

**Series: STICKS AND STONES—Oct. 15, 2006**

### DIGGING GRAVES

Proverbs 10:11-14; 18:7,21; Matt.12:34-37

#### I. INTRO

- A. There's a little chant that kids say, usually after someone's stepped on their heart. You've probably heard it. **Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me!** I have some bad news for you. It's not true! Bones heal, but my guess is that, unless you've been living in a giant bubble—you've got words like barbed arrows **still** sticking in your heart.

-A number of years ago, I did a study on Proverbs. To get a feel for what the whole book was saying, I categorized all the verses. I was **shocked** at how much this collection of sayings from Solomon, probably the wisest man who ever lived, had to say about how we use one of God's greatest gifts. Our mouths. There is a translation of the Bible I've been reading in my personal devotions called, **The Message**. What I love about it is the bluntness and straightforwardness of how it translates this book. So, I'm going to use it this morning. Listen to this cluster of verses:

**The mouth of a good person is a deep, life-giving well, but the mouth of a wicked person is a dark cave of abuse (Prov. 10:11).**

And then these amazing words:

**Fools are undone by their big mouths: their souls are crushed by their word...words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit—you choose!**

(Proverbs 18:7, 21)

1. Show of hands on this; any of you, like me, ever groaned and said, "Oh no! **Me and my BIG MOUTH!**"

On our honeymoon, Lori asked me to shake out the rug in the cottage. *I* said, "That's not **my** job; that's **your** job." **Me and my BIG mouth!** I could give you more illustrations, but they're really none of your business!

-I've said dumb things and I can now laugh them. But I've left some arrows in people's hearts, too. I've broken hearts and hurt reputations. The truth about me is that I've spoken lying words; vengeful words; hateful words; arrogant words--all written on the slate of my life. I have to own them—because they've got my nametag on them.

2. I've lived now for 53 years. Because I work a lot with people, I've had a chance to see what people leave in their wake over time, and what Solomon said is absolutely true. **Words kill, and words give life!** Some people's mouths are like those big diesel backhoes used on construction sites. Only they're not digging foundations. Nope. They're digging graves--graves for their relationships, for reputations they've murdered—but, ultimately, digging a grave for their own happiness; maybe for what they want most in life.

Mel Gibson did tremendous things with his film, *The Passion of the Christ*.

You're aware of his present situation—and the crisis it's created. In the five or ten minutes where his mouth was out of control, he may have undone years of good. That's all it takes.

- B. If we will listen, God asks some very important questions about my mouth...and yours too. Will it destroy people—or bring life? Will it embarrass you and leave messes too big to clean up, or will it create a path of wholeness for those who stand in front of it? **Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit--YOU CHOOSE!**

## II. YOUR MOUTH CAN BE YOUR WORST ENEMY

- A. I want to be clear about something at the top. The mouth itself really isn't the problem. The mouth is just a 3 inch hole in the front of your face surrounded by muscles, bone and enamel that leads to one of two places--your lungs or your stomach. The whole thing is actually an amazing speaker system. The best!

-But, like any good sound system, **something's** driving the speakers. The brain thinks up the stuff—but the heart drives it. Your heart is that inner core of your life and mine that has purpose, intentionality to it. That part that feels, gets excited, gets depressed, gets angry. You and I both know that if our mouths are destroying what we love—sewing it up won't help. You probably know from living and driving in Toronto that angry, frustrated people don't need speech to let you know how they really feel about you and your driving.

-Jesus tells us what the problem is—specifically.

**“For whatever is in your heart determines what you say. A good person produces good words from a good heart, and an evil person produces evil words from an evil heart. And I tell you this, that you must give an account on judgment day of every idle word you speak. The words you say now reflect your fate then; either you will be justified by them or you will be condemned (Matt. 12:34b-37 NLT).”**

-Speech is a huge gift. In fact, it is the most powerful distinguishing mark of being human.

