

Sermon – The Prudence of Discretion
Sunday August 25, 2024

I want you to think of a sin that has the power to destroy lives. What sin comes to mind for you?

Paul has his own list of destructive sins in Romans 1. On his list, he has sins like greed, murder and deceit. Now these sins don't surprise us. In fact, many of you were probably thinking of these sins.

But when you go further down Paul's list, there's one sin that seems out of place. It's a sin you probably didn't think of. Anyone guesses what that sin is? It's gossip.

Now most of us probably don't put gossip in the same category as murder or greed – why is that? Maybe it's because we're so desensitized to it. Gossip is all around us. It's in magazines, reality shows, it's in the news.

Have you noticed that now because of social media, we have full access to people's lives? And we love it because we're a society that wants to know all the intimate details of people we don't even know. We want to know about their moral failures, their scandals and their affairs.

And we don't just love gossip about celebrities. We also love gossip about family, friends and colleagues. We do this even in the church. But in the church, we call it something else. What do we call it? We call it a prayer request.

Did you hear that the real reason Pastor Andrew stepped down from his Lead Pastor role is so he can spend more time eating chips? Please pray for him!

At one church, there was a lady who had a reputation for being a gossip. One day, she notices a church member's truck parked in front of a bar. So she tells everyone that Bob is an alcoholic.

Word soon spreads. And Bob approaches the woman to explain. But she simply says, If your truck was parked in front of the bar, it's clear you were up to no good.

Seeing as he couldn't convince her, he decides to have a little fun. So that night, he drives to the woman's house, leaves his truck on her driveway and walks back home.

This is a funny story. But the truth is gossip is no laughing matter. How many of you have ever had someone gossip about you? If you have, you know that gossip can be destructive.

- It shatters reputations.
- It undermines trust.
- It destroys relationships.
- It leaves deep emotional wounds.

Ann Landers wrote a powerful article in the Washington Post about this. She wrote:

My name is Gossip.

I have no respect for justice.

I maim without killing.

I break hearts and ruin lives.

I am cunning and malicious and gather strength with age.

The more I am quoted, the more I am believed.
I flourish at every level of society.
My victims are helpless.
They cannot protect themselves against me because I have no name and no face.
To track me down is impossible.
The harder you try, the more elusive I become.
I am nobody's friend.
Once I tarnish a reputation, it is never the same.
I topple governments and wreck marriages.
I make innocent people cry in their pillows.
My name is Gossip.

Gossip destroys lives. But here's the problem with gossip - we usually aren't aware that we're doing it. Sure, we say unflattering things about people. Sure, we wouldn't say these things if they were there. But when you and I do this, we don't call it gossip. Do you know what you call it?

- Venting. You're just frustrated and you need a harmless way to let off steam.
- Or maybe you're just processing. You're not sure what to do about someone so you need to talk it through with someone.
- Or maybe you're just concerned. Someone is struggling and you want to know how you can help them.

Here's a question for you: When does talking about someone cross the line into gossip? It's really hard to say.

- Are you gossiping when you complain about your boss to your spouse?
- Are you gossiping when the person you're talking to doesn't know the person you're talking about?
- Are you gossiping when you talk about someone you're trying to help?

What is gossip?

How do you know if you're gossiping?

What do you do if someone gossips to you?

We're in a series called *Navigating Relationships: Wisdom from the Book of Proverbs*. Relationships are messy because people are messy. Isn't that right? Turn and look at the person to your left. Now turn and look at the person to your right. If neither of these people look weird and dysfunctional, guess who the weird and dysfunctional person is?

Relationships are messy because people are messy. So how do you navigate messy relationships? Formulas won't help. Self-help advice won't cut it. What you need is the wisdom that comes from God.

That's what this series is about. We're looking at the Book of Proverbs to learn God's wisdom and gain practical tips to help us in our relationships.

Today we're going to talk about Gossip. It's not always clear what gossip is. So what I want to do is explore this topic by looking at three questions: What is gossip? What's really behind gossip? What should we do about gossip?

First, **What is gossip?**

Gossip is not only hard to resist, it's also hard to define. The Book of Proverbs doesn't give us a definition but it does give us lots of examples. And from these examples, we see three characteristics of gossip.

First, **Gossip is "juicy"**.

You and I are naturally curious about people's lives.

**The words of a gossip are like choice morsels;
they go down to the inmost parts. (Proverbs 18:8)**

The writer of Proverbs describes gossip as a ripe fruit. Why? Because it's tantalizing and tempting. It's sensational and provocative.

