

Series James

This Message Faith Without Submission to the Will of God is Dead part 1 “When you judge the law, you are not keeping it”

Scripture James 4:11-12

Christians tend to idealize the Church of the 1st Century. We think, “The Church in the time of the Apostles must have been dynamic and powerful. Those believers must have been eager to do what Jesus wanted them to do, eager to love one another unselfishly, to look after each other, and share all things in common.”

However, as we have been reading, many of the Jewish background followers of Jesus abandoned their faith after persecution forced them to flee Jerusalem. The fellowship and support structure they had enjoyed was lost. Finding themselves in small groups scattered throughout locations in the Mediterranean region, they resorted to worldly behaviors.

These Jewish ethnic background believers were not the only ones with relational problems, and James was not the only leader to provide instructions about godly living. The Apostle Paul admonished the members of the fellowship in Corinth about their divisive behavior and worldly thinking (*1 Corinthians 1:10-12; 3:1-4*). He urged the Galatian believers to stop biting and devouring one another (*Galatians 5:15*). He urged the believers in Ephesus “to live a life worthy of the calling they had received.” He specifically made an appeal for “humility, tolerance, love, and unity” between them (*Ephesians 4:1-3*). And there are other New Testament examples of interpersonal conflicts.

The reality is that believers in all fellowships, from the early church to the present time, struggled to cast aside the worldly baggage of their pre-salvation days and to follow consistently the ways of God. Spiritually speaking, we are all “works in progress.” God’s expectations of us are clear enough: He wants us “to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ” (*Romans 8:29*), to practice the faith “that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless,” and to “keep ourselves from being polluted by the world” (*James 1:27*). Getting along with other believers is an important part of our spiritual development.

The recipients of this letter were not following the ways of God and, as a result, there were multiple problems in their communities. James attributed their interpersonal conflicts to self-assertive attitudes. He said that “fights and quarrels ... come from personal desires” (*James 4:1*). He accused his readers of being unwilling to trust God for their physical needs. He accused them of spiritual adultery, of “friendship with the world and hatred toward God.” James was incredibly bold and forceful in his descriptions of the spiritual condition of his readers. He didn’t “pull any punches” in describing their bad behavior because it was indeed very ungodly behavior.

In the passage we thought about last week, James emphasized the necessity of “intimacy with God” as the correction for the worldly, ungodly motives which were causing their “fights and quarrels.” He explained the steps that disobedient believers needed to take in order to get back into relationship with God. These steps included a humble submission to God, a forsaking of sinful ways, an attitude of sorrow for wrongdoing, and evidence of repentance (*James 4:7-10*).

In the short passage for today, James zeroed in on another behavior which was inappropriate for the followers of Jesus: slander and its relationship to the law of God.

Read James 4:11-12

Last week we read that “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (*James 4:6*). “Humility” is the basis of a person’s relationship with God and the basis for receiving God’s grace. This truth was emphasized in the verse which stated, “Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up” (*James 4:10*).

The behavior described in the verses we just read is the opposite of humility. “Slander” and “judging” are characteristics of pride and arrogance. Slanderers place themselves in an elevated position when they criticize others. They assume that they are correct in their information and opinions, and that the person being criticized is at fault in some way.

James made reference to the problems of pride and arrogance several times already in this letter. In chapter 2, he accused his readers of “discrimination among themselves by becoming judges with evil thoughts” (*James 2:4*) and he warned them that “judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful” (*James 2:13*). In chapter 3 and the early part of chapter 4 he wrote about the problems of envy and fighting.

The word “slander” in verse 11 means “to speak against,” “to speak evil of,” “to criticize,” to “bad-mouth” a person. “Gossip” behind a person's back and “false accusations” are common forms of slander. The intention of the slanderer is to damage a person’s reputation and diminish his character.

In the second sentence, the word “slander” is translated “speaks against.” James then added a second verb, “judges,” in order to make clear what slander is. The person who “speaks against” another is expressing a derogatory opinion about that person from a standpoint of superiority and arrogance. These practices were a significant problem among believers at the time this book was written. There were several references to this activity in previous verses. For examples, in chapter 2 James wrote, “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law” (*James 2:12*). In chapter 3 we read, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father and with it we curse men” (*James 3:9*), and “Where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice” (*James 3:16*).

The command to not slander or speak against others was clearly spelled out in the Old Testament and, hence, should have been familiar to Jewish background believers. Among the laws given to Moses and the Hebrew people was this statement: “Do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. Do not go about spreading slander among your people” (*Leviticus 19:15-16*). In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul stated that “quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder” were inappropriate for believers (*II Corinthians 12:20*). The Apostle Peter instructed his readers: “rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind” (*I Peter 2:1*).

The prohibition against slander is at three levels. The first level concerns the relationship between believers. They are not to “slander one another.” There are two words in these verses which identify the potential targets of slander — the word “brother” in verse 11 and the word “neighbor” at the end of verse 12.

I don't think it is a coincidence that James used the same terms as Jesus during the Sermon on the Mount. In His instructions to His followers Jesus said, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (*Matthew 7:1-2*). In chapter 2 James wrote this similar instruction and warning: "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law ... because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful" (*James 2:12-13*).

Jesus also gave this relevant command: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (*Matthew 7:3-5*).

Jesus used the term "neighbor" in response to a question asked of Him by a man considered to be "an expert in the law." "Teacher," the man asked, "what is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus gave a two part answer: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself" (*Matthew 22:35-39*).

James reminded his readers of the bonds of love and mercy that should exist between believers and even toward unsaved neighbors. The recipients of this letter needed to drastically change their behavior if they expected God to be merciful to them. At the time this letter was written, they were, unfortunately, showing contempt for others instead of obeying "the royal law of love."

