

How to Kill Your Neighbor

Leviticus 19:16 & Selected Scriptures

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Introduction

About two and a half years ago, I preached a sermon in GraceLife that Pastor John eventually asked me to preach in main service not too long afterwards. The title of that sermon was “How to Kill Your Neighbor.” Some of you will remember that message, but others of you won’t, and, with the number of people who are *new* to GraceLife in this unique season, I thought it would be beneficial to revisit it. And it’s also the case that some current events make it necessary that we be reminded of the biblical standards for reporting and receiving unsubstantiated accusations.

But before I get ahead of myself, I want to begin by saying that to anyone genuinely indwelt by the Spirit of God and graced with a modicum of discernment, it is beyond dispute that our culture is morally bankrupt. Western society has barreled through the checkpoints of God’s judgment of abandonment as outlined in Romans 1 verses 18 to 32. From the denial of God’s existence, to pervasive idolatry; from unfettered fornication, to rampant adultery and divorce; from homosexuality and the virulent attempts to “cancel” anyone who doesn’t “give hearty approval,” as Romans 1:32 says, to the reprobate mind that can no longer discern the difference between good and evil, nor even between male and female. We live in an uncommonly wicked society. When you add to that the systematic extermination of the most defenseless of our population—the 63 million babies murdered in their mothers’ wombs over the last 45 years, all under the protection of federal law—and there can be no question that our nation is and has been under the judgment of God. If there were a tagline or a motto for our generation it would be Romans 1:28: “And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind.”

But in the midst of a culture so morally upside-down as ours, even those of us in the visible church can become desensitized to the sinister nature of what we might think of as less “sensationalistic” sins. Jerry Bridges called them “Respectable Sins” in his 2007 book by that same name, and evangelicalism has understood what he meant. Sins like anxiety, discontentment, impatience, and jealousy all seem to be small potatoes compared to the great societal evils that plague our country and the world. And while we know they’re wrong, we tend to think of them as things that are just a part of life—even life in the church of God. And so rather than martialing all of our energy to mortify these sins and root them out of our hearts, we tolerate them.

But it's these "respectable" sins that have the greatest potential to destroy the moral fiber of a people, because they're the most covered-for and rationalized-away. Like the slow rot of tooth decay, these sins imperceptibly wear away at our moral enamel until the pain they cause is unbearable and requires drastic action.

I don't know if there's a more damaging and destructive "respectable" sin than gossip, and the spreading of slanderous reports. And it is especially damaging and destructive in the philosophical climate of our day, which is dominated by a philosophy that has been dubbed "intersectionality." Intersectionality is defined by one source as "an analytic framework which attempts to identify how interlocking systems of power impact those who are most marginalized in society." In other words, this way of thinking looks at how all the various cultural disadvantages *intersect* with one another in a particular person. It's not merely that if you're poor you're a victim of capitalist greed, or if you're a woman you're a victim of men and a male-dominated society, or if you're an ethnic minority you're a victim of white privilege, or if you're LGBTQ you're a victim of heteronormativity; it's the intersection of all those things.

And so the more disadvantages and victim statuses that a person can claim for herself, the more qualified she is to speak to the culture with moral authority. If you are a poor, black, woman, who's a lesbian, you outrank everyone else in moral superiority and cultural capital. But an older, upper-middle class, white male—who *knows* he's a male—that person just needs to shut up and be quiet, because he has no idea what it's like to be a victim.

Our culture has disciplined its people to believe that the more *offended* someone is, the more *right* they are. Our culture's most celebrated heroes seem to be those who have been able to project themselves as the greatest victims of a majority culture dominated by "income inequality," "racism," "patriarchy," and "homophobia" and "transphobia." And so now, in our culture, it's actually become cool to be a victim. When you combine that mentality with a radically-politicized media, the ease with which that media may disseminate falsehood as if it were truth, and social media's ability to spread information on a potentially worldwide platform without the accountability of peer-reviewed journalism, any quasi-plausible accusation—no matter how outrageous its content, no matter how reputable its victim—is regarded as true until proven false. And that means that the one accused in the matter is guilty until proven innocent. This is throwing garbage against the wall to see what might stick. And when something *doesn't* stick, and they're called on it, they just throw more garbage at the wall.

