



## ***Unwise & Sinful Speech*** **Proverbs series**

We are continuing in our series through Proverbs and this morning we are going to continue our look into what the Bible describes as wise and unwise speech. Last week we talked about wise speech, and just to give a quick review we saw that Proverbs offers at least two big truths when it comes to our speech.

First, speech is a defining characteristic of both the wise and the unwise. That is, when we speak, we are revealing more than our opinions or thoughts, we are also revealing our hearts. Our speech reveals something of our character.

Second, wise people know that what they say and how they say it have tremendous consequences. Death and life are in the power of the tongue as Proverbs 18 describes.

Then we looked at five specific characteristics of wise speech. Wise speech is honest, life-giving, controlled, gentle and gracious, and humble.

This morning, we are going to look at what Proverbs describes as unwise and sinful speech. Now, obviously, the opposite of those characteristics we talked about last week can be considered unwise. Unwise speech is prideful, harsh, uncontrolled, and destructive.

I want to give special attention to three specific forms of unwise and sinful speech this morning: lying, gossip, and slander.

Proverbs has a lot to say about those three. And that shouldn't surprise us. Because we know ourselves. A popular saying in the world of media and communication is "the medium is the message." What was originally meant by that is the technologies that we use for communication shape our messages so much that they become a part of our messages. Recipients of our communication are influenced by the medium through which they receive our message.<sup>1</sup>

Well, we could say that is true not just of movies and social media, but it is true of us. Communication begins with us and is communicated by us, and so it is shaped by who we are. Again, our words are a defining characteristic of the wise and unwise. We are the medium of our speech, and *this* medium, according to Scripture, is imperfect,

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<sup>1</sup> see Quentin J. Schultze, *Communicating with Grace and Virtue: Learning to Listen, Speak, Text, and Interact as a Christian*.

sinful, often selfish, and in process of being sanctified by God's grace yet not fully there.

This means we don't always get it right. We don't always speak in a wise way. We often speak in unwise and sinful ways, so it's important to be reminded of what that speech is and what warnings the Bible gives us and, ultimately, what hope we find in the gospel for it.

## I. Lying

Earlier in the sermon series, Kevin walked us through Proverbs 6, and one week we looked at the list in chapter six of the things God hates. I just want us to look one more time at that...

### **Proverbs 6:16-19**

**16** There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: **17** haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, **18** a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, **19** a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.

Notice, lying is listed twice. We see a "lying tongue" and "a false witness who breathes out lies." God *really* hates lying.

### **Proverbs 12:22**

Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight.

God hates lying, because it is against the nature of God who is only true.

God is omniscient, that is He knows all things, therefore, he knows the truth, but beyond that, he is holy and righteous which means he can't lie. It's something that he can't do as a truly righteous and righteously true God.

### **Num. 23:19**

God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?

In the NT, Paul writes to Titus and points him to this truth...

### **Titus 1:1-2**

**1** Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness— **2** in the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time

Talking about the covenant God made to Abraham, the author of Hebrews says...

**Hebrews 6:18**

God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged.

Again, God is only truth, in him is no falsehood, therefore, lying goes against who he is and his moral law.

And since this is true, Proverbs points out that the righteous should hate lying too.

**Proverbs 13:5**

The righteous hates falsehood, but the wicked brings shame and disgrace.

As people who follow the Lord we should be passionate for truth and despise falsehood. We should seek to honor and reflect the God we represent as ambassadors to the world. We should imitate God in speaking truth and putting away lying, whether those are what we often describe as “big lies” or “little lies.” Failing to do so, fails to reflect our God of truth and it fails to follow him in obedience in this realm of our speech.

Besides that, Proverbs offers a lot of other warnings and instructions about lying. We will look at these quickly:

**Lies are harmful...****Proverbs 25:18**

A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow.

**Better to be poor than a liar...****Proverbs 19:22**

What is desired in a man is steadfast love, and a poor man is better than a liar.

**Closely associated to flattery...****Proverbs 26:28**

A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin.

Flattery is saying something about someone to their face that you would never say behind their back. You are being disingenuous.

**Because all of that is true, we shouldn't listen to or tolerate lies of others...****Proverbs 17:4**

An evildoer listens to wicked lips, and a liar gives ear to a mischievous tongue.

