

Introduction

I'd like to begin with an observation. All of have committed assault with a deadly weapon! Assault with a deadly weapon means that one person physically attacks another with any object capable of inflicting serious bodily harm or death. Guns and knives are the most common of those objects. But when I say assault with a deadly weapon this morning, I don't mean that. I'm speaking metaphorically not literally. The deadly weapon to which I'm referring isn't a gun or knife, but the deadliest weapon of all – the tongue.

Slander and Gossip

In Romans 1, Paul gives us a vivid description of rebels, people who scorn both who God is and what He wills. They have **"depraved minds"** and, as a result, **"do those things which are not proper,"** to quote verse 28. **"Not proper"** means contrary to the nature and order of reality. Paul identifies 20 such things in verses 29-32, two of which involve the tongue as a deadly weapon. Let's examine both.

One, in verse 30, is slander. The Greek word translated **"slander"** means to say something bad about someone that is false. Sometimes, the slander is intentional. If a public figure, for instance, sues someone for slander, he has to prove what the law calls **"actual malice."** Actual malice means the defendant wrote or said something bad about the public figure knowing it was false, or was reckless in that regard. Sometimes, the slander is unintentional (negligent). A person says something bad about someone thinking it is true, but it is false.

Some years ago, a person came to my office and asked me if I go to bars to drink. I answered that I don't even drink, let alone go to bars. When I inquired why he asked that, he replied: **"Someone told me you do."** Whether it was intentional or unintentional, that someone slandered me. She told a person something bad about me that was false.

Paul identifies a second assault with the tongue, in verse 29. He

writes about the rebels of Chapter 1, **“they are gossips.”** Deuteronomy 5:20 defines what gossip is. It’s to **“bear false witness against your neighbor.”** **“Bear false witness”** is a bad translation of the Hebrew words. According to C.F. Keil, they’re better translated **“say something that is worthless or vain.”** Worthless or vain means there isn’t a good reason for saying it. There isn’t a good purpose that saying it serves. So, we gossip when we say something bad about someone that is true, but the harm of saying it outweighs the benefit. On occasion, the benefit outweighs the harm – either to the person talked about or the person talked to. So, a man told his friend, a football coach, that one of his players had a drinking problem. The coach needed to know that. That isn’t gossip. But those occasions are rare. Almost all of the bad things people say about others are gossip.

A neighbor of mine struck up a conversation with me about her pastor, whom I didn’t know. She told me he was a dictator who constantly imposed his will on others. Her saying that was worthless or vain. The harm clearly outweighed the benefit since there was no benefit. There was no good reason for me to know that. She gossiped.

Those then are the two assaults with the tongue that Paul identifies in our text: slander and gossip.

Are Easy

And they’re serious business. I know that because the Bible says so much about them. They are recurring subjects in both the Old and New Testaments. I also know that because of our text. Notice the nature of the things with which Paul links them in verses 29-32. They rank right down there with **“greed,” “evil,” “envy,” “murder,” “strife,” “deceit,”** and **“malice”** to name a few. All of those things, including slander and gossip, come from the **“depraved mind”** of verse 28. There’s no doubt. They’re serious business and here’s why. It’s for three reasons.

First, slander and gossip are so easy. Observe something this week. Pay attention to your conversations with others and determine what

percentage of the subject matter is about people. You'll discover it's well over 50% if you do. Let's face it. We're self-conscious, social creatures and we're incurably interested in each other because we are – so much so that most of our conversation is about people. We talk about what they are and do. I'm not saying that's a bad thing. I'm just saying it's a natural thing.

But it does make slander and gossip such easy things to do. Elton Trueblood analyzed it well in his instructive little book *Foundations for Reconstruction*. He wrote: **"It is easy . . . to sit with one's friends and discuss a third party, especially if the conversation is mildly derogatory."** He went on to conclude that slander and gossip are **"such a pleasant form of sin."**

They are just that aren't they – such a pleasant form of sin. They're a form of sin we commit almost without realizing it.

Harmful to the Slandered and Gossiped About

There's a second reason that slander and gossip are such serious business. It's because they're so harmful. Look at the first part of verse 30. Most versions of the Bible, including NASB, translate it as two qualities, **"slanderers, haters of God."** But the correct translation is **"God-hated slanderers."** The point of that word combination is that God hates slander. He hates it because it's so harmful to people.

First, it's harmful to the person who is slandered or gossiped about. There is a civil cause of action called **"defamation of character."** Defamation occurs when someone says or writes something false that damages a person's reputation. If someone does that, he or she can be sued in a court of law. A legal textbook comments about that, **"Damage to reputation is one of the earliest injuries recognized in the law."** That reminds me of a verse in the Bible, Proverbs 22:1. It says, **"A good name (reputation) is to be more desired than great riches."**

The Bible and the law recognize just how valuable reputation is to people. Few things are nearer and dearer to them than their reputation

is. It means as much to most people as their health and wealth do.

