
James 4:11-12

- 11 Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.
- 12 There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

In 2002, Ken Sande, President of Peacemakers Ministry, wrote an article entitled “Judging Others.” In it he opened with the following story:

“I knew he was too proud to take criticism,” thought Anne, “and now I have proof!” On the previous Sunday, Anne had dropped a response card in the offering box asking her pastor to stop in and pray with her when she went to the hospital for some minor surgery. When he failed to come by, she called the church receptionist and learned that her pastor had already been to the hospital that day to see another church member.

“So he has no excuse!” she thought. “He was in the building and knew I needed his support, but still he ignored me. He’s resented me ever since I told him his sermons lack practical application. Now he’s getting back at me by ignoring my spiritual needs. And he calls himself a shepherd!”

After brooding over his rejection for three days, Anne sat down Saturday evening and wrote a letter confronting her pastor about his pride, defensiveness and hypocrisy. As she sealed the envelope, she could not help thinking about the conviction he would feel when he opened his mail.

The moment she walked into church the next morning, one of the deacons hurried over to her. “Anne, I need to apologize to you. When I took the cards out of the offering box last week, I accidentally left your response card with some pledge cards. I didn’t notice my mistake until last night when I was totaling the pledges. I am so sorry I didn’t get your request to the pastor!”

Before Anne could reply to the deacon, her pastor approached her with a warm smile. “Anne, I was thinking about your comment about practical application as I finished my sermon yesterday. I hope you notice the difference in today’s message.”

Anne was speechless. All she could think about was the letter she had just

dropped in a mailbox three blocks from church.

As Anne discovered, and maybe you have discovered, judging other people can sometimes put us in awkward situations. In God's holy word in his passage today, James wants to get our attention. He wants us to put a stop to judging one another in what he calls "speaking evil against" one another. This word for "speaking evil against" is really just one word in the original Greek. It is the word "katalaleo." *Kata* is a preposition, so it means "against or down" and *laleo* is just "to speak." So it's this idea of speaking down to someone or speaking against them. The word evil is actually implied. So when James uses speaking against – speaking evil against the law, that is that same word. He is basically trying to put a stop to speaking against one another.

I like the way the NIV – if you have a New International Version – translates it as slandering one another. So James wants to put a stop – no more judging, no more slander. He gives us three reasons from this text why we should not judge and slander. The first reason is it's against the law. Look at verse 11, the second half with me. "The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law." The end of verse 12: "But who are you to judge your neighbor?"

I. It's Against the Law

When you speak against a neighbor, you are speaking against the law. The first reason we are not to judge and slander is it is against the law. Now you might be asking me, well, what law are we talking about here because I can get away with it and not go to jail. The law that James is referring to is God's moral law found in his word. More specifically, he is referring to the royal law that he has quoted earlier. If you want to just hold your spot and look over at Chapter 2:8. This royal law, this kingdom law – the law of the King, hence, royal – says the following: "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well."

He brought in at the end of verse 12 the neighbor clause to catch you, to say you are to love your neighbor; you are not supposed to judge your neighbor. This law of love, as you read the rest of the scriptures, is really at the heart of God's commands. Jesus says that this law is the second greatest commandment that God has ever given us. He says the first is to "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." The second is like it, "Love your neighbor as yourself." On these two laws, Jesus said, hang all the laws of the Old Testament, all the prophets. Of all of God's commands, these two are essentially the cornerstone of God's laws. So loving your neighbor is really, really important to God.

Well, where does this law originally come from? It comes from the Old Testament. It comes from the book of Leviticus, Chapter 19:18. The context of this I want to read to you because it is very insightful as to why James is making this point. Two verses earlier in Leviticus 19, God says the following: “You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people...” Verse 18, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself...” Love your neighbor, as it was originally given, was stated a lot in the negative: Don’t do this. Don’t do that. Don’t slander. Don’t judge.

Why are we not to judge or slander? It’s against the law. It’s against one of the most important laws God has ever given to the entire human race. This is a big deal when we break this law. It makes sense that God would speak so firmly against it, and James would as well. So that’s the first reason we are not to judge and slander – it’s against the law.

Now if you are like me, you may be wondering, all right, how do I apply this? Does this mean I should stop all critical thinking and all judgment? Does this mean that I should stop discerning people’s motives as they say something. Should I become completely gullible and just assume people tell me the truth? Should I overlook sin in people’s lives in the church or in the world under this banner: “Don’t Judge. Don’t Judge.” That is not James’ point here.