Like anything powerful—fire, atomic energy or sex—it can be misused. So I have some props to illustrate how speech gets misused.

-Anyone know what this is? It's a genuine blowgun, made by the Waodani Tribe in the Amazon—the one featured in the film, *The End of the Spear*. It's crude—but quite efficient. Let's say you want barbecued monkey for lunch, well, you take this thing out into the forest and go for it. In and of itself, the dart isn't lethal. The lethal part is the poison they're dipped in—made from the brightly colored skin of tree frogs in the Amazon jungle. Get stuck with one of these babies and you're in a heap of trouble!

1. Ever gotten hit with a sharp word that's been dipped in poison? It **hurts!** Sometimes our words are dipped in poison—hatred, jealousy, contempt or self-interest. And they're deadly. Words kill; words give life...you choose. Listen to these words:  
**Liars secretly hoard hatred; fools openly spread slander (Prov. 10:18 Msg).  
Liars hate their victims...(Prov. 26:28 Msg). Mean-spirited slander is**

**heartless... (Prov. 11:12 Msg) Mean people spread gossip; their words smart and burn. (Prov. 16:27 Msg)**

2. Sometimes we shoot these words directly into the souls of people, but more often than not it happens in the shadows with slander and gossip. And when we use words like that—to inflict pain, hurt someone’s reputation—the adjective God reserves for us is **mean**. Why? Because that’s exactly what it is. It’s certainly not motivated by love, is it?

a. For the record, everyone know what **slander** is?

Slander is spreading false or misleading statements about someone behind their back and hurting their reputation. **Gossip** is confessing someone else’s sins—usually for the sake of making yourself look better or bigger than them. And God is very clear about how He feels about this stuff. It’s evil and it’s wrong. It’s a hate crime.

b. It’s wrong because the source is wrong. It comes from a poisoned heart. Many times we hurt, or feel small—and something dark in us wants to inflict some pain, make something die. The Bible says that if you say you love God but hate another person--you're a liar--you can't do both. Sometimes when we do something like that, we’d say, “Well, I don’t **hate** them...!” If you don’t hate them, why would you commit a hate crime against them?

B. Another misuse of the mouth could be illustrated by this thermostat. Anyone know what a thermostat is? It’s a switch activated by a thermometer. When the temperature goes up, the switch is activated—and something like an oven or furnace turns on or turns off. Anyone ever notice that sometimes your mouth is activated by your inner **temper—**ature?

For some people, that’s a huge problem. Things heat up, their mouth opens everyone ducks. Like any explosion, it does collateral damage.

1. The Bible is very clear on this stuff. Solomon wrote: **Slowness to anger makes for deep understanding; a quick-tempered person stockpiles stupidity (Prov. 14:29 Msg).**

In fact, Solomon calls a quick-tempered person a fool and basically says, “Don’t hang around someone like that, because you’ll get shrapnel in your heart!”

2. Know what’s amazing? I’ve watched people just cut loose; when they’re done, there’s relational blood and guts spattered on the ceilings, walls, people are lying around in various stages of death. Then the one who’s just shot everyone says something brilliant like, “Well, I was just upset--I didn't really mean it. It was the wrong time of the month...it’s my red hair...I’ve had a bad day...I’m tired—I didn’t get much sleep--blah, blah, blah.”

-Some really sweet people who are always talking about how much they love Jesus do the **Incredible Hulk** thing when things heat up. I mean, they turn green, pop buttons, turn over small cars—everything!

a. Solomon is very blunt about this. He says, a **quick-tempered person stockpiles stupidity (Prov. 14:29 Msg)**. Think about that. “What are you saving? What do you have in your warehouse?” “Oh, stupidity, mainly!” This hurts others and offends the Holy Spirit. And that’s understandable. God treasures a person, works in their hearts—and then one of us goes off like a landmine and wounds their heart. Think God says to himself, “Oh well. Ken was just having a bad day!”

