

Proverbs 11:12-13

**“Optimal Church Communication: When Not to Talk”**

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*Introduction:*

Children, please come to the screen for the Bible reading. The book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings. They were written to teach boys and girls how to live a good life. This morning these verses will tell us something important about communicating with others.

*Reading:*

<sup>12</sup> It is foolish to speak scornfully of others. If you are smart, you will keep quiet. <sup>13</sup> No one who gossips can be trusted with a secret, but you can put confidence in someone who is trustworthy.

For my dissertation, I researched three congregations that had been near to closing, made significant changes, and become new and vital communities of faith.<sup>1</sup> When I entered each of the three, I could tell that they were now alive because there was a buzz among them. People were talking and truly enjoying each other.

I recently saw the same thing happening at our Sunday Fun Day. While the children played, the adults talked and talked and talked to each other!

**One characteristic of a dynamic congregation is good communication,** and over the course of the next two months, I'll be preaching on what makes for optimal communication in the church.

**Ironically, good communication in the church also includes *not* talking.** “Not Talking?” This is the unexpected practice that the two verses in Proverbs suggest we enact.

Proverbs is a collection of succinct, honest, and memorable teachings, gathered over centuries, from Israel's wisdom tradition. The purpose of this collection was to help people become wise and godly.<sup>2</sup> In fact, there may even have been schools at which portions of Proverbs were used as a kind of ‘textbook,’ molding young people into the good life,<sup>3</sup> somewhat like the advice and sayings we put today in graduation cards; the wisdom we want our young people to believe.

Let's look more closely at verse 12. The version we read from the Good News Bible translates: “It is foolish to speak scornfully of others. If you are smart, you will keep quiet.”

I know that *I* don't like it when teachers or pastors make a habit of speaking critically of their students and congregants, and I am uncomfortable when marriage partners often say sarcastic things about each other. Nevertheless, I can slip into this kind of pattern.

We are also much more aware these days of bullying and verbal abuse. So, in the church, we certainly don't want to talk about each other in negative or derogatory ways. This proverb

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<sup>1</sup>Jean Halligan Vandergrift, *The Dance of a Changing Church: A Practical Theology of Congregational Transformation* (Boston: Boston University School of Theology Dissertations, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “The Book of Proverbs,” *New Interpreter's Bible, Volume V* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

reminds us that there is value in holding your tongue when you inevitably get annoyed with a fellow church member. You and I are to practice building each other up!

It is also not our place to judge, as Jesus warned. It is foolish, for example, for an employer to say to a young adult: “You’ll never amount to anything!” And congregations ought not to denigrate the neighbors who live next door. When you and I are hypercritical of the motives and behaviors of others, we are closing the door on their potential in Christ – stifling their growth and our own.

**It is therefore a wise spiritual practice not to talk in certain instances. But this does *not* mean** ignoring differences or bad behavior. It does *not* mean being superficially kind or disingenuous. It *does* mean letting more light into our relationships and hoping for the best. The church aims for love and acceptance, the kind that “guards each one’s dignity and saves each one’s pride.”<sup>4</sup>

**Verse 13 brings up another example of not talking. It basically says that a trustworthy Christian keeps confidences.** In other words, when another shares a personal issue or story with you in confidence, you ought not tell it to others. A trustworthy church will be careful to maintain this boundary in its communication.

Spiritual guide, Frederick Buechner, wrote a candid memoir called *Telling Secrets*, which sounds like the opposite of what Proverbs dictates. His book starts with the story of his father’s suicide and its impact upon him, including how telling this secret eventually helped him. Later, though, in his autobiography, Buechner broached the sensitive subject of his daughter’s anorexia, and wrote: “I will not try to tell my daughter’s story for two reasons. One is that it is not mine to tell but hers. The other is that of course I do not know her story, not the real story, the inside story, of what it was like for her.”<sup>5</sup>

**So, once again, it is a wise spiritual practice not to talk. But to keep quiet in certain circumstances does *not* mean** becoming a secretive community, afraid or ashamed of itself and hiding in the shadows. It certainly does *not* mean enabling a culture of bad behavior or abuse! These days, with the “Me Too” movement, the clergy abuse scandal, sex trafficking, and home-grown terrorism, when the church hears a confession of sin, it must still protect the vulnerable and press the perpetrator to get help! These steps do not betray a confidence as much as they inspire confidence.

At the same time, Proverbs 11:13 enjoins us in the church to exercise appropriate discretion and honor privacy in its communication. “Wise love knows when silence is right.”<sup>6</sup>

When our faith community practices these two kinds of not talking, we actually create a culture of trust in which people are willing to talk *more* and at a deeper level. People share more, heal, and grow when they are appreciated and their personal lives respected. This is the kind of church communication that then fosters wise engagement with the world in the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

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<sup>4</sup>Church Camp song, “We are One in the Spirit.”

<sup>5</sup>Buechner, Frederick, *Telling Secrets* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 24.

<sup>6</sup>Van Leeuwen, 118.