

I Heard It Through the Grapevine

How many times have you told someone a secret about somebody else, or even yourself, but only if they promised not to tell another person? Sooner or later the word gets around, whether it's a true story or not. Why is it that gossip seems to spread like wildfire, whether intentionally or not, yet good news and compliments about others are hard to come by (or at least take a long time to get around)?

Although it is usually hard to carry out, most of us know how we can stop the spread of gossip, slander, and backbiting; which is by bridling the tongue, as James 3 explains. But it is even more difficult to “promote the advantage of [our] neighbor in every instance [we] can or may,” as we read in question and answer 111 of Lord's Day 42 in the Heidelberg Catechism. It is further explained in question and answer 112 that God commands us in the eighth and ninth commandments that we must not only stop ourselves from negatively hurting our neighbor, but also that we positively defend and promote them in our speech, thoughts, and lives of confession and witnessing. This is part of the fruit that we must bear, so the question is, “Has your fruit been flourishing, sweet and beautiful? Or is your fruit quickly withered and rotted away, bitter and repulsive?”

Matthew 7:16-20 and Luke 6:43-44 tell us that a man is made known by his fruits, and those fruits will fall into only one of two categories: good and corrupt. A good tree can bring forth only good fruit, and a corrupt tree only corrupt fruit. One cannot gather figs from thorns or grapes from the bramble. Let's take a look at these two kinds of fruits from two different vines.

In Deuteronomy 32:32-33 we read that the wicked are vines from Sodom and of the fields of Gomorrah. Their grape clusters are bitter like gall, and their wine tastes like the poison of venomous snakes. Every man in his sinful human nature grows here among the degenerate and strange vines (Jeremiah 2:21). This is due to the fall into sin by our first parents, Adam and Eve. These plants, representing us without Christ and the Holy Spirit, will be consumed by the Lord. Jeremiah 8:13 tells us there are “no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree, and the leaf shall fade.” Joel 1:12 further explains that “the vine is dried up, and the fig tree languisheth; the pomegranate tree, the palm tree also, and the apple tree, even all the trees of the field, are withered: because joy is withered away from the sons of men.”

I could not agree more! The reason there are so many murders, violence, depressions, thefts, gossiping, and backbiting today is because there seems to be no Joy in the world. Men do not want the Joy of the gospel and the Joy found in salvation through Christ. Because they cannot produce the fruit of the Spirit as found in Galatians 5:22ff

and Ephesians 5:9, they try to find joy in themselves. They do this by spreading lies that hurt their neighbors and spreading rumors about themselves in order to look better in the eyes of men. They cannot bear fruits of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance because they are so busy growing the tempting fruits of self-worship, pride, covetousness, and the like. These fruits are not pleasing to the Lord. As Christians, do you have the joy that comes from money, love, games, food, clothes, music and bands, sports, and looking good in the eyes of others at the expense of your neighbor's reputation? Or do you have the joy in your hearts that comes from reading the truths of Scripture and seeing the covenant carried out among your fellow saints?

If the latter is true, then you are no longer looking at the vines of Sodom and Gomorrah. Rather, you are finding the vines that have been cast out of Egypt and the heathen place and which have been healed and replanted near the River of Life. Psalm 80:8-11 show us that these vines will take deep root and shadow the earth like giant cedars. These vines have a tender grape and give a good smell (Song of Solomon 2:13), yielding fruits of strength (Joel 2:22) and peace in the summer (Hebrews 12:11). In Malachi 3:10-12, the Lord promises that the devil won't destroy these fruits, and that these vines won't produce their fruit before the appointed time. These vines will be blessed because they are growing in a delightful land.

However, these vines don't grow and bear good fruits by their own will. The first six verses of John 15 clearly state that Christ is the true vine, and God the Father is the husbandman, or gardener. We are the branches that have been grafted into this true vine so that we may be filled with fruits of righteousness (Philippians 1:11). Without this true vine, we wither and die and are cast into the fire. Therefore, we must see that we are kind to our neighbors by preventing ourselves and others from speaking evil of them and by loving them through word, thought, and deed. When we do this, we will see that others will do the same for us. These fruits of our lips ultimately grow from our heart, which should be firmly rooted in Christ, and they are a means of thanks to him that we must offer up continually (Hebrews 13:15). When he returns to the garden of nuts to see the fruits of the valley, will he find a flourishing vine, budded pomegranates and tender grapes on the branches of the True Vine, as we read of in Song of Solomon 6:11 and 7:12? Or will he find withered and rotten fruits among a network of brittle grapevines fit for the furnace? Let us make sure that the poisoning words of the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh are not flowing through the grapevines. Rather, let the Water of Life nourish us and help us to encourage others to grow in the mountain of the Lord's inheritance (Exodus 15:17).