

## Gossip

### **The Very Serious Sin of Talebearing**

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You may not be aware, but did you know that the early Christians, those in the second century and maybe even a little bit earlier, were thought by many across the Roman Empire to be cannibals? Now we find this practice abhorrent and the accusation shocking since we know that Christianity, you could say, is the most life-affirming institution on the planet. God created life; He does not want us to take life. Of course one of the Ten Commandments is about not taking life—you shall not murder. And human flesh is unclean. That is very clear in the Old Testament. If we cannot eat or drink human blood, or any kind of blood at all because life is in the blood (it talks about that in Genesis 9 and Leviticus 17), God is certainly opposed to us eating people.

It makes no sense to us that they would say such a thing but that is what many non-Christians believed about Christians living among them across the Roman Empire. Now they believed this because Christians very openly preached that in their meetings, which were private, nobody else in the public would be able to come into it without passing the bar as it were, that they ate the flesh and drank the blood of their God, Jesus Christ.

Now, the average Roman did not realize that this was symbolic, that Christians actually ate a piece of bread and they drank a little bit of wine to represent Christ's flesh and blood. But it was not helped at all because there were some Christians at this time (because you remember, in the second century things were beginning to loosen up a bit in the early church), who were beginning to teach what has become known as transubstantiation. This is a Catholic doctrine which says that the bread and the wine miraculously changed into Christ's real flesh and blood in the communion service. So that is what they thought. They accused Christians of being cannibals.

That is not all. Early Christians were accused of incest and gross immorality. How did they get that? Christians, they said, met for incestuous orgies at

their sacred meetings. Again, anybody with a real knowledge of Christianity and Christian doctrine or maybe some familiarity with the Bible, would know that from cover to cover God condemns sexual immorality and of course He condemns incest. Those sorts of things, we find, will keep a person from the Kingdom of God. But non-Christians came to this scurrilous conclusion about Christians among them by putting together three pieces of information which they had gathered, but they lacked understanding in concept to grasp the true meaning. So this was three true things that they threw together and came to a conclusion which was not true.

First, they heard Christians calling each other brother and sister and they assumed that they were blood siblings. Why else would you call this person your brother or this person your sister unless they really were your brother and the sister? They did not understand the dynamics of the Body of Christ and how we are all brethren of each other.

The second piece of information that they put together with the first is that these brothers and sisters in the church of God greeted each other with a holy kiss. In fact, it is mentioned at least twice in the New Testament. Paul tells the Corinthians in II Corinthians 13:12, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." And then Peter writes to the church in I Peter 5:14 (and this is one that probably got their eyes raised), "Greet one another with a kiss of love." In their ignorance, what else were they supposed to think?

The third thing, the actual true fact was that Christians were not shy about calling their frequent potlucks love feasts. They would all get together at somebody's house, bring their covered dishes like good Baptists or whatever (they were not Baptists, they were baptizers, but they were not really Baptists. I am just using that to strike a picture in your mind), very frequently, probably especially on the holy days, and they would have a meal together and these were called agape feasts, essentially. Now we know what agape means and the church members back then knew what agape means, but the people out in the world did not know that. Jude mentions these love feasts in Jude the 12th verse. Peter speaks about carousing while they feast with you in II Peter 2:13, and Paul writes about some people being drunk during their suppers (I Corinthians 11:21).

Of course, both Peter and Paul there are condemning these ones that were making these love feasts into basically a big party. But the man on the street hearing that these Christians were keeping frequent love feasts, assumed sexual love, not godly love, because they were completely unaware of the church's own peculiar, specialized use of the term agape.

So they took three pieces of true Christian teaching and they came up with the wrong conclusion, concluding that those Christians, they just went into these love feasts and had orgies with one another.

There is more. Early Christians were also accused, of all things, of being atheists. Now, that is hard to believe because everything about Christianity is about God and Jesus Christ—all about God. But Roman citizens at the time understood atheism a bit differently than we do. See, to us, atheism means that a person does not believe in the existence of God. You would all agree to that definition, I am sure. But the average Roman used the word atheism to mean the denial of the existence of the *pagan* gods, the denial of the existence of a pantheon of gods, their normal Roman or Greek pantheon. All of them thought they were gods and they all agreed pretty much that all of these gods were like the gods of Mount Olympus of some sort.

