

Who Are You to Judge?
James 4:11-12
ABC 7/21/19

Walter Wangerin, in his collection of short stories, *Ragman & Other Cries of Faith*, begins one of his stories with what seems to be a lesson on the study of spiders. But he surprisingly turns it into an unforgettable metaphor of spiritual truth. He explains that a female spider is often a widow for embarrassing reasons—she regularly consumes those who come her way. Lonely suitors & visitors alike quickly become corpses so her dining room is a morgue. A visiting fly, having become captive, will be granted the illusion of wholeness, but she will have drunk his insides so that he's become his own hollow casket. Not a pleasant thought. Aren't you glad you're here this morning?

The reason for this grisly procedure is that she has no stomach & so is incapable of digesting anything within her. Through tiny punctures she injects her digestive juices into a fly so his insides are broken down & turned into a warm soup. *This soup she swills, even as most of us swill souls of one another after having cooked them in various enzymes: guilt, humiliations, subjectives, cruel love—there are a number of fine, acidic mixes. & some among us are so skilled with the hypodermic word that our dear ones continue to sit up & to smile, quite as though they were still alive.*¹

This is a gruesome but effective picture to describe the destructive power of our words. Our speech doesn't dissolve bodies but souls. The world is populated by people whose lives have been dissolved & sucked empty by another's words, even within the church. This is the evil which the Holy Spirit addresses through James in vss 11-12 of chapter 4, where we find a command against evil speech & the reasoning behind it. **6-12** PRAY

At 1st glance, vss 11-12 don't seem to fit in with James' flow of thought & appear to be rather convoluted. But a deeper look makes things clearer. James has been speaking of **quarrels & conflicts** among Christians caused by selfish desires & worldliness. In vss 6 & 10 he tells us we must be humble to receive God's grace that allows us to obey the 10 commands of vss 7-10. With that in mind, the person who **speaks against** a brother speaks against the law as well because, rather than being a doer of the law (& thus one who loves his neighbor), he's acting as though he were the judge rather than one to be judged. This person isn't humble in that he's usurping a role that belongs to God Himself. He alone is the Lawgiver & Judge. Who do we think we are raising ourselves above both God & His Law by speaking against one another?

Having just shown that the mark of a true believer is humility (4:10), he now gives one practical way in which humility is violated & pride revealed, through speaking against others. A person

¹ Walter Wangerin Jr, p 26, quoted by Kent Hughes, *James: Faith that Works*, p 193

whose life is characterized by habitual slander, condemnation, & criticism of others may be revealing an unloving, unregenerate heart (1 Jn 2:9–10; 4:20). On the other hand, sanctified encouraging speech marks believers (Eph 4:25, 29; Col 4:6). The issue of speaking against others is a test of genuine salvation & a measure of spiritual maturity.² Speaking against others is often linked in Scripture to jealousy (2 Cor 12:20; 1 Pt 2:1), selfishness (2 Cor 12:20), quarrels, & pride & is an outward sign of being double-minded in the heart. Humbling ourselves & getting right with God results in our getting right with other people. When we're right with other people, it will show in the way we talk about them. So we must **not speak against one another** & not judge our fellow Christians.

Before we go any further, we must address the whole *not judging* topic. One of the world's favorite vss is Mt 7:1 where Jesus says, **do not judge so that you will not be judged**. According to the world, Jesus means we're never to point out sin or even classify something as a sin, because then we're judging & breaking Jesus' command. Is that what Jesus said? Is that what James says here? No & no. Here's what judging others doesn't mean:

1) It's not judging someone to be discerning with regard to their character or teaching. As I just mentioned, many people quote Mt 7:1 about not judging others, but they never bother to read down to vs 6, where Jesus says, **Do not give what is holy to dogs, & do not throw your pearls before swine**. To obey vs 6, you must make some judgments about the person's character. Also, if you keep reading, Jesus goes on to say, **Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves** (15). It takes a discerning sheep to recognize a false sheep. It requires judging the man's teaching as false. We live in a culture where, even within the church, if you dare to confront or expose sin, or if you point out that someone's teaching is unbiblical, you get accused of being judgmental & unloving. But the Bible is clear that we fail miserably if we allow false teachers to infiltrate or sinning believers to infect the flock without confronting & exposing them. Remember what Paul says in Rom 16:17-18?

Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions & hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, & turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord

² MacArthur, J. F., Jr. *James*, p 221

Christ but of their own appetites; & by their smooth & flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.

We see throughout the NT that it's not judging someone to exercise discernment about sinful behavior or false teaching.

2) It isn't judging someone to speak to them about their sin or false teaching. We've all probably thought or said things like this: *I could never confront anyone about their sin, because we're not supposed to judge others. Let him who is without sin cast the first stone!* But this is often an excuse to dodge a difficult, but loving, responsibility we all have. If you see your child about to run in front of a car, you do everything in your power to stop him. If you see a brother in Christ about to ruin his life by sin or by believing false doctrine, love should motivate you to do everything possible to warn him. In our text, James isn't being judgmental by confronting sin in the church. In 5:19-20 he states, **My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth & one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death & will cover a multitude of sins.** On a personal level, such confrontation is the responsibility of every spiritual believer (Gal 6:1). It should begin in private, unless the sin is public to start with (Gal 2:11-14; 1 Cor 5:1-13). If the sinning person doesn't listen to you, then take another mature believer with you, or involve someone else who can try to minister to the sinning person. If he still refuses to listen, it may be necessary to tell it to the entire church & to remove the person from the fellowship (Mt 18:15-18). But the aim is always to restore the sinning believer, to protect the church from sin, & to honor God. But it's not being judgmental & it's acting in love to confront sin & false teaching. But a warning too: Not everything is sin that you think is sin & not every doctrine is as cut & dried as you might think it is. We spent several weeks in Rom 14 seeing what Scripture says about things some consider sins & others don't. The examples Paul uses are of eating meat or being a vegetarian, what holidays to celebrate or none at all, & to drink wine or not. Just because someone doesn't agree with your decision on debatable things, doesn't mean they're sinning & you have to confront them. However, if they're living in adultery, mistreating their spouse, bowing to idols, or speaking against other Christians, then you confront them. If they're teaching salvation is by faith plus works, please confront them!

3) It isn't judging to evaluate others for their spiritual maturity & doctrinal beliefs for ministry or shepherding purposes. To be able to make wise ministry decisions & shepherd the flock, church leaders must make judgments about a person's character, spiritual maturity, & doctrinal views. Sometimes you must communicate your evaluations to others that may be affected by the person's immaturity or unbiblical views.

We've seen what it doesn't mean. So what does judging others wrongly mean?

1) We judge someone wrongly when we criticize or **speak against** them out of jealousy, bitterness, selfish ambition, pride, or some other sin, rather than seeking to build them up in Christ. In other words, our motive is crucial. When James says, **Do not speak against one another**, some versions translate it, **Do not slander one another**. Maligning or damaging someone's reputation by sharing false or misleading information, is always sin. But the word James uses here has a broader meaning than just *slander*. It includes any form of criticism or running someone down from selfish motives. In other words, what you're saying may be true, but the reason you're sharing it is to make yourself look good & to put the other person down. If your motive in criticizing someone is jealousy, selfish ambition, rivalry, pride, or hatred, you're judging wrongly.

2) We judge someone wrongly when we assume we know all the facts & motives behind the person's words or actions. We can never know fully another person's motives. So don't judge them! If you do, you're on very shaky ground. We seldom, if ever, know all the relevant facts to make such verdicts.

3) We judge someone wrongly when we set up human standards, rather than holding to God's standards. Your preferences don't have to be everyone's preferences. Your way of doing something isn't necessarily the only way it can be done. So don't demand everyone do things your way. Paul devotes 2 chapters to this problem. I mentioned Rom 14 earlier. In 1 Cor 8, the issue was of eating or not eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. But these are areas where the Bible doesn't give definitive commands. It's wrong to take your personal convictions in such areas & set them up as standards to judge those who don't share your convictions. That's a sin of pharisees, in Jesus' day & in ours. They add man-made rules to God's law & judge everyone that doesn't keep their

rules. They major on minors & neglect the weightier provisions of the law (Mt 23:23). They focus on outward appearances, but their hearts are actually far from God (Mk 7:6-9).

