

## 24. The Sin of Being Judgmental

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*Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you – who are you to judge your neighbor?  
(James 4:11-12)*

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### Two Great Sins

Earlier in his letter, James has already warned against judging one another. Recall James 2:12-13, where we read, “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” Is James simply repeating himself in 4:11-12?

Truth is worth repeating, of course, but this is not mere repetition. In James 2, the element of mercy comes to the fore. We must judge with mercy because we ourselves also require mercy. In the text we are focusing on now, James deals with whether we may speak against our brother at all. He deals with our tendency to speak about someone in such a way that his name or actions are placed in a negative light (the word “slander” is used).

One explainer makes a very fine distinction here. The point is not whether we may or may not judge, for sometimes we are called to do so, but we are warned against the sin of *being judgmental*, the tendency to speak ill of others. Let us be honest: when we are talking about others, is this tendency not often right beneath the surface? It takes very little to become critical and negative, and our words can quickly deteriorate into malicious gossip.

We are not easily complimentary. We are, however, easily critical. Our words, even if they contain kernels of truth, can be slanderous, designed to destroy. When we do this, we fall into two great sins. First, we elevate ourselves

above the law. Second, we elevate ourselves above the Lawgiver, who alone can save or destroy.

Is it not a terrible thing that James describes? We place ourselves above the law as if it counts only for others and not for ourselves. Another is condemned and we go free. We place ourselves above God, who alone can judge justly and who sees perfectly and in love. God teaches us, however, that the sin of being judgmental is extremely serious for our own salvation. We will note how, by this sin, we place ourselves above the law and we place ourselves above the Lord.

## **Slandering**

In 4:11, James returns to the address, “brothers”. I think the reason for this is simple but important. Being judgmental and slanderous especially ruin the brotherhood, breaking the bond between brothers and sisters and disrupting the unity of the body of Christ. The church suffers much from the outside. All kinds of false accusations and outright slander have been hurled at Christians. Perhaps, however, the church suffers more from the inside, from the judgmental attitudes that easily prevail and break the bond of peace, sowing strife among brothers.

James tells us not to slander. In the next sentence, the same Greek word for slander is translated as “speaking against”. It is important to understand the verb that James uses consistently in this passage. It means “to speak against”, yet we might translate it more strongly, for it has the basic connotation of speaking down to someone. There is condescension and haughtiness, for it is obvious from our speaking that we do not place ourselves in the same category as the one about whom we are speaking.

The weapon of slander is often used when people disagree or come to stand at opposite ends. The churches of James’ time that were filled with fights and quarrels were also rife with slanderous talk. The aim of some members was to break down the reputation and position of others, and to do so via a sustained, intense campaign.

Speaking against someone does not necessarily mean telling lies or untruths. What we say may be completely true, or at least partially true. We can use the truth as a surgical implement to cut away sin and to heal, but we can also use it as a dagger with which to kill. The latter is the kind of speaking that James means.

## **Judging**

It is not only a matter of saying something bad about another person, of speaking against him, but also of judging him. James writes, “Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him...” Condescending talk is judgmental. It gives a verdict on someone or leads others to come up with a verdict.

For what is “judging”? It does indeed mean that a verdict is pronounced, directly or indirectly. A conclusion is reached about the other person, taking the form of a pronouncement. And since a verdict has to do with God’s law and justice, we invoke the law against the other person. The verdict is more than just an innocent statement or a hastily spoken word. By it, we judge, we come to a definite conclusion, and we find the other person lacking, even going against God. Hence our verdict is considered to be God’s verdict, supported by the law.

James does not tell us whether the verdict is right or wrong. From the context, I conclude that he is talking about hasty and malicious verdicts that are commonplace in the churches. These verdicts are then wrong. James, however, is actually concerned about another point, namely, that such slandering and judging are themselves against the law. We speak down to others and judge them, but the law of God forbids this. Slandering and judging are not our privilege or prerogative. We may not have a judgmental attitude, believing that everyone must meet with our scrutiny, and that we will decide whether someone is right or wrong.