Now, this phenomenon—that the accused is guilty until proven innocent—approaches the epitome of injustice, biblically defined. And that's nothing if not ironic, because, more often than not, those who lend credence to these salacious tales by passing along unsubstantiated accusations as if they were settled fact style themselves the mavens and protectors of social

justice! And the reason this is so heinous is because of how great the potential for destruction is! In James chapter 3, James reminds us that great forests are set ablaze by such a small fire that is the unglorified human tongue. He calls the tongue “the very world of iniquity,” and says that it is “set on fire by hell” itself! He says, “It is a restless evil, and full of deadly poison”!

Slander is Murderous

There’s a passage of Scripture concerning the harmfulness of gossip and slander that is especially striking and easily overlooked. That text is Leviticus 19 and verse 16, and I invite you to turn there with me. In this section of Leviticus 19, the Law of God is outlining what it means for the worshiper of God to be a good neighbor. Verses 11 and 12 outlaw theft, deception, and lying. Verse 13 forbids the oppression of one’s neighbor through robbery or through the withholding of earned wages. Verse 14 prohibits malice toward the disabled, verse 15 mandates impartial judgment, and verse 18 is the Second Greatest Commandment in the Law: to love your neighbor as yourself.

Well in Leviticus 19:16, we have our text. The Lord states: “You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am Yahweh.” The Hebrew word translated “slanderer” is the word *rakiyl*. It was used to describe an itinerant merchant who peddled drugs and spices from town to town. And as he would travel to different places to sell his products, he would interact with a lot of people. And over time he’d accumulate quite a bit of unflattering information about the different people he’d done business with from village to village. And he would share that information with others when it suited him. And so eventually the term *rakiyl* came to be used of a “talebearer,” as the King James translates it—someone who carried tales from house to house, unto the advantage of himself and the defamation of others (Gill).

In Jeremiah’s day, Judah was overrun with such worthless people. And Jeremiah warned the honest ones against them. In Jeremiah 9:4–5 he writes, “Let everyone be on guard against his neighbor, And do not trust any brother; Because every brother deals craftily, And every neighbor goes about as a *slanderer*. Everyone deceives his neighbor And does not speak the truth, They have taught their tongue to speak lies; They weary themselves committing iniquity.” Paul speaks of this same problem in the New Testament, especially among younger widows, as the case would have it. In 1 Timothy 5:13 he says, “They also learn to be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention.” And I dare say, that description does not only apply to young widows.

The great Bible commentator, Matthew Henry, wrote in his comments on Leviticus 19:16, “We are all forbidden to do anything injurious to our neighbor’s good name. . . . It is as bad an office as a man can put himself into to be the publisher of every man’s faults, divulging what was

secret, aggravating crimes, and making the worst of everything that was amiss, with design to blast and ruin men's reputation, and to sow discord among neighbors." "As bad an office as a man can put himself into." The 18th-century Baptist Pastor, John Gill, said in his comments on this passage, "Such a man is a detestable person, and ought not to be encouraged." This is the slanderer, the gossip. The one who publishes faults, reveals secrets, sows discord, and ruins reputations. And the two words are a little bit different. *Slander* implies that someone is speaking what they know to be false. *Gossip* doesn't concern itself with the truthfulness or falsehood of the report. Even if the account were true, gossip includes passing along such unsubstantiated accusations as would be injurious or damaging to the reputation of someone else.

Now, what I want you to zero in on is the synonymous parallelism in Leviticus 19:16. "You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor." This is not just Moses jumping from thought to thought. "Going about as a slanderer" is equated with "acting against the life of your neighbor." Literally, the phrase is, "Do not stand against the blood of your neighbor." And the force of that text needs to land on us. "Slander? Just repeating unsubstantiated information about someone, put on the same moral level as premeditated murder?" Yes. That's exactly right.