4. When we explode, where do you think that stuff that flies out of us comes from? Again, we say dumb things like, “Sorry, I just wasn’t myself!” Really? Who **were** you then! If I’m holding a full glass and you bump me, what slops over the side? What’s **in** the glass, right? And what comes out of our mouths when we get bumped or jostled comes out of our hearts.

C. The mouth can also be misused as a **laundry chute**. When our son Matt was about 6, he saw the movie, **Dunston Checks In** and became fascinated with laundry chutes. In fact, we were horrified to find out that when he visited a friend after church one Sunday, he took a ride down their laundry chute. The kid had a **death wish!** Laundry chutes are cool. Open the lid, throw in the stuff, and it free-falls right into the laundry room. I couldn’t bring a laundry chute, so I brought some dirty laundry.

1. Well, some people have this unwashed laundry floating around in their brains. It’s like there’s nothing between their brain and their mouth, and whatever they’re thinking drops right out. Sometimes it doesn’t even really pass through the brain. Proverbs says:

**The speech of a good person is worth waiting for; the blabber of the wicked is worthless. The talk of a good person is rich fare for many; but chatterboxes die of an empty heart. (Prov. 10:18-21 Msg.)**

-We used to have this thing we did in college where we’d loosen the cap on the salt shaker when we sat down at the table. Someone would come along, sit down, go to salt their food—and ruin it—mummify it with a pile of salt. This is called **fun!** **Careful words make for a careful life; careless talk may ruin everything (Prov. 13:3 Msg.)**

Words ought to be like salt in a salt shaker—sprinkled carefully. **Think** before you say things. The Bible says:

**Observe people who always talk before they think—even simpletons are better off than they are (Prov.29:20 Msg)**

2. Having a laundry chute for a mouth—doesn’t just potentially hurt others, it makes you look dumb. People think, “Wow! Stuff just falls **right out** of their mouth! Better not tell them anything important!

a. God isn’t giving us this information to make us feel bad; it’s for the sake of our future, our friends, our reputation. God is saying, “I know you! I know

how desperately you want friends who respect you; who listen to you—want to be around you. But you have **got** to control your mouth or you'll run off every single friend you have!"

- b. So, are you losing altitude in any friendships? Doesn't have to happen! Do something!

- D. Fourth category of problem. Some people's mouths are like this giant **Kitchen Aid mixer**--always stirring up trouble. Someone makes a comment—they argue. They always know more than anyone else. They talk down to others like they're idiots. They're **always** right. They say insulting things. I mean, in any given conversation, they just **can't** resist throwing the last knife.
  - 1. Solomon had some very straightforward thoughts about this: Listen as I read through a collage of them:  
**Arrogant know-it-alls stir up discord; wise men and women listen to each other's counsel (Prov.13:10 Msg). A gentle response defuses anger; a sharp tongue kindles a temper-fire (Prov.15:1 Msg). The words of a fool start fights; do him a favor and gag him (Prov.18:6 Msg) A quarrelsome person in a dispute is like kerosene thrown on a fire (Prov.26:21 Msg).** Wow! He's good!
  - 2. Why do people do this? It's usually because they have this inner need to be right. To have things their way. It's a pride thing--they want to be right more than anything else.  
 Sometimes being right is even more important than a marriage, a friendship—  
 than their nose! I **like** my nose!
    - a. The Bible doesn't have any blessing for being a jerk. Jesus did, however, bless the **peacemakers**. The **meek**. Those who long, not to be right, but for **righteousness**.
    - b. The question the Bible asks is, "Why would you do this to yourself? Why would you want to live in relational chaos? Why would you want to go through life alienating people—living, relationally, as if you're in early adolescence? Don't inflame situations. Don't try to be right all the time--try saying "I **could** be **wrong!**" Don't wait for someone else to humiliate you—humble **yourself**. And don't wait to do it. Don't wait until you get fired, or you've blown up a marriage, or alienated your children or driven your friends away. **Deal with it!**

