

Juicy Gossip

Proverbs 11:13; Proverbs 16:28

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When we are given information about others, we are bound by the Ninth Commandment (“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor”) to perform two primary duties: (1) To believe only that which can be shown to be true by convincing testimony; (2) To protect the reputation of our neighbor. In other words, until accusations can be proven to us from credible witnesses, we should be as unwilling to believe the reports we hear about others as we would have others to believe the reports that they may hear about us.

It seems so often that gossip is the acceptable sin countenanced among Christians. Murder, immorality, stealing, and lying may be wholeheartedly condemned within the Christian community; but to lesser or greater degrees, gossip among close friends or family members becomes almost a test of friendship. You are just not a very close friend if you do not gossip with one another about the faults, weaknesses, and sins of others. In so doing, we have violated time and time again one of the two commandments upon which the Lord Jesus said the whole law hangs: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

From our text in Proverbs 11:13, we learn the following two truths: (1) The One Who Gossips Cannot Be Trusted (Proverbs 11:13a); (2) The One Who Is Faithful Proves Himself To Be Trustworthy (Proverbs 11:13b).

I. The One Who Gossips Cannot Be Trusted (Proverbs 11:13a).

A. Solomon quite literally declares, “He who walks about as a slanderer uncovers secret counsel.” The word used here for a talebearer comes from a root (*racal*) that refers to a merchant who markets (by buying and selling) his merchandise. In this case, the trade of the gossip is to uncover juicy information about others and then to sell that information to others.

1. How, you may ask, is the information about others sold? Not for money, but for friendship, or for more information about others. Though it may not be explicitly stated in so many words, the bargain is, “I’ll sell you what I know about so and so to prove how close we really are; or I’ll sell it to you for information you might know about so and so.”

2. And of course, there is usually some qualification made at the outset which is supposed to imply how this is not really gossip and is not to be told to anyone else: “I heard this from a very reliable source and whatever you do don’t spread this information to anyone else.”

3. So the talebearer ensnares others by making them feel very special (almost privileged) that they would be entrusted with this report about another person. What is so hypocritical about all such gossip is that very often the talebearer binds the recipient to a confidentiality that he/she is not willing to keep (“I can share this information about others with you, but you cannot share it with anyone else”).

B. What is and what is not gossip? This we must understand if we are to avoid it in obedience to the God of our salvation.

1. What is gossip?

a. **Gossip is spreading an evil report about your neighbor—behind his back—not out of love for him, but out of envy, resentment, malice, or hatred toward him, or out of superiority over him.** For example, your neighbor (who may be a family member, friend, fellow-Christian, or even foe) is more gifted than you are in certain areas, so you cut him down to size by revealing his weaknesses to others. Or you have been treated ungraciously or even maliciously by your neighbor, so you avenge yourself by uncovering his dirty laundry to others behind his back. Or you are puffed up with pride looking at your gifts, graces, and abilities as that which you have won for yourself by your own strength and then put others down because they

have not attained to your level of achievement. This is an aspect of gossip.

b. **Gossip is also digging for the dirt on others (like some investigative reporter) in order to make yourself look informed or important when you divulge the gory details you have uncovered to others.**

c. **Gossip is at times committed even unintentionally when certain information slips out of your mouth to those who have no reason to know this information about others.** At such times, you are still responsible out of love to go to those with whom you have shared this information and seek to stop it immediately, seek their forgiveness and the forgiveness of God, repent and endeavor new obedience. If that information eventually reaches the ears of those you have spoken against, you must then go to them and seek their forgiveness as well and to all who have come to hear it. For although you may not have shared that evil report with each subsequent individual, you were an unwitting accomplice to the sin.

