



"A little lie is like a little pregnancy—it doesn't take long before everyone knows."

—C.S. Lewis

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Making the Cut (Part Four)

In Part Three, we began our study of the answer to David's double question: "LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill?" ([Psalm 15:1](#)). This initial salvo of the answer—a three-part summary requirement found in verse 2—sets the bar infinitely high: the very character of [God](#) Himself. The person who will dwell permanently with God in His eternal Temple must strive to live a blameless, upright life in which both his deeds and speech reflect the example of [Jesus Christ](#), the perfect Standard of human conduct.

The remainder of the answer lists specific behaviors that an upright, righteous person will model in his daily conduct. These actions are not a complete list of requirements but only representations of the kind of wise living expected of a godly individual. It would have been futile—and have made for a very long psalm—for [King David](#) to have listed every righteous response to the vicissitudes of human life in every age. Instead, he provides a limited list of behaviors that give the gist of godly action and reaction to common circumstances that arise. The psalmist assumes that the reader is familiar with God's Word and longstanding scriptural standards, particularly the Ten Commandments.

The first two prohibitions in [Psalm 15:3](#)—"He who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor"—take their cue from the last two positive requirements in verse 2, which also deal with deeds and speech. Generally, a person who "works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart" (verse 2) will not backbite or mistreat his neighbor. The prohibitions in verse 3, however, are more specific than the standards of the previous verse.

The first one deals with slander. "Backbite" translates Hebrew *rgal* (*Strong's* #7270), an interesting word in this context. It usually means "to spy out," indicating the same sort of roaming about in secret search that the spies whom [Moses](#) sent into the Promised Land did ([Deuteronomy 1:24](#); see [Numbers 21:32](#); [Judges 18:2](#); etc.). Combined with the phrase "with his tongue," however, *rgal* conveys the sense of searching secretly for tasty tidbits of [gossip](#) to use against another. The English term "backbite" brings a similar idea to the table, suggesting slander or defamation while the target has his back turned.

In writing this verse, David may have had [Leviticus 19:16](#) in mind: "You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people," as the root of *rgal* is *regel*, "foot; leg." A person "goes about" on his feet, so both verses provide an image of a person scurrying among his neighbors collecting choice tales to use for his own advantage. A word here or an anecdote there into the right ears can eventually cut another down like knives in the back, blindsiding the subject with malicious, wounding gossip.

Of course, a godly person should never do anything like this. The ninth commandment prohibits bearing false witness of this sort against a neighbor ([Exodus 20:16](#)), so anyone with a desire to please God knows that slanderous speech is wrong. David uses the stark imagery of the backbiting tongue to illustrate just how wicked it is, intending that the reader meditate on other misuses of speech. Not only are slander and gossip wrong, but every other harmful use of the tongue is also just as wrong and wounding to others.

The second prohibition in [Psalm 15:3](#), "Nor does evil to his neighbor," seems at first quite general, sounding like the negative of the second great commandment, "You shall [love](#) your neighbor as yourself" ([Matthew 22:39](#)).

However, modern translations tend to render this prohibition more precisely as "He does not harm his friend" (*Lexham English Bible*) or "They do no wrong to their friends" (*Today's English Version*). The association, then, is much closer than general neighbors or acquaintances. The psalmist refers to being unfriendly toward those to whom we should be on the best of terms, our friends.

The verb "does evil" is from Hebrew *ra'* (*Strong's* #7451), which is a broad term for "bad" or "evil." It can suggest "unpleasant," "unwholesome," or "harmful," yet also "displeasing," "poor quality," or "ugly," as well as "chaotic" or "wicked." With this spectrum of nuances, most translators stick to the more basic meanings of "does evil" or "harms." The general sense of hurting a close companion is what David wants to convey.

David kills the proverbial two birds with one stone here. It is a prohibition against both disloyalty and hypocrisy. A godly person is faithful to his companions along the way. He does only good for them and even goes out of his way to protect them from harm. Solomon advises in [Proverbs 17:17](#), "A friend loves at all times," and Jesus says, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" ([John 15:13](#)).

Treating a friend in a harmful way goes against everything that friendship means. A person who betrays or brings evil on a friend reveals that, despite posing as a friend, he is a hypocrite—in fact, an enemy. David knew the bitter hurt of an unfaithful friend, writing in [Psalm 41:9](#), a verse that prophesies Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus: "Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." Unfaithful friends will never dwell with God in His Kingdom.

The final prohibition of the verse declares that the upright person will not "take up a reproach against his friend" ([Psalm 15:3](#)). The translators' uncertainty about the Hebrew underlying "take up a reproach" has resulted in a variety of renderings. However, it seems to be an idiom that means "cast a slur," that is, "insult," "shame," or "scorn." (It may also imply "picking up" and passing on or using injurious information against another.) The target is, again, someone who is "near" or "close" (literal renderings of the word underlying "friend," *qrob*; *Strong's* #7138).

Solomon writes in [Proverbs 16:27-28](#): "An ungodly man digs up evil, and it is on his lips like a burning fire. A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends." Again, in [Proverbs 17:9](#), he asserts, "He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends." Finally, he says in [Proverbs 10:12](#), "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins." A person who "takes up" insulting or shameful words against a close companion reveals hatred rather than love, exposing his inner wickedness and self-serving attitude. Such people will never fit in among the close-knit Body of God's true disciples.

Next time, we will examine the godly person's attitudes toward others, both sinners and saints.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

Gossip

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The "fake news" of the first century was that Christians were cannibals, atheists and unpatriotic. This view was fact-based, but the facts were contextually contorted by detractors. The Romans had their own version of a media which twists facts through rumor and innuendo. Every culture is prone to interpret facts erroneously—indeed, illogically—and to pass those misshapen interpretations along through various sorts of "whisper campaigns." Today, social media provide a technically advanced conduit for character-assassination. The apostle James recognizes how the tongue, driven by carnal nature, can metaphorically start a dangerous fire. James warns everyone that gossip, tale-bearing and being a busy-body is just as damnable in God's eyes as first-degree murder. Listening to gossip is just as serious an offense as being an accessory to murder. Shockingly, we have a big chunk of the hostile world in our mouth, a potentially deadly three-inch appendage capable of slaying a six-foot human being. When we slander another human being in a whisper campaign, we are diligently performing Satan's work. The prohibition against talebearing occupies a prominent

location in the Holiness Code. If we have been guilty of talebearing and gossip—as all have been, we must: 1) ask for God to forgive us, and 2) ask Him to help us present our tongues as instruments of righteousness to God, for healing and edifying, rather than destroying, people.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Ninth Commandment](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The world is so full of lying and other forms of deceit that "bearing false witness" has become a way of life for the vast majority of humanity. In discussing the ninth commandment, John Ritenbaugh reveals the relationship between telling the truth and faithfulness, virtues that are necessary parts of an effective witness.

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