

9 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. 10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. 17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Last week we started studying this passage and only got through the first point in the outline.

1. Love without hypocrisy (or love without a mask.)

That is literally what the original language means—love without a mask. But that is the opposite of what we tend to do. We wear masks of many kinds and are often not even aware that we are doing so. Others can often see our masks before we do, which is why we need one another.

Remember, this topic is Shepherding the Body, which is all about how we are to treat one another in the body of Christ. The Bible has a ton to say about this subject. As I was saying, last Sunday we were talking hypocrisy—about the masks that we wear and even some of the reasons that we wear them. One mom emailed me and offered a perspective of one of their young children. This is a direct quote. "She said she doesn't wear a mask, but if she did, it would be a lion mask." I love that! When our kids were young and we lived in Sauk Prairie, we'd take trips to the Henry Vilas Zoo. I'll never forget the masks we bought there and I'm certain one of them was indeed a lion mask. Wouldn't it be great of life were that simple? What if we know that we were wearing a mask and we could slip it off just like a lion mask with the stretch cord in the

back? You're an orangutan today and a giraffe tomorrow but they slip off just as easily as you slipped them on. Wouldn't that be nice?

But instead you and I have to deal with the largely invisible masks that are really hard to take off. Last week I told you that this Sunday I would explain how to take off our masks. There is no step one, step two sort of process here, but I do believe that this section of Romans 12 does give us the answers. I believe that the theme of verses 9-21 are summed up in that first phrase—let love be without hypocrisy. Everything through verse 21 tells us how to do just that.

2. Love by clinging to the good.

The key phrase follows on the heels of the first one. *Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.* Let me stop right there and point out something very interesting. What are we supposed to be learning here? How to love, right? How to love without hypocrisy. But did you notice the first thing we are supposed to do in order to love? Paul said we are to “abhor what is evil.” In other words, how do you love one another? You have to hate. Genuine love requires us to also hate. And it's a strong kind of hatred—to abhor. A few translations just have the word “hate” here but it's actually stronger than that. If something is abhorrent it will be disgusting and repulsive to you. It's the kind of hate where you have this visceral reaction. You don't merely dislike it nor is it something that you strongly reject. If you abhor something, you will have a strong emotional reaction to it. It will be emotionally repulsive to you. It may even make you physically ill. We should abhor it.

So to love properly also requires that we hate strongly. But of course our hate has an object—abhor what is evil. What in the world would fit into this category? There is much evil in the world that is certainly worthy of our hate, but remember the context is learning how to love one another better. So what is something that should be abhorrent to us because it kills love? Can I make a suggestion? It's the topic I started with last Sunday—gossip. I had some reactions to my fake gossip story. One guy told me, “I was wondering where you were going with that, why you'd share all of those details.” It didn't feel right because it wasn't right. Gossip is something that is meant to be loathed. We should hate it with such ferocity that it makes us physically ill.

Ray Olson sent me the best article I have ever read on the subject. It's so good I'll just reproduce the main points here for you. The article is titled, **7 REASONS WHY GOSSIP IS POISON.**¹ First, his definition. “Gossip is speaking to someone who is neither directly part of the problem or the solution in a situation, concerning another person who is not present.” I read this article and the next day I had to apologize to the men in our morning Bible study. I shared a story about someone and then five minutes later I apologized to them all for gossiping. The person was not present when I told the story and none of the people to whom I told it were part of the problem or part of the solution.

As I read these reasons, I want you to think about both sides of the gossip chain—giving and receiving. You do realize that it takes two to tango, right? If no one ever bought heroin, the heroin market would die off. If no one ever visited a prostitute, prostitution would disappear. In the same way, if no one ever listened to gossip, the gossip would just go away. Some of you might think that you don't contribute to the gossip problem but if you listen to it and do nothing, then you are participating in the same problem.

1. It feeds a false (and ugly) sense of superiority in our own hearts.

Isn't this so true? We don't ever gossip to make the other person look good, do we? We tell these stories to make other people look bad which then makes us look good. The hidden point of gossip is to make a comparison between ourselves and the other person. If the other guy looks bad, we look good. That's just the way it works.

2. It feeds into our preconceived notions of people.

This is my own addition to the list of reasons. Have you ever met someone who you thought would be not such a nice person and they turned out to be a really wonderful person? Most of us have had this experience. Why does this happen? It happens because you had a preconceived notion about this person without having much or any actual personal interaction with them. And you may have preconceived ideas because you listened to other people's opinions about them. And the problem is that it takes so much more positive impact with that person in order to change your mind about them. If I meet you for the very first time, I know nothing about you, so you are on neutral ground in that sense. But if I have listened to gossip before I meet you, you are not on neutral ground with me. It's like you are standing in a hole. I just met you but I already think less of you. It's going to be a lot more difficult for you and I have to have a good relationship because I listened to gossip about you before I met you.