And Scripture couldn't be any clearer. Turn with me to Proverbs chapter 11. Proverbs 11 verse 9 says, "With his *mouth* the godless man *destroys* his neighbor." The mouth has the power of destruction. Two verses later in verse 11, we're told, "By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, But by the mouth of the wicked it is torn down." Entire cities are torn down by the mouth of the wicked. One verse after that, verse 12, says, "He who despises his neighbor lacks sense, But a man of understanding keeps silent." So the man of understanding who keeps silent is contrasted with the one who despises his neighbor, and, lacking sense, apparently does not keep silent. There's a correlation between speaking about what you shouldn't be speaking about, and hatred of your neighbor. And, as the previous verses mentioned, not just hatred, but destruction of your neighbor. And then turn over to chapter 12. And look at verse 6. The text says, "The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood." Solomon personifies wicked words by styling them as premeditating murderers, lying in wait to shed blood. In Ezekiel 22 verse 9, God says of the wicked rulers of Israel, "Slandrous men have been in you for the purpose of shedding blood." Again, there's this connection between slander and blood shedding.

The slanderer necessarily acts against the life of his neighbor. And in our day of unsubstantiated accusations being hurled all over the place—from news media, to social media, from the grapevine of the church pews to the weekly Zoom meetings—it shouldn't be that hard for us to imagine. Some salacious, horrifying accusation is made against a somewhat public person, and almost immediately that person is found guilty in the court of public opinion—at least until they can clear their name beyond a reasonable doubt. Entire livelihoods can be destroyed by the circulation of just one unsubstantiated claim, if it's juicy enough.

Turn over to 1 Kings chapter 21 for an illustration of that. 1 Kings 21 records the story of Naboth's Vineyard. A man named Naboth had a vineyard beside the palace of Ahab, the wicked king of Israel. And Ahab liked it and offered to buy it from him. But Naboth didn't want to sell it, and Ahab sunk into depression because he couldn't have Naboth's vineyard. But Ahab's wife, Jezebel, a wicked and detestable woman, comes in and basically says, "What are you crying about? You're the most powerful man in Israel! If you want the vineyard you can take the vineyard! Relax, weak man. I'll get you your vineyard!"

And we pick up the story in verse 8. "So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, and sent letters to the elders and to the nobles who were living with Naboth in his city. Now she wrote in the letters, saying, 'Proclaim a fast and seat Naboth at the head of the people; and seat two worthless men before him, and let them testify against him, saying, "You cursed God and the king." Then take him out and stone him to death.' So the men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them, just as it was written in the letters which she had sent them. They proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth at the head of the people. Then the two worthless men came in and sat before him; and the worthless men testified against him, even against Naboth, before the people, saying, 'Naboth cursed God and the king.' So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death with stones."

Jezebel's murderous plan does not succeed without worthless men who are willing to slander Naboth and so act against his life in the most literal sense. Proverbs 22:1 says, "A good name is to be more desired than great wealth." And whether it's bearing false witness in official legal proceedings, betraying confidence, or simply repeating unflattering stories that bring shame and sow division, to speak evil of someone is to act against their life. Proverbs 10:12 says that it is hatred that stirs up strife, and in Matthew 5:21–22 Jesus clearly teaches that anger and hatred are but the committing of murder in one's heart.

Instead, the believer is commanded, Ephesians 4:31, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice." This is just after the command in verse 29 to speak only words that edify, and that give grace to those who hear. Colossians 3:8 says, "But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and [filthy language] from your mouth." And 1 Peter 2:1 says, since we have been born again of imperishable seed, "Therefore, [put] aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander."

