

Matthew C. Mitchell

Foreword by Edward T. Welch

"Gossip is a spark that starts countless relational fires every day."

— Ken Sande, President, Relational Wisdom 360

Resisting Gossip

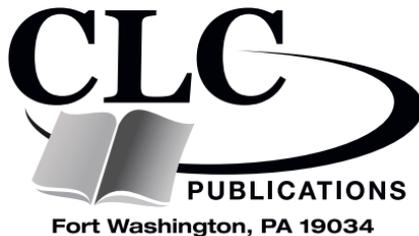


Winning the War of the Wagging Tongue

Resisting Gossip

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Matthew C. Mitchell



In Praise of *Resisting Gossip*

“With clarity and the precision of a spiritual physician, Matt cuts deep into the cancerous disease that produces words that hurt and defame. Not only will this book help you keep your tongue in check, but it will also be a helpful navigational tool in guiding your speech toward the joyful discipline of using words to help and heal others to the glory of God! Put the principles of this book into practice, and you, your family, friends and colleagues will all be better off!”

—**Dr. Joseph M. Stowell**,
president of Cornerstone University, Grand Rapids, Michigan

“Gossip is a spark that starts countless relational fires every day. Matt provides practical, biblical guidance on how believers can reduce this insidious problem by bringing their tongues under the lordship of Christ.”

—**Ken Sande**,
president of Relational Wisdom 360, Billings, Montana

“*You* have to read this book! I am just kidding. *We all* have to read this book. Isn't it amazing that most of us have never read a clear, pastoral and practical book on what Scripture says about gossip? Well, here it is. Matt will guide you through this topic in such a way that you will be convicted. I certainly was. But he will do more than that. He will give you ideas about how you can spread good news about others so that the church will be more united and God will be honored.”

—**Edward T. Welch**,
counselor and faculty member at the
Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF), Glenside, Pennsylvania;
author of *Shame Interrupted, When People Are Big and God Is Small*,
Depression: A Stubborn Darkness and *Running Scared: Fear, Worry, and the God of Rest*

“Matthew Mitchell's book on resisting gossip helped me greatly, and the timing of it was perfect. I want to thank him for his wise and godly counsel straight from our Father's heart. I can hear the author's voice, and it doesn't beat me up. It challenges and exhorts but shows me that we are in this together for much good.”

—**Jani Ortlund**,
author of *Fearlessly Feminine* and *His Loving Law, Our Lasting Legacy*;
speaker with Renewal Ministries, Nashville, Tennessee

“This book is excellent. Sweet and winsome in its presentation. Humble, yet biblically reasoned, ‘an apple of gold in settings of silver.’ I pray that it will be used greatly in local churches. It is good stuff and MUCH needed.”

—**Chris Brauns**,
author of *Unpacking Forgiveness* and *When the Word Leads Your Pastoral Search*;
pastor of The Congregational Christian Church, Stillman Valley, Iowa

“In *Resisting Gossip* experienced pastor Matt Mitchell skillfully tackles one of the most overlooked and destructive sins within the church. Dr. Mitchell’s wise, biblical approach carefully defines gossip (no one excluded here!) and gets to the heart of both the causes and cures of this problem. Full of scriptural insight, practical examples and thoughtful questions for group discussion, this one-of-a-kind book aims to do nothing less than transform the way we speak to and about one another. Whether you are a perpetrator of gossip or a victim of gossip (invariably both!), you will surely find tangible help and Christ-centered hope in its pages.”

—**Michael R. Emlet,**

M.Div., M.D., counselor and faculty member at the
Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF), Glenside, Pennsylvania;
author of *CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet*

“Jesus never gossiped. The One who loves me and gave Himself for me wants me to do battle in my heart, and one of the intense battlefronts is gossip. With this book Mitchell aims to help me win that war with gospel power. Along the way he strategizes about the “principle of overflow,” how to “pray and weigh,” and five types of gossip that show me that though I may not think I have a gossipy heart in one sense, I might in another sense. This book aims at helping the reader repay evil with good.”

—**Sam Crabtree,**

executive pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota;
author of *Practicing Affirmation: God-Centered Praise of Those Who Are Not God*

“Does the gospel have anything to say about gossip? Matt Mitchell’s engaging writing demonstrates that every Christian needs to understand the hope-giving promises of the gospel for addressing the heart issues behind gossip. Building upon a relevant biblical definition of gossip, *Resisting Gossip* empowers believers to apply the gospel to uproot the weeds of gossip. Mitchell’s principles for cultivating a gossip-resistant church are worth the price of the book.”

