

THE CHRISTIAN USE OF GOSSIP

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James 3:7-10

One day last fall while out making calls, I stopped at a coffee shop for lunch. It was one of those little restaurants which has its walls plastered with signs. One read,

“Everything is fresh here but the help.”

Another said,

“Don’t worry about your future. Work hard eight hours a day. Pretty soon you’ll be boss and can work twelve hours and have all the worries.”

One sign gave me cause to worry. It was pasted on the front of the cash register:

“No checks cashed. No credit allowed”.

I didn’t notice it when I ordered my hamburger, coffee and pie a la mode. I reached into my pocket and discovered I had 65 cents. I could just see the headlines,

“MINISTER DOES DISHES FOR DINNER.”

So I quickly canceled the pie a la mode. When the bill came, it was 57 cents. I felt so relieved, I gave the girl an 8 cent tip.

As I started to leave the restaurant I noticed another sign over the doorway that set my imagination to work and eventually led to this sermon. It said,

“Watch your tongue. It’s in a wet place and is apt to slip.”

Even though it is couched in simple language, it’s pretty good advice, for the tongue is a maverick which is difficult to tame.

Of course that’s nothing new. Way back in the fifth century a man named Pambo found that out. He went to the great philosopher, Socrates, seeking the key to wisdom, happiness and success. The learned man turned to the 39th Psalm and began to read:

“I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue”.

When Pambo heard that one sentence he got up and left, saying that was enough for one lesson. When he did not return the next week, Socrates became concerned and sought him out. After nearly two months, he met him one day in the market place and asked him when he would like his next lesson. Pambo explained he had not yet mastered his first lesson and, according to the legend, he gave the same answer to the same question forty-nine years later when he died.

In all candor, most of us are in the same boat, aren't we? We have discovered the tongue is a mighty mite which is full of mischief and difficult to bridle. We have also learned it is an instrument with fantastic power. Power for good or evil according to James, who said:

“Out of the same mouth cometh forth blessing and cursing” (James 3:10).

All of us are aware of the havoc a careless tongue can create. We have all met those “carnivorous conversationalists” who delight in devouring the faults of others. Who draw their tongue like bow and hurl the piercing arrow of a bitter word at the character of another with no heed for the devastating consequences of their thoughtless deed.

Several months ago Better Homes and Gardens carried this little paragraph by Hazel Ferris:

“As a child I had a fiery temper which often caused me to say or do unkind things. Finally, my father told me that for each thoughtless, mean thing I did, he would drive a nail in our gate post; for each kindness, a nail would be withdrawn.

“As the nails increased, getting them out became a challenge. Finally, the wished-for day arrived! Only one more nail! As my father withdrew it, I danced around proudly exclaiming, ‘See, Daddy, the nails are all gone!’

‘Yes,’ agreed my father thoughtfully, ‘the nails are gone, but the scars remain.’”

You see, the terrifying thing about gossip is that we can never completely eradicate its evil influence. Perhaps that is why someone has suggested gossiping is a far worse crime than counterfeiting. There is always the chance a bogus bill will be caught and taken out of circulation, but on evil word can never be stopped. The mind of the hearer or reader has been poisoned by it and there is no antidote on earth which can neutralize its toxic effect.

And so, while it may sound harsh and brutal, nevertheless it is true: when we stoop to gossip we are at one and the same time a thief, a coward, and a liar. A liar because at best we can only speak a half truth, and a half truth is not the truth. A coward because we do not give the person about whom we say malicious things, a chance to reply. A thief because, as Shakespeare said:

“Who steals my purse, steals trash;
But he who filches my good name
Robs me of that which in no way enriches him
And makes me poor indeed.”

In May of 1955, Guidepost Magazine reprinted an old story that is still potent in its illustration of the evil of gossip. A woman confessed to her minister that she had gossiped about her neighbor. “I saw her stagger about the yard so I told a few friends that she had been drunk. Now I discover her staggering was caused by a leg injury. How can I undo the gossip I have started?”

The minister excused himself for a moment, returned with a pillow and asked the woman to follow him to the side porch. There he took out his pocket knife, cut a big hole in the pillow and emptied the feathers over the porch railing.

