

Introduction:

The story is told of a boy who passed on a rumor about his neighbor. It made the neighbor look bad and by contrast, the boy looked good. For a time, he was happy in this gossip. But after a few weeks, when someone passed on a rumor about him, he realized how painful such stories were. He went to his neighbor, humbled, penitent and apologetic. The wise neighbor accepted the apology but asked the boy to do him a favor. "Go home and get your feather pillow," the neighbor said. "Slice it open and then come back to my house allowing the feathers to trail behind you." The boy did so. When he returned to the neighbor's house, the neighbor then said, "Now go collect all the feathers so we can mend your pillow." The boy turned around and noticed that the feathers were being blown all over the neighborhood by the wind. He raced after them but had only been able to collect about half of them. He told the neighbor, "This is impossible. I can never collect them all." To which the neighbor responded, "That is just like the gossip you spread about me. You have apologized and I accept your apology. But the damage is irreversible. You can never recall the story from the minds of all who have now heard it."

Nobody likes a gossiping busybody. Yet, many Christians participate in gossip repeatedly. As we read in our "Give Attention to Reading" plan this week, Paul told Timothy younger widows should not be placed on the church's benevolent roll because they will become idle. That idleness would breed bad habits such as being a gossip and a busybody (**I Timothy 5:11-14**). But what is gossip? When are we actually gossiping? Why should we avoid it? How should the Christian behave instead of gossip? How easy it is to rebuke and condemn idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals and murderers, but overlook our "little bitty sin" of gossip. Examine the scripture and see how big gossip really is and what we must do about it.

Discussion:

- I. Definition of gossip and slander:
 - A. In the Bible we hear about gossip or slander, but what exactly is it? Consider some definitions.
 - B. "A secret slanderer, versus...a backbiter who does his slandering openly." (Spiros Zodhiates, *Lexical Aids to the New Testament*.)
 - C. "Slander. The speaking of base and defamatory words tending to prejudice another in his reputation..." (*Black's Law Dictionary*.)
 - D. "Slander: 3. To disgrace; to dishonor; to discredit." (*Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*.)
 - E. Based on these definitions, consider some misconceptions of gossip.
 1. "If it is true, it isn't gossip." Gossip and slander is anything we say if we intend to prejudice folks against someone or are attempting to dishonor and discredit someone. It may well be true that a brother or sister once committed adultery. There may be times in which it is appropriate to share that information, but if your purpose is to prejudice someone against them, to dishonor or discredit them, then you are gossiping and slandering them.
 2. "I didn't mean to mar that person's reputation, so I didn't gossip." The first problem is we often ascribe to ourselves the best possible motives and act as if we are innocent while we deceive ourselves and everyone around us. Few people would openly state their purpose was to make someone else look bad. But how often do we share things not necessarily to make them look bad, but rather to make ourselves look good in comparison? That is just as much gossip and slander. Further, how would you have spoken about them if you purposefully meant not to mar their reputation? Would you say whatever is on your mind? The problem is we are sometimes like little children, speaking without thinking and afterwards saying, "I didn't mean to." If we will avoid gossip and slander, we must mean not to.
 3. "I don't want to gossip. I just want to let you know." Why? Must I know about it? Must I know to help the person overcome sin? Have you spoken to them about it already? Are you coming to me as a witness after you already spoke to them? Or do you just want to pass on a bit of juicy information you heard about a person? More often what this means is, "I don't like something about this person and I want you to know how I am different from them." The fact is, if you don't like something about a person, you need to talk to that person, not everyone else. If you are not talking to them, then keep your mouth shut.

4. *"I don't mean to gossip; I just thought you might be able to help."* Since when is it helpful to anyone to pass on their secrets to someone else? Would you find that helpful to you if someone did that for you? **Matthew 18:15-17** explains who we should talk to first when someone is doing something wrong. If we haven't talked to them, we shouldn't be talking to anyone. Only after talking to the person who has sinned and seeing their refusal to repent should we talk to anyone else.
 5. *"I would say this in front of them, so this is not gossip."* Why don't we wait until we are in front of the person and see if this is true? In fact, why don't we call them right now and let you tell them face to face? The fact is, if you feel the need to preface your statement with this, you probably should keep your mouth shut. By the way, keep in mind the definition from Spiros Zodhiates, the fact that you will say it in front of someone doesn't necessarily mean you are not gossiping right now. It may mean that you are also a malicious backbiter.
- F. One thing I have learned about gossip through this study is there is no precise definition with which we can draw lines claiming we can say so much about a person but no more. Far too many times we want to draw lines so we can know how much we can get away with and stay close to that line. However, gossip is something that starts in the heart. The diligent Christian doesn't seek to walk the line. Rather, because the diligent Christian loves God and people, he/she follows the principle of **Ephesians 4:29-32**, not allowing any corrupting speech but only what gives a blessing to those who hear. The Christian doesn't speak out of malice, bitterness or resentment but rather from kindness, tender-heartedness and forgiveness.

