

A Gallery of Gossips



by MATTHEW C. MITCHELL

The book of Proverbs is like a song from *Sesame Street*.

If you were a kid or a parent during the last forty-five years, you probably remember “The People in Your Neighborhood.” This childhood ditty was a little different each time it was sung because it always introduced a new neighbor: a police officer, a firefighter, a meter reader, a baker, or a mail carrier. The refrain went like this: “Well, they’re the people that you meet when you’re walking down the street. They’re the people that you meet each day.”¹ The point of the song was to help kids recognize the various kinds of people who live in their community, and to know how to relate to them. It made children feel safe to know what was going on in their little world by helping them to understand the different kinds of people who populated it and how those people would generally act.

Proverbs does the same thing. The book categorizes people into somewhat exaggerated personalities, so that we can recognize these people when we run into them or when we ourselves are acting like them. But in Proverbs, we don’t meet the police officer or the mail carrier. We learn about the sluggard, the wayward wife, the hot-tempered man, the fool, and at least two kinds of gossips.

Interestingly, the Bible more often than not defines a gossip as a kind of person, *not* as a kind of speech. It is something you are, not just something you do. God is actually more interested in the people who are doing the speaking than in their words, because their words represent what is going on inside. Jesus helped us to understand this when

Matt Mitchell (MDiv, DMin) is the pastor of Lanse Evangelical Free Church in Lanse, Pennsylvania, and author of Resisting Gossip: Winning the War of the Wagging Tongue.

The content of this article was originally published in the book *Resisting Gossip: Winning the War of the Wagging Tongue* (Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 2013), 45-60. Used with permission. Content has been edited and adapted.

¹ Joe Raposo and Jeffrey Moss, *The Sesame Street Song Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 43–45.

he said, “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt 12:34). This truth is central to the discussion of gossip.

What *is* going on inside? What is overflowing from the heart of a gossip? Why do we do it? As it turns out, this is a sin of great variety and complexity. To reflect that, I will present a gallery of five types of gossips.

A Gallery of Gossips

Gossips come in different shapes and sizes. Just as the *Sesame Street* song characterizes certain people, I’d like to consider five different kinds of gossiping people that you and I might meet (or might *be!*) in everyday life. These are certainly not the only types of gossips that exist in this world. These are just five types that are common—and easily recognizable.

As we consider each type of gossip, questions like these help us discern the heart motivations of the gossip:

- What does this gossip want?
- What is ruling this person’s heart?
- What inner poison is overflowing into outwardly poisonous talk about other people?

With these questions in mind, I will hone in on at least one ordinary (but ungodly) motivation that could be driving each type of gossip. Keep in mind that this is not the only motivation that could be at work, and that multiple motivations could be at work simultaneously. Our hearts are very creative in mixing up new poisons!

I will then highlight a biblical remedy, an antidote, for each type of gossip. Very great and precious promises speak specifically to each of these hijacked hearts. When believed and taken to heart, these promises renew our minds, de-conform us from the world, and transform our words and lives.

Gossip 1: The Spy

“Meagan” grew up in a family in which nothing that anyone said was secret or sacred. Her family was full of “spies.” She says,

You could count on everything being passed on to aunts and grandmas, because that is just how it was. It was unnerving to have things spread all through the family. I learned to keep most things private, but then I got the cold shoulder because I was “shutting people out.” Meaning, I didn’t tell them all the little details of my life as much anymore. I learned to put my guard up and preface most personal conversations with, “This is private—for you only.” Well, sometimes even that wasn’t enough! Some people actually thought that “for you only” included three aunts and their mother whom they normally talked to!

Proverbs says, “A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret” (11:13). The Hebrew word translated as “gossip” is *rakil*, which means “a peddler (of secrets), a huckster/hawker, a deceiver, or a spy.”² The English Standard Version uses the phrase “whoever goes about slandering” to translate *rakil*. We might use the word *informer*.

