

# DG Guide: James 4:11-17

## Opening Prayer

## Starter Question

Think about the running commentary going on in your head any ordinary day - the driver who cut you off, the comment someone made, the choice you watched a friend make. How often does a verdict get handed down in your mind before you have even thought about it? Where does that voice show up most for you?

## Key Takeaways from the Sermon

1. **This passage is a single thought with two applications, not two disjointed paragraphs.** Criticising a brother or sister (vv.11-12) and presuming on tomorrow (vv.13-17) may look unrelated, but they are the same sin in two outfits: a creature climbing into a seat that belongs to the Creator. The whole passage asks one question twice - who do you think you are?
2. **The silent courtroom is still a courtroom.** Don described the inner critic as sitting "on the big seat with the big gavel," banging out verdicts on people all day long. Most of those judgments never reach our lips. James doesn't let us off on that technicality. The silent verdict that reshapes how we treat a brother or sister is exactly what he's bringing to light.
3. **Judging a brother is judging the law, and judging the Lawgiver.** The royal law is "love your neighbour as yourself." When we sit in moral superiority over a fellow believer, we step outside that law, look in on it, and decide it doesn't bind someone as discerning as us. We stop being a servant of love and become a critic of love - and a critic of the God who gave it.
4. **There is one Judge who can save and destroy, and that's good news.** Isaiah 33:22 stacks the offices: the Lord is our judge, lawgiver, king, and the one who saves. He doesn't judge those in Christ according to their sin but according to Christ's righteousness. The gavel comes down "saved, clear, clean, redeemed." The seat we keep trying to steal is held by the One who climbed onto a cross to rescue us.
5. **"If the Lord wills" is posture, not a magic phrase, and not fatalism.** James doesn't tell the merchant to cancel the trip or hide in a bunker. Surrendered planning still plans, still works hard, still sets goals - but it plans like a steward, not an owner. Your life is a vapour that appears for a little while and then vanishes; so make big, God-honouring plans, and hold them in an open hand.

## Scripture Reading

Read together: James 4:11-17

## Discussion Questions

### Understanding the One Sin Underneath

1. Don argued that James takes one sin and shows it in two places - the judging tongue and the confident calendar. In your own words, what is the single sin underneath both? Why do you think James groups them together?
2. Read James 4:11-12. How does James get from "judging your brother" to "judging the law" to "judging the Lawgiver"? Walk through the logic as a group.
3. Don drew a line between godly discernment and critical judgment, pointing to Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:12-13. What is the difference between challenging a brother for the sake of restoration and sitting "in the seat of judgment"? How can you tell which one you are doing?

### The Inner Critic

4. Don shared that a friend who lived in the States for a decade came back to Australia with "reverse culture shock" at how critical we are about everything. Do you recognise that in our culture? In yourself?
5. "The judging heart always exempts itself." When you sit on the throne, you look out at everyone else and rarely back at yourself. Read Matthew 7:1-5. Where do you find it easiest to see the speck and miss the plank?
6. James says even the slander that never escapes our lips is still an issue. **Why is the silent verdict so dangerous, and so easy to excuse as just "being honest" or "discerning"?**

### The Arrogance in Assuming Tomorrow

7. Read James 4:13-14. Don was clear that James is not against planning - he is against presumption. What is the difference between a good plan and a presumptuous one?
8. Don shared honestly about turning 45 and realising he could have "a whole 'nother life" ahead, then being stopped by "my tomorrow is not guaranteed." He also spoke of his brother who left the house at 16 and never came back, and of friends given months who lived years, and others who died within weeks. How does facing the brevity of life change the way you plan?
9. "Surrendered planning still plans, still works hard, still sets goals, but it plans like a steward and not an owner." What does it look like in practice to plan like a steward this week?

### The Sin We Never Confess

10. Read James 4:17. Don called this the hinge of the whole passage. Why does knowing the good raise the stakes? Why do we have such a well-developed conscience for the wrong we do and almost none for the good we leave undone?
11. Don said we "love the inner critic because it helps us feel better about not pursuing the things we know we should." How does self-criticism sometimes become an excuse for inaction?
12. Don described how God sees you: not running a critical monologue about your mistakes, but looking at you and seeing the perfection of his Son, saying "my beloved." How does being seen that way free you to stop judging others and to do the good in front of you?

