



James 4

Understanding Symptoms vs Cause

Finding the root cause is important because if you aren't treating the

root cause you aren't treating the problem. You'll never get better.

Now in this series we've probably said a dozen times or more now that James is giving us true tests of saving faith. What do you do if you fail the test? How do we interpret the test results? What does the failed test result say about us?

What it says is that we lack faith. That's the root cause. That's the cause of the cause of the cause of the cause. If you fix that problem, you fix all the problems. Last week we talked about fighting and quarreling. That's just the symptom at the very, very surface. The root cause is 20,000 leagues under the sea. The root cause is the weak faith way down in the deep chambers of your soul.

- It is your weak faith which causes God to feel very light in your thinking.
- which then causes you to be prideful and think highly of yourself
- which then causes you to think low of someone else
- which then causes you to think your desires are more important than their desires
- which then causes you to quarrel and fight.

Your lack of faith is the root cause. So if lack of faith is the problem, why not just test for lack of faith instead of testing for these surface problems. That would be nice if such a test existed, but unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. You can't go, "Okay, let me draw some blood and then put a few drops in this machine." Okay, clearly you have the faith. Or, nope, we didn't detect any faith. It's not possible to test for it directly in that way.

We must test for it indirectly. We say, okay, we know saving faith will produce these fruits. And we know saving faith will do this. And it will also affect a person in this way. And so if we start to see a trend

over all these areas, then the only logical conclusion is that we have true saving faith.

Now the reason we start with this is because it's SO EASY to treat symptoms. I failed the quarreling test. So I need to stop quarreling. That's a bandaid. That's a B12 vitamin. Where is the quarreling coming from?

Today, maybe more than any other test James gives we are going to be tempted to treat symptoms and I'm just warning you. Get to the cause. This is so important. Get to the cause. If you walk away from the message with a resolve to "TRY HARDER" I'm going to cry. No, the prayer is this, "Lord, Increase our Faith."

The Outline

Today James is going to test for genuine faith by looking at how we talk about difficult people. All of us have people in our life that are difficult - people who have hurt us, who are annoying, who disagree with us on some issue we care about. How do we talk about those people to others. He's going to talk about the sin of gossip, the sin of slander, the sin of speaking evil of another person. "What does that gossip, that slander, that judgmental attitude say about you?"

James has some incredible insights, but it's going to take some work to understand. We only took two verses today, because there's a lot here and it's not very intuitive.

So here's our outline. We will start by acknowledging the symptom. We will identify the root problem. Then we will apply the cure.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU FAIL

1. Acknowledge the Symptom

So let's start with the symptoms. We only have to read the first sentence to find the symptom.

The Text

James 4:11, Do not speak evil against one another,
brothers.

The SYMPTOM of our sickness, the SYMPTOM of our weak faith is speaking evil of another person. Some translations translate this, "Do not slander one another." That's a good translation, but it misses a key aspect of the word.

A lot of people when they hear the word slander they think, "Okay, God doesn't want us to tell lies about people."

Sure that's true. That's not the core idea. There's another Greek word for telling lies. That's not the word that's being used here.

Of course, we all know, we are not supposed to lie about each other. Sometimes the bigger issue is how you tell the truth about one another. We all know it's possible to say true things in very evil ways.

This word means to speak against. There's two concepts at the core of this root of this word.

1. Content
2. Intent.

There can be words spoken that hurt someone else's reputation that are spoken without intent to do that.

Then there can be words that are true things, but they are spoken with INTENT to harm. There's motive here.

Sometimes it's character deforming content, sometimes character deforming content with intent. sometimes it's both. But in all cases it's wrong.

The Bible has a few helpful examples:

- This word is used when the people of God question legitimate authority, as when the people of Israel “spoke against God and against Moses” (Num. 21:5)

They are grumbling about their leadership. They are grumbling and complaining. The goal was not to help the situation. They weren't trying to help their leaders. They were complaining, grumbling and tearing down. The goal was to destroy the people's confidence in their leaders.

And interestingly, the things they complained about, at times, were true things. The angry mom assembles and these ring leaders cry out, “Moses, what do you have to say for yourself? Who do you think you are? Have you taken us out into the wilderness to die?” Well, yes.

- The word is also used when talking about slandering someone in secret (Ps. 101:5)

Psalm 101

Psalm 101:5, Whoever slanders his neighbor secretly I
will destroy. Whoever has a haughty look and an
arrogant heart I will not endure.

So again, the core idea is to speak against with intent to hurt. This is a practical example of the forest set on fire James finished telling us about in chapter 3. This is relational arson. There is a massive disparity between the effort required to light a fire and the damage of that fire.

Think about the effort of the arson. It's a super tiny thing. The arsonist just strikes a match and drops it. The amount of effort required to do that is almost none. It's so easy. It's actually kind of fun to do that. And so it is with a careless word, a little morsel of 'did you know.'

So the SYMPTOM of the sickness is dropping the match...speaking against. But I think, to be fair to the entirety of the Scriptures, we should expand the SYMPTOM not only to speaking against, but to listening against.

