

Zip it!
Getting a Grip on Gossip
February 19, 2012

Song: "Careless Talk"

Video: "Gossip"

Introduction

Who am I? I have no respect for justice. I maim without killing. I break hearts and ruin lives. I am cruel 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'm nobody's friend. Once I tarnish a reputation, it is never the same. I topple governments and ruin marriages. I

destroy careers and cause heartache and sleepless nights. I wreck churches and separate Christians. I spawn suspicion and generate grief, make innocent people cry on their pillows. Even my name hisses. I am gossip.

When you consider all the sins of the tongue, such as profanity, insults, negativism, complaints, and criticism, gossip is arguably the most deadly of them all. Gossip has destroyed more people, tarnished more reputations, broken more friendships, and split more churches than any sin I'm aware of. The problem with gossip is it's quickly told, quickly heard, and quickly spread. Worst of all, gossip is quickly believed. People

will confess to theft, adultery, even murder. But no one confesses to gossip. I wonder how many of us here today have been hurt by gossip. How many of us have been the target of careless talk, like the song said. How many of us have been hurt by people, even well meaning Christians, who share private information about us without our knowledge? Gossip is funny when it's portrayed in a video clip, but it's not so funny when it's directed at us.

Gossip: Is it good or bad?

Even though most Christians would agree that gossip is a "sin", it appears that the rest of world doesn't share that sentiment.

In fact, some people think that gossip is actually good for us.

A recent article in USA today, entitled "**Gossiping May Be Good for You,**" discussed the findings of a University of California, Berkeley study that included four experiments involving hundreds of volunteers.

According to the study, gossip may have some benefits, such as reducing stress, discouraging bad behavior and preventing exploitation. "Gossip gets a bad rap," says study psychologist Robb Willer, "but we're finding evidence that it plays a critical role in the maintenance of social order".

He and his colleagues also found that gossip can be therapeutic. In the study, participants' heart rates rose when they saw someone behaving badly, but the increase was moderated when they were able to tell others about what they had witnessed.

"Spreading information about the person whom they had seen behave badly tended to make people feel better, quieting the frustration that drove their gossip," Willer explained.

Overall, the findings of the study suggest that people don't need to feel bad about revealing underhanded behavior by others, especially if it helps save someone from exploitation.

After reading about a study like that, it makes you pause and think. Maybe gossip does get a bad rap. Maybe it's not quite as bad as the Bible or other people say it is. Maybe talking about people behind their backs is okay after all. What do you think? Which is it? Is gossip good or bad? Sinful or therapeutic? That's just one of the issues we will look at today as we continue with message #3 in our three-part series entitled, "Zip It".

Review

As you know, we've been learning how to control our speech over the past two weeks. Rick and Irving taught us how to deal with the problems of complaining and criticizing and now it's my turn. Today I want to look at the subject of gossip.

Gossip: Defined

I think a good place to begin our discussion today would be to define what we mean by *gossip*... because one of the things I do not want to communicate is that you should never express any kind of negative information or concern about another person. There is a time, a place, and a process for that. In fact, the USA today article on gossip rightfully pointed out that people don't need to feel bad about revealing underhanded behavior by others, especially if it helps save someone from exploitation. A person who is calling attention to abusive behavior is clearly not engaged in gossip, even though he or she is passing on negative information about

someone. Merely communicating negative information does not automatically make it gossip.

But the bigger question is this: "When does revealing the bad behavior by others" become hurtful, malicious gossip? So it's important that we begin by defining what gossip is. Let's make sure we are all on the same page, terminology-wise. When you look up the word gossip in the dictionary, it's defined as:

Casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details that are not confirmed as being true.

While that's not a bad definition in my opinion, our modern dictionaries don't go far enough. When we look at the bible's use of the word gossip, we find a much more singular and focused meaning. In fact, there are four words which are translated as "gossip" or "slander" in the bible that give us a slightly different understanding of the word.

In Old Testament, we find two Hebrew words used for gossip: rakiyl and dibbah.

Rakiyl (raw-keel) means "talebearer" and refers to someone who goes around telling stories about other people without their knowledge.

