

ISSUES

A Biblical Perspective On Contemporary Topics

The Sin Of Gossip



I am more deadly than the screaming shell of the cannon. I win without killing. I tear down homes, break hearts, wreck lives. I travel on the wings of the wind. No innocence is strong enough to intimidate me, no purity pure enough to daunt me. I have no regard for truth, no respect for justice, no mercy for the defenseless. My victims are as numerous as the sands of the sea and often as innocent. I never forget and seldom forgive. My name is Gossip.

Morgan Blake. sportswriter for the Atlanta Journal

Gossip is the scourge of the Church; always has been, and always will be. What a gun or knife might do to end a physical life, gossip does to a reputation and to relationships. Gossip is a sin that has ruined countless lives and seems endemic to the Church.

GOSSIP DEFINED

The dictionary entry for gossip looks like this . . .

gossip (gos-ep) noun

1. Rumor or talk of a personal, sensational, or intimate nature.
2. A person who habitually spreads intimate or private rumors or facts.
3. Trivial, chatty talk or writing.
4. A close friend or companion.
5. Chiefly British. A godparent.

verb, intransitive

gossiped, gossiping, gossips

To engage in or spread gossip.

[Middle English godsib, gossip, godparent, from Old English god-sibb: god, god. See GOD + sibb, kinsman.]

gos-siper noun - **gossip-ry** noun --

gossip-y adjective

Synonyms: gossip, blab, tattle. The central meaning shared by these verbs is 'to engage in or communicate idle, indiscreet talk': gossiping about the neighbors' domestic problems; can't be trusted with a secret--he always blabs; is disliked by her classmates for tattling on mischief makers.¹

We don't really need a dictionary to define gossip. Most people have a pretty good grasp of what it is.

There are various motivations behind gossip but they all carry a common thread. The one who gossips uses *privileged information* about someone else, as a way of

gaining power. Either it makes them look important because they know something others don't, or it denigrates the person being gossiped about and thus "elevates" the one gossiping.

When you say it, you get a clue as to its origin, "Gosssssss-ip." The serpent's deadly hiss unmasks gossip's *real* source. The word "Satan" means *accuser*; an adversary who opposes by the attempt to discredit or defame. Over and over in scripture we see the devil in this role of accuser. He accused Job to God. He accused God to Eve. In Revelation 12:10, Satan is called "the accuser of our brethren." Even more, it says that he accuses them

day and night before God. "Day and night" it seems his consistent posture, his single-minded opposition of everything godly is focused in one direction; to ac-

cuse and defame! This alone ought to startle us into a diligent pursuit of resisting and avoiding anything that *appears* as gossip.

THE DANGER OF GOSSIP

The real danger of gossip is that while it is so easy to see it in someone else, it is virtually impossible to detect it in one's self.

When someone *else* is talking about others in a confidential manner, it's easy to see it as gossip. But when *we* pass on a piece of information about another, and someone dares point out that *we* are gossiping, we become highly indignant and say we are doing no such thing. Why, we are merely sharing an issue of concern. Christians; of course, take it one step farther. We often cover it up by saying we are just sharing "prayer requests." Uh-huh, sure! In the church, most gossip is passed off as a "prayer request."

The story is told of three pastors who went fishing together in the northern wilderness of Canada.

While they were there, they became quite cordial with one another and began to talk about their innermost thoughts. One confessed that he had been guilty of skimming money off the weekly offerings. He asked the other two for their prayers and then urged them to confess their weaknesses. The second pastor confessed that he too, had a certain weakness; he occasionally thumbed through girlie magazines at the store. The third pastor remained silent for a long time. Finally, when pressed by his

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fellow pastors to reveal his weakness, he said, "Brethren, I don't think you want to know my weaknesses, but since you insist, I am going to tell you. I just love to gossip, and I can hardly wait to get back home."