### III. YOUR MOUTH CAN BE YOUR BEST FRIEND!

- A. John Ortberg tells the story of sitting in a lobby of a university once with his family, when a woman walked in with her little boy, sat down, and just started to talk. They were complete strangers, but she began to talk. And she talked, and she talked. She told them about her relatives, about their home, about their children--she told them things they didn't **want** to know. At the end of 1 and 1/2 hours of non-stop talking, she looked at her watch and said, "Oh, I've got to go--I've got to go and buy some buttons for

my daughter's dress, see ya." At that point, her son, who had been totally silent up to this point, said, "Mom, you need a button for your **mouth**."

1. I have a word from God for us all on this. Behold, I tell you a mystery--everything you think isn't worth saying! Everything you know isn't worth sharing! Sometimes people will think you're brilliant if you **just keep quiet!**
2. If you have trouble holding your tongue, you need to know, first of all, that you've got company. **Lots** of it. Everybody---**everybody**—struggles. Also, you can't change by trying harder; you'll have to do some retraining. By getting feedback. By allowing others to help. There are some great questions you can ask yourself before you start your mouth:

**[ON SCREEN]**

**\*Okay--is this going to help or not?**

**\*I think it's true--but is *in fact* true?**

**\*Why am I saying this? Am I trying to appear clever—or smarter—or better than I am?**

**\*Am I saying this to make someone else look bad--at least, worse than me?**

**\*Is this a joke at someone else's expense?**

**\*Am I trying to inflict pain?**

**\*Will this build up or tear down?**

**\*Would I be—*will* I be embarrassed by these words at a different time and place?**

-David, in one of his Psalms, must've been having a **me-and-my-big-mouth** moment; he says, "**Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips (Psalm 141:3 NIV)!**" Sometimes it's good to appoint someone who loves you as a guard. To let you know what it's like on the other side of your mouth. But you'll have to promise that you won't shoot them for telling you the truth!

-If all you do is have a kind of time-delay thing so that you **think** before you talk—that will help!

3. I'll tell you exactly what the temptation is right now for both you and me. To say, "Ain't no flies on me!" To deny, blame--do everything except say, "I think I'm a little loose in the turns when it comes to my mouth! I may be losing altitude in my reputation or my friendships!"

-If you've got guts, ask a close friend who will be really honest with you about this—say, "Tell me the truth—what's it like to stand in front of my mouth? **Help me!**"

- B. The Bible says a **lot** about speech being something that can have a wholesome effect on others—give you a **good** reputation. I'm going to more about that next week. You've had a taste of what Proverbs, in particular, says about misusing words; now, here's a taste of what it says about using words with wisdom and discretion:

**Well-spoken words bring satisfaction; well-done work has its own reward (Prov.12:14 Msg) Worry weighs us down; a cheerful word picks us up (Prov.12:25 Msg) Congenial conversation--what a pleasure! The right word at the right time—beautiful (Prov.15:23 Msg)! A wise person gets known for his insight; gracious words add to one's reputation (Prov.16:21 Msg.)**

Words are like tools. You use different words for different things--and you use them carefully. Mechanics use greasy wrenches. Craftsmen use table saws, routers and sanders. Surgeons use scalpels. You don't want to get them mixed up. Can you imagine a surgeon chasing a patient around the OR with a hammer saying, "***But I want to fix your brain!***"

- C. Let me mention one final way your mouth can be your best friend. It's when it's wired properly to your ears. Have you ever gotten the feeling in a conversation that the other person isn't really listening; they're just waiting for you to stop talking? Unless you're talking to yourself--you need to listen to others before you talk.
1. Again, Solomon quite bluntly says: **Answering before listening is both stupid and rude (Prov.18:13 Msg)** James, Jesus' half brother writes about this too: **My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry (James 1:18 TNIV)**. Let's do a test on this: Quick to...? Slow to...?
 