Charles Spurgeon, in his *Morning and Evening* comments on Leviticus 19:16, says this: "The reputations of the Lord's people should be very precious in our sight, and we should count it shame to help the devil to dishonor the Church and the name of the Lord. Some tongues need a bridle rather than a spur. Many glory in pulling down their brethren, as if thereby they raised themselves. Noah's wise sons cast a mantle over their father, and he who exposed him earned a

fearful curse. We may ourselves one of these dark days need forbearance and silence from our brethren; let us render it cheerfully to those who require it now. Be this our family rule, and our personal bond—SPEAK EVIL OF NO MAN.”

Slander is murderous. Do you want to kill your neighbor? Slander his character. Or pass along an unsubstantiated accusation.

But what if you don’t want to kill your neighbor? What if you actually want to obey what the Lord Jesus calls the Second Greatest Commandment in the Law, the one that comes just two verses later in Leviticus 19:18—to love your neighbor as yourself? What should a faithful follower of Jesus do when you’re confronted with slanderous reports and accounts of unsubstantiated accusations? Well, I’d like to take some time and give **four directives** for just such a situation.

I. Don’t Stoke the Fire

Number one: **Don’t stoke the fire.** The **first directive** for what to do when you’re made aware of unsubstantiated reports that reflect negatively upon someone is that you must not repeat them. And that needs to be said first because that’s precisely the natural inclination of our unglorified flesh. We hear a juicy rumor that strains credulity; we can barely believe it ourselves. Maybe it’s something that’s terribly disappointing, something we could not imagine to be true of the person we’re hearing about. Or maybe it’s something that’s not surprising at all, and it’s another disappointing example of something we’ve long lamented from that person. Either way, we hear it, and we seek solace in venting our frustrations to our friends and having them affirm our biblically-unfettered feelings. But friends: Scripture explicitly condemns this.

Turn to Proverbs 26, verses 20 and 21. It’s this text from which I draw the language of this first point, **don’t stoke the fire.** That text says, “For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down. Like charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife.” If, as James says, the tongue is like a fire that sets entire forests ablaze, we need to remember that if we deprive a fire of wood there’s nothing for it to burn. So also, the sage says, if we deprive a controversy of whispering repetitions of unsubstantiated claims—or shouting repetitions of unsubstantiated claims, as the case may be—if we deprive the controversy of that, it eventually peters out and dies down like a fire with no wood to burn. But the opposite is true as well. If you’re a contentious person, rather than remove the wood from the fire, you only add to it and stoke the flames. You kindle strife, and you act against the life of your neighbor.

So **don’t stoke the fire.** Don’t repeat the slander. Don’t pass on the juicy rumor. Don’t parrot unsubstantiated claims. Don’t reply to the anonymous Twitter troll with eight followers and give

him a platform for his nonsense. Proverbs 10:18 says, “He who spreads slander is a fool.” And again, as we’ve already quoted, Proverbs 11:12 says, “A man of understanding keeps silent.”

And don’t even repeat it in vague generalities that, you know, leave out the gory details, but nevertheless give just enough information to make your hearers curious. Flip back to Proverbs 18. And note in verse 8, it says, “The words of a whisperer are like dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts of the body.” You need to recognize that it is just naturally interesting for unglorified sinners like you and me to listen to gossip. When people tell you about a matter—even if they only start talking about it and leave enough details out to soothe their conscience that they’re not divulging the whole story—you are hooked. You need to know now. It’s like dainty morsels—like delicious treats—going down into your soul. And once you have one, you’ve just got to have another. You need more of them.

They’re like those chocolate-covered crepes that Costco sells at Christmastime. They are *so* good! And they’re so light, so that when you eat one, you just can’t help having another one. And then another one. And then *another* one, and before you know it the whole tray is gone! Solomon says: Gossip is like that! Somebody says, “So did you hear what happened?” And you say, “No!” And then they say something that you realize right away you shouldn’t be hearing. And that’s the first chocolate-covered crepe. And though you know you should just ignore it, leave it alone, change the subject, you can’t have just one of those dainty morsels, can you? And so you press for more, and more, and more. And before you know it you’re acting against the life of your neighbor.

