

Slow to Speak

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During a recent reading through Proverbs, there were a few verses that stood out to me:

- *“In a multitude of words, sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (10:19).*
- *“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, but the mouth of the fool pours forth foolishness” (15:1-2).*
- *“The heart of the righteous studies how to answer” (15:28).*
- *“He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty. And he who rules the spirit than he who takes the city” (16:32).*
- *“He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him” (18:13).*
- *“Do you see a man hasty in his words? There is more help for a fool than for him” (29:20).*
- *“A fool vents his feelings. But a wise man holds them back” (29:11).*

In these verses, we see warnings about speaking too much, speaking too quickly, speaking harshly, venting our feelings, getting angry, and giving opinions without understanding a matter or having all the information.

Have you seen any of this behavior in the world lately? I'm sure you have. It seems all around us people are speaking compulsively, without regard to how their words might be received, freely venting their feelings, seeking outrage in every place, and giving opinions on matters about which they have given very little thought. People are not reasonable. They are not rational. They are not calm. They are more concerned about agendas and narratives than hearing the truth.

While we can observe all these behaviors in the world around us, these verses in Proverbs also reveal to us where we may be at fault, and they call us to something better:

- Restraint with our words.
- Soft answers.
- Study and thoughtfulness.
- Listening before speaking.
- Ruling our spirit to hold back our feelings, particularly our anger.

Exhibiting this behavior can be challenging when the world continually behaves brashly. So much of what we are exposed to in the news, social media, and everyday interactions with the world pushes us to conform to their behavior.

The news, generally speaking, actively tries to manufacture anger. Like any business, they have a product to sell, and that product is us, the viewers. The more we watch, the more ads they can sell. They've figured out the best way to keep someone's attention is to get them angry. So they manufacture outrage to keep us listening.

Social media platforms, whether intentionally or just by their nature, discourage real thought and real conversation and encourage a quick response and fighting for the last word. A person can share a poorly-thought-out position without fear of having to engage in a conversation. Most of the back and forth is done in writing, a medium that is difficult to engage in an argumentative conversation without it

escalating. The kind of soft answer, self-controlled, well-thought-out manner God desires us to communicate with can go very quickly.

It is also hard to respond in a godly manner when the world is attacking us so harshly. When the world criticizes Christianity or anything for that matter, it is rarely done softly. The criticism almost always carries with it an antagonistic tone. Personal attacks are often levied. When someone is attacking you and your beliefs, or the people you love, it is really difficult to respond appropriately.

These are just a few examples of how we are pushed to engage with the world in the same manner the world engages with one another. But we can't conform to the mold. For one, it's not how God wants us to behave. And secondly, we have to look at what the result is if we adopt this behavior. What would happen if we did? What would happen if we behaved this same way towards the world? What kind of message do we send to the world about God and Christ when our words match their tones? What happens when we fire off a quick response without any real thought? What happens if we begin to treat information the same way the world does? What would happen if we were dismissive of others? Unwilling to listen, unwilling to hear them out. What is the result? I would say nothing that furthers the gospel. We may even close down people's willingness to listen to the gospel.

Just as dangerous as that, what happens if this behavior seeps into our behavior towards one another? If we allow this kind of behavior into our lives and our congregation? Easily angered and frustrated with one another, assuming the worst in people, and speaking harshly when there is disagreement. This will not demonstrate the love we are to have for one another, and it will have disastrous results. If this is how we deal with conflict and contrary points of view with the world, it will end up in our congregations.

We must be mindful that our demeanor in our dealings with others does not degrade as it has in the world. For as the Lord tells us in **James 1:19-20**, "*Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.*"