Even if you were from some barbarian land, they would find that the gods that they worshipped were very similar to the gods that they worshipped in their own Roman or Greek pantheon of gods. And so *they* were not atheists because you could pretty much agree about the gods. Maybe call them different names, but you know, the chief god was Jupiter or Zeus or he was called Baal or something else, but they were all essentially the same. So they would say, "Oh yeah, you're a believer in the gods."

But the Father and the Son were to them, at best, new Gods, and at worse, pretend gods or made up Gods because they did not fit at all in the pantheon of gods. You stack Zeus up against God the Father and Zeus *loses* because Zeus is bad, wicked, cruel, and highly sexualized, even though they considered him their chief god. And of course the Son outdoes all of their gods that they considered the sons of Zeus. It just was not the same. And so

they thought, if these two gods, this "new" Father and the Son are not part of the pantheon, then they are not really gods. And so their worshippers are therefore atheists, they are worshipping phantoms, not reality.

Now this had a bit of a twist because this also applied to the Roman emperor. Even though the emperor was not necessarily part of the pantheon, he was proclaimed to be a god and everybody accepted it. And of course Christians worshipping only the Father and the Son would not acknowledge Caesar as a god. Nor would they at any of the festivals sacrifice to Caesar or burn any incense to him. That was ridiculous! Why should they do that? They knew he was just a man.

So because they would not do this, because they would not acknowledge Caesar as God, Christians were also accused of being unpatriotic. And because they were so unpatriotic, they would not burn incense to Caesar, they were likely to bring the curse of Caesar's wrath on their city. Some of these people were ready to give Christians the bum's rush out of town just for that reason, so that they would not bring Caesar's wrath on them. Added to this, their lack of patriotism was "affirmed" because Christians refused to join the Roman army or the city militias. So that made the accusation of being unpatriotic even more substantiated in their eyes.

Two major failings stand behind each of these scurrilous and defamatory accusations. The first is wrongheaded assumptions about facts which would lead very easily to poorly considered and wrong conclusions. So they made stupid assumptions. That is number one, they assume things not in evidence, which led to wrong conclusions. The second major failing in all this is that they passed along careless rumors and innuendos.

Both errors are typical human defects of character, which show up in every culture, in every era, in both sexes and in all age groups. We all make these mistakes probably more frequently than we would like to admit. We make bad assumptions about people or situations and come to a wrong conclusion, and then without thinking, and sometimes with thinking and maybe malicious intent, we pass it on as true. This kind of sloppy thinking and impulsive talebearing has ruined millions of reputations and spoiled equal numbers of millions of relationships from humanity's earliest days because we do not get the facts and we do not keep our mouth closed.

What I will be talking about for the rest of my time today is specifically the second of these: gossip. Just as gossip is rife in the world (look on any of the social media outlets and you will see gossip more than you would care to imagine because social media just makes it easier and it puts it all out there in public), it is rampant in the church of God and not just this church, in all the churches of God. I could probably say truthfully, just knowing human nature, that this would be a true statement at any time during the church's history because we have never gotten rid of human nature in the Body of Christ. We are *always* making assumptions, we are *always* coming to wrong conclusions, and we are *always* spreading news that we may not know the truth of. We *all* do it, we *all* make these mistakes, and I should say, we *all* commit these sins.

This gossip, talebearing, telling false things is the major component of fake news. It is a big thing these days, fake news, and what it is is official gossip. We have gossip sheets in the grocery store as you are waiting to check out. Those have been going on for decades, taking the latest news out of Hollywood and Washington and New York City and all the places where famous people are, and spreading lies essentially, some truths, but a lot of lies mixed in, to the curious public who really just want to know, who have "enquiring minds." But now that same "Fleet Street" type of attitude that has been in London for many years has jumped the pond and now it is in our own news organizations. They have tabloids over there. We have tabloids over here.

