

Proverbs 18:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.

Analysis

Death and life are in the power of the tongue; and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof. This profound statement places extraordinary power in human speech, teaching that words operate as creative forces with life-and-death consequences. The Hebrew word shaluwm (peace, wholeness, well-being) and mavet (death) are not merely physical conditions but states of relational and spiritual existence. The proverb posits that the tongue—metonymy for speech and what proceeds from the heart—wields authority comparable to God's creative word in Genesis. Just as God spoke creation into being, human beings speak life or death into existence through their words. The mechanism of this power is both immediate and extended. Words immediately affect the listener's emotional and spiritual state—encouragement brings life, insults and curses bring death (psychological, relational, spiritual death). Over time, patterns of speech shape both the speaker and community: the habitually encouraging person cultivates a life-giving environment and reputation, while the critical, vicious speaker creates a toxic landscape. The phrase 'they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof' employs the metaphor of eating/consumption to indicate that one inevitably experiences the consequences of one's own speech. The glutton consumes food; the speaker consumes the results of their words. This is neither reward nor punishment imposed externally, but natural consequence emerging from the speech act itself. The ancient Hebrews possessed profound understanding of the generative power of speech (dabar). Words were not considered mere sounds but actual entities bearing performative power. Blessings and curses altered reality; truth-speaking brought order while lying introduced chaos. This verse teaches that this creative

power is not merely priestly or prophetic prerogative but belongs to every person. Therefore, wisdom demands extreme vigilance over one's tongue—not primarily for etiquette but because speech is a tool of world-making.

Historical Context

The understanding of speech's creative power pervades ancient Hebrew thought and reflects patterns found throughout Near Eastern cultures. In Egyptian Memphite theology, the god Ptah created through speech; in Mesopotamian traditions, spoken words possessed inherent power. The Hebrew Scriptures consistently emphasize *dabar* (word/matter) as something possessing real force—God's word does what it says (Isaiah 55:10-11), and human words similarly shape reality. This worldview differs fundamentally from societies that treat words as merely conventional signs with no intrinsic power. In the Proverbs collection, the power of speech appears as a major thematic concern, reflecting the role of wisdom teachers in maintaining social order through instruction. Young men being trained for leadership roles needed to understand that their words would influence followers, establish or destroy reputations, and bind or break community relationships. The teacher's own authority depended on careful, truthful speech. By the Second Temple period when Proverbs likely took final form, this teaching remained relevant for sages, judges, and community leaders whose words literally shaped legal and social reality. The concept of eating one's words—experiencing the fruit of one's speech—appears throughout biblical wisdom literature and reflects ancient understandings of accountability and karma-like consequences that arise naturally from one's actions. Unlike legalistic punishment administered externally, these consequences emerge organically from the nature of the deed itself. This perspective encourages moral self-regulation rather than mere fear of external punishment, suggesting the sophisticated ethical psychology underlying wisdom literature.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

1 Corinthians 13:4 – Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to say that death and life are 'in the power of the tongue'? How literally should this be interpreted, and what are the limits of speech's power?
2. How might understanding words as creative forces change the way we approach communication in our own context? What obligations does this place on speakers?
3. The proverb teaches that speakers 'eat the fruit' of their own words. Can you identify modern examples where this natural consequence operates?
4. How does the teaching about speech's power relate to other biblical concepts like covenant-making through oaths or the power of blessing and cursing?
5. What is the relationship between the power attributed to human speech here and the power of God's creative word in Genesis 1? Does human speech truly 'create' in the same sense?

Interlinear Text

וְאֵכֶל יְהִי לְשׁוֹן וְאֵת בַּיד כִּי מִים יְהִי לְאַפְּבָר וְאֵת מִתְּהִלָּה

פרק:

the fruit

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Additional Cross-References

Ephesians 4:29 (Parallel theme): Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.

Colossians 4:6 (Parallel theme): Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.

Proverbs 10:31 (Parallel theme): The mouth of the just bringeth forth wisdom: but the froward tongue shall be cut out.

Proverbs 12:13 (Parallel theme): The wicked is snared by the transgression of his lips: but the just shall come out of trouble.

Isaiah 57:19 (Parallel theme): I create the fruit of the lips; Peace, peace to him that is far off, and to him that is near, saith the LORD; and I will heal him.

Proverbs 11:30 (Parallel theme): The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise.

2 Peter 2:18 (Parallel theme): For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error.

2 Corinthians 11:15 (Parallel theme): Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works.

2 Corinthians 2:16 (Parallel theme): To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?