

## Feathers & Morsels: Part 2 in a Series on the Words We Speak

Romans 12:9-21

Rev. Jim Zazzera, Faith Presbyterian Church, 26 April 2015

When I am at the church all day, and have a night meeting, I will often go out to dinner by myself. Last week was one of those times. I was at a little Mexican food restaurant, the only customer in the place, when two people came in and sat right behind me.

Now I would love to say that I never listen in on other people's conversations but, of course, I would be lying. I was, however, thinking about this sermon, wondering about what I would say about gossip when I heard these two begin to talk about a neighbor.

*Yes, he has a very big house, with a huge driveway—but for some reason he has to block my driveway. I guess it is because he has 5 cars!*

***Wow, he must have quite a bit of money.***

*Somebody told me he has a gold mine in Columbia, but I think the truth of the matter is that he is a drug lord!*

***Really? Wow.***

*Yes, he came to me a few months ago, when he heard I was going to sell my house. He said he wanted to make an offer, but he never got back to me. So now that I have sold my house, he came over to ask me about it. When I told him that the buyer was going to build a second story, he griped about how that would block HIS second story view. Can you believe the nerve?*

***Seems pretty selfish to me.***

*But the worst thing, and I find it shocking given all the new regulations, in fact, I'm ready to report him. The worst thing about this guy is that he waters his lawn 6 days a week and floods the whole street!*

***Oh my goodness...***

You see where this conversation is going. Anyone of us could write this conversation, because most of us have spoken these words. We have all gossiped in this way at one time or another. In fact—I fear I am teetering on the edge of sin myself as I gossip infant of you about these two people.

*So how do you define gossip? Is it one of those things that “you know when you see it?” I'm not so sure. James Bryant Smith, writing in his book *The Good and Beautiful Life*, a book about having our character formed by Christ, defines it this way:*

“...gossip is (1) speaking negatively (2) about someone who is not present. Those are the two elements of gossip.”<sup>1</sup>

According to Smith, If you say something positive or that person is present, it may be other things, but it is not gossip.

I like that definition— it is simple...clear...down to earth. The problem is that gossip is not all that easy to spot and acknowledge in ourselves.

Yet even the ancients understood its power. Proverbs, a book of wise sayings in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, references gossip more than once. Proverbs 18:8 reminds us...

*The words of a whisperer (a gossip) are like delicious morsels;  
they go down into the inner parts of the body.*

Proverbs 20:19 points out...

*A gossip reveals secrets;  
therefore do not associate with a babbler.*

Proverbs 26:20 observes...

*For lack of wood the fire goes out,  
and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.*

What is it about gossip? What makes it so tantalizing to us? Why is gossip like so many “delicious morsels?” (It reminds me of the crumbs in the brownie pan that are so easy to eat, they are so satisfying, so tasty, yet when you eat them you can’t even imagine there are any calories in them.) Delicious morsels.

So what is it about gossip? It is actually rather simple. When I speak about someone in a negative way, when I whisper about how bad someone’s behavior is, when I put down the other, I am actually saying something about myself. I am saying that I am NOT like them.

*I am NOT ostentatiously rich. I am NOT a bumbling idiot. I am NOT filled with silly fears. I am NOT and egotistical maniac. I am NOT someone who asks dumb questions. When I gossip, when I speak negatively about another I am trying to lift myself up by saying I am NOT like her, I am NOT like him.*

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<sup>1</sup> James Bryant Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Life*, p. 202.

I can't help but think of the religious leader who prayed in the Gospel of Luke::

*God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.*<sup>2</sup>

It was almost as if this Pharisee was gossiping to God! Saying someone else is bad - behind their back, is another way of saying that we think we are good. We judge another person negatively so that those around us will judge us positively.

The writer of the book of James (who Jeff referenced last week) talks so much about our misuse of our words. He also addresses this question of judgment as well. He reminds us how hard it is to keep the law, and how careful we must be about judgment. Listen to his words here:

*So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.*<sup>3</sup>

James reminds us that grace in our judgment of others is what God calls for. But grace is a rare commodity, a missing factor—when the spirit of gossip takes hold. *When we gossip, we show no mercy.* I love how one writer reminds us of the need to withhold judgment when he says,

“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.”<sup>4</sup>

You would think that Christians, of all people, would be wonderful at this. That followers of Jesus would know how to be kind.

As you might guess, gossip has powerful effects. Watch this short clip from the movie *Doubt*, a story of two sisters religious who sow the seeds of suspicion about a certain priest. In the scene, the priest preaches a sermon meant to deliver a particular message to the two sisters.

Watch clip from the movie “Doubt”

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OwpGUI-TAI>

It is near impossible to undo the effects of our gossip. It would be like gathering hundreds of feathers from the four winds.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 18:11, *NRSV*.

<sup>3</sup> James 2:12-13, *NRSV*.

<sup>4</sup> Attributed to Rev. John Watson, writing as Ian MacLaren.

