

INTRODUCTION

Today, I'm going to preach about the least obeyed of all of God's commandments. There are a lot of commandments in the Bible aren't there, 613 of them in the first five books alone. Let me ask you a question about them. Which one is the least obeyed? Or to ask it a different way, which one do people most frequently disobey? If someone forced you to give an answer to that question, what would it be?

Turn in your Bibles to Romans 1:28-32. In this passage, Paul describes those who reject Jesus and run their own lives. They commit many sins because they do, the most heinous of which Paul lists in verses 29-31: greed, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, insolence, pride, disobedience to parents, and lack of mercy. I'm going to focus on and discuss one of those today, gossip.

GOSSIP DEFINED

The first thing that I need to do is to define it. It saying bad things about people that are true but not justified. "Not justified" means that there isn't a constructive reason for saying them. There isn't a legitimating and overriding good that saying them serves.

Several years ago, a woman from another Friends Church told me that her church's secretary, whom I know, is a gossip. How ironic that was. I rarely see or talk to that secretary. So, there's no reason at all that I need to know that she's a gossip. That means that woman is herself what she accuses the secretary of being, a gossip.

That illustrates well what gossip is. It's saying bad things about people that are true but not justified. There isn't a legitimate, overriding, and justifying good that saying them serves.

So, don't gossip! That's what God commands in both the Old and New Testaments. Don't gossip! But people do. I believe, in fact, that is the least obeyed of all divine commandments. People disobey it more frequently than any probably any other.

EFFORTLESS AND ENTERTAINING

There are two reasons they do, both of which I want to explain to you. The first is that gossip is so effortless.

Stop for a moment and consider the things that we talk about with others. Sometimes, we talk about ideas. Sometimes we talk about events. But most of the time, as studies show, we talk about people. According to sociologist Robin Dunbar, for instance, analysis of human conversation shows that 62% of it is about people.

But that only makes sense doesn't it? After all, human beings are 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. I've told others, for instance, that Rich Wardle is an avid Indians fan, that James Deemer enjoys antique tractors, that James Coy can fix anything, that Robert Vrabel competes in the Senior Olympics, and so on. We're incurably interested in each other and most of our conversation is about people because we are. I'm not saying that's a bad thing. I'm just saying that it's a natural thing.

But it does make gossip so effortless. In his book Foundations for Reconstruction, Quaker author Elton Trueblood wrote about that, "*It is easy . . . to sit with one's friends and discuss a third party, especially if the conversation is mildly derogatory.*" Notice the word he used to describe gossip, "easy." That's what it truly is. It's almost as effortless to us as breathing is.

But it isn't just effortless, it's entertaining as well. In that same book, Trueblood also wrote about gossip that it's "*such a pleasant form of sin.*" It's entertaining in other words - especially to women. I see the men nodding their heads "yes" on that and the women shaking their heads "no." I know I'm on thin ice here but I'm only telling you what many women themselves say. Miranda Hitti, for instance, wrote an article about gossip for MD Medical News. She says in it that three factors are involved in making gossip entertaining: highly animated tone, plenty of detail, and enthusiastic "feedback." She then goes on to claim that

women are far more skilled than men in achieving those factors.

Anyway, that's why "Don't gossip" is the least obeyed of all God's commandments. It's because it's so effortless and entertaining.

EVIL

But it isn't just effortless and entertaining. It's evil as well. We see that in the first part of verse 30. Some translations including my NASB say, "*slanderers, haters of God,*" as if it's two sins. But the correct translation is "*God-hated slanderers,*" one sin. Paul's point is that God hates slander. Slander and gossip are twins. So, if He hates the first, He hates the second as well. Why? It's because it's so evil.

Few people understand that. Most of us take gossip lightly. We often joke about it, that someone is a gossip. But in reality, it's no laughing matter. Look at the kind of mind that it comes from in verse 28. Queen Elizabeth once observed: "*Great minds discuss ideas. Average minds discuss events. Small minds discuss people.*" But she was wrong. According to verse 28, gossip isn't the product of a small mind. It's the product of a depraved mind, one in rebellion against God, and we need to grasp that. We need to grasp that it's a great evil that harms.

First, it harms reputation. Proverbs 22:1 teaches us about that, "*A good name is to be more desired than great wealth.*" According to the wise man here, few things are nearer and dearer to people than their reputation is. It means as much to most of them as their health and wealth do. That explains why one legal textbook says, "*Damage to reputation is one of the earliest injuries recognized in the law.*" Damage to reputation is just that. It's a great and grievous injury.

That means to assault people's reputation is to assault them. Gossip assaults people's reputation. Therefore, it assaults them. Most of you know what Hari Kari is, the Japanese custom of a person committing suicide when he or she loses face. The custom is wrong but not strange. It simply stylizes what most people experience when that happens. When they're reputation is ruined, they feel ruined. Well, that's what gossip

does. It ruins people's reputation and thus makes them feel ruined.

