

THE PASTORS' PEN

articles from the elders of BBC

What do you think of when you hear the term “a debased mind”? A deranged serial killer? A sexual predator? A heartless dictator? Of all the sins you would associate with “a debased mind,” how far down the list is gossip?

When Paul wrote to the Romans of God giving people over to a debased mind “to do what out not to be done,” he included a long list of sins that evidence a debased mind (Romans 1:28-32). Among those sins is gossip (v. 29).

In 2011, annual revenue from the celebrity gossip industry was, according to [one article](#), more than \$3 billion. The public’s appetite for celebrity gossip is insatiable. But let’s be honest: The entertainment industry is not the only place that such an appetite manifests itself. The yearning for gossip exists among the people of God as much as it does in Hollywood. Solomon recognised this when he wrote, “The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body” (Proverbs 18:8). There is something deeply wrong with our “inner parts,” which so crave the “delicious morsels” of the “whisperer.”

We all know what it is like to be confronted with gossip: “I shouldn’t tell you this, but—” “It’s none of my business, but—” “Have you heard the latest about—” “Could I ask you to pray about so-and-so because—” Even if we can’t precisely define it, we know it when we hear it.

Matthew Mitchell has memorably defined gossip as “bearing bad news behind

someone’s back out of a bad heart.” This is a helpful definition, which bears some examination.

Gossip is “bearing bad news.” As Proverbs says, gossip has to do with “the words of a whisperer.” These “words” can be spoken or heard. On the one hand, we are warned against speaking words of gossip: “The one who reveals secrets is a constant gossip; avoid someone with a big mouth” (Proverbs 20:19, CSB). On the other hand, Solomon cautions against listening to gossip: “An evildoer listens to wicked lips, and a liar gives

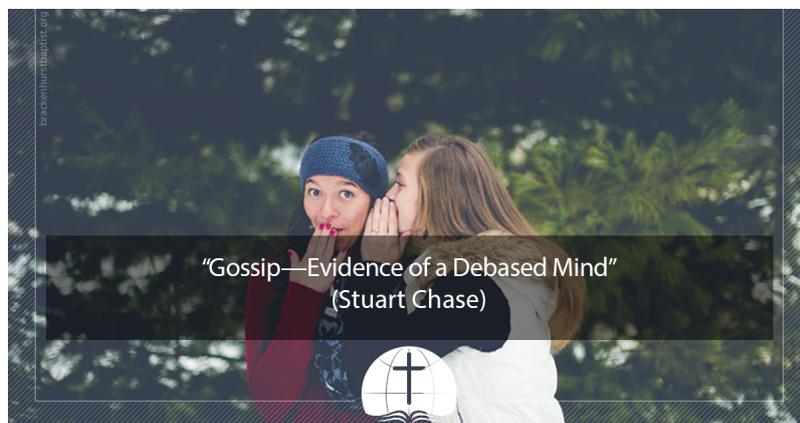
ear to a mischievous tongue” (Proverbs 17:4). Absorbing gossip without saying anything to arrest it can be as sinful as speaking it.

Of course, words of gossip need not be verbalised or

heard audibly. In the information age, opportunity to spread and entertain gossip abounds. Sharing, tweeting, or reading gossip is as dangerous as actually speaking or listening to it.

The “bad news” of gossip can take various forms. It might be a bold-faced lie. It might be misinformation that you believe to be. Regardless, “a false witness will not go unpunished, and he who breathes out lies will not escape” (Proverbs 19:5).

But gossip is not always misinformation. The “bad news” might be true information



told in such a way as to harm the victim of gossip. The gossip is one who “reveals secrets” (Proverbs 11:13). Spreading information that others do not need to know is a form of gossip.

The “bad news” might also be sketchy information that might or might not be true but is a projection of ill will on another. David wrote of those who wished him well to his face but turned around and spread rumours about him when they left (Psalm 41:5-9). This is gossip.

Gossip is bad news “behind someone’s back.” That is why Solomon writes of the words of the “whisperer.” The gossip says things that he would not say if his victim were present, or at the least says them in a different way than he would say them if his victim were present. He would not like to be spoken of that way in his absence but feels the freedom to speak of others—or listen to talk about others—in a way that he would object to if he were the object of the discussion.

This bad speech flows from “a bad heart.” Jesus clearly stated that our speech flows from what is in our heart (Matthew 12:34). That is why we must guard our heart above all things (Proverbs 4:23). If our speech is bad, it shows that there is something rotten in the heart.

If this definition of gossip—“bearing bad news behind someone’s back out of a bad heart”—is accurate, it hints at what we can do to overcome the sin of gossip.

For one thing, if gossip is bad news, we can work hard to bear good news. When we speak to and about others, we can strive to ensure that our words build up rather than tear down. Second, we can be up front with others rather than speaking behind their back. Talk *to* people, not *about* them. And when you do talk to people, talk in a loving, edifying way. Third, allow your speech to flow out of a changed heart—the heart of flesh that has been created in you by the gospel.

It is possible to overcome gossip. We need not resign ourselves to the sinful pattern of the world. Indeed, we are instructed to break away from the sinful pattern of the world (Romans 12:1-2). We all face the temptation to gossip, but God has provided a way of escape for every temptation we face (1 Corinthians 10:13). The way of escape is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The tongue is a world of iniquity, which can spread its damage like wildfire. Corrupted by indwelling sin, the tongue delights to speak words of death and destruction (James 3:2-6). The surest way to protect oneself against the flame of the tongue is to water oneself frequently with the truth of the gospel. It is to immerse ourselves in the old, old story of the gospel rather than eagerly listening to or spreading gossip about others. If our words are the overflow of what is in our heart, let us drive gospel truth deep into our heart and let that truth overflow in the way that we speak to and of one another. Chris Bruce’s charge to churches applies equally to Christians:

Gossip is a serious problem for churches, but it doesn’t have to be. If, as James says, the tongue can light a great fire, then we might think of the church as a tree. On the one hand, we can neglect to water the tree, and stand by with a hose to put out fires that threaten its dry and brittle branches. But the much better course is to continually keep the tree watered and moist with the truth of the gospel and the Bible’s teaching on godly speech. A tree like that, even when it encounters the flame, will not easily catch fire. A tree like that will grow and bear much fruit.

Gossip is evidence of a debased mind (Romans 1:28-32). Christians must pursue a renewed mind (Romans 12:1-2). Our minds are renewed not primarily by our efforts to avoid what is wrong, but by immersing our minds in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross, by which God delivers us from our sinful tendencies. Let us recognise the depravity of gossip. Let us at the same time look to Jesus, who died for us so that we might be dead to sin and raised to walk in newness of life.