A small breeze soon scattered the feathers over the yard among the shrubs, flowers, even up into the trees. A few feathers floated across the street heading for unknown destinations.

The minister turned to the woman. “Go and gather up every one of those feathers?” The woman looked stunned. “That would be impossible!” “Exactly,” said the minister sorrowfully. “So it is with your gossip.”

There is no end, you see, to the cycle of events you start when you speak one thoughtless, unkind, brutal word about another.

So if you see a tall fellow ahead of the crowd,
A leader of men, marching fearless and proud,
And you know of a tale whose mere telling aloud,
Would cause his proud head to in anguish be bowed;
It’s a pretty good plan to forget it.

If you know of a skeleton hidden away
In a closet, guarded and kept from the day
Whose showing, whose sudden display
Would cause grief and sorrow and lifelong dismay;
It’s a pretty good plan to forget it.

If you know anything that would darken the joy
Of a man or a woman, or a girl or a boy,
That would wipe out a smile or the lease way annoy
A fellow, or cause any gladness to cloy,
It’s a pretty good plan to forget it.

Well, how are we going to make Christian use of gossip?

James says,

“Out of the same mouth cometh blessing and cursing.”

It is evident then that there are legitimate uses of our tongue. One of them is --

Always Give the Other Fellow the Benefit of the Doubt.

We're rarely wrong when we do that because in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred we do not have all the facts. That's why Jesus said, "Judge not." Only God knows the heart. He bases His dealings with men upon the intimate, absolute knowledge which is His. But human knowledge is limited. We do not know the secret workings of the inner heart. We have an inference here, a word there, an impression gained from one source, a suggestion from another. At best, it is only piece-meal—this knowledge of ours—and therefore it is not thoroughly dependable. That's why we should go slow in telling what we "know" about a neighbor or friend. True charity begins with offering the other fellow the benefit of the doubt.

But we can do more than that, we can --

Take a Positive Stand in His Defense on the Basis of His Overall Performance.

A few weeks ago that one of our fine members, Ivar Turnquist, had a little upset which put him in the hospital? One of the consequences of his illness was some difficulty remembering what had happened for several hours before he was stricken. When he mentioned it he jokingly said:

“I sure hope I didn't do anything I will regret.”

I assured him there was no danger of that for a leopard doesn't change his spots overnight.

You see, I know Ivar Turnquist. I know how he lives. I know he has built his life upon the premise of Christ and so I could say with absolute assurance he had done nothing he would regret. That kind of man does not change in a moment.

I heard of a man recently who said, “I always interpret every action and attitude in terms of the

average of an individual’s life. If he stoops sometimes to angry dealings, or if his speech is brusque and brutal, I always say, ‘That’s not his average. I’ll judge him by the better level on which he usually lives!’”

That comes even closer to “A Christian Use Of The Tongue.” It goes beyond the neutral position of merely giving a fellow the benefit of the doubt and lets you take a positive stand with the firm affirmation.

“He’s a better man than he showed in that particular instance.”

It is saying that which is good and helpful.

“A careless word may kindle strife;
A cruel word may wreck a life.
A bitter word may hate instill;
A brutal word may smite and kill.

“But, a gracious word may smooth the way;
A joyous word may lighten the day.
A timely word may lessen stress;
A loving word may heal and bless.”

So “A Christian Use Of Gossip” means we give the other fellow the benefit of the doubt and think of him within the context of his typical behavior, rather than his occasional expressions of immaturity. It also means that we recognize --

How We Use Our Tongue Is an Index to Our Spiritual State.

One of the first things a doctor does when you go to him for a physical examination is to look at your tongue. Now he doesn’t expect your tongue to be sick, but he knows it is an index to what is happening within your body. Likewise, what we say with our tongue is an indication of the spiritual state of the inner man.

We have already referred to James’ assertion that “out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing.” He goes on to say:

“These things ought not to be. Does a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?”

In other words, the water which flows out of a faucet is no better than the well from which it is drawn.

Our heart is like a fountain, and our words are its flow. From a corrupt heart can come incalculable evil. From a pure heart can flow untold good. And thus, to make “A Christian Use of Gossip,” we must say with the Psalmist,

“Create within me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

We must fill our entire being so full of Christ the overflow which pours from our lips will be permeated with the essence of His sweetness.