Only the law itself determines whether someone is right or wrong. If we judge on the basis of our own insights and understandings, then we judge the law. We let it be known that the law is inadequate, and that our very own standards, which are undoubtedly pious, also need to be applied to the situation. So we place ourselves above the law, going even farther than the law has allowed.

## **Judged By the Law**

The question arises: may we then never judge? Let us look at the “Sermon on the Mount”, as recorded in Matthew 7. In verse 1, we read, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.” Here the Lord Jesus does not say that we may never judge, but that we must be very careful to apply the law equally to ourselves as to others. Verse 2 teaches us that “in the same way [we] judge others, [we] will be judged, and with the measure [we] use, it will be measured to [us].”

The Lord also mentions how we do not see the sins in our own lives, but only in the lives of others. Remember the plank and the speck (Matt 7:3-5).

We may apply certain high standards to others, but God will apply the same standards to us. If we find others guilty, how do we think the Lord will regard us? In the “Sermon on the Mount”, our Lord is warning against hypocrisy, that is, judging others while we commit the same or worse sin ourselves. James is actually on a different, but related, line: we have no right at all to judge others, for all people are judged by the law. The *law* condemns or acquits us, not the views of people.

As the Judaists have done, we can so easily add all kinds of rules and regulations to the law. Perhaps we feel the law is not clear or expansive enough on a certain point. Remember that James is writing predominantly to Christians from among the Jews. They had added many laws to the law, and whoever did not keep these additional rules was judged and condemned. Thus the Jews had placed themselves above the law by becoming lawmakers themselves. They also judged on that basis. Whether they were called to do so or not, they freely offered and loudly pronounced their judgments. Strong language and severe verdicts were not far from their mouths.

## **Judging the Law**

James writes that the law is judged in this way. People place themselves above the law by adding new laws. Their opinion must be shared by others, or those others fall short and may even become enemies in their eyes. God’s law is insufficient, and human traditions and rules are added to complete the picture.

Our churches have always recognized that there must be rules and regulations in any society, or it becomes chaotic. In the church, however, there is only a *spiritual* order, the one made known by the Word of God. There are no rules besides those that have been accepted as flowing forth from Scripture. God has placed us under Christ, in the realm of the Holy Spirit, and in this way the law functions among us. Those who would go farther place themselves above the law and judge it as being inadequate. The result is either hierarchy or chaos.

James writes very frankly in 4:11, “When you judge the law (by adding rules and thus declaring it to be insufficient), you are not keeping it.” We are so busy using our own laws to judge others that we do not get around to the

real law, which is the law of love. When we do not keep the law, it judges us. Whoever elevates himself above the law of God will be crushed by it.

We must therefore always examine our own piety. Sometimes, people say that those who have strong opinions (and eagerly make these known) mean well. Do they really mean well when they stand above the law and, in fact, subvert it? Our intentions must also be subject to the law. How can someone have the right intention if he follows the wrong path? How can someone seek to build up his brother when he speaks against the law? We must indeed examine our own piety. It is not above the law. No one is above the law. We are all called to love the Lord our God with all that is in us and our neighbor as ourselves, and whatever goes beyond that is against the law. Being judgmental, that is, always standing ready with your verdict, is a terrible sin.

### **Only One Lawgiver and Judge**

Our conclusion that James is speaking against the tendency to add human rules to the divine law is confirmed in the next verse: "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge." There is only one Lawgiver. When we add to the law, essentially making ourselves lawgivers as well, we elevate ourselves above God himself. We put ourselves in his place. In fact, we insinuate that God does not have a proper view on things, that his insight falls short, and that many more rules and regulations are needed. We become lawgivers, and we forget that God is the *only* Lawgiver.

There is only one who makes the law, and it is certainly not us, but God alone. James must therefore also add that there is only one Judge. Only God can truly judge whether we have broken his law or not. He alone can fathom the depth of our sin and understand the circumstances of our life. No one else has this right or capability.