In other words, it can be just as sinful to listen to gossip as it is to speak gossip or slander. Listening is passive in nature so it doesn't

feel like we are doing anything wrong. I didn't say anything.

Listening to gossip says something about your faith. If your faith is strong you'll be a SOPPING WET fire break. You won't listen. And that is a beautiful thing. If the listener stops the gossip, redirects the gossiper, confronts the gossiper, 9/10 times it will stop.

But if the faith is weak,

- the gossiper is heard,
- there's encouragement to keep sharing so your 'hard situation can be understood'
- it then tempts the listener who has already demonstrated weak faith by listening to then spread it further.
- A weak faith listens because it's flattered by the other persons trust.
- A weak faith loves being in the know. It loves having information on others. There's power in that. And we sense that power. We never know when that might come in handy.

A strong faith asks the unbearably awkward question,

- "Before you continue, can I ask, 'is this gossip?'"
- "Do I really need to know this?"
- "Did he give you permission to tell me this?"

I want you to imagine a difficult person in your life. Imagine a person who has maybe hurt you or who really annoys you. What you say about that person to 'safe people' when that person is not present is a huge test of your faith and it's a huge test of how far the gospel has penetrated into your heart.

Listen, let me make this super clear, the strong faith associated with stopping gossip and slander is not a matter of being tight lipped so

the information doesn't spread. It's a matter of never knowing the information because you stopped it before it got too far.

We fail this test of James when we speak against them or listen against them when they aren't present. That's a symptom of sickness. That's a symptom of weak faith and a poor understanding of the gospel.

That's the SYMPTOM.

Now it's at this very point that we would all be tempted to go, okay, yeah, I feel convicted. Speaking evil of another person is not good. Gossip is a bad deal. Let's stop gossiping. That's treating the symptom. Of course God wants us to stop speaking evil. But what's the root problem?

Where is that evil coming from? So let's do that work.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU FAIL

1. Acknowledge the Symptom
2. Identify the Root Problem

Now let's look closely at that connection. The SYMPTOM is speaking evil against others. James says, that is evidence of weak faith.

James 4:11-11, 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.

Okay, so let's really think about the text here. What he's trying to get us to see is that this surface behavior of slander is LINKED to a deep evil. What is the evil behind the evil? It's the evil of arrogance.

He says, "The one who speaks evil against his brother and judges his brother speaks evil against the law and judges the law."

So it appear that the type of evil speech and the type of judgmental attitude that is being addressed, at it's core, is an attitude that has contempt for the law of God.

In other words, the law tells you not to speak in this way, but you say, that's a stupid law. And you blaze forward. I don't know of a single person who says, "God LOVES Gossip." Everybody thinks

gossip is wrong. But they still gossip with a clean conscience because, after all, in their situation, the law does not apply to them. They are somehow exempt. They give themselves a pass.

And we see that this kind of arrogant law breaking in our speech is what James is targeting because the next sentence reads, "If you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge." What he's observing is that if you knowingly break the law, you have mentally set yourself above it.

- You have justified it in your thinking.
- You actually see yourself as towering in a place of authority over the law.
- You see yourself as not being subject to it.

James points out, there are two classes of beings in the world. There are makers of laws. They and they alone are tasked with creating the laws and evaluating whether or not the laws are good. They can make laws and make exceptions. Those are law makers.

The other class of beings are the law obeyers. They have one job and one job only. OBEY.

The first group of people, the law maker group, is a very small group. Like very small. God.

The second group is a very large group. Everyone else.

James says, if you FIND a person who speaks evil against his brother or slanders or judges his brother, then you have also FOUND a person looks with contempt on the law of God and sets himself up as the evaluator of God's laws. He sees himself in that first group. He sees himself above them. He sees himself as an authority to determine if the law is a good one worth obeying or a

poor one worth discarding.

It's arrogance.

And I want to get really practical here. Everybody who slanders, everybody who gossips has a reason why there slander and gossip isn't slander and gossip. And almost always the excuses revolve around close friendships. Because we feel, close with someone, because the trust is high, the sin feels justified.

The excuses just come pouring out.

- I'm talking to a friend. I'm talking with my spouse for goodness sake. I know they won't share it with anyone. James says, "The issue isn't whether they share. The issue is you sharing.
- Well, I'm just processing so I can know how to help.
- I'm just sharing so you can pray.
- I'm counseling them and I need the details to help them.
- I'm creating a safe place.
- I'm empathizing.

But James is saying, "Yeah, that's great but here's the problem: the law says don't do that." Those would all be great things if you weren't breaking the law.

You might be objecting, "Does that mean that I can never talk about someone else behind their back in any circumstance." No, not at all. There are two situations where this is acceptable.

1. You can talk to others about a person if the person has given you their permission. And then all your talk needs to be as if that other person were present. There would be no surprises because what you've said directly to their face is what you are saying to another.
2. The other situation is a Mt 18 situation. If a brother sins against you

go to him directly. If he listens you've won your brother. But if that doesn't work, well, you need go to another brother, you explain the situation to them and the both of you go and confront him.

In any other case, it falls into the category of 'speaking against.'