We must treat our gossip for what it is—sin—a deadly sin of the heart. And we must go to the source of our difficulty and ask God to remove the secret guilt, bitterness and resentment that we have harbored in our heart. The sin that is poisoning our entire being, and through our tongue is passing the infection on to others. Finally, to make “A Christian Use of Gossip” we must --

Recognize the Human in Us and Adapt to Meet Those Human Needs.

A woman in an isolated rural spot wrote to the Lonely Hearts Editor:

“My sister and I aren’t exactly lonely. We have each other to talk to, but we need another woman to talk about.”

Let’s be honest. We all need someone to talk about. That’s why we should fill our beings with Christ. In Him that need can be satisfied. We can get back in step with the first century Christians who went everywhere engaged in Godly gossip... continually talking about Christ.

In Acts 8:25 we read that they went everywhere and “preached the Gospel in many villages...”

The original Greek word for “preached” means “gossiped.”

They gossiped the good news that Jesus Christ had come.

They gossiped about His ability to give men abundant life.

They gossiped about the healing He could bring.

They gossiped Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

That’s what we need today. People who will make “A Christian Use of Gossip.” People who, with good loud mouths, will speak for the still, small voice. Men and women who will gossip Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Not the fine sermons of the pastor, the splendid sociability of the services, the magnificent music of the choir, but Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Ever, only, always, Jesus!

Let me show you what I mean. About an hour before I was to speak at the Seattle Convention, the telephone rang in my hotel room and it was Wil Borne, pastor of our Foster Park Baptist Church. He said, “I just wanted you to know, John, I’ll be praying for you.”

You’ll never know how much those few words meant to me. It was just the lift I needed. He talked for a few minutes ,and then told me a story that hit so hard I sat down and re-wrote a whole section of my sermon to include it.

He had been holding revival meetings in a church in West Virginia. One day the Pastor had to go downtown on business and when he came home he was visibly shaken. He told Wil how he had been walking down the main street of the town when he noticed a man who was visibly drunk walking toward him. He was dressed in vermin ridden rags and as he staggered back and forth across the sidewalk, bumping into people, knocking some of them off into the street, pausing only long enough to curse anyone who got in his way.

When he reached the minister, he stopped and stood there for a while reeling in his drunken stupor, and then asked him for money to buy food. The pastor had had a lot of experience with alcoholics and said,

“I’m sorry, sir, I won’t give you any money, but if you will come with me into the restaurant I’ll buy your dinner.”

When the man’s food had been set before him he began to stuff it into his mouth like a hungry animal. It was utterly revolting. Like some sort of a wild beast, he gorged himself for several minutes. Then he reached across the table, grabbed a fist full of bread, and was about to shove it into his mouth when he stopped, looked at the pastor, and said,

“What do you really think of me, anyhow?”

For a moment, the pastor was filled with complete contempt. Righteous indignation swept through his entire frame. Everything human in him wanted to cry out,

“I think you’re nothing but a dirty, rotten, filthy,
grimy bum. You made your bed, now go lie in it!”

But even as he started to speak, the Spirit of God took hold of his heart and, leaning across the table, looking deep into the man’s eyes, he said,

“I think you’re the man for whom Christ died.”

His answer pierced through the alcoholic haze which had fogged the man’s mind and sent him spinning back to his childhood when, as a little boy, he sat on a crude bench in a little country schoolhouse and sang:

“Jesus loves me, this I know;
For the Bible tells me so.”

Quietly he dropped his head on his arms and began to weep, his shoulders heaving convulsively. I don’t know if he’s a sober man this morning, but I do know this. He’s a different man. He will never be the same because someone cared enough to tell him he was the man for whom Christ died.

You, too, can make “A Christian Use Of Gossip.”

You, too, can tell others of about Jesus.

You, too, can speak --

A word of comfort in a time of sorrow.

A word of courage in a time of despair.

A word of joy In a time of sadness.

A word of light in a time of darkness.

A word of hope in a time when faith grows thin.

You, too, can make “A Christian Use Of Gossip” by giving the other fellow the benefit of the doubt; by judging him upon the basis of his average performance; by cleaning up the fountain of your heart so it’s flow shall be full of sweetness; and best of all, by using your tongue to tell the glad news that Jesus Christ has come.