The Sin of Slander

Timothy Berg

Like 0

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It's an image I can't get out of my mind.

An image of me, mercilessly, repeatedly kicking a smaller kid in the dark corner of a school hallway.

It's an image that plays over and over again in my head.

My Life As A Bully

I was always the scrawny kid growing up. Being born several months pre-mature will do that to a guy. I have a little experience with being bullied. Not a lot of experience on the other side. But this image sticks with me. Beating that small kid. You've heard the story. You pick on that kid, over and over. He becomes your favorite pet to haze. But then, you grow up. You move on. And someday, you even change. Because of the power of the gospel, you become a different person. You're not the same guy that always enjoyed beating that little kid up in the hallway. But what happens then when you now see others being beat up on? I can tell you. It breaks your heart in a way that's hard to describe. You walk into a school as an adult, and you see the new bully, beating up on the new small guy. And your heart sinks in sadness. Not just for the guy getting the beating. But also for the guy giving it. You know that being either one brings a special kind of pain and regret. Both are so ugly. You know, because somehow, you've been both guys.

Or at least, I have.

To be sure, I've never been the guy beating up on the smaller guy, at least not physically (or not that I can recall). But I have been that bully, when it comes to how my words have been used. I wasn't kicking with my feet. No - I was punching with my tongue. The clichéd schoolyard rhyme says that "sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never harm me." But Solomon would have taken issue with such schoolyard claims. For Solomon, words were as dangerous as a sharp sword. He had a lot to say about them, and their power to hurt or heal. The truth is that words can not only hurt you - they can rip your heart out.

I grew up around harsh words. I was yelled at almost every single day of my life until I was about 20. I mean vitriolic cursing, screaming at the top of the lungs, rafter-rattling yelling. I was reminded how worthless I was. I've been pulled out of bed in the middle of the night so a parent could spend an hour or two screaming at me for how awful I was. I've set in front of the people who were supposed to love me the most while they began instead to pray that God would smite me. That he would destroy my ministry. That he would make sure I never got married, never had kids, would never be happy, etc. I've had former friends say some of the most awful, painful, wounding, things to me, and about me, that they surely knew weren't true. In fact, I grew up in circles where one of the goals in some "preaching" seemed to be to act as angry and harsh as possible in the pulpit. The quickest route to the "amen button" for some was to passionately yell about the "sins" and "heresies" of anyone that wasn't "just like us." It was as though I took a kind of perverse pleasure in listening in as the "outsiders" were verbally abused.

Some Words About Words

There are many different ways that harsh words can be used to abuse others. Solomon speaks about the issue of speech from several different angles. (For example, Proverbs 2:16; 4:24; 5:3; 6:12, 24; 8:13; 10:18-21; 10:31-32; 11:9; 12:6, 13-25; 13:2-3; 14:3; 15:1, 2, 4; 16:10, 13, 24; 17:4, 7, 20, 28; 18:4, 6-8, 20-21; 19:1, 5, 9, 28; 21:6, 23, 28; 22:11, 14; 23:16; 24:28; 25:11, 15, 18; 26:20-28.) Solomon noted that, *"Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones"* (Proverbs 16:24 KJV). Paul spoke repeatedly of the power of words (Col. 4:6; Eph. 4:25, 29). James addressed the power of the tongue at length in James 3:1-12.

In our modern society, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and other social media have made it easier than ever to speak words that can be heard by many. They have given anyone who wants it a platform for their speech. In many ways, this is beautiful, and can be of immense service to the Gospel. I suspect that if someone told Paul about Facebook, he might say something like, "Are you serious! I can write something that thousands might read in a matter of just a few minutes! Where do I sign up? How do I use this for the gospel of Jesus Christ?" But if social media brings the power of using our words for the gospel, it also brings with it the power to use our words to abuse others. Everything that Solomon says about words applies of course to his own written medium, so common in his day. And it applies just as clearly to the common written mediums of our day (like Facebook). Surely, there are many ways to transgress with the tongue. But I want to mention just one of these ways for a moment. One that I think gets neglected. I want to talk about slander.