What James is trying to put a stop to is judgmentalism. Judgmentalism is this idea that when I see you and I look at your actions, your motives, I assume the worst. I assume the worst of your motives and your actions. Anne, in our opening story, is a classic example: Guilty until proven innocent. Assuming the worst.

So how do we overcome this tendency, because we all have it, don’t we? This tendency to try to evaluate and discern and we sometimes ascribe negative motives to people. Well, the key is found in the same royal law that James has pointed us back to. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves. So follow me here. Love should guide all the judgments that we make about one another. We should love them. We should judge people the way that we ourselves would want to be judged. So how would you want to be lovingly judged if someone were looking at you and your actions and your behavior? We would want them to assume the best of us, right? We would want them to assume the best of our motives.

There is an old Christian phrase I want to re-insert back into our vocabulary for the church at present. It is this term “charitable judgment.” This has revolutionized my thinking. I was introduced to this a few years ago. Charitable is an old word for loving, so charitable judgment.

Jonathan Edwards, 18th century pastor and theologian, in his great book *Charity and its Fruits* described charitable judgment in the following way: It is “a disposition to think the best of others that the case will allow.” So if there is a way to interpret your behavior favorably, love obligates me to assume the best unless I’m forced otherwise by mounting evidence.

So let’s run this out and play an example. Pretend you have a meeting with a friend and they never show up. Negative, critical judgment says, “Blew me off. They don’t think my time is important. Who do they think they are? I mean, they just stood me up. They are snubbing me.”

Now charitable judgment starts to run a few exercises. It says:

- Maybe an emergency came up. Maybe they were on the way or they hit traffic.
- Maybe they had one of those electronic calendars and it accidentally got deleted from their calendar.
- Maybe they were unable to reach me. They wanted to call, but they didn’t have my phone number.

You could run a lot of different scenarios of why that person didn’t show up. But it’s true that we are always inclined to take the former – the more negative interpretation – as the truth. We instantly want to judge. Charitable judgment withholds judgment and assumes the best until we learn otherwise.

If we are honest, we are all tempted to make these negative judgments and then defend our own motives as pure: No, no, no, you got it all wrong. That’s not what I meant. Please let me explain. We feel judged especially if someone’s interpretation misrepresents us or our motives. Friends, we must judge others the way that we want to be judged, charitably. So it’s the law to love your neighbor as yourself. Anything else is a violation of the law. That’s the first reason we are not to judge or slander. It’s against the law.

II. It’s Against a Brother

Look at verse 11. “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law.”

When James uses the term “brothers,” he is referring to all Christians. If you have a little footnote in your ESV on the bottom, it says “or brothers and sisters.” It is referring to brothers or sisters in Christ, God’s family. The bible teaches when we become a Christian, God’s spirit comes into our life and causes us to be born again into God’s family and adopted as sons and daughters of God. Therefore, God is our Father and we become siblings. We become brothers and sisters. James’ focus, as he is writing this letter, is to end slander and judgmentalism amongst brothers, amongst Christians.

Now, certainly, the second greatest commandment applies to all people, so we don’t limit it within the church. Jesus gives us the parable of the Good Samaritan to make that point. Who is my neighbor? So when he takes the neighbor clause, he applies it universally and gives the thumbs-up card to the Samaritan in the story. Secondly, all of the wisdom here in James can be extended to all of life. Yet even so James has a very specific focused target group he is going after. He is going after the brothers. He is saying, “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers,” because when we speak evil against one another, we are not simply tearing down another person created in the image of God – as sad as that is, as wrong as that is – we are tearing down our family. We are tearing down our brother or sister in Christ.

I think we are all aware of families in our life – maybe our own extended family – that is full of strife, judgmentalism, gossip, slander. When we see that, it ultimately rips a family apart, does it not? It tears it apart. That’s what judgment and slander do to God’s family. They tear it apart.

If you want to come in here and you want to blow up our church or if you want to go into any church and just shred it to pieces, there is a very easy, effective way to do it. Just go in and start sowing seeds of suspicion, gossip and slander against each other, against the leadership of the church. Just watch the dam crumble and sin’s current just wash through and wreak havoc. Greater churches than ours have been destroyed through gossip and slander.

Now you might be here thinking, well, I don’t do that stuff. I’m not one to speak evil against one another. I’m not one to talk against other people. Maybe not, but one way, brothers and sisters, we can all become complicit in this sin is simply by receiving gossip or slander. It provides the oxygen to keep those fires alive and raging within the church. There is part of our sinful hearts, if we are honest, that actually delights in gossip.

Proverbs 18:8 says, “The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.” A whisperer is that picture of someone passing along a delicious, choice piece of gossip. It is like a delicious platter, the bible says, of these poisonous appetizers. They will destroy you, but they taste delicious.

