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Series: Proverbs: Living Wisely in a Fallen World
Message: Taming the Tongue

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Ray Ortlund, Jr. has been a favorite of mine for a long time. He just recently retired from Immanuel Church in Nashville, Tennessee. I've always enjoyed the things that he has written. A number of years ago he wrote an article called "The One Another's I Can't Find in the New Testament." There's like 30 something one another statements that we are to engage each other in in so many respects. He's taken that concept and he said there's some one another's I can't find in the New Testament. He said I can't find humble one another. Scrutinize one another. Pressure one another. Embarrass one another. Corner one another. Interrupt one another. Defeat one another. Disapprove of one another. Run one another's lives. Confess one another's sins. Intensify one another's sufferings. Point out one another's failings. We could certainly add to that to talk negatively about one another. One of the ways we speak well of each other is through the tongue, through our speech, through our words.

But it is also the true that this is an area of nearly universal failure. I mean, if we take James seriously, which we must, that is exactly what he says, doesn't he? This likely misuse of the tongue is something that plagues all of us. Things that we say to each other. Things that we say about each other. That would certainly be consistent with what we've been studying in Proverbs. We noted last week that Proverbs says more about the tongue, more about words, more about speech than any other single topic almost times two. So clearly this is a word that God wants us to hear.

Last week we looked at words matter, the power of speech. This morning we want to look into this matter of the tongue and the sin of gossip. What I want you to see this morning is that too often those who are busy magnifying the sins of others are the first to minimize their own sins of the tongue. Let's begin where it's always good to begin. Let's begin by getting God's perspective about this. I've noted there on your outline three passages with regard to God's perspective on the sins of the tongue.

They're very sobering passages. Proverbs 6. We've already looked at that a number of months ago. Just to remind you, it's that statement where Solomon says here are seven things that God hates. Of those seven, three of them have to do with the tongue. So almost half of the things that Solomon says in Proverbs 6 are things that God literally hates have to do with our speech, have to do with our tongue, and our lack of control.

In Romans chapter 1, this is a passage that we're very familiar with, Paul is bringing to us a picture of the depravity of the heart of man, of man's condition apart from this gracious work of God. You know this litany of things that he puts before us. He says beginning in verse 28: "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless." You read that and it just sets you back. Tucked away in that whole list of things is he says the very character of certain people. He doesn't say they gossip. He said they are gossipers. They don't just slander. they are literally to be understood in their character as being slanderers.

Then if you slip over to 2 Corinthians chapter 12 you remember the church in Corinth had a few problems. Paul in this last letter that he writes to them says in verse 20: "For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish – that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder." As I read that I just go yikes! This is the body of Christ. This is a church that the apostle is getting ready to visit and he's looking ahead to what he anticipates from what he has heard he could encounter. He speaks very forcefully, very powerfully about that.

So let's think together of two definitions. These two words that we've been introduced to. This matter first of all of gossip. The Old Testament Hebrew word for gossip is literally talebearer. A talebearer is simply someone who goes from person-to-person bearing tales, telling stories, spreading damaging information. In the New Testament, the Greek word is literally that of a whisperer and so it speaks of somebody who is doing something in secret, something that often times is hurtful and dishonoring

and damaging to people. It can be as simple as somebody grumbling and complaining about somebody to somebody in an all out angry rant against somebody. So you have this spectrum of how this would in fact be understood. We might define gossip in this way. Saying something about someone you wouldn't say to them if they were standing right there. You say something about somebody but you would never say that if they were standing right there. I have to confess that there's a bad memory. This is like 45 years old. I was in college when this happened. We had just played a pickup basketball game at a local park not far away from the college. My team had lost and I don't like losing. As I'm walking off with another guy, I say to him, who I took to be my friend, "Man, we would've never lost if it hadn't been for Bill." Bill is about 20 feet ahead of us walking. And what does my friend do? He goes, "Hey Bill, Carlon just said that your team would never have lost if you hadn't been on the team." I felt so small. If I could have disappeared, I would have loved to. Why? Because gossip is when you say something about somebody that you would never say to their face but for some reason you say it to somebody else.