It is common in some separatists Christian circles to divide oneself so sharply from the rest of the Christian world that, for some (not all, and maybe not most), the demonization and vilification of those Christian's on the other "side" of the wall seems almost inevitable. I was raised in such circles. I know them well. I have elsewhere likened such groups to the "hobbits" in Tolkien's works, who had erected boundaries to create a "Shire" shut off from the outside world. This isn't to denigrate them. They mostly value this "separation" and prize it as one of their greatest virtues. And to be clear, this seclusion itself isn't any kind of inherent evil (except perhaps in what it might to do one's ability to fulfill the Great Commission and to be "in the world"). Such seclusion, in a different fashion, has a long and valued history in the church in the monastic tradition, and can bring a richness and beauty with it. But if this seclusion becomes the cause for the vilification and misrepresentation of other Christians simply because they are on the "outside" of the Shire, that is another story altogether. I noticed for most of my life in the Shire an odd hypocrisy in myself. I could angrily yell about all the sinners and sins outside the Shire, while often being so blinded to my own.

And one sin that was especially prominent in my life, and often exempted from scrutiny, was the sin of slander. I apologized here for some of that.

At times it almost seemed that if one didn't vehemently oppose those outside our walls, then one didn't really "belong" within them. Some seemed so eager to jump to accuse those outside our circle with such a passion. But just when did those outside our circles become targets simply by virtue of being outside our walls? And just when did shooting them become a sport? Sadly, it was so often not necessary to check our facts. It was not necessary to temper our words. "Heresy hunts" seemed common in some corners of our Shire. Vitriol and slander were sins not only justified, but encouraged (by some at least - not all). Sharp and baseless condemnation of others was not only not something to be avoided, it was an expected and regular part of some pulpit ministries.

"That's not sin - that's just good hard preaching!"

But doesn't it seem that a proper Christian spirit would always choose to give the benefit of the doubt to another person's character? Surely errors need to be opposed at times. And sometimes even believers need called out on their sin, if the NT is any indication. But didn't Paul tell us that *"love thinketh not evil"* (i.e., gives the benefit of the doubt - Tyndale's 1526 rendering of I Cor. 13:5d). Didn't Paul speak his condemnations of others after multiple attempts to correct them personally? Didn't he speak with tears of deep reluctance, sharing his judgments, *"even weeping?"* (Phil. 3:18). Have we sometimes maintained his judgment with passion, but neglected to share his heart?

What is Slander?

Webster's 1828 defines the verb *"to slander"* as follows;

> *"To defame; to injure by maliciously uttering a false report respecting one; to tarnish or impair the reputation of one by false tales, maliciously told or propagated."*

Moses spread a net wide enough to cover this sinful defamation of another's character when he demanded that multiple witnesses be provided before a man be condemned of a crime. Witnesses who speak untruths that defame a man's character should not be heeded. In fact they should be punished, for lying on the stand or repeating false information in the course of accusing another is damaging to them (Deuteronomy 19:15–21 KJV). Moses also made stipulations that the death penalty, so deserved in many cases, couldn't be meted out on the basis of a single witness, because he recognized the real presence and danger of false witness and slander (Deut. 17:1-7). Joseph was slandered with "evil report" (Gen. 37:2). The Psalmists was wounded by the slanders of others (Psalms 31:13). Paul affirmed the real danger of slander and false witness in his allusion to the Deuteronomic law in II Cor. 13:1 (and Moses' law probably also stands behind such passages as Matt. 18:16 and I Tim. 5:19). Solomon noted that, *"He that hideth hatred with lying lips, and he that uttereth a slander, is a fool"* (Proverbs 10:18 KJV). Solomon urged that when one has a bad report about a neighbor (Proverbs 25:7:b-14), he should go straight to him to get the facts and work out its truthfulness (25:9), rather than immediately bringing accusation in court (25:9a), or spreading the unconfirmed charge to others (25:b). He well understood the power of speech that meant that *"a soft tongue breaketh the bone"* (25:15 KJV). He warned that *"A slanderous person pricketh like a sword, but a wise man's tongue is wholesome"* (Proverbs 12:18, Coverdale, 1535).

