

Truth for Today

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Coping with Life: How to deal with gossip

Talking in a critical way about other people and their personal affairs behind their backs on the basis of incomplete or inaccurate information can hardly be called a Christian activity. But sadly gossiping can be a real problem amongst the people of God. Towards the end of his letter to the Philippians Paul writes, "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy - meditate on these things" (Philippians 4:8).

Paul encourages the Christians at Philippi to dwell on what is positive and encouraging. I suppose his thinking was that if you fill your mind with what will benefit you and share it with others there will be a positive result. Equally, if you focus on the failure and faults of others, further damage will result. He describes it in another way in Galatians 5:14-15: "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!"

Love demonstrated between Christians is proof that we are Christ's disciples (see John 13:34-35). What Paul calls "biting and devouring one another" is a very powerful illustration of the destructive effects of gossiping and the enormous damage it does to Christian relationships and the wider Christian fellowship.

The Old Testament has a few things to say about gossiping.

1. Gossiping is forbidden: "You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people" (Leviticus 19:16).
2. Gossipers cannot keep secrets like a good friend would: "A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter" (Proverbs 11:13).
3. Gossipers take pleasure in spreading tales: "The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, and they go down into the inmost body" (Proverbs 18:8).
4. Gossipers flatter to gain information and are to be avoided: "He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets; Therefore do not associate with one who flatters with his lips" (Proverbs 20:19).
5. And things are better when there are no gossipers about: "Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases" (Proverbs 26:20).

Paul was no stranger to this teaching in the Old Testament and warned the Thessalonians about busybodies, or gossipers: "For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread" (2 Thessalonians 3:11-12).

He picks up the same theme in 1 Timothy 5:13: "And besides they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, and not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not."

We see in these short scriptures some of the things that characterise gossiping. First, it was associated with idleness, "not working at all" (2 Thessalonians 3:11). We know, 'the devil makes work for idle hands' and, we might add, 'for idle tongues'. Frustration with our own circumstances can sometimes lead us to an unhealthy concentration on the affairs of others and allow envy and jealousy in our hearts. Paul also describes gossipers as "wandering about from house to house," (1 Timothy 5:13) looking for opportunities to idle their time away engaging in unhelpful and hurtful conversations about other peoples' affairs.

In today's world it seems that nothing is private and that everyone has a right to know everything about anyone. But God in His wisdom has set the boundaries of relationships and family life within which privacy is to be respected and Christians should uphold these rights.

Paul goes on to write that gossips and busybodies speak inappropriately about things which were none of their concern. Paul seems to be describing the practice of speaking about others in negative ways, without the full knowledge of circumstances and with a tendency to be malicious. The Apostle was well aware of the difficulties caused by such characteristics and does not hesitate to expose gossiping as an unpleasant occupation.

In Galatians 5:16-25 Paul takes up the subject of the walking in the Spirit. He encourages his readers to walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16) and goes on to list what he calls the “works of the flesh”: “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21).

This list is a very important one because it highlights in the main the behaviours which most damage individuals, families and communities. A considerable number of these activities are connected with what people say. The power of language is so often at the centre of the debasing of humanity and we should always be aware of the pain and suffering which can be - by not being careful about the way speak of others.

However Paul goes on to list the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit, in which there is a wonderful harmony of expression between what is said and what is done: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another” (Galatians 5:22-26).

Love, joy and other beautiful characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit are expressed by both word and deed. The great challenge for Christians is to recapture this balanced expression of Christ in our lives by the way we do things and way we speak. This was how Jesus communicated the grace of God: “And He began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’ So all bore witness to Him, and marvelled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth” (Luke 4:21-22).

Of all the New Testament writers, it is James who pulls no punches in laying bear the untold damage which can result from failing to control our speech. He begins his discourse on “the tongue” in James 3:1-12 by outlining the responsibility that comes from taking a position of leadership: “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment” (James 3:1).

He explains that those who teach the word of God will be held to account by Him in regard to how consistently their lives witness to their teaching. I think James also highlights the universal principle that all of us have a responsibility for what we say. James was very aware of how easy it is to say the wrong thing or to be misunderstood: “For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body” (James 3:2).

Controlling what we say is one of the most difficult things to do. How many times have we had to say to ourselves, “I wish I hadn’t said that” or “I didn’t mean to say that”. One of the few men in the Bible who knew how to control his tongue was Samuel. As he grew up he is described as letting “none of his words fall to the ground” (1 Samuel 3:19). In other words he was not only careful about what he said and but the way he said it.

This kind of wisdom is rare and James compares controlling our speech with the way powerful horses are controlled by small bits and great ships by a small rudder: “Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires” (James 3:3-4).

James warns that the tongue is only small but “boasts great things” and is capable of great harm (James 3:5). He describes how small acts can result in devastating destruction and uses the powerful picture of how a tiny flame can start a great forest fire (James 3:5). Some of the great forest fires in the USA and other parts of the world were caused accidentally by small flames, but others were started deliberately. This is a very vivid illustration of how a few words carelessly, or worse still, deliberately spoken can do immense and uncontrolled damage amongst the people of God: “See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:5-8).

James is quite blunt about the destructive power of an uncontrolled speech and the poisonous nature of slander and gossip. Particularly chastening is what James writes next. He highlights the utter hypocrisy of Christians on the one hand singing the praises of God, using the beauty of language to bless our heavenly Father, whilst also deploying their command of language to belittle and damage fellow believers: “With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh”

(James 3:9-12).

James concludes that such behaviour is not consistent with true Christianity and undermines our testimony as Christians. But James does not stop by simply condemning what is wrong: "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom" (James 3:13).