Slander is a close cousin. If gossip is the idea of whispering in secret, then slander is something that you do openly. Slander is that which we do with the idea of openly, intentionally, defaming and destroying. I find it interesting that in Leviticus 19:16 in this opening code of conduct that God gives to his people right there in the earliest part of Scripture, God says let nobody be a slanderer among My people. He just calls it out right at the beginning and says this is not the way we are going to conduct ourselves and treat one another. We don't have civic laws against gossip. We have industries that promote gossip. We don't have civic laws against gossip We have civic laws against slander that seem oftentimes impossible to prove but we do have laws against intentionally, purposely harming somebody by means of slander.

So when we think about this, I want to make just this one observation. One of the great dangers to any church is the tongue, the uncontrolled tongue. An indicator of the health of the church is the quality of its talk, the quality of its conversation. If we're talking about concepts, about vision, about strategy, about mission – if we're talking about those kinds of things, that's almost always going to be good. It is when we start talking about people and when we start talking about each other that we begin to give

away something that is dangerous in the life of the church. How we talk to each other. How we talk about each other. The sad fact is, and we probably can all think of examples, people leave churches, they leave the family that they've been a part of because of gossip. Churches literally are split apart because of gossip. If you just did a study of why churches go through the things that they do, it is very seldom in churches that it's over some doctrinal difference, the deity of Christ, or what is the gospel. It's very often over some minor personality issue or something that has been spread that is untrue. Churches find themselves in all kinds of difficulty because people talk inappropriately about each other.

Covenant Community Church. Take any area of measure that you want to. We are far from perfect. Just name an area and we can think of a hundred ways we need to improve. But my hope and prayer is that we are not a gossiping church. I'm glad you don't come and tell me stuff. I hope you don't tell each other stuff because the health of the church is easily measured by how it is that people talk to and about each other. There's so many ways that we can encourage each other and build each other up and talk well about each other that promotes the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace. So if this is in fact God's perspective, this is heavy stuff. Look at those lists in Proverbs 6, Romans 1, and 2 Corinthians 12. If this is God's perspective, then I guess my question to us is why does gossip seem then to be our favorite pastime so very often?

Let's look at the teaching of Proverbs on the harm the tongue can do. I want to start off by asking that question and seeking to answer it. Why do we gossip? I'm going to move quickly through this. These are just some practical observations about why this happens. We'll see in some instances there's a statement in Proverbs and others there is not. I think first of all one of the reasons we get caught up in gossip is somehow or another we think it elevates us above somebody else. There is that almost perverse sense that keys on pride that causes us to think that there is some sense of superiority, that there's some sense of power that we have when we talk about somebody in a way that somebody else may not have heard or know about. We believe the lie that says when we put somebody else down somehow or another we go up. The truth of the matter is I would suggest to you that when we are putting somebody down we're going lower than that. We're in fact lowering ourselves in such a way that we're even lower

than whatever it is we might be sharing about somebody else. We have information that other people don't have so it makes us appear knowledgeable. We have some inside track. We have some inside information. Again, there's just a sense of self-importance that gets fed in a perverse way when we gossip about each other. We need to understand that our acceptance, our value is based on how God sees us and not how other people see us. Not how it is that we think we might be elevating ourselves in the eyes of somebody else by putting somebody down.

Secondly, we have nothing better to do. This statement isn't in the book of Proverbs but it is in Paul's writings. It's in 1 Timothy chapter 5:13 Paul said about some that are involved in this. He says they're idle. They're going from house to house gossiping and being busybodies. His word to them is knock it off. Find something to do. Most of us probably would not fall into the category that we don't have enough to do. Most of us probably would say we're too busy. But by chance you find yourself not having enough to do, call the church office. Call the church office and we will find you something to do. We will assign you to the Tuesday/Thursday deacon crew. You can invest hours helping these guys. We can give you a cleaning assignment that doesn't get done regularly because there's just so much to do here. We can give you a flower bed or two or three or four and you can keep weeding that and occupy yourself. But Paul links together this idea of gossiping about each other because people are idle. They don't have enough to do in their life. So if that's you then I think we can be of help.