So what’s that mean? In the illustration I just gave, we’re the ones being spoken to. But let’s apply it to us as the speaker. Friends, you need to recognize that if you “whisper” like this, you are unfairly laying a snare—not only for the person you’re gossiping *about*, but also for the person you’re gossiping *to*, as well. Even when you try to say very little, and just keep it vague, and to just give them enough but not too much, you’re giving them that first chocolate candy. You’re tempting them to push for more information—information that you’re more likely to give them once you know they’re interested and itching to hear more. Friends, don’t act against the life of your neighbor whose reputation is tarnished by your words, and don’t spread a net for the steps of those tempted to listen to you.

Let the fire die down. Instead of acting against their life, love them, as is only fitting for a Christian to do. Proverbs 17:9 says, “He who conceals a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends.” What’s so interesting about that is the sage acknowledges that it’s a *transgression* that the loving person conceals! Now, of course, there are times when we must expose sin, and there are proper channels for that. You go to your brother first, you seek to win him over, if he doesn’t repent you take two or three along with you, and so on. There’s a way to do that. But the loving brother or sister takes no delight in exposing the

shame of their fellow believers. 1 Peter 4:8 says, “Love covers a multitude of sins.” There’s this instinct for love to cover—to not broadcast the shame of the beloved. **Don’t stoke the fire.**

II. Obey the Duty of Disbelief

A **second directive** comes from Proverbs 17 verse 4. Number one: Don’t stoke the fire. Number two: **Obey the duty of disbelief**. You see, not only must you not repeat slander and gossip; Scripture commands you to not even listen to it. Proverbs 17:4 says, “An evildoer listens to wicked lips; A liar pays attention to a destructive tongue.”

When we hear something we know we shouldn’t be hearing, we often don’t know how to react. We don’t want to come off as holier-than-thou with respect to the person we’re talking with. We’re uneasy about rebuking that person for repeating things they shouldn’t be repeating. So in a cowardly fashion, we awkwardly smile, look away, stay silent, and listen. But Proverbs 17:4 says that it’s sin even to listen to gossip, even to entertain it as plausible unless it is substantiated. So if someone is in the middle of telling you something you know you shouldn’t be hearing, rather than awkwardly hoping in silence that they’ll just stop talking, you need stop them—even in mid-sentence if necessary—and allow them to have no audience with you until the biblical standards for corroboration have been met.

And until they have, you have a **duty to disbelieve** the accusations. Now, understand what I mean by that. I do not mean that you should accuse the person of lying to you; what they’re saying might actually be true. But if the biblical standards of corroboration haven’t been met, the Word of God forbids you to treat those claims as if they are settled fact, and it calls for you to suspend judgment until the facts are known.

Now, what *are* those standards of corroboration? Deuteronomy 19:15 lays them out well. Let’s turn there. Deuteronomy 19 verse 15 says, “A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.” Jesus repeats this standard in Matthew 18:16 as He gives the disciples instruction on church discipline: “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.’” Paul also cites Deuteronomy 19:15 in 2 Corinthians 13:1, where he speaks of his visits to Corinth as “witnesses” against their sinful behavior. He says, “This is the third time I am coming to you. ‘Every fact must be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’” And he refers to it again in 1 Timothy 5:19, where he addresses how to deal with accusations made specifically against elders. 1 Timothy 5:19 says, “Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.” He says there must be direct, firsthand knowledge

of the sin issue that is the substance of the accusation, corroborated by at least two and perhaps even three separate individuals who also have firsthand knowledge.

Now why is that? Why is that standard so high? Because, as Proverbs 18:17 says—a proverb I would challenge each of you to commit to memory—“The first to plead his case seems right, until another comes and examines him.” What’s that saying? It’s saying that you can only hear one side of a story at a time! And sometimes, when you hear a piece of salacious gossip, you feel like the person who’s just been implicated by that negative report is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt! “There is just no other possible way to explain this except to conclude that that guy is a scoundrel!”

