



What If Gossip Isn't a Sin—But a Skill in Peacemaking?

By Skyline

DIALOGUE

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What if gossip isn't always harmful? When rooted in empathy, it becomes a path to deeper relationships.

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How often do you gossip? Chances are it's higher than any one of us would like to admit. Our culture is saturated in gossip from tabloids and politics, to social media, conversation, and even prayer; gossip is everywhere. Christ made it clear, we will be held accountable to “every idle word” we speak ([Matthew 12:36](#)). As a Christian, how can one realistically avoid talking negatively about another person ([James 4:11](#)) or never spread a rumor ([Helaman 16:22](#)) when it is estimated 65 to 80% of all conversation is some form of gossip? ([Emler, p.131](#)).

Defining Gossip

In an effort to avoid [semantic ambiguity](#), in this article, *Gossip* is [defined as any conversation about another person who is not present](#). This is a slightly different way of discussing gossip from more [conventional connotations](#), which typically illustrate gossip as a purely negative or false form of communication. Using the common definition for gossip limits the scope of interactions-while-discussing-others as a purely “[sensational](#),” “[false](#),” or even “[malicious](#)” form of communication. This popular negative connotation for gossip aligns with the [apocryphal adage](#), which asserts, “Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people.”

But consider this realistically. How often is conversation about some celebrity, politician, neighbor, coworker, family member, or even a group of people (i.e., political parties, sports teams, the ever-ambiguous “they”) who are not currently present in the room? *Any time* I discuss someone who is not currently with me, I am engaging in some form of gossip. It doesn’t seem functionally possible to avoid gossip. For better and for worse, there are entire industries built on gossip. And discussing someone else’s behaviour or circumstances isn’t always a negative.

Positive gossipers reinforce group norms by celebrating successes and promoting the virtues of others.

This rather cheeky video was produced by the [Skyline Research Institute](#) as a part of their [Peacemaking Series](#) and reveals that while gossip gets a bad wrap, not all gossip is bad.

Positive and Negative Gossip

Expanding to a more “integrative definition and framework” for gossip to include all forms of private communication about someone else who is not present, provides the opportunity for more self-reflection on the nature of our individual communication ([Cruz & Others’](#) meta-analysis provides the foundation for this and the following ideas of this section). Through the lens of this expanded definition, we can start to characterize gossip as either *Positive* or *Negative*. Whether negative or positive, the motivation and function for gossip remains relatively the same: to communicate right

and wrong behaviour within a social group. Distinguishing positive from negative gossip is a combination of recognizing both tactics and motivation.

Negative gossip discusses people's mistakes or inadequacies as a tactic to advance individual integration within a social group, but does so at the expense of the social integration of the person being gossiped about. Negative gossip rehearses the behaviors of fault-finding, back-biting, and the proliferation of false information. Because of this, negative gossip is equally destructive whether discussing intimate relationships or those with celebrity status. Ironically, the consequences of promoting this kind of communication include social insecurity. By using negative gossip, the user and group confirm negative gossip as appropriate within the social group, causing a spiral effect in the social culture of the group. In an effort to further integrate oneself with the group, negative gossipers increase their own social vulnerability and insecurity while eroding social credibility.

It's hard to be in an environment where you recognize a culture of negative gossip, especially when one is part of the problem. Shakespeare, illustrating the point, used the analogy, "He that filches from me my good name robs me of that which not enriches him and makes me poor indeed" (*Othello*, 3.3). God long ago expressed the cause and effect relationship between our conversation and our own condemnation, "For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned" (*Matthew* 12:37). If one discovers themselves suffering from the self-inflicted consequences caused by gossiping negatively, observe the truth in the proverb, "Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth" (*Proverbs* 26:20), and the succinct advice "cease to find fault one with another" (*D&C* 88: 124).

Positive gossipers reinforce group norms and the appropriate behavior for relationships by celebrating successes and promoting the virtues of other people as the "standard" for their communication, whether at home, work, church, or online (*Nelson*, 2023). While a good place to start, positive gossip is more complicated than merely 'saying nice things about other people.' Oftentimes, we will have to make judgments about "ideas, situations, and people throughout our lives" (*Judging Others*). Not all criticism is negative gossip; however, positive gossip discusses strategies focused on *maximizing strengths* and employs empathy when recognizing weaknesses. As a leader, it would include recognizing weaknesses as springing from "unmet needs," and as a Christian, condemning "the sin without condemning the individual" (*Kimball*, 1979).

Transitioning from Negative to Positive Gossip

Those who use positive gossip are socially favourable and attract like-minded conversation and consideration. Learning to transition from negative gossip to positive gossip is a socially attractive skill. Here is one tactic. To avoid sounding preachy, an individual can use questions that reorient the gossipers' attention to the feelings, motivations, or circumstances of the person who is the subject of the gossip ([Abramson, *Cultivating Empathy*](#)). This helps foster empathy in the conversation or may challenge the negative gossipers' perception of the situation.

For example, a friend is hammering down on why the other presidential candidate is "the worst." You might ask a question like, "What is the reason their party wants them to do that?" (focused on motivations), or "I can't imagine how intense it must be to run a country. Can you?" (focused on feelings), or "Is there a reason why you think that policy won't work? And have you heard another idea?" (focusing on circumstances), or "Have you had a personal conversation with someone who supports them? What did they think? Or, what do you think they'd say?" (challenges their perception).

Rehearsal on this skill can be done on one's own. As a mind puzzle, consider shifting the following scenarios from negative gossip to positive gossip:

- A spouse constantly criticizes a specific child.
- A neighbor expresses frustration with another neighbor's behavior.
- A fellow coworker or student criticizes a boss's or teacher's policy.
- A friend shares intimate information about someone else (whether true or not).

Other tactics could include stressing common ground, changing the topic entirely, or addressing the deeper need. As a positive gossipers engaging with a negative gossipers, remember to recognize that this individual may be stuck in a habit of negative gossip, or acting out of an unmet need or insecurity. Stressing social unity, common ground, and mercy may validate them better than engaging in negative gossip.

A Parable for Conclusion

Now, to end with a story and a proverb.

A sentry stood at the edge of a town and watched as two families of settlers approached.

The first family reached the town limits and asked, "What's this town like? Is it good here?"

The sentry replied, "Well, what was it like where you left?"

They answered, "We loved it. Our hearts broke to leave. The people were kind and there was always enough, but we had to leave."

The sentry replied, "You'll find the same here."

Shortly after, the second family arrived and asked, "What's this town like? Is it good here?"

The sentry replied, "Well, what was it like where you left?"

They answered, "We hated it. Our hearts couldn't wait to leave. The people were mean, and there was never enough, so we had to leave."

The sentry replied, "You'll find the same here."

And [Proverbs 18:21](#), "Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof."

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