

Sermon for Sunday, March 8, 1981 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D. Pastor Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO 63105

"HOW TO START A FOREST FIRE"  
St. James 3:118

Text: "So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!" St. James 3:6

It is just incredible the way God has blessed this congregation in recent years. I understand that Christians across this city talk about what God is doing here. That is certainly no cause for pride on our part. We ought to be very humbled that God has chosen and anointed this congregation to use it for His purpose in a very special way. So what is happening here is not to our credit but to the glory of God. God has raised up this church in a special way to be His witness in this community. Some weeks ago I was talking with some of our officers and I said, "You know, at a time like this when God has used us in a very special way we need to be very vigilant against the attacks of the Devil." They said "Why do you say that?" I said, "It is because, if I were the Devil and I wanted to bring dishonor to the name of Jesus, one of the first things I would do would be to attack, destroy and cause to be a public shame, something that has gained notoriety for Christ. I think we are very vulnerable. I think we will be particularly an object of attack by the Devil." I said, "Churches that are dead and not alive--the Devil isn't interested in them. He has already got them. He is interested in destroying and damaging churches where the name of Jesus is glorified. We really need at this time in our congregational life to be vigilant that we not be attacked." Then yesterday at the Officers' Retreat our guest speaker was talking about the wolves that attack the flocks of God. He asked our officers this question--"Where are your vulnerable spots? Where are the places in your congregational life where a wolf could likely attack successfully." Well, that was a sobering thought. The one thing that can damage the witness of this congregation, one of the most serious potential wolves of Satan, is from within. As I think about it, one of the things that could do more damage and cause disharmony in this church would be gossip about one another that would destroy our unity and our fellowship in the Lord. We have some people in our church who feel very deeply about the ministry of healing. Suppose they start criticizing everybody else for not believing as they do. Or suppose there are those who are on fire for the Lord with enthusiasm and involved in Bible study and they begin to criticize those who are not that involved. Suppose those not so involved begin to criticize those who are involved. Or suppose those not so involved begin to criticize those involved for the fanaticism. You see, that kind of internal criticism of one another could engender a break or rupture in our fellowship that could be disastrous. That is the kind of thing the Devil is looking for. Nothing would please Satan more than to bring down the witness of this church.

This morning I want to talk about the person who gossips. Personally, I never gossip. Sometime I relay helpful information or give constructive criticism about others, but I never gossip! I know that is probably true in your case, too, so we will be talking about the person who is sitting next to you, or the neighbor who lives across the street! One of my seminary professors used to say that a person who gossips is like a car out of gear: the gossip puts his mind in neutral and let's his tongue idle on! I've always had a sneaking admiration for the lady in a church I once served who said, "I never say anything about anyone unless it is good--and, boy, is this good!"

There are three areas that I want to talk about this morning in terms of gossip. First, I would like for us to think together about what gossip says about the person who gossips. Second, to think together about what gossip says about the gossip's relationship to others. Third, to think together about what gossip says about the gossip's relationship to God.

Let us begin, then, by looking at what gossip has to say about the person who gossips. The psychology of gossip is a fascinating thing. It is certainly revealing to discover why we gossip. First, the psychology of gossip tells us that the person who gossips has a narrow intellectual field. That's a nice way of saying that a person is basically ignorant! As a result of this "limited intellectual interest," they turn to others as a source of conversation. You see, it doesn't take any intelligence to carry a tale--even a monkey carries one! So, a gossip is usually a person who has no adequate knowledge of a stimulating subject, hasn't read anything but the comic page, and isn't qualified to talk about anything.

Another psychological cause of gossip is sheer boredom. I grew up in a small community where nothing much exciting ever happened and I think the town gossiped just to create some excitement! Sometimes I think gossip is an occupational hazard of housewives. After you've made a bed, or swept the floor, or washed the dishes four or five hundred times, there isn't just a great deal you can say for it! And a busy housewife who doesn't keep her mind occupied with some creative effort is likely to let an idle brain turn to thoughts of other people. I'm reminded of the man who returned a new camera to the store. He explained to the salesman, "I'll have to have one with a faster shutter speed. My mother-in-law's mouth always comes out blurred." But we men are just as bad! Samuel Rogers once invited some guests for dinner, including the great literary figure, Tom Macaulay. Before Macaulay's arrival, Rogers said to the other guests, "If any of you has anything to say, you had better say it now while you have the chance. Macaulay is coming."

It is true in the church, too. Idle people in the church are often its worst critics. You know, there are three kinds of people in the church. First, those who talk about what ought to be done. Second, those who do it. And, third, those who criticize them for it! A few idle hands and a loose tongue can ruin any church--including this one. And I adjure you, do not disrupt and break and destroy the fellowship of this church by gossip!

A third reason for gossip is jealousy or self-centeredness. Many of us have the need to be the center of attention. We have a desperate need to be admired or respected. Thus, when somebody else begins to get a little praise or attention, we begin to criticize. Why? Because as long as I feel insecure about myself and my place in the world, anybody else who gets in the spotlight is a threat to me. That is particularly a danger to young people because as you are growing up and learning to interrelate you have a great deal of insecurity. In order to cover your insecurity you begin to talk about the other young people. You see, if I am insecure, if I am concerned about how you feel about me--when you brag on someone else, I imply that you think more of them than you do of me--I imply rejection of me. Therefore, in my insecurity, if you build someone up with praise, I must tear him down with criticism. He is a threat to me.

