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## Fire and Ice Sermon Series

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### Cases Of Conscience, and Directions Against Backbiting, Slandering, and Evil Speaking

by Richard Baxter

Contributed by Steve Doan

#### Title 1 Cases of Conscience about Backbiting and Evil-speaking.

*Question I.* May I not speak evil of that which is evil? And call every one truly as he is?

*Answer.* You must not speak a known falsehood of any man under pretense of charity or speaking well. But you are not to speak all the evil of every man which is true: as opening the faults of the king or your parents, though never so truly, is a sin against the fifth commandment, "Honour thy father and mother:" so if you do it without a call, you sin against your neighbor's honour, and many other ways offend.

*Quest. II.* Is it not sinful silence, and a consenting to or countenancing of the sins of others, to say nothing against them, as tender of their honour?

*Answer.* It is sinful to be silent when you have a call to speak: if you forbear to admonish the offender in love between him and you, when you have opportunity and just cause, it is sinful to be silent then, but to silence backbiting is no sin. If you must be guilty of every man's sin that you talk not against behind his back, your whole discourse must be nothing but backbiting.

*Quest. III.* May I not speak that which honest, religious, credible persons do report?

*Answer.* Not without both sufficient evidence and a sufficient call. You must not judge of the action by the person, but of the person by the action. Nor must you imitate any man in evil-doing. If a good man abuse you, are you willing that all men follow him and abuse you more?

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*Quest. IV.* May I believe the bad report of an honest, credible person?

*Answer.* You must first consider whether you may hear it, or meddle with it: for if it be a case that you have nothing to do with, you may not set your judgment to it, either to believe it, or to disbelieve it. And if it be a thing that you are called to judge of, yet every honest man's word is not presently to be believed: you must first know whether it be a thing that he saw, or is certain of himself, or a thing which he only taketh upon report; and what his evidence and proof is; and whether he be not engaged by interest, passion, or any difference of opinion; or be not engaged in some contrary faction, where the interest of a party or cause is his temptation; or whether he be not used to rash reports and uncharitable speeches; and what concurrence of testimonies there is, and what is said on the other side; especially what the person accused saith in his own defense. If it be so heinous a crime in public judgment, to pass sentence before both parties are heard, and to condemn a man before he speak for himself; it cannot be justifiable in private judgment. Would you be willing yourselves that all should be believed of you, which is spoken by any honest man? And how uncertain are we of other men's honesty, that we should on that account think ill of others.

*Quest. V.* May I not speak evil of them that are enemies to God, to religion and godliness, and are open persecutors of it; or are enemies to the king or church?

*Answer.* You may on all meet occasions speak evil of the sin; and of the persons when you have a just call; but not at your own pleasure.

*Quest. VI.* What if it be one whose honour and credit countenanceth an ill cause, and his dishonour would disable him to do hurt?

*Answer.* You may not belie the devil, nor wrong the worst man that is, though under pretense of doing good; God needeth not malice, nor calumnies, nor injustice to his glory: it is an ill cause that cannot be maintained without such means as these. And when the matter is true, you must have a call to speak it, and you must speak it justly, without unrighteous aggravations, or hiding the better part, which should make the case and person better understood. There is a time and due manner, in which that man's crimes and just dishonour may be published, whose false reputation injureth the truth. But yet I must say, that a great deal of villainy and slander is committed upon this plausible pretense; and that there is scarce a more common cloak for the most inhuman lies and calumnies.

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*Quest. VII.* May I not lawfully make a true narration of such matters of fact, as are criminal and dishonorable to offenders? Else no man may write a true history to posterity of men's crimes.

*Answer.* When you have a just call to do it, you may; but not at your own pleasure. Historians may take much more liberty to speak the truth of the dead, than you may of the living: though no untruth must be spoken of either: yet the honour of princes and magistrates while they are alive is needful to their government, and therefore must be maintained, oftentimes by the concealment of their faults: and so proportionably the honour of other men is needful to a life of love, and peace, and just society; but when they are dead, they are not subjects capable of a right to any such honour as must be maintained by such silencing of the truth, to the injury of posterity: and posterity hath usually a right to historical truth, that good examples may draw them to imitation, and bad examples may warn them to take heed of sin. God will have the name of the wicked to rot; and the faults of a Noah, Lot, David, Solomon, Peter, &c. shall be recorded. Yet nothing unprofitable to posterity may be recorded of the dead, though it be true; nor the faults of men unnecessarily divulged; much less may the dead be slandered or abused.