James encourages his readers to display the life they have in Christ. Instead of making slanderous attacks upon fellow believers, they were to demonstrate love and gentleness towards them; in other words, they were to be like Christ. The alternative would only lead to disaster. "But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there" (James 3:14-16).

James directs the minds of his readers to what is heavenly. He lists the characteristics of the wisdom which is from above. This wisdom is pure and does not look for evil in others. This wisdom is peaceable and seeks harmony. This wisdom displays a Christ-like gentleness. This wisdom is willing to give way so that others might benefit. This wisdom is merciful and looks to meet the needs of others. This wisdom is fruitful, a sign of abiding in Christ. This wisdom does not favour others on the basis of position and it is not hypocritical. Finally this wisdom seeks peace on the ground of righteousness: But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace (James 3:17-18).

If you read Paul's great chapter on love, 1 Corinthians 13, you will find great similarities with James' description of the wisdom that is from above. He uses this wisdom to influence how we should talk to each other and how we should talk about each other.

Paul also weaves the same threads of gracious and loving ways of speaking: "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one" (Colossians 4:6), "And speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head - Christ" (Ephesians 4:15).

In these ways we can protect and encourage each other in our Christian faith and show the world that we are the disciples of Christ by the love we have one for another (see John 13:34-35).

But we may be left asking what about the practical issues we face when it comes to gossiping?

To start with - how do we recognise it? What's the difference between normal conversation or banter and gossip? We can all enjoy happy and stimulating conversation, the pleasure of sharing good news with each other and genuine concern about each other's welfare. Gossip is easily recognised. It is when a group of people begins to talk about the affairs of someone who is not present and the person and their circumstances become the subject of criticism so that they are diminished in the eyes of the group. In such situations it is evident that those being spoken about are not the focus of pastoral care or prayerfulness but are being judged and belittled.

Of course conversations are complex and many people are skilled at introducing subjects in a roundabout way and getting others to make remarks which they can then expand upon. Sometimes conversations become excited and when there is a lot of banter it is easy to slip into poking fun at friends. And we should also be aware that amusing remarks could disguise more unpleasant thoughts.

When Christians fall out or dislike each other there is a tendency to form groups who have the same opinions and gossip about each other. Groups form on the basis of friendships, loyalties or family ties etc and those who want to remain impartial are often forced to decide one way or another or be ostracised. These kinds of behaviour betray an unspiritual attitude. When two Christians fall out they need to take responsibility for their actions and put things right. Paul challenges two sisters in regard to a dispute in Philippians 4:2, "I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord."

He does not broadcast the problem; he simply appeals to them to sort out their difficulty. How many of us simply gossip about the situation rather than approach those who need to be encouraged to sort out their differences?

Of course, Paul himself fell out with Barnabas over John Mark in Acts 15:37-41 and it took some time to resolve this issue, as the two men of God travelled in different directions. But ultimately the matter was resolved (see 2 Timothy 4:11).

It should be our aim to encourage pastoral care when we discover a fellow Christian is in spiritual need. It is also our responsibility to defend those who are being verbally attacked when they are not present to defend themselves. Gossiping can give a sense of power. It can be used not only to hurt others but also to control how others think. This

is not spiritual behaviour and, as we have seen, both Paul and James begin their teaching by identifying the problem. When we find ourselves in situations where things are being said about others who are unable to defend themselves, we can intervene by asking questions like, "I don't think that's any of our business, do you?" This is usually enough to bring the matter to a close. We can also ask the person who is sharing the gossip "Who told you that?"

If we know the person being spoken about or know facts which challenge what is being said we can say so. Jesus speaks of His disciples as being the salt of the earth: "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavour, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men" (Matthew 5:13).

Jesus uses salt as a picture of that characteristic of a Christian which preserves. Christians have the ability to challenge what is not right and not allow things to slip by. We don't have to do this in a self-righteous or an unpleasant way - just be straightforward.

Sometimes gossipers try to endear themselves to others in order to gain information. Always remember that just because someone asks you a question it does not mean to say you have to answer it. Sensitive matters are best shared with those we trust and know have a genuine care for us. Some years ago a Christian I know well lost her brother in tragic circumstances. Another Christian lady, whom she hardly knew, approached her and with no display of compassion started to ask her the details of the tragedy. She simply replied, "I am sorry; it's too painful to talk about." Don't be afraid not to answer a question or share information which is private.

When my granddaughters were younger and used to fall out with each other, to get them to make up I would ask them to list five positive things about each other. It was amazing how quickly they could find attractive features in each other. When we find ourselves in a conversation where others are being criticised, it's a good opportunity to highlight the positive contributions of the people being criticised.

Criticism is sometimes just, but the mistake we make is to highlight and discuss the failings of others rather than to seek their spiritual welfare. It is far easier to talk about people than to talk with them. But it is not good to focus on the failings of other Christians. It may give us an inflated view of ourselves and fills us with a dangerous pride. Paul beautifully describes the actions of spiritual Christians towards a fellow Christian who needs spiritual help: "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1-2).

The whole text is about love responding to need. Rather than dwelling upon and examining and exposing the faults of others it is about covering, caring for and healing a needy friend.

The Lord Jesus was often the subject of gossip. This is never more true than at the cross when (in words of the hymn):

*No eye was found to pity,
No heart to share Thy woe,
But shame and scorn and spitting:
None cared Thy name to know.*

JN Darby (1800-1882)

Yet in the midst of all the voices raised in condemnation against him at the cross the Lord Jesus heard one voice speaking up. It was the voice of the dying thief, "This man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41). It is hard to imagine the joy it gave to the Saviour to hear one voice speaking in His defence. One voice which didn't believe the gossip and one voice that owned Him as Lord (Luke 23:42).

The dying thief did not live long after coming to know the Saviour, but he left us an abiding lesson in how to deal with gossip - let's follow his example.

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