If you are prone to lie, you are failing to reflect the One in whose image you were created. At the core of lying is idolatry. It is deciding that the thing you stand to gain by lying is of greater importance and worth to you than honoring the Lord with your speech.

Again, God hates lying and we should too.

## **II. Gossip**

I think we all probably understand what gossip is. Gossip is talking about someone behind their back. But not positively. If flattery is saying something about someone to their face that you would never say behind their back, gossip is the opposite. It is saying something about someone behind their back that you would never say to their face.

This is a tricky one, even for Christians, because we still battle the old flesh which causes us to kind of baptize our sin sometimes and justify it with spiritual language. Ever said for heard someone say, “Hey, you should pray for so-and-so because I heard that she....or I saw him...”

Most of us have, and what we’ve done is gossiped but because it came as a “prayer request” we tell ourselves that it is ok. But the Bible gives us clear warnings against gossip, and the wise will heed them.

### **It is destructive...**

#### **Proverbs 16:28**

A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.

Those who gossip are described as “whisperers,” again because they are saying something that they wouldn’t want to get back to the person they are talking about. It highlights the secretive nature of this kind of speech.

But that kind of speech destroys. In that verse, it points out that one result is broken friendships. Whereas two people or a group of people enjoyed a strong relationship, gossip has torn them apart. And this is an important warning, because there is a temptation to think that gossip can stay within a close relationship without doing any harm, that it is safe there, but that is unwise. Gossip brings destruction.

In fact, gossip damages three people. It damages the one speaking, because it is acting on a temptation to sin. It damages the one hearing the gossip, because it now involves them in a difficult situation, perhaps sinful depending on how they respond. And it damages the one who was gossiped about. We shouldn’t kid ourselves into thinking that it is harmless communication, even among friends. It is destructive.

And of course, churches are not immune to the presence and destruction of gossip. How many churches have been ravaged by gossip? One pastor described gossip as “the RPG that blasts holes in the fabric of the church.” (Erik Raymond)

A few years ago a fire broke out in the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. Maybe you remember seeing that on the news. Notre Dame is a beautiful building with stunning artwork. But a small spark quickly became a raging inferno destroying a large part of that historic building.

That event is a perfect illustration of the effect that gossip has on a local church. The church is beautiful (and I don’t mean the building, though ours is). The church is the body of Christ, made up of people redeemed by the blood of Christ. It is a beautiful thing. But gossip which starts out as a spark can quickly engulf and absolutely destroy it.

The strange thing is, we know it is destructive, and yet, we love it...

**Proverbs 18:8**

The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.

We *love* to hear gossip. It’s delicious to us.

I love chips and queso. I think it is one of the greatest culinary achievements of mankind. When I go to a restaurant and have chips and queso, I learn how little self-control I have. It is delicious to me, so it goes down so easily, and I can’t wait to have more.

Gossip is like that for us, so often. We love to hear. We love how it makes us feel important as we declare our judgments on the person. We love how it makes us feel included because we know the inside scoop. We love how it makes us feel powerful because we can cut someone down to size. We love how it makes us feel righteous by pronouncing someone else guilty.<sup>2</sup>

We love it, and Proverbs recognize that but notice the warning that goes with that. Those morsels of information about someone “go down into the inner parts of the body.” In other words, they will affect you. You won’t leave that conversation unchanged. It affects the way you view people. It affects the way you interact with people. It affects how much or how little you trust others. It affects your fellowship with those who are to be seen as brothers and sisters, and so many other harmful ways.

So, when someone brings a delicious morsel of gossip to us, we should shut it down...

**Proverbs 26:20**

<sup>2</sup> Based on Ray Ortlund, from Justin Taylor, “How to Stop Church-Killing Gossip,” The Gospel Coalition, February 12, 2013, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/how-to-stop-church-killing-gossip/>.

For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.

Now, that's easier said than done, I know. Most of the time, I think we hear something and it makes us feel uneasy, but we don't know what to say so we don't say anything, thinking as long as I don't repeat it or ask for more info, then that will suffice. But remember that gossip is destructive and it is likely that a gossiper isn't only talking to you.

But what can we say? Practically, how can we handle gossip?

**Questions to ask when you hear gossip to shut it down.**<sup>3</sup> These go from gentler to more direct and serious...

