

"How to Gossip Like a Christian" Psalm 140

Introduction

- Tasmanian Devils are amazing creatures. I'm not talking about the Road Runner hunting, witless, dust cloud making Warner brothers cartoon but the real-life, fox-sized scavengers with a bloodcurdling growl and powerful jaws that can crunch through the bones of much larger animals. In fact, Tasmanian Devils are capable of completely consuming birds and small to medium sized mammals, including all bones. But recently, The Associated Press has reported that the number of devils on the island state of Tasmania has been plummeting. In the last few years alone over 40 percent of the devil population has been wiped out. Finally, in February 2006, Australian scientists discovered the cause of a mysterious disease. The scientists initially believed the deaths were caused by a virus; however, their research ultimately uncovered a rare, fatal cancer. They named it *Devil Facial Tumor Disease*. The disease is caused by cancerous tumors that are spread by ferocious squabbling.
- Cytogeneticist [Anne-Marie Pearse](#), a researcher for the state of Tasmania who co-wrote an article published in the journal *Nature* points to a unique, infectious cancer that is spread when devils bite each other, usually on the face, as they violently squabble over carcasses. "Devils jaw wrestle and bite each other a lot, usually in the face and around the mouth, and bits of tumor break off one devil and stick in the wounds of another," Pearse explained. The mysterious illness creates grotesque tumors on the animals' snouts that lead to starvation within a year.¹
- Do you realize that when people gossip they are no different than Tasmanian Devils? When we gossip, when ferocious and biting words spill out of our mouths, it's like spreading a grotesque, cancerous, fatal tumor. What if we were able to see the physical results of our words? What if every gossiping word uttered by our tongue ended up as an ugly, grotesque tumor on the face of the person we talked about? And yet, gossip is as destructive as a cancer. Proverbs 18:21 *The tongue has the power of life and death*. There is no such thing as benign gossip. If we could see the results of our words, we would think twice about what we say.

Transition

This morning, we continue our series through the Psalms called *The Songs of Life*. God has given us the psalms to teach us how to emote, how to feel emotion in a god-glorifying way. And I believe the reason he has given us Psalm 140 is to teach us how to gossip in a god-glorifying way. Again, you've got to hang on and let me explain what I mean when I say that.

- Being talked about and talking about others is a universal phenomenon. [The Social Issues Research Center](#) reports that gossip accounts for 55 percent of men's conversation time and 67 percent of women's. The [National Opinion Research Center](#) reports that 29 percent of adults feel their privacy is violated by gossiping neighbors.² We all know what it feels like to

¹ Associated Press, "Tasmanian-Devil Mouth Cancer Spread by Bites", February 06, 2006.

² National Opinion Research Center, cited in American Demographics [1995]. "To Verify," Leadership.

be talked about. We all know what it feels like to share that juicy morsel about another person. The scary thing is, most of us gossip unconsciously—without even realizing what we are doing. It's as natural as breathing. We gossip in the name of concern and care and wanting to protect people. We cloak our gossip in the form of prayer requests. "I think you should know..." We even have church prayer chains that can become, if not guarded carefully, officially sanctioned grapevines. For today and the rest of this week monitor your conversations. Turn the gossip sensitivity meter on and listen to how frequently you talk about other people. You'll be shocked. Gossip is an epidemic.

Transition

So where and how does Psalm 140 fit into this gossip epidemic? I think God has given us Psalm 140 so that we might learn how to handle gossip in a god-glorifying way—as one on the receiving end of gossip or as one who's tempted to dole out some gossip. I believe Psalm 140 teaches us that...

Proposition

- **Christians must refrain from gossip and can confidently endure gossip because God alone is just**

Transition

Again, whether you are on the receiving end of gossip or are tempted to talk about others, **Christians must refrain from gossip and can confidently endure gossip because God alone is just.**

- Have you ever wondered why gossip is wrong? Theologically speaking, why is it wrong to talk about others? Let's back up a second. What is gossip? Let's define it. Gossip is betraying someone's confidence. Gossip is whispering secrets about others; rumor or talk of a personal, sensational, or intimate nature.³ Gossip is pouring poison in your neighbor's ear.⁴ It's telling stories, tale-bearing about others that may be true or false—it doesn't matter. In *The Jewish Press*, [Morris Mandel](#) writes, "Gossip is the most deadly microbe. It has neither legs nor wings. It is composed entirely of tales, and most of them have stings."⁵
- Over and over in scripture you find commands against gossip and explanations of what gossip does. Proverbs 20:19 *A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much.* Proverbs 26:20 *Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down.* Romans 1:29-30 *They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil.* I could go on and on.
- And not only is telling gossip wrong but listening to gossip is gossiping. [Rick Warren](#) says, and I agree, "People who gossip *to* you will also gossip *about* you. They cannot be trusted.