News is all the same these days because they are all aiming to deceive and slander their political opponents. And if it is not political opponents, it is their cultural opponents, or whatever it happens to be. But you cannot trust the news anymore because this spirit of gossip and slander has infected it.

We need to consider our participation in this sin as we evaluate ourselves in comparison to Christ in these last few weeks before Passover. Because I think you will see by the time I am finished today, that this is a far more serious sin than we usually think. It is terrible. And the apostles, and some of the writers in the Old Testament as well, pull no punches about how bad gossip is.

Please turn with me in James the 3rd chapter. I am going to start in this place because it is a general section on speech and specifically this section is for teachers, because those who stand up in front of you have to be extra careful about what they say. They must tell the truth, they must tell it from God's perspective, they must reach right conclusions, they must expound it in a way that is good and right, and they have to give you good advice from the Bible on what to do. So it is very important that teachers be especially careful about their tongues.

**James 3:1** My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.

Because God is watching, God is listening. We have to be aware of that. And it is not just teachers that He is listening to. He is listening to the words that go out of our mouths all the time, especially among His people.

**James 3:2-10** For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things.

See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.

Like I said, the apostle pull no punches here about how terrible and destructive the tongue is.

Now we are all in the same boat because each of us fall short in various ways. But we all, and I mean *all*, no matter who you are, have trouble controlling our tongues. James says here that if we can master our mouths, we could master ourselves completely and we are pretty much perfect. Because it is easy to master a lot of these other things that we do, but controlling that tongue—Oh, that is hard. Because that tongue is connected to your brain and that brain and your heart together have all kinds of wickedness in them that they need to have purged. And we do not want to have it purged because that, we think, is us. That is the way we are, this is the way we have always been. It has never hurt anybody.

But Jesus Christ says that out of the heart of man, out of his mind, out of the workings of his nature come all kinds of evil. And the tongue is a chief way of getting that evil out of the body.

So, as James says, it is not usually the case that we are able to control the tongue. Our tongues master us, they control us, and they make us do or they cause horrible destructive things to happen. That is why James calls it "a world of iniquity." That is really an interesting phrase and I am not sure I really understand what it means. But the word "world" there is a word that were very familiar with. It is cosmos. It is a whole system of things. It is a whole set of, as it says, iniquity—sins! It is like saying, in your mouth is an entire planet full of sin. He is trying to give you a broad idea of how expansive sins of the tongue are and how normal it is.

You know, this is our world, we understand it, we accept it, and we just go blithely on, and that is how our tongue is too, the way we speak. We just accept it, this is the way it is. And we live in it, as it were, without ever condemning it for what it really is. And so we have in ourselves, James says, a very large facet, a very large chunk, if you will, of the hostile world right inside our mouths. This hostile world is the world apart from God. In our mouths spew out ungodly things on a regular basis because we do not have control over it.

It is an unruly evil. Do you understand what that means? It means when something is unruly *you cannot control it* and it just goes and goes and does whatever it wants to do and everything it wants to do is bad. It is iniquitous. It is wicked.

James is painting a very black, very dark, very evil picture of our communication, of our natural communication with one another. But it must be held in check because it cannot truly be tamed. Not in this life, not by us. So he says here, "It is full of deadly poison." Our job is that we have to keep its poisonings to a minimum.

These are really kind of dire words! You do not think of this thing in your mouth as being so terrible. Of course it is all run by the brain, our mind. But James is telling us that we have something right there in us that causes all sorts of harm. And when there is something that is in your territory, in your circumstances, in your milieu of life, whatever it is, and it is causing harm, what you need to do is make sure that it does not. You need to rein it in. You need to corral it. And the same is true of the tongue.

Understand that James is setting here the basis for our dealings with, our communications with one another. More than likely, because of human nature, because of the way we just let our tongues do what they do without a whole lot of control, our communication is going to end in sin. That is the way it is with most people. Some people tend to have a good grasp on it or they just do not talk very much and that is a good thing. But most of us tend to let our speech just fly out of us without much thought, with hardly any control.

