
Set a Guard

*The Christian, the Tongue,
and the Sin of Slander*

by
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*"Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth;
keep watch over the door of my lips."*

— Psalm 141:3 NKJV

Introduction

Of all the sins to which the Christian is exposed, none is so common, so easy to commit, so quickly defended, and so slowly repented of, as the sins of the tongue. We may not steal. We may not murder. We may keep our hand from crossing the boundary of God's law in matters of property or person. But the tongue – small, fast, and unguarded – slips past our defences a hundred times before we have even thought to set a watch over it.

The apostle James understood this. *“If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body”* (James 3:2 NKJV). He chose his words carefully: not the strong man, not the disciplined man, but the perfect man – and this perfection is reached, he says, not by mastery of the great vices but by mastery of the tongue. He saw what every reader of Proverbs already knew: that *“death and life are in the power of the tongue”* (Proverbs 18:21 NKJV), and that the same small member that praises God in one breath can curse the image of God in the next.

This book is about one particular sin of the tongue: slander – the sin of speaking against another person in a way that defames, distorts, or destroys. Scripture is unsparing about it. Paul lists it among the marks of perilous times (2 Timothy 3:3). Peter commands its complete laying aside (1 Peter 2:1). The very name of the evil one – *diabolos* in the Greek – means simply “slanderer,” or “false accuser.” When we slander, we do not merely sin; we wear, however briefly, the very character of the one whose works Christ came to destroy.

And yet slander is everywhere – in our newspapers, our social-media feeds, our family WhatsApp groups, our offices and choir lofts and political rallies and even our prayer requests. It hides under names we do not at first recognise as slander: gossip, venting, sharing concerns, telling our side, processing publicly. It feels harmless because the wound is not visible; the bleeding happens out of sight, in another person's reputation, in another family's home, in another believer's standing before brothers who once trusted them.

But not every word spoken about an absent person is slander. The Scripture itself records the sins and failures of named men and women — Cain, Korah, Saul, Solomon, Peter at Antioch, Demas, Diotrephes — without sinning in the telling. The Lord Jesus warned His disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees while the Pharisees were not in the room. Paul publicly recorded Peter's hypocrisy at Antioch for the instruction of the whole church. So the question this book must answer is not merely *whether* we may speak of others, but *how, when, and why* — and where, exactly, the line falls between honest speech and the kind of speech that wounds without warrant.

This study works through that question in three movements. First, we will look at what slander is — distinguishing it, as Scripture does, from speech that is permitted, necessary, or even commanded. Second, we will trace its consequences: the friendships it sunders, the reputations it ruins, the character of Satan it puts on display, the eternal reward it costs the unrepentant. Third, we will set out the safeguards by which a believer may keep watch over the door of his lips — the disciplines of evidence, motive, restoration, and prayer that turn a tongue full of poison into a tongue full of grace.

The aim, throughout, is not condemnation but cleansing. It is the slow and serious work of a heart asking, with David, “*Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips*” (Psalm 141:3 NKJV).

The Heart Speaks Through the Tongue

Before we can speak rightly about slander, we must first see what Scripture teaches about the tongue itself. The tongue is not an instrument apart from us, like a hammer we pick up or set down. It is the outward voice of an inward life. What lives in the heart eventually walks out through the mouth. The Lord Jesus made this plain in a single, searching sentence:

“

For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.

— **Matthew 12:34–36 NKJV**

There is no separating speech from soul. The tongue is the heart's interpreter. When we speak well of others, our hearts have already learned to think well of them. When our speech wounds, our hearts have already done the wounding privately, long before the words came out. The mouth simply reports the inner work.

This is why Proverbs warns so often about the power of speech: “*Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit*” (Proverbs 18:21 NKJV). A single sentence can build up a marriage or break it. A single rumour can preserve a reputation or destroy one. The smallest member of the body, James writes, carries the largest leverage in the moral life:

“

See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.

— **James 3:5–6 NKJV**

This is the gravity that gives slander its weight. We are not, when we speak carelessly of others, merely “venting” or “processing” or “telling our side.” We are wielding a thing the Scripture compares to fire — and fire, by its nature, does not contain itself. The first discipline of a Christian tongue is the discipline of a Christian heart.

And there is one further truth that gives the discipline of the tongue its full weight: God Himself hears every word. The believer does not speak alone, even when no human witness is present. Malachi records this with quiet seriousness:

“

Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name.