Do you have someone like this in your life? Are *you* an informer? One of my friends calls this “the eager-eared, probing side of gossip. Sometimes, it’s so stealthy I don’t catch it right away. Some people are so good at probing that they simply mention a word or two and then just analyze my expression or the stuttering.” Spies know how to wheedle a story out of us.

The spy is somebody who loves to get the dirt on someone and then *informs* others for personal advantage. At first spies may seem trustworthy, but they really are not. Don’t talk to a spy, or *your* secrets may be the next ones that get spilled.

So what is the motivation of a spy?

Motivation? Spies are often motivated by a hunger for *power*. After all, information is power. A spy wants to use power to stir up trouble, and such a person will use your secrets and mine to do that. Or spies might gossip because it offers the opportunity to tear others down while building themselves up. Knowing something that shouldn’t be known or being the first to know something may enhance a spy’s *reputation*.

Meagan again writes, “I think for some people gossip is like a thrill or a high from being the first one to tell someone else about things. It’s like a competition to see who knows the lowdown on someone else first. It makes them feel better about themselves because they ‘knew’ before you did.”

Some spies know that they can get something they perceive as better than what they already have by trading one secret for another. We see this often with teenage girls. They trade gossip about each other to maintain power over each other in their cliques. For the spy, gossip provides the power to include and exclude.

I’m not immune to this temptation. I like to be known as someone who knows things. I enjoy the feeling and status of being “on the inside.” At pastors’ gatherings I find myself sharing juicy tidbits about our family of churches, our seminary, or some famous Christian I have met—just so that I can be perceived as a “someone.” Yuck. I hate to admit this. In this area, I need to change.

Antidote: Jesus’ Incomparably Great Power. If you gossip for the power it gives you, then you are using the wrong kind of power for the wrong purpose. You are

² Robert H. O’Connell in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1114-15. Scholars connect the Hebrew word *rakil* (gossip) with the similar word *ragal*, “to go about” or “to make traveled, explored, spied out, exposed, defamed.” See also *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 920 and 940.

using power in the evil way that Satan does. But power itself is not evil. Jesus offers those who believe “*his incomparably great power*” (Eph 1:19). It is the same gospel power that brought him back to life after he was crucified. It is eternal and available to us through the Holy Spirit, and it is better than anything that gossip promises.

We are called to use “the power that is at work within us” (Eph 3:20) to bring unity and peace to the church. Among the many ways to do this is to “not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (4:29).

In short, we are to use Jesus’ power and we are to use it *his* way, to do good. A gossip peddles secrets for personal benefit. But Jesus is the “trustworthy man” of Proverbs 11:13. He is someone to whom you could entrust your deepest, most shameful secrets, and know they are as safe as can be. And through his Spirit, we can learn to be trustworthy, too.

Jesus is the “trustworthy man” of Proverbs
11:13. He is someone to whom you could en-
trust your deepest, most shameful secrets, and
know they are as safe as can be.

Gossip 2: The Grumbler

The other Hebrew word that is commonly translated as “gossip” in the Proverbs is *nirgan*. For example, “A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip [*nirgan*] separates close friends” (Prov 16:28). The English Standard Version consistently translates *nirgan* as “whisperer.” The Hebrew dictionaries say that a *nirgan* is one who is “murmuring about another person behind their back rather than openly complaining about their behavior.”³

The root word for *nirgan* is the same word used to describe the people of Israel when they grumbled in their tents (see Ps 106:24–25). Did the Israelites go out and talk directly with the Lord about their concerns? No, they hid in their tents and murmured about him in secret. (Of course, he heard them; you can’t really talk behind the Lord’s back. But you get the idea.)

The grumbler complains. The grumbler criticizes. When he is upset about something—and misery *loves* company—he will talk about others behind their backs. This

³ Gary V. Smith in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 3:1053.

kind of gossip can be found in nearly every workplace—and in every family, every city, and every school. We love to grumble and complain about authority figures, parents, teachers, and politicians. We often euphemistically call this “venting.” Yet there is no constructive purpose in this kind of talk, and no love in the speaker’s heart. Just grumbling.