—**Bob Kellemen,**

Ph.D., executive director of the Biblical Counseling Coalition, Lafayette, Indiana;
author of *Equipping Counselors for Your Church*

“Matt Mitchell did not casually put this book together but asked lots of questions, explored lots of complicated situations and aimed for biblical wisdom that truly applies to all. The book is great for the home groups at my church to consider walking through together.”

—**Diane McDougall,**

editorial director at Journey Group, Charlottesville, Virginia;
editor of EFCA Today

“Matt Mitchell tackles one of the most common, destructive but least talked about sins. While gossip destroys, Matt suggests alternatives to gossip that build trust and relationship and that are practical and helpful. Our words, good and bad, are powerful, and this book can be a helpful tool in prompting God’s people to consider their words, attitudes and practices. I highly recommend it.”

—**T.J. Addington**,
 executive director of ReachGlobal, Minneapolis, Minnesota;
 author of *Leading from the Sandbox*, *High-Impact Church Boards*,
Live Like You Mean It and *When Life Comes Undone*

“This book provides a great balance between exposing and articulating the heart problem of gossip and revealing and articulating the gospel’s answer to that problem. The book applies several well-known passages of Scripture to the topic of gossip that I had not previously seen applied in this manner. Many other lesser-known scriptures came alive to me by their application to gossip. I already am recommending this book—and quoting it.”

—**Dan Ledford**,
 pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in America, Butler, Pennsylvania

“Matthew Mitchell’s book is personal and loving instead of simply academic and informational. I appreciated his open, honest self-disclosure. I really liked the simple definitions, especially of gossip and of judging. Matt makes it clear that our heart is the core issue in the problem of gossip as well as the place in which change happens through confession, repentance, grace and the work of the Spirit. This book will be extremely helpful in clarifying, diagnosing and healing the sin of gossip in individuals and in churches. It is simple, deep and easy reading all at the same time.”

—**Bruce Weatherly**,
 director of Safe Harbor Christian Counseling of Mid-Pennsylvania

“The foundational strength of *Resisting Gossip* isn’t found in just a single chapter. It runs through the whole book. That strength is the good news, the gospel. Not the three-point outline that gets a person ‘saved’ but the impact of the gospel that redeems, justifies, propitiates and sanctifies. Too often authors who take on topical issues such as gossip tip their hat to the gospel, assume it as an underlying principle or ignore it altogether. Not so in this material. The gospel is front and center and applied throughout all the suggestive material in how to deal with resisting gossip.”

—**Dennis W. Wadsworth, Jr.**,
 pastor at Hope Evangelical Free Church, Fertile, Minnesota

“This book presents real-life examples that I can identify with. They are engaging because, let’s be honest, we love to hear a good story. The reader is drawn in by the example and then confronted with the spiritual ramifications of gossip because of the book’s biblical content and teaching on the subject of gossip. The supporting references and practical advice do not leave much room for misunderstanding. On the contrary, they bring one to the point at which the reader’s final decision has to be a matter of the heart, before God and man.”

—**Jaroslav Elijas,**

director at Christian Evangelistic Center, Serbia;
assistant pastor at Glozan Baptist Church, Serbia

“Dr. Mitchell not only walks alongside us as a brother in Christ to help us understand the subject of gossip, but he also gives a proactive, biblical and applicable plan of how to deal with it through the changing of our own hearts. This book is an excellent resource within our School of Discipleship.”

—**Matt Cox,**

executive director of Miracle Mountain Ranch Missions Inc., Spring Creek, PA;
homeschool father of five

“This book on gossip meets a huge need. It is a response to a problem within the church as well as in individual lives. I would recommend it to all Christians and more specifically to pastors. There is precious little on this topic.”

—**Tim McIntosh,**

author of *Leadership Peruvian Style*;
director of general studies at the Evangelical Seminary of Lima, Peru

“I thoroughly enjoyed and was challenged by Matt’s biblical approach to gossip. As a district superintendent with the EFCA, I too often experience the fruit of gossip in churches. I believe that Matt’s work has great opportunities for individuals as well as groups to learn to biblically deal with gossip. I especially like the questions at the end of each chapter and believe they make the material very applicable for small groups. I believe this subject must be addressed in the church today.”