*Quest. VIII.* What if it be one that hath been oft admonished in vain? May not the faults of such a one be mentioned behind his back?

*Answer.* I confess such a one (the case being proved, and he being notoriously impenitent) hath made a much greater forfeiture of his honour than other men; and no man can save that man's honour who will cast it away himself. But yet it is not every one that committeth a sin after admonition, who is here to be understood; but such as are impenitent in some mortal or ruling sin: for some may sin oft in a small and controverted point, for want of ability to discern the truth; and some may live in daily infirmities, (as the best men do,) which they condemn themselves for, and desire to be delivered from. And even the most impenitent man's sins must not be meddled with by every one at his pleasure, but only when you have just cause.

*Quest. IX.* What if it be one whom I cannot speak to face to face?

*Answer.* You must let him alone, till you have just cause to speak of him.

*Quest. X.* When hath a man a just cause and call to open another's faults?

*Answer.* Negatively: 1. Not to fill up the time with other idle chat, or table talk. 2. Not to second any man, how good soever, who backbiteth others; no, though he pretend to do it to make the sin more odious, or to exercise godly

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sorrow for other men's sin. 3. Not whenever interest, passion, faction, or company seemeth to require it. But, affirmatively, 1. When we may speak it to his face in love and privacy, in due manner and circumstances, as is most hopeful to conduce to his amendment. 2. When, after due admonition, we take two or three, and after that tell the church (in a case that requireth it). 3. When we have a sufficient cause to accuse him to the magistrate. 4. When the magistrate or the pastors of the church, reprove or punish him. 5. When it is necessary to the preservation of another: as if I see my friend in danger of marrying with a wicked person, or taking a false servant, or trading and bargaining with one that is like to overreach him, or going among cheaters, or going to hear or converse with a dangerous heretic or seducer; I must open the faults of those that they are in danger of, so far as their safety and my charity require. 6. When it is any treason or conspiracy against the king or commonwealth; where my concealment may be an injury to the king, or damage or danger to the kingdom. 7. When the person himself doth, by his self-justification, force me to it. 8. When his reputation is so built upon the injury of others, and slanders of the just, that the justifying of him is the condemning of the innocent, we may then indirectly condemn him, by vindicating the just; as if it be in a case of contention between two, if we cannot justify the right without dishonour to the injurious, there is no remedy but he must bear his blame. 9. When a man's notorious wickedness hath set him up as a spectacle of warning and lamentation, so that his crimes cannot be hid, and he hath forfeited his reputation, we must give others warning by his fall as an excommunicate person, or malefactor at the gallows, &c. 10. When we have just occasion to make a bare narrative of some public matters of fact; as of the sentence of a judge, or punishment of offenders, &c. 11. When the crime is so heinous, as that all good persons are obliged to join to make it odious, as Phinehas was to execute judgment. As in cases of open rebellion, treason, blasphemy, atheism, idolatry, murders, perjury, cruelty; such as the French massacre, the Irish far greater massacre, the murdering of kings, the powder-plot, the burning of London, &c.<sup>1</sup> Crimes notorious should not go about in the mouths or ears of men, but with just detestation. 12. When any person's false reputation is a seducement to men's souls, and made by himself or others the instruments of God's dishonour, and the injury of church or state, or others, though we may do no unjust thing to blast his reputation, we may tell the truth so far as justice, or mercy, or piety requireth it.

*Quest. XI.* What if I hear flatterers applauding wicked men, and speaking well of them, and extenuating their crimes, and praising them for evil doing?

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The reader will recognise that Baxter's imperfect knowledge of history does not detract from his argument.