1. **Why are you telling me this?** Hopefully, this is enough for someone to recognize that what they are saying isn't above board.
2. **What's the difference between what you're telling me and gossip?** A little more direct if they are deflecting or minimizing.
3. **How is your telling me that thought, that complaint, that information going to help you and me love God and our brothers better, and knit us closer together as a church in Christ's love?** Reminds them that we are to be eager for unity within the church body.
4. **Now that you've told me about that, what are you going to do about it?** It calls them to repentance.
5. **Now that you've told me about that, you've morally obligated me to make sure you talk to that person about it. How long do you think you need, so I can know when this becomes a sin that I will need to confront in you?** Reinforces the seriousness of gossip.

### III. Slander

Slander is similar to gossip. One author described gossip and slander as communication's "two catastrophic cousins."<sup>4</sup> Slander is the sharing of false information about someone in order to damage their reputation. That could be a complete fabrication, an utter lie. But it also includes stretching the truth about something they said or did in order to make it sound worse than it really was.

#### **Proverbs 10:18**

The one who conceals hatred has lying lips, and whoever utters slander is a fool.

<sup>3</sup> Justin Taylor, "How to Stop Church-Killing Gossip."

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Robinson, "Communication's Two Catastrophic Cousins," *The Gospel Coalition*, June 7, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/catastrophic-cousins/>.

Fools slander. Not the wise.

We should remember that the first person to slander was Satan. Remember in the Garden of Eden, that Satan slandered God by misrepresenting God's character.

**Genesis 3:4-5**

**4** But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. **5** For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Satan slandered God by saying that he lied about them potentially dying and that he had other motivations for the boundary he created for them.

When we gossip and slander we reflect Satan more than God. In fact, the word *devil* literally means "slanderer."

When you're tempted to misrepresent someone else for your own gain, remember that your brothers and sisters in Christ already have an accuser in Satan, already have a slanderer. Don't offer your assistance.

Also, it's not sufficient to defend slander by saying, "I was only joking!"

**Proverbs 26:18-19**

**18** Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death **19** is the man who deceives his neighbor and says, "I am only joking!"

So, again, according to Proverbs and so many other places in Scripture, the wise are honest and are controlled with their speech. It is the unwise who engage in sinful speech with lying, gossip, and slander, among other ways.

**Much more could be said, but I do think this brings up an important question that is good to mention.** It is one thing to identify gossip and slander, but it's good to consider what isn't gossip/slander that sometimes gets labeled gossip? What about the need to seek out advice, counsel, or help? Is it wrong to talk about someone when they aren't present? Isn't that damaging their reputation when we talk to others for help?

This is super important in our whistle-blowing age because sometimes overzealous people think they are doing right but have spoken about someone without full knowledge and ruined the hard-earned reputations of others, but then there are also people who should have spoken up but didn't because they were afraid they were gossiping and thought if they did reach out or expose someone's sin they would be the one in the wrong. For whatever reason they thought the Christian or righteous thing to do was be quiet.

First of all, know that anytime there is harm or threat of harm involved, whether that is someone harming you, harming others, or harming themselves, please talk to someone. That is not unwise speech. Those things should come to light. Please don't suffer in silence out of fear of gossiping. Don't let someone else suffer in silence out of fear of gossiping.

If you just need advice dealing with a difficult person, it's absolutely ok to seek out counsel. Know that counselors and pastors will handle your information with as much confidentiality as possible, though there might be circumstances in which we need to have conversations with others or even notify the authorities. It's good to have friends who have proven to be trustworthy confidants with whom you can seek advice.

When it comes to confronting someone in their sin, Jesus gave us a clear pattern to follow in Matthew 18 where we confront that person, if they don't repent we bring someone else, and if they still don't repent we bring it to the church. Obviously, in that process there is the possibility of talking to others about someone. And we know that Jesus' counsel and pattern are good and right.

If there is ever a situation with a pastor or elder, please let us know so that we can handle it biblically and appropriately.

Understand, speaking about someone else in all of those situations is very different than what the Bible forbids as gossip and slander. As long as it is true, that communication doesn't have destruction as its end goal, but restoration and healing. Seeking and desiring justice is not harmful, it is good for all involved, including the one who is guilty.

That is different than trying to form an army of close friends in order to have more people on your side than the other person's, or to boost your reputation at the expense of someone else's, or to damage someone out of envy or revenge. So understanding the motive of your communication is vital there.

