

Proverbs 6 (16-19) – What Gossip Is & What It's Not

We have a gossip problem, and it isn't just that people gossip. The problem is that we are often calling gossip what isn't gossip and failing to call gossip what is gossip.

The word "gossip" itself is not prominent in Scripture, but the idea is shown throughout the Bible, along with the various sins related to gossip. The Word of God speaks of talebearers, or whisperers, people who murmur derogatory information about others. It mentions backbiters, people who talk about the failings and faults of others behind their backs. It discusses slanderers, people who speak against others with a desire to do them harm. It talks about false witnesses, and speaking evil of people or maligning them. Sometimes it's in secret, sometimes in the open, and sometimes it's both.

We know that God hates gossip. Notice the connections in Proverbs 6:16-19; the sin of gossip is tied up with all sorts of other evil intentions. The Bible shows us the consequences that gossip and its evil cousins bring, and tells us to stay away from gossip and those who gossip, and to keep our ears from hearing slander and our lips from speaking slander (cf. Exodus 20:16, 23:1 / Leviticus 19:16 / 2 Samuel 10:1-3 / Psalm 15:1-3, 31:13, 34:13, 41:5-8, 101:5, 109:2 / Proverbs 10:18, 16:28, 17:4, 9, 18:8, 19:5, 20:19, 24:28, 25:23, 26:20, 22 / Jeremiah 6:28, 20:10 / Romans 1:29-30 / 2 Corinthians 12:20 / Ephesians 4:31 / Colossians 3:8 / 1 Timothy 3:11, 5:13, 6:4 / 2 Timothy 2:16, 3:3 / 1 Peter 2:1 / 3 John 1:10 / Revelation 12:10 – Satan is a slanderer).

Why do we gossip? Often, it is to make ourselves look better to others, or to make ourselves feel better about ourselves. We think that divulging certain information will gain us an audience and acceptance, or that it will win other people to our side in a conflict. Gossip can be an attempt to hurt or retaliate against someone. Perhaps we gossip because we have had poor examples, we grew up around it, or maybe we keep poor company. Sometimes people fall into gossip because they don't think that they have anything better to do than just blab about things with idle talk.

Gossip is a serious matter, and we should be concerned that we avoid it, but before we just accept the world's definition of gossip, or we just rely on what we have heard as the traditional or "church view" of gossip, we need to look to Scripture to see what gossip is and is not.

While the world says that gossip is simply, "talking behind someone's back", and the church seems to follow suit, that isn't all there is to it, biblically speaking. Otherwise much of the Bible would be gossip. It would make God a gossiper, telling the sordid details and sorrowful stories of hundreds of others without their permission. It would mean that the apostles and early disciples used gossip to spread the Gospel. Again, this idea would make the Bible a book of gossip.

To illustrate what gossip is not, consider the following...

- Was Jesus gossiping when he said "negative" things behind the backs of Herod (Mark 8:15), the Pharisees (Matthew 12:38-40), the Teachers of the Law (Luke 20:45), and the Sadducees (Matthew 16:6)? Was it gossip for Jesus to warn His disciples against false teachers and prophets, etc., when these teachers and prophets weren't around?

- Was Jesus guilty of spreading gossip when he called a woman in the church of Thyatira a “Jezebel” (Revelation 2:20)?
- Did Mark get permission from James and John before writing of their misguided passion to “be first” (Mark 10:35-44)? Was he looking to ruin their reputation?
- Was Luke gossiping when he revealed the whisperings at the Last Supper (Luke 22:24)?
- Was Luke gossiping when he tells the story of Peter’s denials of Jesus (Luke 22:55-62)?
- When Chloe and her people reported to Paul about the specific types of carnality going on in the church at Corinth, did Paul rebuke her for gossiping, or did he rather base several chapters of Scripture on this “negative” report (1 Corinthians 1:11)?
- Did Paul gossip by reporting the failures of Peter & Barnabas (Galatians 2:11-13)?
- Was Paul gossiping when he said that Demas left him because he was in love with the world (2 Timothy 4:10)?
- When the Apostles Paul (1 Timothy 1:20 / 2 Timothy 2:17, 4:14) and John (3 John 1:9-10) were contending for the faith and were naming names, were these cases of gossip?
- Is the discipline process laid out by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20 a case of gossiping?

