

Do Not Judge: James 4:11-12  
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church  
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In our study of James, we come this morning to chapter 4:11-12. In God's providence, Grace Church and Crossroads Church have both been studying the letter of James, and we're going to continue this study in our times together. James 4:4-10 is really at the heart of this whole letter. It's in 4:4 that James delivers the strongest rebuke of the letter: "You adulterous people!" And then he warns against being a friend of the world, because friendship with the world is enmity with God. But then James speaks of God's wonderful grace which He bestows upon the humble—those who submit to Him and draw near to Him and humble themselves before Him. God gives more grace! That's verses 4-10.

Verses 11-12 pick up the theme of verses 1-3—the theme of quarreling and fighting. And these verses also relate back to the whole discussion of the tongue in chapter 3. James now makes a couple concluding points about our speech and our relationships with others.

The clear command in these verses, which is also the main point here, comes at the beginning of verse 11. "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers." James is back to referring to his readers as brothers, after the strong rebuke of verse 4. And he tells his brothers not to speak evil against one another. At the end of verse 12 he makes the same point, but there in the form of a rhetorical question. "But who are you to judge your neighbor?" In other words, don't judge your neighbor. So this short section begins and ends with a command, and the two commands are essentially the same. Don't speak evil against one another. Don't judge your neighbor.

And in between those two statements, James gives a very detailed rationale for the command. He answers the question, "Why shouldn't I speak evil against my brothers and sisters in Christ? Why shouldn't I judge my neighbor?" And we find here some clear responses to those questions. The way I want to approach these verses is by following James' train of thought, and trying to understand how he constructs his argument against slander and judging. If you think of these two verses as a building, the commands that come at the beginning and the end are like the roof of the building. They constitute the main point of the passage. But they are supported by a foundation and a floor and walls. So I want to begin with the foundation, and then work our way up to the command. We'll look at 4 points, the last being, "Don't Slander or

Judge One Another.” The first three points will be the foundation and floor and walls that under gird that command.

### **I. There is Only One Lawgiver and Judge (verse 12a)**

The first point is that there is only one lawgiver and judge. This is the foundation, and it’s found in the first half of verse 12. “There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy.” This is a profound statement about our God. He is lawgiver and judge, and He is the *only* lawgiver and judge. There’s only One, and He’s it. And this is a fundamental point for James to make, because he wants each of us to understand that we’re not the lawgiver and judge. There’s only one lawgiver and judge, and it’s not you. God is the One who commands and instructs, and we are to submit to Him. Just a couple verses earlier, in verse 7 we read, “Submit yourselves therefore to God.” God is supreme. He is our Lord and Master, and we are to submit to Him. We are to submit to the laws and commands that He gives. He is the lawgiver, not us.

Likewise, He is the judge. And the rest of the verse goes on to describe what is meant by this—“he who is able to save and to destroy.” This is speaking of judgment day, when we will all stand before Him and either be saved unto eternal life or we will be condemned to eternal punishment. It will be God’s prerogative and His alone, to save and to destroy.

Maybe you’re wondering at this point which category you’re going to be in, and that’s the right question to be asking. On judgment day are you going to be ushered into the joys of heaven, or are you going to be cast into hell? And as we each ponder that question we must consider who God is and what He has done for us in Christ Jesus. In this statement that God is able to save and to destroy, we see some very important things about God’s nature.

First of all, He is powerful. He is the One who is *able* to save and to destroy. God is the One who called this universe into existence, and He continues to uphold it in existence. And He controls every minute aspect of His creation. Everything happens precisely according to His plans and His will. Nothing escapes His control. And we see in these words an emphasis on God’s power—a point that ought to instill in us a healthy and reverent fear of God. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus says, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” God is powerful to do that. He is powerful to destroy both soul and body in hell, and therefore He is to be feared far more than any earthly danger.

But God is not only powerful to destroy, He is powerful to save. And this is such a wonderful truth, because we are so

rebellious and stubborn and sinful, that we would never come to Christ on our own. Apart from God's saving power, we would continue to resist Him and run from Him. Romans 8:7 says, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot." But God is able to save us. He is powerful to save us. He can overcome our rebellion and change our hearts so that we no longer run from Him but we run to Him. God is powerful to save *and* to destroy.

Secondly, we are also reminded here that God is just. He is the just judge, and He will save and destroy in a way that upholds His perfect righteousness. He will destroy those who deserve to be destroyed. He will not sweep sin under the rug. That would be a violation of His justice. Imagine that you're observing a court hearing in which a man is being convicted of murder. And the man is found to be guilty beyond the shadow of a doubt. But then imagine that the judge decides that there will be no punishment. The judge decides to be a nice guy and just forget that the murder ever happened, and he lets the man go free. Would we think that judge to be a kind person? No. We would say he is unjust, capricious, and unfit to be a judge. God is not like that. In the justice of God, every sin is dealt with fully. Every sin is punished. For those who are not in Christ, they will be condemned to hell forever. Some people think that the idea of an eternal hell is unjust, because they think it's an excessive punishment. The punishment ought to fit the crime, they say, and what crime requires eternal punishment? But that line of thinking misses the fact that our sins against an infinitely holy God are infinitely offensive. And so when God destroys—when He condemns unforgiven sinners to hell—He does so justly. He gives them exactly what they deserve, and thus He judges justly.