— Malachi 3:16 NKJV

The Lord listens, hears, and writes down. The Lord Jesus extended the principle into territory most of us would rather it did not reach:

“

But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

— Matthew 12:36–37 NKJV

And Solomon adds a sober prudence: “Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few” (Ecclesiastes 5:2 NKJV). Every conversation we hold has more witnesses than we know — and the most important of them never forgets.

What Slander Is — and What It Is Not

Before we trace the marks of sinful slander, we must clear a common confusion. Not every word spoken about an absent person is slander, and not all unfavourable speech is sin. The Scriptures themselves record the failures of named individuals — David’s adultery, Solomon’s idolatry, Peter’s hypocrisy at Antioch, Demas’s desertion, Diotrephes’s pride — without the inspired authors sinning in the telling. We must let Scripture, not popular opinion, draw the boundary.

Speech That Is Not Slander

First, simply speaking about someone who is not present is not, by itself, slander. An angel told the women at the empty tomb to go and tell the apostles (Matthew 28:7–8); Peter recounted to the Jerusalem church the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 11:1–18); we ourselves announce births, illnesses, prayer needs, and bereavements concerning absent persons every Sabbath. The person is not harmed; nothing is misrepresented; the report serves love.

Second, even unfavourable speech about an absent person is not necessarily sinful. Jesus warned His disciples, in the Pharisees' absence, of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees (Matthew 15:12–14; 16:5–12). He told His disciples privately, while the chief priests and scribes were not present, that they would condemn Him to death (Matthew 20:17–19). Paul published Peter's hypocrisy at Antioch in a letter circulated across the Galatian churches, naming Peter by name (Galatians 2:11–14). The Spirit who inspired these passages did not sin in inspiring them.

Third, the Lord Himself commands certain unfavourable speech. When a brother refuses to repent of personal sin, Christ commands: *"tell it to the church"* (Matthew 18:17 NKJV). Paul names by name those who shipwrecked their faith — Hymenaeus, Alexander, Philetus, Demas — as warnings to the next generation (1 Timothy 1:19–20; 2 Timothy 2:17; 4:10). To refuse such speech when the church needs it is itself a failure of love.

So the question is not whether we may ever speak of an absent person, or even speak unfavourably of one. The question is *how, when, why, and on what evidence*. The next pages set out the four marks by which Scripture identifies speech that has crossed from legitimate into sinful — speech that has become slander.

The Four Marks of Sinful Slander

It is possible to slander another whether they are absent or present, whether the words are true or false, whether the listener is one or many. What turns honest speech into slander is not the topic but the manner — and Scripture exposes four diagnostic marks by which the heart may know when it has crossed the line.

The First Mark: Accusing Without Evidence

It is not necessarily wrong to *ask* someone about what they did. But it is slander to *accuse* a person without substantial evidence of guilt. The ninth commandment is unmistakable:

“

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

— Exodus 20:16 NKJV

Paul lists “slanderers” among the marks of perilous times (2 Timothy 3:3 NKJV) — rendered “false accusers” in the KJV. The Greek roots underneath both words point in the same direction: the spreading of reports for which no witness has been called, no evidence weighed, no question asked of the accused. To accuse without proof is to stand at the bench of God’s justice and pronounce a verdict the Judge has not authorised.

It does not matter who originated the accusation. To repeat an unverified rumour is to put oneself in the same place of guilt as the one who started it:

“

You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.

— Exodus 23:1 NKJV

People often hedge their slander with formulae: “I don’t know if this is true, but I heard...” Or, “Don’t tell anyone I told you, but...” The disclaimer does not absolve the speaker; it merely confesses that he knew he should not be speaking.

Even when we cannot prove a thing but only suspect it, Paul names that, too, among the works of the flesh: “evil suspicions” (1 Timothy 6:4 NKJV) — what the KJV calls “evil surmisings.” Jumping to conclusions about what a man did, or why he did it, when one has not asked him, is the harvest of a heart that already wanted him to be guilty. Proverbs gives the rule plainly: “Do not be a witness against your neighbor without cause” (Proverbs 24:28 NKJV).

Paul gave Timothy a precise process for receiving an accusation, even against a senior figure in the church:

“

Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.

— 1 Timothy 5:19–20 NKJV

If a single anonymous report cannot be received against a church elder, how much less should a single, sourceless, evidence-free claim be received and spread against an ordinary brother or sister? When we hear what we cannot verify, the godly response is not silence about what is real, but investigation before judgment. Ask. Seek witnesses. Get the facts. But do not affirm guilt until the proof is in.