Motivation? For grumblers *jealousy* is often a key factor in their motivation. If you are jealous, you will be tempted to grumble behind the back of someone who has something you want: a job, a girlfriend, a car, happiness, or whatever.

“Jason,” a friend of mine from church, wrote me a note saying, “About twelve years ago I was discouraged because I saw people in my organization who made more money than I did and who I believed did not work as hard or have as hard of a job as I did. Because I felt this way, I would voice my opinion to many people at work.”

Can you guess what happened? Two of the people whom Jason was complaining about stopped interacting with him altogether. They wouldn’t even say hello to him in the hallway. It took some humbling apologies from Jason and a good deal of time before the relationships were restored. As we just saw, “A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip [a grumbling *nirgan*] separates close friends” (Prov 16:28).

Antidote: Be Content in Any and Every Situation. The gospel remedy for grumbling is contentment and thanksgiving. It is not wrong to want a good thing, but it is terribly enslaving to want something too much. As Christians, we need to cultivate a heart of contentment with what we have, and of thanksgiving for what we have been given. Grumbling gossip may feel good, even justified and righteous. But it is *not* good. Contentment feels even better.

The apostle Paul knew something about contentment. He said, “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (Phil 4:12). How can we be content? What is the “secret”? He tells us in the next verse: “I can do everything through [Christ] who gives me strength” (4:13). Christ can give you the strength to be content, which looks like counting your blessings and knowing that if you have Jesus Christ, you have everything.

That will undo grumbling!

Gossip 3: The Backstabber

Like the grumbler, the backstabber is full of complaint, but his heart is angrier, more hateful. Backstabbing gossip overflows from a malicious heart bent on revenge and retaliation. The backstabber actually desires the target of his gossip to experience pain.

The backstabber usually begins by spreading lies, starting a “smear campaign.” Or a backstabber will hurt someone by spreading a shameful truth. Love, on the

other hand, covers the warts in another's reputation. Backstabbers not only uncover the warts, they then go and tell everybody else about the warts.

Absalom was a backstabber. King David's son sat at the gates of Jerusalem and complained about his dad's leadership (see 2 Sam 15). He told visitors pursuing lawsuits that King David had not appointed enough judges, and that justice was not being done. Absalom did not say this to David, just to the people. He wanted to steal the kingdom from his father, and he almost succeeded.

King David experienced a lot of backstabbing. Remember how he was sick in Psalm 41 and his enemies gossiped about him? He said, "My enemies say of me *in malice*, 'When will he die and his name perish?' . . . All my enemies whisper together against me; they imagine the worst for me, saying, 'A vile disease has beset him; he will never get up from the place where he lies'" (41:5, 7–8). This is hate.

We love to grumble and complain about authority figures, parents, teachers, and politicians. We often euphemistically call this "venting." Yet there is no constructive purpose in this kind of talk, and no love in the speaker's heart.

Here is betrayal: "Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me" (41:9). Was David talking about Absalom here? We do not know. But we do know that the Lord Jesus quoted Psalm 41:9 at the Last Supper to refer to Judas Iscariot. Our Lord, too, knows what it is like to be betrayed.

Malicious backstabbing gossip is the worst kind because it is the most like Satan's behavior. Hateful gossip tears apart churches. Paul fought it at Corinth (see 2 Cor 12:20). John dealt with it in his churches (see 3 John 10). Malicious gossip is a cancer. It must be stopped!

Motivation? Motives are often murky "deep waters" and difficult to discern, yet it is possible to "draw them out" and understand, to some degree, why we do what we do (Prov 20:5).

For many backstabbers, the motivation is *revenge*. The backstabber has been foiled, perhaps hurt or damaged, and is now angry. In his anger, he wants someone to pay for what has caused his pain. Gossip becomes a delicious means of payback.

