A woman’s Wisdom

how the book of Proverbs speaks to everything

lydia brownback

INCLUDES STUDY GUIDE
“The book of Proverbs is a gold mine of divine wisdom, and Lydia Brownback applies that wisdom in very practical ways to the issues women face. This is one of those books that should be studied more than simply read, and I can see it as a valuable resource for women’s Bible studies.”

Jerry Bridges, author, *The Pursuit of Holiness*

“If only we could pull up a chair across from the purple-linen-wearing Proverbs 31 woman to observe her inner strength, listen to her confident laughter, admire her reverent fear, and absorb her wise ways. That’s what readers get to do through the pages of *A Woman’s Wisdom* as we’re invited to saturate ourselves in the source of true wisdom—the Scriptures—where we find what we need for living in a world full of distractions, decisions, dilemmas, disappointments, and delights. This book lends itself to quiet mornings of reflection on your own as well as vigorous discussions with a group of good friends.”

Nancy Guthrie, Bible Teacher; author, Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament Bible Study series

“It is so refreshing to read a book that handles the kinds of things that every woman will face from one single perspective: the stunning wisdom of God. Too often books like this start with cultural assumptions that only serve to weaken their effectiveness in the end. It is only God’s wisdom that can help us navigate the pressures and insanities of the surrounding culture and teach us the freedom of being what we were created to be and living as we were created to live. Read and experience how God’s wisdom is eloquent and transcendent while being concrete and practical at the same time.”

Paul David Tripp, President, Paul Tripp Ministries; author, *What Did You Expect? Redeeming the Realities of Marriage*

“In a day when we’re often inclined to settle for helpful hints or pious platitudes, this book points us to the source of that rare commodity, true wisdom. Lydia Brownback has the depth of insight and the lightness of touch needed to make the book of Proverbs come alive for her readers. If your heart yearns for a solid place to stand in the shifting currents of your everyday life, you will find a sure guide and refreshing stream of truth here.”

Liam Goligher, Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; author, *The Jesus Gospel*

“Lydia Brownback has provided women with an excellent resource for unlocking the wisdom of Proverbs.”

Josh Moody, Senior Pastor, College Church, Wheaton, Illinois; author *No Other Gospel*
“Halfway through the first chapter, I thought, ‘My wife would love this book.’ Halfway through the book, I thought, ‘I love this book!’ My reasons are manifold: Lydia Brownback’s study of Proverbs is biblical, practical, straight-forward, convicting, instructive, transformative, and Christ-centered. With wisdom, wit, and carefully crafted sentences, Lydia Brownback’s study of Proverbs helps women (and men!) to rest in the source of all wisdom, Jesus. See if you might ‘love’ the book as well.”

Doug O’Donnell, Senior Pastor, New Covenant Church, Naperville, Illinois; author of The Beginning and End of Wisdom

“The beauty of proverbs is that, by their very nature, they are timeless and ageless. The smallest child can memorize and apply them on a surface level while the oldest adult can meditate on them and apply them over a lifetime. In this wonderful book, Lydia Brownback applies the proverbs to today’s Christian woman. With equal parts sound interpretation and heartfelt application, this book offers that same timeless, ageless wisdom to a new generation of women.”

Tim & Aileen Challies, Grace Fellowship Church, Toronto, Ontario; Tim blogs at Challies.com

“From the wisdom of Proverbs, Lydia Brownback draws wise and ever so practical applications for women. Her clear and consistent call is to embrace the full wisdom of God given to us in Christ.”

Kathleen Nielson, Director of Women’s Initiatives, The Gospel Coalition; author and speaker, Living Word Bible studies and Bible Study: Following the Ways of the Word
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Advice books are no short-lived trend. They continue to top best-seller lists, and new how-to releases get clicked into Amazon shopping carts hundreds of times each day. The popularity of such books isn’t likely to wane, even though the “wisdom” of much of what’s offered is transient and proves shallow in the long run. How-to books wouldn’t be nearly so popular if people would just embrace the wisdom of God’s ways, but whenever God’s ways—the how-tos of Scripture—are rejected, even shallow alternatives are going to hold appeal.