The Second Mark: The Malicious Motive

Even when we have the facts, that does not by itself mean we are right to spread them. There is a second mark Scripture watches for: the motive of the speaker. Some imagine that a true thing may be said about anyone, at any time, in any spirit. Scripture knows better. Peter places evil-speaking in a list whose other members tell us what spirit usually produces it:

“

Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word.

— 1 Peter 2:1 NKJV

Notice the company evil-speaking keeps: malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy. These are the breeding-grounds of slander. There must be good reasons — love-shaped reasons — for telling bad things about others. Anything less, however true, is sin. The malicious motive takes at least four common forms.

Envy. Peter, as we have seen, places envy beside evil-speaking. We may speak ill of others because we secretly envy their abilities, their blessings, or the honour they

have received. Bringing them down by speech is the lazy man's way of raising himself.

Vengeance, anger, hatred, or grudges. Jeremiah's enemies defamed him in order to take revenge for his preaching (Jeremiah 20:10). Peter warns Christians not to return evil for evil or reviling for reviling (1 Peter 3:9), and points to Christ as our model:

“

Who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously.

— 1 Peter 2:23 NKJV

Vengeance does not always reach for a weapon. One of the most common forms of revenge is the cutting sentence. Someone wounds us — really or in imagination — and we wound back with words, sometimes months or years later, in the form of a story told to the right listener. Sin must indeed be rebuked. But when we rebuke, we must be sure we are moved by concern for the sinner, not by a desire for his pain.

Self-will. When others oppose our views — whether in personal matters or in doctrinal ones — we may seek to gather “dirt” on them, discredit them, and keep others from listening to them. False teachers, Paul writes, are often involved in “reviling” (1 Timothy 6:4 NKJV); they hope to find fault in those who speak the truth. Jeremiah saw the same pattern: “*They are all stubborn rebels, walking as slanderers*” (Jeremiah 6:28 NKJV). And John, late in his life, named a man in the church who had perfected this technique:

“

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words.

— 3 John 9–10 NKJV

This technique appears in every age and in every arena — in workplaces, in congregations, in families, and wherever truth has lost its argument and slander remains the last weapon. Speaking evil against others so we can win a confrontation

and get our way is one of the most common — and one of the most denied — forms of sinful slander among believers.

Persecution. Sometimes slander is suffered, not committed; the Christian becomes its target rather than its source. The Lord placed His own benediction on those who bear it for His sake:

“

Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven.

— Matthew 5:11–12 NKJV

Before we speak any derogatory thing about another, we must make sure our motives are pure. Are we speaking for our own benefit, or for the genuine good of the one we describe and the genuine need of the one to whom we speak? This requires hard, honest self-examination — because the human heart finds it easy to attribute bad motives to others and good motives to itself.

The Third Mark: The Meddler's Tongue

Some people are not particularly malicious in their slander; they simply enjoy the traffic of other people's affairs. They feel important when they know what others do not know. They keep a quiet inventory of neighbours' troubles, colleagues' quarrels, and friends' embarrassments. Some tabloids and online platforms have built fortunes on the back of this appetite, digging up dirt and selling it to those who delight to read it. The biblical name for this is *busybody*:

“

And besides they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house, and not only idle but also gossips and busybodies, saying things which they ought not.

— 1 Timothy 5:13 NKJV

Paul gives the same diagnosis of certain idle men at Thessalonica: “*not working at all, but are busybodies*” (2 Thessalonians 3:11 NKJV). And the Law itself had already

legislated against the talebearer: “You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people” (Leviticus 19:16 NKJV).

The pattern is the same in every age. Where there is little useful work to do, there is usually much useless talk to fill the silence. Some information may indeed need to be made known — for the help of the one who did wrong, or the protection of those who must be warned. But the meddler is not concerned with help; he is concerned with the small thrill of knowing, and the smaller thrill of being the one to tell.

The Fourth Mark: Broadcasting the Private Sin

The fourth mark is perhaps the most common in church life. When a brother sins against us, or near us, our first instinct is rarely to go to him. It is to tell someone else first — a spouse, a confidant, a trusted friend, a small group. We dress the report up as request for prayer or as the seeking of counsel. But Christ’s order is very clear:

“

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church.

— Matthew 18:15–17 NKJV

The order is plain: private first, then witnesses, then the church. Nowhere in the sequence does the Lord authorise the route most often taken — private to widening private circles, with the sinner himself the last to know. Luke records the same instruction more tersely: “If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3 NKJV).

