

# Be Careful Little Mouth

*By John R. Gibson*

“O be careful little mouth what you say.”

Those words are taken from one of the very first songs I ever learned, but each time I read Proverbs I’m reminded of how often I have failed to be careful in controlling my mouth and in so doing have hurt myself and others. While the importance of guarding the tongue is also a new covenant principle with numerous warnings and admonitions concerning our speech recorded in the New Testament, no other book deals as extensively with the tongue as Proverbs and I want us to think about a few of the proverbs I have read recently.

## **Talk Less**

“In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, But he who restrains his lips is wise.” 10:19

“He who has knowledge spares his words, And a man of understanding is of a calm spirit. Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; When he shuts his lips he is considered perceptive.” 17:27-28

Are we to keep our mouths closed at all times? Of course not, for we are expected to confess Christ, evangelize, tell people we love them, etc., and there are times when silence is no more than cowardice or implied consent to wrongdoing. Truth must be defended and error must be corrected, but how many of us in looking back over our lives would say that failure to speak up has been more of a problem than failure to shut up? Why do we struggle sometimes not to say too much? For some it’s a prideful confidence that what they know more than anyone else or what they have to say is so important everyone needs to hear it. Closely related to that is insufficient interest in and concern for the thoughts of others. Jesus warned that the mouth is a reflection of the heart (Matthew 12:34-37) and improvement in this area of our speech requires hearts filled with a humble love for others.

But perhaps we talk too much for some innocuous reason such as nervousness. For some it’s not that they think they are smarter than everyone else, but when they get nervous they can’t seem to stop talking. Though the heart may not be filled with pride or disdain for others, a lot of nervous talking can still result in dishonesty, hurt feelings, gossip, etc. What can we do about this? Habits are usually hard to break, but it will make a difference if we spend time thinking on the importance of restraining the tongue. Before getting into a situation in which we might tend to start talking, let’s think about the problems it can cause and commit ourselves to less talk. And there are other possible explanations, but let’s all strive to pay more attention to how much we are talking and know when to shut it down.

## **Don’t Be a Repeater**

“A talebearer reveals secrets, But he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter.” 11:13;

“An ungodly man digs up evil, And it is on his lips like a burning fire.  
A perverse man sows strife, And a whisperer separates the best of friends.” 16:27-28

“He who covers a transgression seeks love, But he who repeats a matter separates friends.” 17:19

As these verses point out, sometimes we may hear something that seemingly begs to be told, but before we repeat the juicy tale, we need to stop and ask ourselves what the profit will be in repeating it. Though it happens far too often, we ought not to repeat what we have heard or read without being certain

that it is true. We must not spread rumors or say things like, “I can’t say with certainty this is true, but I was told...” Before we repeat anything we are obligated to make certain it is true, but let’s not stop there. Even if it’s true, why do we feel it needs to be repeated? Oftentimes a person will repent of some sin and go to those whom they have wronged, only to find that news of their transgression has already spread. Though they have made their life right with God, they may not ever be able to repair their reputation because we’ve unnecessarily spread the news about them.

What about those situations when one person says something hurtful about another person behind their back? Even if it’s true that someone said something ugly about John Doe, is this something John needs to know? What if the person comes to regret his words, wouldn’t it be better if John had never been told? Even if the one saying the hurtful things never regrets their actions, I should still ask myself if it there is any benefit in John Doe knowing what was said about him.

The next time I can’t wait to tell someone what I’ve heard, I need to stop and ask myself...

Is it true?

Is there more value in telling it or keeping it to myself?

### **Calming and Kind**

“A soft answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger.” 15:1

“Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, Sweetness to the soul and health to the bones.” 16:24

Certainly there are times that call for strong words (e.g. 1 Kings 18; Matthew 23; Acts 7; et al), but strong words are too often used when a soft answer could have a calming effect. As Jesus would say, “Bless those who curse you” (Matthew 5:44). To give a soft answer requires self-control and to speak pleasant words we must give careful thought to our words, but this extra effort is what our Lord expects. With our words we can “impart grace to the hearers” (Ephesians 4:29), but only if we commit ourselves to self-control and forethought.

In all our speech we need to heed the counsel of Proverbs 15:28—“The heart of the righteous studies how to answer, But the mouth of the wicked pours forth evil.”

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