d. **You may participate in gossip not only by spreading an evil report about others, but also in receiving an evil report about others.** You partake in the sins of others when by your silence you do not seek to stop the evil report that is given to you. If you do not rob a bank but knowingly receive the money stolen from the bank, are you not a partaker in the crime? So this is true when you likewise receive stolen information about others (Psalm 50:18; Romans 1:32; 2 John 11). When you are about to receive some report about another, ask the one who is giving you this information: Do I need to know this information? Will it be helpful to me or to others (especially the subject of this report) to know this information? Will you keep people's names out of it if at all possible? Can love cover the sins and weakness of those involved? Try to change the topic to something more edifying. You may not become popular with the talebearer and the gossip, but you will be glorifying the Lord and loving your neighbor. For if the one gossiping will give you information about someone else, what is to keep him/her from sharing your sins, weakness, or an evil report with others about you? You cannot trust a gossip. If you silently partake in this sin by receiving such reports, you will likely be burned yourself by this talebearer. Thus, be careful in what you receive from others and in what you share with others and with whom you share it.

e. **Gossip may either be an outright lie, a misrepresentation or distortion of certain details of the truth, or it may actually be a truthful, factual representation of the truth.** Just because you get all of your facts straight in what you share with others does not necessarily acquit you of the devastating sin of gossip. For gossip or talebearing does not so much have to do with the specific nature of the information shared (as to whether it is true or not), but more with the **motive, reason, and consequences** involved in making merchandise of information that will likely hurt, damage, or perhaps destroy another person. Here is your check list to consult before opening your mouth to others.

(1) Is your **motive** in opening your mouth with that report about your neighbor a sincere love to obey God and an earnest desire to be faithful to Him? Or is the motive of your heart rather jealousy and discontentment with your own lot in life, a self-righteousness and superiority to exalt yourself and put others down, or contempt and vengeance against your neighbor for the sin he/she committed against you? The first and great commandment is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (Matthew 22:37). Furthermore, Paul teaches that above all things we are to seek God's glory in everything that we do: "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

(2) Is the **reason** you have divulged this information because God requires you to do so in His law? In other words, was it easy for you to share this information with others, or did it almost have to be pulled out of you because you knew to hide it would be to sin against God and the principles found in His Word? Have you followed the biblical principles found in Matthew 18:15-17 (keep the information as private as possible only going to the next step because the brother/sister refuses to listen and repent of a clear sin committed), and Galatians 6:1.

(3) Are the likely **consequences** to be that this is the best way you can see to

truly help this person? Did you go to those who have the spiritual gifts and graces and who can either advise or counsel you as to what you can do to help your neighbor or who can go to the brother/sister with a desire to restore him/her who has fallen? Did you seek to protect the name and specific details of your neighbor, for the name is not important if what you want is advice and counsel? It may become necessary to share specifics, but it should ordinarily not be your first step unless the urgency of the situation requires it.

2. What gossip is not?

a. **It is not gossip to seek advice or counsel from your minister, elder, or a mature Christian who has the gifts and graces to help you and the person concerning whom you have a less than flattering report.**

(1) But as was said earlier, there is ordinarily no need to give specifics (name and other details). Give only that information that will get the advice you need while protecting the name of your neighbor.

(2) Be sure that when you seek out such advice **that** you have all your facts straight—**that** either you witnessed the sin or there are credible witnesses to the sin committed—**that** it is a clear and obvious violation of God’s commandments which love cannot cover—**that** it is a sin that if continued in will affect not only your neighbor, but is likely to affect others as well (like a cancer infecting others)—**that** it is a sin that one is obstinately persisting in or helplessly falling into rather than a sin that was committed and was repented of and dealt with in the past.

(3) Beware of promising an absolute confidentiality before hearing information from others. What you may hear may, in fact, require you to tell someone in authority or at least seek the advice of someone in leadership. You will then be accused of breaking a promise. When someone begins, “Now you can’t share this with a single soul”—beware. Qualify your listening with words like this, “I want to help in any way that I can, and I will not share it unless it is necessary to do so (so as to be faithful to the Lord or others).”