### Personal Reflection

- Where is God exposing a seat you have been sitting in that belongs to him - the judge's seat over a person, or the sovereign's seat over your future?
- Who is the specific brother or sister you have quietly appointed yourself judge over? What would it look like to climb down and bless them instead?

- What is one good thing you can see right now and have been walking past? Name it.

## Group Commitments

Choose 1-2 of these to commit to as a group:

1. This week, notice every silent verdict you pass on someone in your head. This isn't an exercise in guilt, but helping us recognise sin. Bring what you notice back to the group next week.
2. Take the person you have been most ready to judge and pray for them daily this week as an equal under the same Lord, assuming the best motive you reasonably can.
3. Memorise James 4:17 together and text one another midweek to check it has stuck.
4. Pick one significant plan you are carrying - a move, a purchase, a career step - and deliberately hand it to God in prayer this week, then plan it well as a steward.
5. Do one good you have been seeing and skipping - the call, the apology, the gift, the hard conversation - and tell one person in the group you have done it.

## Closing Exercise

Go around the group and complete this sentence out loud: "The seat I most often try to climb into is..." Keep it short and honest. Then, as a group, read aloud together: "There is one Lawgiver and Judge who is able to save. He is on the throne, and he loves us."

## Closing Prayer

Pray together, focusing on:

- Worship: thank God that he is judge, lawgiver, king, and saviour all at once, and that he is a merciful one.
- Confession: name the inner critic and the presumption that treats tomorrow as ours, and lay both down.
- Thanksgiving: thank Jesus that the gavel comes down "saved" for everyone who is in him, not because we are awesome but because the righteous one died in our place.
- Commitment for one another: ask the Spirit to turn each of you from an inner critic into a giver of life, peace, and encouragement toward your brothers and sisters.
- Boldness: ask God to help you see and walk into the good works he has prepared in advance for you.

## For Next Week

- Follow through on the group commitment you chose, and be ready to share how it went.
- Memory verse - James 4:17: "So, it is a sin to know the good and yet not do it."
- Preparation: read ahead into James 5:1-6 (the warning to the rich), and notice how the presumption of the confident planner in 4:13-16 grows into the presumption of hoarded wealth.

## Leader Notes

- This passage can land as condemnation, especially v.17. Keep pulling the group back to the gospel landing Don gave: the same God who holds the judge's seat is "able to save," and Jesus is the one human who never stole either seat and who covered every omission we are guilty of. Aim for repentance and gospel confidence, not guilt.
- Watch for two opposite misreadings of "if the Lord wills." Some hear fatalism (stop planning), others hear a magic phrase (say the words and you are covered). Don guarded both flanks: the plan stays, the posture changes.

- Guard against the group using v.11-12 to excuse never challenging one another. Don was careful that Scripture does call us to loving discernment within the body for the sake of restoration. What James forbids is self-exalting condemnation, not all discernment.
- Some members carry a brutal inner critic aimed at themselves. Don named this directly: God does not look at his children and think "what a fool." Make space for people to hear that they are "the beloved," and do not let the session become an exercise in self-flagellation.
- For you, the DG Leader, before you lead this week ask the Spirit where you have been sitting in the judge's seat this week. You will lead with far more grace if you have already climbed down yourself. I really appreciate you giving your time, effort, and energy to disciple your brothers and sisters this week. Blessings!

Or, if you just want a bunch of discussion prompts:

1. James says judging a brother is the same as judging the law. Do you find that a fair claim or a too harsh one? Why?
2. What is the practical difference between discernment and a critical spirit, and where is the line for you?
3. Why does God reserve the role of judge for himself alone? What does "able to save and to destroy" add to the argument?
4. Isaiah 33:22 calls the Lord judge, lawgiver, and king. How does holding all three offices together shape how you trust him?
5. Is planning for the future an act of faith, an act of presumption, or both? How do you tell?
6. How does the image of life as a vapour change the way you think about your calendar without tipping you into either anxiety or carelessness?
7. What would genuinely surrendered planning look like in a decision you are facing right now?
8. Why is the sin of omission so rarely confessed? What good have you seen and walked past recently?
9. How does knowing something raise our responsibility before God? Is that fair?
10. If God truly sees you as "beloved" rather than running a critical commentary on your failures, what changes in how you see yourself, and treat the people you are tempted to judge?