A gossip (rakiyl) betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.
Proverbs 11:13 (NIV)

Dibbah (dib-baw) means "bad or evil report." It refers to someone one who tells lies about other people.

He who conceals his hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander [dibbah] is a fool. Proverbs 10:18 (NIV)

The basic idea of behind dibbah is conveyed in the 7th Commandment which says, "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."

Now in the New Testament, we also find two Greek words used for gossip.

Psithuristes (p sith-oo-ris-tace') means "whisperer" in Greek and it literally

refers to a person who whispers behind your back with the intention of hurting you. When speaking about people who are under God's wrath, Paul says, They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips [psithuristes], 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; Romans 1:29-30 (NIV)

All too often we can be like Dennis the Menace who whispered in his neighbor's ear,

"Now listen good. I can only tell you this once 'cause my Dad told me not to repeat it."

The other word for gossip in the New Testament is the word katalalia. katalalia (kat-ah al lee a) means "slanderer" in Greek and it means "to speak evil of or badmouth someone". In 1 Peter 2:1 we are commanded to not use this kind of speech. Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander [katalalia] of every kind. 1 Peter 2:1 (NIV)

You can see that gossip in the Old and New Testament has a richer, deeper meaning than the traditional definition of the word. Therefore, a more complete definition of gossip would include a least

two additional elements: the elements of intent and content.

When it comes to intent, the Scriptures point out that gossipers have the intent or goal of building themselves up by making others look bad. Regarding content, the bible seems to indicate that gossipers like to talk about the faults and failings of others, or reveal potentially embarrassing or shameful details about other people without their knowledge or approval.

Therefore, it's your intent as well as your content that determines whether you are engaged in casual conversation or caught up in harmful gossip.

When we include the additional elements of intent and content in our definition of

gossip, we come up with something like this:

unconstrained conversation about other people that makes them look bad, or conveys false, embarrassing or private information about them without their knowledge or approval.

So let's push pause for a minute and think about some of the most recent conversations we've had lately. When you think back over the things you've said recently about another person, how would you answer these questions?

What was your intent? Were you trying to make the other person look bad by what you said? What the content of your conversation? Did you share any false,

embarrassing or private information about someone without that person's approval? If the answer is yes OR yes, then YES, you are gossiping!

Why We Gossip

So now that we have a biblical understanding of gossip, the next logical question to ask is "why do we do it?" Why do we so often find ourselves bad mouthing other people? I think there are several reasons why we do it, but three reasons seem to come to the top of the list. The first reason we gossip is...

We want to hurt others and not be held accountable. If we walked up to someone we wanted to hurt and punched them in

the face, we'd be thrown in jail for assault. Then how can you assault someone without having to account for it? Gossip. Gossip is the sign of the person who is vindictive and cowardly in equal measure. A gossip wants to hurt people, but doesn't want to face any other consequences of doing so. The second reason we gossip is...

We refuse to respect other people's right-to-privacy. People have a right to keep certain aspects of their lives out of the public eye. Yet sometimes, not wanting to honor someone else's right-to-privacy, we speculate or fantasize as to what is happening in that person's private life. The next thing you know, we voice our

speculations or fantasies as though they were factual. We guess at what's happening in a person's life and repeat it as if it's fact. There are no grounds for doing this. But "who needs grounds?" we say to ourselves. The third reason we gossip is...

We are envious of other people's possessions. Not only do we refuse to a person's right-to-privacy, we refuse to grace them their right-to-possession. We cannot endure someone whose house is larger, or bank account richer, or inheritance bigger, or ability is greater, or children brighter. Since the difference between someone else and us is intolerable, we have to find a way to end

the disparity. There are only two ways of doing this: either we elevate ourselves or we bring the other down. Since we can't do the first, we resort to the second. But how are we to bring the other person down? We can't embezzle their savings or reduce the achievement of their children or lessen their talent but we can gossip. All it takes is a few words of gossip and the other person will be leveled; but more than leveled, they will be beneath us. And oh how good that makes us feel...for the time being.

I'm sure you can think of other reasons besides the three I just mentioned. But whether it's stems from envy, or maliciousness or just being nosy, our

tendency to gossip is something we are all guilty of.

