

JAMES 4:11, 12

JUDGING THE SAINTS

“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. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour?”¹

Canadian Christianity is in crisis. The reaction to this statement among most professing Christians in Canada likely would be immediate and decidedly hostile. Nevertheless, an honest appraisal of the state of the pulpit and the condition of the membership compels such a negative assessment. The pulpit is, for the most part, uninspiring and lacking in courage. Pastors are unwilling or incapable of adhering to biblical truth, fearing a board or committee more than they do God. Those occupying the pews are uncomfortable when confronted by bold prophetic preaching or with authenticity from the pulpit.

Modern Christians, priding themselves on their tolerance, are often the most judgemental people within contemporary society. Few events are more detrimental to the cause of Christ or more destructive to the work He has assigned His people than the slander and evil speech of Christians against their brothers. We haven't changed much in the past two millennia. The Christians to whom James wrote were apparently resorting to destroying one another with their tongues. James turned from excoriating those to whom he wrote to appealing to their reason in this portion of his letter. Join me in a sobering study of James' admonition in order to discover what pleases the Master and to equip ourselves for His good work.

THE DIVINE COMMAND — “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.” James had excoriated the believers to whom he wrote. Earlier, he had said they were adulterous [verse 4], implied they were proud [verse 6] and had called them “sinners” and “double-minded” [verse 8]. Now, his language is somewhat more conciliatory, addressing them as “brothers.” He is shifting from calls for repentance to exhortations to perform specific actions that are pleasing to God.

The first action, avoiding slanderous speech, is the focus of the message this day. Other exhortations will follow in James' letter, and we will consider each admonition in its turn. The **ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION** translates the Greek term James uses by the English concept of speaking evil. The **CHRISTIAN STANDARD VERSION** translates the concept by our English term “criticise.”² The translators for the **NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION** rendered the Greek word as “slander.”³ Kenneth Wuest felt the word was best conveyed by the concept of defamation.⁴ No doubt, each of these thoughts is communicated by James' choice of words.

Today, slander is a legal term that implies a falsehood that damages the reputation of another individual. The term James uses is broader than that, including gossip that injures another as well as demeaning someone or talking down to them! One can speak the truth about another and still put them down. Scripture requires our words to reflect love as well as truth.

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² **The Holy Bible, Holman Christian Standard Version** (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2008)

³ **The Holy Bible, New International Version** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1984)

⁴ Kenneth S. Wuest, **The New Testament: An Expanded Translation** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1961)

David spoke of the wicked, describing them as those

“who whet their tongues like swords,
who aim bitter words like arrows
shooting from ambush at the blameless,
shooting at him suddenly and without fear.”

[PSALM 64:3, 4]

In another place, David prays,

“My soul is in the midst of lions;
I lie down amid fiery beasts—
the children of man, whose teeth are spears and arrows,
whose tongues are sharp swords.”

[PSALM 57:4]

And Asaph, speaking of the wicked, describes them thusly:

“They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
They set their mouths against the heavens,
and their tongue struts through the earth.”

[PSALM 73:8, 9]

God’s Word frequently characterises the wicked as marked by caustic and calumnious speech. This should not be surprising since the Master has taught those who are His disciples, “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person” [MATTHEW 15:18-20].

Immediately following his proscription, James used the same Greek term that is now translated “speaks against.” This gives us a clue as to James’ concern. The Greek word used implies any speaking that is prejudicial to another. Consider some biblical proscriptions against such speech. The speech James had in mind is that which questioned legitimate authority, as when the people of Israel “spoke against God and against Moses” [NUMBERS 21:5]. Again, it describes slandering another secretly [e.g. PSALM 101:5] or levelling false accusations against one who is innocent [e.g. 1 PETER 2:12; 3:16]. Such verbal destruction of others is among the grave sins Paul listed when describing those who are utterly debased and degenerate [ROMANS 1:30].