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*Answer.* You must on all just occasions speak evil of sin; but when that is enough, you need not meddle with the sinner; no, not though other men applaud him, and you know it be false; for you are not bound to contradict every falsehood which you hear. But if in any of the twelve forementioned cases you have a call to do it, (as for the preservation of the hearers from a snare thereby; as if men commend a traitor or a wicked man to draw another to like his way,) in such cases you may contradict the false report.

*Quest. XII.* Are we bound to reprove every back-biter, in this age when honest people are grown to make little conscience of it, but think it their duty to divulge men's faults?

*Answer.* Most of all, that you may stop the stream of this common sin, ordinarily whenever we can do it without doing greater hurt, we should rebuke the tongue that reporteth evil of other men causelessly behind their backs; for our silence is their encouragement in sin.

## Tit. 2 Directions against Backbiting, Slandering, and Evil Speaking.

*Direct. I.* Maintain the life of brotherly love. Love your neighbour as yourself.

*Direct. II.* Watch narrowly lest interest or passion should prevail upon you. For where these prevail, the tongue is set on fire of hell, and will set on fire the course of nature, James 2. Selfishness and passion will not only prompt you to speak evil, but also to justify it, and think you do well; yea, and to be angry with those that will not hearken to you and believe you.

*Direct. III.* Especially involve not yourselves in any faction, religious or secular. I do not mean that you should not imitate the best, and hold most intimate communion with them; but that you abhor unlawful divisions and sidings; and when error, or uncharitableness, or carnal interest hath broken the church into pieces where you live, and one is of Paul, and another of Apollos, and another of Cephas, one of this party, and another of that, take heed of espousing the interest of any party, as it stands cross to the interest of the whole. It would have been hardly credible, if sad experience had not proved it, how commonly and heinously almost every sect of Christians do sin in this point against each other and how far the interest of their sect, which they account the interest of Christ, will prevail with multitudes even of zealous people, to belie, speak evil, backbite, and reproach those that are against their opinion and their party! Yea, how easily will they proceed beyond reproaches, to bloody persecutions!

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He that thinketh he doth God service by killing Christ or his disciples, will think that he doth him service by calling him a deceiver, and one that hath a devil, a blasphemer, and an enemy to Caesar, and calling his disciples pestilent fellows and movers of sedition among the people, and accounting them as the filth and offscouring of the world. That zeal which murdered and destroyed many hundred thousand of the Waldenses and Albigenses, and thirty thousand or forty thousand in one French massacre, and two hundred thousand in one Irish massacre,<sup>2</sup> and which kindled the Marian bonfires in England, made the powder mine, and burnt the city of London, and keepeth up the Inquisition, I say, that zeal will certainly think it a service to the church, (that is, their sect,) to write the most odious lies and slanders of Luther, Zuinglius, Calvin, Beza, and any such excellent servants of the Lord. So full of horrid, impudent lies are the writings of (not one but) many sects against those that were their chief opposers, that I still admonish all posterity, to see good evidence for it, before they believe the hard sayings of any factious historian or divine, against those that are against his party. It is only men of eminent conscience, and candor, and veracity, and impartiality, who are to be believed in their bad report of others, except where notoriety or very good evidence doth command belief above their own authority and veracity. A siding factious zeal, which is hotter for any sect or party, than for the common Christianity and catholic church, is always a railing, a lying, and a slandering zeal, and is notably described, James 3, as “earthly, sensual, and devilish,” causing “envy, strife, and confusion, and every evil work.”

*Direct. IV.* Observe well the commonness of this sin of backbiting, that it may make you the more afraid of falling into that which so few do escape. I will not say, among high and low, rich and poor, court and country, how common is this sin; but among men professing the greatest zeal and strictness in religion, how few make conscience of it! Mark in all companies that you come into, how common it is to take liberty to say what they think of all men; yea, to report what they hear, though they dare not say that they believe it! And how commonly the relating of other men’s faults, and telling what this man or that man is, or did, or said, is part of the chat to waste the hour in! And if it be but true, they think they sin not: nay, nor if they did but hear that it is true. For my part I must profess, that my conscience having brought me to a custom of rebuking such backbiters, I am ordinarily censured for it, either as one that loveth contradiction, or one that dependeth sin and wickedness, by taking part with wicked men; all because I would stop the course of this common vice of evil speaking and backbiting where men have no call. And I must thankfully profess, that among all other sins in the

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<sup>2</sup> See note on page 4 above.