4) We judge someone wrongly when we don't 1st judge our own sin before trying to help others with theirs. That's Jesus' point in Mt 7:1-5. He doesn't say it's wrong to help your brother get the speck out of his eye but before you do so, deal with the log in your own eye 1st. If you went to an eye doctor to remove a speck from your eye & he had a log sticking out of his, you wouldn't let him get close to you! From the other point of view, if you haven't removed the log from your own eye, you'll come across as arrogant & lacking in compassion if you try to help a brother with his speck. Removing our own logs has a way of humbling us & that's what we all need.

5) We judge someone wrongly when we share confidential or personal information with the wrong intent. One of the most common examples of this is when someone says, *I wanted you to know about this situation so you could pray*. But you really have no need to know the information & aren't part of the solution. The person sharing it just wanted to feel important because they know something you don't. Another common way this happens is to share damaging information about another person in order to make yourself look good or to win people to your side in a grudge you have against the other person. Often this information is either false or misleading.

6) We judge someone wrongly when out of a self-righteous spirit, we criticize or malign them over a minor or indifferent matter. Maybe you have insight on a matter that the other person lacks. Or you've never struggled with a problem that the other person struggles with. In a conversation with a 3rd party, you refer in a derogatory manner about this person's lack of insight or his struggle with this sin, & your motive is to show how *good* you are by way of comparison. That's judging your brother.

7) We judge someone wrongly when we claim to know their eternal destiny. The Bible gives many tests that we can apply to ourselves to determine if our faith is genuine. James gives several in this book alone. These tests are also valid to apply to others. Jesus said, with regard to false teachers, **You will know them by their fruits** (Mt 7:16). If a man's conduct or teaching doesn't conform with Scripture, you can conclude that at best, he's an immature believer. At worst, he

may not be saved. But in the final analysis, only God knows the heart. We may carefully say, *Based on the fruit, I question that person's salvation.* In talking with a professing Christian whose life or doctrine doesn't line up with Scripture, we can say, *If I were in your shoes, I'd question my salvation.* But we cannot authoritatively say to someone, *You're going to hell or heaven.* Only God knows that for sure.

OK, let's get to the text. **11-12**

1. How We Relate to Each Other The threefold repetition **brethren ... brother ... brother** reminds us of the family relationship we share with other Christians. Evil speech is the opposite of what's expected & acceptable in a family, whose members are to love, support, & protect each other. While Christians are to expect slander from outside the church (1 Pt 2:12; 3:16), within the church it's unacceptable. **If you bite & devour one another**, Paul warned the Galatians, **take care that you are not consumed by one another** (Gal 5:15). **Speak against** has been translated **evil speech** (KJV/ESV) & **slander** (NIV). It includes repetition of real faults. It's critical, derogatory speech that deliberately calls attention to the faults of others while minimizing their virtues. The point isn't the falsity of what's said but rather its uncharitableness. The evil lies in the speaker's hostile intention, aimed at eroding the position or character of the one spoken against. It's an activity related closely to the work of the devil, the slanderer (7).³ As I said, this forbids more than just **slander**. Literally the command is, **Do not speak down on one another** or **do not speak against one another, brethren**. Slander is malicious speech that's untrue. But the command here forbids any speech (whether it's true or false) which runs down another person. Certainly no Christian should ever be a party to slander, making false charges against another's reputation. But even more convicting is the challenge to refrain from any speech which intends to run down someone else, even if it's totally true. Most of us feel it's OK to deliver negative information as long as it's true. We know lying is wrong. But is passing along damaging truth sinful as well? We often think it's our moral responsibility to do so. By such reasoning, criticism behind another's back is thought to be all right as long as it's true. Likewise, vilifying gossip is OK if the information is true. Thus many believers

³ D. Edmond Hiebert, *James*, p 241

use truth as a license to destroy others' reputations. Related to this, some reject running down another behind their back, but believe it's OK if done face-to-face. These persons are driven by a compulsion to make others aware of their own faults. Fault-finding is, to them, a spiritual gift. Of course, by doing so, they elevate themselves & thus pride is at the root of it. As Christians we often poison one another repeatedly with the gastric mixes of slander, gossip, & criticism, both behind their back & face-to-face. One who judges another Christian in this way can hardly be said to have humbled themselves, submitted to, or drawn near to God. We're not loving one another when we speak against them.

