

Any reality tv fans in the room? I won't ask you to raise your hand because you might not want to 'out' yourself that way. There's a show for everything...for dating, for home buying and renovating, for parenting, for medical procedures, for extreme health competitions. There's a reality tv show based on just about any habit, stage of life or goal you're pursuing.

I've watched my fair share (or more than my fair share) of reality tv over the years....always curious about one thing. The back-room confessional snippet, which more than anything else, seems to be the spot where the juicy tv comes from contestants coming on screen to talk about their perspective on the things that have happened, what they've thought, and most often, to talk about their fellow contestants – talking about them in a way most of us would describe as gossip.

And I think the juicy gossip on these shows is a result of the most significant thing that they all have in common – they have no desire, plan or realistic expectation to remain in community/relationship with these people after the show.

We all know that it wouldn't be possible, because the way that they've spoken about others in judgement, in disrespect, in airing out all of their weaknesses would make that impossible.

What can that teach us about our own lives? In our day to day lives, we don't do confessionals to a camera to watch at a later date for entertainment, but do we ever engage in similar patterns of gossip about the happenings and the people in our lives? People we actually do want to not just maintain relationship with, but hopefully **grow** in the love of Jesus with...

What is gossip and how does it show up in our lives?

The bible doesn't give a clear definition of gossip in one location. Instead, several verses describe gossip in action, the impact that it has and ties it to the character of the people participating in this pattern of speaking. The Bible often uses the word *gossip* to describe a kind of person more than just a pattern of communication. With all that in mind, for this morning, I'm describing gossip as sharing information that is not about you with anything other than a pure and loving heart toward the person you are sharing about. And that's pretty broad as a definition!

Most of the time, for many of us, gossip feels small, harmless and even inconsequential. But truth in scripture is that the tongue, and our words, are not at all harmless....they are powerful.

The truth is that if we want to experience Jesus' way of love, we have to examine the way we use our words.

We've anchored this series in Paul's letter to the Ephesian church and in this letter, he says,

Ephesians 4:29

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up... that it may benefit those who listen.”

The translation of ‘unwholesome talk’ comes from the Greek word ‘sapos’, and means “corrupt” or “foul”. The term was used to describe rotten fruit or decaying trees. When used in the context of corrupt words, foul language - or wholesome talk - whether deceitful, insensitive or offensive - is damaging or hurtful to someone else.

Unwholesome talk, or rotten communication is used in this verse as the **opposite** of words that are used for the purpose of building someone up. They are set as a contrasting one another.

If you were to ask me what pops to mind immediately when I hear the word ‘rotten’ – I immediately think of fruit. I’m the first to confess that I’m unreasonably picking in that area. Specifically, I think about the ultimate sign that Christmas is coming as when I begin to see those boxes or bags of clementines in the grocery store. They are sweet, easy to peel, usually without seeds....they are just the perfect snack! They are also *almost* always contaminated with one that’s gone soft, squishy....sometimes even with mould growing on it. And that’s never the end of it! As you unpack the box and realize there’s one rotten clementine, it’s inevitable that the rot has begun to turn the others that were immediately close to it. It spreads, often beginning before there’s any external evidence. In Ephesians 4, Paul says that our words are like that fruit; with rotten words having the ability to spread rot and ruin to people around us.

Paul’s message doesn’t stop there, however. Paul knew that words are to be used with intentionality; that they are not neutral. The direction is not only that we don’t speak unwholesome words, but goes further to instruct what our words are to be used for. He raises the bar for us and tells us to **speak what builds others up, that it may benefit those who listen**. That we must use our words to be speaking what builds people and relationships, what builds community and truth; which ultimately means that we’re asking some questions about the words we use....

- Does what I’m about to say strengthen someone? Does what I’m about to say benefit the person I’m speaking about?
- Does what I’m about to say benefit the listener?
- Does what I’m about to say reflect Jesus? Does this reflect Jesus’ life of love?

Notice the contrast between the two. Unwholesome talk is the rotten fruit that contaminates and takes out the whole box of clementines.

Jesus-shaped words build up; they strengthen people, they work to hold people in unconditional positive regard and they set the ground steady for true, authentic community together.

Really, what the bible is saying about our words is that there is no neutral speech. That our words all come from some kind of intention and are bound to have some kind of impact. Words are either constructing or contaminating what, or who, is around us.

In fact, Jesus actually tells us that our words are so intentional that they are a mirror into our hearts. In [Luke 6:45](#), we read that

For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

The mouth speaks what the heart is full of; the mouth overflows what is happening in your heart, the good and the bad. My words reflect my heart posture; your words reflect your heart posture. So, are my words reflecting an overflow of love that I have for people, an overflow of care; and overflow of building up and strengthening? Or, are my words reflecting an overflow of judgement, of enjoyment at another's expense, of disregard for another's privacy so that I can be entertained and have something to talk about?