To spread a personal matter before confronting the sinner does at least three kinds of damage. It causes unnecessary harm to a brother’s reputation; it drags other people into a controversy that is not theirs; and it forecloses the very repentance and reconciliation Christ’s order was designed to produce. Many sins which would have been “nipped in the bud” by a quiet private conversation have instead spread, festered, and divided whole congregations because the first step was skipped.

Whose Character We Wear

Before we move from *what slander is* to *what slander does*, there is one truth worth setting down clearly — because it lifts the whole subject from the social to the spiritual, from the awkward to the eternal.

A NOTE ON THE DIABOLOS

The Greek word translated “devil” in the New Testament is *diabolos*, and it means, very literally, “slanderer” or “false accuser.” It comes from *dia* (across) and *ballo* (to throw), and pictures the act of throwing accusations across at someone — a verbal assault. The Septuagint translators used a related form for the Satan who appears before God in Job 1–2, throwing accusations against Job and claiming his faithfulness was bought with prosperity. When Paul commands that the wives of elders and deacons must not be “slanderers” (1 Timothy 3:11 NKJV) he uses the very same word: they must not be *diabolos*. To slander is therefore not merely to sin in the manner of the devil; it is, in the very moment of slandering, to wear the devil’s name. Christ’s mission, John writes, was “that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8 NKJV) — and false accusation is one of the devil’s defining works.

When Paul listed for Timothy the wives of elders and deacons among the people whose character determined the health of a congregation, he chose his words with deliberate weight: they must not be *slanderers* — using the very word, *diabolos*, that elsewhere in Scripture serves as the proper name of the evil one. Slander, in Scripture’s vocabulary, is not a personality quirk or a forgivable lapse of speech. It is the imitation, however unintentional, of a being whose entire vocation is the destruction of others through accusation. There is no posture more profoundly contrary to the cross than that of the unjust accuser.

What Slander Sunders

We turn now from the anatomy of slander to its consequences. Some sins leave little visible damage in the world; slander is not among them. It wounds at least four different things, and Scripture names each.

The first thing slander sunders is friendship itself. Proverbs is unusually vivid here:

“

A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends.

— Proverbs 16:28 NKJV

How many friendships, marriages, partnerships, and church bonds have been broken by something said about an absent third party? The whisperer rarely shouts; the damage is too efficient to require volume. A single quiet remark, dropped in a sympathetic ear, has split apart bonds the parties themselves could not have broken with direct confrontation. Solomon also names the cure:

“

Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases.

— Proverbs 26:20 NKJV

Slander is fuel. In every congregational division, every family rupture, every workplace feud, the same dry wood is somewhere on the fire: the loose tongue. Remove the wood and the fire dies of its own accord. The Spirit's strategy for peace is not always grand intervention; sometimes it is simply the silence of one tongue that should have spoken less.

What Slander Destroys

Beyond fractured friendships, slander destroys what cannot easily be rebuilt: reputations, livelihoods, even lives.

“

The hypocrite with his mouth destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous will be delivered.

— Proverbs 11:9 NKJV

Men have lost jobs, careers, marriages, ministries, and the trust of their children because of words spoken behind their back. Proverbs frames the matter still more starkly:

“

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.

— Proverbs 18:21 NKJV

There are accusations now circulating in our culture — sexual misconduct, racism, child abuse, financial impropriety — whose very utterance is enough to end a career or a marriage long before any evidence has been weighed. When such things truly occur, they are grave and must be addressed. But the ease with which the accusation alone can destroy a man should make the Christian tremble before he repeats one. Anyone who wants to harm a public figure can ruin his name simply by raising a charge, however unsupported.

And the converse danger must also be named. When the sin is real and the victim is wounded, the silencing of just accusation — the covering of evil to protect a reputation, an institution, or a friend — is itself a form of slander, this time against the truth and against those who have been wronged. Scripture is severe about this too: *“He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord”* (Proverbs 17:15 NKJV). And Isaiah pronounces woe upon *“those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness”* (Isaiah 5:20 NKJV). The Christian’s task is therefore neither the reflex of belief nor the reflex of dismissal, but the patient labour of truth: believing what is proved, refusing what is not, and never weaponising the absence of evidence to silence those who have genuinely been wronged.

Slander has destroyed not only individuals but nations. When David sent a delegation of condolence to the new king of Ammon, the king’s advisers convinced him the visitors were spies; David’s servants were publicly humiliated, and a war followed in which thousands died (2 Samuel 10:1–3). The accusation was untrue; the consequence was burial. So it is, in smaller scale, every time false report is taken into

a congregation, a family, or a marriage. How many congregations have been torn apart by unfounded slander — accusations made without evidence, rumours spread without challenge, the accused never personally confronted? The cost is rarely visible at the time, but it is real, and in many cases it is permanent in this life.