A third thing that we learn about God in this statement is that He is also gracious. Because He not only destroys, but He *saves*! He is the supreme lawgiver and judge who is able to *save*! And in light of what I just said about God's justice, we have to ask, How can He save sinners and remain just? How can He let us go free without becoming the capricious judge who just overlooks the crime? The answer is Jesus Christ. Romans 3:25 says that "God put [Christ Jesus] forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith." This means that Jesus, in our place, endured God's intense wrath against sin. Every sin is punished, either in hell or on the cross. And, in the words of Romans 3:25, this is how God is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." He upholds His justice by punishing every sin. And He is also gracious in that He places our sin on Jesus Christ, who died in the place of all who will repent of their sin and trust in Him.

So we come back to the very personal question: On that final day of judgment, will I be saved or destroyed? Will I be ushered into the presence of God to enjoy Him forever, or will I be cast into the pit of hell? And the answer to that question depends on whether or not you are repenting of sin and trusting in Jesus. And I say it in the present tense because repentance and faith are ongoing realities in the life of every true believer. It's not that we *once* repented of sin and *once* trusted in Christ. Yes, there was a specific point in time, whether we can remember it precisely or not, that we were saved and became a new creature. But that was just the beginning of a life-long fight of faith—a fight that involves continual repentance of sin and a continual struggle to hope in Christ rather than hoping in the things of the world.

So I ask you: Are you repenting of sin and trusting in Christ? If so, then you can be assured that you belong to Christ and your sin is forgiven. However, if you are not walking with the Lord, if this fight of faith does not characterize your life, then you need to be warned that there is hell to pay. You will be destroyed. Please, friend, let this warning bring you to your knees. Stop running, and cry out to Jesus. He is your only hope.

That statement in verse 12 is what I understand to be the foundation of the house which is verses 11-12. This fundamental truth that God is the only lawgiver and judge, who is able to save and to destroy—this is the foundation for the commands not to slander or judge one another.

## **II. Don't Judge the Law (verse 11c)**

The next level up in this house is the last sentence in verse 11. "But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge." And I'll give this the simple heading, Don't Judge the Law. What does James mean by judging the law? What law is he referring to, and what does it mean to judge it?

In chapter 2 James called it the "royal law," and he quoted Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," a verse that Jesus also quoted. When Jesus was asked, in Matthew 22, "which is the great commandment in the Law." And Jesus responded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). So in James 2:8 the royal law is closely identified with the love command of Leviticus 19:18, which was reiterated by Christ.

And in our passage this morning it seems like that same love command is at the forefront of James' mind. If you look at the verses just before Leviticus 19:18, you'll find statements very

similar to what James is saying here. “You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor. I am the Lord. You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:15-18). And when we look at James 4:11-12 and the parallel theme and also the use of the word “neighbor” in verse 12, where we would expect James to say “brother” again, it seems evident that the love command is what he has in mind here. The command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” which was given in Leviticus 19 and given again by our Lord Jesus Christ. So the law James writes of is the law of love.

What, then, does it mean to judge this law? Well, we see that it is the opposite of doing the law. If you’re judging the law, you’re not doing the law. And as we learned back in chapter 1, we are to be doers and not hearers only (1:22). And what I think we’re seeing now is that when we fail to live out the love command, when we slander one another and judge one another, we are, in effect, setting ourselves above the law. We are putting ourselves in the place of God, who is the *only* lawgiver and judge. When we disobey God’s commands we are saying to Him and to the world that we are not subject to His authority. We are saying that God’s law is in error in some way, or it doesn’t apply to us. We judge the law and fail to recognize God as the only lawgiver and judge.

### **III. Judging a Brother is Judging the Law (verse 11b)**

The next step up in the logic here is that judging a brother is judging the law. God is the only lawgiver and judge. That’s the foundation. Therefore, we must never put ourselves in the place of God by judging the law. And now we see this connection between judging one another and judging the law. “The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law.” This connection makes sense because it’s the love command that’s in view. When we slander and judge one another, we are violating the command that says, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And thus we are setting ourselves above God’s commands and are not only judging a brother, but judging the law.

This is the height of arrogance, and it’s in stark contrast to the humility called for in the previous verses. Verse 10 says, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.” But

in our pride we judge one another and demonstrate that we think we're somehow above the law.