3. It sows distrust among your team, family and friends.

Let's say John, Rich and Bob are friends. If I am having breakfast with John and I gossip about Bob the whole time, what do you think John believes will happen when I have breakfast with Bob the next day? He knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that I will gossip about him. Now when this happens within the environment of a church, it sows distrust within the body. The damaging effects reach further and deeper into the church. We are commanded "to make every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace." Gossip crushes unity in the body.

4. It harms your personal Christian or spiritual witness.

This one is obvious and does not need much comment. There's nothing worse than a gossiping Christian in the workplace.

5. It destroys your integrity.

This goes hand in hand with the last reason. It's not just your Christian witness that is harmed but your integrity as well, whether with believers or unbelievers. Don Eiseermann turned me onto this quote from former Wyoming Senator Alan Simpson. "If you have integrity, nothing else matters. If you don't have integrity, nothing else matters. This is why I have always said that character trumps giftedness. Gossip chips away at your integrity

6. It harms (or ends) relationships.

Few relationships can endure knowing that one person knows that the other gossiped behind their back. If the relationship remains, it will exist in an absence of trust. And a relationship without trust is not much of a relationship.

7. It ruins reputations.

People tend to believe the first thing that they hear. It's just human nature. If I hear that the new restaurant that opened has terrible food, I'll probably believe it and may not even give it a

chance. Several years ago I happened to see that our church had a very negative review on Google. The review specifically called me out as being a horrible person. Oddly enough I was able to make a good guess about who wrote the review. I contacted this person and he immediately apologized and removed the negative comments. This one review was not going to destroy our church but if you are new to the area and looking for a church, nasty comments like these could easily keep you away.

8. It Will Come Back to Haunt You.

Author Paul Myers, says, “Gossip is like a fired bullet. Once you hear the sound, you can’t take it back.” That’s the power of gossip and slander. It has this way of weaving itself into your memory. Once you hear a juicy morsel about someone, it can continue to impact the way you feel about them.

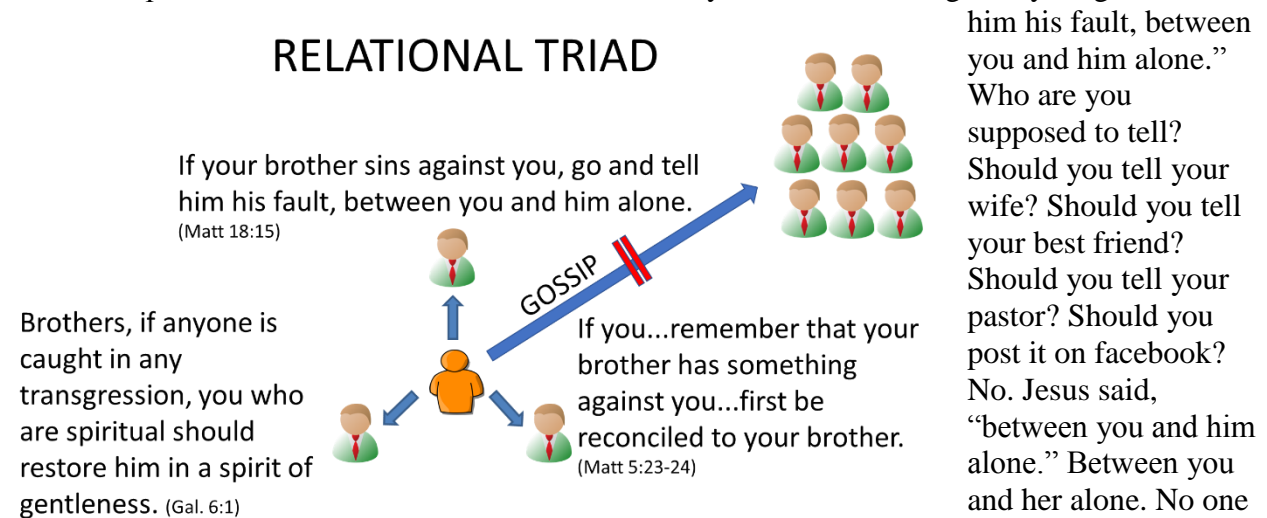
And again, all of this goes for both sides of the gossip mill. Hopefully most of us don’t engage in gossip but if you just sit and listen to it, you are participating in it. I realize you can’t always help what happens to you at lunch with your co-workers. Some people are brutal and you need to figure out how to deal with those situations. But I am specifically referring to our relationships within our church body.

And how are we supposed to feel about gossip? We are supposed to hate it. We are supposed to abhor it. When you hear it, it should turn your stomach. It ought to be revolting to you. Hate the evil things that maliciously and secretly destroy relationships. Hate it so much that you repent of it and vow never to be a part of it again. Gossip is evil and the only way to build genuine love is to hate things like gossip.

Let me offer some Biblical principles for avoiding gossip. It’s not enough just to say “Don’t do it!” We need to have some options.

Let me show you what I call the Relational Triad.