—**Jeff Powell,**

Allegheny district superintendent of the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA),
Minneapolis, Minnesota

“Gossip is such a pervasive and insidious problem that it’s amazing there are so few resources to help churches deal with its destructive power. Matt’s book is an incredibly useful tool that I expect to have wide impact in dealing with the problem of gossip. It is thoroughly biblical, loaded with wisdom and immensely practical. Just as importantly, it is written in an engaging and accessible style. I can’t recommend it more highly.”

—**Winston T. Smith,**

counselor and faculty member at the
Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation (CCEF), Glenside, Pennsylvania;
author of *Marriage Matters: Extraordinary Change Through Ordinary Moments*

Resisting Gossip

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To my Heather Joy:
Sweetheart, you don't need this book.
"She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue."
Proverbs 31:26

In loving memory of Linda Jane Lundeen
February 28, 1951–December 10, 2010

Nana, we miss your stories.

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Foreword

I came to this book, not because I thought I had a huge problem with gossip—who does?—but because I love Matt. With that in mind, I'll first introduce Matt then get to the book itself.

The Person

I want Matt to be my pastor. I want to move to rural Pennsylvania, maybe move in with his family, learn from his preaching, and watch him love people wisely and well. You will want that, too. He is one of those rare people who can say the hardest thing to you and you will find it so helpful that you'll ask for more.

He knows how to say the right thing and he knows how to say it well. Check out his blog for more evidence. He is so clear in what he says and writes. So personal. So accessible. You will see that clarity right from the beginning when you read his definition of gossip: “sinful gossip is bearing bad news behind someone’s back out of a bad heart.” That is memorable and gets to the point. “Stinky words”, far from being just a clever phrase, will also stick in your mind as he shows you how it is a reasonable translation of a biblical word used for gossip.

He loves his family. What a great dedication at the front of this book. It brings tears to my eyes and shows his tenderness.

He is the anti-gossip. You will read a number of stories in

what is ahead, and like nearly every person in them. Matt bears good news about congregants and friends.

He knows Scripture very well and it is part of him. Scripture is deep and sophisticated—yet is understandable to children; it says hard things, but it is truly good news and it should sound that way; it is fresh and lively; it should never seem canned, trite, hackneyed or boring. You will get all this from Matt. He embodies these attributes, and he writes this way, too.

Think of him as a friend. A friend is a very high calling. A friend is open with his or her own life, walks *with* us rather than far out in front, never talks down, has our best interests at heart, and, somehow, we let down our guard in a friend's presence. Think of him as a *trusted* friend.

The Book

Regarding the book, everyone should read at least one book about resisting gossip; every pastor should have this topic in the preaching rotation; and every small group should talk about it each year. Scripture identifies it as a pernicious problem (e.g., Prov. 26:22) and it deserves our careful attention.

The choices of reading material, surprisingly, are few. Perhaps we have assumed that gossip is one of those features of human nature that cannot change and so we celebrate it rather than fight against it. Matt suggests why this is: gossip is like “choice morsels.” For me, that would mean M & M's. You might think you can resist them when they are out of sight, but they beckon and tantalize once in view. That insight alone makes the book worthwhile.

I can remember times when gossip was a choice morsel for me. I thought I had grown in these things. I don't speak gossip that often, but I can listen to it when it is available, and I am

still attracted to the covers of the tabloids and *People* magazine.

So yes, be prepared for conviction. Better yet, look forward to it. Conviction is sweet when the one who brings it has our best interests in mind, and it is certainly sweet when our God is quick to forgive and speaks good words to us and about us.

The wonderfully practical steps in *Resisting Gossip* give clear direction to that conviction. They show us a way out of gossip that is wise, not formulaic, always fixing our minds on Jesus, and they replace gossip with a rich vision for how to be a bearer of good news about people who are commendable and even about those who are rascals.

People who are guilty of gossip are also hurt by it. How pastoral and protective of Matt to include a significant section of this book to gossip's destruction. It is so painful for the maligned. For them, Matt maps out a path that is hard, and can only be done in prayerful dependence on Jesus, but that path is so good. He got me excited to love people who acted as my enemies.

If people have gossiped about you, make sure that your basic stance is *for them*. This doesn't mean that you must trust them in the same way you did before they gossiped about you. It does mean you should want what is best for them, even at a personal cost. That is how Jesus loved us, isn't it? While we were still His enemies, Christ died for us (see Rom. 5:8).