The Cure for Gossip

Enough of all this talk about the cause of gossip. Let's get to the solution side of the problem. Let's talk about the cure for gossip. When I look at the problem of gossip, I believe there are basically two approaches to dealing with it. You can either:

Start on the outside and work in or begin on the inside and work out.

Let's examine the first approach: Start from the outside and work in. I thought it might help if I showed you a training video on how to use the outside/in approach, just in case you'd like to try it out for yourself. Let's watch.

Video: Father Shooting Laptop

Hopefully all of you checked your guns at the door! This is obviously an EXTREME example of the first approach, but I showed it to you to make a point: You can't cure gossip simply using an outside/in approach. The outside/in approach assumes that if you just change the environment and get rid of the external influences...facebook, cell phone, laptop computer, etc., then you'll get rid of gossip. That may sound logical, but it doesn't work and most of all, it doesn't get to the root of the problem. Gossip, at its root, is a HEART (internal) problem, not an ENVIRONMENTAL

(external) problem. In other words, rearranging a person's external environment won't solve the problem. Grounding your daughter, banning her from Facebook, or shooting holes in her computer is only a temporary fix. I guarantee you that the daughter of that angry father in the video will use some other means to gossip or slander her parents. She doesn't need a computer. All she needs is her mouth. This is exactly what the Scripture says:

Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him." Matthew 12:34-35 (NIV)

The problem of gossip can't be fixed by working from the outside in...you must work from the inside out. The heart, the inside, must be fixed and then the mouth will follow. As you can see, I don't believe the first approach is very effective. You may get short term results, but you won't be dealing with the root of the gossip problem.

I prefer approach #2: Begin on the inside and work out. Let's talk about the best approach...approach #2...the inside/out approach. In order to help us understand this approach, I want to use the metaphor of a tree. As you can see, a tree consists of three parts:

the root, the trunk and the fruit.

The key to fixing a gossip problem is to start with the root, not the fruit...which is another way of saying begin with the inside and work out.

In our tree metaphor, the root of our tree is equivalent to our heart. That's where the transformation process must begin.

The root of our lives is our identity...who we are, the essence of our being.

Through the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, God can change our hearts...our essence...our "insides" if you will. When we place our trust and faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, God gives us a new heart. He replaces

our old stony, cold heart with a heart that beats for him. But that's not all.

When we place our faith and trust in Jesus, God changes our name as well. We are no longer called "children of wrath". We are forevermore called the "beloved", his children. We are no longer God's enemy. We are now God's loved ones.

That means that as a Christian, I'm fully accepted, fully forgiven, and of great value to God as a Christ follower.

Therefore, I am whole. I don't need to get my value from other people or other things. I don't need a bigger house or a larger bank account or a prestigious job to be our value. I'm valuable because God says I am. Therefore, I am whole. I

am full...full of God and indwelled by his Holy Spirit. This is my heart, my foundation, my root system from which everything else flows. But that's just the beginning.

Once our lives are firmly rooted and grounded in Christ, our mind begins to change.

Our mind is represented by the trunk of the tree.

When we begin to think about what God has done for us...how he's forgiven us and accepted us and loved us, we start thinking about ways to share that same love with others around us. That's exactly what the Bible says should happen.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. [2] And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5:1-2 ESV)

We are to be imitators of God in our humanity. We are to reflect his character to the world around us. How does this happen? According to the verse, it flows from our identity as his beloved children. Beloved children think differently than unloved children. Beloved children think about how much they are valued and how they became whole in the first place. Beloved children think about the fact that their savior, Jesus, first loved them and He gave his life for them. As Christians, we grasp the amazing love Jesus showed to

us, and then they we begin to think about ways to show that same kind of sacrificial, unconditional love to others. Our old ways of thinking gradually get replaced by new ways of thinking. Those old desires of wanting to elevate ourselves above others or wanting to bring others down are gradually replaced by new desires to humble ourselves and build others up. Our thinking changes because our hearts have been changed.

This is what Paul means in Romans 5:5 when he says, "we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love."

Once our minds and desires change, our actions and words are not far behind. They begin to change as well.

My mouth is represented by the fruit on the tree. The fruit of my mouth is intended to be wholesome words, kind words, gentle words, words that build people up and don't tear them down.