Now, a fourth reason for gossip is closely related to my insecurity. If I tear the other person down, by implication I am building myself up. The gossip says, "Look how badly so-and-so acts." Or he says, "See how terrible so-and-so is." What they

are really saying is, "Look how fine I am in comparison." Isn't it true that if everybody else is three feet tall, a man of four feet is a giant? John Calvin once wrote, "There is an innate disease in mankind to seek reputation by blaming others."

A fifth psychological motivation behind gossip is that it makes the person feel important. Watch out for the gossip! If he feels important telling you about somebody else, he is going to feel important telling somebody else about you! I remember some friends once planning a surprise birthday party for the father of the house. Naturally, the children had to be let in on the surprise. The very minute daddy walked in the door one of the children began to literally dance up and down in excited self-importance and said, "I know a secret!" And he immediately spilled the beans! (What the mother said under her breath, however, is still a secret!) The child was bursting with importance because he knew something to tell--, and, of course, its no good if you don't tell it! In our adult world, we are not so obvious. But a casual, "Oh, have you heard..." is usually the prelude to the same thing. Yes, the sense of importance.

So, if you find that you tend to gossip, you really need to take a good, hard, realistic look at yourself. If we gossip, it reveals a great deal about who and what we are, what our needs are, what the inner quality of our lives is like.

The second area I would like for us to think together about is what gossiping says about our relationship to others. Now, follow this closely: when I gossip about you, I am looking at some quality, or some characteristic, or some aspect about you. And when I do that, I never see you as a whole person. If I never see you as a whole person, the things I see about you may be entirely out of context. See how it works: here are two passages of scripture--both are true, both are from the Bible. But when I take them out of context and put them together you don't have a true picture of the Bible. Here are the two passages, "Judas went and hanged himself. Go thou and do likewise."

The gossip never sees the other as a whole person. He never sees the context in which the other person really lives. He never sees the secret cares and wounds, all the things the other has to struggle with, the things that get him down and nobody else knows about. You see, people walk right by you but you really don't know the hurt. The gossip never sees the heartache, the inner wrestling of the person. You see, it is one thing to call a man a thief and crook for stealing a loaf of bread, but it is quite another thing to see his act in the total context of his life where his wife and little child are starving to death. The Bible says if there be anything of excellence, of great worth, think about these things. What do you think about in terms of your mate? Do you think about how she squeezes the toothpaste in the middle of the tube and doesn't put the cap on, and that he leaves the toilet seat up?--What do you think about your children? Do you think about how long their hair is or how sloppy their table manners are, or how impolite they seem to be? Do you focus on the negative? When you do, you see that person out of context. Focus on the positive!

One of the things they teach us in pastoral counseling is to listen--to try to hear the inner emotional needs another is expressing. As Benjamin Disraeli once put it, "people should remember that in His creating providence God gave us two ears, but only one mouth." I do not know anybody who has been helped by judgmental, destructive criticism. I do know many who have been helped because others were willing to see them as whole persons and who were willing to listen sympathet-

ically. The Arabians used to say that if one is tempted to reveal a tale about another, he should make it pass, before he peaks, three narrow gates of gold. First, is it true? Do we have the facts straight, is our information accurate? Second, is it needful? Even if it is true, does it need saying? If you say it, is there anything constructive to be gained? Third, is it kind? So many of us have tough, difficult roads to travel in life. Will broadcasting our infirmities and deficiencies make that road any smoother? Yes, gossip has a great deal to say about our relationship to others.

The third area I would like to call to our attention is what gossip says about our relationship to God. Let me say several things quickly. First, gossip about another implies I have no need for pardon myself. Remember the story in the Bible where the woman taken in adultery was brought to Jesus? The rule was that such a sin was to be punished by stoning to death. Jesus said, "Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone." When they realized their own need for pardon, Jesus looked up to discover that they had quietly slipped away and only he and the woman were left. Calvin wrote, "He acts unjustly who denies to others the pardon he needs himself." None of us is perfect this morning but he needs the understanding and forgiveness and pardon of a compassionate God. The gossip denies in a person his own need for pardon. "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

Secondly, gossip forms the very standards by which I myself will be judged. Jesus was very specific on this point. He said, "Judge not that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged." That's clear enough, isn't it? God shall judge us by our own standards of judgment and for many of us that is a fearful prospect.

Third, gossip destroys my ability to love God. St. John writes, "If any one says, 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also." If you show lack of love for a brother by hurting him with gossip, you hinder your capacity to love God.

Yes, gossip reveals a great deal about who and what I am like inside; it reveals a great deal about my relationship to others; and most of all it reveals a great deal about my relationship to God.

In our scripture St. James says that no man can tame the tongue. And he is right--no man can. But there is one who can--God can! Jesus once said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." (Luke 6:45) That means that if we are to reform the tongue, we must let God transform our hearts. So, when I talk about others, I'm really revealing my own inner life--it tells what my heart is like. I cannot reform my tongue--not by will power, not by effort--and neither can you. The secret to a reformed tongue is a transformed heart for "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." Before you can deal with your tongue you must first deal with God. I invite you do to that right now.