



Intro:

Raise your hand if you're familiar with the age-old "sticks and stones" nursery rhyme. Like I suspected, a lot of us have heard it before. Now, raise your hand if you think you can recite it. Okay, we have some brave people in this room. Here's what we are going to do. I'm going to say the first part of the rhyme by myself, and then you are going to say the second part of the rhyme along with me. Ready? "Sticks and stones may break my bones...*[but words can never hurt me.]* Beautifully done everyone. Give yourselves a pat on the back. Better yet, give your neighbor a pat on the back. The sticks and stones rebuttal was the comeback of the ages on the playground back in the day. All you had to do was drop the line, drop the mic, and walk away to the tune of your friends cheering, and the school bully running away crying. At least that's how we pictured it playing out. Unfortunately, it usually didn't unfold that way because no matter how cool we tried to play it, those words affected us. The tough truth is that sticks, stones, and syllables can either build things up or break things down, depending on how we use them. This is what the Old Testament book of Proverbs tells us time and time again. In fact, between chapters 10 and 31 there are more than 60 verses that talk about the way we use our words. Which means this topic is important to God. One of the key verses concerning how we use our words in the book of Proverbs is Proverbs 18:21. Check it out.

The Word:

Proverbs 18:21(CSB)

*Death and life are in the power of the tongue,
and those who love it will eat its fruit.*

Although some of our words can be categorized as neutral words, meaning they don't have much affect or hold much weight, Proverbs 18:26 says most of our words fall into one of two categories: words of life or words of death. And Solomon—the writer of many of the Proverbs, including

Proverbs 18—said that we will reap the consequences of our words depending on which category we choose.

This is a sobering and surprising truth. It's sobering because life and death aren't trivial things to trifle with. When life and death hang in the balance, we always take them seriously. But it's also surprising because who would have thought such a small and seemingly insignificant thing like a tongue could wield such power? Well, James, Jesus' brother, certainly thought so. James wrote a letter in the New Testament, and chapter 3 has some striking and strong things to say about the power of the tongue. In verses 3 through 5 he laid out two different analogies to describe the significance of the tongue, despite its smallness.

James 3:3-5a (CSB)

3 Now if we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we direct their whole bodies. 4 And consider ships: Though very large and driven by fierce winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So too, though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts great things.

[TEACHER NOTE: If you would like to provide visuals for the following two analogies, there are two pictures in the folder labeled "Additional Visual Slides" in your download folder.]

Think about those two analogies: a horse and a ship. For as large and powerful as a horse is, it's ultimately controlled by a small bit in its mouth that attaches to the reins and allows the rider to steer it wherever they will. And for as large and immovable as a ship is, it's ultimately steered by a small rudder—at least small in comparison to the rest of the ship. In the same way, our tongue, though small, has the power to guide and control our whole body. What Solomon and James were saying in unison was that sticks, stones, and syllables can bring life or death, depending on how we use them.

Now, as I mentioned before, the book of Proverbs has a lot to say about how we use our words. So, let's get a little bit more specific about what life-

words and death-words look like. Let's start with the latter and then move to the former.

Words That Lead to Death:

Proverbs has a lot to say about words that lead to death. Proverbs 8:21 says our words can kill. Proverbs 26:28 says our words can crush. Proverbs 11:9 says our words can destroy. Proverbs 16:27 says our words can scorch like fire. Proverbs 15:4 says our words can break. There goes our "Sticks and Stones" rhyme. Proverbs 30:14 says our words can devour. And Proverbs 12:18 says our words can pierce like a sword. And these are merely a few examples we find in Proverbs.

While this is hard to stomach, it's not that hard to believe as I think we all have experienced at least one of these feelings, if not a few of them. I imagine some of us still presently wrestle with words that were spoken to us years ago; words that seemed to crush our hopes and dreams; words that devoured our confidence and self-worth. These kinds of words sound like, "You're a failure," and "You're a disappointment," and "You're crazy," and "Nobody loves you". The truth is these kinds of words often hurt worse than a broken bone or a physical cut. And it shows us that words are powerful and can have lasting effects. So, now that we better understand the damage and death our words can bring, let's look at the healing and life our words can bring.

Words That Lead to Life:

Many of the verses that mention words that lead to death also mention words that lead to life where one part of the verse mentions one category of words and the other part of the verse mentions the other.

For example, Proverbs 12:18 starts by saying "*There is one who speaks rashly, like a piercing sword*" but it ends by saying "*but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*" Here are a few more examples. The latter part of Proverbs 15:4 says, "*a devious tongue breaks the spirit*" but the first part of the verse says "*The tongue that heals is a tree of life*". Proverbs 16:27 implies a worthless person's speech is like a scorching fire, but just a few verses prior in verse 24, it says "*Pleasant words are a honeycomb: sweet*



Main Scriptures Used:

Proverbs 18:21, James 3:3-8, Matthew 12:34, John 6:63

Main Ideas and Points:

Sticks, stones, and syllables can bring life or death, depending on how we use them.

The problem is our words, but the root of the problem is our heart.

If we want to reset our hearts, tame our tongues, and use our words to bring life, we need to fill ourselves with God's words.

Discussion Questions:

Icebreaker: Answer one of the following questions: 1. What's the nicest compliment you've ever received? 2. What's the harshest insult you've ever received?

1. What does it mean to use our words to bring life? What are the benefits of using our words to bring life?
2. What does it mean to use our words to bring death? What are the consequences of using our words to bring death?
3. Explain a time when you used your words to bring life to someone else. How did it help the person you were talking to?
4. Explain a time when you used your words to bring death to someone else. How did it hurt the person you were talking to?
5. How can filling our hearts with *God's* words change *our* words?

Action Step:

Take a few minutes to challenge one another to read the book of Proverbs for the next month. Discuss different ideas about how you can help one another stick to this commitment.

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