Gossip is not simply like the knife that rips apart a pillow, but like someone who sneaks up on us, and stabs us in the back. Gossip is not just an attack, not just judgment, but is the knife used in a sneak attack.

For you see, gossip is not just idle conversation, or objective assessment of another, or life observations, but a cowardly ambush. *Even as I wrote these words I felt my own shame, because I know I have gossiped—and done it often.*

Gossip is a spiritual issue, for it addresses our character that is either formed—or not formed—by the presence of the Spirit. While our passage for today from Romans 12 does not address gossip head on, it does address it from the positive side. Paul the apostle doesn't tell us what NOT to do, but he tells us what do do. If you wanted a guide for practical Christian living, if you wanted a place to begin to address our penchant for gossip, you could do worse than follow these 13 verses.

Listen to some of the phrases and see if they speak to this issue:

*love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. (vs. 10)*

*bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. (vs. 14)*

*live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. (vs. 16)*

*take thought of what is noble in sight of all (vs. 17)*

*live peaceably with all (vs. 18)*

*overcome evil with good. (vs. 21)*

Where in any of these phrases do you see room for gossip? I like how Pastor/writer Eugene Peterson translates in his version of this passage:

*Bless your enemies, no cursing under your breath. (vs. 14)*

*Make friends with nobodies, don't be the great somebody. (vs. 16)*

Gossip is really our attempt to be the “great somebody.”

It is clear that Christ calls us to an alternate way of living. But then comes the hard part—how do we do this?

In the spirit of this sermon series, it is time for another knife. And this knife is used not for backstabbing, but for sculpting. Last week, I visited with a friend in Red Bluff who is an expert wood carver. He has created horses, human faces, trees, and scenes of life. For some of these, he uses power tools, but for the most part, he uses simple wood carving knives. He crafts his creations—literally—by hand.

He brings amazing things out of castoff piece of wood. He makes stunning art out of unformed pieces of basswood, or pine, or cottonwood, or butternut. He creates beauty.

And that is how God works in us. We can see this if we jump to the beginning of Romans 12, a familiar and fundamental passage for any Christian seeking to grow in the character of Christ. Paul asks his readers to present their bodies to Christ (that would include their tongues) as a living sacrifice.

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*<sup>5</sup>

Bring your whole self, step back from being conformed, let God transform your life. Let God carve out a beautiful life for you. Or as the Message translation puts it...

*Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering... You'll be changed from the inside out.*<sup>6</sup>

Stopping our gossip (or any other sin) is not about willpower or gritting out teeth. It is about being constantly formed in Christ's image, by things like prayer, serving others, living in Christian community, worship, and experiencing the power of scripture in our lives. But God's soul shaping is not like some 21st century self help program, it only happens at the invitation of God's Spirit into our lives.

*Place your life before God as an offering.* We may wield the knife that stabs someone in the back, but only God has the knife that creates beauty out of unformed and broken selves.

And there is one more thing. There is one last bit of Good News. Also in the book of Romans, we are reminded of God's unfailing love and told that Christ is at the right hand of God and "intercedes" for us.<sup>7</sup> Christ intercedes for us. Think about that. Christ is talking about us, praying for us, remembering us in kind ways.

Again from *The Message*:

*The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard*

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 12:2, *NRSV*.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 12:2, *The Message*.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:34, *NRSV*.

*times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture*<sup>8</sup>

Christ thinks of us, talks about us when we are not there—but not for the purpose of tearing us down—but with words of love that only have in mind what is best for us.

*What better news can there be? Christ only wants good for us.* Nothing can stand in the way of that love God offers. Every word he speaks to us and about us—is a word meant to show love, is a word meant to bring hope, is a word meant to deepen our faith.

Praise and thanks be to this God, who calls us all “beloved.”

## Next Step Questions

1. Read Romans 12:9-21 again. What is the most important thing you notice? Is there anything here that challenges your behavior?
2. How would you define gossip? How do you know when you have crossed the line from general conversation to gossip?
3. What do we get from gossip? What is so tantalizing about it? Why do we like it? Why are these words like “delicious morsels?” (see Proverbs 18:8)
4. In what way might gossip be related to judgment? What do you make of James comments on judgment and mercy in James 2:8-13?
5. 1 Peter 2:17 says a number of things about how Christians are to live in our world. One very short comment the writer makes is to “honor everyone.” What does that behavior look like to you?
6. Can we simply stop gossiping? Why or why not? What might give us the power to stop? (Hint: take a look at the beginning verses of Romans 12.)
7. Have you ever experienced the “backstabbing” effects of gossip? What was that like? Have you ever experienced words about you (from God or another person) “sculpting” or “forming” you in a helpful way?
8. What do you imagine Jesus says about us? Romans 8:34 says that Jesus is on the right hand of God and “intercedes for us.” The Message translation of this same passage says that Jesus is “in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us.” How does that help you understand what Jesus might say?

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 8:34-35, *The Message*.