

What the Gossiper Does

by Walton Weaver

A one who gossips is "a person who chatters or repeats idle talk and rumors about others" (Webster). The Bible describes the gossiper as a talebearer, whisperer, busybody, or slanderer. Even Christians who have not learned to control their tongues may be guilty of gossip. Much instruction is given in the New Testament on the proper use of the tongue. In one way or another we are often admonished to lay aside falsehood and "speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor, for we are members one of another" (Eph. 4:25).

Sometimes Christians who are not especially gifted at being professional liars will without much thought repeat things that they do not know to be the truth. No matter what form it may take, Christians ought not to be found as slanderers or gossipers. This sin does not keep good company. It has as its friends strife, jealousy, angry tempers, arrogance, disputes and disturbances (2 Cor. 12:20), as well as unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil, envy, murder, deceit, and haters of God (Rom. 1:29-30).

Before relating something that may be detrimental, we should ask the following questions: Is it necessary that I tell this? Will it profit him or me about whom I'm speaking? Have I considered every possible angle? An earnest endeavor to answer these questions may check the flow of harmful words. Someone has well said, "if that bit of gossip has made nothing of you, you make nothing of it!"

What does the gossiper do? By answering this question we should be able to see why the Bible paints such a terrible picture of the gossiper.

1. The gossiper wounds others deeply. "All that hate me whisper together against me: against me they devise my hurt" (Ps. 41:7). The gossiper intends to bring hurt to the one spoken about. He may find it necessary to "distort . . . words" to accomplish this end, but since his thoughts are against the person for evil, he has no scruples of conscience forbidding him to do so (Ps. 56:5).

2. The gossiper always finds eager listeners. "The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of the body" (Prov. 18:8; 26:22). There seems to be little doubt that the second clause of this verse refers to food, and for this reason "dainty morsels" is probably a good rendering of the Hebrew word in the first part of the verse. The point of the comparison is that just as the delicate eater loves his delicacies, so the man who delights in gossip gloats over it sinking into his heart. Like the Athenians, too many people find great delight in hearing "some new thing"--and to their shame, too often they have little regard as to whether it is true or not. We must be careful. The words of the talebearer affect us adversely even when we are not aware of it. Reflect for a moment: How easy is it to forget about evil words you have heard about someone and to act naturally toward him the next time you meet him?

3. The gossip separates friends. "He that covers a transgression seeks love; but he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends" (Prov. 17:9). To cover a transgression is to keep silent about it (but not in some guilty way hide it). It is not always necessary that others know about a wrong that has been done against us. One may go to his brother and be reconciled, and if so, there is no need for anyone else to know about the wrong that was done. In the case of others, when we hear that one person has wronged another, there are two things we must be careful not to do: 1) conclude prematurely that a crime has in fact been committed, and 2) repeat what we have simply heard about someone else. If we later know for sure that a fault was committed, the loving thing to do may yet be to "cover the transgression." We may be wise to leave the matters to the parties involved to work them out.

"A perverse man spreads strife, and a slanderer separates intimate friends" (Prov. 16:28). As the parallelism shows, the "perverse man" here is the slanderer, or a man of falsehood. You have seen it happen. The best of friends have become hateful enemies because of unnecessary talk. The friends referred to in this verse may be the slanderer and his friend. His talk has alienated from him a bosom friend. But in the same way a gossip is often successful at breaking up others who have been bosom friends.

Of course, there is also a danger that runs in another direction. A person may be so attached to another that he will not even listen to what might be legitimate charges brought against his friend. No Christian should ever defend a brother who is a bosom friend just because he is a friend. Fear of losing a friendship has led some to compromise the truth. Faithfulness to a friend must never mean more to us than faithfulness to our Lord and His truth. What has a man gained if he should retain a friend and lose his soul?

4. The gossip sows strife and digs up evil. "A worthless man digs up evil: while his words are a scorching fire" (Prov. 16:27). To "dig up evil" literally means "to dig for others a pit" (cf. Prov. 26:27; Ps. 7:16); thus to prepare evil for others. The gossip, through the use of words, will dig a pit to serve as a trap for those he dislikes. This "worthless man" is a person who does much mischief with words. He "uses words which, like an iron glowing hot, scorches and burns" (Delitzsch). You have known people who simply must talk. The gossip is one who will find something to talk about. He will "dig it up" if he must, but his lips burn to talk, and he will talk. The shame is that his lips burn with a message of gossip. He does not have to know that his message is true. He will say it anyway. If one ever gets at odds with "a worthless man," or an unprincipled person, he can expect hurt and much mischief ahead.

5. The gossip will not keep a secret. "He who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets, therefore do not associate with a gossip" (Prov. 20:19). Most of us have known people who cannot keep a secret. When they repeat what has been told them in confidence they will sometimes say, "I was told this in confidence, so be sure not to tell anybody that I told you," thinking that somehow this justifies them in telling it. One simply cannot trust a gossip. For this reason, the admonition is, "do not associate with a gossip." If you want to get hurt a sure way to do it is to reveal to a whisperer that which

you do not wish others to know. If you want to get word out about something, tell it to a gossip---but remember to tell him it is a secret! This is the fastest way to get word around.

6. The gossip destroys his own soul. "A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are the snare of his soul" (Prov. 18:7). We have a way of saying of the person who is known for much talk, "He (or she) is always putting his foot in his mouth." Often the gossip in deeply wounding others comes through it himself unhurt, but as the old saying goes, "there is payday someday." The gossip is digging his own grave. The very means he has used to wound others will bring about the ruin of his own soul. He brings about his own condemnation.

"So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. Behold, how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire. And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell" (James 3:5-6). "But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger" (James 1:19). "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person" (Col. 4:6). "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips" (Ps. 141:3).