

**“The Tongue of the Self-Trusting”**  
**Proverbs 26:17-28**  
**June 7, 2009**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Many proverbs throughout this book deal with various sins of the tongue. The section before us today lists four different sins with escalating levels of severity. The first sin of the tongue relates to the busybody who meddles in a dispute between two other people. He naively wades into the conflict uninvited, thinking that he can assist them in resolving their dispute. Verse 27 records the outcome. **“Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears.”** A dog’s ears are particularly sensitive, and a dog is likely to interpret as a hostile act someone who grabs its ears. The meddler had imagined his quarreling friends coming together in unity after he inserts himself in their dispute, but the only unity he produces is to unify the two of them against him.

The second offender with the tongue is the person who underestimates the damaging power of words. He deceives his neighbor in some way that brings harm upon the neighbor, and then wants to undo it all by saying, “Just kidding.” But words are far too powerful to be so easily erased, and damage can be done that will be long-lasting. So this deceiver who wants to erase his damaging words is like a **“madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death”** (v. 18). We would say he’s like a deranged man with an AK-47 automatic.

We’re going to focus this morning on the third and fourth sins of the tongue described in these verses. One of them is called a “whisperer” in our translation and refers to any kind of self-centered speech behind someone’s back, such as gossip or slander. The second is the sin of flattery, which is another example of self-centered speech, but with a different goal than the speech of the whisperer. The whisperer’s goal is really to escape guilt, while the goal of the flatterer is to control and manipulate others for his own purposes. The whisperer speaks behind someone’s back what he would never say to their face, while the flatterer says to someone’s face what he would never say behind their back. Both sins are fueled by a heart that hasn’t learned to trust God, so it depends fully upon itself. Let’s look more carefully now at these two sins of the tongue.

**I. The Whisperer Trusts Himself in an Attempt to Escape Guilt.**

The word “whisperer” appears twice in verses 20-22 of our passage. The difficulty involved in translating this word can be seen in the variety of ways it is done in English translations. The old King James and the New King James versions translate it “talebearer”, while in the NIV it is translated “gossip.” In the New Jerusalem Bible it is translated “slanderer.” The Bible in Basic English has

the most cumbersome translation, weighing in at eight words in order to translate one four letter Hebrew word. It translates it as “one who says evil of his neighbor secretly.” If we limit ourselves to a one-word translation, probably the translation in our pew Bibles, the ESV, is the best one. Obviously, this is not talking about literal whispering, much of which is done out of consideration of others. If your first-grader is in church and needs to go to the bathroom, we’re all glad to have him inform his parents of that fact using a whisper instead of a normal voice. This word is talking about whispering that has an evil intent. It is the negative report given of another in private that you would not want to be made public. This sin wants the safety of anonymity while it runs down another person. So the cumbersome translation above is not far off the mark: “one who says evil of his neighbor secretly.” This could include both gossip and slander, which is why I don’t like either of those translations. Do you know the difference between gossip and slander? I have heard people defend gossip by saying that what they said was appropriate because it was true. By definition, gossip is true. Gossip is saying something negative about another that is true, while slander is a negative report that is false. Both are covered under this word.

Verse 20 describes the effect of whisperers upon relationships. **“For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.”** One of the common weapons firefighters use to put out forest fires is the firebreak. It is simply a clearing that is made in the path of the fire, so that when the fire reaches the clearing, an area where there is no more fuel for the fire, the fire spends its fuel and dies out. The secret sharing of bad reports of other people acts as fuel for the fires of dissension. So if a community like a church is full of strife and contention, all that is required for it to die out is for whispering to cease. If there could be a successful moratorium on the whispering of bad reports, the strife would soon die. Verse 21 describes the opposite side of this. **“As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.”** Whisperers fuel the fires of strife.

We know that Satan loves to bring dissension to all communities, and there is no community he more wants to destroy than the church. What these verses say to us is that when we secretly share negative reports of others, we are serving Satan’s purposes. We sometimes seek to disguise the evil nature of whispering through some type of sugarcoating. So someone might add a prayer of blessing to words of gossip. “Someone needs to help Barbara. She just doesn’t know how to put together outfits very well. Bless her heart!” Or we sugarcoat it by putting it in the context of sharing a prayer concern. “I am really concerned about John. We need to pray for him, because he’s really not doing well spiritually.” But no matter how we might attempt to disguise them, these words still serve the purposes of Satan by bringing strife to the church.

Verse 22 tells us why these secret reports of evil have such power to bring harm. **“The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.”** They have an ability to penetrate. Though the

speaker of such words may view them as superficial and quickly forgotten, the hearer does not receive them in such a way. They penetrate deeply into the inner part of the hearer and play a major role in forming his opinion of the person being spoken about. Have you ever had that experience of hearing a negative report about someone you haven't met, and having that report play a large part in your view of that person? Then you meet the person and get to know them, and slowly find that they are not that way at all. But it takes a while for the initial report of their bad nature to be dispelled.

How does God's word tell us to fight the sin of whispering? There are several clues we get from the three verses we have just considered. If the words of the whisperer are like these tasty morsels that penetrate deeply, one way to fight them is for us all not to have such hungry ears for them. Have you ever noticed how a simple word of caution can stop a word of gossip? If you hear gossip coming, it can often be silenced by saying something like, "If I can't be part of the solution to this, I would rather not hear it."

The definition of this sin provides us with another help in defeating it. If a whisperer is someone who secretly shares bad reports of others, one of the effective ways of dealing with this sin is to remove the "secretly" part. If you do have a concern that a friend is not doing well spiritually, it would be gossip to share that concern with a third party in order to ask him to pray about it. But to share it with the person himself would be the act of a loving friend. **"Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend"** (27:5-6). Greater candor between friends helps fight this sin of whispering.

