

Is it Gossip or Speaking the Truth in Love?

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<http://jensgems.wordpress.com/2014/01/15/scott-browns-no-gossip-rule-the-plague-of-the-ncfc/>

There is much confusion in Christian circles over the sins of gossip and slander. It is evident that there are many people, whether or not they are in a position of leadership, who espouse the “no gossip rule” and lord it over others as a means of keeping people silent over sensitive issues or blatant sin. Often, the bottom line is that the person accusing someone else of “gossip” simply does not want or know how to handle the truth in a God-honoring way.

When a pastor, church leader, parent, or anyone else in a position of authority pulls out the No Gossip Rule card, it is nearly always in a spirit of pride and is used as a guilt and manipulation tactic. This leads to confusion and misunderstanding of the real sin of gossip (and pride), and tightens the grip of bondage on the heart of the person who was told to keep silent. In fact, the more serious the matter, the stronger the command to not be a ‘gossiper’. Many well-meaning Christians are quick to obey the commands of their authority, sometimes even going against their conscience to do so. After all, no one wants to be accused of being a gossip or slanderer!

Many people who sound the alarm on what they call ‘gossip’ are guilty of believing “I never engage in my interpretation of gossip and/or slander, so therefore I am righteous.” But actually, most of the (Christian?) leaders who espouse the No Gossip Rule are quick to break their own rule if it suits their purpose. And this they disguise as “wisdom”, but in reality they are just displaying a hypocritical attitude. On one hand, these pastors or leaders say that the Bible teaches it is wrong to question anyone in authority or leadership. While on the other hand, they are quick to condemn, criticize and cast disparaging accusations against anyone with whom they disagree, particularly those in higher political office. The men whom I have heard condemn their congregants of the sin of ‘gossip’ (without any Biblical justification), are the same men who take pride in criticizing the President, state leaders, high profile women in political office, non-Family Integrated Churches, Christian pastors of different denominations, fathers who choose not to homeschool their children, and a variety of Christian ministries. Many of these men have violated their own principle, as errant as it might be, by their strong language and finger pointing. When the Scripture gets distorted, it can become difficult to sort out the real issue of what is the sin. We ask ourselves, “Who is doing the sinning? How can we have a clear conscience in these matters? How do I make an application of God’s Word when I don’t even know my own heart?”

I would like to address several concerns that are frequently raised on the subject, and look into what I believe is the heart of the matter. There are those Christians who abide by man-derived

assumptions of certain commandments and interpret through their own lens of Law, as a means of measuring their own personal level of holiness. This is wrong and leads to bondage, not freedom in Christ.

The “accepted meaning of the word” that has been defined as gossip is what I term a Pop-Christian understanding: “Never say anything negative about anyone, for any reason, regardless if it is true.” There is also the version of gossip that is popular in Patriarchal teachings: “Never call into question the character or teachings of those who are in spiritual authority over you, and do not speak of any negative issues or circumstances that occur in our Christian homes or churches.”

If these are the Biblical definitions, then it is impossible to ever speak anything negative about anyone, at any time, for any reason, without being guilty of sin. The definition that many Christians have erroneously used leaves no room for qualifying the context of any situation to determine the legitimacy of speaking something negative about someone. I believe that there are times when it is helpful and necessary to speak the truth about someone else, even if it is a ‘negative truth’.

The Biblical definitions are what we must use to lend understanding of the sins of gossip and slander. In understanding the command and principle fully, it is also needful to look at the examples of Christ and the Apostles, and examine the exhortations in the New Testament on dealing with sin, false teachers, pride in the church, the means of personal holiness, speaking the truth, exposing lies and deception and the proper means of holding one another accountable. It is easy to forget context.

Gossip is not defined as speaking the truth about someone in a negative way, with or without their presence. The word for gossip means ‘to whisper’ (not in a literal sense, but figuratively). It is also used to connote idle speaking or purposeless, meaningless, unedifying conversation. Malicious gossip carries the additional weight of evil forethought or intent. It is always used in the negative, often listed with the works of the flesh (2 Tim 3:3).

Slander is more than merely speaking a falsehood or exaggerating the truth (as some believe); it carries the meaning of causing division, maliciously backbiting, evil speaking.

As Christians, we do need to be very careful of not taking part in tale-bearing; this is clear and undisputed. It is sin. We are not to have any part in talebearing and idle speaking and defamation of someone else’s character. There are times when we do need to learn to mind our own business. The question is, “What constitutes a tale?” I believe that it is possible to be a tale-bearer and a gossiper even without mentioning names of people involved, because gossip means idle speaking and that can take many forms. Under this definition then, is it not possible that ‘gossip’ could pertain to things other than people? (The Bible doesn’t define it as being solely related to speaking about other people.)

This is where many Christians hold to the principle of the ‘sphere of influence’, which I agree is a good, wise principle. If the other person cannot be of help (godly counsel, admonition, 3rd party accountability, mediator, etc) in the situation, then it is not their business to know about a particular situation specifically. However, how do you define that sphere, and its limitations, when the Bible makes no direct mention of this principle?

Many times, it is considered acceptable to say negative things about others as long as there is no mentioning of names. I do agree with this principle being applied to some contexts. In many scenarios, it is possible to discuss and learn from issues where it is not necessary to know details and names. Other times, it is needful to know, so that is a matter of wisdom and discernment. As far as I know, the Bible does not address this point, and there are not any Scripture references to this application.