What Slander Costs

The first three costs of slander are temporal: friendships, reputations, the fabric of community. The fourth is eternal. Scripture is unambiguous about it.

“

Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, him I will destroy; the one who has a haughty look and a proud heart, him I will not endure.

— Psalm 101:5 NKJV

Paul lists slander, backbiting, and whispering in the long catalogue of sins for which men are “worthy of death,” and adds that those who approve of such conduct in others share in the guilt of those who commit it (Romans 1:29–32). His instruction to the Corinthian church is even sharper:

“

But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner — not even to eat with such a person.

— 1 Corinthians 5:11 NKJV

The placement of the *reviler* in that list deserves slow notice. Paul did not group slander with the small social sins; he set it beside sexual immorality, idolatry, drunkenness, and extortion. The church is instructed to withdraw fellowship from the unrepentant reviler as it would from the unrepentant fornicator. Heaven does not weigh slander lightly. The accuser who will not repent puts his eternal reward at the very same risk as the idolater and the adulterer.

Refusing to Listen

If slander costs this much, it must be refused at every door. The first door is the ear. Paul writes that those who consent to the speech of whisperers, backbiters, and revilers share in the guilt of those who speak:

“

Who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.

— Romans 1:32 NKJV

Approval, in Scripture, is not only the active “Yes, you’re right.” It is also the quiet, listening face that lets the speech continue without challenge. Every slanderer needs an audience; without one, the words die in the speaker’s own mouth. To listen appreciatively to slander is to supply the very oxygen on which it lives.

When someone begins to speak ill of another in our hearing, the question we have learned to swallow is the very one we must learn to ask aloud: “How do you know that is true?” And then: “Why are you telling me this?” If they cannot answer the first, the speech has no basis. If they cannot answer the second, the speech has no purpose. Paul’s instruction to the Ephesians is direct: “Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them” (Ephesians 5:11 NKJV).

There are some people whose entire mode of relating to others is the carriage of stories. Proverbs warns us not to share our lives with such:

“

He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with one who flatters with his lips.

— Proverbs 20:19 NKJV

If they treat others this way in our hearing, they treat us this way in our absence. Paul echoes the same warning for any member of the church who has made reviling his habit (1 Corinthians 5:11), and gives the underlying principle:

“

Do not be deceived: “Evil company corrupts good habits.”

— 1 Corinthians 15:33 NKJV

We become like the people whose speech we tolerate. A church culture that refuses to listen to slander will, over time, become a church culture that does not produce it.

Searching the Heart

The second discipline is inward. Because the tongue is the heart’s interpreter, the work of cleaning the tongue must begin with the work of cleaning the heart. Christ’s diagnostic remains:

“

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit... For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.

— Matthew 12:33, 34 NKJV

Before any sentence about another person leaves my mouth, three questions should pass first through my heart: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? If any one of these answers is wrong, the sentence should die unspoken.

The deeper test is the second commandment. Christ said the whole Law and the Prophets hang on two commands; the second is this: “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*” (Matthew 22:39 NKJV). If the thing I am about to say is something I would not want said of me in the same circumstances, the second commandment has already answered the question. Paul gives the positive shape:

“

Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.

— Ephesians 4:29 NKJV

Two phrases govern this verse: *necessary edification* and *imparts grace*. Necessary — not gratuitous, not entertaining, not self-promoting. Edification — building up, not tearing down. Grace — the unmerited kindness that runs in the opposite direction from accusation. The Christian who has internalised this verse will find, over time, that a great deal of what he used to say no longer passes through the strainer of his own conscience.

And there is one final test to pass, perhaps the most uncomfortable of them all. Be wary of the subtlest temptation this very subject contains: it is possible to study slander, recognise it accurately in others, and yet sin afresh in the very recognition. The reader who closes a chapter on slander thinking, “*now I see what is wrong with them,*” has failed the test the chapter was administering. The mature believer learns to study the sins of the tongue not to diagnose his neighbour but to disciple himself. The mirror Scripture holds up is never for inspecting other people’s faces; it is always, and only, for our own. “*Let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another*” (Galatians 6:4 NKJV).

