

How We Must Depend on Holy Spirit to Tame Our Tongues

The first step to understanding why we do what we don't want to do begins with probing the root cause of the behavior.

Most of us exercise regular opportunities to repent from spreading a story we heard about a friend, neighbor or colleague. As we toss and turn in bed, trying to understand why our tongue betrayed us, answers evade us, and we pray for strength to do better tomorrow.

Mark Travers reported in *Psychology Today* that the average person gossips 52 minutes per day. He cited research that concludes "sanctions against gossip may be futile and underscore the importance of understanding gossip at a descriptive level."

Researchers define three categories of gossip:

Positive: flattery oriented.

Neutral: neutral observations about others.

Negative: malicious commentary.

The researchers concluded that 75% of all gossip fits the category of nonevaluative or neutral.

In a recent episode of the *Greenelines* podcast on the Charisma Podcast Network with author Susannah B. Lewis, she and I discussed many topics from her book *How May I Offend You Today?* Lewis offers "rants and revelations from a not-so-proper Southern lady" and opines with great clarity about "nipping gossip in the bud."

Lewis says, "Nipping the gossip bud is so hard to do, especially in these small Southern towns. I've been caught up

in some of the juiciest gossip while sitting on the bleachers at a ballfield. Then, I always ask myself, 'What? What just happened?'"

The answer to Lewis' question always comes from the Holy Spirit. Psychologists do their best to describe and categorize, but the Spirit of God brings conviction.

"I will tell you that I have conviction every time I run my mouth," Lewis says. "I thank God for His conviction—for that nudge to repent. Without that, I would be a mess. We all hear so many things, and we have this desire to run and tell everyone what we know.

"I say to the Lord, 'I can't spread this; it must stop with me,'" she adds. "I want to be more conscious of the words I share. I know we crave that juicy talk and love the excitement to share goodies with others. I don't want to be a person who causes more harm than good."

If we are to squelch the gossip monster, we must walk in the Spirit and "let no corrupt communication proceed out of [our] mouth" (Eph. 4:29a, KJV). The New Living Bible translates this biblical phrase as "Don't use foul or abusive language," while The Message paraphrase says bluntly, "Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth."

No matter how we describe it, gossip has the power to hurt us all. Careers have been broken, relationships destroyed and churches split through the power of misplaced words.

We shudder at the regular news stories that highlight pastors and other Christian leaders who have made an error—often multiple errors—in judgment. As a result, they lose their employment.

But we don't wait for the leader's repentance and potential restoration. Instead, we eagerly spread the ugly rumors. We delight in discussing another's sin but don't dare stop to

consider our own. As the Spirit intervenes, Jesus' words about logs and specks come to mind (see Matt. 7:5).

As the gossip virus spreads, it multiplies and morphs, escalating far above the original story. In the New Testament, James offers specific advice for dealing with gossip in relationships: "Do not speak evil of one another, brothers. He who speaks evil of his brother and judges his brother speaks evil of the law and judges the law. If you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge" (James 4:11, MEV).

When God's still, small voice urges us to stop a rumor before it starts, we must pray in the Spirit, asking God to help us "walk by the Spirit and [we] will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16b, NIV).

The only effective gossip inoculation comes from the Holy Spirit. {eo}

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