But as anyone knows who has tried to fight this sin, the previous two points, true though they are, aren't nearly enough to fight it successfully. There is a spiritual root to this sin, and any successful attempt at dealing with it must uncover it at this root. The root can be exposed when we consider why it is that we enjoy so much making someone else to be the bad guy? The answer can be seen in the very first sin committed. When Adam sinned by eating the forbidden fruit, there were only two others around who could be made to be the bad guys—Eve and God—and he managed in one sentence to make them both to be blameworthy. After he ate the forbidden fruit, God asked him, **"Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"** Adam said, **"The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate"** (Gen. 3:12). The root is exposed here for all to see. We blame others and make them out to be the bad guys in order to escape guilt. Like Adam, we don't even spare God in our blame game, finding him at fault for a variety of ills in our world. I see no difference between what Adam does here and what many continue to do in finding God at fault for bad things happening. Did God know Adam and Eve were going to sin? Of course he did. He is God, and he knows all things. Could God have stopped Adam from sinning? Of course he could have. He could have intervened by stopping the serpent, or by any number of means at his disposal. Adam names one of the things God could have done differently that would have

stopped this sin. He could have created Eve differently so that she wouldn't have sinned. But God will hear none of Adam's blame shifting, and makes it clear that he places the blame squarely on Adam's shoulders. The key to dealing with the sin of whispering at its root is to accept blame and stop trying to shift it elsewhere. We will continue to make everyone else the bad guy until we can say, "I am the bad guy." It is when we accept blame that God delivers us from it through the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf. When our hearts thrill to hear or speak a bad report on another, it is because we have not accepted God's bad report on us. And until we have accepted God's bad report, we will not be able to receive his good report through Jesus. The sin of whispering is put away as we learn to thrill at the forgiveness we have in Christ.

## II. The Flatterer Trusts Himself in an Attempt to Control Others.

The remaining verses of the chapter (23-28) talk about the flatterer. This is the person whose smooth talk is a disguise for his evil heart. He may speak graciously, but **"there are seven abominations in his heart"** (v. 25). The number seven is often used to symbolize completion, meaning that his heart is completely evil and self-centered. The flatterer seeks to manipulate others with his tongue. He gives compliments that make it seem as if he is interested in your welfare, but his only interest is himself, and language is nothing more than a tool to get what he wants.

There is a good example of this sin at work in the life of King Saul, who attempted to bring harm to David through flattery. After David slew the Philistine giant, Goliath, Saul sent him out to fight the rest of the Philistines. David was so successful that the women started singing a song about him that went like this. **"Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands"** (1 Sam. 18:7). When David was credited with ten times as many Philistines as David, Saul was angry and began to plot David's downfall. He came to David as a flatterer, offering to give his eldest daughter in marriage to David, if only David would continue to fight the Lord's battles against the Philistines. Then we read in the text Saul's real thoughts. **"For Saul thought, 'Let not my hand be against him, but let the hand of the Philistines be against him'"** (18:17). He wanted David to die at the hands of the Philistines, and he attempted to manipulate the situation through the flattery of making David part of his family. But he really didn't intend on giving his daughter to David, because we read that when she came of age for marriage she was given to another.

What are some examples of flattery in our day? I think one of them is a word that sounds similar to flattery—flirting. Flirting is the self-centered attempt to flatter someone into thinking that you like them, when its real purpose is for the one flirting to feel good about him or herself by getting someone to find them desirable. I remember once when I was 13 or 14 years old walking around on the campus of Auburn University before a football game. I was approached by this

really cute college girl who was selling something. She talked to me in that tone of voice that communicated to me that she was really interested in me. I would have purchased whatever she was selling, which I did. That was somewhat innocuous, but there are more serious examples of that. Why do so many people fall for Ponzi schemes that lead to the loss of their money? Part of it can undoubtedly be explained by greed, but it is also a case of flattery. The one trying to sell the scheme tries to flatter his would-be investor by suggesting that it is only the financially savvy who can really understand and appreciate what a good deal this is.

The author tells us not to believe the flatterer (v. 25), no matter how gracious and smooth his words. Our chief ally in not believing the flatterer can be found in our own humility. The flatterer seeks to work through our own pride to manipulate us into thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought, in order to tempt us to do what he wants us to do. That's what Satan did with Eve in the garden. **"When you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God"** (Gen. 3:5). It was through humility that David resisted Saul, saying, **"Who am I... that I should be son-in-law to the king?"** (1 Sam. 18:18). Humility served Jesus well as he was resisting the flatteries of Satan during his temptation. Just as he had tempted Eve to be as God, so he tempted Jesus with **"all the kingdoms of the world and their glory"** (Matt. 4:8), if he would only bow his knee in worship to Satan. But Jesus knew that he was to walk the path of humility that his heavenly Father had appointed for him, and he refused to veer from that path.

## **CONCLUSION:**

It is as we follow Jesus and trust him that we can overcome these two sins of the tongue. As we have seen, both of these sins are forms of self-trust instead of trust in God. The whisperer makes another to be the bad guy so that he doesn't feel so guilty himself. The flatterer seeks to control others to accomplish his will. But it is through Jesus that guilt is dealt with, not through gossip. We don't need to make someone else out to be the bad guy because God himself made Jesus to be the bad guy when sin was placed upon him at the cross. God **"made him to be sin who knew no sin"** (2 Cor. 5:21). Remember how I mentioned last week the deficiency of that well-known definition of God's grace as his unmerited favor. While it is true that we don't merit God's favor, Jesus has merited it on our behalf. And we can put away flattery and all attempts at manipulating others because this same God who has showered his grace upon us in Jesus also is in control of our lives. We don't need to control things, because we have learned to trust his control as we rest in him.