His last chapter gives recommendations for church leaders. They are in a complicated predicament when it comes to gossip. They know it can bring down a church, as well as their own ministry; every pastor has been victimized by gossip. But a pastor cannot easily say, "Stop gossiping about your leaders—that is, me— and honor me as Scripture says." Matt brings essential

guidance on these matters.

If you are not a pastor, be sure to either give this book to yours when you are done or, buy an extra copy.

Thank you, Matt. You have pastored us well with your diligent labors.

Edward T. Welch
CCEF

Introduction

Gossip is everywhere.

Need proof? Check your Facebook. Flip on the television. Scan the magazine rack at the checkout counter. Listen closely to the conversations around you at work, at school, or in the neighborhood. How often do you hear or say, “I shouldn’t tell you this, but . . .” or, “It’s none of my business, but . . .” or, “Have you heard the latest about . . .?” Ears perk up. Eyebrows rise. Bodies lean in. Voices lower. We’re hooked.

Gossip is something that we all experience. No one is safe from its tantalizing lure. No one is safe from its poisonous effects.

And yet, there is a surprising and sad lack of teaching on the subject for Christians. When was the last time you heard a sermon on the sin of gossip? The Bible is bursting with wisdom on the subject, and yet this teaching has hardly been noticed. This book is an attempt to arm followers of Christ with the biblical weapons we need to resist gossip in all its forms.

The Allure of Gossip

Gossip *is* hard to resist.

Why? For one, it is hard to define. There is a lot of confusion about what gossip is (and is not). When is it okay to talk about others, and when is it wrong? In chapter 1 I offer a biblically based definition: *the sin of gossip is bearing bad news behind someone’s back out of a bad heart*. I explain this definition in great

detail and show you where I get it from the Bible.

Chapter 2 explains why we gossip. The key to true change is understanding the last phrase in my definition, “out of a bad heart.” We gossip because our sinful hearts are attracted to bad stories like moths to a flame.

Let me share with you a bit of my personal struggle with gossip. I’m an information junkie. I want to be in the know and to have a finger on the pulse of what’s happening now. Can you relate? Of course, technology just feeds my addiction. With blog posts, status updates and e-mails, I crave the feeling of control that information gives me.

But that sense of control is just an illusion. I don’t control anything. Instead, my addiction to information often controls me. But there’s good news! Jesus Christ is changing my heart, and there are great and precious promises in His Word that the Lord is using to wean me off my information addiction and onto a love for and trust in Him.

A thirst for information may not be your personal temptation. In chapter 3 of this book, I sketch out five different kinds of gossiping people who are motivated by five different heart desires. If you do not find yourself somewhere among them, I’ll be surprised.

Even when we know what gossip is and where it comes from, it is still hard to resist. It is hard to see any alternatives. What do you do *instead* of gossiping? Chapters 4, 5 and 6 provide biblical strategies for holding out against gossip and replacing it with loving thoughts, words and actions.

The Pain of Gossip

It is likely you initially picked up this book not because you have been tempted by gossip but because you’ve been hurt by it.

People have been gossiping about *you*, and it aches like a knife wound (see Prov. 12:18). Your reputation has been dragged through the mud, and you're not sure anymore who your true friends are. Chapters 7 and 8 are written for you. They explain what the Bible says we are supposed to do when we have become the target of sinful gossip.

I've been there too. As a pastor, there have been times when I've been the subject of gossip in our little community. In fact, I'll share with you a few stories in later chapters (although names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect reputations—I do not want to gossip in a book about resisting gossip!). One time, when the gossip was at its worst, I thought seriously about quitting the pastorate altogether. But I'm glad I didn't. God has been faithful to me, and He will be to you, as well.

The Wickedness of Gossip

Sometimes gossip does not seem like such a big deal. The English word “gossip” only appears a handful of times in the whole Bible. But every time it shows up, it spells trouble. The apostle Paul denounces those who gossip alongside murderers and God-haters in a list of “every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity” (Rom. 1:29), saying that those who do these things deserve death (see 1:28–32). The apostle James says that although our tongues are small, they are capable of great evil. He says that gossiping is playing with fire (see James 3:2–6). Though gossip is everywhere and so alluring, it must be resisted—not just because it hurts people but because it offends a holy God.

