

Introduction

In 1968, Marvin Gaye sang a hit song in which a man is speaking to the woman he loves. He tells her something he heard, that she was going back to the **"other guy you knew before."** He also relates where he heard that. It was **"through the grapevine,"** and that's what I'm going to preach about today – what we should do when we hear it through the grapevine. Our text, Joshua 22:10-34, teaches just that.

The Text

In the preceding chapters, the Israelites entered the Promised Land and pursued a specific strategy in conquering it. They subdued the nations in the central part of it and from there those in the south and north. Having accomplished that in chapters 1-12, they then divided the land in chapters 13-21. Three tribes, Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh, were apportioned land on the east side of the Jordan River, and ten tribes land on the west side, the river creating a geographical barrier between them.

After taking possession of their land, the three tribes feared that barrier might separate them from the ten tribes (verses 24-30). So, they built a large memorial altar by the Jordan River. It was to remind their descendents and those of the ten tribes of two things: that they were of the same nation and that they worshipped the same God, Yahweh.

But the leaders of the ten tribes misunderstood the nature of the altar. God had commanded that the Ark of the Covenant and an altar be set up in Shiloh. Sacrifices were to be brought there and nowhere else. Assuming the three tribes were establishing a competing altar of sacrifice, those leaders prepared to go to war against them, verse 33.

That's what happened and notice how it all began in verse 11, **"the sons of Israel heard it said."** We can conjecture what occurred. Some person or persons saw the altar by the Jordan, surmised it was an altar of sacrifice, and either told the priests at Shiloh that it was or told someone else who told them it was. The priests then told the chiefs of

the households and together with them prepared for war. The priests and chiefs, in other words, heard it through the grapevine.

The Grapevine

Notice how I said that, **“through the grapevine.”** That’s an idiom of course. It refers to an informal person-to-person method of spreading information. One person tells something to another who tells it to another and so on. The something that’s told is information about people, things, activities, experiences, or events.

I once stated in a sermon that the inclination to homosexuality is a temptation, not a sin. But the practice of it is a sin and even a perversion as well. Someone in the congregation that day told a family member what I said who told a friend who told her pastor, whom I know. She told her pastor that I said that homosexuality isn’t a sin. The pastor, in other words, heard it through the grapevine. He informally received misinformation from a thirdhand source who received information from a secondhand source who received it from a firsthand source.

That fleshes out what the grapevine is. It’s an informal person-to-person method of spreading information about people, things, activities, experiences, or events.

Pervasive and Powerful

Now, this method of spreading information is one of the most common occurrences in day-to-day life. Much if not most of what we hear is through the grapevine. But it now has a super-charged conduit via social technologies like Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. Those technologies have dramatically increased its reach.

A woman posted a note on her Facebook page about a motel at which she stayed in Amish country. She wrote that the farm land around it **“smelled.”** Reading that, one of her friends on Facebook posted on her Facebook page that the motel smelled, which one of her friends read. Her friend then told that to my wife Jill. Jill wouldn’t have received that

misinformation 12 years ago because there was no Facebook.

That illustrates well how pervasive the grapevine really is. It's a routine part of the day-to-day life of us all as tellers and/or hearers.

But it isn't just pervasive. It's powerful (influential) as well. Notice how close to war with the three tribes that the ten tribes were. According to verse 12, they had "**gathered themselves at Shiloh to go up against them in war.**" What is spread through the grapevine is impacting in many ways big and small. It affects how the hearers think, feel, or act for good or ill. If what is spread is about people or things, they're affected for good or ill as well.

Let's go back to the motel. The thirdhand source who told my wife that it smelled said that she'd never stay there. The grapevine clearly damaged its reputation, turning away potential customers from it.

There's no doubt about it. The grapevine is pervasive and powerful.

Susceptible to Error

And it's unreliable (susceptible to error) as well. Notice what the original source in the grapevine in our text did. He interpreted what he saw, the memorial altar, to be an altar of sacrifice. What the priests at Shiloh received, therefore, wasn't information. It was misinformation. What they were told was so wasn't so.

That's often the case isn't it, as the two anecdotes I shared make clear. I said that the inclination to homosexuality isn't a sin. The thirdhand source told her pastor I said that homosexuality isn't a sin. Or the original source said that the farm land around the motel smelled. But the second hand source said she said that the motel smelled. The moral of both stories is the same. Much of what's spreading through the grapevine isn't *information*. It's *misinformation*.

But that's understandable when we consider everything that occurs between the moment something is said or done or happens and the moment we're told about it. First, the original source, the witness, perceives with his senses, interprets, and remembers what is said or done

or happens. Second, he tells that to someone as he has perceived, interpreted, and remembered it. Third, that someone perceives, interprets, and remembers what the original source tells him. Fourth, he in turn tells that to someone else as he has perceived, interpreted, and remembered it, who does the same thing he did. And on it goes.