The problem for so many of us is that we want a formula: three easy steps to the good life. In the midst of meticulously scheduled lives, it is much easier to cruise through the McDonald’s drive-thru than to prepare a well-balanced dinner. For the same reason, it is often much easier to digest a quick read on our problem du jour than to take time to dig into God’s Word. We don’t “have time” to get to know him. Maybe tomorrow, we think; today we just want a few pointers on how to minimize stress, balance the budget, and get the kids to behave.

A glance through the book of Proverbs shows us just what we seem to need—short, pithy how-tos in Twitter-like blurbs. However,
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if we approach Proverbs with a quick-fix mind-set, we are going to miss the overarching point of the book: getting to know and learning to love the Author of wisdom. It is only through knowing and loving God—what Proverbs calls “the fear of the LORD”—that we will understand how to apply its practical how-tos.

We women need practical advice for life, but even more than that, we need hearts set on the One who governs all our practicalities. The book of Proverbs unlocks the key to both. Its wisdom is timeless. Although the book of Proverbs was written to particular people—primarily young men in ancient Israel—its wisdom and the necessity of obtaining it are the same in every age for both men and women. What changes are the circumstances in which to apply it. We may not face the difficulties that ancient women did, but we do face very real challenges:

• practicing biblical womanhood in a world that scorns us for it;
• keeping sexually pure in a sex-saturated society;
• handling our freedom, independence, and material resources wisely;
• maintaining God-glorifying marriages;
• elevating biblical priorities ahead of day-to-day pressures.

Some may be surprised to learn that Proverbs addresses all these things. In fact, there is no area for which we need wisdom that Proverbs doesn’t address. That’s because all wisdom is summed up this way: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (9:10; see also 1:7 NKJV). Once we get this—and embrace it—we will find ourselves equipped to handle the how-tos.

In your hands is a book for women on the wisdom to be gleaned from the book of Proverbs. You will find nine chapters that you can read alone or in a small-group setting with the accompanying study guide at the back of the book. What we will see as we take a close
look at Proverbs is that all true wisdom springs from the fear of the Lord.

Part 1, “What Is Wisdom and Why Does It Matter?,” is based on chapters 1–3 and 8–9 of Proverbs. Here we will examine why pursuing biblical wisdom, what Proverbs calls “the fear of the Lord,” is the primary calling of every Christian woman. Women of wisdom are those who:

- acknowledge God’s sovereignty over everything that comes to pass;
- submit to God’s ordering of the world;
- cherish Christ above all else;
- trust in the goodness of God’s character;
- guard their hearts in biblical truth.

One of the ways that Proverbs shows us the blessings of wisdom is by contrasting wisdom with folly, so we are going to look not only at characteristics of the wise but also at characteristics of fools.

Part 2, “Six Things Wise Women Know,” applies biblical wisdom to six aspects of a woman’s life: (1) her words; (2) her friendships; (3) her physical appetites; (4) her emotions; (5) her money; and (6) her sexuality.

Part 3, “A Portrait of Wisdom,” offers a biblical illustration of all we will study in parts 1 and 2. The focus here is on the woman in Proverbs 31:10–31. Some women are either intimidated by this woman or dismissive of her, but we will see why she isn’t at all intimidating. An understanding of how she fits into the overall teaching of Proverbs eliminates any intimidation and can inspire a love of wisdom in specifically feminine ways. May we find ourselves becoming more like her for the good of our families, our churches, and our communities, and for the glory of God.

At the end you’ll find a study guide. You can use it on your own as you are reading through the book or for small-group discussion. One of the questions accompanying each chapter is marked with . These questions require more in-depth study and will take a
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bit longer to complete. If you want more room to interact with the study guide, you can download and print a larger copy for free at crossway.org/awomanswisdom.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. (James 1:5)
Lying is very stressful. It actually can make you feel really worthless—a crutch you get in the habit of using when you really don’t need one. But because lies beget other lies, you start to think that who you really are does need all that cover-up, so you end up with very little faith in yourself. We need to get you out of this rut. There’s a golden rule that you need to embrace if you want to stop lying: There is nothing and no one that is better than you.

—Seventeen magazine

Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight.

—Proverbs 12:22
Our words carry tremendous power, and perhaps that is why Proverbs contains so many sayings about how we use our tongues.