We do not know for certain why evil speech such as James rebukes in this place, was a problem among these early saints, but the divisions that were wracking the churches may provide the best explanation. James has described these divisive arguments earlier [see JAMES 3:13-4:3]. Quarrels almost always degenerate into personal attacks and judgemental attitudes. Unfortunately, Christians are not exempt from the tendency to descend into the slimy slough of denigration and defamation of fellow believers when they disagree. However, James compels us to acknowledge that such attacks are inappropriate for Christians. The one who pleases God and dwells in His presence, “speaks truth in his heart,” and “does not slander with his tongue.” Neither does she “take up a reproach against his friend” [PSALM 15:2b, 3].

Through Moses, God has expressly proscribed such wicked speech. In the Law we read, “You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people” [LEVITICUS 19:16]. The evil speech in view, both in the Law and by James, may be categorised under two headings—whispering and backbiting. Whispering is private defamation of someone; whereas backbiting is more public, in view of others. Each of these actions may be performed in any of several ways, not only through falsehoods, but also through divulging the secrets of others, through exaggerating their faults or depriving them of the opportunity to respond to baseless and unfair charges, or through ascribing sinister motives to their good and reasonable efforts. When we seek to injure by exposing what is culpable in our brothers or suppress meritorious words and actions, we are just as guilty as if we had assailed them frontally. Evil speech is the sin of those who meet in small cliques after church to destroy the good name of those who are not there to defend themselves.

No Christians should ever engage in slanderous speech; nor should such evil be tolerated either within the congregation or by a Christian receiving an evil report. According to the Master, such false speech that seeks to injure and hinder others has its origin in hell. Confronting the Pharisees, Jesus exposed the origin of their wicked speech when He said, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” [JOHN 8:44]. Wicked though such speech is in the normal course of life, how much more horrendous is such speech when it is perpetuated by Christians or tolerated among Christians!

You who share the service today must guard yourself against slanderous speech. Tragically, it is natural for us to engage in slanderous speech, just as it was natural for the Christians to whom James wrote. Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because he had married a woman from Ethiopia. When God rebuked them, he asked, “Why ... were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses” [NUMBERS 12:8]? Just so, we should be afraid to speak against fellow Christians and the more so when they occupy a place to which God has appointed them within the congregation or when God has honoured them among His people.

Slander is the devil’s own sin; he is “the accuser of our brothers” [REVELATION 12:10]. However, is anything more common among the supposed people of God than slander of their own brothers? John the Baptist’s head on a platter is a common dish in the home of God’s people! When our bellies are full with God’s good things, like Samson brought out to amuse the Philistines, the name of a believer is brought out in Christian gatherings. Do we not fear God who warned, “Judge not, that you be not judged” [MATTHEW 7:1]? Surely, God will hold us accountable and judge us because of this wickedness. Of the wicked, God says that he will turn their own tongues against them [see PSALM 64:8]. Should we not imagine that He will expose the perfidy of our own heart because of our speech if we do not repent of this evil?

Certainly, you know that you must not speak evil of your brothers, but common sense would dictate that neither may you receive an evil report without severe consequences. Whispering campaigns and backbiting may not seem evil if you do not spread the report, but receiving the slander gives tacit approval to the slanderer. Those who destroy the reputation of others will cease their efforts if you do not give them an audience. The wise man has said,

“The north wind brings forth rain,
and a backbiting tongue, angry looks.”

[PROVERBS 25:23]

Those bearing evil reports will be deterred from repeating their slander if we do not permit them occasion to dump their garbage into our ears. By permitting them to continue spreading their wicked speech, we share in the evil they do against others.

Certainly we are warned not to receive such wicked slander against a minister of the Word. We are taught, “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses” [1 TIMOTHY 5:19]. How many godly men have been destroyed because “mature Christians” chose to receive and promote wicked speech! The man of God who speaks as God commands will inevitably anger some who do not wish to be reproved publicly, and as result will experience attacks against his reputation and his service.

There are other supposed Christians who attack the servant of God because they are dupes of the devil. Like the people of Ezekiel’s day, they “talk about [the preacher] by the walls and at the doors of the houses,” and they “say to one another, each to his own brother, ‘Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD’” [EZEKIEL 33:30]. Such people carefully listen to every sermon, not to discover what God would have them know and do, but in order to discover an error or to stimulate their rage.