³ *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from INSO Corporation; further reproduction and distribution restricted in accordance with the Copyright Law of the United States. All rights reserved.

⁴ Reinecker and Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the NT*, p. 351.

⁵ Arlin Schrock Atmore, Alabama. *Leadership*, Vol. 6, no. 1.

If you listen to gossip, God says you are a troublemaker."⁶ Obviously, not all people agree. In my studies this week I came across an August 2002 *New York Times* article by [Patricia Cohen](#) entitled "Go Ahead. Gossip May Be Virtuous." She reports the research of Emrys Westacott, an associate professor of philosophy at Alfred University in south central New York. Through his research, Westacott...concludes that gossip's advantages on the whole far outweigh its failings. "Gossip and be proud," he says. "The more I thought about it," he explained "talking about other people, even in a negative way, is not just socially useful but indispensable."⁷ I think this research is way off the mark and the witness of scripture is clear—gossip is clearly a sin. But why? Theologically speaking, why is it wrong to do this? What is so wrong with gossip?

Transition

Here's what's wrong with gossip. Here's why God calls it sin.

- We know that God is all-knowing—that he's an omniscient God, right? Job 37:16 asks the rhetorical question, *Do you know how the clouds hang poised, those wonders of him who is perfect in knowledge?* God's knowledge is perfect. Now, "Knowing all things, God knows what is good...When we humans act, we sometimes act unwisely simply because we do not have all the facts. Later developments prove our actions have been unwise. Had we known certain relevant facts, we would undoubtedly have acted differently...God however, has access to all information. So his judgments are made wisely. He never has to revise his estimation of something because of additional information. He sees all things in their proper perspective; thus he does not give anything a higher or lower value than what it ought to have."⁸ Because God is omniscient God cannot gossip. It is impossible for him to conjecture and speculate and spread rumors of what might be because he knows what is, he knows all things, he knows the truth, and he knows what men and women hide in their hearts. So when God speaks he is always justified in what he says. It is never wrong for him to speak—about anything—because he always makes an accurate assessment of things. He has all knowledge at his disposal so all his comments and remarks concerning anything and everything are right and true.
- Because we've been created in God's image, human beings have a thirst for knowledge, a desire to be informed, to be in the know. But the difference between God and us is that we are not omniscient. If the span of my arms measures the entire sum of all the knowledge there is to know in the universe, the smartest Einstein-like braniac only knows an infinitesimal microscopic portion of that sum. And because of our sin nature, this aspect of the image of God in man, of wanting to know and learn and be in the know is marred. So not only do we not know all things, we gossip and presume to know when we really don't. In other words, when we gossip we presume omniscience like God. But we can never know how things really are, we can never know the hearts of men and women, we never have all the details, we are always revising our estimation of things, we don't have access to all information, we don't know all the relevant facts and so our perception is always warped by our sin nature and finite knowledge. So, again, the reason **we must refrain from gossip is because God alone is just**. Only God is perfect in knowledge. Therefore, he alone is just

⁶ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, p. 1653.

⁷ Patricia Cohen, "Go Ahead. Gossip May Be Virtuous." *The New York Times*, August 10, 2002.

⁸ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 276-7.

when he speaks. Gossip defames God and defrauds him of his omniscience by making us equal to him. That's why gossip is wrong.

Transition

Make sense? That brings us to Psalm 140. Look at the first section of Psalm 140 which is made up of the first five verses.