That's how the grapevine works, which means it can go wrong in a host of ways. Anywhere along the chain of communication, beginning with the original source, there can be and often are errors of perception, interpretation, and/or memory. If you've ever played the telephone game, you know exactly what I mean.

When I preached that sermon, I was careful to distinguish between homosexual inclination and homosexual practice. But the original source who heard me wasn't as careful in retelling it. Her family member, as a result, misinterpreted what she said. Or the original source said that the farmland around the motel smelled. But the secondhand source remembered her to say that the motel smelled. In both cases, what spread through the grapevine from that point forward was misinformation.

The lesson to be learned is that the grapevine is an unreliable source of information. Its very nature makes it easily susceptible to error. It's a vehicle of misinformation as much as it is of information. What it says is so often isn't.

Verify before We Rely

Consequently, for our sake and the sake of others, we need to respond rightly, wisely, to it. Our text teaches us how to do just that.

Verse 12 records that the priests and the chiefs of the ten tribes gathered an army to fight the three tribes. That implies that they had initially believed what they heard. But verses 13-20 imply that "**cooler heads**" eventually prevailed. They decided to confirm what they heard before acting on it. They sent leaders to the three tribes who inquired about the altar. They learned when they did that it was a memorial not an altar of sacrifice, which averted a tragic and deadly war.

Verses 13-20 reveal what we should do when we hear it through the grapevine. Verify before we rely. That's our guideline. Verify before we rely.

To rely on the grapevine means that we act or decide pursuant to what we hear through it. So, the thirdhand source decided not to stay at the motel that she was told smelled. She also acted to spread what she was told by telling my wife. That's what it means to rely on the grapevine. We pursue a course of action or make a decision based upon what we've heard through it.

But as our text teaches us, we should verify before we rely. Going back to Marvin Gaye's song, he declared in it, "**Believe half of what you see son and none of what you hear.**" Those lyrics clearly overstate the case. There are circumstances in which we should act or decide pursuant to what we hear without verifying it. Irreparable harm might occur to others or us if we don't. But those are the exceptions that prove the rule. The rule is that we should verify before we rely.

To verify means to confirm as best as we can the truth or falsehood of what we hear. Recognizing the unreliability of the grapevine, we ask our source questions. If he's the original source, we ask how he knows what he tells. What specifically did you see or hear? Or if he isn't and someone told him, we ask precisely what he was told. What were your source's exact words? We also go to other sources, if we can, to gather information. We may discuss the matter with our source's source or go straight to the original source himself. We may also do research and gather information from official sources. However we do it, we need to do it. If what we hear is impacting enough and requires a response from us, we should verify before we rely.

But most of what we hear through the grapevine is neither. It isn't impacting enough and/or doesn't require a response from us. So if it's negative, we ignore it. We don't participate in it. I follow a guiding principle in that regard. If someone tells me something bad about some person or thing, I give the person or thing the benefit of the doubt until

I know otherwise. Unless some greater good requires it, I don't form opinions or make judgments about him or her or it based on what I heard. I also certainly don't repeat or spread it. It's gossip if I do.

Years ago, a person told me that so and so, who had left our church, was bad mouthing me to others. But I didn't form an opinion of him based on what I heard. The next time I saw him, I greeted him warmly, giving him a big hug, after which he thanked me. He knew what I had been told, vowed it wasn't true, and thanked me for giving him the benefit of the doubt.

You get the idea. If we hear something bad about people or things, we give them the benefit of the doubt until we know otherwise. Unless some greater good requires it, we don't form opinions or make judgments about them. We also don't repeat or spread what we heard.

Conclusion

That's the end of the sermon today and at this point some of you may be wondering why I preached it. The grapevine may seem to you too trivial a subject to address. But it isn't. The fact is it's a primary source of evil. The Bible teaches that Satan is the father of lies. He uses lies probably more than anything else to prejudice, sabotage, or destroy. And the grapevine, because of its nature, is the chief means by which he spreads them.

Besides, as C.S. Lewis wrote: **"There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square inch, every split second is claimed by God, and counterclaimed by Satan."** He was absolutely right, which necessarily means the grapevine isn't neutral ground. It's a battleground instead in the cosmic war between God and His kingdom and Satan and his. Our call is to fight on God's side not Satan's in that specific battle.

We've learned today how we do that. First, don't rely on the grapevine if it isn't necessary. And second, verify before we rely if it is. That's what we should do when, as Marvin Gaye sang, we **"hear it through the grapevine."**