Paul specifically took up this sinful action of slander in his "vice list" in Romans 1:29-31. I am quite certain we would all abhor many of the sins listed there. Yet sadly, in many corners of the church, those relating to slander are given a free pass. Paul speaks of "whisperers" and "backbiters" (KJV) in vs. 29-30. Both words refer to the same sin of defamation of character. A standard lexicon like BDAG explains that ["whisperers"] is a word, *"pertaining to speaking ill of others, slanderous,"* and that specifically in Romans 1:30 it means,

"slanderer (in a list of vices) Romans 1:30." Normally I would use BDAG and other modern lexical tools to do basic lexical study, following methods like those in Silva's "Biblical Semantics." But for those who might prefer a particular set of older tools, Strong's Concordance explains, of G5588, concerning its etymological origin and meaning,

> *"from the same as G5587; a secret calumniator"*

Of G5587, (what Strong claims as a root), Strong defines it as,

> *"(a whisper; by implication, a slander; probably akin to G5574);*
> *whispering, i.e. secret detraction."*

The word translated, *"Backbiters,"* in Rom. 1:29-30, Strong explains to mean, *"talkative against, i.e. a slanderer."* Canfield explains the slight distinction between the two words (backbiters and slanderers) in his magisterial ICC Commentary on Romans,

> *"Both words denote people who go about to destroy other people's reputation by misrepresentation. The difference between [whisperers] and [backbiters] is that the former denoted specifically one who whispers his slanders in his listener's ear, whereas the latter means a slander quite generally, irrespective of whether he whispers his calumnies or proclaims them from the house-tops -- though the fact that it is used immediately after [backbiters] makes it natural to understand it to refer here in particular to the more open sort of slanderer. The [whisperer] is, of course, the more vicious and dangerous kind, inasmuch as he is one against whom there is virtually no human defense."*
> *(ICC Romans, pg. 130-131.)*

The point is - the flippant sharing of false information with the specific intention to tarnish or impair the reputation of another is sin. Intention is the key. The uttering of false information is often simply a mistake. We all speak untruths on accident all the time. We easily overlook such mistakes. But when one's intent in sharing information is to tarnish another's reputation, to assassinate their character, then the truth or falsehood of the information takes on a higher level of importance. It doesn't have to be the case that the speaker knows the information is false (although they often do, which seems to be the situation Moses speaks most against). If they are even *reckless with the truth* such that they don't appropriately determine that it *is* true, and they still share it with the intent of defaming someone, they are likely guilty of defamation of character. A reckless handling of the truth in accusation + a malicious intent to attack someone's reputation is slander. The standard of truth-checking is simply higher when one is making chargers against someone. In modern legal parlance, we distinguish between libel and slander, but the action is essentially the same, only the medium changes. Defamation of character may be only a "tort" rather than a crime in most modern justice systems. But in the Bible it is more than either. It is a sin.

Martin Luther - That Mass Murderer Of Baptists

Let me share an example that is all-too-common in some circles. On a FB post that I liked and commented with approval about a few days ago, a friend shared a link to a recent documentary about Martin Luther. I have a growing appreciation for Luther, and for the contribution he made to the Reformation and its revival of the gospel. I am well aware of many of his flaws. He was probably a drunk. He was often exceptionally harsh with words (the irony of which, in a post arguing for the gracious use of words, is not lost on me). Towards the end of his life, he seemed to go a little crazy, and wrote with a terribly anti-semitic spirit against the Jews, and an angry vitriol towards others whom he disagreed with that he had formerly tolerated. Many have suggested he was literally going mad in those final years. One of the blights on his character, as far as I can see, was his contributions to the Peastants War from 1524-25, which we will look at in more detail.

But under the FB post sharing this documentary, I happened to see some rather inflammatory words. They were written by a good friend, whom I love and respect. They are all the more painful to me because they are the same kind of thing I once heard often, and probably said just as often, about Martin Luther. May God forgive me. He wrote, in what appears to be an attempt to snub both the documentary and Luther with one broad swipe,

"Does it include Luther Murdering Baptists like his Roman Catholic friends?"

I remember being taught in a Fundamentalists Bible College that Martin Luther was a mass murderer, that he hunted down and slaughtered thousands of Baptists with the sword. I heard these accusations made often. (Usually in an attempt to separate oneself from the Reformation as part of a group that was "not Protestant" and was "the one true church").Time and again I was taught that he slew Baptists, and that he called on others to "smite, stab, and slay" them wherever they could be found (words usually attributed to his own mouth). My friend is only repeating (uncritically) what we both learned in class together. It was taught in our texts, and shouted angrily from our pulpits on a regular basis.