But then what happens? You eventually hear the other side of the story! You hear the explanation of events and circumstances that formed the context to the actions and statements that were passed along to you. And you start to say, “Hmm. Wow. Um. Well, I guess it wasn’t as cut and dried as I thought.” “The first to plead his case seems right, until another comes and examines him.” And so if we haven’t heard both sides, we should be quick to listen and slow to speak (Jas 1:19). Because, as Proverbs 18:13 says—another one worth memorizing—“He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him.” If you render a judgment on a matter before hearing both sides of the story and having the facts confirmed by two or three witnesses, you traffic in folly and court shame.

And you also risk acting against the life of your neighbor. Why? Because this mandate for multiple witnesses to substantiate accusations is only put in place to ensure that justice be maintained and that the lives of men and women are not needlessly destroyed by a single malicious witness. Because sometimes, even if you don’t intend to pass along false accusations, the person you heard them from does. Or the person who *they* heard them from does.

Now, what if this standard of biblical corroboration is not met? What if there are not two or three witnesses that have direct, firsthand knowledge of the sin in question? Then friends: you have **the duty of disbelief**. 1 Timothy 5:19 says it plainly, “Do not receive [such] an accusation.” Don’t receive it! If someone comes to you with a distressing rumor about someone, but it’s a matter that has not been confirmed by two or three credible witnesses, then, out of love for your neighbor who is being accused, you have **a duty to disbelieve** that accusation. You must move forward as if you didn’t hear what you heard until it has been substantiated according to the biblical prescriptions. And the moment you give credence to unsubstantiated gossip, even in your own heart, you violate these texts of Scripture and act against the life of your neighbor.

Now, I have to make an important qualification, here. None of that is inconsistent with caring well for those who may be in danger. If someone is coming to you to report a crime, they may not be gossiping; they may be crying out for help. In that case, you can take a complainant’s

allegations of abuse seriously without treating their unsubstantiated accusations as if they're settled fact. There's value in saying, "I hear you. I receive what you're saying. I have no reason to think that you'd not be telling me the truth. Let's get you out of that house, let's contact the appropriate authorities, and let's get to the bottom of this biblically." But none of that means that you're ready to treat the accused individual as if they've already been proven guilty. Sadly, because of the prevalence of false accusations, *two* people are potential victims in this situation, and it's our duty to neglect neither and to serve both. We can't do that if our knee-jerk response is to *ignore* the allegations, but neither can we do it if our knee-jerk response is to *receive* those allegations uncritically and without the proper biblical protocols for investigation.

So don't do it. Don't stoke the fire. And **obey the duty of disbelief**.

III. Separate When Necessary

A **third directive** is **separate when necessary**. Besides not repeating unsubstantiated accusations, besides not listening to them and not believing them—Scripture admonishes us not even to associate with those who gossip. Turn Proverbs chapter 20. Proverbs 20 verse 19 says, "He who goes about as a slanderer reveals secrets, therefore do not associate with a gossip." In other words, you have a duty not only to suspend judgment upon unsubstantiated accusations. You have a duty to separate from those who speak them.

If someone demonstrates that they're going to persist in repeating slanderous charges which haven't been corroborated by two or three firsthand witnesses—or even if they're in the habit of repeating true stories that just cast people in the worst of lights, always saying something negative about somebody—they are engaging in divisive behavior that threatens the health of Christ's Church. This is not—as some claim—defending the sheep. It is not loving, protecting, serving, or edifying to the sheep. It is only harmful to them, for the reasons we've seen.

And so Scripture commands us to root out that influence from our lives by refusing even to associate with someone who has a pattern of talebearing. Not only will we protect ourselves from the malignancy of gossip, but by **separating when necessary** we communicate to the one gossiping that their behavior is harmful to the body of Christ and therefore unacceptable. "Hey brother. I'm sorry. I've got to stop you right there." "What? What's the problem?" "Well, to be honest, you've just got a lot of negative things to say about a lot of people. And it's a pattern of behavior that I just don't want to expose myself to." We need to have that (yes) very difficult, very awkward conversation. On social media, we need to unfriend and unfollow those professional Christian gossip columnists—the muckraking yellow-journalists who appoint themselves to the "ministry" of vocational busybodyism and scandalmongering. It wouldn't exist if there weren't a market for it. And there should be no market for it among anyone who considers themselves a Christian. Again: "Do not associate with a gossip."