Let us go back to the Old Testament to Leviticus 19. If you know your chapters, you know that Leviticus 19 is part of the holiness code and this is where *gossip* is first mentioned. It is interesting that it would be in the midst of the holiness code. If you want to be holy, as God is holy, then you had better get control of your speech.

**Leviticus 19:16** "You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people."

This is one of those commands that are a lot like the Ten Commandments. It is a negative commandment, just like "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not commit adultery." It is said in that same formula. This is something you, as a holy person, as one whom God has separated out to righteousness, shall not do because it is a sin to you. And by the way, it is



here because it is actually stuck among most of the other Ten Commandments in this holiness code. If you go through and look at the first twenty verses of chapter 19, you will find, I think I counted nine of the Ten Commandments in just these twenty verses, and making sure you are not a talebearer is stuck in among them. Of course talebearing, gossip, any kind of evil communication out of our mouth is contained in the ninth commandment—"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."

This one in verse 16 just defines it a little bit more closely. "You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people" because you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor is, in a nutshell, exactly what gossip is. Gossip is relating something untrue about another human being. Or you could say, gossip is conveying false information of any kind, by whatever means, about another.

Now, if you want some, what we call secular definitions, what the dictionaries will have, *Oxford Dictionary* will define it as "casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details that are not confirmed as being true." So that is pretty close to what we get from the Bible. The *Random House Dictionary* says "idle talk or rumor, especially about the personal or private affairs of others." A slightly different nuance there, but pretty much true.

The word talebearer here in verse 16 is a Hebrew word, *rakil*. Sounds like rock hill, rocky hill. "Don't go to *rakil* because you'll probably get gossiped about." You will probably remember *rakil* now because of this association here with the next town over, Rock Hill. *Rakil* means talebearer, slanderer, informer, or detractor. That is *rakil*.

Let us go to Proverbs the 11th chapter so that we can add a little bit of nuance to this word and the definition of what a talebearer is, or a slanderer. Slander and gossip are very closely aligned concepts. So if I use slander instead of gossip, basically it means the same thing.

**Proverbs 11:13** [This uses the same word, *rakil*.] A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter.

This adds a little bit of nuance to the definition of *rakil*. What a talebearer does or a gossip does is that he reveals secrets. He tells something that should be privileged information, private details about a person or a situation that, at this point, whatever point that happens to be, should not be related to other people. It is something that should have been held in confidence. Some things a person did not want to get out. Oftentimes, it is a relationship that they should not have or it is a secret sin or it is something that they have done that they really do not want other people to know about at the time. Gossip is spreading this privileged information and therefore betraying a trust. It is *faithlessness*. It is taking something that most of the time were given in confidence that you would not spread it to anybody else, yet you do it anyway.

Now this is clarified by the second half of the couplet there in verse 13. A faithful person, he who is of a faithful spirit, conceals a matter, covers a matter. Because normally the information that we are passing along is that juicy tidbit that is going to show that Joe Blow or whoever it is, is not as good a guy as you thought he was. And so you have got this juicy tidbit of information and the gossip will say, "Ha ha, I can't wait to tell all my friends!"

But the faithful person, the one who is loyal, the one who is trustworthy and reliable, will cover it up, will say nothing, will give no indication that he knows such a thing—and will certainly never pass it along. Because that faithful person knows that passing along this information, that exposing whatever the secret is, would cause harm to the other person. And so out of love, out of concern, they say, no, this is going no farther. I am not going to tell anybody, *anybody*, about this.

**I Peter 4:8** [We should all have this in our memory banks.] Love covers a multitude of sins.

A lot of times we think, "Oh, if I tell my brother in the church about this problem that my sister in the church has, then they will be able to pray for them and help them by going to God." No! Not unless it is something that they *allow* you to tell the other person. They have to give you *permission* to let X, Y, Z know your faults and pray for you. You do not take it upon

yourself to tell this juicy tidbit to someone just so they can pray for them. That is gossip! A fine line. But if you are given something in confidence about another person, his faults, his sin, or whatever, *do you not dare repeat it!* Something we have probably all been guilty of. Love, the love of God, real agape love covers those things, does not let it spread any further, allows the person who has the problem to work on it without it getting out.