Thirdly, we accept the idea that if it's true it's okay to share. If it's true then it must be okay to share. Of course, the problem with gossip is we never know for sure if it's true or not. We're never quite sure if what we're passing on is absolutely true or not. But the issue is never if it's true or not. We don't pass something along about somebody else simply because we know or we think it's true. The questions that need to be asked are: Is it kind? Is this something that's kind that I'm sharing about somebody else? Is it in any way helpful? Is it necessary for me to share this with somebody else? Does it involve the person that I'm telling this to in any way, shape or form? Does it have anything at all to do with them or is it just a matter of relating something to them? Will it make the person I'm talking about look bad? Or is it going to make them look good?

Listen to Proverbs 11:13 “He who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered”. He who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered. Understand, and we don't have time to go into all of the detail here, but he is not talking about some area of sin that would rise to the level of needing to be dealt with or brought to somebody's attention. He is not talking about something that's going to be grievous to the name of Christ if it would be publicly known. Those kinds of things we have to be wise to in how we respond. We've seen enough of the covering up of things within the church. That's not speaking in that regard. It is speaking of those many things that any of us might find ourselves failing in at any given point. Some that we say something that we wish we hadn't. He says it's a trustworthy person who just keeps that information to himself. They don't need to say, “Did you know what so-and-so did? Did you hear what happened to so-and-so?” It's not going to help anybody. Peter says the same thing. 1 Peter 4:8 says, “Above all love each other deeply.” What a good word right before he is going to admonish us. He tells us to love each other deeply because love covers a multitude of sins. So if you see me going down I-40 and it looks like I'm near road rage, you don't have to come back and tell the whole church about that incident. It's rare and it hardly ever happens. Hopefully, it never happens. But that's what he is talking about. He is talking about those areas where any of us might stumble and fall. They don't need to be passed on to other people.

Fourthly, and this one may be the most difficult to hear, we actually enjoy it. Why do we gossip? Because we actually may enjoy it. Remember in Proverbs 18:8 this very specific statement about this. “The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.” What a descriptive picture that it is of what it means to gossip. He says the exact same thing word verbatim in Proverbs 26:22 so he definitely wants us to get this. The verb here means to swallow something greedily. To swallow it greedily. Here is someone who is a glutton for gossip. Remember we talked last week about Matthew 12 revealing our heart? Here is someone whose heart has hospitality for gossip. You talk about a contradiction – for a Christian to have a heart that swallows greedily negative things about somebody else. Just think for a minute about your favorite snack. For me it would be a bowl of caramel corn anywhere near me. I don't care if it's a little bowl or a big bowl, I'm going to eat the whole thing. I'm

going to be sick after I eat the whole thing but I can't stop eating caramel corn. That's what he's saying here. He's saying there are people who are greedily hungry to take in gossip about other people. I don't want that to be true of me and I don't want that to be true of you. How we devour gossip, eager for more.

Let's look at some of the characteristics of the gossip. These are some of the reasons that Proverbs and Scripture tells us why we do it. What are the characteristics of a gossip? Again this is really giving to us God's perspective and we start off by acknowledging the fact that a gossip is a fool. We're not surprised by that because remember the whole of Proverbs and everything that we've been studying is this choice that we're making every day either to live wisely or to live like a fool. In Proverbs 10:18 "The one who conceals hatred has lying lips and whoever utters slander is a fool." If you're a gossip and a slanderer, Proverbs says you're a fool. God says it is an abomination. The fool who has no regard for the truth says it's not that big of a deal. A fool in Proverbs remember is one who lacks wisdom and not one who values truth. He likes his folly ultimately so he has a spiritual problem. He's choosing something in this case that makes him look like a fool.

Secondly, the gossiper can't be trusted. We read in the 13th verse "Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he is trustworthy in spirit who keeps a thing covered." But it's the first part of that verse. "whoever goes about gossiping and slandering reveals secrets..." They're not to be trusted. A helpful reminder is that the person who is sharing with you about somebody in a negative way might very well in a conversation not too distant from that conversation be sharing something negative about you to somebody else. That's the nature of the gossiper. They're not to be trusted. They bring something to you but they bring something to somebody else about you. It's their nature.