Unfortunately, we have all been guilty of offending God by gossiping at some point, and we can't just take our words back. Where do we go when we've already given in? In chapter 9, we

learn what the Bible says about true repentance and the hope we have in the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

* * *

If you are a pastor or church leader who wants to strengthen your local fellowship against the dangers of gossip, you might want to have study groups read this book together. Group discussion questions at the end of each chapter focus on applying key scriptures. There is also a bonus chapter at the end of the book containing biblical principles for your leadership team to consider as you cultivate a gossip-resistant church.

I'm thankful for my church family, Lanse Evangelical Free Church, for making it so easy for me to write this book. When one guy heard that I was writing on gossip, he asked me, "Oh, do you have *that* problem in your church?" I was able to truthfully say, "No. We don't have a gossipy church." That makes it much easier for me to teach on this subject. We're not perfect, but we are committed to spiritual unity and have learned a few things along the way.

The Resistibility of Gossip through Christ

There *is* hope. You and I are not left on our own to deal with the allure, pain and wickedness of gossip. God's "divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Pet. 1:3). The gospel of Jesus Christ defeats gossip. Turn the page, and we'll begin to see how.

PART 1

RECOGNIZING GOSSIP

*The words of a gossip are like choice morsels;
they go down to a man's inmost parts.*

Proverbs 18:8, 26:22

1

What, Exactly, Is Gossip?

The first rule of war is to know your enemy.

Before we can resist gossip, we must recognize it. That's not as easy to do as it may sound. It is not always easy to recognize the moment when our "small talk" becomes sinful talk. In fact, if you're like me, then you regularly ask yourself during conversations, "Should I be saying this?" or, "Should I be listening to this?"

You may even find yourself questioning what makes gossip wrong. Is it *when* it is said? *Who* says it? To *whom* it is told? We often give ourselves small passes. Gossip is okay if we're just chatting with our wife or sister, right? Or if we're just "venting" to our mom or pastor, right? What is gossip, anyway? Is it always a lie? Is it always an unsubstantiated rumor? Is gossip always malicious? The line becomes increasingly fuzzy as confusion sets in about the definition of gossip. Deciding what is or isn't gossip is certainly a challenge.

The hardest part about recognizing gossip is that it does not come with a warning label. Wouldn't it be great if a sign like this would flash above the heads of the people with whom we're talking?

WARNING!

The contents of the next conversation contain sinful gossip. Use extreme caution.

Then again, I'm not sure I would like that. Too often it might show up over *my* head!

Nevertheless, this is not what happens, is it? No, normally, there we are, just talking with someone, and seemingly out of nowhere this juicy piece of news about someone else presents itself and asks us to swallow it. The Bible says, "The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts" (Prov. 18:8, 26:22). This proverb is so important that the Lord made sure it was in the book of Proverbs twice! Let me explain what it means.

Choice Morsels

"Choice morsels" are tasty things that we want to devour quickly. They are the best, most attractive, most addictive things to eat. They are like a bowl of potato chips left on the kitchen counter.

What happens in most families if Mom puts a bowl of Doritos (or substitute your favorite salty snack here) out on the kitchen counter in the late afternoon? I don't know about your family, but at our place, those things are gone like the wind! My wife, Heather Joy, has gotten wise to this and now puts out a bowl of apples or carrots. And *they* are gone long before supper.

But let's say there are Doritos on the counter. What happens if you eat the whole bag before supper yourself? Unless you have the constitution of an ox, you're probably going to feel sick. Gossip is like that. It goes "down to a man's inmost parts." My grandma had a magnet on her fridge with a picture of a pig that

said, “Once across the lips, always on the hips.” Gossip tastes great going down, but it has lasting and poisonous effects on our hearts.

But again, what *is* sinful gossip?

I’m glad you asked.

Here is a one-sentence summary of the Bible’s teaching on gossip: *Sinful gossip is bearing bad news behind someone’s back out of a bad heart.* This definition has three main parts.

Definition Part 1: Bearing Bad News

Gossip is, obviously, a “talking” thing. As we saw, our opening scripture says, “The *words* of a gossip are like choice morsels.” Gossip is sharing, communicating and transmitting stories. These stories flow in both directions: talking and listening.