-Now, there's a sort of genius in this. First, listening to others gives you time to ***think*** before you ***talk***. And when you listen, you learn--and you can respond more intelligently.

Finally, when you listen more, you talk less--and your chances of messing up are a ***lot*** less.

-In fact, want to sin less with what you say? ***Talk*** less. Prov. 10:19 says, **When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise (Prov. 10:19 NIV)**. Doing a *word reduction* has a direct effect, on you sin quotient!
  2. But you can't—and shouldn't—listen to everything. You need ***filters*** so you don't get polluted in the process of listening.
 

**The gullible believe anything they're told; the prudent sift and weigh (Prov.14:15 Msg)**. Be smart. Don't believe everything you hear.
  3. You also have to filter out the sewage. **Listening to gossip is like eating cheap candy; do you really want that junk in your belly (Prov.18:8 Msg)?** Guess what happens next? You get a bellyache, and go vomit the gossip on someone else. Proverbs says something else quite disturbing; there's a reason ***why*** we listen to gossip:
 

**Evil people relish malicious conversation; ears of liars itch for dirty gossip (Prov.17:4 Msg)!**

-I'm going to talk a little more about this next week from a positive point of view, but the thing that sabotages most churches is not government persecution or chucking the Bible as our authority. It's gossip. And we need to understand that, in the list of sins in Rom. 1, **gossip** is found right between the sins of murder and hating God. The early church dealt with this very severely. Paul taught Titus, an early leader: **If anyone is causing divisions among you, give a first and second warning. After that, have nothing more to do with that person (Titus 3:10 NLT).**

-Magazines and gossip rags make money off of this stuff. But when this happens among Christ-followers, they might as well be selling drugs or committing adultery right in church—it's **that** serious.

-Anyone remember where Jesus said the real problem is when it comes to the mouth? The heart. Garbage in, garbage out. When it comes to gossip and slander and criticism, I've seen so many people feign innocence on this; "I don't know **why** people come to **me** with this stuff? What could I do?"

-What would you do if the city garbage truck backed up on your driveway--and dumped? "Well, I didn't know what to do--all this filth--flies, rats, old slimy food just came pouring out. So, I cooked a little up, and it's really not bad if you use lots of ketchup" That's gross--but gossip isn't any different. When someone backs the gossip truck up to dump a load on you...beep...beep...beep—have the courage to **stop** them.

- D. Now, I know this is a lot of material--a lot of different verses about the mouth. Maybe it's too much to absorb in one message. I'm going to get painfully practical. You okay with that?
1. First, if you want to deal with your mouth—you've gotta deal with your heart. Your tongue is like a wick in a lamp. Pretty neutral. It's what the wick's **dipped** in that matters. It can be a lamp or a Molotov cocktail.

-One of the reasons why it's so important to invited Jesus Christ into the core of your life is because He's the only One who can really clean it out—and change it. Truth is, sometimes we invite Jesus to forgive us—but we never allow Him to go in our lives where He needs to if He's going to change us. He alone is the source of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, long-suffering and...**self control**. Have you ever asked him to change your heart? To do whatever it takes inside you so that your life brings good—not bad.

There's something else that is absolutely critical as to what's in your heart. It's what you **feed** your heart. You could call it the **LAW OF EXPOSURE**. This is the way it works. What enters your mind, what fills your mind, the kinds of things that repeatedly occupy your mind will shape your mind, what you think about, and ultimately what you do and **WHO YOU BECOME**. If you fill your heart up with critical and unforgiving thoughts--or even self-loathing and regret and anger—it will come out. And over time it putrefies—and then comes out worse than it went in.

Fill your heart with better things! Listen to what the Bible says:

**Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse (Phil. 4:8 Msg).**

Write it down—what your mind is continually exposed to will determine how you feel, what you say, and what you do.