If the current trending definition of gossip is the Biblical commandment, then the apostle Paul was guilty of gossip, for he consistently recognized, named and specifically warned and exhorted the Christians about men who strayed from the truth, men who were false teachers and men who were causing factions and divisions (Galatians 2:11-14, 1 Timothy 1:19-20, 2 Tim. 2:17 & 3:8-9 are a few that come to mind.) Paul spoke against these people, using them as an example of what not to be or do, and to help the believers learn to discern truth from error.

According to the popular definition of gossip taught in patriarchal circles, then anything that is said or could be perceived as remotely negative about anyone is wrong and sinful. Based on this teaching, it seems that the logical conclusion is: no one must ever tell or discuss with another person about someone else’s sin, failure, foolishness or doctrinal error, no matter the reasoning for doing so, unless it falls into the category as defined by Matthew 18.

Where does a Christian draw the line on the right and wrong of this principle? And what defines “negative”?

It is not my belief that all ‘negative speaking’ falls into the gossip or slander or talebearing categories. Having said this, I will add that there are times when it is needful, even profitable, to speak in the negative about someone else. Also, stating a disagreement about someone else’s choices, habits or doctrine is not always to be considered as speaking negatively about someone’s character. The only way we can know the wisdom in doing so is through our conscience and conviction from the Lord.

I believe that Scripture makes a clear distinction that “evil speaking” is completely different than “speaking of evil”. (The first is a sinful motive, the second is understanding a negative truth.) The sins of gossip and slander are often listed in the passages of Scripture that portray the deeds of the flesh. Therefore, those who do these things are walking in the flesh. The Christian who walks in the Spirit will not commit these sins. (Galatians 5:16-25) Based on my understanding of these verses, I do not believe it is possible for a Christian to be controlled by the Spirit and sin at the same time. Thus, doesn’t it follow that a person who is controlled by the Spirit in a

conversation will not “slip-up” and gossip? Sin happens only when we are being controlled by the flesh, and thus when a Christian fails to walk by the Spirit, he easily falls into sin.

We are called to observe those who walk according to a Godly pattern, contrasted with those who allow sin and deceitfulness to control their lives. In order to recognize the right, true way of living, we must also be able to identify the false, ungodly ways of people so that we do not fall into the trap of following after their patterns. (Philippians 3:17-19)

The fruit of the Spirit, produced through a heart that is being controlled by the Spirit is in direct contrast to the deeds of the flesh. If a person is being controlled by peace, exhibiting love, longsuffering and patience toward someone else, they will not gossip or slander against that person. That person’s *motivation* is conformed to God’s will.

I am in no way saying that we are not ever going to fall into sin. We are being perfected, but not yet perfect. We have a new nature in Christ, indwelt by the Spirit of God. We are no longer slaves to sin, even though we still have sinful flesh. We always have His Spirit within, but there are times in the Christian’s life when he will quench the Spirit, when he will fail to walk by the Spirit and produce Spirit-filled fruit, when he will give in to the carnal desires of the flesh, rather than being controlled by the Spirit. There are times when we question ourselves, as Paul did in Romans 7. But Galatians is clear, “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh.” The heart and mind that are conformed to Christ, possessing a “righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (Phil. 3:9) is no longer subjected to the futility of mind and darkness of understanding as spoken of in Colossians 1:21 and Ephesians 5:8-10. Looking at Jeremiah 17:9 from the perspective of Romans 8 and Ephesians 4:17-24, the *unregenerate* heart is “deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?” But to the pure, all things are pure. And Matthew 5: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” A mind that is set on the mind of Christ, *will act like Christ*. Attitude fruit produces action fruit.

Stated another way, the fulfillment of the entire law of God is summed up in the commandment “Love thy neighbor as thyself”. There are many facets of what love is (1 Cor 13). *If a Christian is obeying this commandment and loving others in a Biblical fashion, he will not sin against others in any way.* We do not have to have laws to obey in order to know how we are to love others. If our hearts are controlled by Christ’s love through the power of His Spirit, the outflow is in perfect accordance with the law of Christ. Law-keeping does not equal love. Love equals obedience. There are no “Do This and Don’t Do That” checklists to keep as reminders of how to obey God’s law. It is written on our hearts through Christ, guided by the work of the Spirit.

Therefore, if the occasion would arise of needing to say or convey something about someone else that might be interpreted as negative, we must examine our hearts, ask the Lord for guidance and determine if it profitable and wise to do so. If my heart is filled with love for another, I will not fall victim to the sins of gossip, slander or talebearing, and will be able to share the truth (however negative) with the ultimate goal of honoring the Lord.

Frankly, the only way that we can know whether something is gossip or slander is to examine our heart motive by looking at the fruit of the Spirit produced in our life. Our conscience can be clear that we are following God's will, even in speaking negative truth, if our heart and mind are being guided by the Spirit. He will convict the heart that sins against Him, through the clear, unencumbered interpretation of His Word, not through someone else's law or standard. Discerning the truth becomes complicated when we turn our focus away from the Spirit of God working in our lives.

Where Scripture is specific, there is little or no question of application. Where Scripture is not specific to every situation or circumstance, it is the working of the Holy Spirit within each individual person's heart which grants understanding to the application of the truths of Scripture. Based upon the conviction that He brings to our hearts, we can then know how we are to be obedient. It is not always as cut-and-dried, black and white, "do this, don't do that" as we would like; we are constantly in need of bringing situations and issues before the Lord with humility, trusting Him to reveal truth and learning to walk by faith. And when we follow Christ, He grants us a clear conscience and gives divine wisdom and understanding on what it means to love one another.