As I was thinking about this, the illustration came of the magical “Turkish Delight” from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Do you remember this? The evil queen of Narnia gives to Edmund and, as he eats them, greed and gluttony start to seize Edmund’s heart and start to blind him and cloud his judgment. Before long he turns on his very own brothers and sisters. That is the same way. We know it is wrong, but it just tastes so good.

Brothers and sisters, if we want to put a stop to gossip and slander, we need to cut off the oxygen. We need to have self-control when a little delicious platter is served up for us to say, you know what, I’m sorry, but you need to talk to the person who offended you, not me. You take the away the oxygen and the flame dies.

Again, Jonathan Edwards likened believing and spreading critical judgments to “feeding on it as carrion birds do on the worst of flesh.” When we receive and circulate evil reports, it is like passing around rotting flesh, like vultures.

Paul makes this same point in Galatians, Chapter 5:14. He says, “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word” – here comes this royal law again – “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” It’s very important. We keep coming back to it. Jesus does. Paul does. James does. Verse 15, “But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.” When we spread or receive gossip and slander -- judgments against one another -- it devours the church.

It is really the opposite of the loving community that Jesus held out for us. He said that we would be known to the world by the love that we have for one another. The world would know that we are Christ’s disciples by the love that we have for one another. That’s why James is so strongly speaking against judgment and slander. The very witness -- the very health of Christ’s people is at stake. Rather than build one another up in love, we tear one another down with judgments, with slander, with accusations against one another.

The name Satan literally means the accuser. Satan, the accuser. In Revelation he is called the accuser of the brothers. One of Satan's primary attacks is to accuse the brothers – to accuse Christians, especially in areas where we are weak, especially in areas where we are falling into sin – when we judge, when we slander and when we accuse the brothers, we are literally being swept up into his evil schemes. Unless you think I'm foisting or throwing interpretation upon James, in Chapter 3:15, James says bitter jealousy, selfish ambition is ascribed to demonic influence. You look just a few verses earlier, in Chapter 4:7, James says, you need to "resist the devil." You can be sure when accusations are in the church, the accuser is not far away. If we want to resist the devil, brothers and sisters, we must resist slander and judging one another.

I want to broaden my application. This is going to be my longest point because I think this is really important for us, to think about the broader church. I think we could all agree that one of the areas we sometimes see the most judgment and slander against the brothers is when we relate to brothers and sisters from other churches and other denominations. This is especially easy when we disagree over secondary doctrinal issues. We can cloak our judgment and slander behind a pious cloud of doctrinal discernment, doctrinal purity. Certainly, we must defend sound doctrine, but we must also hold our differences with humility and with charity. We must assume the best of others' motives.

One of my heroes in the faith in this regard is the great George Whitefield. You may be familiar with his name. If not, let me catch you up to speed. You need to know about George. He was an 18th century Anglican priest. He was literally the founder of what is now known as Methodism. Originally it wasn't a denomination. It was a movement, like Evangelicalism. Very much of what we ascribe to Evangelicalism in the US today is due to him being one of the pioneers of spreading the gospel in Britain and also up and down the American Colonies. He preached across denominational lines. In open air he preached to literally thousands at a time – tens of thousands – with no microphone. It's incredible. People would travel for miles to hear Whitefield preach – on foot, on horseback – just to hear Whitefield preach the gospel.

In 1739, he returned to Britain. While he was there, because he was traveling up and down the American Colonies, he entrusted the movement to one of his dear friends and colleagues, John Wesley. At this point the revival was united around historic Protestant doctrines. But, sadly, Wesley soon shifted in his theological convictions and began preaching against reformed doctrines, especially those like election and predestination. This splintered the movement in America into a pro-Wesley camp and a pro-Whitefield camp. The debate between Arminianism and Calvinism is very much alive today because of that shift. After

this occurred Whitefield refused to speak out against Wesley. In fact, he spent the rest of his life trying to restore unity to the body of Christ.

John's beloved brother, Charles Wesley – we still sing many of his hymns in the church to this day – had a falling out with his brother John and sought to realign himself under Whitefield. Whitefield wouldn't have it. He turned his brother Charles right back to John and said, you guys need to reconcile. Rather than take it as a win – what have we all been tempted -- I've got the hymn writer on my side of the camp now – he wouldn't do that. He sent him right back to John and said you guys need to reconcile.