But are these allegations true? I replied to the comment to ask if this is really an accurate summary of the Peasants War, and Luther's involvement in it (the situation I assume stood behind the comment). I shared some of what I wrote above about slandar, and noted,

> *"You have directly accused Martin Luther of "murdering Baptists like his Roman Catholic friends." (You may also have subtly accused this documentary of seeking to dishonestly hide facts about Luther's far from perfect life - something I doubt it does, though I have yet to watch it). I am more than willing to hear the case for such a serious allegation.*
>
> *Now, per Moses, the burden of proof is on you. Provide multiple witnesses (i.e., produce your work with multiple primary sources) to the allegations. (I will graciously set aside the misnomer of calling Roman Catholics the "friends" of Luther, as a charge that reveals ignorance of almost every page he ever wrote. We can focus here only on your charge that he "murdered Baptists.")*
>
> *If you cannot provide multiple witnesses to the allegations, please repent of the sin of slander in the same public venue in which you committed it.*
>
> *I will wait..."*

In return, I was greeted with not a single primary historical source. Despite my requests for primary sources, I was instead greeted with a list of quotations, all from a single website, about Luther, titled, "Shocking beliefs about Martin Luther." Oddly, this website never once accused Martin Luther of murdering Baptists.

I was saddened. This dashed my hopes that my friend might actually have become aquainted with primary sources (or even standard or classic secondary sources) related to the history of the Peasent's War, or Luther's involvement, or the history of the Reformation broadly, including its Left Wing of "Radicals." But sadly, no. Instead, a simple internet search had given my friend the boldness to dig in his heels in his accusations against Luther's character. He ended his copy+paste storm with the brisk comment, "Sorry, that I cannot allot more time at the moment to this, but more important things (things that Luther would probably have me killed for must take priority.)," [sic] again seeming to allege that Luther was the equivalent of a serial-murdering psychopath.

In a second blog post to follow, I would like to explain why I think that any charge that Luther "Murdered Baptists" is more likely slander than truth. It is an accusation that should be made only when irrefutable evidence unavoidably compels it, and even then with broken heart rather than flippant comment.The truth is, this charge is one far too often made in some IFB circles (and in some Roman Catholic ones as well). Whatever one thinks about the character of Luther (and I for one can see many, many, flaws in his character and actions), he was a man made in the image of God, and he deserves to be represented honestly.

Surely, with the upcoming 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the time is ripe to either establish these common charges of mass murder and slaughter of Baptists, or lay them to rest once and for all. I am grateful to my friend for the opportunity to attempt to do just that. And even apart from just the example of a charge against Luther, I am eager to encourage us to be careful, and compassionate, with our words. Words matter. If death and life truly are in the power of the tongue, then words aimed at defaming character and assassinating reputations matter even more. For they always end up only on the "death" side of the equation.

I don't ever want to be the guy beating up the kid in the corner again. I want that image to be swallowed up by an image of the gospel that forgives the sins of my past, transforms the character of my present, and compels me to defend the accused. I want to be more gracious with my words. In fact, when I see others beating someone up verbally, I want to jump in with strong defense. Even if it means I get accused of contention and throwing blows myself. (Let's be real though - is someone who jumps between a bully and his victim actually contentious? Or is he actually a brave peacemaker?) I want to do this, even if it means I must take a few of the blows myself. Because I've been both of those men. I've seen the pain of both sides. And I want that pain to stop.

Make Your Case

Of course, one need not be accusing Luther to be committing slander. When we choose to follow the Jesus who is truth, we forfeit the right the engage in impenitent slander. Jesus called us to realize the incredible weight of our words (Matt. 5:22; 12:36; 15:11) and modeled gracious speech for us (Luke 4:22). I may share these words with others who make unfounded accusations as well. I am more than willing to hear the evidence for any such accusation. Against both the reputation of the living, or the memory of the dead. My mind is open and my jury is still out. But I want *witnesses*. I want primary sources. Not hearsay. I presume innocence until guilt is established. I don't demand multiple witnesses for every truth claim every made. But I do (and must) for accusations against someone's character.

The question is, will you provide them?

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