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits. (Prov. 18:21)

And

A fool’s mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul. (Prov. 18:7)

We find the same perspective in the New Testament. The apostle James wrote, “The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of
God” (James 3:6–9). So it is clear that we can greatly affect our well-being and that of others by what we do with our tongues.

That being said, the power of our words springs not from our actual tongue but from the heart that controls it. Jesus made clear that our words are a reflection of our hearts, which is why they will be judged so strictly: “The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:35–37).

helping words

As we’ve seen, the proverbs were originally recorded to instruct young men in God’s ways, but the truths we find in them aren’t just applicable to young men. They are fitting for everyone—male or female, young or old—because they are God’s truths. There is, however, a distinction in how to apply them.

God designed women to complement men. That’s not compliment with an i but complement with an e. That one letter makes all the difference. To complement means to fill up, complete, or make perfect. That’s what God had in mind when he said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen. 2:18). Actually, it’s a two-way street; men and women were designed to complement each other. Men and women have been hardwired with distinctive gender traits that, when working together, serve the human race and display the glory of God.

The word helper gets a bad rap. In the marriage context it can conjure up a mental picture of a worn-out wife trudging through the housework and seeking to help her man accomplish his personal goals while he has a stimulating day at the office. But that is not what God had in mind. A wife’s calling is to help her husband accomplish God’s goals. The two working together, each with particular
wise women know the power of words

strengths, grow and build up God’s family and spread God’s name throughout the world.

There is actually a lot of power in being a helper, because one of the primary ways we exercise it is by influence, and we influence by means of our words. All that to say, one of the primary ways we fulfill our role as helper is through our tongues. A godly helper uses her words to build up, to encourage, and to disseminate God’s Word.

A woman who used her tongue for the good of others was Esther. In fact, she risked her life in doing so after her relative Mordecai said, “Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king’s palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Est. 4:13–14 NKJV). The Jews of her day were up against a secretive deadly plot, but because Esther employed her tongue with great wisdom, the Jews were saved.

We can, however, corrupt the call to help, to influence for good, by our words. Consider Delilah in Judges 16. Delilah was a Philistine woman who was employed by her countrymen to trick the Israelite judge Samson. From what we are given to see of Samson in the Bible, it is apparent that he was susceptible to worldly women like Delilah. She put to use all of her feminine wiles—including her speech—to convince Samson to reveal the secret of his great strength so that the Philistines might come in and overpower him. On three separate occasions Delilah said, “Please tell me where your great strength lies, and how you might be bound, that one could subdue you” (v. 6). Because Samson was infatuated with this woman, he believed she was merely playing some sort of lovers’ game, and he teased her with wrong answers time and again. Finally, though, when Delilah’s manipulative words failed to charm the secret from Samson, she nagged the truth from him, harassing him verbally until he gave in from sheer frustration.
Delilah epitomizes how a woman can misuse her tongue to destroy. God hasn’t given us the gift of speech to gratify our selfish desires. It is meant for building up, encouraging, and setting forth wisdom. When a woman uses her tongue to influence for good, God is glorified and the people in her life are blessed. Will we use our words to manipulate for selfish gain? Or will we use them for the good of others? We will face this choice every day in every conversation we have.

**words of folly**
If we isolate all the proverbs that have to do with our words, we find that certain speech sins are addressed repeatedly, so of these we should take careful note.

*Lies*
From Proverbs we learn a lot about the characteristics of a liar and the consequences of lying. One thing we learn is that lying is futile because it is always caught and punished:

> A false witness will not go unpunished, 
> and he who breathes out lies will not escape. (Prov. 19:5)

Sometimes we lie because we feel cornered; it’s almost a knee-jerk response to avoid shame or embarrassment. Other times our lies might be more deliberate. Either way, Proverbs indicates that liars will be held accountable for their words.

We also discover that there is a link between hatred and lying:

> The one who conceals hatred has lying lips, 
> and whoever utters slander is a fool. (Prov. 10:18)

> A lying tongue hates its victims, 
> and a flattering mouth works ruin. (Prov. 26:28)
As we can see, hatred and lying go together. Lying expresses contempt for the one being lied to. It is a move away from relationship. Recall a time when someone lied to you, and think about why it hurt when you found out. Chances are it wasn’t just whatever the liar had tried to cover up but also the fact that the liar created a barrier in your relationship. The act of lying is a maneuvering tactic for creating relational distance, whether or not the liar is conscious of doing so.