So a loving, caring, trustworthy person keeps his or her mouth shut and *never* divulges a secret until he is authorized by the subject of that secret to do so. Oh, how hard that is! Because we all like telling that juicy little tidbit to somebody else. Because you know why? It makes us look so good that we have all this information, that we can be "helping other people." That is not what it is doing, actually. It is actually tearing down.

Now, as the definition of *rakil* suggests, a person who tells a harmful secret, whether entrusted with it or not, if you *see* it and tell another person, you are still guilty of gossip. It does not matter whether you come by the information directly from the person or you come by it independently, if you tell it to somebody else, you are committing gossip, you are committing slander. If you write it down and tell somebody you are committing libel. But libel or slander or gossip, it is kind of all the same thing. It is telling something given in confidence that should not be repeated.

I do not know if you have ever looked at it this way, but when we gossip, we are essentially doing Satan's work because you know what the word devil is in Greek: *Diabolos*. It actually means to throw (like throwing a ball) through someone, taking the feet right out from under them. But you know what *diabolos* is when it is not rendered as devil in the New Testament? It is rendered as slanderer. Sometimes it is accuser. So when we gossip about someone and tear them down, slandering them, we are being a little Devil. We are doing just like Satan is. We are being a false witness, a malicious accuser.

It is easy to see why God is so against talebearing and gossip and slander. It is satanic, it is what His enemy does. Gossip, talebearing, slander is no little thing in the mind of God. He does not want to see His sons and daughters act

like little Satans, and when we flap our jaws and we are saying something that is undermining somebody else, that is what He sees—the sin of Satan the Devil. Pretty horrific, is it not, to think of it in that way.

Let us go over a few pages to Proverbs 16. We are going to look now at another word for gossip in the Old Testament. This one is *ragan*. Sometimes, like in *Strong's*, it will say that it is *nirgan*. It is just another form of the same word. But the one I am going to be saying is *ragan*.

**Proverbs 16:28** A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends.

This is *ragan*, whisperer. That is what *ragan* means: to maliciously whisper. It also is sometimes translated as backbite or slander. So *ragan* is whisper maliciously, backbite, slander. It is related actually to the Hebrew word for murmur. And you know what God thinks about murmuring and complaining! Because the reason why it is related is not necessarily by its definition, but by the fact that when you murmur you are talking in a very low voice and that sort of thing. And *ragan* means whisper. It is the same sort of thing. You are talking very low so only the one you want to hear it hears it. You understand? *Ragan*, *nirgan*, they are all talking about speech that is done at a low level so you can pass on information that you do not want other people to hear. So you are either a whisperer telling secrets or you are a murmurer complaining about something. In this particular form here, it is translated as talebearer or whisperer.

Notice how this verse defines what *ragan* means for us. It says here that the whisperer, in the first part of the couplet, is a perverse man. What this perverse means is wicked. A perverse person is a wicked person. Or we could also use the word warped. A perverse person is warped. He is not straight, he is kind of weird and bent up, which leads us to another definition: crooked, *morally* crooked. So this whisperer, this perverse person, this morally crooked person, his aim is to sow strife. He is planting, through his words, the seeds of conflict. He wants to see a fight. He wants trouble to be stirred up, in time, by these little whispered words that he is telling somebody in their ear. He wants the object of his gossip somehow to pay by the strife that he is a ginning up here. He is so malicious, he desires to ruin relationships. That is what it says. He wants to separate even the best of

friends. He is a destroyer! He is a divider. We have a saying in our own culture about somebody who does this. He is running a whisper campaign and the whisper campaign usually has the object of bringing somebody down.

**Proverbs 26:20-22** [The same word *ragan* is used here.] Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer [whisperer], strife ceases. As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife. The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, and they go down in the inmost body [where they can do a lot of harm]. (Just to add that little bit.)

