

Study 5: Good relations at work - gossip

Key idea:

We are sent into the world, but are not to be of it. We want good relations with people at work, but we want to be constructive in what we say, and not encourage destructive behaviour in others.

Bible passages:

Proverbs 11:13: A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret.

Proverbs 16:28: A perverse person stirs up conflict, and a gossip separates close friends.

Proverbs 18:8: The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts.

Proverbs 20:19: A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid anyone who talks too much.

Proverbs 26:20: Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down.

2 Corinthians 12:20: For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.

Questions:

1. Based on these passages, how should we define 'gossip'? [See notes below for help with this.]
2. We are to avoid gossip but we are to be in the world! Consider John 17:14-18:

You have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. 15 My

prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. 17 Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.’ So we are ‘not of this world, but sent into it.

How does this fit with the command to avoid gossip? Can we be in the world but not be part of a gossip culture?

3. What is the gossip culture like at your work?
4. Do you find yourself being drawn into it?
5. How do you avoid it?
6. What risks do you face when you do not participate in gossip? [You may miss out on legitimate information that can help you in your job. You may lose friends.]
7. How can we judge our contributions to discussions? [Would we want to be spoken about like this? Does the person being spoken about have a value to God that is not reflected in the way we speak about them?]
8. What Christian virtues may help us avoid gossip? [Justice, courage, temperance, prudence, faith, hope and love (from Aquinas)].
9. What outcomes do we want? [God has made us as ‘lovers’, that is, as people who seek the good of other people. In our speech we should do good. If we are not sure if either our listening or our speaking will achieve some good purpose, and fear that harm may actually come from it, it may be best to keep quiet.]

End of Study

Study notes:

A dictionary definition of gossip is ‘casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details which are not confirmed as true’. For me this is not sufficiently negative in connotation.

Another way to see it is as, ‘talk about others when we are neither the problem nor the solution’. I think this can be useful at a practical level. If

you feel you are being drawn into gossip, you can think, ‘do I need to participate because I’m the problem, or I have a useful solution?’ However, this definition is a bit narrow. It does not reflect the fact that talking about other people is simply part of being human and being social beings. We are story tellers, and stories usually involve people.

The Hebrew word translated ‘gossip’ in the Old Testament is defined as ‘one who reveals secrets, one who goes about as a talebearer or scandal-monger’.

Two related words are used in the New Testament. In Romans 1:29 the best greek dictionary (lectionary), BDAG, defines the word translated as ‘gossip’ as as ‘rumourmonger or tale-bearer’. In 2 Corinthians 12:20 the word translated as ‘gossip’ is defined by BDAG as ‘derogatory information about someone that is offered in a tone of confidentiality, (secret) gossip, tale-bearing’. It is often associated with ‘speaking badly’ (as in 2 Corinthians 12:20), which is ‘the act of speaking ill of another, evil speech, slander, defamation’.

From this we could say that a gossip is a person who has privileged information about people and proceeds to reveal that information to those who have no business knowing it. Gossip is distinguished from sharing information in two ways:

- (a) *Intent*. Gossipers often have the goal of building themselves up by making others look bad and exalting themselves as some kind of repositories of knowledge.
- (b) *The type of information shared*. Gossipers speak of the faults and failings of others, or reveal potentially embarrassing or shameful details regarding the lives of others without their knowledge or approval. Even if they mean no harm, it is still gossip.

Other observations.

When I first started work as a lawyer, an old, crusty and very practical senior partner told me, ‘there are more people in jail for saying too much and not enough’. This was a strong and threatening image. It was used too convey the idea that some people let their tongues run away with them, give too much information, express unformed or untested ideas or

opinions, and bitterly regret it later. How many times have we thought, 'I wish I hadn't said that!' or 'if only I had stopped earlier'. Some people speak a lot so they can be the centre of attention. Others do it out of nervousness, 'I want to speak so I belong'. We don't want to be scared to speak, or overly taciturn, but some discipline is needed. A good practical guide is to ask yourself, 'what good am I hoping will come from saying this?' or 'is this likely to do more harm than good?'. If you are unsure, take greater care.

As usual, the Book of Proverbs has things to say that help us with day-to-day living:

13:3, Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin.

20:15, Gold there is, and rubies in abundance, but lips that speak knowledge are a rare jewel.

22:11, One who loves a pure heart and who speaks with grace will have the king for a friend.

23:9, Do not speak to fools, for they will scorn your prudent words.

23:16, my inmost being will rejoice when your lips speak what is right.

29:20, Do you see someone who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for them.

None of us will go through life without making awful mistakes with what comes out of our mouths. But a wise person will learn from their mistakes.

Finally, we should want to see people in the best light that God sees them. We know there are fools and idolators, and that we are all sinners. But we also know that every person bears God's image and is of great value to him. So, when we speak of other people, we could concentrate on the good we see in them. If we do that, we will not be gossiping.