That's what Paul meant in Ephesians 4:29 when he said, " Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

We can't get consistently get rid of our unwholesome talk without changing our hearts and minds. Once our hearts and minds have been changed by our relationship with Jesus, our mouths begin to change as well. That's the way the inside/out process works. If you want to change your tongue, then begin with your heart and your mind. Once you do that, you'll find yourself replacing hurtful gossip with helpful talk. You find yourself wanting to say something positive, something fitting, something helpful instead of something juicy and untrue about another person. Your words will become clean and wholesome, helpful and faithful, building up and encouraging other

people, instead of fiery darts that light fires in other people's minds.

You see, if we begin on the inside, and work out, we will see amazing results. We will find that gossip will be replaced by wholesome talk. And the reason why all of this works is because we are the beloved. And beloved people love others. Forgiven people forgive. Accepted people accept others (even with all of their flaws) and build others up.

I want to stop for a minute now and do a little self assessment. I want each of us to think about where we stand regarding this issue of gossip. Are you struggling with it? Do you find yourself too often talking

about other people behind their backs?
Do you have trouble keeping other
people's junk confidential? We all struggle
with gossip at some level. Let's look at the
tree metaphor again and assess the
source of our gossip problems.

Tree picture

Maybe your problem is with the root.
Maybe you are still living with a stony,
cold heart that is distant from God. Maybe
for you, it's time to say "yes" to Jesus and
by faith, give him your heart. Maybe today
you need to ask Jesus into your life to
become the forgiver of sins. If you do, I
guarantee you that your identity will
change. You will go from seeing yourself

as unloved, unaccepted and of little value
to seeing yourself as God's child, as his
beloved. And when you do, you will be on
the road to getting a grip on your gossip.
Maybe your problem is with the trunk.
Maybe you have forgotten what Jesus has
done for you. Maybe you need to remind
yourself of the great sacrifice Jesus made
on your behalf, SO THAT you can turn
around and show that same sacrificial
love to others. You need to remember this:
because you are a Christian, you owe a
debt of love to everyone. That's Paul's
command in Romans 13. "Owe no one
anything except the debt of love." We owe
it to others to love them because of the
love God has shown us. We are to reflect
his love to others as his beloved children.

Think about that. Remind yourself of it often. Remember: loved people love. Forgiven people forgive.

Maybe your problem is with the fruit. Maybe you've just allowed negativity and unwholesome talk come out of your mouth way too often lately. If you know that your heart beats for God and your mind understands what God has done for you, then you just need to do something simple to get you back on the right track. For you, a simple confession will do. Confession is simply saying to God, "I've sinned and I'm sorry. I'm sorry for talking bad about that person. I'm sorry for not keeping that private information confidential. I'm sorry for passing along

those stories that were nothing but gossip."

As we conclude today, I'm going to ask the band to come out and get in place for our last song. In closing, I remind you that if you want to get a grip on gossip you have to use the right approach. Working from the outside/in doesn't offer any lasting change because it doesn't deal with the root of the problem. It only puts a temporary band aid on gossip. On the other hand, if you work from the inside/out, if you begin with the root and work toward the fruit, you will see significant lasting change as God transforms your whole being, including your speech. That's what this whole "Zip

It" series has been about. God wants to teach us how to control our tongues. We need to restrain our complaining, and curb our criticism and get a grip on gossip so that our mouths glorify God in everything we say. And that's what it's about, isn't it? Glorifying God? The apostle Paul says,

"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." 1 Corinthians 10:31.

That should always be our goal. We want everything about our lives to reflect the glory of God. Let's close in prayer and ask God to do that very thing.

Prayer: God, thanks for the transforming power of the gospel. Thanks for showing us how real change works. God, help those people who need a change of heart and prompt them to give their lives to Christ today. Help those who need a change of mind to remember the love you've shown them so that they can love others in return. Help those who need a change of words to confess gossip when they see it and begin again to speak the truth in love. And finally God, we echo that words of the Psalmist when he said, "Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips." Ps. 141:3. We ask this so that you may be glorified in all that we say and do. In Jesus name, Amen.

Song: For Your Glory (Matt Maher)