An old adage in Texas says, “If you don’t want any trouble, don’t say anything, don’t do anything, don’t be anything.” Few people attack the individual who warms a pew, but those who are accomplishing anything for the cause of Christ are often attacked because they are honoured by the Master. Jealousy and envy motivate some because they imagine they are losing prestige and thus losing power among the people of God. Therefore, rather than doing some great thing, they seek to destroy through ruining the reputation of one who endeavours to honour God.

THE RATIONALE FOR THE COMMAND — “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.” James inveighs against speaking evil of fellow believers because the one who thus slanders places himself or herself in the place of God.

James exposes the evil reality hidden within slanderous speech when he repeats the title “brother.” The use of this word elucidates how unloving such speech really is. Behind the slander (and behind the back of the one being slandered) is an attitude that condemns. Instead of relying on God as the righteous judge, the slanderer establishes his or her own standard and condemns a brother as having failed to meet that artificial standard. No brother can meet the standard we erect because we exclude grace and mercy from the standard we create!

Judging involves the notion of making a distinction. Do not err in imagining that one must never distinguish between good and evil. James is certainly not timid about condemning evil behaviour. Nevertheless, he warns against judging. In order to understand the distinction in James’ mind, we will need to review the manner in which he has approached this matter throughout the letter. James has emphasised faith, and in particular he has brought to the fore the practical impact of faith in the life of believers.

When we judge another, we pass sentence on that one. In judging, we make a statement about the destiny of that individual or their works that really only God is capable of making. Judging is an act that can ultimately be performed only by God who knows the heart. God alone sees what is done in secret and He only is able to judge the motives of the individual or of her labours. James reminds his readers that “there is only one lawgiver and judge” [JAMES 4:12]. God will bring to light all the deeds of those who have served Him [see 1 CORINTHIANS 4:5], and He will accomplish this without help from any of His people. Our ignorance of individuals, to say nothing of their motives, makes us incapable of judging anyone,

I suppose there are some who argue at this point that if this is true, then we cannot judge within the church, and Paul commands us to hold those who are immoral, unethical or doctrinally deviant accountable [e.g. 1 CORINTHIANS 5:9-13; 6:2b]. Unfair criticism, judging motives, that is what is in view in James' mind. He is not telling us that we must not be discerning. Jesus certainly resisted the Pharisees and warned the disciples against false prophets [MATTHEW 7:15; 23:1 ff.]. Paul called Elymas a "son of the devil" and an "enemy of righteousness" [ACTS 13:10]. Jude was unsparing in speaking against false teachers, and James has not hesitated to speak of disobedient believers as adulterous and as enemies of God. The key to these distinctions is that in each instance the hope of the one speaking is that the one confronted will repent and turn to life. However, to excoriate another simply because we seek to destroy them or ruin their reputation exposes us as judging the law of God.

We are not given authority to judge another; but we are given authority to preach the Good News and to forgive sins that have been committed against us personally. These are great responsibilities. This does not permit us to ignore church discipline, for we are responsible to humbly, but firmly, hold one another accountable before the Lord. This discipline we administer is to be meted out for gross sins of immorality and for promoting false doctrine or for unethical actions before the world. However, to judge those who seek to serve is not given to us.

James says that speaking against a neighbour is judging the law. How can this be? In order to answer this, I direct your attention to a portion of the Mosaic Law. "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 neighbour. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbour: I am the LORD.

"You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbour, 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 neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD" [LEVITICUS 19:15-18].

The overarching principle that dictates what our behaviour toward our "neighbour" should be is that we must love our neighbour as we love ourselves. This assuredly means that I am responsible to be honest and honourable in matters of law—both civil law and ecclesiastical law. According to the Word, this knowledge must dictate my actions in dealing with social issues and in speech. It even governs my feelings toward my neighbour.