Main Points

- **Verses 1-5** describe a situation in which Israel's King David is the target of malicious gossip. False accusations are flying. Listen. *Rescue me, O LORD, from evil men; protect me from men of violence, 2 who devise evil plans in their hearts and stir up war every day. 3 They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent's; the poison of vipers is on their lips. 4 Keep me, O LORD, from the hands of the wicked; protect me from men of violence who plan to trip my feet. 5 Proud men have hidden a snare for me; they have spread out the cords of their net and have set traps for me along my path.* David describes this gossip he hears in very physical terms. The words are violent—like a simmering, boiling cauldron those gossipy words boil up from evil hearts and spill over into war. My high school social studies teacher [Mr. Eaton](#) used to say, "Loose lips sink ships" referring to the German submarine warfare of World War I, but also as a general principal of life. In the same way, David says that those who gossip, in essence, make war with their words. Did you ever pause to think that when you gossip it's like taking another person to war? Verse 3, it's a sharp weapon. Gossip is like snake venom. The tongue is caustic. You might as well spray Agent Orange in the face of the person you gossip about. You want to see the casualties of gossip, just walk down a hallway at any high school in the country. Repeatedly in scripture the tongue is characterized as a weapon. It's a sword in Psalm 57 and 64, a deadly arrow in Jeremiah 9, a destructive scorching fire in Proverbs 16.⁹ Because of these words David feels like he's caught in an animal trap, like he's being hunted. *They've hidden a snare. They've spread their nets. They've set traps for me along my path.* His point is that the situation is deadly serious. He is being pushed to his limits.¹⁰

Transition

So as the object of malicious gossip, what does David do? **Verses 6-8.** He turns to God.

- *O LORD, I say to you, "You are my God." Hear, O LORD, my cry for mercy. 7 O Sovereign LORD, my strong deliverer, who shields my head in the day of battle-- 8 do not grant the wicked their desires, O LORD; do not let their plans succeed, or they will become proud.* Remember when we talked about how to gripe like a Christian? We talked about the lament psalms, the complaint psalms. Psalm 140 is a lament. It follows the typical pattern of a complaint. There's an address to God and a cry for help. *Rescue me, O Lord*, verse 1. Followed by the reason for the complaint—in this case it is gossip, verses 2-5. There's a request for God to hear and deliver, verses 6-8, ending with a confession of trust and a vow of praise. What this means is that like the lament, God wants us to involve him in our gossip. Gossip becomes part of our worship. And so what that means is that if you hear gossip about yourself or you're tempted to make yourself a link in the chain of gossip, you have an obligation to end it by directing the gossip, about you or anyone else, to God. *O Lord, I say*

⁹ Psalm 57:4, 64:3; Jeremiah 9:8; Proverbs 16:27

¹⁰ Davidson, p. 451.

to you. Not to your husband, not to your wife, not to your kids, not to your pastor, not to your mom, not to your best friend across the country who doesn't know any of the people you know—end it. Take the gossip to God and leave it with him. How do you gossip like a Christian? You whisper your dirty little secrets in the throne room of God, you take those poisonous words that people have spoken about you and you spew them out to God. You plead your case before him alone.

- What's so instructive about this lament psalm is that "there is no expression of complaint against God for having permitted evil men to cause him so much pain."¹¹ There is just the cry for help. If you are the object of gossip, cry to God for mercy. If people are making war with you by their words ask God to ready you for the onslaught of battle. Shield me God. Verse 7. Be my strong deliverer. God is the Divine Warrior, who will avenge and deliver his people. He is the strength of our salvation. Instead of gossiping, blab to the one who already knows, who is perfect in knowledge and is able to justly respond and leave it there. **Christians must refrain from gossip and can confidently endure gossip because God alone is just.**

Transition

That brings us to the antidote to venomous gossip. Look at verses 9 through the end of the psalm with me.