Another thing we learn from Proverbs about lying is how much God hates it:

There are six things that the Lord hates,
seven that are an abomination to him:
haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
and hands that shed innocent blood. (Prov. 6:16–17)

Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord,
but those who act faithfully are his delight. (Prov. 12:22; 6:17)

Abomination is a pretty strong word. In Scripture it is attached to behaviors for which God has a particular disgust and loathing. For that reason, wise women also hate lying:

The righteous hates falsehood,
but the wicked brings shame and disgrace. (Prov. 13:5)

To hate something is to reject it, to utterly repudiate it, and to cringe when it confronts us. Wise women take honest speech seriously and do not consider half-truths, white lies, or anger-generated vows as legitimate exceptions. If we catch ourselves telling a lie, we stop and tell the truth. Those who are careful to speak only truth are trusted and their words are weighty, whereas those who are careless with the truth aren’t taken seriously.

Ellie learned this firsthand with her daughter Kate, who had
been pushing the boundaries of her curfew for several weeks. Ellie warned Kate that if she broke curfew again, she would be grounded. It did happen again, that very week, but Ellie didn’t follow through with the punishment. As a result, Kate has lost respect for her mother and gives even less weight to Ellie’s rules.

If we want to be taken seriously, and if we really want to love those around us, we won’t be careless with the truth. When a friend asks if we think she needs to lose weight, we will tell her the truth rather than just what will make her feel good at the moment. If a coworker tells us she is planning to use a sick day for fun at the beach, we don’t back up her dishonesty with our own untruth and say, “Hey, that’s okay. You need a break.” Being scrupulous with the truth can be hard sometimes, but the payoff is worth it.

What about things like Santa Claus and keeping surprise parties a secret? It is possible to participate in the delights of such occasions without lying. I think, for example, of the husband of a friend of mine who recently threw his wife a surprise birthday party. He worked behind the scenes to gather her friends for the occasion and managed to keep the party planning so completely off her radar that he never once felt cornered into having to lie.

When it comes to Christmas, some Christian parents include Santa in their family tradition and others do not. Among those who do, I’ve known many who incorporate Santa without actually leading their children to believe that the gifts under the tree were left there by a jolly old man who came down the chimney. However Santa is handled in your home, it provides an opportunity to teach children about wise words as they are exposed to those whose Christmas tradition differs from theirs.

Surprise parties, Santa Claus, and sensitivity to others’ feelings are just some of the areas in which bringing joy to another without compromising truth can take some creativity, but since God is the originator of joy and truth, he will surely help us to convey both in these situations, if we ask him to.
Wise women take to heart all Proverbs has to say about the inevitable destruction of lying, the reality of which is played out before us all the time. The demise of the political career of John Edwards is a recent illustration. When the media exposed his extramarital affair with a staffer, he initially denied the reports, but as evidence of his infidelity grew, he had no choice but to admit the truth that he not only had been unfaithful to his wife but also had fathered a child through the affair. His lies harmed numerous people—dedicated political supporters, both his illegitimate child and legitimate children, and his wife, who had been diagnosed with cancer at the time of the scandal. His wife, Elizabeth, stuck by her husband until the depth of his attempted cover-up became known. Elizabeth Edwards died some time ago, and although John was in the family home at the time of her death, the media reported that she had cut John from her estate just days before. Those he harmed will be scarred certainly, but in time it is to be hoped that what he did and tried to cover up won’t prove detrimental to their lives. Not so with John himself. In the eyes of the public, at least, he will be remembered not as a great politician but as a liar.

False Witness

Another speech folly found in Proverbs is false witness, of which lying is a subset.

A faithful witness does not lie,
but a false witness breathes out lies. (Prov. 14:5)

We also find it in the ninth commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Ex. 20:16). When we encounter this commandment, a courtroom scene pops into our minds. We picture a court officer placing a Bible before a witness and asking, “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—so help you God?” But not bearing false witness includes more than
being truthful in court. What exactly is false witness? The term is broader than simple lying, as the Westminster Larger Catechism points out:

The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for, and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocence; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging talebearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requireth; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practicing of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.¹

It seems, then, that we break the ninth commandment every time we sin with our tongue! Any speech sin breaks the ninth commandment.

