

Talk about Others the Way You Want Others to Talk about You

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A friend and her husband recently told me the story of how they met and married. One day, sometime before they moved into a serious relationship, he called her about something completely unrelated. The phone picked up, but he soon realized that it had answered by accident in her purse. He was surprised to find himself listening in on a conversation about himself.



“I’m sure I said some awful things,” my friend remembered. Someone had just asked her if she was interested in a relationship with her now-husband and she was responding with statements like, “No, I don’t want to date him. I really hope he doesn’t want to date me. He’s so awkward.” The whole time, he was taking it all in from inside her purse.

What if people could hear you every time you talk about them? Would it change what you say?

Unwholesome speech about others can be a way of using them. We want to be funny, so we use another person’s quirks to get a laugh. We feel awkward or insecure, so we use another person’s weakness to draw attention away from our own. We want to feel superior, so we express concern for another person’s problem that we don’t have or that we know how to fix. We want to be an insider, so we subtly point out the things that distinguish us from those who aren’t part of the inner ring.

Yet we wouldn’t talk this way to their face because we know deep down that we are just using them. Trust me, I know. I’ve done it many times.

Taming Your Tongue with the Golden Rule

Jesus summarized the Law and the Prophets this way: “In everything, treat people the same way you want them to treat you” (Matthew 7:12). This is another way of saying, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” but somehow it comes across even more clearly. How should you love your neighbor? Think about how you would like to be treated, and treat him the same way. “In everything” ... including how you talk about him.

I have many quirks and flaws, but I don’t want other people to use them to get a laugh or a feeling of superiority. I want people to help me with them instead. So, when they do talk about me, I hope that it will be because they want to edify those they are talking with.

If this is how I want to be talked about, this is how I ought to talk about others.

Additionally, unwholesome speech about others can destroy one of the most precious things that we have in Christ—our fellowship. When we talk about others in these ways, we undermine the respect that our hearers have for them. We also create a culture of distrust, because everyone knows that the same group I talk about others with today will be talking about me tomorrow. Instead of building up the body of Christ, we dismember it.

This is why Paul writes:

“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.” (Ephesians 4:29)

Words are potent. They can build and destroy. When you use them to talk about others, which do they do? Do they do what you would want someone else’s words to do to you?