Obviously, there are three parts to this which are simple Scriptural commands for healthy relationships. The first is found in Matthew 18:15. “If your brother sins against you, go and tell



else. Because as soon as you add others into the mix you have gossip.

The next relational instruction comes from Matthew 5.

“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24).

This passage shows the importance of relationships as it relates to worship. Reconciling with a brother or sister in Christ is so important that worship is supposed to be interrupted in order to attempt reconciliation. Do you see how this would prevent gossip as well? Not only are we to go only to the person with whom we have an issue, but we are supposed to go right away. Offering your gift at the altar is like driving to church. If you are on your way to church and remember that a brother has something against you, instead of driving to church you should drive to their house. If you are singing worship songs in church and remember that your brother has something against you, stop singing and ask that person to step into the lobby so you can talk to him or her. Now that may not always be practical but you get the sense of urgency, right? Don't do anything else 'spiritual' until you reconcile. It's that important.

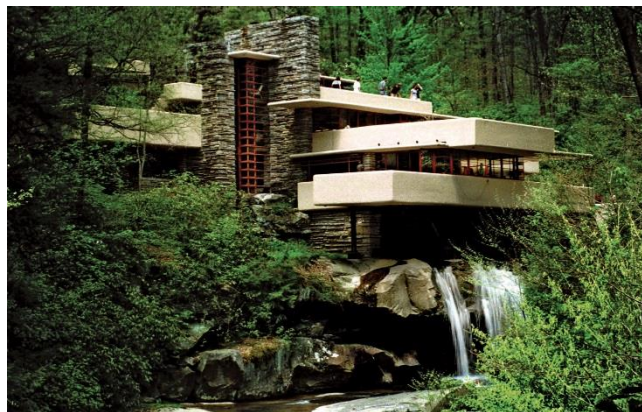
The last relational responsibility is from Galatians 6:1. “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.” The first two have to do with sins which are directly between you and another person. The first are the responsibility of every believer but this one is not for everyone. It is for “those who are spiritual,” which in context means those who exhibit the fruits of the Spirit from Galatians 5. Confronting another believer can be a little bit dicey at times so it comes with this restriction. But the other 2 are responsibilities for every believer.

I know how difficult it can be to obey these clear commands. On occasion, you may need to seek some counsel from someone else to help you think and pray through a situation. But please be very careful with that as it could quickly descend into gossip as well.

3. Love by blessing those who persecute you.

Most Wisconsinites know about the famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright who was born just down the road from us in Richland Center. He believed in what he called organic architecture where humans and buildings would live in harmony with the environment. One of his best-known homes is called Fallingwater in Pennsylvania. Water runs under the home and almost appears to be running through it.

This home is incredibly beautiful but it had serious design flaws. Wright ignored warnings about the flaws and by the time it was completed in 1939, the main floor had already sunk 2 inches. By 1995 the floor had sunk 7 inches and required \$11 million in repairs to fix it. The moral of the story is that it is always easier to prevent problems than to fix them.



This is nowhere more true than with our masks. Since it is so hard to remove our masks it makes sense that we are better off learning how not to create them in the first place. Look back at verse 12. *Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.*

If you can consistently do these three things, it will keep you from developing a mask in the first place. Some relational issues are close to tribulation and persecution. I realize the persecution in the U.S. is not on the same level as much of the world, but even if it not true Christian persecution, there is still lost of injustice and lack of fairness in our society. If we allow hurt and injustice to accumulate in our hearts, we start to develop masks and walls around our hearts. Prevention is always easier than repair.

4. Love by thinking rightly of yourself.

Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. In one sense, this is a no-brainer. Pride is the opposite of love. That ought to be so obvious. But on the other hand, we can't be reminded enough about this, am I right? Every relational conflict has pride at the heart of it. At least one party is selfish. At least one party is stubborn. At least one party wants its own way at all costs.

5. Love without vengeance.

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Watching Ethan play basketball is a test of patience, not because of the way he plays but because of the officials. Now why am I impatient? Why do I get frustrated? The short answer is that I get frustrated because of the bad calls—all 50 of them per game! But the real reason I get frustrated is because the calls that the officials make are out of my domain. They do not belong within my sphere of authority.

So it is with vengeance. *never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."* Vengeance is not our domain. It does not belong to us. But it is God's domain. Only he has the right and authority to act. And act he will. "I will repay" says the Lord. That's from Deuteronomy 32. God is love and God is wrath and he will pay back every injustice.

Vengeance is not our domain. But mercy is within our domain, which is why Paul wrote, *To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."* These are acts of pure mercy. Enemies do not deserve food and drink but mercy supplies it to them.

And the only way you could ever be merciful to an enemy is because of the gospel. You and I deserved vengeance and wrath but instead we got mercy. This is the well from which we pull our own mercy. It cannot come from our own strength because we will find that well dry. But the gospel well always has an abundant supply.

Rich Maurer
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ⁱ <http://www.caesarkalinowski.com/7-reasons-why-gossip-is-poison/>