First, *talking*. Proverbs says, “A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who *talks* too much” (20:19). The old King James word for a gossip in Proverbs 20:19 is a “talebearer,” or one who carries a story. Gossiping is often sharing someone else’s secret. Have you ever done that? I must admit that I have, to my shame. Have you ever had it done *to* you? It feels awful to find out that someone gave away your secret. It is a betrayal by talking.

Then there is *listening*. Proverbs also says, “Wrongdoers eagerly *listen* to gossip; liars pay close attention to slander” (17:4, NLT). Sometimes even just receiving that spicy piece of gossip without stopping the conversation (or, at least, saying *something*) is sinful—almost as sinful as speaking it.

Online Gossip

Of course, this bearing of bad news is not done by just talking in person. Technology has made it possible for us to gossip long distance. We can gossip on the phone. We can gossip on-

line. We can tweet our gossip on Twitter!

I love the Internet. As of this writing, I subscribe to 357 blogs in my blog reader and have hundreds of friends on Facebook. It is a great way to stay in touch with people. But anything that can be used for great good can also be used for great evil, especially if it involves a lot of words. The Bible teaches this: “When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise” (Prov. 10:19).

So sinful gossip for me might be pressing the “Send” button on my phone, the “Publish” button on my blog or the “Share” button on my Facebook account. Remember, whatever is said online is pretty much permanent. Think first!

A few years ago a friend of mine sent a negative e-mail about a mutual acquaintance of ours not to me but, by mistake, to the person herself! Oops. Did *that* ever cause bad feelings! You and I may never press the wrong “Send To” button, but what kinds of stories have we been sharing about others via technology?

Three Types of Bad News

The content of sinful gossip is never neutral. It is always “bad news” of at least one of three kinds.

Bad information. Sharing bad information—lies—about someone behind their back is sinful gossip. Worse, if you *know* that a story is false, then it is not just gossip, it is also slander! Have you ever had your reputation hurt by bad information that someone had spread about you?

I have. Once I heard through the grapevine of our little community a circulating rumor that said I had left my wife. This was laughable to anyone who really knows us (I don’t know how I could live without her!). I have no idea who started the rumor or who might have heard it and believed the lie.

The Lord promises us that “a false witness will not go unpunished, and he who pours out lies will not go free” (Prov. 19:5).

Of course, the “bad” information might be something that you *think* is true but really is not. You *think* that your neighbor got a DUI, but you got the story wrong. Or it might be something unverifiable such as rumor or hearsay, as in my case. Either way, it’s gossip.

Bad news about someone. On the other hand, the story being shared might actually be true and only *about* something bad that someone has done. This is what I call a shameful truth. Some of us have been taught that if something is true, then it’s not gossip. Not so. Gossip is also foolishly spreading that awful truth about someone. Proverbs tells us that “a gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret” (11:13). The secrets revealed by gossip are often the skeletons in someone’s closet that do not really need to get out.

A biblical phrase for this is “a bad report” (Hebrew *dibbah*). A bad report is what Joseph brought to Jacob about his brothers in Genesis 37:2. We don’t know exactly what the young men were up to, but given what we do know about Joseph’s ten brothers, it was probably something they shouldn’t have been doing. So Joseph was probably not lying, but he was, at the very least, being an annoying tattletale. Tattling is gossiping to someone in authority instead of someone uninvolved. Proverbs says, “Whoever spreads slander [*dibbah*] is a fool” (10:18).

For example, let’s say one of your friends recently did something bad, and you heard about it. Maybe it was even your friend who told you about it. He cut someone off in traffic. She lied to her spouse. He cheated a coworker. She hit her mother. Whatever. Your friend actually did some shameful thing.

Catch this: *you don't have to talk about any of it with your other friends!*

I know it's hard to refrain. As our key Scripture passage says, "The words of a gossip are like choice morsels." They are incredibly difficult to resist.

By the way, you may have memorized Proverbs 18:8 and 26:22 in the King James Version, and right now you may be scratching your head and saying, "Hey, wait a minute! That verse says, 'The words of a talebearer are *as wounds*!' There's a big difference between wounds and choice morsels!"

The reason for the difference between the two versions is that the translators of the King James Bible thought that the Hebrew root word being used here was one that means to hammer or strike something (*halam*). And that rings true, doesn't it? The words of a gossip are harmful. They are a kick in the gut.

