

James' Letter

8: Condemning Others

We now move into the sixth main teaching of James' letter where he adds to the theme concerning our words and watching what we say (see 3:1-12). One of the main ways we people disrupt harmony and unity is through the things that we say to others or about others behind their back.

James has just declared that, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." And that we ought to submit ourselves to God, humble ourselves before him, and let him be the One who exalts us. And it's against that backdrop that James now warns us that saying bad things about others is a form of pride and self-exaltation where we are putting ourselves above the people around us, and also above God's Law and even God himself.

James warns all of us to watch what we say and avoid saying bad things about people.

He writes:

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 neighbor? (4:11-12)

Judging Others

Now before we get into what James is saying here we need to clarify what he is not saying. James is warning us to not judge others. Jesus also taught, "Judge not, that you be not judged."¹ (Matthew 7:1)

This particular warning and command is a very misunderstood and misused portion of Scripture. And so we need to be clear on what James and Jesus mean concerning judging others.

There are many people who want to take this phrase as literal as possible and declare that for the sake of peace, tolerance and unity we must avoid all forms of judging others whatsoever. But that is not what Jesus is saying.

He is not calling us to avoid making judgements concerning others. He is simply warning us about an attitude that seeks to condemn others and exalt ourselves.

¹ Matthew 7:1

What does this kind of attitude look like?

It is a self-righteous attitude that looks down on others in a way that magnifies their sin while minimizing our own. It is an attitude of superiority. It's an attitude where we saying bad things about others just for the sake of doing it, and we even find ourselves enjoying it. If you have ever felt some sort of pleasure from hearing something bad about someone else then you have experienced this sinful attitude that Jesus is addressing here.

So Jesus is not calling us to abandon all discernment and reason and to hold no convictions or strong opinions about what's right and what's wrong. As salt and light within this world, we are called to speak up and confront the world when and where confrontation might be needed. But we are not permitted to do so with an attitude and a disposition that seeks to harmfully criticize or condemn another person.

Loving Others

If we are honest with ourselves, the main reason that we say bad things about other people and try to judge others based on our own standards is that we are trying to exalt ourselves. A natural way to exalt ourselves is to bring others down, and one way that this often plays out among the church is in the way we highlight the sins of others while ignoring our own.

We highlight certain commands and then criticize those who aren't upholding them perfectly. But when we do this, we are not only exalting ourselves over the people around us, but we are also exalting ourselves over God's Law and even God himself. James warns that if you are acting like a judge over the law then you are trying to take on a role that only belongs to God. The moment you begin to consider yourself the authority over spiritual standards is the moment you have exalted yourself as the one who sets and supervises those standards rather than being someone in submission to those standards.

A weak but modern day example of this can be seen in the unspoken rules of rookie conduct in the clubhouse. There is an unspoken rule that seems to govern most clubhouses that basically says rookies are expected to behave in a certain way and must remain submissive to this unspoken rule as long as they are rookies. Now, what happens if a rookie decides to act like one of the veterans in the clubhouse and even to the point of hazing other rookies on the team? Everyone would look at this guy like, "Who are you man? Who do you think you are?" The other rookies would look at him like, "Dude, you're no different than any of us. What makes you think you're any better than we are?"

And that's the sort of thing we see when someone attempts to exalt themselves over others by acting like they have a superior status than they actually have. We are people just like everyone else who are supposed to obey God's Law, but we are not the Judge or Lawgiver — that status and position is God's alone.

Instead, we ought to strive to uphold God's command that says:

"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 19:16-18)

In the first main teaching of his letter, James echoed this command by encouraging us to obey the Royal Law of loving others around us. And we declared in that study that loving others like Jesus has loved us should define the way that we live our lives. And so a true follower of Jesus views everyone and loves everyone like Jesus.

We need to watch what we say and avoid saying bad things about people.

We are called to reason frankly and honestly with others whenever correction is needed and necessary, but we must do so in humility, sincerity and love. God alone is the Judge who is able to save and condemn. And therefore, we might want to heed this warning by James and the following warning given by Jesus:

"I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."²

² Matthew 12:34-37