Backstabbers, however, must beware. Gossip does not satisfy. It does not always work. It often backfires. Wisdom in Proverbs says, "If a man digs a pit, he will fall

into it; if a man rolls a stone, it will roll back on him. A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin” (26:27–28).

Antidote: *Waiting and Trusting in God’s Justice.* And what does the gospel say to backstabbers? Certainly more than just “Don’t do it! Cut it out! Don’t be hateful!” As right as these rebukes might be, they don’t go deep into the heart. The gospel says to the backstabber, “Justice will be done. Leave it in the proper hands.”

Yes, we should pursue loving confrontation when someone has hurt us. Yes, we should take offenses to the proper authorities. But no, we are not to take revenge. God will see that justice is done. The Bible says,

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:19–21)

Only a Christian can overcome evil with good. We know that every wrong will be repaid either at the cross or in the eternal judgment. Knowing this changes our hearts. It makes it possible for us to not take revenge.

Gossip 4: The Chameleon

A chameleon is a person who goes along with other gossips to try to fit into the crowd. A commenter on my blog said, “I think that sometimes people gossip so they can be a part of the conversation. If they know something ‘interesting’ about another person, they might get people to listen to them.” In other words, we don’t want to be left out, and we’re willing to risk another’s reputation in order to fit in.

Motivation? *Fear of man* is the main motivation for a chameleon’s gossip. A chameleon is afraid of what her peers will think, say, or do if she does not join in on gossiping about a person. She is especially afraid of being excluded.

We can easily scoff at others when they are afraid in this way, but when we are the ones in a similar situation, we find that it is very difficult to resist the pressure. Proverbs says, “Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe” (29:25).

Antidote: *Fear of the Lord.* The key for the chameleon is to trust in the Lord and, even more, to fear him. The Lord Jesus said,

I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. (Luke 12:4–5)

The answer to the fear of man is the fear of God.

But it's not a slavish fear. Jesus goes on to say, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (12:6–7). The fear of God brings peace and comfort.

Imagine a chameleon-type person hanging around with the same coworkers every day at lunch. The group usually spends this time gossiping about their supervisor. The chameleon participates in dishing out gossip because she is afraid of being excluded by her coworkers. Let's imagine, however, that her mind becomes more and more full of God's character. His holiness. His omnipotence. His faithfulness. His awesomeness. She reminds herself that her hairs are all numbered and that God truly cares for her. If God looms in her mind and heart like that, her coworkers' opinions and snarky comments will shrink in importance, and the chameleon will begin to stand out as a follower of Christ.

Gossip 5: The Busybody

The busybody is a person who is idle, not engaged in purposeful business and wants to be entertained. He gossips for titillation and for the purpose of living vicariously through the stories of others. A busybody enjoys meddling in other people's business.

It is easy to fall into this kind of behavior. In 1 Timothy, Paul explains what to do about widows. The church in Ephesus had a list of widows whom they supported. A widow had to meet certain qualifications to be put on this list. Most of the qualifications were about godliness, but a woman also had to be older, because younger widows would be prone to particular temptations if they were put on a list like this when they were too young. Paul told Timothy, "They get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to" (1 Tim 5:13).

Let's be clear: this behavior is *not* just a female thing! Women get blamed for being gossips more than men do because they are generally more relational and more interested in the things that make up stereotypical gossip. Gossip, though, is a gender-equal sin. The busybodies Paul confronted in Thessalonica included a number of unemployed men (see 2 Thess 3:6–14). If we are not busy with productive, purposeful, godly activity, any of us can easily be sucked into being a gossipy busybody.

Being a busybody gets us into trouble, especially when we get involved in people's conflicts. Proverbs says, "Like one who seizes a dog by the ears is a passerby who meddles in a quarrel not his own" (26:17). I wouldn't want to try grabbing the ears of the big barking dogs in my neighborhood, so why would I insert myself

and my unsolicited opinions into someone else's problem? Is it because I am lacking something good to do?

