

Question: Doesn't everybody engage in a little gossip now and then? What's so bad about that?

The misuse of the tongue is one of the most common sins of our human society, and carelessly repeating gossip is an often tragic form of this. Reputations have been irreparably damaged, millions of dollars lost or wasted, relationships destroyed, good deeds undone and even lives lost because of a few carelessly spoken words. The Bible associates gossip with envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice (Romans 1:29). As the wise man said, "The tongue has the power of life and death" (Proverbs 18:21).

Gossip is the practice of repeating secretive information that may or may not be true. This secretive information may be passed on to others who have no need of it and in a manner or with the intent to bad-mouth someone. While it thrives on the enticement of giving and receiving secrets, gossip ends up contributing more to the problem than to a solution. Masked in a deceitful cloak of concern for others, gossip may come from an unreliable source. It may distort and exaggerate, and may betray confidential information. Gossip is often negative in tone. Gossip is often motivated by selfish desires: to gain attention by looking important and informed or to drag down and destroy someone. It is the hobgoblin of idle minds who need to "get a life" (cf. 1 Timothy 5:13).

Once gossip has been repeated, there is little that can be done to undo the harm caused. It has been compared to emptying the feathers from a pillow into a wind storm. Once our words are scattered, we have as much chance of gathering them up as we have of gathering the feathers from the pillow. After comparing the tongue to the small rudder that guides a large ship, James, the brother of Jesus, wrote: "Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:5-6).

I believe Jesus would advise us to take two primary steps. First, we need to avoid gossipy people. The wise man of Proverbs commented on the tasty temptation of gossip by saying: "The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts" (Proverbs 18:8). But a person who gossips to you will

often gossip about you; so be careful of boastful or overly talkative persons who try to appear always “in the know.” Proverbs 20:19 says: “A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much.” We should avoid both listening to gossip and repeating gossip. “Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down,” says Proverbs 26:20.

In addition, we must learn to be careful with the use of our words at all times. Avoid repeating negative information about another person. Even if the information is true, we need to ask ourselves some serious questions. Why do I feel it is necessary to repeat this story? Will we benefit the one involved? By taking these steps, we can be a source of healing instead of harm in our world. “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Proverbs 12:18).

I don’t know whether or not everybody engages in “a little” gossip now and then, but I do know that those who do are playing a game that is dangerous to themselves and to others. If we have been guilty of this to any extent, we need to repent immediately and begin making Jesus the model for both our lives and for our words. “He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity” (Proverbs 21:23).

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