But most scholars today believe that there is a different Hebrew root underlying this word: *laham*. This root word depicts savory or delicious morsels that you can hardly resist and want to swallow right down.¹

My wife, Heather Joy, makes candies called Buckeyes. They are like homemade Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, but better. The candy is chocolate on the outside with sweet peanut butter on the inside. My wife almost has to lock the cabinet, however, after making them, because I can't say no to them. If she offers me a Buckeye, I don't care how many platefuls I have just eaten or how full I am. I'll find the room! Those candies are "choice morsels."

Back in Solomon's day a choice morsel wasn't made of chocolate and peanut butter. It may have been various nuts and raisins or figs mixed with honey for something sweet to eat. Or, even more likely, it was a choice piece of meat. Whenever roast beef is being cooked, my oldest son, Andrew, always says, "Can I

have a piece with some fat on it?” *That* is an example of a choice morsel! It is difficult to resist.

Bad news, shameful news, is like that too for you and me. Bad news is attractive but not good for us. There is something really wrong within us that makes us want to know and to talk about the shameful things that other people do.

Bad news for someone. A third kind of bad news is neither false nor true but is a projection of something bad happening to someone. In Psalm 41 King David got really sick, and his enemies rejoiced and started to gossip about him. David wrote,

My enemies say of me in malice, “When will he die and his name perish?” Whenever one comes to see me, he speaks falsely, while his heart gathers slander; then he goes out and spreads it abroad. 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.” (41:5–8)

That is gossip too. David had not done anything shameful, but his enemies were two-faced. They came in saying, “Oh, poor you,” and then went out to spread the bad news that he was going to die.

Have you ever had this happen to you? People say, “He’s going to lose his job” or, “He’s not going to make the team.” They project, “She’s going to get kicked out of school” or, “Her husband is going to leave her.” They whisper, “They’re going to lose their house.” Gossip is bad news wickedly projected for someone else.

Definition Part 2: Behind Someone’s Back

By anyone’s definition gossip happens when the person you are talking about *is not there*. Some translations of Proverbs 18:8

and 26:22 use the word “whisperer” instead of “gossip” or “tale-bearer.” A whisperer is someone who talks about you behind your back. Therefore, gossip is clandestine—and intentionally so!

You see, it is so much easier (and more interesting) to talk about someone when they are not around. Before you talk (or before you continue to talk) about someone who is not present, ask yourself the following:

- Would I say this if he were here? (Really? Be honest now.)
- Would I receive this bad news about her in the same way if she were present?
- Am I hiding this conversation from someone?
- Would I want someone else to talk this way about me if I were out of the room?

Yeah, But What About . . . ?

Let me clear up a possible misunderstanding. The Bible is not teaching that we should never talk about people who are not present. We certainly can say good things about people who are not with us. In fact, we absolutely should turn gossip around and spread good news about people!

Also, there are times when we have to talk about people who are not present and even share bad things about them. Parents, teachers, elders and pastors, even friends, teammates, coworkers and neighbors all have to do that sometimes. This falls in line with the biblical principle of *warning others*, which we’ll learn more about in chapter 5.

I once heard of a Christian couple who tried really hard to resist gossip. This man and his wife would not say anything about someone who was not in the same room as they were. Nothing.

Not even a positive word! How long do you think that worked?

Sometimes we need to seek counsel from a wise person about our conflicts and problems. Seeking counsel may involve sharing the shameful things that someone else has done without that person being there. It is certainly not sinful gossip to truly seek out help. On the other hand, we can often mask our desire to gossip by claiming that we are just seeking counsel. The key to sharing circumstances with people in a right way is to keep loving others even when we have to talk about them and even if they are our enemies. We'll dig into this more in chapter 8, but simply put, we just need to apply Jesus' Golden Rule to any difficult situation. If you have to talk about someone when they are not present, make sure that you are treating them as you would want to be treated.

Definition Part 3: Out of a Bad Heart

Gossip comes out of a bad heart. That is, gossip is caused by something that is wrong at the core of our beings. *We are attracted to the "choice morsels" of gossip because of something already wrong in our "inmost parts."* Accepting this is the most important key to resisting gossip.

The Lord Jesus taught that "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34). The heart is the control center of a person. It is the inner you, the real you. The Bible also teaches that we live from our hearts. Proverbs says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (4:23). Our motives spring from our hearts. Our sinful motivations for speaking about or listening to any form of bad news are what makes gossip sinful. Therefore, in recognizing gossip the most important question for us to answer is, "Why?"

- Why am I saying this?

