

## COLLEGE CHAPEL TALK

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# GOSSIP AND SLANDER

by the Rev. Ormond Odhner

*Readings:* Leviticus 19:11-18

Gossip is the chatter of an idle mind. Slander, a crime punishable by law, is the lying destruction of another's reputation, and thus of his life as a person in polite society, and so also of his use. Slander is definitely forbidden within the merely natural sense of the Fifth Commandment, for as the Writings say, "'You shall not kill' ...means also not to inflict any deadly harm upon [a person's] name and fame, since with many, fame and life go hand in hand." And if gossip is not specifically forbidden in the Writings, it is nevertheless notable that gossip is rarely concerned with spreading nice stories that will enhance another's reputation.

Gossip is idle chatter about people—tale-bearing; and in Leviticus the Lord commanded, "You shall not go up and down as a talebearer among your people." There is no record that this command was ever abrogated in later revelation. People, of course, are interesting. They are even interesting to talk about. In a church community such as ours, furthermore, where many people know others very well, there is an unusually keen interest in the affairs of others. It is simply interesting to know that so-and-so has apparently fallen in love with so-and-so, or that thus-and-so has bought a new car. But it does not really do much good to talk about such things, even if it does but little harm. Talk about people rarely improves anyone's intellect. An old teacher of mine used to tell us that before we said anything about anyone, we should be sure that our remark affirmatively met a threefold test: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? It is a fairly good rule; her words bear deep consideration, but the Lord gave another rule, a perfect rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Would you want someone else to say the same sort of thing about you?

Slander, however, is another matter. Purposely to spread a false report about a person—a report injurious to his reputation and thus to his use—is so vile that civil law affixes heavy penalties to it. And the angels, the Writings say, account it as one with bodily murder.

A person is a social being; and exceptionally rare is the person who can live without friends and companions who trust and respect him. Hence every sane person works hard to build up a good reputation; and it is not hypocritical for him to do so, for without a good reputation he cannot properly perform his uses. Maliciously to destroy another's reputation by spreading lies about him is, then, to destroy both the person and his use. And use is the Lord among people.

But what if the report is true? Should it then be spread? Only under very limited circumstances. Is it true? Yes. But is it kind and is it necessary? Sometimes it is. A "tattle-tale" is a despicable individual; but sometimes it is necessary to report the evil you see in another—not to the widest circle of friends you can summon, but to the proper authority. If his evil is injuring a use greater

than his own, report it. Otherwise, you yourself share in his guilt. But if it is not, keep quiet. Each of us has many evils that we do not wish others to know about, and usually there is no reason that they should. Perhaps we are even sincerely trying to conquer them. Perhaps we are only momentarily overcome by them. And what if we even habitually give in to them without a fight? Should you tell? Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. You shall not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people. And, in the last analysis, you shall not murder.