It's no wonder, that Paul speaks so strongly about the church's need to protect the flock from such people. Romans 16:17 says, "Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who *cause dissensions* and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them." And in Titus 3, verses 10 and 11, Paul writes, "Reject a *factious* man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned." Causing dissension and breaking down into factions are the inevitable results of slander and gossip.

When you listen to malicious reports against someone, but you don't bother to hear the other side of the story and confirm the facts on the testimony of two or three witnesses, and you just believe those negative reports, what happens? You nurse a bad opinion of that person in your heart. You become angry. "How could he do such a thing?" "Where does she get off thinking she can say something like that?" And eventually you become bitter, and you hold yourself aloof from that person. Dissension exists in that relationship now, and the other person doesn't even know it!

And so those who are characterized by this kind of behavior are to be **separated** from. Again, Titus 3:10: "Reject a factious man after a first and second warning." The elders of the church—as shepherds of Christ's flock—are called to protect the sheep from those who are intent upon acting against the lives of their neighbors. And so there comes a time when we must **separate when necessary**.

IV. Speak Truth, Dwell on the Praiseworthy

Don't stoke the fire. Obey the duty of disbelief. Separate when necessary. A **fourth directive** for the faithful follower of Christ who has been confronted with slanderous reports or accounts of unsubstantiated accusations, is, number four: to **speak truth, and dwell on the praiseworthy**. Don't just put off slanderous speech and malicious gossip. Put on the God-honoring, edifying speaking of truth to one another.

Turn to Ephesians chapter 4. In Ephesians 4, verses 17 to 24, Paul speaks about the believer's responsibility to lay aside the old self, which, he says, is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and to put on the new self, which, he says, has been created in the likeness of God, in righteousness and holiness of the truth. "You're not unbelievers anymore, so don't live like unbelievers anymore!" And then, in verse 25, the first practical implication of that is: "Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another."

We are members of one another! If we belong to Jesus, we are members of His body, and therefore we belong to one another as much as we belong to Him! Since we are members of one

another, we ought not to traffic in falsehood and unsubstantiated claims and thereby act against one another's life. Why? Because their life *is* our life! If we act against the life of our brother or sister in the body of Christ, we act against ourselves! Against our own lives! No one ever hated his own flesh! Proverbs 11:29 says, "He who troubles his own house will inherit wind, and the foolish will be servant to the wisehearted." Proverbs 14:1 says, "The wise woman builds her house, But the foolish [one] tears it down with her own hands." We don't want to be foolish. We don't want to inherit wind. And therefore we ought not to trouble and tear down our own house. We ought to work to ensure that the Church of Jesus Christ is devoid of gossip and slander.

And so instead of falsehood—or at least instead of what we don't know to be true—we ought to speak what we *can* know to be true! We ought to speak truth to one another in the body of Christ! We ought to occupy our thoughts and conversations with the truth of God's Word! We ought to heed Paul's exhortation in Philippians 4:8: to dwell on whatever is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, any excellence and anything worthy of praise. Our hearts and our minds ought to be occupied with the glories of God revealed in Christ and His great salvation! Since we're filled with the Spirit of Truth, we ought to overflow in speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Psalm 33 verse 1 says, "*Praise* is becoming to the upright!" It is becoming, it is fitting, for the upright—those whom God has made new through faith in Christ—it's only right for their lips to be preoccupied with praise and thanksgiving to God! Not with malicious gossip concerning their neighbor!

