

Good morning, it's good to be with you as we continue in our series Zip It. My name is Andrew, and I get to serve as one of the Pastors here. If you're just joining us, throughout this series, we've been looking at the power that our words have. There is sort of a theme verse we've been repeating throughout our messages taken from the book of Proverbs in chapter eighteen verse twenty-one. It tells us **"The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit."** As Christians, this doesn't mean that we believe our words are magic, like some Harry Potter spell. We're all muggles after all. But there is a real power embedded in the words we use. No doubt we've all experienced the power of a word to lift us, tear us down, we've experienced words that shape us and words devastate us. Words that heal and hurt inspire and give us hope for tomorrow. The premise of this series is that the words we use – matter.

This morning, we're going to look at one of the most destructive uses our words can be put to – particularly amongst a community of Christians such as ours – and that's the issue of gossip.

As I was researching for this sermon this past week, I discovered something that really surprised me. There were a number of articles I came across published in the Atlantic, BBC, even Psychology Today, major media publications that gave a positive spin on gossip. That is, they were defending the role of gossip, and the contribution it makes in social situations. One of the articles published in Psychology today was titled: "Gossip Is A Social Skill, Not a Character Flaw." A social skill. As if gossip was something we should cultivate or hone. I know that the lifestyle that God calls us to is countercultural, but I thought surely, we are on the same page with gossip, aren't we? Apparently not. We will do anything to justify our sinfulness. In Isaiah chapter five, Isaiah the Prophet said **"Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter."** This is definitely a case of calling evil good.

The article in Psychology Today suggested the reason that we should engage in gossip is that to refrain from doing so, would leave us isolated and ostracized. Those who engage in gossip are welcomed into the inner circle of their social networks, while those who refuse...are excluded. Look, I don't want to dismiss the very real cost that this brings upon on us, in our workplaces, with our friends, even in our families. But is it a greater cost to be outside our social circle or to be outside of Gods? I don't mean to put too fine a point on it, but that's what we're talking about. Make no mistake; gossip is not some minor sin. In Proverbs chapter 6, Solomon tells us:

"There are six things the Lord hates—no, seven things he detests: 17 haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that kill the innocent, a heart that plots evil, feet that race to do wrong, a false witness who pours out lies, a person who sows discord in a family." What does it mean to **"sow discord in a family?"** It's Gossip. And do you see in this list of seven things what the person who gossips is likened to? **The hands that kill the innocent.** We'd be hard-pressed to come up with something more severe than that. This passage communicates a lesson we should take quite seriously **God hates Gossip.** God hates it.

We don't often think of God hating. We like to focus on God's more positive traits. Like his mercy and his forgiveness. In 1 John 4, John tells us that God is love. That's a pretty good trait to focus on, isn't it? Yet here, Solomon lets us know – there's something that our loving God hates, something he detests.

The reason that God hates gossip so much is that gossip is the very antithesis of who God created us to be and what he created us for. **Gossip violates our created purpose.** Remember all the way back to the creation story in Genesis chapter one, God said, ***“Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.***

When God says ***“let us”*** in verse twenty-six, he’s talking to himself. Kind of weird that he’s talking in the plural isn’t it? What we’ve learned, through the incarnation of the Son, Jesus and through the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, is that our one God exists in three persons. Our God exists and has existed from all eternity as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. So, when God says “let us.” The us is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We’ve come to refer to this theologically as the Trinity. As Orthodox Christians, we are trinitarian. You can do a word search in your bible, the word Trinity isn’t going to show up, but the concept is clearly there.

Matthew 3:16-17, is probably the best example ***“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”*** Do you see it? All three members of the Trinity are present. You’ve got Jesus in the water, God the Father speaking from heaven, remaining in heaven, while the Holy Spirit – or the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus to reside on Jesus throughout his ministry.

You’re thinking, “why is this rabbit trail important?” Because as Genesis tells us we were created to reflect God’s image, and the God whose image we bear and reflect is one who exists in the picture of perfect community. Can you ever imagine, God the Father and the Holy Spirit, gossiping about the Son? Or the Holy Spirit, saying to Jesus, you know what the Father’s been up to lately? Do you know what he’s been doing? No, of course, you can’t, it’s stupid, it’s crazy. That’s the type of community that we were created to reflect to the world.

In the gospel of John, on the night Jesus was betrayed, while still in the upper room he prayed with his disciples – one of the things that Jesus prayed for was for their and our unity. He said this ***“I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— 23 I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”*** The truth that Jesus conveyed in this prayer was that our unity actually serves as a witness to Christ and his message. That is, people will come to know and put their trust in Jesus based upon the unity, or the oneness that they see in his followers. Do you see why this is so vital? Gossip by its very nature separates, it divides. It pulls people apart. If unity witnesses to the truth of the gospel than the division that gossip creates surely obscures it.

...If it’s so terrible, why do we do it? Why do we hunger for it, yearn after it? Proverbs talk about this appeal, I love how Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase the Message states it ***“Listening to gossip is like eating cheap candy; do you want junk like that in your belly?”*** Gossip is something we know is bad for us, and it’s probably even going to make us feel kind of gross afterward, but in the moment, it tastes so good to do it.