II. How wrong can gossip be?

- A. **Proverbs 26:20**—Like wood feeding a fire, gossip feeds strife. So many conflicts are never resolved because of gossip behind the scenes.
- B. **Psalms 15:1, 3**—Gossip and slander will keep us from being able to dwell with God.
- C. **Psalms 50:19-22**—Slanderers and gossips are among those who have forgotten God and they will be torn apart in judgment.
- D. **Romans 1:28-32**—Gossip is part of the debased mind to which God gives up those who will not honor Him properly. It is classed among some of the greatest of immoralities.
- E. **I Timothy 3:11**—God considers gossip so bad that even if a man himself is not a gossip but his wife is, he is not qualified to be a deacon. By implication, neither is he qualified to be an elder.
- F. **James 1:26**—If we do not bridle our tongues, including from gossip, our religion is in vain.

III. A portrait of a gossip.

- A. If you really want to see what a gossip looks like to God, examine **Psalms 64**. In **vss. 1-2**, David is crying out for God to deliver him from his enemies. What are these enemies doing? Are they laying siege to Jerusalem? Are they torturing him? Are they pursuing him to kill him? No, they are talking about him. They are gossiping and slandering him. Look at the portrait of a gossip in **Psalms 64:3-6**.
- B. **Psalms 64:3**—We may think our words are harmless, but the tongue of a gossip is maiming sword and his/her words are wounding arrows. Even the worldly can recognize how bad gossip is. Consider the following essay reportedly from the pen of Ann Landers entitled "Nobody's Friend."

My name is gossip. I have no respect for justice. I maim without killing. I break hearts and ruin lives. I am cunning and malicious and gather strength with age. The more I am quoted the more I am believed. I flourish at every level of society. My victims are helpless. They cannot protect themselves against me because I have no name and no face. To track me down is impossible. The harder you try, the more elusive I become. I am nobody's friend. Once I tarnish a reputation, it is never the same. I topple governments and wreck marriages. I ruin careers and cause sleepless nights, heartache and indigestion. I spawn suspicion and generate grief. I make innocent people cry in their pillows. Even my names hisses. I am called Gossip. Office Gossip. Shop Gossip. Telephone Gossip. Church Gossip. I make headlines and headaches.

Before you repeat a story ask yourself, is it true? Is it fair? Is it necessary? If not—KEEP IT TO YOURSELF."

- C. **Psalm 64:4**—Gossipers are selfish cowards. They do not love people and therefore want to help them. Instead they want to attack. But even then they will not attack in the open where the victims can see and have opportunity to defend themselves. They will speak ill of a person when one on one with someone else, but get them in a group of people or in front of the person, and they will keep quiet. They often pick as their targets those who are without blame. Sadly, because of this cowardly tactic, the one shot, may not even know it for days, weeks, months or even years. The victims are often unsuspecting about what goes on behind their backs.
- D. **Psalm 64:5-6**—The gossip is a schemer. They are part of a conspiracy. That is an interesting picture, but think about it. It always takes at least two to gossip. The one speaking and the one listening. These gossipers are like conspirators setting a trap for the innocent.
- E. Brethren, think about this picture. This is what God sees when we start talking about other people. This is what God sees when we listen to what is said about other people.

IV. The outcome for the gossip.

- A. Continuing in **Psalm 64:7-8**, we learn that while gossipers and slanderers believe they are in hiding and are, therefore, protected, they are in for a rude awakening and strong judgment.
- B. We may be able to hide our gossip from our victims, but we cannot hide it from God. While we hide in the bushes to spread our slander, aiming our word darts at those who cannot see us, God is taking aim to pierce us with wounds. We will be brought to ruin by our own words. Not only is God specifically going to judge us, but the point is that there are simply natural consequences to being a gossip and slanderer. As **Galatians 5:15** says, if we bite and devour one another, we will be consumed by one another.

V. Our response to gossip.

- A. **Psalm 64:9-10**—Seeing the outcome of gossip, the righteous should respond with fear of God. We will ponder what He has done to those who have taken part in this secret plotting of the wicked and we will refrain from gossip. Further, we will not gossip and slander in return for those who gossip against us. Rather, we will entrust ourselves to and take refuge in God.
- B. **Matthew 18:15-17**—When someone gossips against us, we do not respond by gossiping in return. We do not talk to everyone else, instead we go to the gossip and talk to them. But we do not do this in vengeance. We do it from an attempt to regain our brother or sister whose sin is separating them from God and us.
- C. **Proverbs 20:19**—The wise path is to avoid gossips. In that way, we avoid the temptation to gossip ourselves. Further, we do not reveal our secrets to those who will pass them on and thereby avoid being the targets of much gossip and slander.
- D. **Ecclesiastes 7:21-22**—This one is tough, but don't take slander and gossip too seriously, whether it is against you or against others. As we have all been party to gossip, we can recognize how idle and false it is. Take all things heard in gossip with a grain of salt, reproving the gossip for his sin.

Conclusion:

Paul took gossip so seriously, he directed that younger widows to get married because it is too easy for them to become idle and start gossiping (**I Timothy 5:13**). **Ephesians 4:29** says no corrupting talk should come out of our mouths. Our job is to build others up with our speech, not tear them down, whether we are in their presence or not. Let us give grace, not poison, to those who hear us.