Gossip is a great evil that harms a second thing – attitude. In Proverbs 18:8 and 26:22, which are identical verses, the wise man writes, *“The words of a whisperer (gossip) are like dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of the body.”* Notice where gossip goes - into the innermost parts of the body. That Hebrew phrase refers to attitudes. Gossip poisons people's attitudes toward others. It causes them to hold others in low or lower regard.

Just before my first semester in seminary, a student told me to avoid taking the Old Testament professor, Joseph Kickasola. He's unsympathetic, unfair, and vain, he told me. So I held him in low regard, disliked him, and hadn't even met him. My attitude eventually changed though. Ironically enough, he became my favorite professor and I ended up taking every class that I could from him.

That experience taught me well. Gossip harms people's attitudes. It makes them hold others in low or lower regard.

There's a third thing that gossip harms. Look at verse 32. It says that those who practice the things that Paul mentions, including gossip, are worthy of death. He's clearly referring to spiritual death here. The implication is staggering. Gossip either diminishes or destroys our aliveness to God and the realities of His kingdom.

At one time, Quakers like us were given what were called Queries. It was a series of questions that we were supposed to ask and answer yearly to help us evaluate our 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 prayer and Bible reading are so crucial to our spiritual lives. But here's one that most of us wouldn't expect, *“Do you avoid tale bearing and detraction (belittling others) and are you careful concerning the reputation of others?”* Quakers in those days were on to something. That query assumes that gossip impacts our spirituality and it does. It certainly diminishes and can even destroy our aliveness to God and the realities of His kingdom.

You can see then the evil that gossip is. It harms everyone involved: the reputation of the person gossiped about; the attitude of the person gossiped to; and the spirituality of the person gossiping.

STOP GOSSIPING

So, stop gossiping. Never do it again and I mean never. That's our call and there are three things we need to do to answer it.

First, don't rationalize. Most of us do you know. We deceive ourselves by masquerading our gossip as two things.

One is concern. It's much more palatable to us if we couch it in those terms. We had a neighborhood gossip years ago, a professing Christian, who always introduced her attack on someone this way, *"I'm not gossiping about so and so, just expressing my concern for him or her."* We feel a whole lot better when we convince ourselves, like she did, that we aren't gossiping, just expressing Christian concern.

We often masquerade our gossip as a second thing, a component of prayer. Melody Green, co-pastor of Last Days Ministries, admits that she did just that in the early days of her ministry. She justified gossiping. She needed to share the facts about people so that others could pray well. She also justified listening to gossip. She needed to know the facts about people so that she could pray well. But neither was true.

The first step in eliminating gossip as a posture of our tongue is to quit rationalizing it. If we really want to express concern and pray well for people, we should go to them and not others to do it.

There's a second thing that we need to do to obey the command, "don't gossip." We must intend to. I don't mean to be blunt about it but the reason that we gossip is because we intend to. We intend to gossip. We don't intend not to gossip. It's as simple as that. So, let's reverse that. Stop intending to gossip. Start intending not to gossip.

Most of us can do that directly by just trying to. We make and carry out the decision not to gossip. We can "not do it" and so don't. Others of us can't do that by just trying to. Gossip is such an ingrained habit of

ours that we almost can't help it. If that's the case, practice the right spiritual disciplines that enable the Holy Spirit to transform us in that regard. We'll eventually be able not to gossip if we do. At that point, we then intend and try not to and don't.

The third thing that we need to do is to practice solitude.

Why do we gossip? It's because our world is set against God. And because it is, our daily interactions with others lock us into ungodly patterns of thought, feeling, and action. The things that the people around us say and do pollute or taint how we think, feel, and will in other words. One of those things is gossip. Take the Nancy Grace news show, for instance. "News" is a misnomer. It isn't news; it's gossip pure and simple. Watch it for half an hour and I can tell you this. You'll be more inclined to gossip after watching it than you were before. Our daily interactions with others lock us into patterns of thought, feeling, and action that are geared to gossip.

But solitude frees us from that. Solitude means abstaining from human interaction by withdrawing and being alone for a specified period of time. We close ourselves away and purposely deny ourselves human companionship and noise. What we do in this aloneness is dwell on our experience of isolation. We place our mind on the aloneness and silence that surround us and the living God who is immersed in it. Doing that is a powerful and profound thing. It frees us from the ingrained habits of thought, feeling, and action that our human interactions create.

I don't have time to discuss solitude in any more detail than that. I have materials I can give you though that do. Ask if you want them.

CONCLUSION

Let me ask you a question in closing that I've already asked myself. How often do you gossip? What percentage of your conversation is gossip? Decide to follow Jesus. Then do the three things that I just discussed. Don't rationalize, intend not to gossip, and practice solitude. The answers to those two questions will be "never" and "0" if you do.