There is an important principle that I think all of us do well to heed. What you hear and what you receive, you control. Anything that you hear, anything that comes to you, you control that. As soon as you share something with somebody else, you no longer have control of that information. You may say to that person you may think they're as trustworthy as can be. You may say to them don't tell anybody else this. Promise right now that you won't say this to anybody else. As soon as you say it, you no

longer have control over it. They might very well go to the next person and say now Carlon said don't tell anybody, so don't pass this on to anybody else. As soon as you share any information, you no longer have control and that's what he is saying here. A gossip cannot be trusted.

Thirdly, a gossip is attracted to other gossips. We are to avoid them. There are all kinds of statements in Proverbs about that. Chapter 15 and verse 14: "The heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouth of fools feeds on folly." Chapter 17 and verse 4: "An evildoer listens to wicked lips and a liar gives ear to a mischievous tongue." It just goes on and on. Proverbs tells us people who gossip find other people who gossip. They just enjoy sharing stuff together. They're attracted to each other for all the reasons we've already talked about. The word and counsel of Proverbs is to avoid these people. Ray Ortlund, who I mentioned at the beginning, says some people become verbal garbage collectors. Again, an imagery that is a rather strong.

There is a worthy admonition here for us again I think. Be careful about becoming the person that people like to come and tell stuff to. Be careful about being the person that disgruntled, unhappy people like to come and talk to. If it involves you, obviously have a sympathetic ear to listen carefully. But if you are constantly the person that grumbling, complaining people come and talk to, then I think you need to ask yourself a very serious heart question. What is it about me that makes grumbling, complaining people want to come and talk to me? Is it because they sense within me a sympathetic ear, knowing that I will take in whatever they say and will bring no word of admonition or rebuke to them? I will not ask them if they have gone to talk to anybody else about this, the primary person essentially. I can remember years ago somebody saying to me I don't know why complaining, grumbling people always come talk to me. I had an idea. You can become that person who becomes the one that everybody just comes and dumps stuff on. We'll see a little bit later how you can stop that, how that can be ended.

Let's look at the results of gossip. Again sadly, I think we've all experienced these at one time or another. We know them firsthand. First of all, it separates friends. Proverbs 16:28 says, "A dishonest man spreads strife and the whisperer separates

close friends.” Paschal, the French mathematician, inventor, Catholic theologian, said this, and to me it's incredibly cynical and I hope I hope it's not true at all, but this is what he said, “I maintain that if everyone knew what others said about them, there would not be four friends in the world.” That’s tough. If everybody knew what everybody was saying about them, it would be Proverbs 16:28. Now thankfully that's not the case. That's not true. But we know how quickly trust evaporates when we find out somebody has said something about us that is not positive or not helpful or maybe even not true. A friendship of many years is quickly shattered when someone speaks an unkind word about another friend.

Secondly, it wounds and destroys people. Obviously separating friends, it wounds and destroys people. We saw last week in Proverbs 18:21 that there is life and death in the power of the tongue. That's what we are saying here is that it wounds and it destroys people. It hurts people. It has been pointed out that three people are hurt every time gossip is shared. Every time somebody gossips about somebody at least three people are hurt. The person doing the talking is clearly sinning. They are going against what God has mandated without question. The person they're talking about. They're sinned against. The person who's listening and hearing by involving themselves in something that they don't need to hear, then they become involved in the scenario as well. Then so very often it expands beyond that, doesn't it? It doesn't always just expand, sometimes it gets improved and enlarged and changed. It wounds and destroys people.

Thirdly, it leads to contention and strife. It leads to contention and strife. Proverbs 25 and verse 23 says this: “The north wind blows forth rain and a backbiting tongue brings angry looks.” There’s just contention and strife. It would be hard to imagine a situation in a church, in a family, at work, anywhere where human relationships are engaged and involved, it would be hard to think of any of those settings in which if people would just stop talking negatively about whatever it is that's causing this contention and strife. If people would just stop talking. It would immediately improve about 100%. What he's saying is that this whispering, this talking is what brings contention and strife.