#### **IV. Don't Slander or Judge One Another (verse 11a, 12b)**

Finally, we come to the roof of this building—the main point of these verses, which is the imperative at the beginning of verse 11 and the rhetorical question at the end of verse 12. The imperative is, “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.” And the rhetorical question, which makes the same point, says “But who are you to judge your neighbor?” We can summarize these points with the heading, Don't slander or judge one another.

Seeing how James relates these two things helps us interpret them. It helps us understand what it means to judge, in this context. Judging involves slandering others, speaking evil against one another. And this may happen for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways. Maybe the person has done something to hurt us, and we want to get back at them. Maybe the slander is a result of favoritism—in James 2:4, as he gives the command to “show no partiality,” he says, “have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” Or maybe there are differences of opinion that cause us to judge others. Paul addresses this in Romans 14. “One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables,” (verse 2). “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike,” (verse 5). And then he writes in verse 10, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.” And in verse 13, “Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.” So we may disagree on certain minor issues, but we are not to judge or despise those with whom we disagree.

Ultimately, our judging of others results from our prideful assumption that my sins are very small in comparison to everyone else's sins. Jesus points out the hypocrisy in this, when he says in Matthew 7, “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” When we are judging others, despising others, speaking evil against others, we hypocritically focus on their faults while ignoring our own faults.

I think we can understand the nature of judging even better when we contrast this evil judging with the appropriate kind of judging that the Bible calls us to. There is a kind of judging that is

right and good and necessary, and it's important that we understand the difference.

Listen to what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5:1-3, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing." He says in verse 12 of that passage, "For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?" Judging in this context means confronting and disciplining those who are professing believers but who are living in sin. And this kind of judging is absolutely necessary for the purity of the church. So we have a good and necessary judging, on the one hand. And we also have an evil and harmful judging, on the other hand. The kind of judging Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 5 is the appropriate and necessary church discipline which must be administered in love for the building up of the body. The kind of judging James talks about is the kind that arises from an attitude of jealousy and selfish ambition, and it is intended to tear people down in order to make oneself look better. This includes gossip and the spreading of rumors. It includes repeating again and again the faults of others. It includes making false charges against a person's character, but it also includes highlighting negative things about a person that are entirely true.

This is an interesting thing to recognize, because there are certainly plenty of bad things that could be said about each and every one of us. And it's so easy to justify our negative words by thinking to ourselves, "I'm only telling the truth," whether it be to the person's face or to someone else. "I'm only stating the obvious." Alec Motyer makes this insightful comment, "My fellow-Christian is my neighbour *par excellence*. Suppose I do know something to his discredit—and be it never so true—my task is not to publicize it, nor even privately to berate him with it, but to go where he is and lift him up. I must be the Samaritan to him. He is my neighbour" (*The Message of James*, 158). The question is, when you know of someone's faults or failures, how do you respond. It's so sickening that our pride can cause us to actually take pleasure in the faults and failures of others. And we speak evil against them and judge them. Instead, we must humble ourselves with the knowledge that we are sinners, too, and we have not been assigned the role of lawgiver or judge. We must come alongside one another for the purpose of building up, not tearing down.

I want to close with just a few practical applications—a few practical suggestions for killing this tendency to slander and judge others.

1) When tempted to slander or judge an individual, instead pray for that person. When you're tempted to speak evil against a brother or sister in Christ, instead begin to pray very specifically for that person's needs. Pray for that person's sanctification. Whatever fault or failure that you're aware of in that person's life, instead of using it as an occasion for slander, use it as an occasion for intercession.

2) The Blind Eye and the Deaf Ear. Charles Spurgeon has a chapter in his book, *Lectures to my Students*, entitled "The Blind Eye and the Deaf Ear." He's making the point that there are many things that are said that we must not even pay attention to. Things said around us, to us, about us, about others. There are many things to which we must simply turn a deaf ear. And certainly one of these things is slander, back-biting, gossip. When you are within earshot of these things, do you gravitate toward it or away from it? Take Spurgeon's advice, and turn to it a blind eye and a deaf ear. At the end of that chapter Spurgeon writes, "I have one blind eye and one deaf ear, and . . . they are the best eye and ear I have" (*Lectures to My Students*, 335). When you hear slander, don't listen—don't take it to heart.

3) Be willing to overlook offenses. Proverbs 19:11, "Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense." When we're offended, when we're slandered or mistreated in some way, what is our natural reaction? We want to slander in return. We want revenge. But it is to our glory to overlook an offense.

4) Finally, trust in God's Sovereignty. Remember that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28), and that includes even the person whom you're tempted to slander. That person is in your life by God's design. So instead of speaking evil against that person, ask God, "What are you trying to teach me in this situation? How are you wanting to refine me and sanctify me through this?"

I hope that these things are helpful, and I pray that we will all fight against the sinful tendency to slander and judge one another. This command is founded upon the truth that God is the only lawgiver and judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy. And when we disobey the command to love our neighbor as ourselves we are not only judging our neighbor, we are judging God's law. So let us humble ourselves before God and before one another, that we might edify one another rather than slander and judge.