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world, the sins of selfishness, pride, and back-biting, I have been most brought to hate and fear, by the observation of the commonness of them, even in persons seeming godly: nothing hath fixed an apprehension of their odiousness so deeply in me, nor engaged my heart against them above all other sins so much, as this lamentable experience of their prevalence in the world, among the more religious, and not *only* in the profane.

*Direct. V.* Take not the honesty of the person as a sufficient cause to hear or believe a bad report of others. It is lamentable to hear how far men, otherwise honest, do too often here offend. Suspect evil speakers, and be not over-credulous of them. Charity thinketh not evil, nor easily and hastily believeth it. Liars are more used to evil speaking, than men of truth and credit are. It is no wrong to the best, that you believe him not when he backbiteth without good evidence.

*Direct. VI.* Rebuke backbiters, and encourage them not by hearkening to their tales. Prov. 25:23, “The north wind driveth away rain, so doth an angry countenance a backbiting tongue.” It may be they think themselves religious persons, and will take it for an injury to be driven away with an angry countenance: but God himself, who loveth his servants better than we, is more offended at their sin; and that which offendeth him, must offend us. We must not hurt their souls, and displease God, by drawing upon us the guilt of their sins, for fear of displeasing them. Tell them how God doth hate backbiting, and advise them if they know any hurt by others, to go to them privately, and tell them of it in a way that tendeth to their repentance.

*Direct. VII.* Make mention often of the good which is in others; (except it be unseasonable, and will seem to be a promoting of their sin): God’s gifts in every man deserve commendations; and we have allowance to mention men’s virtues oftener than to mention their vices. Indeed when a bad man is praised in order to the disparagement of the good, or to honour some wicked cause or action against truth and godliness, we must not concur in such malicious praises; but otherwise we must commend that which is truly commendable in all. And this custom will have a double benefit against backbiting: it will use your own tongues to a contrary course, and it will rebuke the evil tongues of others, and be an example to them of more charitable language.

*Direct. VIII.* Understand yourselves, and speak often to others, of the sinfulness of evil-speaking and backbiting. Show them the scriptures which condemn it, and the intrinsical malignity which is in it: as here followeth.

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*Direct. IX.* Make conscience of just reproof and exhorting sinners to their faces. Go tell them of it privately and lovingly, and it will have better effects, and bring you more comfort, and cure the sin of backbiting.

### Tit. 3 The Evil of Backbiting and Evil-speaking.

1. It is forbidden of God among the heinous, damning sins, and made the character of a notorious wicked person, and the avoiding of it is made the mark of such as are accepted of God and shall be saved: Rom. 1:29,30, it is made the mark of a reprobate mind, and joined with murder, and hating God, viz. “full of envy, debate, deceit, malignity, whisperers, backbiters.” Psalm. 15:2, 3, “Lord, who in thy tabernacle? Who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour.” And when Paul describeth those whom he must sharply rebuke and censure, he just describeth the factious sort of Christians of our times. 2 Cor. 12:20, “For I fear lest when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and that I shall be found unto you such as ye would not: lest there be debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults.” Eph. 4:31, “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil-speaking be put away from you, with all malice, and be in one to another, and tender hearted—.”

2. It is a sin which gratifieth Satan, and serveth his malice against our neighbour. He is malicious against all, and speaking evil, and doing hurt, are the works which are suitable to his malignity! And should a Christian make his tongue the instrument of the accuser of the brethren, to do his work against each other?

3. It signifieth lack of Christian love. For love speaketh not evil, nor openeth men’s faults without a cause, but covereth infirmities; much less will it lie and slander others, and carry about uncertain reports against them. It is not to do as you would be alone by: and how essential love is to true Christianity, Christ himself bath often told us.

