

The Book of Proverbs, found in the Jewish Bible or Christian Old Testament, declares its purpose at the outset, which is to promote the pursuit of wisdom within a God-centered framework by encouraging individuals to reflect upon truthful sayings:

To know wisdom and instruction, to discern the sayings of understanding, to receive instruction in wise behavior, righteousness, justice and equity; to give prudence to the naïve, to the youth knowledge and discretion, a wise man will hear and increase in learning, and a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel, to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (1:2-7)

A major topic in Proverbs is speech, which is presented as having the power both to heal and destroy. In today's world "free speech" is often defended, as it should be, but too little time is spent on what is proper or prudent speech—and, of course, everyone is familiar with the low place to which online discourse can descend. As we will see, the ancients of the thousand years before Christ who developed and assembled this collection of proverbs knew better than many today the importance of how we go about expressing ourselves.

The Book of Proverbs on Prudent Speech (as translated in the New American Standard Bible)

There are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood; a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers. (6:16-19)

When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable; but he who restrains his lips is wise. (10:19)

The lips of the righteous bring forth what is acceptable, but the mouth of the wicked, what is perverted. (10:32)

He who despises his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding keeps silent. He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy conceals a matter. (11:12-13)

An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips, but the righteous will escape from trouble. (12:13)

He who speaks truth tells what is right, but a false witness, deceit. There is one who speaks rashly like the thrust of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips will be established forever, but a lying tongue is only for a moment. (12:17-19)

Anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down, but a good word makes it glad. (12:25)

The one who guards his mouth preserves his life; the one who opens wide his lips comes to ruin. (13:3)

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable, but the mouth of fools spouts folly. The eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good. A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but perversion in it crushes the spirit. (15:1-4)

A man has joy in an apt answer, and how delightful is a timely word! The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things. (15:23, 28)

The wise in heart will be called understanding, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness. The heart of the wise instructs his mouth and adds persuasiveness to his lips. Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. (16:21,23-24)

A worthless man digs up evil, while his words are as a scorching fire. A perverse man spreads strife, and a slanderer separates intimate friends. (16:27-28)

He who has a crooked mind finds no good, and he who is perverted in his language falls into evil. (17:20)

He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is considered prudent. (17:27-28)

A fool does not delight in understanding, but only in revealing his own mind. (18:2)

A fool's lips bring strife, and his mouth calls for blows. A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are the snare of his soul. The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of the body. (18:6-8)

He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him. (18:13)

Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity, than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool. (19:1)

Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man, but any fool will quarrel. (20:3)

He who guards his mouth and his tongue, guards his soul from troubles. (21:23)

Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the wisdom of your words. (23:9)

He kisses the lips who gives a right answer. (24:26)

Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances. (25:11)

Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all the unfortunate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the afflicted and needy. (31:8-9)