Seeking the Sinner

Rather than spreading reports of another’s failure, the Christian is to *seek* the failing one — to want, more than the small pleasure of telling, the larger joy of his repentance. The pattern is what we have already seen: private first, then witnesses, then the church. To skip the first step is to begin slandering; to keep all three steps is to begin loving.

Paul puts the spirit of it in a single, searching sentence:

“

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.

— Galatians 6:1 NKJV

Three words in that verse rule out slander entirely: *restore*, *gentleness*, and *considering yourself*. Restoration, not exposure, is the goal. Gentleness, not severity, is the tone. And the consciousness of one's own vulnerability — *considering yourself lest you also be tempted* — is the steady undertow of every word. A man who has truly looked at his own heart in the mirror of God's law has rarely much energy left for the dissection of another's.

Our practical responsibility is, of course, limited by opportunity. The Christian is not commissioned to confront every sinner he reads about in the news. But where there is real relationship — family, neighbour, colleague, fellow-member of the local church — there is real responsibility, and the right response is not the spreading of the story but the seeking of the soul.

Praying for the Other

The fourth discipline reaches further than the other three: it changes the heart in the very act of changing the speech. When we have prayed earnestly and by name for someone, slander becomes very difficult. The Lord Jesus put the command at the centre of the Sermon on the Mount:

“

But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you.

— Luke 6:27–28 NKJV

And He embodied the command at the very edge of His suffering, praying for the people who were nailing Him to the cross: “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know*

what they do” (Luke 23:34 NKJV). Peter, who watched it from a distance, drew the lesson for all future generations of Christians:

“

Who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously.

— 1 Peter 2:23 NKJV

There is something the heart cannot do at the same time. It cannot pray earnestly for a person’s welfare and slander him in the same week. Whichever of the two becomes habitual will eventually crowd out the other. The believer who finds himself slandering can be confident he has not been praying; and the believer who finds himself praying will discover, in time, that the words about that person have begun to change of their own accord.

When the Slander Falls on You

Every counsel we have given so far has been directed at the one who might *speak*. But there is another side of this subject that the Christian must also know: what to do when slander falls on us — when we are the spoken-of, the accused, the misrepresented. Most of us will find ourselves on this side of the line more often than we would wish, and the Scripture is not silent here either.

Scripture sets two postures before us, and the believer must learn when each one fits.

The first posture is silence. When Joseph stood accused before Potiphar, the Genesis text records no defense from him; he went to prison without recorded protest (Genesis 39:19–20). When Moses was slandered by Miriam and Aaron, Numbers records not a word of self-justification, only the meekness for which he was known (Numbers 12:1–3). When David walked the long road of his sorrow during Absalom’s rebellion, and Shimei the Benjamite cursed him and threw stones at him, David forbade his soldiers to silence the slanderer, saying only, “*Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the Lord has ordered him*” (2 Samuel 16:11 NKJV). And the Lord Jesus, before His accusers, fulfilled what Isaiah had long before written:

“

He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.

— Isaiah 53:7 NKJV

Peter, who watched it from a distance, gave the apostles their pattern: *“when He was reviled, did not revile in return... but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously”* (1 Peter 2:23 NKJV).

The second posture is measured truth. The Scripture does not teach an unbroken silence under every false report. Paul did not always stay silent when accused. He defended himself before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa — calling witnesses, citing facts, exposing the bad faith of his accusers (Acts 24–26). He appealed to Caesar. Nehemiah, when Sanballat slandered his motives in a circulated letter to the king, replied directly and without anger: *“No such things as you say are being done, but you invent them in your own heart”* (Nehemiah 6:8 NKJV) — and then went back to the wall. Even the Lord Jesus, who often remained silent before His accusers, did ask, when an officer struck Him during His trial, *“If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?”* (John 18:23 NKJV).

How does the Christian know which posture is right? The question to ask is whose name is at stake — your own, or another’s, or the Lord’s. When only your reputation is at risk and the truth will come out in time, silence and trust are usually best; you have nothing to defend that God has not promised to vindicate. When others stand to be wronged by the believed lie — a spouse, a child, a congregation, a work — measured speech, with witnesses and evidence, becomes a duty of love. And when the Lord’s name is touched by the false report, the believer must answer for the truth’s sake, in the manner of Nehemiah and Paul: clearly, briefly, and without bitterness.

What is never permitted is the return of slander for slander. The believer who answers accusation with accusation has lost his protection and put himself in the same category as the one who started the fire. Peter is direct:

“

Not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing.