The Westminster Catechism points out something interesting: we can bear false witness against ourselves. We do this whenever we put ourselves down. “I’m such an idiot!” we say, when the good china platter slips from our grasp and smashes on the floor. We also bear false witness against ourselves when we focus perpetually on our weaknesses rather than view ourselves through the lens of God’s Word. We need a healthy self-image, the world says, but this is only possible if it is shaped by God’s Word. A healthy self-image is found in reflecting God’s image. The world tells us to glory in our particular strengths, in what makes us measure up to or surpass the accomplishments of others. The Bible, on the other hand, tells us to rejoice that we have been made in the image of our Creator. A truly healthy self-image can be glimpsed in the words of the psalmist: “You formed...
wise women know the power of words

my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well” (Ps. 139:13–14).

Concerning our neighbor, bearing false witness can be as much about what we don’t say as it is about what we do say. We bear false witness whenever we refuse to stand up and defend someone who is being gossiped about in our presence (more on this below). We can also bear false witness against our neighbor in our hearts when we presume to pass judgment on her intentions or motives.

A man who bears false witness against his neighbor
is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow.
(Prov. 25:18)

Exaggeration
We also sin with our words whenever we exaggerate the truth. I’m not talking about embellishing as a literary device, times when storytelling is fun, and the audience knows the storyteller’s colorful words are meant for effect. I’m talking about skewing the details of real life to garner attention. It may not seem like such a big deal, but over time all the words of an exaggerator lose credibility.

The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious
and adds persuasiveness to his lips. (Prov. 16:23)

Think about our natural response to television commercials. We don’t really believe that Frosted Mini-Wheats will improve our kids’ attentiveness by 20 percent, or that switching to Pantene Pro-V Moisture Renewal Shampoo will transform our genetically frizzy hair into silken strands. We don’t believe it, because past experience has shown us that products routinely promise more than they deliver. Just so, if we routinely embellish the truth, people will begin to take all our words with a grain of salt.

It’s something we must be on guard against, because we slip into
it so easily. “I hate winter!” we say, but we probably don’t, if we consider that hatred involves a strong, visceral desire for the destruction of someone or something. “My haircut is a total catastrophe!” Is it really? We might want to bounce that off a survivor of the 2011 Japanese tsunami. “I just adore cashmere!” Let’s hope we don’t, since to adore is to worship.

Exaggeration is the American way, but it is not the way of wise women, who know that, according to Jesus, they shall be held accountable for every careless word they utter.

**Slander**

Wise women avoid slander, which is the destroying of another’s reputation. Proverbs tells us that slander is a trait of fools:

> The one who conceals hatred has lying lips,  
> and whoever utters slander is a fool. (Prov. 10:18)

Some years ago a young man in our community fell into some trouble and was placed under church discipline. Those of us who knew about it were warned by the church’s pastor not to talk about the situation with outsiders in order to protect the young man’s reputation. I was powerfully impacted by the pastor’s instructions because from all accounts, the young man was clearly guilty of the wrongdoing. Nevertheless, discussing it could further have damaged him. Stories grow as they are told, and human nature being what it is defaults to believing the worst about someone. Because of that, we are capable of slandering someone even if what we say is factually right.

**Careless Words**

Another speech folly addressed in Proverbs concerns how much and when we talk. Proverbs links folly to a multitude of words—in other words, to talking too much:
When words are many, transgression is not lacking,  
but whoever restrains his lips is prudent. (Prov. 10:19)

We see there that restrained words are indicative of wisdom, which means that how much we talk is one way we are exposed to others as either foolish women or wise ones. Fools speak before they think, whereas the words of wise women are timely and well thought out. Wise women practice discernment with their words:

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

Do you see a man who is hasty in his words?  
There is more hope for a fool than for him. (Prov. 29:20)

The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer,  
but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.  
(Prov. 15:28)

If one gives an answer before he hears,  
it is his folly and shame. (Prov. 18:13)

Concerning that last verse, Proverbs 19:3, do we have a tendency to cut others off mid-sentence, assuming we know what they are going to say?