That's why when you're bored and hungry, what snack do you go to? Gossip. Because gossip gives you that thrill:

- Hearing about how someone you don't like is struggling.
- Feeling proud that you know something other people don't.
- Getting a distraction from your mundane routine.

Second, **Gossip is secretive.**

Just think. Before anyone gossips, what's the first thing they do? They look around. They make sure no one else is there. And then they lean close and whisper.

**A dishonest man spreads strife,
and a *whisperer* separates close friends. (Proverbs 16:28, ESV)**

The English Standard Version describes a gossiper as a *whisperer*. Why? Because gossip by definition is something you do when the person you're talking about isn't there. It's talking about them behind their back. That's why gossip is always secretive.

Third, **Gossip is a betrayal.**

When you share personal information with a friend, you have an expectation don't you? You expect your friend to keep what you've shared in confidence. So when they tell others what you've told them, what have they done? They've betrayed your trust.

**A gossip betrays a confidence,
but a trustworthy person keeps a secret. (Proverbs 11:13)**

The Book of Proverbs describes gossip as juicy, secretive and a betrayal. Gossip:

- Typically involves sharing personal information about someone that others aren't meant to know.

- It's usually untrue (which is called slander), but it can also be true, but still inappropriate to share.
- It typically thrives on speculation and exaggeration.

And here's the thing. Whenever the Bible talks about gossip, it always describes the character or lack thereof of the gossiper. The Bible calls these people untrustworthy, divisive and meddling.

So **What's really behind gossip?**

Do you know why gossip is so hard to define? It's because it's not just about our words, it's about our heart.

Jesus said, **For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.** ³⁵ **A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. (Matthew 12:34-35)**

Jesus knew that everything we do and say all come from what's inside our heart. That's why what's really behind gossip is our motivations.

You might not talk negatively about someone to spread rumours. But you may have other motivations for doing it - motivations that are just as unloving and self-promoting.

- Maybe you want to recruit someone to join your side. So you tell them about all the ways someone is bad at their job so they will see them in a bad light.
- Maybe you want to control the narrative. So you paint the other person as the instigator and yourself as the victim.
- Maybe you're jealous of someone. So you magnify their faults to make them look bad so that you can feel better about yourself.

You see, here's the thing. **Our words reveal the condition of our heart.** Our words are like a mirror.

- When you complain in secret.
- When you sit in judgment of others.
- When you put people down.

Whether it's gossip, slander or misinformation. Whether you call it venting, processing or caring. Do you know what your words are doing? They're exposing you. They're exposing your fears, your insecurities and most of all, they're exposing your lack of love.

Proverbs says **Whoever conceals hatred with lying lips and spreads slander is a fool. (Proverbs 10:18)**

So to deal with gossip, one of the most important things you need to do is pay attention not only to what you say but why you're saying it. Why? Because your words reveal your heart.

But does that mean you should never talk negatively about someone? What if I said that in some situations – not only is it appropriate to do so, but it's also necessary. For example:

- If someone's behaviour is concerning and you have good reason to believe they might harm themselves or others, you may need to talk to others to figure out what to do.

- Or say you're part of a group that's supporting someone. You may need to talk about their struggles and challenges. Not to spread rumours, but so you can figure out how best to support them.
- Or if someone has harmed someone or broken the law, you may be required to report them to the authorities.
- Or if someone poses a threat to others, you may need to warn them.

So **What do you do about gossip?**

How do you know if you should say something? How do you know what your true motivations are? The Bible says the heart is deceptive above all things. How do you know if you should speak or remain silent.

Here are three helpful questions you can ask yourself.

First, ask yourself: **Why am I saying this?**

Do a heart check. Why do I want to say this?

Am I feeling insecure? Am I trying to feel better about myself? Am I trying to control the narrative?

Or do I have a genuine concern for the other person? Do I have their best interests in mind? Am I trying to protect others?

The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out. (Proverbs 20:5)

So ask yourself, Why am I saying this? And if you do need to talk about someone with someone else, be discerning.

- Talk only to the people you need to talk to.
- Focus only what's helpful and constructive.
- And avoid sensationalizing or exaggerating.

Second, ask yourself: **Will saying this escalate tension?**

What do you think would happen if the world stopped painting everyone who disagreed with them as a villain? Tensions would die down. People would calm down. They'd would listen to each other. They would talk and work on solutions.

Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down. (Proverbs 26:20)

Spreading unnecessary and unhelpful information adds fuel to the fire. But when you refrain from spreading gossip, you help de-escalate tension and put people in a better position to work things out.

Third, ask yourself: **Would I want someone talking like this about me?**

Just think, how would you want others to treat you?