James equates our failure to keep the law with judging the law. When I sin, in effect I say that the proscription of my behaviour is not worthy of my obedience. In the present instance, the law debars speaking ill of another. However, when I ignore the will of God and seek to injure another with my words, I am sitting in judgement of the law, condemning the law as not good. More particularly, when I speak evil of my neighbour, I am ignoring the law. In effect, I am creating my own law, having dismissed what God has set as the standard for all interactions within the faith community. However high and orthodox my confession concerning God's Word, failure to obey His Word reveals that I do not see it as authoritative for life and practise. James here iterates a truth that has guided all that he has written to this point: ***the reality of our faith is tested through our obedience to God's Word!***

When David sinned through committing adultery and attempting to cover his sin through an even more heinous sin of murder, Nathan asked, "Why have you despised the Word of the LORD, to do what is evil in His sight" [2 SAMUEL 12:9]? In the heat of desire, David considered the proscription against adultery as a small matter. Whenever you see someone sinning, you may be assured that they have decided that God is unfair, unreasonable or unaware of their desires.

We cannot choose which commands of God we will obey and which we will disregard, as though we were selecting salads at a salad bar. We dare not imagine that the Word of God does not apply to us. We cannot justify our evil through appeal to necessity. “I had to do this,” or “You made me do this” is the cry of a self-seeking individual who has permitted her feelings or her desires to rule over her, and James clearly will have none of that.

When we censure a brother or sister, we arrogate a power that does not belong to us. We reveal abysmal arrogance at even thinking that we are capable of making such judgement about another. Paul cautioned against condemning another because of dietary decisions [ROMANS 13:3] or because of days set aside for worship [ROMANS 13:5]—in other words, inconsequential choices. In the midst of providing this critical instruction, he makes a significant affirmation concerning judgement. “Who are you to pass judgement on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand” [ROMANS 14:4].

Were we to truly apply the law, we would always exercise mercy before judgement [JAMES 2:13]. We received divine mercy when we were saved, and each of us is compelled to confess that we continue to require God’s mercy. How is it, then, that we are so merciless when we speak of others? Little digs of the tongue are far weightier than we think, for they place us in the awful position of presuming against God’s Law, imagining that we are superior to what He has commanded. Perhaps this is one reason for the lack of effectiveness in our witness in the world. Perhaps this is a major reason for our lack of power before the world.

In modern church life, we have turned our own world upside down. Isaiah warned,

“Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!”

[ISAIAH 5:20]

Tragically, this is how it often is for anyone who seeks to follow Christ and His commands. Obedience to God meets with calumny and sin with flattery. Open and gross sin is treated gently, because we do not wish to offend the world, or because we fear that powerful individuals will not approve of our actions. We say that we cannot see people saved if we are too harsh with them. I wonder, at what point are pastors to confront sin? When shall the preacher speak the truth and not give offence to the world? Are we not more concerned with acceptance by the world than we are about offending Holy God? However, godliness and holiness are censured as fanaticism, and rejected as fellow Christians question our motives.

In the modern theology, drunkenness is called good fellowship, gossip is dialogue, theological error is scholarship, rebellion is zeal for the public good, immorality is finding oneself, and malicious talk is righteous indignation. However, obedience to God’s Word suffers because it restricts our “freedom.” The Word teaches us to be zealous to do good works and to be peace loving; however, in modern church life zeal becomes extremism, obedience to God’s Word is legalism, and holiness is recast as intolerance. Prophetic preaching becomes criticism, righteousness is overly narrow, and obedience is too restrictive. So, the resort of the rabble among us is to evil speech against those who seek to honour God.

What is needed in modern church life is a dose of sanctified common sense. The pews of contemporary churches are occupied by wanna' be lawyers who struggle to find a loophole for every command of God. What is needed are men and women who are filled with the Spirit of God, yielded to the reign of the Master, and consumed with a desire for God's glory to be expressed through their lives. When we again have such people—even a few—filling the pews, we will again witness the power of God among the churches. Then, sinners will be saved, wayward saints will be convicted and the people of God will again know the presence of the Master in power. Lord Jesus, let it be and let it be now that this becomes reality!