While we’re on the subject, I can’t help but think of those of us who walk through life with our cell phone affixed to our head as if it was an appendage of flesh. “I’m multitasking!” goes the explanation, but only in the last generation or two has multitasking come to be considered more virtuous than moments of silence and reflective thought. Besides, this is often an excuse we allow ourselves when, for whatever reason, we are ducking time alone with our thoughts. As I
sat in cross-traffic last week, I decided to count the number of drivers I could spot talking on cell phones. Of the twelve cars that went by, there were eight cell-phone-using drivers; six of those were women. Phones on the road, in the dressing room, at the restaurant counter—we talk too much, and according to Proverbs there is folly in that.

In addition to the wisdom of when and how often we speak, there is even wisdom in the way we pitch our voice:

> Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing. (Prov. 27:14)

The immoral woman of Proverbs 7 is portrayed as having a loud voice:

> She is loud and wayward; her feet do not stay at home. (Prov. 7:11)

And so is woman Folly:

> The woman Folly is loud; she is seductive and knows nothing. (Prov. 9:13)

When it comes to how much and how often we talk and the voice we use to do so, here’s wisdom:

> Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble. (Prov. 21:23)

Wise speaking not only keeps us out of trouble, but it also brings us joy:

> To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is! (Prov. 15:23)
Gossip

One of the things Proverbs makes clear is how much our words affect our relationships. Gossip has a tremendous impact. We are told:

A talebearer reveals secrets,
  but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter.
  (Prov. 11:13 NKJV)

In other words, someone who gossips about another reveals an unfaithful spirit toward the relationship. Additionally:

A dishonest man spreads strife,
  And a whisperer separates close friends. (Prov. 16:28)

This proverb tells us that no matter how strong a foundation a relationship has, gossip can tear it apart. Think about your closest friendship: what bonds you? Isn’t it your memories of shared experiences, both good and bad, and the confidences you’ve entrusted to each other as you work through life’s complexities and hard times? Now consider what Proverbs teaches: gossip has the power to wipe all that out.

Although we know that gossip is sinful, we tend not to see it in quite the same destructive light that Proverbs does. We often view it as one of those “little” sins, something we know is wrong but not bad enough to wage war against in our hearts and lives. Some of us repackage the sin of gossip as “prayer concern,” revealing personal tidbits about others’ lives to our friends or Bible study group with hushed tones and concerned faces. Those of us who listen avidly are equal gossip participants. Do we realize that offering a receptive ear to gossip is as bad as voicing it?

Whether we listen to gossip or speak it, we are proving ourselves to be untrustworthy. So why do we do it? Sometimes we do it because we think it is a way to deepen a bond. “I’m really disturbed at what Sarah did last week,” Sally tells Susie, “and I’ve just got to talk about
it with someone. I’m telling you because I know I can trust you not to tell anyone.” Ironically, Sally is undermining the very thing she wants from Susie—a deeper trust bond—because at some level, Susie realizes that if Sally can talk about Sarah to her, then Sally can just as easily talk about her to Sarah.

Gossip and all other speech sins stir up relational trouble. Think about every conflict you’ve ever had: wasn’t it words of whatever sort that inflamed it? Probably right now we can all think of a conflict or two going on in our lives or among people we know. How can we use our words to respond to those conflicts wisely? One thing we can do is make a commitment not to involve ourselves in any gossip swirling around, whether by speaking it or listening to it.

For lack of wood the fire goes out,
and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.
(Prov. 26:20)

Since gossip has such negative consequences, why do we do it? As we already noted, one reason is that we believe the lie that it will bond us closer to those we gossip with. Another reason is this:

The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels;
they go down into the inner parts of the body.
(Prov. 18:8)

Primarily, Scripture says, we do it because it’s enjoyable. The truth of this is proven by our response to the screaming headlines we see on supermarket tabloids—published gossip—while we are waiting in the checkout line. Just a passing glimpse at these headlines lets us in on the sordid affairs, legal troubles, addictions, and eating habits of the celebrities of the moment. A Christlike response would be sorrow, but instead we often feel good. The exposure of the travails of others makes us feel better about ourselves. “At least I don’t have that trouble,” we think with smug superiority, or, “My sin isn’t as bad as
wise women know the power of words

hers.” Peeking inside the private problems of those who are successful by the world’s standards also makes us feel vindicated—all their money, perfect bodies, and Hollywood homes can’t shield them from the same troubles that others have. We are reminded in black-and-white and four-color that worldliness doesn’t pay what it promises.