Conclusion

And that's really the key to all of this. This is the kind of conduct that ought to mark those who have been saved by grace alone through faith alone in the Gospel of Christ alone. But if you're here this morning and you're not a genuine believer in Christ—if you haven't confessed and turned from your sins against a holy God, if you haven't abandoned confidence in yourself and your good works to commend you to God—then you haven't been born again through the imperishable Word of God. You haven't laid aside the old self and put on the new self created in the likeness of God. You don't have the Holy Spirit of God dwelling inside you, warring against your natural sinfulness and generating the supernatural power to walk in holiness. Friend, you're lost. You're in the bondage of your iniquity.

And so if you hear the standard for our speech as outlined in the Word of God this morning—the standard that Jesus speaks of in Matthew 12:36, when He says that "every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned"—if you hear that standard, and you're thinking, "Wow, my life is not even close to that standard!" friend, if you're outside of Christ, there's no way your life *could* reach that standard! It's an *impossible* standard apart from the sanctifying grace of God that comes to us in Jesus! You're still dead in your sins. You need

to be born again. And as 1 Peter 1 says, we are born again only through the proclamation of the living and enduring Word of God as preached in the Gospel.

And that Gospel is the Good News that, though each and every human being has sinned against God and is therefore liable to the just judgment of His eternal wrath, and though every man or woman is absolutely powerless to atone for their own sins through some sort of penance or moral improvement, nevertheless God sent His own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ—fully God and fully man—to live as a man—to live the perfect life that we were commanded to live but failed to live, and to die on the cross to bear the wrath of God that was due to sinners like you and me, who are condemned by our words.

And that He was dead and buried, but on the third day He rose from the grave in victory over sin and death—just as He'd promised He would—demonstrating that full atonement for sin had been accomplished. And this Gospel is the Good News that the work of the Lord Jesus Christ can count for *you*—that your sins can be forgiven, that every word of gossip and slander that you've ever spoken can be nailed to the cross, and that you can be credited with the perfect record of the righteousness of Christ, upon which you can stand before God and be accepted—if only you receive it as a gift of God's grace through faith alone, apart from any work of your own. Dear sinner, confess your sin and guilt before God. Repent and turn away from it. And put all your hope and trust for righteousness and acceptance with God in the doing and the dying of Another—of the Lord Jesus Christ!

And to my brothers and sisters in the body of Christ—and especially to the precious flock of GraceLife—I want to add one more thing. Many of you have noticed that, with the recent spate of attacks that have come against our Pastor, and our Church, and our Seminary, we've largely chosen not to dignify such scandalmongering with any public response. After all, Proverbs 26:4 says, "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you become like him," and Proverbs 18:2 reminds us that we'd have little hope of persuading those whose minds are already made up when it says, "A fool does not delight in understanding, But only in revealing his own mind." But I do realize that to those poised to believe the worst, such silence looks like evasiveness and creates suspicion. In the case of the public, that's fine; as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:12, "our proud confidence is the testimony of our conscience." And in 1 Corinthians 4:3, "To us it is a very small thing if we are examined by any human court," especially the court of public opinion.

But in case any of you, the precious sheep of our own flock, are tempted to be troubled by some of these "reports"—if these accusations have reached your ears and have created concerns or doubts in your mind about the integrity of those who are laboring over you in the Lord—I want you to know that you should always feel extremely free to ask us about them, especially me and Phil. We understand that troublemakers are often successful in troubling sincere people. And though we think it's often foolish to enter the public fray, we do want to be open and accountable

to you, the flock of God among us whom the Lord has given us to shepherd and care for. You should never feel like any question is off-limits, or that you'd be regarded unfavorably for asking questions. We would only ask that you believe the best of us, and that you bring any concerns to us directly and in accordance with biblical principles of communication.

But ultimately, my plea to you who have trusted in Christ and know the sweetness of His forgiveness, is this: may we who have so much to praise God for—so much truth to delight in—may our thoughts and our speech be preoccupied with what is lovely and praiseworthy, rather than what is base and corrupt. May we embrace the way of wisdom and put folly far from our house. May God keep us from acting against the lives of our neighbors, and may He always and in every place vindicate the cause of righteousness.