Clearly, we should not be defining “gossip” in such ways. God reveals and discloses the truth – both positive and negative things – and this is most definitely not “gossip”. And those who follow Him will become like Him (cf. Ephesians 5:11).

Some of ideas about “gossip” are simply means of “damage control” or “image management”. For example, leaders can foster an environment of fear by stifling normal conversation in the body. To be sure, not all the people who claim “gossip” are consciously harboring sin or trying to control others. But those who love darkness or who want to try and control information through manipulation or emotional blackmail can simply label openness, honesty, and light as “gossip”, and many seem to buy this tactic without considering it as false doctrine.

If we don’t understand what gossip is and isn’t, what Paul, Mark, Luke or God did could be labeled as “gossip”. This keeps us from learning from anyone else’s mistakes or failures and short-circuits God’s intention for us to live in the light. When the church stifles real news among the brethren under the misnomer “gossip”, we endure outrageous fabrications, slander, and lies among us; not recognizing that this is the gossip that Scripture is telling us not to engage in.

So what is the real sin of gossip, then?

Gossip is talking behind someone’s back with bad news (think: not true), given with a bad heart (a wrong motive), to effect a bad result (self-promotion, malice, manipulation, revenge, etc.). Telling the truth to protect others is not gossip, if that is what is really going on, and if it is not done with an evil heart motive. Gossip is spreading harmful information in an ungodly manner – without love, and thus to no positive end. Its stepchildren are strife, dissension, division.

Gossip is inherently a “false witness” of slander. Gossip and slander orbit around each other. Slander is the lie, and gossip is the spreading of lies. Sometimes gossip may well have some truth to it, but also include an embellishment, or perverted “twist” to it, which is the attraction; it lures others into wanting to hear and spread the news. In some situations, the gossip will be repeating some slander someone else told as a speculation that has no basis in truth at all.

Think about how the religious leaders accused Jesus (Matthew 11:18-19, 12:22-25 / Luke 23:2), and Paul (Acts 24:5, 9-13, 25:7), and the other disciples (Acts 6:13-14, 17:4-7), speaking slander, starting rumors, spreading lies, and promoting gossip.

With biblical wisdom and experience, we can recognize real gossip when we come across it. A gossip's main intention isn't about accurately depicting reality like the writers of Scripture, God, or normal healthy Christians do as they speak of one another. Instead, the gossip is promoting lies to project onto others. Gossips aren't interested in being true witnesses, but instead find unhealthy enjoyment in bearing and believing false witness. A gossip gives no thought to the reputation of someone else. A slanderer wants to ruin the reputation of someone else. They bring accusations and assign bad motives to people. A gossip keeps those rumors going.

Like all sin, slander and gossip can be enjoyed in the moment. But like all sin, there is a price to be paid later. With slander and gossip, the price is in the defamation of character, the ruining of real-life people, relationships, and organizations. It results in self-delusion and an inability to discern the truth for those who continue in it. It isn't wise to swim in such polluted waters, because we become polluted ourselves. Gossiping is foolish, and gossips become fools.

However, there is a big difference between gossip and accountability to a group. The Bible is in favor of accountability, and sometimes it will involve the disclosure of sin to more than one person, and this would not be considered gossip (cf. Matthew 18:15-20 / Romans 16:17-18 / 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 6:5 / 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 / Galatians 6:1-2 / 1 Thessalonians 5:14 / 2 Thessalonians 3:11-15 / 1 Timothy 5:19-20, 6:3-5 / Titus 1:10-13, 3:10-11 / James 5:16).