2. How We Relate to God's Law 11b

This is the next logical step in James's flow of thought. Since loving others is the essence of the law (Rom 13:8; Js 2:8), & speaking against others is failing to love others, it's therefore a violation of God's law. James calls God's Word **the law** to show its authoritative nature. God doesn't give suggestions for happy living. He commands us with His sovereign authority. When we **speak against** other believers, we exalt ourselves above God's Law. When we speak uncharitably against a fellow believer & judge him, we break the royal law (2:8), **love your neighbor as yourself** (Lev 19:18). This makes us guilty of breaking the whole Law of God (2:10). Our failure to keep God's Law amounts to judging it, in that we've judged it to be unnecessary or that it doesn't apply to us. Such a person, becomes a judge of the law & sits himself 'outside' & 'above' the law.⁴ If we think like this, we view our opinions as better than God's. We imagine that given the chance we could improve God's perfect Law.

James' argument is meant to deliver us from mind games which tell us it's OK to be judgmental because we're so spiritually mature, sensitive, & insightful. This is nothing but arrogance. God's Word is absolute. It's humility which allows us to submit everything to the Judge of the Universe. It would be the height of arrogance for us little peons to kick out the almighty Judge & take over the bench & make our own law. But that's exactly what happens when people haven't humbled themselves (10). Rather than being under God, they take over for God. Speaking **against a brother**

⁴ Douglas Moo, *James*, p 199

is speaking from a presumptuous position of supposed superiority, looking down on an inferior (but you're his fellow brother, not his boss or lord). Speaking **against the law** is an insult to the Law-giving God because you're setting yourself above His law, especially the law of loving your neighbor (2:8-10; Lev 16:18). When you do this you aren't a **doer of the law**, implying you neglect at least some of the law. You're making the law bend to your life or standards, rather than making your life & standards bend & bow to God's Law. You determine you're not guilty rather than letting God's Word be judge & jury to pronounce where you are guilty. In essence, you think you're qualified to enact a better law than God's. We must never set ourselves above God's law. Instead we must submit to it (7a). We aren't the Judge with authority over the Bible; the Lawgiver & His Word is the authority over us (12).

By using the word **neighbor** in vs 12, James probably shows he has in mind the 2nd greatest commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself. Judging your neighbor isn't loving him. It's setting yourself up in a position that belongs to God alone. Love doesn't tear down others; it builds them up in Christ. If you **speak against** others & criticize them to make yourself look good, you're loving yourself, not others. You aren't obeying God's law, you're setting yourself above it. Of course, we must love others with our deeds, not in words only. But here James is focusing on how we speak to & about one another. Our words need to demonstrate God's love. Since speaking against others is a violation of the law of love, when we do so we **speak against** the Law & condemn it. This shows an utter disregard for God's standard. & if you place yourself above God's law, warns James, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. The unimaginable implication of that is that the one who disregards God's law, in effect, claims to be superior to His law & not to be bound by it or to be subject to its authority. By such disrespect the sinner judges God's law as unworthy of his attention, affection, obedience, or submission, all of which is blasphemy against God. Experiencing victory over evil speech requires us to take our proper place under the law's authority.

3. How We Relate to God By placing himself above the law, the one who speaks evilly also attempts to place himself above the only true Lawgiver & Judge, God Himself. When we do this we side with

Satan, who also tried to usurp God’s throne (Is 14:13–14). James is clear. **There is only one Lawgiver & Judge, the One who is able to save & to destroy.** Or as Jesus said, **Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul & body in hell** (Mt 10:28). If another person has wronged you, you don’t need to judge that person, because God will. Instead, you should pray for them & remember that your judging the other person is a sin against God, who rightly could’ve sent you to hell. Submit to God by obeying His Word, which commands us not to **speak against** others. Since God is the only one who can **save & destroy**, only He has the right to judge. Therefore, for us to judge one another is to steal a right that only He has. Therefore, this kind of speech isn’t just arrogant but blasphemous!⁵ This alone ought to shut our demeaning lips. The desire to take the place of God has been the essence of every sin ever committed. Sin seeks to dethrone God, to remove Him as supreme Lawgiver & Judge & rule in His place. Because it asserts that the sinner is above God’s law, sin strikes a murderous blow at the very Person of God Himself. Every sin is ultimately against God because every sin in effect belittles & condemns His law, as well as laughs at His authority.

