



The Journey of Thomas

Protect Confidentiality

By John J. Smid

Proverbs 11:13

A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.

Prov. 25:9-10

If you argue your case with a neighbor, do not betray another man's confidence, or he who hears it may shame you and you will never lose your bad reputation.

Prov. 12:14

From the fruit of his lips a man is filled with good things as surely as the work of his hands rewards him.

One Type of Gossip

I learned a valuable lesson a few years ago about gossip. There are two aspects to protecting one another's confidentiality. The first pertains to what is commonly understood as gossip; it is our responsibility not to speak out of turn with regards to someone else's story.

When someone shares something with us that is personal or when we become aware of something in someone else's life that we intuitively know needs to be protected, we ought not to speak of it to anyone else.

There isn't a better way to ruin the health of a relationship or the unity of a group of people than to talk about things we shouldn't. I have added the word "protect" to the title of this topic because it brings to my mind the nature of my responsibility, which is essentially to protect someone's "nakedness" in life.

When we become close to someone through really hearing their heart and through our own personal honesty connect to their story, it would be my hope that the natural outcome would be to be protective of them and not share their story out of turn.

I have listened, understood, and related and now I can actually put myself into their shoes and think about how I might want my personal story protected. Even as I write this I am thinking of someone I know who is going through a very hard time. I reflect back on times when I have struggled intensely with something very personal. I wonder how I would have felt if someone carelessly told my story without purpose or redemptive intent. I wonder if they would rather tell my story just to have something juicy to share with their friend.

A More Subtle Type of Gossip

For the last 30 years, my life has been a relatively open book. When I chose to go into a sin-filled lifestyle of homosexuality my family and friends all knew of my choices. I didn't necessarily make the decision to tell everyone but in that situation, no one attempted to hide my choice or pretend in any

way so as to hide their perspectives. Actually, this became a good thing in the long term. There was no information that was left unturned.

When I made a decision to leave my behavior and associations with it behind, that too was public information. Then for the next 25 years, my life became an open book to the public. There isn't anything further to find out about me. All of the skeletons that could have been in my closet never moved behind the closed door. It has been pretty hard for someone to gossip about my life. There isn't anything further to tell that I haven't already publicly told. I find that quite freeing!

I have learned there is another aspect to gossip that is a bit more difficult to discern as such. Gossip can also be a pursuit of "untold" information. I find that when it is appropriate to share something about our own lives, then sharing enough pertinent information about the circumstances will actually slow down the temptation to gossip from others. When we hide things from those around us it is more likely there will be gossip.

I remember a time when a spiritual leader had fallen into sexual sin. The leadership of the church saw his repentance and felt the spiritual leading to have this man share his struggle and seek forgiveness with those in the sphere of his influence. Due to the fact he had sinned against them in his disobedience they had him share in front of his group. When this was done, the details were not kept to just "he has had a moral lapse" but rather, he shared that he had gotten into pornography and had committed adultery against his marriage. The leadership supported his desire to seek restoration and he was then prayed for and subsequently supported into his restoration.

The facilitator of the sharing time closed with this statement, "when you leave this place, don't talk about anything you didn't hear here" I was amazed at this because it was as though there was a release to talk, to process, to work through the effects, but there was a boundary set in place. "Don't go digging for things you don't need to know. You have all the information you need to deal with this appropriately!"

The outcome of this situation was a surprising lack of gossip within the circle of people involved! People were loving, supportive and went away with the questions in their mind settled. I learned that gossip often comes out of unanswered questions. It can be for some an attempt to seek answers but without honesty and authenticity this can become a breeding ground for gossip. The "did you hear about" pursuit often ends up in a fact-finding pursuit that leads to gossip.

Our Responsibility

We have two responsibilities here. The first is to not share things out of turn or to seek answers to our questions through the guise of "please pray for them". The second is to live our lives with integrity, honesty and not seeking to falsely protect our reputation. Live in the light!

The biblical encouragement to confront sin in Matthew chapter 18 starts with the one on one confrontation of what has happened or is going on. If it becomes clear that the sin continues, scripture says to take two others with us. This would require telling someone about what is going on. This step has a spiritual responsibility to share the situation and if done with redemption in mind, is not gossip – that is unless you have the wrong motives.

The spirit of this lesson is to have a protective heart for others no matter what our relationship is. In building healthy relationships it is imperative to not speak out of turn. Some of the deepest wounding in our families and relationships come from not protecting one another's hearts.

Proverbs 16:28

"A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends."

Let's become trustworthy people and build a strong supportive community so that when we have problems, we have a community to help.

When we have engaged in gossip

I struggle with my lips being too loose. One of the hardest things I have had to do is to go to someone and confess that I have said something out of turn. There is a lot of shame associated with gossip. This tells me in my spirit how much this hurts the Father and others. Gossip is listed in the same places as sexual sin, adultery, stealing and prostitution!

1 Cor. 6:9-11

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

So often we hear of the abomination of "bigger sins" and yet, slander is listed amongst them. Gossip is slander. It is engaging in conversation that would leave someone's reputation in worse condition than before we spoke. I am speaking to myself here! I feel much conviction when I have spoken about someone negatively.

As I evaluate the times I have spoken out of turn I realize that I have often been feeling resentful, entitled or betrayed. I have been looking for validation or for someone to vent with instead of handling the situation with maturity and love. There have also been times when I have felt "powerless" to change someone else but instead of having a redemptive attitude or plan in place, it was just empty and unproductive "talk".

A common passage on the tongue was written in the book of James.

James 3:3-12

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water

and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water

This passage tells me that without Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, we will allow the tongue to control our lives and relationships.

Prayer for today: Dear Father, help me today to protect my friends, brothers and sisters. Help me to support them as we struggle through this world together, and when I learn of their weakness help me to protect them. I know my weakness is no less than or greater than theirs. When I hear of another's error or pain help me to keep it confidential unless I need more help. If I need more help, I want desperately to seek the kind of help that will redeem the situation and bring it under Your grace. I am grateful that you have spoken so strongly to me to protect others. I can forget so often.

Practical Application: Look over the past year and see if you can find times when you didn't protect someone's confidentiality and shared something out of turn. As you look at these situations, practice "honesty" and ask yourself what your motive was to break their confidentiality. If you have experienced someone telling your story against your permission, evaluate how you felt about this and write out a feeling statement relating to the incident.

Write three feeling statements regarding the subject of confidentiality:

"I feel _____

About (Joe telling Sarah about)....

Because _____"

"I feel _____

About the times I have broken someone's confidentiality

Because _____"

"I feel _____

About having to confront someone by myself

Because _____"

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