THE LAWGIVER AND JUDGE — “There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour?” Behind the divine warning are three relationships that are jeopardised when we slander another. There is the relationship with each other as members of the Family of God. James reminds us that we are violating this relationship when he addresses his readers with the terms “brother” and “neighbour.”

The second relationship that is violated is our relationship with the Law of God. James has taught us that we are to be doers of the Law and not mere hearers of the Law [JAMES 1:22]. Yielding to Christ as Saviour implies that we have received mercy and that we have placed ourselves under His Law, which commands mercy. Thus, if we judge others, instead of being merciful we are rejecting Christ's Law and exalting ourselves as superior to that Law.

The third relationship that is violated when we judge others is that which we enjoy with God. James says “There is only one lawgiver and judge, He who is able to save and to destroy.” God alone gives the law; and God alone is able to judge. Therefore, when we attempt to judge others we are setting ourselves not only over the Law, but over the Lawgiver as well. Let the horror of the thought grip your mind—when we judge our fellow believers, we are attempting to usurp the place of God. This is the great sin of Satan.

Perhaps you will recall Isaiah's revelation concerning the rebellion which caused the devil to be cast out of Heaven.

“You said in your heart,
‘I will ascent to heaven;
above the stars of God
I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly
in the far reaches of the north;
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.’”

[ISAIAH 14:13, 14]

That is the attitude we evince whenever we presume to judge our fellow believers. The best-case scenario is that we act thoughtlessly in our judgement. Nevertheless, the attitude expressed is identical to that of the devil. It should be obvious that this is an affront to Holy God.

God alone gives life; and only God has power over the soul of man to judge him after this life. Jesus cautioned those who follow Him as disciples, “Do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear Him who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell” [LUKE 12:4, 5]. Similarly, Jesus warned, “Fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” [MATTHEW 10:28].

You do not have the power over another's soul. You are incapable of changing anything that God has not permitted. Therefore, how foolish to imagine that God will listen to you when you judge His people. We who are Christians shall stand before the Judgement Seat of Christ. Paul reveals that "We must all appear before the Judgement Seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" [2 CORINTHIANS 5:10].

Therefore, the judgement of Christians lies in the future, whether immediately or at some distance time. Indeed, we need to heed the cautionary note sounded by the Apostle. "You have no excuse, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself" [ROMANS 2:1]. In attempting to judge the words and the actions of our fellow believers, we forget that "The spiritual person ... [is] to be judged by no one" [1 CORINTHIANS 2:15]. We will do well to remember the injunction not to "pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart" [1 CORINTHIANS 4:5].

Jesus said that "The Father ... has given all Judgement to the Son, that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father" [JOHN 5:22, 23]. Therefore, if the saints will be judged to determine the manner of their life, are you surprised to discover that outsiders will also be judged by the Master? Jesus continued with his instruction to the disciples by saying, "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so He has granted the Son also to have life in Himself. And He has given him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement" [JOHN 5:25-29].

John speaks of that judgement of those who are outside of Christ and outside of His grace. He wrote, "I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it. From His presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" [REVELATION 20:11-15].

No one need be in that judgement. The Master has offered life to all who will receive it. "Truly, truly, I say to you," said Jesus, "whoever hears My Word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life" [JOHN 5:24]. God offers life in His beloved Son. You cannot earn it; it is freely offered if you will receive it. You do not deserve it; it is offered by the grace of God to all who will receive it.

The Word of God promises life to all who are willing to receive it. The Word promises, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him to be sin who know no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" [2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-21].

This is the promise of God. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That promise concludes by calling all who are willing to receive this life that is freely offered in Christ the Lord. The Word of God promises, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]. You, too, may be saved. Your sin can be forgiven and you can begin again.

And that is our prayer for each one who reads this message or who hears what is declared. Believe the Lord Jesus Christ, receive Him as Master over your life, and rejoice in the life that God freely gives. Do it now. Amen.