(4) As a general rule, never give information to anyone that you would not be willing to sign your name to. If you follow that rule you will be less likely to let just anything out of your mouth.

b. **It is not gossip to share information that is already a public scandal provided you do not do so with sinful motives, but with righteous motives as stated above.** For in such cases, there is no secret that is being revealed. For example, if you should discuss the public views of various individuals, ministers, or churches (whether you agree with them or disagree with them), you have not fallen into gossip so long as you accurately represent their positions and discuss them with a view to your own profit, the profit of others, and the glory of God.

c. **It is not gossip for elders and ministers on the Session or in the Presbytery to discuss matters among themselves privately since they are entrusted with the souls of their flock.** However, it should always be with the right motive (love for God), for the right reason (because God requires it of them in His Word), and looking to the right consequence (to help or restore the brother or sister in question). There is a great responsibility to help others not a great license to speak against others.

d. **It is not gossip to share a good report about your neighbor with others, for you are commanded to rejoice in the gifts and graces of others.**

B. Let us learn from the exhortation of God Himself in the very pages of Scripture the grievous nature of this sin: Ham (Genesis 9:18ff), Miriam and Aaron (Numbers 12:1ff), Absalom (2 Samuel 15:1ff).

C. Not only do we have these examples of how we are to avoid this sin, but God has given us explicit precepts to drive us from this evil path as well: Exodus 23:1; Leviticus 19:16; Proverbs 20:19; Romans 1:29. Dear ones, we must learn that in order for gossip (or whispering) to be grouped among sins such as

fornication, murder, and covenant breakers, it is hardly a harmless, insignificant sin. It is one which deserves the righteous judgment and eternal condemnation of God just as these other sins listed here.

D. Why does God forbid us to gossip?

1. It violates the law of love (Matthew 7:12).

2. It destroys others rather than benefiting others. If not an act of love, it is an act of hatred.

3. It is a cancer that will spread throughout the whole church until it has infected everyone. Gossip feeds upon itself and continues to grow the more it is fed.

4. It destroys the peace and unity within the body of Christ (Proverbs 16:28). It divides us rather than uniting us.

5. It denies and contradicts your profession of love for God (1 John 4:7-12). Love for God is manifested through your love for another. All expressions of love for God are empty apart from a demonstrable love for one another. Dear ones, aren't you thankful that the Lord did not gossip about you, merely speak evil of you (even if everything He said was true), but He did something about it? He set His love upon you who had spoken evil of Him and of His good laws, and of His holy doctrine and worship. He sent His Son to become sin for you who trust Him that you might become the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ. The Lord tells us plainly what we are in ourselves (sinners), but He also declares to us plainly what we are in Christ (justified, adopted, and being sanctified) by the grace of God. If the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost had gossiped about us (as it were), it would have meant our eternal destruction in Hell for we would have received no help from mere gossip (even if it were true). But God did not gossip, He reached out to help us, and so must we with others if we are the children of God.

II. The One Who Is Faithful Proves Himself To Be Trustworthy (Proverbs 11:13b).

A. I would simply have you observe at this point that one who is faithful does not either divulge information about others that is not helpful, nor does he feast upon the gossip which others may try to feed him. He is faithful because he seeks to bury and cover all sins of others that he can and only exposes them when He must do so in order to be obedient to the Lord and in order to help restore others.

B. I would like to emphasize that one is faithful who can handle information without feeling like a blown up balloon that is ready to pop over the information he has just received or behavior he has just observed. Can others trust you with information about themselves as they seek your help and prayer with a weakness or personal sin?

C. Is there hope for those who find gossip to be a besetting sin in their lives? Absolutely! Where sin did abound grace did much more abound. You can never overcome the destructive sin of gossip apart from the grace of Christ. How can you overcome gossip in your life?

1. You must earnestly desire to overcome this sin in your life.

2. You must acknowledge to God that it is not a harmless sin, but a destructive sin against your neighbor.

3. You must seek His daily forgiveness for this sin and those you have sinned against in sharing this information.

4. You must grow in your hatred for this sin and in your love for God and neighbor.

5. You must receive the grace of God which was purchased for you by Christ to overcome this sin.

6. You must begin your day by setting a guard over your lips and end the day by reflecting upon any occasion of falling into this sin.

7. You must remember that God did not gossip about you (although if anyone ever deserved it, you did and so did I). To the contrary, He saved you and rescued you from your sin. The love of Christ must constrain you to love your neighbor.

8. If you fall, you must rise up and start the process over again. Dear ones, in following these steps, the Spirit of God will assure you that you truly belong to the Lord Jesus Christ (for His love abides in you).

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