4. It is a sin which directly serveth to destroy the hearers’ love, and consequently to destroy their souls. If the backbiter understood himself, he would confess that it is his very end to cause you to hate (or abate your love to) him whom he speaketh evil of. He that speaketh good of a man, representeth him amiable; for amiableness and goodness are all one. And he that speaketh evil of a man representeth him hateful or unlovely; for hatefulness, unloveliness, and evil are all one. And as it is not the natural way of winning love, to entreat and beg it,

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and say, I pray you love this person, or that thing; but to open the goodness of the thing or person, which will command love: so is it not the natural way to stir up hatred, by entreating men to hate this man or that; but to tell how bad they are, which will command hatred in them that do believe it. Therefore to speak evil of another, is more than to say to the hearers, I pray you hate this man, or abate your love to him. And that the killing of love is the killing or destroying of men's souls, the apostle John doth frequently declare.

5 And it tendeth also to destroy the love, and consequently the soul of him that you speak evil of. For when it cometh to his hearing, (as one way or other it may do) what evil you have reported of him behind his back, it tendeth to make him hate you, and so to make him worse.

6. It is a great contention-maker and peace-breaker wherever it is practiced. It tendeth to set people together by the ears. When it is told that such a one spake evil of you in such a place, there are then heart-burnings, and rehearsals, and sidings, and such ensuing malice as the devil intended by this design.

7. They who often speak evil of others behind their backs, it is ten to one will speak falsehoods of them when they do not know it. Fame is too ordinarily a liar, and they shall be liars who will be its messengers. How know you whether the thing that you report is true? Is it only because a credible person spake it? But how did that person know it to be true? Might he not take it upon trust as well as you? And might he not take a person to be credible that is not? And how commonly doth faction, or interest, or passion, or credulity, make that person incredible in one thing, who is credible in others, where he hath no such temptation. If you know it not to be true, or have not sufficient evidence to prove it, you are guilty of lying and slandering interpretatively, though it should prove true; because it might have been a lie for aught you knew.

8. It is gross injustice to talk of a man's faults, before you have heard him speak for himself. I know it is usual with such to say, O we have heard it from such as we are certain will not lie. But he is a foolish and unrighteous judge will be peremptory upon hearing one party only speak, and knoweth not how ordinary it is for a man when speaketh for himself; to blow away the most confident and plausible accusations, and make the case appear to be quite another thing. You know not what another man hath to say till you have heard him.

9. Backbiting teacheth others to backbite. Your example inviteth them to do the like: and sins which are common, are easily swallowed, and hardly repented of: men think that the commonness justifieth or extenuateth the fault.

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10. It encourageth ungodly men to the odious sin of backbiting and slandering the most religious, righteous person. It is ordinary with the devil's family to make Christ's faithfulest servants their table talk, and the objects of their reproach and scorn, and the song of drunkards? What abundance of lies go current among such malignant persons, against the most innocent, which would all be ashamed, if they had first admitted them to speak for themselves. And such slanders and lies are the devil's common means to keep ungodly men from the love of godliness, and so from repentance and salvation. And backbiting professors of religion encourage men to this; for with what measure they mete, it shall be measured to them again. And they that are themselves evil spoken of, will think that they are warranted to requite the backbiters with the like.

11. It is a sin which commonly excludeth true, profitable reproof and exhortation. They that speak most behind men's backs, do usually say least to the sinner's face, in any way which tendeth to his salvation. They will not go lovingly to him in private, and set home his sin upon his conscience, and exhort him to repentance; but any thing shall serve as a sufficient excuse against this duty; that they may make the sin of backbiting serve instead of it: and all is out of carnal self-saving; they fear men will be offended if they speak to their faces, and therefore they will whisper against them behind their backs.

12. It is at the least, but idle talk and a misspending of your time: what the better are the healers for hearing of other men's misdoings? And you know that it no whit profiteth the person of whom you speak. A skillful, friendly admonition might do him good! But to neglect this, and talk of his faults unprofitably, behind his back, is but to aggravate the sin of your uncharitableness, as being not contented to refuse your help to a man in sin, but you must also injure him and do him hurt.

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