- The antidote to venomous gossip is the justice of God. The reason I began today's message with the idea that **Christians must refrain from gossip and can confidently endure gossip because God alone is just** comes primarily from verses 9-13. Listen. *Let the heads of those who surround me be covered with the trouble their lips have caused. 10 Let burning coals fall upon them; may they be thrown into the fire, into miry pits, never to rise. 11 Let slanderers not be established in the land; may disaster hunt down men of violence. 12 I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy. 13 Surely the righteous will praise your name and the upright will live before you.* The antidote to gossip is God's justice. God's justice is the reason we must refrain from gossip. God is not only the Divine Warrior who protects his people and carries out the sentence, he is the judge who hands the sentence out. At some point, when God justly judges all things, the gossipier—the slanderer will find his security, *his inheritance* gone. The hunter—the warring man of gossip becomes the hunted. In the words of **Robert Davidson**, "Throughout this whole section there runs the theme vigorously expressed in other psalms that evil signs its own death warrant."¹² It is an open and shut case. No deliberation needed.
- And the reason we can confidently endure gossip if we're on the receiving end of it is because God alone is just. *I know that the Lord secures justice*, verse 12. Again, the reason that God can justly determine right from wrong, the reason he is able to judge fairly, equitably, rightly is because he knows everything. Underlying God's justice is his omniscience. What good would it be for God to judge, how could he judge justly if he didn't have all the proper information at his disposal—if he didn't know the facts of the case? But, "Knowing all things, God knows what is good... When we humans act, we sometimes act unwisely simply because we do not have all the facts. Later developments prove our actions

¹¹ VanGemeren.

¹² Davidson, p. 452.

have been unwise. Had we known certain relevant facts, we would undoubtedly have acted differently...God however, has access to all information. So his judgments are made wisely. He never has to revise his estimation of something because of additional information. He sees all things in their proper perspective; thus he does not give anything a higher or lower value than what it ought to have."¹³ *He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.*¹⁴

Conclusion

- It is so easy to sit here and listen to David's words sympathize with David. As we close this morning, I want you to turn to Romans 3. The temptation, especially in a psalm like this where David is the object of gossip, is to identify with David and miss the point of the psalm, that this is our problem, that sin resides in our hearts. Before we let ourselves off the hook and rationalize these verses away by saying that we are always on the receiving end of gossip—never the perpetrators, I want you to see what Paul says in Romans 3. Starting in verse 9...*What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. 10 As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; 11 there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. 12 All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." 13 "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." 14 "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." 15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 ruin and misery mark their ways, 17 and the way of peace they do not know." 18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes."* Did you catch it? Verse 13. *The poison of vipers is on their lips.* In this diatribe about sin and the universality of sin, Paul quotes Psalm 140, verse 3. His point is that all people, Jew, Gentile, you name it, all are under the power and curse of sin. And in the context of Psalm 140, verse 3, it means we all gossip. No one escapes. No one is righteous in this area. If there is a gossip epidemic it's not because of the other guy it's because we are sinful. It's you. You gossip. Romans 3 describes your heart, your life, your words, your conversations. Think about it like this. If David lived now, he could have written this psalm about you or me.
- What we need most is a God of justice. When scripture condemns our hearts it is for the purpose of exposing our need for Christ. As we think about this psalm, about gossip, I hope you realize that what you and I need most is God's justice demonstrated through the cross of Christ. Romans 3:25-26 *God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-- 26 he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.* By Christ's blood, God justifies us, he declares us not guilty of our sins, he cleanses our tongues and purifies our hearts from a guilty conscience. Turn to the cross of Christ for help.
- There is an old story about a monk and his monastic leader. One day, the monk came to his leader and said, "I am troubled in spirit, and I want to leave this place." The old man said, "Why?" He said, "I have heard unedifying stories about one of the brothers." The old man said, "Are the stories true?" He said, "Yes, Father. The brother who told me is a man of

¹³ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 276-7.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 32:4

trust." The old man answered, "The brother who told you is not a man of trust. For if he was so, he would not have told you these stories. When God heard the cry of the men of Sodom, he did not believe it until he had gone down and seen it with his own eyes." The brother said, "I too have seen it with my own eyes." When the old man heard this, he looked down and picked off the ground a wisp of straw, and he said, "What is this?" He answered, "Straw." Then the old man reached up and touched the roof and said, "What is this?" He answered, "It is the beam that holds up the room." The old man said, "Take it into your heart that your sins are like this beam, and that your brother's sins are like this wisp of straw."¹⁵ Christ has taken the beam of our sin upon his shoulders in the form of a cross and snapped it in two like a wisp of straw. He has set our tongues free from the curse of sin so that instead of gossiping we might praise his name forever. Verse 13. *Surely the righteous will praise your name and the upright will live before you.* Pray with me.

¹⁵ Sayings of the Desert Fathers, translated by Owen Chadwick, in *Western Asceticism* (Westminster 1983)