to either persuade or dissuade other concerning our purposes or perception of a matter or course.
- It can, thirdly, speak of a formal discourse given before others to elaborate or give information concerning some topic

The word used, “bawtaw” basically means to “pronounce” (2x), to “speak” (1x). The idea is to “speak unadvisedly” (1x). It can be used as to speak rashly or angrily, even to speak thoughtlessly. In some forms it speaks of one that babbles, or speaks rashly (in its’ participle form). And even unadvisedly. Though the word is not used a great deal of times in the OT, interestingly, it seems to be very, very applicable to our daily lives. We are subject a great deal of temptation (and even habit!) to do this very thing in our daily lives, perhaps even a number of times! It was even used, in ancient Hebrew to speak of the idea of “Babbling” or speaking in an ongoing, unthinking fashion more designed to satisfy ones’ need to speak rather than to communicate something useful.

The reference here “There is that” is, of course, speaking in a general sense meant include everyone who communicates with another, and includes those who speak audible and, pretty much those who use any other kind of communication.

What Solomon is saying here is that this type of speaking is very dangerous and quit often, even virtually always hurtful. The hurt given is quite frequently, Solomon says, very, very hurtful. This is why he uses the phrase “the piercings of a sword” to communicate the hurt that it does. “Piercings” actually speak of a stab wound by the fighting device. We can easily see the parallel here between what Solomon speaks of as hasty and vicious words and the idea of the damage they can do to the hearer; damage akin to a sword thrust. It is interesting that this kind of damage is compared to the permanent, even killing thrust of the sword. Now, it is true that the damage of the sword thrust can heal and be medically dealt with; and it seems that likewise, the damage done by speech might also be repaired, at least to some degree. However, in Solomon’s eye, that is no justification to allow yourself to inflict it in the first place!

I suspect that this (the terrible damage that could be done) is, at least to some degree, a reason why Solomon goes on, and in the second part of the verse, and speaks to us of the real benefit of “wise speaking”:

¹⁸ *There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword,
But the tongue of the wise promotes health.*

“Tongue”, in the OT, can speak of two basic ideas. First, it can speak of the act verbal communication, in whatever form it takes (see above). Second, it can also (as in the NT) speak of the particular language that this verbal communication takes. In the NT, this “tongue” can also refer to an “angelic” language that is a part of how the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost showed itself and demonstrated the vesting of Apostolic gifts to the disciples of the Lord as the NC era arrived. We understand this use to speak of another way that the OT uses the term - here we see it referring to the “manner” of this speaking.

Now, in this context, we actually can see the first phrase as speaking of the way or manner in which the “one” referred to speaks. We remember that this suggested various hurtful manners of speaking. In contrast here, we see that the “wise” manner of speaking “promotes health”.

First, this manner of speaking is identified as being a manner employed by “the wise”. As we have seen in many of our studies on this Book, “Wise” refers to one who, by means of the content of God’s Word, is skillful, clever, or experienced (in this particular context) in the manner in which they speak to others.

“Health” is a word that speaks of a remedy or healing. It means to heal, repair or rebuild something damaged. In this manner, it can even speak of one who IS a healer. Though it used here in the context of treating someone who has been injured in some fashion. Harsh words injure, at times badly. But wise words can either do good (as opposed to the result of the “piercing” spoken of earlier) or can heal up a damage or hurt already present.

Now, it is easy to see which of the two mentioned is more appropriate to wise or godly person. There is also another thing that these “wise” words can be seen to do here. Just as there are many things can be done and used to promote and advance our health. So also, wise words, can take effect and have benefit to the others who hear us speak. It is plain to see which of the two, hurtful or wise, Solomon commends to adopt.

Just to rethink our interpretation for a moment - The fault condemned is that kind of talk which, whether from pure inconsiderateness, want of tact, want of sympathy, or cruel purpose, often inflicts stabs—like the thrusts of a sword—upon the feelings of other people. In contrast with this, the tongue that is wisely guided has a healing influence, speaks words of soothing, words which allay resentments, compose differences,—in short, promote peace and concord.

There are a number of illustrations that can help us to grasp what is being said here:

- How harsh, indiscriminating, and inconsiderate were the reproaches with which Job's (so-called) friends pierced that afflicted man! Well might he call them "miserable comforters," "physicians of no value," and charge them with vexing his soul, and breaking it in pieces with words (13; 16; 19).
- With still more intention of wounding did King Saul use his tongue (compared by David to a "sharp sword," Ps. 57:4) against Jonathan and the son of Jesse (1 Sam. 20:30; 18:21).
- Whereas, Jonathan so wisely spoke of David to his father as to heal for a time the breach between the two (1 Sam. 19:4, etc.).
- Paul, though obliged to wound, was prompt to heal the wound inflicted when, as a wise physician, he saw the time was come (1 Cor. 5:1-6; 2 Cor. 8:8, etc.).
- But no greater contrast can be found than the Jews exhibited to our Lord, - their words being too often designed to stab Him to the heart, while His, even when most severe, were medicine for their souls.

Just to consider the application of the ideas we have considered here - To avoid what we observe to be offensive in others is a plain duty recommended by common sense, if by no higher motive. And who has not met with the character which the Germans significantly term this "ein Schwert - Mund" (a sword-mouth)? Such is often a mere babbler, who neither bridles his loquacity by reflection nor moderates it by indulgent reference to his fellow-men. Through mere want of thought and tact and good manners, he will blurt out remarks by which the feelings of others are hurt, without regarding it. Or he may be a still more dangerous character, a wit, who must make his jokes, his sarcasm, his repartee, no matter at whose expense. For the sake of its glitter the sword is flourished, and any one may feel its piercing. Such people are to be feared and avoided. Be it mine to employ my tongue to heal; and only to wound, if needs be, with a view to work a cure. To this end let us seek "the wisdom that is from above." Then my speech will be "always with grace," and "seasoned with salt," the flavoring of that highest wisdom which has its source in the hidden depths of charity.