Whitefield's refusal to speak out against Wesley troubled many. Thomas Noble, a wealthy New York friend, even suggested his kindness revealed a departure from the faith. And Whitefield wrote the following words back to Thomas Noble:

My principles as to the fundamentals of the gospel are just the same as yours. I cannot renounce those precious truths, that I have felt the power of, and which were taught of me not of man but of God. At the same time, **I would love all that love Jesus**, though they differ from me in some points... If our brethren will quarrel with us, **let us not quarrel with them**. Oh, my dear brother, I pray our dear Redeemer, to give you meekness to those who may not see so far as you do. I entreat you, my dear brother, to overcome their evil with your good.

To a complaining correspondent in Pennsylvania, he said the following:

I dare not look on them as willful deceivers, but as persons who hazard their lives for the sake of the gospel. Mr. Wesley I think is wrong in some things... yet I believe (that he)... will shine bright in glory.

What a charitable spirit, brothers and sisters!

- “I would love all that love Jesus.”
- “Let us not quarrel with them.”
- “I dare not look on them as willful deceivers.”

I choose not to interpret it that way. I choose to believe the best and when we get to heaven, Mr. Wesley will be right there shining bright with his Lord and Savior alongside of me. Some may see this even today and say this is a mark of Whitefield's weakness, but I believe our Lord looks at this and says this is a sign of my Son's strength.

Jesus, our Lord, said this: "Every kingdom that is divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls." Jesus first applied this to Satan's kingdom. I fear Satan has returned the favor. We have taken the bait. When we judge, when we slander our brothers, we are subversively dividing God's household. Should we speak evil against the very sheep that the Good Shepherd laid down his life for? God forbid! Should we expose and exploit the very sins that the blood of Jesus was shed to cover? No! Brothers and sisters, they are God's children. They are our family. They are our brothers. That is the second reason not to judge and slander – it's against a brother.

III. It's Playing God

Finally, it's playing God. Verse 11-12, the second half, James writes the following: "But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy."

Here is James' logic. He says when we judge the law, we place ourselves over the law rather than under the law. Verse 11 says we are no longer doers of the law. That is always James' heart. Chapter 1:22, "...be doers of the word." We are no longer doers, we are judges. When we judge the law -- essentially we have done this -- we have installed ourselves into two offices. James uses these terms: lawgiver and judge. We make ourselves lawgiver and judge. In American terminology, it would be the following: We have consolidated the Legislative and Judicial Branches and we have installed ourselves and placed ourselves as judicial and legislative powers and we have started legislating from the bench. So you would say that would be preposterous. If anyone sought to do that with American law, we would say treason! Get this guy out of here! Remove any authority, any power he has. That would be with American law.

James is saying this: That is what you are doing with God's law. You're pushing God off his bench and you're trying to take his seat. His rebuttal, verse 12, "There is only one lawgiver and judge" (implied) and it isn't you, it's God! So follow me, when we judge a brother, we judge God's law, the greatest command,

making ourselves judge instead of the one true Judge, God. Therefore, we are playing God. Why must we not judge or slander? It's playing God.

Notice what James doesn't say here. He doesn't say God doesn't judge, so neither should you. That logic is often applied in Christian ethics. God loves you so you should love others. God has had mercy on you so you should have mercy on others. God forgave you so you should forgive others. Adam pointed out really well on the section of partiality that God shows no partiality – in the negative – so you should not show partiality. You would think he would say God doesn't judge so neither should you. That's not his point at all. He does not say that. I think most Americans would apply that reasoning when we get to judgment. They think God would never judge me so Christians shouldn't judge either. The old man upstairs loves me regardless, so sin is no big deal. That is light years from James' argument here. He's not saying God does not judge. He is saying God is the judge, not you, so leave it up to God to judge. But, rest assured, God is Judge, God is able to save and God is able to destroy. God **will** judge, God **will** save and God **will** destroy.

Brothers and sisters, James wants to remind each of us here that only God knows the motives perfectly of every human heart. Only God knows every thoughtless word spoken in private, not you or me. Only God will hold every person accountable on that final day, not you and not me. Who do you think you are, verse 12, "...who are you to judge your neighbor?" Why must we not judge and slander? It's playing God!

Now as a brief aside, I do want to highlight two instances in scripture where God does call us to judge as his representatives. The first is in government. 1 Peter 2:14 says that civil leaders are ordained by God to punish evil and promote good. Governments are imperfect, but they are necessary. This extends and applies inside organizations. For example, your workplace. I think of Jerry Sandusky – he is all over the news – former assistant coach of Penn State's football team, caught molesting boys. Reporting that to the authorities is not judgmentalism and it's not slander. It's critical. James is not speaking out against this kind of judgment. Here's a good rule of thumb in your organization. When we pass information up, it's not slander. So if you have critique about your workplace and you bring it to your boss or someone who is supposed to fix it and you hand that to them or you go above, which should have been done in this case, that's not slander. Now if you start talking to all of your colleagues and co-workers and talking to people under you and say, man, this place stinks; I can't believe how my boss is leading this place. If you have a critique against your boss, then eventually gracefully and kindly share it with your boss and don't share it with all your friends. That's the first inside-of-government structure.