Is this really so bad? It is, because we are renewing our satisfaction at others’ expense. Consider how Asaph handled similar circumstances in his day:

As for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.  
For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.  
For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek.  
They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. . . .  
Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies.  
They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.  
They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. . . .  
Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.  
All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. . . .  
If I had said, “I will speak thus,” I would have betrayed the generation of your children.  
But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! (Ps. 73:2–19)
Just as we do at times, Asaph wondered if following God’s ways was worth it. As he looked at the worldly people around him, he saw their seeming advantages, and he was envious. But listening to gossip about the downfall of the worldly was not his path to peace. Rather, he found it by going into God’s presence, which gave him long-range perspective. Additionally, it wasn’t the downfall of the worldly that made him feel better; it was the fact that the purposes and glory of God and his ways will inevitably prevail, and therefore God’s people can safely follow his ways.

Gossip makes us feel good, like eating tasty morsels, for a variety of reasons. Therefore, we are going to have to make every effort to resist it, perhaps lifelong effort. We are going to have to make a commitment not to “vent” or to spiritualize our words about others.

What about situations or relational conflicts in which we need advice or input from someone we trust? Surely there are times when discussing another person doesn’t fall into the gossip category; in many of our relational conflicts we do benefit from outside help. When it comes to determining which is which in our particular case, usually our hearts will tip us off about why we want to talk about another, if we’re honest enough to look. Are we seeking vindication? Are we bringing a third party into the conflict because we want someone to take our side? Or are we seeking help because reconciliation is what we’re after? As with so many things, our motives make the difference.

Flattery

Another speech folly that Proverbs highlights is flattery:

A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin. (Prov. 26:28)

Women steeped in biblical wisdom typically see right through flattery; they can sense the difference between a sincere compliment and flattering words. A compliment is offered as a means of building up,
wise women know the power of words

whereas flattery is spoken for personal gain. Complimenting is others-centered; flattering is self-centered. People who flatter are after something. Consider the stereotypical cad, a good-looking man with a slick tongue who woos a gullible and lonely woman out of her savings. How does he do it? He flatters her. She is the most beautiful creature to ever walk this earth, he says; and because she wants so desperately to be loved, she will do anything, even impoverish herself, to keep him around. His flattery has gotten him what he wanted.

Proverbs warns us to be careful and discerning:

A man who flatters his neighbor
spreads a net for his feet. (Prov. 29:5)

Flattery ensnares us where we are weak. It appeals to our desire to be loved, admired, and sought after. At some level, we all lust to be lusted after, and it is to this that flattery appeals. Flatterers are trying to get to us by appealing to this lust. Wise women not only guard their hearts from the flattering words of others, but they also guard their tongues from dishing out flattery of their own. We don’t tell our boss that he delivered a fantastic speech at the board meeting, if his speech was mediocre. We don’t tell the next-door neighbor that she is admired by everyone in town, just because we want an invitation to her next party. A modern slang term for flattery is “sucking up,” which is what we are doing whenever we offer praise in hopes of personal profit.

transformed tongues

As we can see, how we use our tongues indicates in no small measure whether we are wise women or foolish ones. We will be known by what we say and how we say it. This truth is quite sobering, for who among us doesn’t ever shade the truth or gossip or talk too much or flatter? We all sin with our words. It is at this point that we can see another way in which the book of Proverbs points us to Christ. We
want to be wise, but as we discover that so much of what we say is actually foolish, we recognize that our need for wisdom far exceeds our ability to lay hold of it. A wise tongue comes only from the perfect Wise Man, who never spoke a foolish word. Jesus never lied, exaggerated, gossiped, or flattered. Every word he spoke was perfect for the occasion and accomplished God’s purposes—every word. Only as we lean fully on him as the One who spoke perfectly for us will we find what we need to become women of wise words. And find it we will, if we look there. If we merely try harder to watch what we say, wise words will prove frustratingly elusive; we’re just too sinful to ever master this on our own. Women of wise words are those whose hearts are being transformed by Christ while recognizing that real and lasting change comes only as they ponder all his words.

words of wisdom
It’s worth the pursuit, and here’s why:

From the fruit of his mouth a man is satisfied with good, and the work of a man’s hand comes back to him. (Prov. 12:14)

And

The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense. (Prov. 10:21)

Words governed by wisdom bless not only those who hear them but also those who utter them. Proverbs tells us explicitly how wise words bless and the ways in which wise women use them.

