

How to Kill Your Neighbor

Leviticus 19:16 & Selected Scriptures

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INTRODUCTION

Well, our return to our series in 2 Corinthians is going to have to wait for my next turn in the preaching rotation. The events of this past week got me thinking once again about several passages of Scripture that I've been meditating on for a while—passages that I've been meaning to assemble into a sermon for quite some time. And so I thought I'd take the time this morning to preach that sermon, which I've entitled, "How to Kill Your Neighbor." And I won't explain that right up front, but I trust it will make sense before long.

But I'll 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 destroy anyone who doesn't "give hearty approval," to the reprobate mind that can no longer discern the difference between good and evil, or even male and female: we live in an uncommonly wicked society. Add to that the systematic extermination of the most defenseless of our population—the 60 million babies murdered in their mothers' wombs over the last 45 years, all under the protection of federal law—and it makes one cry out for the mercy, or the judgment, of God.

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 I've just outlined. 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 what is called "intersectionality." Intersectionality is defined as "an analytic framework which attempts to identify how interlocking systems of power impact those who are most marginalized in society" ([source](#)). In other words, this way of thinking looks at how all the various cultural disadvantages *intersect* with one another. 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, 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 the more disadvantages and victim statuses that a person can claim for herself, the more qualified that person is to speak to the culture with moral authority.

Our culture has taught its people that the more offended someone is, the more right they are. Our 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 bigotry. When you combine that mentality with a radically-politicized press, the prevalence of what's called "fake news," 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.

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 style themselves the mavens and protectors of social justice! And the reason it's 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.

Slander is Murderous

There's a passage of Scripture concerning the harmfulness of gossip and slander that is especially striking. And I imagine it is also easily overlooked because of where it's found in the canon of Scripture. That text is Leviticus 19 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 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. 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, and 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 to 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. 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.”

The great 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 notice the difference between gossip and slander. Slander passes along false information as true. But with gossip, the truthfulness or the falsehood of the claim doesn’t matter; if you’re passing along negative information that undermines the reputation of your neighbor, you are acting against his life.

Now, what I want you to zero in on is the synonymous parallelism in that verse. “You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor.” “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.” The man of understanding who keeps silent is contrasted with the one who despises his neighbor, and, lacking sense, apparently doesn’t 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! 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 weekend potluck—it shouldn’t be that hard 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 doesn’t 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.” 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 you have been born again of imperishable seed, “Therefore, [put] aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.”

Charles Spurgeon, 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 on 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, and we can't quite believe it ourselves. Maybe it's something that's terribly disappointing, something we couldn't 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 that 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. 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 chapter 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's 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're 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.

Every year at Christmastime, Janna and I try to make the effort to get back to New Jersey to visit our parents for the holidays. And that's only intensified now that they're grandparents. And we don't make it out every year; sometimes they visit us. But when we do, and when we stay at my parents' house, my mom always puts out this gift box of chocolate treats for dessert (along with

many other desserts). And one of those includes these chocolate covered wafers. They're so simple! But they're so good! And they're super light, so that when you eat one, you just can't help having another one. And then another one. And then another one, until the whole tin is gone!

But 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 wafer. 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! 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 wafer. 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 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." 1 Peter 4:8 says, "Love covers a multitude of sins." **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 that 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. Not necessarily to 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 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 you have **the duty of disbelief**. 1 Timothy 5:19 says it plainly, "Do not receive [such] an accusation." 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 whose lives 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." None of that means that I'm ready to treat the accused individual as if he or she has 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.

And before moving on, I want to add that that standard is especially laid upon the shoulders of those who are in spiritual leadership. Just as those in spiritual leadership are *protected* by the standards of biblical corroboration, so also are they especially *accountable* to those standards. Proverbs 29:12 contains an implicit admonition to leaders when it says, "If a ruler pays attention to falsehood, all his ministers become wicked." This is a severe warning to us in leadership. If you as a leader listen to falsehood—if you compromise your own integrity by making decisions based on unsubstantiated gossip—eventually, the people who are accountable to you are going to realize they can get in your good graces by monitoring and modifying the information they give you. And they're going to realize that others can do that as well, and that they themselves are at the mercy of the bad reports of others. And so unless the grace of God is especially at work in

their hearts, their instinct for self-preservation is going to make them think, “Well I’m going to get them before they get me.” And before you know it, your having listened to unsubstantiated accusations has turned those who serve under you into wicked liars and deceivers.

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 back to the Book of 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 have not 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—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.

It’s no wonder, that Paul speaks so strongly about the church’s need to protect the flock from such people. Turn to Romans chapter 16. And look with me at verses 17 and 18. “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. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.” And then turn over to 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 and 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 verses 17 to 24 of Ephesians chapter 4, Paul has 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. 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.” We don't want to inherit wind, and therefore we ought not to trouble 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 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 sin before a holy God 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 granting 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 Charles read for us in Matthew 12:36, that "every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment"—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, and you need to be born again. And as the text said, 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 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.

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 your sins. 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, to you who have trusted in Christ and know the sweetness of His forgiveness, 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 their neighbors, and may He always and in every place vindicate the cause of righteousness.