But that is what it means. You take these dainty trifles from somebody's whispered words into your ear and they begin to do their damage, usually by undercutting somebody's reputation. And then, on top of that, later on, the relationship gets ruined, whatever it happens to be.

So, the Old Testament makes it abundantly clear that gossip is a great evil. And for some reason, we tend to think of gossip as such a little thing. We make fun of it in sitcoms. We think of old ladies around a knitting circle or a quilting circle, and all they are doing is blab, blab, blab. And we laugh, "Ha ha ha ha ha! Isn't that what old people do, old ladies do?" But it is not something that is funny. It is very serious.

Let us go into the New Testament, which is no less condemning of gossip than the Old, as you might expect. Let us go to Romans 1 and we see this right in the first chapter of Romans as Paul is wrapping up this section on God's wrath that He is going to bring on the unrighteousness of humanity for not seeing Him in the way that He had revealed Himself to them, by suppressing righteousness.

**Romans 1:28-32** And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do things which are not fitting [Now he is going to tell you what things are not fitting that came out of that debased mind of humanity.]; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil

things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.

Did you notice where gossip is in this list? Whisperers is the word. It is clustered here among such evils as malice, murder, and hating God. Paul does not pull any punches, just like the Old Testament does not, saying that practicing such things makes one worthy of death, and allowing or approving of another doing it is tantamount to doing it oneself. So if you are "in the know," but you have not spread it because it has been spread to you and you think about spreading it, but maybe you just cannot, you are just as guilty of gossip as the next person if you approve of the actions of the gossipers.

Here the Greek word is (and this is a little hard to say), *psithyristas*. Those Greeks, they knew how to say a thing! Literally, it is whisperers, it is a gossip, and it implies secrets, slander.

Let us follow Paul's stream of consciousness here in verse 29 and into verse 30 because it is very interesting. He was probably either writing this out longhand by himself, or he had a scribe that was listening to him and taking it down. So we have here his thoughts of one leading to another to another to another. And notice how he got to whisperer and then beyond.

First he thought of envy, that people are full of envy. And envy is often a cause of murder and strife. So he talks about murder and strife. One is specific and strife is usually a little bit more general. Then he thinks, oh yeah, deceit is also a frequent cause of strife, and that deceit is evil-mindedness, that is wickedness, being morally warped or being crooked. That leads him, then, because he probably remembers Proverbs 16:28 about being morally crooked, the perverse man is the gossip, so he thinks of backbiting. Well, first he thinks of whispering and then he thinks of backbiting because whispering is secret slander and backbiting is actually just open slander. They are about the same thing, but one you whisper in somebody's ear and the other one you shout from the mountaintops, at least in the Greek thought here.

Then, thinking about slander, which he had just thought of with both whisperer and with backbiter, that led him to think of slander. And then he decided to add that in by saying, yeah, Satan is the great slanderer and who is the great hater of God, and so the people who slander are also haters of God. One thing led in thought to the next, to the next, to the next, and you go from full of envy and murder and strife and evil-mindedness right through whispering and backbiting to hating God.

I hope we are seeing the seriousness of gossip. Like Satan, gossip is a destroyer. Another name for Satan: Abaddon or Apollyon. When we gossip, when we slander other people, we are destroying, maybe just in a smaller way.

Let us move along here a little deeper into the New Testament to I Timothy 5. The context here is widows. Paul wants to make sure Timothy understands the policy about widows, and he says that there are true widows, and then there are others who are not true widows. He should honor the true widows and do what he can for them. But these other widows, if they have family to take care of them, or if they are too young and they are just idling away and wasting everybody's time and money rather than getting remarried or what have you, then you need to take care of them differently. So here he is talking about idle widows.

**I Timothy 5:13** Besides they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, and not only idle [that is bad enough], but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not.

