

Avoid Gossip

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*There is so much good in the worst of us,
and so much bad in the best of us,
that it hardly becomes any of us
to talk about the rest of us.*

Anonymous

Thomas Edison, the famous inventor, suffered from a hearing impairment and yet he was thankful for it. It prevented him from hearing all those "wagging tongues," as he expressed it. Things haven't changed much, and if you want to get a feel of how extensive gossip is these days, make up your mind not to participate in it and your ears will quickly get a fill of it.

Some people are always anxious to hear and spread the latest gossip; the wisdom literature labels such people as lacking common sense or as being fools! *He who repeats an evil report has no sense* (Sir 19:5). The American Natives used the expression "forked tongue," while Sirach says, *Cursed be gossips and double-tongued, for they destroy the peace of many* (Sir 28:13). The "double-tongued" thought of Sirach implies that gossip is often insidious because it involves conflicting comments given to different individuals in such a way as to breed discontent or hard feelings. If you pay close attention to a gossip you can experience this contradiction and even be amazed as to how a person can be so ambiguous. Such people *are of two minds and unstable in all their ways.*

(James 1:8). Perhaps we should often ask ourselves as Job (6:30) did: *Is there insincerity on my tongue, or cannot my taste discern falsehood?* Discernment is a spiritual gift and consists of the spiritual quality or skill of being able to see or understand, especially that which is hidden or obscure. The lack of discernment is a major weakness besetting many people. Just because someone comes with comments and/or some kind of "reputation" does not mean we accept wholesale what is said.

You can usually identify the gossips by noting they are the ones who are always interested in what is going on and talking about it. Shallow familiarity breeds illusion and that is usually what they unknowingly spread. It is well known that when a comment is passed along it may barely bear similarity to its origin as it passes through time and space. Furthermore, gossip lures people into judging the shortcomings of others which can eventually be exaggerated to the extent that it is completely out of context. *The tongue is a small member and yet has great pretensions. Consider how small a fire can set a huge forest ablaze. The tongue is also a fire. It exists among our members as a world of malice, defiling the whole body and setting the entire course of our lives on fire, itself set on fire by Gehenna.* (James 3:5-6)

In responding to a *values, attitudes, priorities, and action* questionnaire relating to faith of the community, my son's confirmation class had to mark items as being evident values, or being neglected values. The tabulated results were noted to all parents and indicated that the most neglected value chosen by the class was "to tell the truth even if it hurts, respect the reputation of others, and avoid gossip." If you slip and realize what you said is not really verifiable or even wrong it can usually be corrected simply with, "Sorry I know the remarks are not justified."

A teacher who left the priesthood was giving a parish course on sensitivity and he told of an experience in the confessional. "A man confessed to me that he committed both murder and gossip. I thought for a moment and then asked him to tell me about the gossip. He asked if I



had heard him clearly and I responded that I did and again repeated my request." He went on to explain to the class that at that time he was very deeply disturbed by the incessant gossip and backbiting going on in his religious community and that the destructive nature of gossip was foremost in his mind. *Gossip is often sarcastic and sarcasm comes from a root word meaning, "tearing of the flesh." He who gloats over evil will meet with evil, and he who repeats an evil report has no sense. Never repeat gossip, and you will not be reviled.* (Sir 19:5-6)

One of the concerns that Paul had for the Church at Corinth is that he feared he might find *slander and gossip* (2 Cor 12:20) among the people. In describing the irreligious in Romans he said *they are gossips and slanderers* (Rom 1:29). Many people criticize because they believe that their actions and attitudes are superior to another's. A spiritual leader once noted that the pious, most of all, waste their time in competition with one another, a competition in which nothing but misery is found! Thomas of Kempis noted that it will not hurt you to consider yourself below everyone else, but put yourself above even one person and it could do you great harm. An Abbot said that you choose a heavier burden by justifying yourself and condemning others; the lighter burden is to keep track of your own faults. On the other hand, Sirach recognizes the fact that *a person can slip and not mean it; who has not sinned with his tongue?* (Sir 19:25).

Removing all aspects of gossip from our lifestyles can indeed be a healing experience as it will bring about dramatic improvement in relationships. Isaiah recalls for the people that part of God's reprimand is to set things right if we have caused disorder! *Come now, let us set things right, says the Lord* (Is 1:18).

In general, those who have nothing to say continue to spend the longest time doing it. (Lowell)

Ye who believe! Avoid suspicion as much(As possible): for suspicion in some case is a sin: and spy not on each other, nor speak ill of each other behind their backs. (Qur'an 49:12)

I hope the believers of God will shun completely backbiting, each one praising the other cordially and believe that backbiting is the cause of divine wrath, to such an extent that if a person backbites to the extent of one word, he may become dishonored among all people, because the most hateful characteristic of man is fault-finding. (Abdul-l-Baha, 1913, Star of the West, Vol. IV, #11, p 192)

Let your mouth be constant in blessings and no one's abuse will ever fall on you. Insult generates insult and blessing, blessing. (St. Isaac of Nineveh)

Do not return evil for evil, insult for insult. Return a blessing instead. (1 Pet 3:9)

But far more numerous was the herd of such, who think too little, and who talk too much. (Dryden)

Just as a sliver is lodged in a man's finger is gossip on the tongue of a fool. (Ecclesiastes 7:21)

(Revised from Spiritual and Physical Alternatives, Fall 1992)