

Death and Life Are in the Power of the Tongue

Proverbs 18:21

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.” - Proverbs 18:21 (Cf. ver. 20; 21:23).

As I'm sure many people know, there are quite a number passages in Proverbs that are very, very familiar. This is one of those passages, both completely familiar and, interestingly, somewhat misunderstood. For instance, the idea of death, in this passage, need not be taken to refer to literal death on every occasion that it appears in life. There are a couple ways, in basic for to begin, that we can see it:

1. It can be seen to refer to metaphorical “death”. That is, it can refer to encouragement or discouragement and the like. The words of the mouth can speak that which gives life, or that which badly discourage and cause the falling away from any goal or the pursuit of useful purposes.
2. Second, it can be used to instruct and/or direct others to actions that either useful and beneficial; or it can direct them to activities and that are harmful and/or destructive.
3. In the life of one who has the power of a superior, as in the instance of King like Solomon, such useful or destructive activities can literally result in living or even dying as a result of that “speaking”.

The meaning of the word “death” underscores the truth of what we have said. It is used 160 times and is translated simply as either death or die 150 of those times (with 128 of those as “death”). Other uses or a little more use oriented. For instance it is given as “die” some 22 times, as “dead” 8 times. It is given as the adjective dead 8x and “deadly” and “to slay” 1x each. Interesting forms of the word are rendered in a personified fashion as well; referring to the realm of the dead. As such it can refer to personal death, death by violence (at times as a penalty). It is also used to refer to the the state of or the place of death.

It is interesting that Solomon here sets the idea of death both in contrast to and, to some degree, joined with the idea of life.

- Life, to think first of all, is joined to the idea of death which was given first in the verse.
- It is also, very interestingly, set in apposition to what immediately follows, namely the matter we have looked at already, that is, the issue of death.

The concept of “life” is broad and complicated in the Bible, with many “shades” of meaning. But altogether, the concept is well-known and familiar to us. It occurs some 501 times in the OT. It means anything from the simple idea of living, to that which lives, a beast, etc. It can also speak of the quality or manner of living given the context in which it is used. It is not limited to human

life of course, it is also used of animal life, or even vegetable life. BTW, this is not meant to imply that all that it used to speak of are equal in the value of their “life”. There are some who would try to make that argument; but the Bible clearly does not make that argument. Also, it can speak just what, variously, the thing that is alive does to remain alive, like eating, breathing, etc.

“Power” is a basic noun in the OT that, at its’ root refers to the physical hand. It is one of the most common theoretical words in the OT translated as power, strength, part or portion, support, even that which holds up or supports another thing. For instance it is the word that was translated “tenons” which held up the Tabernacle.

“Tongue” is a word that is not complicated. It speaks, often, of the physical organ, but most often of the matter of speech and also, often of that which is communicated by that speech. This is its’ use here – Solomon is speaking of just what the ability to speak communicated to those who hear and are listening.

Just to finish our observation here; the “Those who love it”, as Solomon has frequently said elsewhere in Proverbs, speaks of those who hear it well and taking it to heart. We should note that this second phrase is joined by what is known as a coordinating conjunction – it takes the content in the second phrase and joins it, functionally with the first. In this case, it takes the statement of the reality of what the tongue and its’ power can do; and joins it, in a logical and functional sense.

In James 3:6-10 James told us that the greatest good and the greatest harm are in the power of the tongue:

And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.

That seems fairly clear and it is likewise clear that this is speaking of the very same idea that Solomon is speaking about in the verse we have been speaking of. It seems clear that Solomon wants us to grasp the truth that Speech can do either good or harm. The person who is fond to talking needs to be aware and be watching which of the two ways that its’ effects go. The man’s tongue can yield satisfaction, and the metaphorical equivalent of life or death. Solomon is urging us to take into account the consequences of their words. We must guard our speech.

Solomon also, in a way, hints at the danger of “loving” to talk. There are many fall into the category of “loving speech”. There is common English colloquialism (it may also be common in other languages, but be said a bit differently). “You talk too much!” Of course, there is a negative result implied

in that statement. Solomon as much as says the same thing in the second part of our verse when he tells us "...those who love it will eat its' fruit". As we see in many, many other places in the Scriptures, he tells us that those who indulge in much speaking will "eat of its' fruit"; that is, they will be held accountable by God and will answer and be judged for their much speaking.

Just to rehearse our interpretation – we can see that this proverb is connected with the one immediately preceding. In that the result of a habit of talking sensibly and well is said to be advantageous to himself. In this, the tremendous power which a man's tongue exercises over his own destiny and that of others, is asserted to be equivalent to death or life. "*And he that loveth it*" (i.e. discoursing, for which the word "tongue" stands) "*shall eat the fruit thereof,*" "*death or life,*" according to the use, whether good or bad, which he makes habitually of his tongue.

There are several illustrations we appeal to to help us grasp their idea here:

1. By their evil report of Canaan, the spies brought death on themselves, and led the Israelites so to act as to cause their death in the wilderness (Numb. 14).
2. Doeg, by inflaming Saul's anger, brought about the slaughter of a whole city of priests (1 Sam. 22:9, 10).
3. On the other hand, the Apostle Paul and his fellow-Apostles, by consecrating their tongues to the proclaiming of the Gospel, both saved themselves and many among those who heard them.

By way of application - The great alternative placed before men is death or life (Deut. 30:15). And this is, to no small extent, in the power of the tongue, which itself is an index of the heart. Our Lord teaches this when He says, "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned" (Matt. 12:37). But, although "every idle word" needs forgiveness, or must be given "account of in the day of judgment," the *habit* of the tongue is that which determines the character and the future of a man. A chance word to his own discredit or to another's hurt may be spoken by a saint. A word to be remembered for good may be uttered by one who is very unbeliever-like. In either case, the "fruit" will be good or bad, according to the nature of what was spoken, for every word is seminal. But the test of the tongue lies in that which it loves to speak. David said: "*Thou lovest all devouring words, O thou deceitful tongue*" (Ps. 52:4). On the other hand, "*They*" in Malachi's time, "*...who feared the Lord, spake often one to another*" (Mal. 3:16). They *loved* to speak of the things of God. Now, every kind of word will produce fruit "after its kind." Again, great good or hurt to others resides in the tongue. The judge, the advocate, the witness,—what power is theirs! The orator, the fluent talker, above all, the preacher,—what a responsibility rests upon them! It is surely true in my own life that when I reflect upon the subject, I see the need of guarding the tongue like the life, careful of what I say and/or preach. For "*with the tongue is no mean, only extremes; either it is the worst of evils or the best of blessings.*"