



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Giving Rumors a Rest

James 4:11-12

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Introduction

1. It's good to be reminded what a society looks like when God is left out, whether in theory or practice. Paul gives the New Testament's longest treatment of the matter (Rom. 1:18-32).
 - a. Devoted to lesser things, people decide their own course and reap the consequences in behaviors that move ever further from God and his ways (1:23-28).
 - b. Paul does not leave the specifics to our imaginations (29-31).
2. Wait. Did Paul say *gossips*? *Slanderers*? Along with murder, God-haters, strife, and inventors of evil? Yes. That he did should give us pause. In a world where so many have to be "in the know," in possession of the "latest news," and are diligent to make sure it gets spread, Paul reminds us that gossip is quite serious. So, we should not treat it lightly.
3. I bring this up in light of James 4:11-12 where James specified the change needed if they would repent from the friendship with the world that led to their strife. They were to stop judging, taking God's prerogative. That included ceasing to "speak against" their brothers.
4. "Speak against" καταλαλέω (*kataleleō*), used three times in v. 11 (cf. 1 Pet. 2:12; 3:16), is the verb form of the word translated "slanderer" in Romans 1:30 (κατάλαλος, *katalalos*; cf. the noun καταλαλία, *katalalia* in 2 Cor. 12:20; 1 Pet. 2:1).
 - a. Its use to refer to gossip tells us that such behavior also amounts to playing God with others in a different way.
 - b. In light of gossip's prevalence, we would be remiss not to give attention to the problem.

Body

I. Who Is a Gossip?

- A. "Gossip" is, in its very definition, a corruption of something that ought to be good.
 1. "The English word 'gossip' has an interesting history. Once it referred to a close personal relationship: a dear friend or godparent (thus 'god-sib').¹ But it has come to

¹ A dictionary that traces etymologies confirms this: "O.E. godsibb 'godparent,' from God + sibb 'relative' (see sibling). Extended in M.E. to 'any familiar acquaintance' (mid-14c.), especially to woman friends invited to attend a birth, later to 'anyone engaging in familiar or idle talk' (1560s). Sense extended 1811 to 'trifling talk, groundless rumor.' The verb meaning 'to talk idly about the affairs of others' is from 1620s" (gossip. Dictionary. com. *Online Etymology Dictionary* . Douglas Harper, Historian. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/gossip> [accessed: October 14, 2011]).

represent the very abuse or pretense of closeness – the idle talk of a person concerned with the private affairs of others.”²

- B. Scripture uses multiple words to identify this sin; the New Testament features three.³
1. The Busybody, also called the tattler (1 Tim. 5:13, KJV/ASV), “the nosy news-monger who delights in the gathering and spreading of personal information.”
 - a) His credo: “The public has the right to know.”
 - b) Paul tends to blame idleness for such behavior (cf. 2 Thess. 3:11).
 2. The Whisperer, “who breaks confidences entrusted to him or reveals secrets he has learned about others” with no concern for another’s privacy and trust.
 - a) A favorite expression: “Now, I probably shouldn’t tell you this. . .”
 - b) He is the opposite of a trustworthy [faithful] man (Prov. 11:13).
 - c) The consequences are strife and separating close friends (Prov. 16:28).
 3. The Slanderer “damages others’ reputations by speaking malicious or evil things about them.”
 - a) “Back-stabbing” and “character assassination” fit his malicious intentions.
 - b) The Greek word, sometimes translated “slanderer”⁴ when applied to human beings, is διάβολος (*diabolos*) (1 Tim. 3:11; 2 Tim. 3:3; Tit. 2:3), generally used of the devil (cf. Matt. 4:1, 5, 8, 11; 1 John 3:8, 10; etc.).