I want to stress that there is only one Judge. We must therefore leave all final judgment to him, and to him alone. We should not pronounce a verdict until the time is ready and all the facts are in. Even then, it is not our jurisdiction to come with a judgment, for the Lord God is the one and only Judge.

Do we understand what this means for us? Sometimes we must come to a verdict. Spiritual discipline must be exercised, which sometimes leads to excommunication. We then confess that what we loose on earth is loosed in heaven. We rightly believe that the Lord above concurs with a just judgment below, but we must always remember that the true and final judgment belongs to the Lord alone.

## The Final Say

James adds something important: “the one who is able to save and destroy.” “To save” means here to save from sin, and “to destroy” means to cast into the eternal agony of hell. There is only one who can do this, and it is not one of us. If we are called to make them, our judgments are always *temporary and provisional*. God alone has the last word. He alone can save and destroy.

The Judge can declare someone righteous and save him from his sin. He can also declare someone unrighteous, and say, “Away from me!” No one else has this power or privilege. No one else sees all, knows all, and determines all, so we had better be careful. God may yet save someone whom we have written off. He may destroy someone whom we esteem so highly. The final judgment will bring all to light in a marvelous and wondrous way, in true justice and true love, and until then let us watch that we do not become judgmental.

There is a tremendous comfort here. God has the final say. We may be glad that people do not pronounce the final verdict over our lives, for they would condemn everyone except possibly themselves. We usually consider ourselves better than others. If we were the judges, we would probably write everyone off. “Yes, if I was the judge, things would change around here, and we would really have a clean-up!” In so thinking, we elevate ourselves above the Lord. We must watch what we say, for God makes our words come back on our own head.

We can be so judgmental. It is very difficult to fall under the judgment of people, for we are generally harsh and unyielding. David was once given a choice of punishment, and he said, “Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men” (2 Sam 24:14).

## Save and Destroy

As a theological student, I was taught that even the order of words in the Bible is important. Notice, then, that the word “save” comes before “destroy” in 4:12. We ourselves would embark on a search and destroy mission, for that is our style. God, however, embarks on a search and save mission. That is his style. He does not seek the death of the sinner, but that he repents and lives. This is still the Gospel. Christ says, “Come and drink from the waters of life. Repent and believe and I will save you.” That comes first.

This is not meant to cover up the other element, the consequences of disobedience, for James also writes, “destroy”. This, too, can happen. God is

merciful but he is also just. Sinners who do not flee to Christ will be judged by him and destroyed.

God can do the one or the other because he alone sees the truth, and he alone knows the whole story of our lives. He has the power to save. This is comforting for us when we have family members, relatives, or friends who leave the church and fall into a worldly life. We believe in his power to save, and we plead on it. But we also know that he can destroy. It is his jurisdiction alone, under which we bend, acknowledging his sovereignty.

Our Lord Jesus Christ experienced this in his own body and soul. He let God be the Judge over others. “I do not condemn you,” he said, meaning not at that time because he himself would be condemned and destroyed, although he was without sin. He did not slander his brothers, but encouraged them. He did not speak down to his disciples, but always defended them. He never stood above the law, but always submitted to it. He never elevated himself above the Father, but surrendered to the full counsel of God.

When everyone had given up on him and he lay vanquished in the grave, he arose from the dead and was appointed as Judge over all. Now he has the right to judge. He is appointed to do so. Judgment belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ alone and he will do it in truth and equity.

James ends 4:12 with a question: “But you — who are you to judge your neighbor?” The question has this implication: “Who are you to *condemn* your neighbor?” That is what our judging leads to. After all that we have learned from the previous words of James, we must say that the question is somewhat rhetorical. Who, we? We have no right to judge our brother, let alone condemn him. We may not place ourselves above the Lord. If we did, we would jeopardize our own salvation. We have the duty to love our neighbor and to seek his interest above our own. But to judge? No, we must leave that up to Christ. He alone is righteous. He alone is merciful. We leave judgment up to him, where it belongs.