Secondly is church discipline. Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 lay out a protocol as the framework for bringing correction and bringing judgment to public, unrepentant, blatant sin in the church. Now this is not to be done in a gossiping, slandering, sinful way. I don't have time to go into a lot of specifics. This could be a sermon of its own, but here are a couple thoughts.

First, Jesus tells us in Matthew 18 that we are supposed to go to that person first privately. If you have an offense and someone has sinned against you, you go to that person and share that privately. We are only to pull in others, Jesus says, after private appeal if that person refuses to repent. Secondly, in Matthew 7, Jesus says we must first remove the log from our own eye before we go after any specks. His point is no self-righteous hypocrisy allowed. If we want to share something with someone, we have to make sure that we have repented enough, we have humbled ourselves, we see ourselves as the bigger sinner, hence, the log/speck analogy before we start going after little specks in other people's eyes.

So those are a couple principles to apply for correction within a church. Now, these examples don't undo anything that we have already talked about. For example, you can be installed as the Supreme Court judge of the United States of America and James still wouldn't let you get away with judging and slandering. It's not like your official position now extends to immunity in your personal and private life. You go to church, this still applies. You go home to your family, this all still applies. The same is true of a pastor. If a pastor like myself has to get involved in church discipline in that official role, that doesn't give me permission now to start gossiping and slandering other people. I hope you see the connection there. There is an official, ordained spot that God allows and requires judgment, but it doesn't extend to allowing us to just walk around judging and slandering one another.

Here is the other reality, brothers and sisters. We don't normally live in the exceptions. Are there any Supreme Court judges here? Two pastors. We don't live in exceptions. Maybe in your organization you might have to bring some judgment as a leader, but we live in the norm. It's clear from the book of James and throughout scripture God is Judge, not you and not me. This is helpful because it releases us from avenging ourselves. Our job is not to go on sin hunts: we are now God's police, trying to sniff out any wrongdoing in the congregation, sniff out all evil motives. Our job is to love others and believe the best about them and leave vengeance up to God. Paul writes in Romans 12:19, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" Do you see the similarity with James? Paul is saying, Beloved, God is Judge. Leave judgment up to God. Stop playing God.

Faith That Works – Who Are You to Judge?

James 4:11-12 | Sunday, July 15, 2012 | By Stefan Bomberger



James has given us three great reasons not to judge or slander.

- It's Against the Law.
- It's Against a Brother.
- It's Playing God.

In closing, I want to speak to a specific group here. There may be some of you here when I talk about the brothers, who are not sure you are a brother. You are not sure that you are a Christian. When you hear that God is judge, able to destroy, it rightfully brings fear to your heart because you know, "I've broken God's laws. I've been playing God my whole life." Maybe that's the banner of your life, "Playing God." When I disagree with God, I'm right and he's wrong and that's how that works in my world. My God would never do this. Of course he wouldn't because he doesn't exist. He is a figment of your imagination. You have created him in your own image. That is not how it works.

If that is you today, God will want to get your attention because he has declared – we saw in the book of Romans here – there is a wrath – a day of vengeance coming – where God will repay you. If you see that and you see the bad news, James also wants to give you some good news, because, friend, the God who is able to destroy you is also the God who is able to save. James says the God who is able to destroy is also able to save. This is how he did it, friends. Through the incarnation, God, the Judge, took off his divine robe; he laid aside his gavel and he clothed himself in frail humanity. He sent himself in the person of Christ. The eternal Son of God clothed himself in flesh – the Father of Lights sent a good and perfect gift to this world – Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. And Jesus Christ gave up himself willingly on the cross. The bible says, in the divine courtroom Christ suffered our sentence. He purchased our pardon and he rose again, defeating our death penalty. And through repentance, the bible says, the willingness to turn away from yourself and your sin and having faith in Christ – trusting in Jesus not yourself – God the Judge is able to save you this morning. God the Judge is able to save, but even better, friends, God the Father is able to adopt you.

As Christians, we don't just relate to God as Judge who has forgiven, we relate to him as Father who has adopted us. God will do just that for you today. He will embrace you, love you, wrap you in his arms and welcome you into this family. And **we** want to do the very same thing.