

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

SUNDAY, JANUARY 15, 2023

COLOSSIANS 3: 4-11

“WORDS THAT HELP, NOT HURT”

How very important words are! They have great impact...

President Lyndon Johnson loved to tell a story about something that happened back in the 1950's when he was in the Senate. It had to do with a fellow senator—Senator Bob Kerr of Oklahoma. Oklahoma back in the 1950s still had Prohibition laws. Alcohol was illegal. It was a strongly Baptist state with a high percentage of teetotalers who wouldn't have a drop of alcohol and didn't think anyone else should either. Senator Kerr was apparently fine with those laws.

When he was running for re-election to the Senate he decided to have a big Oklahoma style barbeque for his supporters and donors in Washington, D. C. He himself owned a ranch and decided to use the meat from his own cattle. So some of his herd was slaughtered and then the meat was flown by air to Washington—nice and fresh Oklahoma beef. The party went well. The A.P. sent a news report about it to be in all the Oklahoma newspapers. But the man who typed up the news release made a typo mistake. He meant to type—“Sen. Kerr had some *steers* flown in for the meal.” Instead the news release that all the newspapers ran actually said, “Sen. Kerr had some *beers* flown in for the meal.” That caused a lot of outrage in Oklahoma and Kerr's popularity started dropping fast! He did get the story corrected and still ended up winning the election. But one word sure can have big impact! (Robert Caro, Master of the Senate, Knopf, 2002, p. 414)

Words are important. They can do much good. They can do much harm. In our epistle lesson today from Colossians 3, St. Paul urges us to put away sins, including sins of the mouth, from our lives. As he wrote in verse 4—“But now put them all away; anger, wrath, hatred, slander, and foul talk from your mouth”. The sins he lists here mostly are committed with our tongues, our words. The apostle says that, being we are Christians, we should put such sins away from our lives. We should speak words that help, not hurt.

Perhaps the most hurtful of sins of the tongue is gossip. It can really hurt people. And it not only damages the person gossiped about, but the one doing

the gossiping. The Saints tell us that if we gossip about our brother and accuse him of bad things, God will accuse us! St. Isaac of Syria wrote back in in the 600's----“The person who accuses his brother of evil deeds will find God as his *own* accuser!” (Daily Readings, St. Isaac, Templegate, 1984, p. 78)

What is the solution to the problem of gossip? To not say bad things about other people. Even if we think the bad things are true! For who are we to judge others? As St. Paul said in a different epistle, in Romans 14: 10—“Why do you pass judgment on your brother?” Am I perfect? No. So who I am to judge? So if you don't wish to be accused by God, don't accuse others!

To not hurt others or ourselves by our words, there is a simple solution--- don't gossip. Simple to say, not always so simple to do!

Gossiping is a very strong temptation for many people! I just now remembered a passage (can't give you the exact reference) in the book of Proverbs that tells how gossip is like swallowing a tasty morsel of food! Many find it a great pleasure to gossip.

Yes, it can be very tempting. But no one can make you say anything. It is totally *your* decision about what words you will speak. So decide that no words of gossip will leave your mouth. Pray hard to God for the spiritual power to stay true to that decision. And then just do not say the words.

But to go a step further---there is a second way, besides speaking words of gossip, to participate in the sin of gossip---to listen to it. To just soak in all the bad things being said about other people. Just listening to gossip can spiritually destroy us. St. Maximos the Confessor wrote in the *Philokalia*---“Do not happily listen to gossip about your neighbor. Or you will find yourself cut off from eternal life.” (Philokalia, Vol. 3, 1981, p. 59) Stern words----if we have the habit of soaking up gossip, St. Maximos says we better plan on going to hell!

So how can we avoid not only speaking gossip, but passively participating in it by just listening? Four suggestions:

#1-----Change the subject. Start talking about the weather or how your family is doing. Or ask the gossipier, “What do you think about the Cleveland Browns this year?” That will probably depress the gossipier so much that he will just moan and walk away!

Don't be passive. Step up and take charge of the conversation and steer it to something else than gossip.

#2---- If suggestion #1 doesn't work well, go on to this suggestion---This is an especially good one if it's a “one on one” gossiping situation. When the gossiping starts, just go completely silent. After a while, the gossipier will probably get the

hint that you're just not interested----and he will talk about something else.

#3---- If neither #1 or #2 work, move on to #3..... Just turn around and walk away or hang up the phone. Say "Sorry, got to go!" And go.

#4---- If nothing else works, you may need to consider option #4, the Spencer Method of avoiding hearing gossip. Herbert Spencer was a very well-known British philosopher in the late 1800s. Later writers can't quite see why he was so popular----his writings are boring and mediocre. And he was an atheist to boot..... But, he did come up with a great way to avoid hearing gossip. In his honor, I like to call it the "Spencer Method"

Herbert Spencer often invited guests over to dinner. And, of course, there would be lots of conversation. But he didn't like it when it turned into gossip about other people. The reason was that when he went to bed after the guests left, if there had been gossip he couldn't help but think about it. His mind would race and race and he couldn't get a good night's sleep. So he came up with a very successful solution to this problem. He bought a pair of earplugs and kept them in his pocket. When the gossiping began, he put on the earplugs and sat and smiled through the conversation, hearing nothing. And he slept well that night. (God's Funeral, A. N. Wilson, Norton, 1999, p. 156)

Well, earplugs are cheap so you may have to consider buying a pair and trying the Spencer Method if nothing else works!

Don't just passively soak up gossip. As St. Maximos said, doing so can have very dire consequences! Do whatever it takes to avoid that.

In our epistle reading this morning from Colossians 3, St. Paul urges us live in a truly Christian way and put away sins from our lives. That includes sins committed with the tongue. And that includes the deadly sin of gossip. Instead of speaking words that hurt, we should speak only words that help.

There was a company office in Chicago that had altogether too much gossiping going on among the employees. The head folks at the company got concerned---it was leading to resentment and infighting, etc. So they took action. They declared their headquarters a "gossip-free zone". No gossiping tolerated. The first time you were heard gossiping, you got called on the carpet for a stern warning. Second time? You were fired. It probably didn't totally eliminate the problem but it helped a great deal. ("Our Daily Bread", 11/10/08)

Let's make our church a gossip-free zone. Let's make our homes gossip-free zones. Let's make our entire lives gossip-free zones.

Then, with the help of God, we can speak only words that help, not words that hurt.