Let's look then finally at the antidote for gossip. What's the antidote? I'm going to go right back to where we started. Let's see it for what it is. Let's see it as God does. He sees it as sin. Clearly the listing that we noted at the very beginning in those passages reminds us that this is something that God views as incredibly serious. What if we were to regularly remind ourselves just of those three passages? Proverbs 6. Romans 1. 2 Corinthians 12. See that by involving ourselves in this kind of behavior we're opposing God Himself. We're taking a stance against God and doing something that He has said is literally an abomination. Consider the fact that there will never be a word of gossip there will never be a word of slander in heaven. Never. There won't be one word that is untoward spoken between anybody in heaven. Think of the fact that within the Godhead between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit the only words that are ever communicated within the Godhead are words of love and grace and of encouragement and of building up and edifying and all of the things that we're called to do ourselves. Consider the fact that God Himself will not tolerate the accuser bringing a word to Him about us. Jesus our advocate jumps into that fray and He stands in our behalf. What a beautiful picture. Gossip is anti-gospel. Let's be advocates for each other, not accusers of each other.

Secondly, this is the point that I was referencing earlier. Refuse to listen. Refuse to listen. If every time gossip came our way we would simply stop and ask the person very graciously do I need to hear this? Is there a way that I am involved in this in a primary manner? Have you talked to this person? Oh by the way, there they are. They're standing right over there. Let's go over and have a conversation with them. Do you think you would be the depository of all of these people coming to you if every time somebody came to you you said I'm not sure that I'm involved in this but I'm happy to go with you right now and we can clear this all up? Let's go find this person. They would run from you rather than seek you out. So our refusal to receive gossip goes a long way to stopping it. The body of Christ of all places is to be a place of safety. It is to be a place where, as Paul says in Galatians, if any man sees a brother or sister stumble, you who are spiritual go to him and come alongside. You don't have to share it immediately as a prayer request. You may not even have permission to do that. You don't need to

tell somebody else again what you know or saw or heard unless the situation calls for that. But let's be advocating for each other as we're so clearly called on to do.

Then finally, ask God for help. That passage we read in James. James just flatly says you and I can't do this on our own. We're going to fail in our own flesh. But with God's help obviously we can do this. Pray James 1:19. Be quick to listen and slow to speak. We have one mouth and two ears for a reason. Proportionality. Be slow to speak. Ask the Holy Spirit to convict you immediately when you begin to go down that path. Just ask for greater sensitivity of heart so that when we begin to speak something about something that we don't need to say, the Holy Spirit is queued up to say to us stop. Don't need to share that. Not necessary. Not helpful.

Then I go back to where we were last week. These memorizing of these Scriptures. Psalm 141:3 – “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth. Keep watch over the door of my lips.” Ephesians 4: “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths...” Notice that mouths is plural. He is talking to the community of believers. “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths but only such as is good for building up as fits the occasion that it may give grace to those who hear.”

What do we take away? Who is at the center of your theology? Another way to say that is: who is Lord in your life? Who is it that you find yourself submitting to? For the child of God, there's just two choices. We are either in submission to the Lordship of Christ and to the Word of truth that He has given us. Or we're yielding ourselves to the flesh and behind that flesh is none other than the accuser, the devil himself. Christ is the one who unites us as the people of God. Satan is always the divider. He is always the destroyer. He is always the one who is trying to come in and create strife and contention and havoc within the precious body of Christ which He bought with His own blood. So we simply ask ourselves as we close: Whose side are you on? Let's be sure we're on God's side. If we're on God's side, then we're most clearly on each other's side. There's a whole list of one another statements that we can accomplish as the people of God if we'll give ourselves to this great task that God is for us.

Let's pray. Father God, thank You for this hard word. Lord, it's hard to hear. This matter of our tongue and an area where we confess we so often find ourselves failing. But Lord, I'm thankful for this word of hope that in the midst of this struggle there is the

indwelling Spirit of God who is actively at work on our behalf and seeking to embolden us and to quicken us and to enable us to be encouragers, edifiers, builders of each other in the body of Christ. Let it be true of Covenant Community Church, let it be true of us that we are those who encourage each other. Father God, let it not be true that we are ever to be known as a gossiping body. May that not be. We pray in Jesus's name, amen.