Please grasp what that implies. Slander and gossip are personal attacks. When we assault people's reputation, we assault them. When we touch and affect people's reputation, we touch and affect them.

Most of you are familiar with hari kari and I don't mean the baseball announcer. I mean the Japanese custom of a person committing suicide when he loses face. That custom isn't as strange as it first seems. It's extreme and wrong but it isn't strange. It simply stylizes what most people feel when that happens. When their reputation is diminished, they feel diminished. When it is ruined, they feel ruined.

Harmful to the Slanderer and Gossip

But slander and gossip don't just harm the slandered and gossiped about. They're serious business for a third reason. They harm the slanderer and gossip as well.

Psalm 15 explains how they do. Verse 1 articulates the subject of the psalm in clear-cut terms. It asks: "**O Yahweh, who may abide in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy hill?**" The tent and holy hill refer to the tabernacle where God manifested His presence. So, the question of verse 1 is, "**Who can be in your presence?**" Who can have a personal relationship with you? The psalmist answers it by giving a sample list of qualities, ones that matter deeply to God. One of those, in verse 3, is that "**he does not slander with his tongue.**"

The implication is startling. I don't know about you, but the one thing I want most in life is to have a familiar friendship with the God of the universe, Yahweh. But I can't have that if I'm assaulting people with my tongue. That is so contrary to Yahweh's nature, so repulsive to Him, that He can't be a familiar friend of anyone who does it.

In days gone by, Quakers practiced what were called "**the Queries.**" The Queries were a series of questions they were supposed to ask and answer yearly to help them evaluate their spiritual lives. One, for instance, asked, "**Do you observe a time of daily prayer and Bible**

reading?” We’d expect a question like that since, as we all know, prayer and Bible reading are vital to our lives with God. But here’s one that most of us wouldn’t expect because we don’t take it as seriously as God does, **“Do you avoid tale bearing and detraction (belittling others) and are you careful concerning the reputation of others?”**

A correct assumption underlies that query. It’s that assaulting people with our tongue adversely affects our lives with God. It certainly alienates people from us, especially the slandered and gossiped about. But because God loves them, it also alienates Him from us. It’s harmful to us, in other words, not just socially but spiritually as well.

The Tongue of Disciples

So, for the sake of God, others, and us, let’s have **“the tongue of disciples,”** to quote Isaiah 50:4. One of the main themes of Isaiah’s book is what he calls **“the Servant.”** That designation refers to the coming Messiah, Jesus. Notice what the Servant says in verse 4, **“Yahweh God has given Me the tongue of disciples.”** The term **“the tongue of disciples”** means literally **“the tongue of learned ones.”** It refers to a tongue that instructed or trained people have, that is, an expert tongue. As the Servant says in verse 4, God gives it. It belongs, in other words, to people whom He Himself has instructed. The next line in verse 4 reveals one of the things such people do with it. They **“sustain the weary one with a word.”**

Jesus had the tongue of disciples and since we follow Him, so should we. We should speak as God instructs us to speak in His written word, the Bible. We received some of His instructions today in Romans 1, Psalm 15, and Isaiah 50. Another instruction, in Ephesians 4:29, sums it up well. **“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment.”** The negative side of this instruction addresses our subject today. Let no slander or gossip proceed from our mouth.

In his book *Come Before Winter*, Chuck Swindoll shares what he calls

“ground rules” that should guide the use of our tongues. Two of those are as follows: (1) Whenever you’re discussing people, do not gossip; and (2) However you’re prone to disagree, do not slander. I’ve developed two of my own ground rules that I’d like to share as well.

First, don’t say something bad about someone unless we know for sure it’s true. There are exceptions to this rule but they’re rare. Most of the information we get about people is through the grapevine. It’s secondhand, thirdhand, or even beyond that, which makes it unreliable. We’ve all played the telephone game and know how information gets changed from the original source. Besides, the perceptions and interpretations of the original source, even if it’s us, can be flawed and thus, mistaken. So, don’t say something bad about someone unless we know for a fact that it’s true. That’s one ground rule we should follow.

There’s another. Don’t say something bad about someone unless there’s good reason for saying it. **“Good reason,”** as I’ve already explained, means that the benefit of saying it outweighs the harm, which is rarely the case. Before we say something bad about someone to someone, we should imagine this. We say it to Jesus and He asks, **“Why did you tell Me that?”** If we couldn’t answer Him confidently and clearly, we shouldn’t say it. If we couldn’t say it to Him, we shouldn’t say it to anyone else.

Conclusion

That then is the negative side – what the tongue of disciples doesn’t do. No unwholesome word, including slander or gossip, proceeds from it. But there’s a positive side – what the tongue of disciples does do. **“Only a word that is good for edification according to the need of the moment”** proceeds from it. The last line in a Thomas Robinson poem sums it up well, **“Oh, that it might be said of me, ‘Surely thy speech betrayeth thee, as a friend of Jesus of Galilee.’”** That’s our call. Let’s not assault people with our tongue but sustain them. It shows them what we are when we do – friends of Jesus.