[Proverbs 18:21](#) –

*The tongue has the power of life and death,
and those who love it will eat its fruit.*

Again, there are not neutral words. We can speak life or death (which is separation, darkness, discord, disunity); but our words have impact.

Further to this, we see in [James 3:5-6](#) a caution to carefully consider how we use these powerful words of ours.

⁵ Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶ The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

We read here that our words can spark a fire that gets out of control quickly. Leaving a path of destruction behind that can't be undone.

There is residual damage out of the wake of our unwholesome words. It's true that relationships can be repaired, repentant apologies made and forgiveness offered. AND also, have you ever had that little nagging doubt about whether or not you can believe what someone is saying? Have you been in the experience of wondering if someone is speaking about you without you knowing once you've left the room. Have you been in the experience of needing to work on rebuilding trust with someone once it's been broken?

That's because we know that careless comments can cause long-term damage to reputations. Careless comments can divide and separate friendships. Careless comments can promote distrust and disunity that can take a lot of time and effort to rebuild.

Gossip rarely feels destructive in the moment. In fact, gossip sometimes feels like its coming disguised in good intentions, maybe especially in a church community. Let's talk about some of the disguises that sometimes hides our gossip.

- The truth disguise – this is when we share something that we believe is true but is hurtful...and then we can ease our conscious by naming that 'we're telling the truth'. We have to consider that if you are saying something that isn't about you or yours to share, there is a real and likely possibility that what we know is maybe true, but not the whole truth.
- The prayer disguise – often begins innocently, but can sometimes be a form of sharing information more so than committing to being people of prayer for one another. God doesn't need the details from us! We can hold one another up in prayer without unnecessarily sharing information that isn't ours to share.
- The 'wronged' disguise – this is when we share incomplete / untrue and unkind information about someone else as part of sharing how we were wronged or hurt.
 - "Sue did this thing to me.....and it's not like she's the person to talk, did you know she...." It starts by processing our own hurt, but includes a lot 'extras'.

These disguises can be very effective at hiding gossip but James says: it burns more than we think.

What does it look like to give up gossip? How do we begin to keep this in check – surrendering our words and our ways of speaking to Jesus? There's a couple of 'tests' to help us check our posture as we engage our words.

- The 'fly on the wall' test – would I say this if the person I'm speaking about was a fly on the wall of this room? If they did hear me as a fly on the wall, how would they feel about what they've heard? Did I hold them in unconditional positive regard?
- The 'Who does this benefit?' – Eph 4:29 – is this helpful and necessary? Does this benefit the one who listens?
- The 'truth' test – 1 Corin 13:6 – love does not delight in evil, but rejoices in the truth – is this true and is it mine to share? I'll also add here as part of the 'truth test' that if something is not about me and is not mine to share, there's a very real and likely possibility that what I believe I know to be true is wholly true, but not the whole truth.
- The 'impact' test – James 3 – if this spreads, what will it burn?

I've personally used these tests over the last weeks and have found them to be helpful in learning to give up gossip.

But Lent isn't just about giving something up. We've heard throughout this series that it's about giving something up to become more like Jesus. About giving something up to gain something else. About giving up anything and everything that keeps us from following Jesus' way of love. So, how did Jesus use his words?

Jesus consistently demonstrated the way of love when he:

- Defended the vulnerable
- Corrected privately; speaking directly to and not about others.
- Spoke truth with kindness

If we want to follow Jesus' way of love, then we have to use our words in a way where:

- We offer correction directly and motivated by love.
- We have conversations that build up people and purpose.
- We speak with intentionality; knowing their power.

Imagine that kind of church.

A place where if someone spoke about you, you could trust it would be kind, loving and building you up.

A place where hard and honest conversations happen face-to-face; going directly to the person, not talking about them to others.

A place where words are used to restore, not to erode.

Proverbs 18:8 calls gossip 'delicious morsels'... like that indulgent treat you know you shouldn't have but can't help but sneak.

Reality TV confessionals give the people what they want.....those delicious morsels to snack on in secret. It's why they are called 'guilty pleasures'. I remember beginning to watch what is maybe the worst of them all...Vanderpump Rules. I know, it's truly terrible. Recently, a friend who started the show around the same time I did asked me if I finished it and I told her the truth. I found myself getting anxious when it was on. The language that they used with and about one another was pure nasty. It was everyone's own version of truth running unchecked and the resulting 'season reunions' created a pit in my stomach. I couldn't watch it....I most definitely would never want to live it.

Instead, my prayer for our church is different.

Our words matter and we are choosing community together, which means our words matter even more.

So this Lent, what if we surrendered not just our obvious sins, but our subtle speech – especially any of our gossip?

What if we became people whose words consistently build up and benefit others?

And as followers of Jesus, we gave up gossip to choose the way of love.