He says widows have a tendency to be gossips and busybodies. If we went to II Thessalonians 3:11, we would find he uses the same term, busybody, to a more general audience. Not just older women, but he is talking about most people when they are idle, they turn into gossips and busybodies. So he is looking at these gossips and busybodies as related sinners. Gossips are (oh, here is another hard Greek word), *phlyaroi*. How do you pronounce that?! That just means babbler, like a brook. Babblers, talkers, chatterers, praters, tattlers. We have a lot of terms for that sort of thing.

People who babble and talk and chatter a lot, these are people who never shut up! They never stop talking. They are always going on about this and

that. And in the meantime they are spilling all the beans about everyone and everything that happens to come through their own stream of consciousness. These are people whose mouths run so often that they are bound to say something that they should not just by the multitude of their words. And there is a proverb about that.

**Proverbs 10:19** In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise.

If you see somebody who talks all the time, there is probably a bunch of sin pouring out of his mouth.

The other word, busybodies, is *periergoi*. Sounds like water or something. And the meaning is basically meddlers. The word picture used in II Thessalonians 3:11, where the same word is used, is of those who are not busy in their own business, but who are over-busy in the business of others. So you are not taking care of the things that you were given to do, your task. You have got your nose stuck in what other people are supposed to be doing and you are meddling, then, in their affairs. And that is what it means. Someone who is always sticking his or her nose in other people's business, other people's affairs. I am not going to go over this one very much. I did a whole sermon on this in 2003 titled, "What's So Bad About Busybodies?" (If you are interested, you could get it online.)

But these kind of people are the kind that are always digging up dirt on others for the purpose of spreading it. They do not have time for work, but they have got an awful lot of time to sit around listening to the local wags tell them all the bad things that are happening about X, Y, and Z around town and then they always have an A, B, and C that they want to add to the conversation and it just goes on and on and people are destroyed. Busybodies can do terrible damage to a church, ruining reputations and breaking up even longstanding relationships. If we would go to I Peter 4:15 we would see that the apostle there ranks busybodies in the same class as murderers, thieves, and evildoers in general.

As I said, this subject is serious business. God looks very much askance at gossips and busybodies.



Let us go back to Proverbs 18. Widening this back out a little bit.

**Proverbs 18:21** Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

We probably heard this one before. In other words, our words have consequences. They can be good consequences or they can be bad consequences. They could either cause life or they can cause death. There is a Japanese proverb that says, "Though the tongue is only three inches long, it can slay a man six feet high." In both of these, there is a warning to those who love to talk. Our words do not just disappear into the ether after we say them. People hear them and they, the words, begin to do a work. They can do a good work or they can do a bad work, but whatever the case is there, those words linger in the hearts and minds of those who hear them. As I said, they work. They do not just lay idle. They work either for good or for evil. And not only that, they have an effect on the speaker too.

There is a Jewish proverb or Hebrew proverb that says (I did not write this one down, I am taking it off the top of my head), but it says. "The words of a gossip slay three people: the gossip, the hearer, and the object of the words of the gossip." It is going to do something. That is what I am trying to get across here. It is not just going to lay flat there and not cause any harm, or not cause any good. Words either bring life or they bring death. Jesus says Matthew 12:36 that we will have to give account before God for every idle word that we speak. He is not kidding! God wants us to control our tongues. God wants us to make our speech to be speech that brings life to others, help, good, show love. Not the other kind that Satan spews all the time. Words that end in death.

So what do we do about this sin? Let us not look around and point fingers at people who we *know* are gossips. We are in this period of self-evaluation. I want us to think about us—ourselves—as individuals because we are engaged in *self*-evaluation, not judging other people for their sins and what they should be working on. So think about yourself. How do we rid ourselves of this sin? Well, I have got pretty much three easy steps. (Ha ha ha!)

First, we must acknowledge that we have been and are probably still guilty of the sin. Acknowledge that you have a problem. Is that not what they say in all forms of addiction? The first way to getting over it is to acknowledge that you have the problem, and believe it or not, gossip is addicting. So acknowledge that we are or have been guilty of gossip and seek God's forgiveness and ask for His help in overcoming it. As we saw, James said that no man can tame the tongue, and that is true. No *man* can tame the tongue. But God can, so ask God for help. James 1:5 says, "If you lack wisdom, ask Him and He will give it to you." Well, He will do the same thing in helping you overcome a problem with gossip. Ask Him for the help and He, by His Holy Spirit, will give it to you to help you control your tongue. Make Him a party in your overcoming.