2. Second observation. As I have already said, speech is **powerful**. It can do a **lot** of good, or it can do a **lot** of damage. **Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit—you choose (Prov. 18:21 Msg.)**

-It's the message of Proverbs; it's the message of Jesus—it's right, it's true, and it's eternal. Your life will be weighted by your speech--toward blessing or disaster—one word at a time.. Your Think about it. Over a lifetime, the average person says enough to fill a library with 10,000 books--300 pages apiece! It's like there's this watershed point—and what you say determines whether your life will flow toward love, joy, great relationships—really making a difference—or to a far different ocean. A place you don't want to be.

-So, **do the work of figuring out which direction yours is headed in!** Ask for help. Let others tell you how you come across—and have the humility to learn!

3. Based on all this, there's a third observation. Your mouth will either make you a good friend, a great parent, and a loving spouse--or it'll leave you a crabby, old lonely person at the end of your life. Do you want friends? Do you want to leave behind a legacy--and wind up with God's smile on your life? **Watch your words; clean out your heart!**
4. Fourth observation, if people are getting hurt by what you say or how you say it, you may have a bunch of anger inside. It's in there, floating around—kinda like a Molotov cocktail waiting to be lit. It might really help you and help those around you to see a good Christian counselor and find out **why** it's there.
5. Some of you may be saying to yourselves, “Yeah, well there goes Ken again with his dumb little props—the blowgun, the thermostat, the boxing glove, the laundry and the lamp. Geesh! Does he think we're all idiots?

-Friends, I've been a pastor for 27 years—last month—and I just need to say—I'm not sure what else to do? Honestly, I can't say I've seen a **lot** of Christ-followers who **get** it—who understand ugly gossip and slander and nasty words are—and how it grieves God and hurts the church. My prayer for The Olive Branch—and beyond—is that we will be different. That, as Jesus prayed, **we** will be known by our love; by the gracious, kind and generous way we treat other's lives and hearts.

Can we agree on that? Jesus said, "**On the last day, your words will either acquit you or condemn you.**"

#### IV. SWEEPING UP

- A. In our home, one of the toughest things we've had to model and teach is, "If you **make** the mess, **you** clean it up." I think we'd all grow to more like Jesus if we, with humility, would simply clean up the messes we've made with misusing our mouths.
1. I honestly feel bad about what Mel Gibson has done. I feel bad for him, and I feel bad for the Kingdom. But I have to tell you that I really, **really** admire him. This past week he made one of the most brutally honest apologies I've heard, and that takes character—and it takes courage. Watch this (**VIDEO CLIP**).  
-The principle is very simple. If you make a mess, **you** clean it up. If you shot arrows, shed blood, you pull them out and help heal the wounds. **You** own them. No excuses. No, "Yea, but **you...**" No, "Gee, I'm sorry; I wasn't really myself. I didn't get much rest, see..." It would actually sound more like, "To tell you the truth--I've got a mouth that's out of control, and what I said was **totally** uncalled for. For some reason, God hasn't fully gotten control of my mouth yet, and I want to do whatever it takes to bring healing."
  2. And I want you to know that I've had to do that. The grossest, most humiliating moments of my life have been when I've had to own my own brokenness—the misuse of my mouth and my life. It's messy and humbling and painful. But it works. See, if you have to humble yourself, ask forgiveness, 10, 20, 50 times; if you get tired of mopping up relational blood, and pulling arrows, and stitching up wounds, the chances are you'll get **SO tired** of it, you'll eventually cry out and say, "Oh, God--you have **got** to do something about my mouth; take a coal from your altar--burn it good; wash it with heavenly soap. Don't let it sing praises one minute and sewage the next. And **I'll cooperate!**"
- B. The most gracious person who has ever lived has made this incredible offer to you and me--that if we will give Him our mouths--and the heart--the container this little wick is dipped in--He would fill the container with something worth dipping in. Himself. His love. He's waiting for people like you and me to take Him up on His offer. I'm going for it.