— 1 Peter 3:9 NKJV

The deepest comfort, when slander falls, is the knowledge that there is One Judge whose verdict is the only one that finally matters, and who has bound Himself to act in His own time:

“

He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday.

— Psalm 37:6 NKJV

God hears every accusation that has been brought against you. He has watched every conversation in which your name has been twisted. He has not forgotten — and He will answer in His own time and in His own way. The slandered Christian's strongest weapon is therefore not the defending tongue but the trusting heart, which prays with David: “Plead my cause, O Lord, with those who strive with me; fight against those who fight against me” (Psalm 35:1 NKJV).

A Tongue Worth Trusting

The Christian tongue is not a quiet tongue. It speaks, often, and on many subjects. It rebukes sin, warns the unwary, names error, comforts the wounded, and tells the truth about the world. What distinguishes it from the slandering tongue is not silence; it is grace.

“

Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.

— Colossians 4:6 NKJV

Grace and salt — the warmth that draws, and the savour that preserves. The Christian tongue is meant to taste, in other men's lives, like food that has been prepared with care. It is not a tongue that flatters — salt is too honest for that — nor a tongue that injures — grace is too kind. It tells what must be told, in the way Christ would tell it, for the reasons He would tell it, to the person who needs to hear it, at the time the hearing can do good.

Such a tongue is not the product of a single resolution. It is the slow outcome of a heart that has been washed by the gospel, taught by the Spirit, and disciplined by years of small refusals. The man who has learned to say nothing when he might have spoken slander has done more, in the unseen ledger of heaven, than the orator whose tongue is brilliant but loose.

The mouth that pleases God is not the mouth that is most often heard; it is the mouth that is most often guarded. And the guard is set not by willpower but by petition — by David's prayer, made our own:

“

Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.

— Psalm 141:3 NKJV

Five Biblical Examples of Slander

Before we close, consider five lives in which slander appears in its most instructive forms. These are not the only examples Scripture provides, but they are among the clearest — spanning two thousand years from the patriarchs to the apostles, and showing the same sin in five different costumes. Read them slowly. Ask, in each case, on which side of the story your own heart most often stands.

1 Potiphar's Wife

Slander born of rejected lust (c. 1900 BC)

Joseph had fled her advances day after day, refusing to sin against his master and against his God. When she could not have him, she did the next worst thing: she manufactured a story. She kept his garment as false evidence, called the men of the house, and then her husband, and reversed the truth completely — the man who had refused her she accused of attempting her (Genesis 39:14–18). The slander cost Joseph years in prison. It is the oldest and bitterest pattern: the rejected heart, unable to wound the body, wounds the name. What she could not corrupt by seduction, she destroyed by accusation.

2

Doeg the Edomite*The slander that killed (c. 1010 BC)*

When David, fleeing Saul, came to Ahimelech the priest at Nob and was given bread and the sword of Goliath, Doeg the Edomite happened to be there (1 Samuel 21:7). He later reported what he had seen to Saul — technically truthfully, but in the worst possible light, presenting Ahimelech's innocent help as if it were knowing conspiracy (1 Samuel 22:9–10). Only in Ahimelech's defense did the missing context emerge: the priest had inquired of the Lord for David in complete ignorance of David's conflict with Saul (1 Samuel 22:14–15). On the strength of Doeg's framed report, Saul ordered the slaughter of eighty-five priests of the Lord, and Doeg himself carried out the killing when others would not (1 Samuel 22:18–19). David later wrote Psalm 52 about him: "Your tongue devises destruction, like a sharp razor, working deceitfully" (Psalm 52:2 NKJV). A true report, told with the wrong framing to the wrong ear at the wrong moment, can kill.

3

Ziba*The opportunist's slander against an absent friend (c. 1000 BC)*

When David fled Jerusalem during Absalom's rebellion, Ziba, the servant of Mephibosheth, came out to meet him with provisions. David asked where his master's son was. Ziba answered, "He is staying in Jerusalem, for he said, 'Today the house of Israel will restore the kingdom of my father to me'" (2 Samuel 16:3 NKJV). It was a lie. Mephibosheth, lame in both feet, had been unable to follow David and was, in fact, mourning his king's flight. But David, in haste and grief, believed the single source and gave Ziba all of Mephibosheth's estate. When the truth emerged later (2 Samuel 19:24–30), the damage was only half repaired. The slander of an absent friend is the easiest of all to commit and the hardest of all to undo.