- Why am I listening to this?
- Why am I attracted to this bad news?

It could be because of jealousy or anger or hate. Or it could be the result of boredom, pride, or the fear of people. There are a number of sinful heart motivations that can produce sinful gossip. The good news is that the gospel of Jesus Christ has answers for them all.

Resistance Is *Not* Futile

Proverbs 18:8 and 26:22 offer only a warning: “Beware of gossip.” They do not tell us how to resist those choice morsels—just that we need to. But now that we have a biblically informed definition to use when we attempt to recognize gossip, we can begin to think more clearly about gospel strategies for resisting gossip. Some of those strategies include:

- Bearing good news
- Being up front, and loving those we talk about and talk to
- Having a changed heart that loves God and loves people

When I was a teen, I was a big fan of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The greatest enemy of the crew of the Starship *Enterprise* during that particular incarnation of the Star Trek series was a species called the Borg. A race of aliens, the Borg were basically part of one great, big machine that swallowed up whole cultures into its system. There was no individualism in the Borg, just “the collective.” When the Borg came to town, their favorite phrase was, “Resistance is futile! You will be assimilated.”

I know that’s how gossip often makes us feel—that we must

conform to the world's gossipy pattern. *It is not true.* Jesus Christ died to set us free from sin. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness" (1 Pet. 2:24). Resistance is not futile. Doesn't the Bible insist that we are to "resist the devil, and he will flee" (James 4:7)? The Lord Jesus empowers us to die to sins and to live for righteousness. One of the chief ways He does that is through promises like the one we find in First Corinthians 10:13.

A Great and Precious Promise: A Way Out

The apostle Paul told the Corinthians (and, through them, us too), "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man" (1 Cor. 10:13). The urge to gossip is not extraordinary. We should not feel as if we are the first to ever experience it. I'm sure that even the Lord Jesus was tempted to gossip (although, praise God, He never gave in; see Heb 4:15).

But Paul went on to say, "And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear" (1 Cor. 10:13). We have to believe what Paul said, even though it will seldom feel as if it is true.

Paul finished the verse with the promise, "But when you are tempted, [God] will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (10:13). What a great and precious promise! Our job is to trust God's promise and to look for the "way out" which will always be available. The temptation may not go away. We may even have to continue to "stand up under it." Yet although it is not easy, it is possible to win against sinful gossip.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What are some popular conceptions and misconceptions of gossip? Before you read this chapter, how would you have defined gossip?
2. Discuss the book's definition of sinful gossip: bearing bad news behind someone's back out of a bad heart. In what ways does this definition expand or sharpen your concept of gossip? How is it helpful (or unhelpful) for recognizing sinful gossip in everyday life? Give an example.
3. Read Proverbs 18:8 or 26:22. In what ways is gossip like a "choice morsel"? Why is gossip so attractive and addictive? How does it affect us?
4. Read First Peter 2:13–25. How does Jesus' death enable Christians to live for righteousness? How does the gospel defeat gossip?
5. Read First Corinthians 10:13. How can you apply this great and precious promise to gossip this week?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Mitchell is Heather's hubby and daddy to Robin, Andrew, Peter and Isaac. He has pastored Lanse Evangelical Free Church [www.lansefree.org], a 120-year-old rural church parked along Interstate 80, since 1998. The Mitchells live in the woods of Central Pennsylvania with a flock of free-range chickens. They love to read books, play games and go for long hikes.

A graduate of Moody Bible Institute and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Pastor Matt received his doctorate in biblical counseling from Westminster Theological Seminary in 2012. Matt is active in his family of churches, the Evangelical Free Church of America [www.efca.org] and is the book review coordinator for *EFCA Today* [www.efcatoday.org]. He loves getting to talk about Jesus at conferences, seminars, retreats and workshops.

Matt writes a blog about passionate truth called *Hot Orthodoxy*, where he posts his thoughts on pastoral ministry and biblical counseling, book reviews and sermon manuscripts, links to helpful and humorous places, glimpses into family life and personal reflections along the journey of following the Lord Jesus Christ with both head and heart.

The most amazing thing about Matt is that Jesus loves him even though he doesn't deserve it, and that gives Matt the greatest joy and the greatest message to share with others. He loves to "gossip" the gospel of grace. *Resisting Gossip* is his first book.

Join the conversation!

Find more resources for resisting gossip at
www.matt-mitchell.blogspot.com

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