James’ concluding rhetorical question is powerful: **But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?** (NIV, 12b). Why would you try take God’s place? As Paul tells us, **Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness & will expose the motives of men’s hearts** (1 Cor 4:5). Sin inhibits our judgments. We are all such sinners that our subjective judgments are clouded by our fallenness. Shouldn’t we be thanking God that we won’t be judged by our sinful human counterparts? To control the sin of speaking against others we must recognize the seriousness of sinning against the supreme Lawgiver & Judge.

4. How We Relate to Ourselves Those who speak against others reveal an exaggerated view of their own importance. In a stinging rebuke to them, James demands, **who are you who judge your neighbor?** He’s implying, *Do you think you’re God? If not, why do you set yourself up in His role?* Clearly, speaking against others flows from incredible arrogance. When you find yourself thinking judgmentally about others, judge your own pride instead. God rightly could have judged you, but

⁵ Peter Davids, *Epistle of James*, p 170

He didn't. He will righteously judge the one you're condemning & it isn't your place to do so. Setting yourself up as judge leads to conflict & broken relationships. Humbly submitting to God & His Word & obediently seeking to love & build up others leads to harmony & restored relationships. The next time you're tempted to run down someone, remember James' pointed question, **who are you who judge your neighbor?** Judge & humble yourself before God instead! As Paul told the Romans, **through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think...**

We'd probably all agree that speaking against our brothers & sisters & judging them is a serious sin. But James puts it even stronger showing it's one of the worst of sins because it exalts us above the Law, & even worse, it's self-exaltation above God. We must agree that this evil, demeaning, dishonoring, evil speech is a terrible sin. But there's a sin that's even worse. What is it? Denying that this is a terrible sin. We must agree with God & cleanse our mouths & purify our hearts & thus use only edifying speech to one another.

As we acknowledge & confess our sin, what then? Here again the lowly spider has a lesson for us. Sometimes a famine descends upon the mother spider & her offspring. There's no food to eat & the spiders will die. Says Wangerin:

But then, privately, she performs the deed unique among the living. Into her own body this spinster releases the juices that digest. Freely they run through her abdomen while she holds so still, digesting not some other meat, but her own, breaking down parts of her that kept her once alive, until her eyes are flat. She dies. She becomes the stomach for her children, & she herself the food.⁶

The spider, whether sipping the life of another or becoming soup for her children, is simply acting according to the instincts God created her with. Nevertheless, it's a picture of what Jesus had done for us on the cross when **God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God** (2 Cor 5:21). It was our sin that Christ took upon Himself. What horror rolled over Him as wave after wave of all our sins rolled over Him & through Him as He became a curse. **Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'** (Gal 3:13). He endured the boiling wrath of God

⁶ *Ragman & Other Cries of Faith*, p 27

on the cross in the juices of our sins. He died for us. But death didn't defeat Him. The resurrected Christ is food for our souls. Jesus said, **I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man & drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh & drinks My blood has eternal life** (Jn 6:53, 54). We're called to spiritually dine upon His flesh & blood: **This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.... This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me** (1 Cor 11:24, 25). Those who put their faith in Jesus now have His life in them. & when we draw deeply on Him, the same submissive love which caused Him to become sin for us flows through us. Then, like Him, when insulted we don't retaliate or make threats or speak evilly but entrust ourselves **to Him who judges justly** (1 Pt 2:23). Like Him, we don't **speak against** others but rather are channels of His love. It's possible to lead lives which heal instead of harm, which sustain life instead of sucking out the life. Which build up rather than tear apart.

We'll never get to the heart of dealing with the problem of our sinful speech until we realize our problem is our own arrogant heart. The desires in us that elevate ourselves cause us to speak from our pedestal against others. But those who lower themselves, humble themselves (10) can receive heart-changing grace from God. That's what we all need. We don't deserve God's grace, but praise Him that His mercy triumphs over judgment. Therefore we must not be unmerciful, unloving, or unjust in our judgments toward far lesser offenses than we've done to God. Be humble not lifting up yourself to judge others, not undermining God's law by man's legalism, & not usurping God's role. There's only One Judge & Lawgiver & He's not retiring or looking for replacements, & He doesn't need advice on His job performance! Humbly submit to Him, submit your life, your thoughts, & your words.