4

Sanballat and Tobiah

Slander to obstruct the work of God (c. 445 BC)

When Nehemiah began to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite tried first to mock him, then to frighten him, then to slander him to the king of Persia. They circulated reports that Nehemiah was building the wall in preparation for rebellion and intended to be Judah's king (Nehemiah 6:6–7). The accusation was a lie; its purpose was to halt the Lord's work by destroying the workman's name. Nehemiah's reply has become a model for every believer slandered in the cause of ministry: "No such things as you say are being done, but you invent them in your own heart" (Nehemiah 6:8 NKJV) — then back to work, on the wall, with weapon in one hand and trowel in the other. The enemy's favourite weapon against a Christian in good labour is a manufactured accusation.

5

Diotrephes

Slander within the church (c. AD 90)

Late in his life, the apostle John wrote a short, pained letter to a man named Gaius, naming another man in the same congregation: "Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us" (3 John 9 NKJV). Diotrephes's technique was simple: he "prated against" John and his fellow workers "with malicious words" (3 John 10 NKJV), turned away the brothers John sent, and excommunicated members who tried to receive them. Slander served his love of preeminence. He is the last named slanderer in the New Testament, and his story is preserved as a warning to every congregation that has ever harboured a man who needed to be first. Where slander is in the church, Diotrephes is alive.

Ten Questions for Honest Self-Examination

Before the final word, sit with these questions. Take them one at a time; do not race through them. They are not designed to condemn but to clarify. Let the Spirit of God use them as a quiet mirror — for *“the tongue that will not be examined will not be tamed.”*

- 1 *Have I ever accused someone of wrongdoing on the basis of rumour, partial evidence, or assumption — and presented it as if it were fact?*
- 2 *When I hear unverified news about another person’s failure, is my first instinct to investigate the truth, or simply to pass it on?*
- 3 *Have I ever circulated a story I “heard from a reliable source” without knowing whether the story itself was actually true?*
- 4 *Do I find a quiet satisfaction in hearing or telling of the failures of those I dislike, envy, or compete with?*
- 5 *When someone has wounded me, do I find ways to “let it slip” to others — telling myself it is mere information when in truth it is payback?*
- 6 *Have I spoken evil of a leader — in church, government, or workplace — under the cover of “concern” or “discussion” when really I was venting contempt?*
- 7 *When I have learned of a brother or sister’s sin, have I gone to them privately as Christ commanded — or have I told two or three others first?*
- 8 *Do I tolerate slander in others — listening politely, allowing the speaker to continue — when I should challenge their evidence and their motives?*

- 9 When I pray about another person, am I praying for their good and restoration, or am I framing my complaints to God as if they were petitions?
- 10 If God reviewed my last week of speech about absent people, would He find a tongue that builds up and protects, or one that wounds and tears down?

A Final Word

The same God who raised Joseph from prison to the right hand of Pharaoh first watched him keep silent under the wife of Potiphar's accusation, refusing to defend himself even when the truth would have been believed by no one but God.

The same God who spoke with Moses face to face first heard Moses say nothing when Miriam and Aaron slandered him for his Cushite wife — for the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth (Numbers 12:3).

The same God who established David's throne first watched him walk past Shimei, the Benjamite who cursed and threw stones at him in the day of Absalom's rebellion — refusing to let his soldiers silence the slanderer, saying only, "Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the Lord has ordered him" (2 Samuel 16:11 NKJV).

The same God who shut the mouths of the lions first heard Daniel pray with his windows open, refusing to answer the satraps' slander with slander of his own, refusing even to defend himself before the king who had been deceived by it.

And the same God who raised Christ from the dead first watched His Son, in the night of His trial, accused by false witnesses and reviled by the people for whom He was about to die, "not revile in return... but commit Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:23 NKJV).

The pattern is always the same: the silent endurance of slander before the vindication of God; the closed mouth of the slandered saint, and the open mouth of the Father in heaven who sees and will answer in His own time.

Speak less. Investigate more. Ask the question before you carry the answer.

Go to the brother before you go to the friend; go to the friend before you go to the crowd.

Refuse the bait of the talebearer. Challenge his evidence. Question his motive. Decline the listening face that lets evil speech continue.

When you are slandered, do not slander back. Trust the One who judges righteously to vindicate in His time.

Pray for the one whose name your tongue is tempted to bruise — and watch the temptation lose its power.

And ask the Lord, every morning before the day's words begin, to set a guard over your mouth, and keep watch over the door of your lips.

A tongue that guards the absent will be trusted by the present.

That is the kind of mouth worth pleading for.

“

Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.

— Psalm 141:3 NKJV

Oludare Akinbo