II. Why Do We Gossip?

- A. “Will Rogers observed, ‘The only time people dislike gossip is when you gossip about them’” (Durham, 48). That said, why is gossip so popular (cf. Matt. 7:12)?
1. Proverbs 18:8 (= 26:22) gives us one clue: “The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.”
 2. There is a perverse pleasure derived from knowing – and telling – a thing.
 3. “A juicy rumor is to an adult what the prediction of a big snowstorm is to a kid. It promises so much fun that you pray it’s true.”⁵
- B. But, there are also other causes.
1. We are often convinced that it’s innocent and so minimize the sin.
 - a) Remember “sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me”? Or, “I didn’t mean anything by it”?
 - b) We don’t realize how what is so easily begun can do such damage.
 2. We are fooled into thinking it’s not that bad or even that it is a good thing.
 - a) Durham calls it, “Satan’s perversion of compassion.”
 - b) Indeed, some gossip starts out (or in some cases we convince ourselves that it does) with a concern. While there are times we need to know things about others, often we don’t need to know as much as we think we do, nor do we need to tell as many details as we do, as widely as we do.
 3. Some gossip out of pride (or its inversion, to compensate for some inadequacy).

² Ken Durham, *Speaking from the Heart: Richer Relationships through Communication*, 48.

³ I am following Durham, 48, here.

⁴ Other words are also translated “slanderer”; e.g., κατάλαλος (*katalalos* - Rom. 1:30); βλασφημία (*blasphēmia* - Matt. 15:19 = Mark 7:22; Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8; 1 Tim. 6:4); δυσφημέω (*dysphēmēō* - 1 Cor. 4:13; 2 Cor. 6:8).

⁵ Tom Molloy, *Reader’s Digest*, May 1991, 110.

- a) Some “have” to be “in the know,” so “privileged information [is] treated as a trophy to be displayed: ‘She confides in me, and the truth ... is...’
- b) “Flaunting his status as one of the privileged few, the gossip leaks a bit of information just to show others what he knows” (Durham, 54).
- 4. Guilt can also be a factor: in a game of Comparative Righteousness, we find out and spread the dirt on someone else and we can gloss over our own failures.
- C. James would attribute it to being so compromised, and therefore friends with the world, that we think *we* can decide what’s best to tell, are right to judge another, etc. (see Jas. 4:4).
 - 1. It should tell us something that gossip “almost always zeroes in on the negative, hardly ever the positive” (Durham, 52).

III. What Is at Stake?

- A. First Timothy 5:9-14 is instructive.
 - 1. There are some things relative to this passage about which we would like to know more.
 - a) Were the “enrolled” widows in fact receiving financial assistance from the Ephesian church (cf. 1 Tim. 1:3)?
 - b) Were they “an order of widows” with specific responsibilities?
 - c) What specifically prompted Paul to write these verses?
 - 2. We know his words reveal compassion for those who were at serious risk in a day when there were no “survivor’s benefits”.
- B. We also know that those selected to be “enrolled” were to have a track record of spiritual maturity, a point that brings out the real issue where gossip is concerned.
 - 1. It was for that reason that younger widows were not to be “enrolled.”
 - 2. Paul was not disparaging real needs and desires, but was warning how those needs and desires could lead to a failure to fully focus on ministry.
 - 3. It is noteworthy that he singled out gossip as the indicator of that immaturity (one thing older women were to model was a refusal to slander - Tit. 2:3).
 - 4. Spiritual growth includes the self-discipline that does not value or participate in gossip.

Conclusion

- 1. Ken Durham reports that, “One of the first jokes found in the dusty pages of ancient literature goes something like this. One man walks up to another and says, ‘Hello, friend, I’m surprised to see you. I heard that you were dead!’ The other replies, ‘Well, as you can see, that information is incorrect.’ The first man says, ‘I’m not so sure. I heard it from a very reliable source’” (Durham, 47).
- 2. Some, it seems, simply cannot help themselves. But, God can, and Paul shows how. In contrast to the “depraved mind” that led to the sins that included gossip and slander (Rom. 1:28), Paul told the Roman Christians to stop letting the world shape them and “be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (12:2). There is the key – and only hope – for eradicating the sin of gossip. Stop it! And let God re-shape your aim and behaviors.

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