- You'd want them to keep what you say confidential.
- You'd want them to come to you directly if they have a problem.
- You'd want them to give you the benefit of the doubt.

You know how you want others to treat you – so treat others the same way. Jesus said, Do to others what you would have them do to you (Matt 7:12).

Now we've been talking about what to do if you're tempted to gossip. But what if someone comes to you and starts to gossip? What do you do then?

First, **Avoid gossipers.**

If a person is willing to gossip to you, guess what? They're probably willing to gossip about you.

A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid anyone who talks too much. (Proverbs 20:19)

Gossip ruins reputations, creates division and destroys community. So avoid gossipers.

Second, **Suspend judgment.**

If someone has already gossiped with you, it's too late to unhear it. And it's easy to start forming your own opinions, but here's some advice from Proverbs – don't.

In a lawsuit the first to speak seems right, until someone comes forward and cross-examines. (Proverbs 18:17)

When someone tells you something, just remember, you only have all the information. Turn to your neighbour and tell them, You don't have the full story.

If someone has shared information with you, you only have one side of the story. And that side is coloured by that person's feelings and biases. So suspend judgement and don't jump to conclusions.

Third, **Call it out.**

Many of us are afraid to do this. You don't want to offend someone and risk the relationship. So what do you do? You nod and stay silent. But do you realize that when you do nothing, you're basically saying that it's okay. Because what you permit, you promote. So redirect the conversation - call it out.

Here are some effective ways you can do that.

First, say: **Why are you telling me this?**

This is a great question! Do you know why? Because when you ask it, you're disrupting the person's thought process. You're forcing them to reflect. You're encouraging them to think about their motives. You're also establishing a boundary that says, I'm not going to participate in this.

The second thing you can say is: **Have you talked to this person yet?**

If you have an issue with someone, who are you supposed to go to? According to Jesus in Matthew 18, you're not supposed to go to others. You're supposed to go to the person you have a problem with.

Why? Because like the broken telephone game, talking to others creates confusion, spreads misinformation and escalates conflict. That's why you go directly to the person. When you do that you protect unity. You establish trust and you pave the way to work things out.

And I know. Having difficult conversations is hard. And most of us have never learned to do it. So how do you have these conversations?

If you scan the QR code on the screen, you'll find the **Relationships Resource Page** for this series. We recently ran a Crucial Conversations workshop. We also have links to two great books: Crucial Conversations and How to Have that Difficult Conversation. We also have recommendations for some Christian counsellors you can talk to. So check out this page and get the help you need to have the difficult conversations you need to have.

God is doing amazing things at Cornerstone! He's growing us, he's transforming us and he's using us to reach our community for Jesus. And he's still not done. We're in the process of discerning what big plans he has in store for us.

But with all these great things happening, you and I need to remember something. **The effectiveness of a church's mission is dependent on its unity.** That's why unity is essential. That's why gossip is so dangerous. Because gossip always threatens our unity. How does it do that?

- It undermines trust.
- It spreads misinformation.
- It generates bad feelings.
- It creates division.
- It distracts us from our mission.
- And it compromises our witness.

So if you're about to say something about someone else, do a heart check. Ask yourself,

- Why am I saying this?
- Will saying this escalate tension?
- Would I want someone to talk this way about me?

And if you someone talks to you about someone in an appropriate way, you need to call them out. Ask them:

- Why are you telling me this?
- Have you talked to the person directly?

Remember - **The effectiveness of a church's mission is dependent on its unity.** Gossip always threatens the unity of God's people. That's why gossip has no place in our relationships. That's why gossip has no place in our church.

So let's continue to embody Jesus' love and integrity not only with our actions but also with our words. Not only with what we say but also with what we don't say.

Let's pray.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We acknowledge that this is your church. And we thank you for all the amazing ways you are working here.

Thank you for...

Help us, Lord, to protect the unity you have blessed us with over the years.

Protect us from the destructive power of gossip.

Help us to use our words instead to speak healing, encouragement and truth.

Help us to fix our eyes on you Jesus so we can Make Space for you.

May this church community reflect your love and grace and may we be a witness to you in our community and in our world for the sake of your mission.

Amen

Benediction

Remember - your words have the power to build up or tear down, to heal or to hurt, to protect unity or to threaten it.

So as you go into this week:

May the grace of God fill your hearts with love.

May the Spirit grant you wisdom to know when to speak and when to remain silent.

And may you bear witness to Jesus' love and integrity not only with your actions but also with your words, not only with what you say but also with what you don't say.

Amen