It is difficult to calculate the damage gossip does. At last count, gossip was running down more people than automobiles. It

destroys reputations, relationships, and lives. Thousands upon thousands of people have turned away from the Lord because of the unkind word of another. In my short time as a pastor, (nineteen years) I have met dozens of people who told me they stopped going to church because of gossip told about them or a friend.

DISCERNING GOSSIP

Because it is so hard to see what we are saying as gossip, it is a difficult sin to overcome. It's impossible to repent of a sin we do not see. That is why we need to become more conscious of the prevalence of gossip. The only way to do this is to ask the Holy Spirit to search us and make us sensitive to the reality, or at least *possibility* of gossip in our own lives.

A good test is to check our *motiva-*

tion for saying something to someone. The Apostle Paul wrote,

Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. Ephesians 4:29

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What is the *reason* you are saying what you are to the other person? Is it really for NECESSARY edification?

Does it convey grace to the one hearing?

As the followers of Christ, who is The Truth, our speech should be more than the mere communication of *facts*. It should model and communicate *truth*, which comprehends much more than mere facts. Truth's source is God and it is concerned with the will and counsel of the Lord. So while what you are sharing with another may be *factual*, and you may feel some justification because of that, don't confuse *that* with *truth*. In order for something to be *true*, it has to be in alignment with God's will and *purpose*.

So, consider your *motivation* or *reason* for why you are telling someone something.

The difference between gossip and merely sharing news is found in whether you raise or lower your

voice.

Another reason gossip is hard to overcome is because it is a sin we commit with our speech, and as Jesus said, "It is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks."² If bitterness and hatred have taken root in our hearts, no matter how hard we may fight it, we will sin with our mouths. If we hold anger and resentment towards another, it will inevitably manifest itself in our speech.

If you know gossip is wrong, but can't seem to stop it, no matter how hard you try, see that as a symptom of a deeper problem, a heart problem. There is probably a deep-seated hatred that needs to be dealt with and repented of. The sin of unforgiveness may be the driving force. Deal with it!

DEALING WITH GOSSIP

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke about the link between hatred and murder. "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the

council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire." Matthew 5:21-22

Note that Jesus takes the prohibition against murder deeper than just the

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physical act of taking another person's life. Hatred also lies under the ban of God. Jesus then applies this principle of hatred to speech. Just as hatred must not

express itself in an act of *physical* violence, so it must not manifest itself in an act of *verbal violence*. He spoke specifically of name-calling and defamation of character. And while gossip isn't spelled out in this context, it *is* in another passage from the Law of Moses. In Leviticus 19:16 we read, "You shall not go about as a tale-bearer among your people; nor shall you take a stand against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD."

There is one passage in Proverbs that speaks in the strongest possible terms about God's abhorrence of gossip.

"These six things the LORD hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: A proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren." Proverbs 6:16-19

Notice how many things in this list relate directly to sins that disrupt relationships between people: a lying tongue, a witness who speak lies, and one who sows discord among brethren.

The Apostle Paul gives some great counsel to govern our speech in Ephesians 4:29-32. "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary

edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you."

Proverbs carries this farther when in 11:13 we read, "A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter." Not every that is going on in someone's life needs to be shared with others. A faithful person will not *repeat* what is shared with them in confidence.

A good rule to discern whether or not you should say something about someone else is to ask yourself if you would be embarrassed being overheard by the person you are talking about. If you would be, then you know you are betraying a confi-

dence. So don't say it!

If you are the *target* of gossip, the one the gossip is being told *to*, when you perceive that what you are being told is the possible betrayal of a confi-

dence, interrupt and politely ask the person if they have permission to share what they are saying. And even if they say it's okay, and you are uncom-

fortable with what you are hearing, then tell them so and don't permit them to go on.

In Galatians 6:2 we read, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." We are to bear one another's burdens, but we are not to bear them to another!

Endnotes

¹ The American Heritage(r) Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition copyright (c) 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from InfoSoft International, Inc. All rights reserved.

² Matthew 12:34 Luke 6:35

Pray for your
brothers and sisters
in Christ; don't
prey on them!