Of course, we are not supposed to always be going about like a sin police; proper church discipline is about dealing with open, ongoing, unrepentant, defiant sin, and that may need to involve more people than usual. But this must be about a process of restoration, not retaliation. That being said, church discipline is not gossip; problems get to the point you have to say something, first to the individual, then to others when it gets too far. Of course you have to have a case, or the person bringing the accusation is merely slandering. The difference of whether or not it is gossip is the intent of the heart, to wound or to heal, both individual and church.

Certainly we need to use discretion with our disclosure, and some things are better left unsaid (Proverbs 10:12, 19:11 / Colossians 3:13 / 1 Peter 4:8). That being said, telling the truth for the right reasons need be restrained only by the law of love, for each other and for the truth.

There is a balance between loving people and taking a stand against sin. It is not necessarily wrong to sincerely ask someone about what they did, but it is slander to accuse someone without substantial evidence they are guilty (cf. 1 Timothy 5:19). Contending for the faith is not in itself slander, but some have used contending for the faith as a pretense for slander.

Sometimes, "spreading information" is just plain old gossip. Gossip is talking about the failings and faults of others to people who cannot do anything about them, people who are neither part of the problem nor a part of the solution. They are neither a victim of the other person, nor a potential victim of this other person. Sometimes, even though the person in question needs to be prayed for, our "prayer requests" are also just a sanctified way of spreading gossip.

Some people want others to see them as someone “in the know”, but sometimes we just need to mind our own business, and not go looking and listening about like busybodies (2 Thessalonians 3:11 / 1 Timothy 5:13). We need to remember that listening to gossip counts as taking part in gossip. When we hear a whispered innuendo, a juicy rumor, an unsubstantiated claim, instead of just listening, we should ask about evidence and motives. Ask, “Why are you telling me this”? If they cannot properly defend their speech, we should rebuke them.

Even when we have the truth, that does not mean we are right in spreading the information. Some people think they can say anything about anyone as long as they feel sure it is true. But there is also the question of motive: there must be good reasons for telling bad things about others. Just because you have news doesn’t mean you’re supposed to broadcast it. The questions are, “Does this person need to know?”, and “Will it be helpful to tell them?”

Even when informing someone who “ought to know” about certain people and certain things, we can still be gossiping, when our intent is to sow seeds of suspicion. When we embellish the story to make it more exciting, when we must be sure to add all the “juicy details”, we are involved in gossip. It is spreading rumors or secrets, speaking about someone maliciously behind their back, or repeating something about someone else that you have no right to repeat.

When it isn’t your responsibility to inform others, or it isn’t in the realm of their accountability to you or that other person, or it isn’t a matter of safeguarding someone else, then the other person isn’t in the “need to know” category, and you aren’t in the “need to inform” category. This would be a violation of Scripture (cf. James 4:11 / Titus 2:3, 3:2).

When does your “sharing” descend into gossip? Ask yourself these questions...

- How certain am I that the facts are correct?
- Was the information given in confidence?
- Is this important enough to share?
- Am I telling this story to help build up others in Christ?
- Am I telling this story to help protect others in Christ?
- What is my motive for telling *this particular person* about it?
- Have I prayed about it (cf. Psalm 19:14, 141:3)?

As Jesus has told us, the truth is that gossip will always be used against the godly (Matthew 5:11-12). But as Christians, we should be prayerfully checking our motives, respecting proper boundaries, using some discretion with our disclosure, and as with all communication, we have to consider truth, timing, tact, and tone.

Gossip is a destroyer and we should be on guard against it, with our lips and our ears, and in our hearts. People should feel like we “have their back”, not that we are always “at their back”. But speaking the truth “behind someone’s back” is what God does, and what Christians have always done. It is biblically based, and is a healthy and normal human activity. It is bringing life out into the light. Those who want to manipulate and control people will label such things as “gossip”, because they want to micro-manage everything said about them. We need to be clear about such false teachings. Biblically speaking, we need to know what gossip is, and also what it’s not.