Second, Paul says in Romans 6:13 to present your members, like your tongue, as instruments of righteousness to God. What we have to do is we have to dedicate ourselves to doing, to speaking, only good, righteous things, so that we bring glory to God. So we have to dedicate ourselves. We have to make a commitment that we are not going to allow this tongue to control us anymore. We are going to *control it*. And by controlling it, we are going to bring honor to God. So we have to make this commitment to a godly course of action. What we must commit to, if you will, is:

**Ephesians 4:29** Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.

That is what we strive for. First the negative: do not let anything corrupt proceed out of your mouth. That would include things like euphemisms and any kind of cursing, and of course, gossip. And then the positive: make sure what you say is upbuilding to other people, encouraging, exhortative, helpful, those kind of things that you would say that could bring them life, and good. So we refuse to tear down with our mouth and we commit to build up and encourage. To put it in James' idiom there in James 3, out of our mouth should flow only sweet water, not bitter, never bitter. Out of them should come blessings, never curses.

Third (and this you do in tandem with somebody else, but mostly you are in control of this), and that is refuse to listen to gossip. And rebuke it if you must. Refuse it so that you will not hear it.

**Proverbs 20:19** He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with one who flatters with his lips.

The NIV has maybe a little bit better way of saying this, "A gossip betrays a confidence, so avoid a man or woman who talks too much."

If we hear it, we will only be tempted to pass it on. Better not to hear it at all. Gossips tend to think that they need a constant flow of information so that they will be "in the know," and being in the know is gratifying. You have got something on somebody else, you know something that somebody else does not and it makes them feel very satisfied about themselves. And that is probably why we listen to it—because we want to cash in on that too. That feeling of self-satisfaction and superiority that the information gives us.

But we have to learn to stop listening to it. We do not need the information. We do not need the gossip because really, truly in God's way of life, a person is a lot happier and carries a lot less stress when they do not have to carry another person's secrets, all this bad information. Would you like to be a minister for a week and have to carry the burden of people's trials and sins and so-called secrets that they have? It is no wonder I got adrenal fatigue. I do not have the body that can stand it. But I have to. It is just one of those things have to deal with it. I do not like hearing bad things about my friends.

And so that is what we need to do: to stop listening to gossip so we do not have to tackle those things. So cover your ears in the presence of a gossip or run away or stop the conversation, change the topic, whatever it is that you have to do to make sure you are not getting that information. It is not going to do you any good, believe me.

And finally, this is kind of a bonus, I am going to just throw it in there. It was not part of my three. But make a study of the book of Proverbs, concentrating on the many, many proverbs focusing on speech and deception. Doing that is an education in itself. Do not just read them, study

them, figure out what they are really telling you. Sometimes the wording is a little bit vague. It is sometimes put into Hebrew idiom that we do not understand, but if we go into them and look behind them and see what they are saying, we can learn a great deal.

I am going to finish in Psalm 15. We are going to read verses 1-3 and then we are going to skip down to verse 5 in that last sentence there.

**Psalm 15:1-3** Lord, who may abide in Your Tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? He who walks up rightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart [Now verse 3, which contains three related items that have to do with gossip or slander.]; he who does not backbite with his tongue [You want to be in the Kingdom of God, do not backbite with your tongue.], nor does evil to his neighbor [That is what gossip does. It brings evil to his neighbor.], nor does he take up a reproach against his friend [very similar to the last one].

**Psalm 15:5** [Finally, in that third section] He who does these things shall never be moved.

All three of those actions in verse 3 have a relationship to gossip and murder. If we can put these things out of our lives, if we can remove these sins of the tongue, it will go a long way to pleasing God and ensuring a place in His Kingdom.