## **GOSPEL**

Again, as we wrap up this morning thinking through lying, gossip, and slander, we've all spoken in these ways, haven't we? We've stretched the truth, we've concealed the truth, we've distorted the truth. We've talked about others behind their backs, sometimes in a malicious way, purposefully damaging their reputation with others.

Thankfully, there is grace for that. As we mentioned last week and really every week, Jesus lived a perfect life in the place of you and me. And he went to the cross to pay the debt we all owe for our sin, which includes every sinful word, every sinful motivation, and every sinful participation in gossip and slander. And so as we recognize



our failures, if we repent of them and turn to Jesus we can rest knowing that his blood has covered our unwise and sinful words.

And because we are all guilty of speaking in these ways, that also means we have all been on the receiving end of this kind of speech. People have lied to you and lied about you. People have talked about you behind your back. People have slandered you so that others have a worse view of you. How do we respond to that?

There is certainly a place to confront the person who has sinned against you in that way. Go to them. Follow the biblical model and pattern for confronting sin. But if you've done that, and nothing seemingly good comes from it, or they have repented but the damage has already been done, what can you do?

**First of all, you should commit your reputation to the Lord.** He knows the truth. And the truth will come out. Remember it was in the context of being maligned that Jesus said...

**Matthew 10:26**

So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.

We so often want to defend ourselves and our reputations, and there is certainly a place for that which takes some wisdom on when and how to do that, but oftentimes we are just driven by fear of man instead of fear of the Lord, and sometimes we can make things worse.

Gavin Ortlund wrote, "When you feel the pinch of fear and self-protection, remind yourself that truth will win in the end. Truth is relentless, unyielding, inevitable, invincible. It's the king of come-from-behind victories."<sup>5</sup>

George Whitfield once wrote, Let the name of Whitefield perish, but Christ be glorified. Let my name die everywhere, let even my friends forget me, if by that means the cause of the blessed Jesus may be promoted. . . . I am content to wait till the judgement day for the clearing up of my reputation; and after I am dead I desire no other epitaph than this, "Here lies G. W. What sort of man he was the great day will discover."<sup>6</sup>

**The second thing you should do is preach the gospel to yourself.** Of course, it doesn't remove the pain of being gossiped and slandered about, but it reminds you of some very important truths.

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<sup>5</sup> Gavin Ortlund, "3 Ways to Respond When Slandered," *The Gospel Coalition*, October 21, 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/3-ways-to-respond-when-slandered/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

By remembering your need for God's grace in the gospel your defensiveness is eased. Because you remember you aren't perfect to begin with. Spurgeon famously said, "If any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him; for you are worse than he thinks you to be."

But in preaching the gospel to yourself you remember more than just your sin, you are reminded of your Savior who knows everything you've experienced, loves you as his own, and intercedes for you even in this very moment.

Jesus was slandered, gossiped about, and lied to. Jesus really does understand our pain from sinful speech.

So as you preach the gospel to yourself, you are able to anchor your heart in the love of Jesus which helps you let go of pain and extend grace and forgiveness.

So do that this morning. Look to Jesus. Trust in him. Find the forgiveness you need and the peace he provides.

## **CONFESSION**

## **PRAYER**

## **ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

### **Hebrews 4:14-16**

**14** Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. **15** For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. **16** Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Again, we have a great high priest in Jesus who succeeded in every way that we have failed and now extends his grace to us. So, let's stand and continue and worship...

## **VERSES**

Proverbs 6:16-19

Proverbs 12:22

Numbers 23:19

Titus 1:1-2  
Hebrews 6:18  
Proverbs 13:5  
Proverbs 25:18  
Proverbs 19:22  
Proverbs 26:28  
Proverbs 17:4  
Proverbs 16:28  
Proverbs 18:8  
Proverbs 26:20  
Proverbs 10:18  
Genesis 3:4-5  
Proverbs 26:18-19  
Matthew 10:26  
Hebrews 4:14-16

## **SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. In what ways do our sinful hearts shape the way we communicate?
2. Why is gossip so destructive to relationships?
3. Why is gossip so destructive to churches?
4. How have you stopped gossip when you heard it?
5. How are gossip and slander similar and different?
6. Why can it be hard to commit our reputations to the Lord?
7. How does the gospel shape the way we interact with sinful speech?