You're at work sitting at your desk, and someone comes up to you, leans over and kind of quietly says "hey, did you hear what Pastor Andrew did?" Or maybe you get a text from a friend that says "you will never believe what I just heard..." It's so appealing, and we know, I should shut this down. I should take the high road. I shouldn't give in to this cheap thrill. We've talked about this before, about gossip – it isn't just what you say, it's what you permit to be said in your presence. That's gossip too. Passivity is not an excuse. We don't get off by saying "I didn't participate" – if your ears did, you did. In that kind of situation, we should either leave or speak up, say "hey I don't want to be a part of this" or "if this is that important, can we go talk to them?" Sometimes our role in gossip is as not-so-innocent bystanders because we haven't set up boundaries.

For some of us, our interest in gossip stems from boredom. We might not articulate it this way, but it's as if there's something about our lives that just isn't exciting enough or dramatic enough, and so we look for another outlet that stimulates and entertains us. To give us that thrill, that charge we're looking for that seems to be so absent in our own lives. Whether it's US Weekly, TMZ or even the romantic lives of our co-workers. We're glued to it. This is tragic. Boredom is tragic, because Jesus promised us a full and abundant life, we have been granted a moment to moment connection with the God who created the universe. We've been indwelt by his spirit. If we are living a life of boredom, if we feel like we're just going through the motions, somewhere along the line we missed the gospel. We've traded the good news, for checkout stand garbage.

Maybe the greatest cause of gossip, beyond lack of boundaries and boredom is our personal insecurity. I know, that probably sounds to you like something we should have gotten over when we were a teenager. None of us really want to admit that that's what it's about for us – that we're insecure. By and large, most gossip is designed to make us feel better about ourselves, and we do this by making others look worse. There's a Pastor named Scott Sauls who makes a connection between Gossip and pornography. *"Gossip and pornography aren't all that different. Think about it: Gossip is a way to exploit someone else's weakness without making a commitment to them. We gossip for cheap thrills and to feel better about ourselves entirely at someone else's expense."* Ouch...it's true, isn't it? Think about why Jesus came **"he said he didn't come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many."** Isn't gossip the complete and total opposite of that? Through it we serve ourselves, not sacrificing ourselves for others, but sacrificing others, sharing their embarrassment, faults and failures feed our own ego.

I realized I was doing this recently. I was talking to my wife, telling her a story about another Father, a guy who had a young child and he was struggling with something as a dad...something that I don't feel like is that difficult for me. And after telling her the story, it occurred to me, that deep down, the reason I was telling her this story, wasn't because I thought it was a funny story that would make my wife laugh, but because in telling it, it made me feel better about myself as a dad. I was just trying to pad my fragile ego. That's what so much of gossip is.

So what's our solution? What do we do with gossip? Our sermon series is called Zip it. Do we really need to put our zipper on our mouths to put a stop to it? I'm not sure even that would fix it if we did. We can still text and use email; we can still listen to it. Scripture tells us that the problem with gossip isn't our mouths. In Luke 6:35 Jesus tells us **"The good person out**

of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.” Gossip at its core is a heart issue. We've got a heart problem. In our workplaces, in our families, and among our friendships we *should* do everything that we can to create gossip free zones – where we make it clear that we don't to participate in gossip. But if we don't do the heart work that's necessary, there will be no lasting outward change.

The way that we go about that heart change is through repentance. By becoming aware, just as I shared the example from my life, of my hearts disposition to gossip. When we realize that we've gossiped, we confess it as sin, as something that offends God and hurts others. We ask God for forgiveness and the power to change. And then, we turn away from it, in order to live in a new way. Because something like gossip is a habit that's probably deeply ingrained in us. This is a process that we're going to repeat over and over, again and again. Just as gossip has been a habit for us, we will make our repentance from gossip our new habit. As often as you discover your habit of gossip, you bring it before God and repent.

Let me tell you why you're going to do this: there's a scene in the gospel of Luke where Jesus was dining at the house of a Pharisee named Simon. A sinful woman came into the house and anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume and washed his feet with her tears. The Pharisee was taken aback, that Jesus would let the woman do such a thing. And Jesus told him a story, to explain

“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?” ⁴³ Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.” Jesus went on explained to Simon, this woman's actions were the outpouring of her heart to which he added. ***“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”*** Don't miss this: according to Jesus, our love for him is in direct proportion to our understanding of the forgiveness we've received.

If Gossip is a heart issue, and the solution is loving God more, **(our strategy is repentance.** Establishing a regular habit of repentance is how we address gossip...it's how we address any sin as well.

I wanted to close with this story from Luke for another reason. After spending so much time focusing on how offensive of our gossip is to God, how destructive it is to community, some of you might be feeling pretty bad. Maybe even a bit beat up. And I don't want you to leave this evening weighed down by your guilt and shame. I want you to leave with the picture of Jesus' love and acceptance of this sinful woman that no one else would have anything to do with. He proclaimed in front of everyone **“your sins are forgiven.”** And he's got the same message for you.

Whatever sin you struggle with, whether it's gossip, criticism, complaining, maybe it's not a sin of the mouth, maybe it's something else, greed, lust, jealousy. We could go all day, and he will forgive it all. Those things don't define you. That is not how God sees you. In and through Christ, you are forgiven. In Christ, you get the same message proclaimed over you, that was spoken over him at his baptism. You are God's child, with you he is well pleased.

Let's thank him for that as we go to him in prayer.