Soft Words
From Proverbs we learn that a certain tone of voice, a soft one, stops quarrels:
wise women know the power of words

A soft answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Prov. 15:1)

Soft words also bring healing:

A gentle tongue is a tree of life,  
but perverseness in it breaks the spirit. (Prov. 15:4)

We see again here that Scripture assigns value to our tone of voice. It matters more than we typically think, and recognizing this is a hallmark of wisdom.

Timely Words

A wise woman knows what to say and when to say it:

The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly,  
but the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness.  
(Prov. 15:2 NKJV)

She knows when a rebuke is the best way to love someone:

Better is open rebuke  
than hidden love. (Prov. 27:5)

A wise woman also knows when to be quiet:

Better is a dry morsel with quiet  
than a house full of feasting with strife. (Prov. 17:1)

This even includes knowing when to share the things of God. Jesus told his followers, “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you” (Matt. 7:6). Several years ago, I encountered the need for wisdom in this very context. Someone I cared about made sport of the Christian faith, and whenever I tried to communicate the gospel
message, the response I received was cutting sarcasm and blasphemy. After one particularly painful exchange, the Holy Spirit brought Jesus’s words in Matthew to bear on my heart, and from that day on for many years thereafter, I stopped mentioning anything about the Christian faith in her presence. I did not cease because my feelings were hurt; I stopped because Christ’s name was being maligned, and I could sense the Spirit being grieved during those conversations. Years later, however, my friend was humbled by life’s sorrows, and she became receptive to hearing the truth. I rejoiced as I began afresh to tell her about Jesus.

Knowing when to apply Jesus’s mandate requires wisdom, because it is easy to mistake someone’s reviling the gospel for what is really just our personal discomfort in talking about it to a skeptic. How, then, do we discern the difference? D. A. Carson helps us here:

Jesus is commanding his disciples not to share the richest parts of spiritual truth with persons who are persistently vicious, irresponsible, and unappreciative. Just as the pearls were unappreciated by the savage animals, but only enraged them and made them dangerous, so also many of the riches of God’s revelation are unappreciated by many people. And, painful as it is to see it, these rich truths may only serve to enrage them.2

ears of wisdom
Being a woman of wise words necessitates listening carefully to what others say. To that end, Proverbs teaches us the way to listen to a proven liar:

Whoever hates disguises himself with his lips
    and harbors deceit in his heart;
when he speaks graciously, believe him not,
    for there are seven abominations in his heart.
(Prov. 26:24–25)
This is powerful stuff. God’s Word is warning us to be on guard against those who have knowingly lied to us in times past, and it is giving us a clue as to some of what resides within a liar’s heart. While we cannot know others’ hearts explicitly or accurately, God can, and graciously the Bible reveals a bit of that to us here. In light of this revelation and its call to be on our guard, we can echo those who say, “Lie to me once, shame on you. Lie to me twice, shame on me.”

Another time that ears of wisdom are necessary is when we are trying to mediate a disagreement between others. Proverbs cautions us to listen to both sides before making a judgment about the matter:

The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him. (Prov. 18:17)

You know what they say: there are always three sides to every story—his, hers, and the real one.

How much better all our relationships will be—how much more peace we will have—when we become wise with our ears and our tongues! The apostle Paul wrote, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Col. 4:6). Who is sufficient for these things? Only one: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary” (Isa. 50:4).
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*lydia brownback* (MAR, Westminster Theological Seminary) is a Christian book editor, a speaker at women’s conferences nationwide, and an author of several books including the On-the-Go Devotional series, *Fine China Is for Single Women Too*, and *Legacy of Faith*. 