Motivation? Gossip entertains us when we are bored, and *escape from boredom* motivates gossips who love to be entertained. Our culture encourages it with gossip columns, gossip shows on television, and gossip blogs with the latest story about whichever celebrity is popular this moment. Gossip is big business in show business. The entertainment industry has tapped into the desire of the masses to escape from boredom. We talk about other people to have something to do.

Can you relate? I know that I can certainly be a busybody when I'm bored. I hate to admit it, but I was hooked on soap operas when I was a teenager. I had to watch *General Hospital* before I went out on my after-school paper route. What is that except a malignant desire to be entertained by bad stories?

We rationalize it. "It is not *malicious* gossip," we say. And that is true. But it isn't *love* either, is it? Remember that the Lord Jesus said we would have to give an account "for every *careless* word" (Matt 12:36), not just the malicious ones.

I have a new slogan that I have been preaching to myself recently: *The foolish people of the world do not exist for my entertainment.*

That is a hard one to accept. We love to talk about the foolish, shameful things that people do. There are many places on the Internet that are devoted to laughing at the folly of others. Isn't that the point of most of the "reality" shows on television?

Not only does it help us escape from boredom, but it also entangles another sinful motivation: we want to *feel good about ourselves*, and it's easy to do that if we focus on how stupid other people are. But that isn't how God treats people, is it? He doesn't use us for his own selfish advantages. Instead, he serves selfish people at his own expense. God loves people and treats them with much more mercy than they deserve. God loves me, and I have been a fool. But God, in love, sent his own Son to die for fools in order to make us wise.

Antidote: *Intentional Acts of Love.* The "gospel escape" from boredom is active love, active service, and active mercy for other people—including those who do not deserve it. Paul tells the young widows to marry and to have children (see 1 Tim 5:14). Marriage and motherhood are not an antidote to gossip, but they are an antidote to idleness! Paul told the male busybodies in the church in Thessalonica to get a job, and if they were not willing to do so, they were not to eat. And the rest of the church was to warn them and keep away from them (see 2 Thess 3:10–15 and 1 Thess 5:14).

If we reach out to others in love, we will never be bored. Tired? Yes. Bored? No.

The People That You Meet

So these are some of the people in our neighborhood: the spy, the grumbler, the backstabber, the chameleon, and the busybody. Recognize them? We have run into all of

them at one time or another—and have been most of them, too! These people might act differently from one another, but at heart, they are all the same. Each one is moved by a heart that loves to pass on a bad story. Each one has gotten everything backwards. Each one uses words to selfishly serve self rather than to love God and love other people.

But our gracious God speaks to each of these gossips in this gallery with his life-changing gospel truth, so that increasingly the overflow of our hearts is no longer bad news from a bad heart, but good news from a transformed heart.

* * *

Questions for Group Discussion

1. The Bible says that gossip is more about people than about their words. How is this so? Why is that important for us to understand?
2. Which of the five kinds of gossips are you most prone to be? Which of them have you encountered recently “in your neighborhood”? (Remember: do not fall into gossiping about others while discussing how to resist gossip!)
3. Read Proverbs 20:5. Pick two or three of the following kinds of gossips and discuss the motivations of each one at the heart level. What other motivations would you add?
 - a. The spy: a hunger for power
 - b. The grumbler: jealousy
 - c. The backstabber: a desire for revenge
 - d. The chameleon: the fear of man
 - e. The busybody: escape from boredom
4. Take the same list and discuss the biblical truths listed below that speak to each hijacked heart. What other gospel truths would you add?
 - a. The spy: Ephesians 1:18–21
 - b. The grumbler: Philippians 4:12–13
 - c. The backstabber: Romans 12:19–21
 - d. The chameleon: Proverbs 29:25; Luke 12:4–7
 - e. The busybody: 2 Thessalonians 3:10–15
5. Change is not automatic. Simply reading a Bible verse does not fix our hearts. What can we do to internalize the truths we’ve just learned so that God can use them to transform us? What are you going to do about that this week?