The correct godly attitude toward those close to us should be love. Believers are expected to "build each other up" and not to pull them down. Previously in this letter, James wrote that "Loving your neighbor as yourself" was fulfilling "the royal law found in Scripture" (*James 2:8*).

The second level concerns the relationship of believers to the law. James has insisted throughout this letter that believers must be “doers of the law.” Obviously slanderers would be contradicting the Biblical commands by speaking against and judging others. Unfortunately, breaking the law through disobedience is only part of the sin. By breaking the law, the individual is “sitting in judgment of the law.” In other words, he is placing himself above the law and, by his action, declaring that the law does not apply to him. The point is that a person cannot be both a judge over the law and an obedient doer under the law.

There are several ways in which we can make wrong judgments. We can speak against others out of jealousy, bitterness, selfish ambition, or in some other mean-spirited way. We can assume that we understand all the pertinent facts behind the other person’s words or actions, although it is likely that we are misrepresenting the person. Our opinions of another person are usually based on our human standards rather than using the standards of God’s Word. We often try to make ourselves look good by putting down the other person. These are all examples of the sinful motives which are behind our slanderous words. And there is one more. Jesus said that we sin when we try to correct the behaviors of others before dealing with our own ungodly behaviors.

The third level of relationship is with God. Verse 12 underscores the fact that God is the only One qualified to be Lawgiver and Judge. When humans judge each other, they are putting themselves in the place of God. Believers do not have either the authority to set the standards by which others can be judged or the ability to measure if those standards are met or not. Human efforts to put oneself in the place of God has been the essence of disobedience and rebellion ever since the serpent told Eve she could be “like God, knowing good and evil.” This point is obvious: believers must not act like they are over the law and over the Lawgiver.

God is described as “the only one who is able to save and destroy.” He is the One who established the conditions for acceptable living, and He is the only One qualified to judge those who are responsible to keep His law. The fact that He is “able to save and destroy” is proof that He has the authority to enforce the law. God is able to reward those who keep it, and punish those who violate it. God therefore stands supreme as Giver of the law and as its Judge. The required attitude expected of His followers is humble submission to His authority.

James concludes this topic with sarcastic bluntness, which can be paraphrased, “And compared to God, just who do you think you are to be judging your neighbors?” The readers needed to understand that it was the height of arrogance and pride to try to take upon themselves the role that God has reserved exclusively for Himself.

I once read a statement that said, “criticism is the most widespread sin among Christians.” I have observed that believers have many clever and pseudo-pious ways to communicate their opinions about others. Gossipy believers may say, “I’m sharing this information about so-and-so with you so you can pray about it with me.” All too often we pray publically for others and criticize them all in the same breath. We can piously express our concern for another believer while calling attention to their faults and deficiencies. Group prayer times can, all too easily, be gossip times. We have learned to disguise our slanderous gossip, complaints, and criticisms within a spiritual demeanor.

Wherever believers are guilty of such slander, James bluntly and forcefully commands, “Stop it!” His concern is not so much for those individuals who are the objects of criticism but, rather, for those who have a critical spirit and are the initiators of the slander and gossip.

It is very important that we, as believers, keep coming back to the royal law of Scripture: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The Apostle Paul quoted those words in his letter to the Galatians, and then he added this warning, “But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another” (*Galatians 5:14-15*). When we spread or receive gossip and slander, when we speak against any other person, we subject ourselves to God’s displeasure. Both the spiritual health and the witness of God’s people are damaged when we forget who we are and what God expects us to do.

James was aware of the “fights and quarrels” among the fellowships of believers when he wrote his letter. That was why he wrote with such forthrightness and urgency — why he wanted the believers to change their ungodly ways of interacting. Scripture demands that we seek to build up others spiritually. Jesus said that His disciples would be known to the world by the love that they have for one another (*John 13:34-35*). There needed to be a turn-around in the behaviors of the recipients of the letter.

Now, I must take a few minutes additional time to explain that there is a redemptive kind of judgment in the Scriptures that believers can carry out. The Apostle Paul described this kind of situation: “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (*Galatians 6:1-2*).

There are clear-cut guidelines in Scripture for this kind of judgment. Jesus Himself explained, “If your brother sins, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (*Matthew 18:15-17*).

James, in his letter, adamantly forbids believers to speak against their brothers behind their backs, but he does not condemn believers when they confront face to face their brothers who are clearly violating the Word of God. Believers are responsible for the spiritual well-being of brothers and sisters in Christ, and therefore, believers have Biblical permission to rebuke others in those areas where God has clearly identified certain actions as sin.

Believers must not judge others in areas where only God is qualified to judge. This means that believers must not judge the motives and intentions of others. Only God is capable of looking at the hearts of people. However, when we see another believer living in rebellion against a stated principle of Scripture, then we should go to him in love and help him to recognize and repent of his ways. That is a redemptive kind of judgment. It builds up and encourages. It brings about spiritual growth. It restores fellowship.

Let’s summarize the truths in this message. James has very clearly stated that it is wrong to speak against and judge another person. When we do this, we are “playing God,” that is, we set ourselves over Him who is both the Author and the Interpreter of the law. When we judge others, we completely lose sight of our proper place in God’s scheme of things. The consequence is interpersonal conflict.

The following chart summarizes the options:

CRITICISM	CORRECTION
Tears down, interpersonal relationships are damaged	Builds up; makes restoration possible
Behind the back, but shared publically	Face to face, private interaction
Attitude of superiority, pride and envy	Attitude of humility and love
Motivation is to boost self	Concern is for the other individual
Result is divisiveness	Result is healing and restoration