Jesus, in the sermon on the mount associated speaking against with the root sin of murder. Jesus said, "You've heard it said, 'You shall not murder, but I say if you call someone a fool, and if you call them a 'Raca,' if you slander, if you accuse, if you swell with anger, if you defame that person, you're also guilty of judgment?"

Do you know what Raca means? It means you empty one. You nothing.

Do you realize what Jesus is saying? He is saying when you slander, or speak evil, or call someone a fool or call them a nothing, it's not a subheading under lying; all that evil speech is a subheading under murder.

How was it possible for the Nazis to kill the Jews? They were able to kill the Jews because, for many years, they called them "nobodies." They looked down at them. They thought of these people as fools. They did that until they could kill them.

Jesus says when you assume this position of moral superiority, you condemn, you write them off, that's the seed form of murder. It's the same arrogance that makes a murderer think he should be in the place to determine whether a person lives or dies. That's God's job, not ours.

If you slander another, that same seed of murder is in your heart. I

am justified in using this verbal knife even though God tells me not to.

You have put yourself above God's law. We would all wince at someone who said, "I know that murdering is bad, but this person deserves it." And yet we are quite comfortable with the idea, "I know that slandering is evil but this person needs a verbal knife to put them in their place." Slander is verbal punishment. It's making someone pay. Slander is all about elevating self to judge. The central sin of slander is the elevation and centralization of self. It might feel like the central sin is tearing down someone else. But that's the symptom. The core sin. The root sin is self-love, self-worship, self-elevation.

That's why gossip is the antithesis of Faith. Faith is God worship, God elevation, God love.

So if the root cause of our gossip is our murderous, adulterous, self-loving hearts, what do we do about it?

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU FAIL

1. Acknowledge the Symptom
2. Identify the Problem
3. Applying the Cure

So what's the cure? So here's the final part. Here's the solution.

James 4:12, There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

The reason we judge others is because we are arrogant. This is the root problem. We put ourselves above the judge of all the earth. We put ourselves in God's place. We feel superior. And the conclusion

here by James is a mocking rebuke? Who in the freakin' world do you think you are? Who are you to judge your neighbor?

And so presumably, the converse of that is also true. If we are humble, if when God asks, "who are do you think you are?" we answer, "I am a nobody just like the person I was calling a nobody."

Presumably, if that is our posture then we will not judge, slander or speak against.

How do we get ourselves into that posture? You ready for it. Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God. Submit to the law and the judge.

What would happen if you put yourself under the law instead of above the law? Can you see what happens? If you're under the law, you find yourself guilty. You find little difference between yourself and the person you were just judging. You see that you are in need of a savior just like they are in need of a savior. There's only one lawgiver. And there's only one judge.

And if you submit to that law giver, if you humble yourself under the judge, he will change you.

Let's give an example. You might think you're pretty good at chess. You could boast about your chess abilities. But let's just say, that in reality your really bad. You can only get better by beholding true goodness, by beholding a grand master. But you can never really behold a grand master until you allow yourself to be judged by him. You have to play him and get slaughtered. You have to have your best moves just get destroyed. You have to watch him belly laugh at your sophistication as he tips over your queen and then puts a knife

to the throat of your King. When you play that grand master, in the same stroke you see both how amazing his mind is and how inferior you are. You see how much you have to learn.

You have to submit yourself to master to ever know the master. You have to be judged by his beauty before you can be changed by it. You have to let his words of truth destroy you before his words of life can restore you.

The CHOICE

This text is forcing us to make a choice. Will we submit to the judge of all the earth, to be judged by him, to see his white hot beauty and allow that beautiful judge to save us and by saving us change us.

Or will we stand above God's law. Will we resist his beauty by resisting his judgment and remain unchanged.

Here's what James is saying, "Oh dear. You failed the test. You are slandering. Oh dear. You know what this means, don't you? You have set yourself up in the place of God. And you know what that means? You can never know goodness. You can never be changed by his goodness. You can never draw near to God. You can never see the living God. And seeing the living God is what changes you.

If you knew the real Lord of glory, you would never do this. You'd never be tricked like this, if you really saw Jesus."

We cannot pretend that we will know God and not submit to him. When he says, "Do not slander. Do not speak against." Those are laws given by the lawgiver. We are not the judge. We do not have the right to elevate ourselves above them. We cannot say, "I am my

own grand master.”

The text make something very clear. Those two choices have to outcomes.

Look at the text. What does this text say? As the judge of all the earth, he has the power to do two things. To those who will not submit to his laws, what does it say he will do? He will destroy.

But to those who do submit to his laws, what will he do? He will save.

Now, please, please, please don't miss this. In both cases, both the rebel, and the submitter, they are both law breakers. Why do we say that? Because the one who submits to the law of God is saved. Someone who obeys the law doesn't need saving. It's the one who breaks the law who needs saving.

The world is classified into two types of law breakers. Lawbreakers who allow themselves to be judged by the law and acknowledge their law breaking and then their is another class of lawbreakers. Lawbreakers who see themselves above the law and will not confess. A theoretical third category exists. The righteous. But the Bible tells us there are none who are righteous.

It's way too easy to just say, the reason you slander is because you're a bad person. We are all bad people. James is not going to let us off with something that easy. It would actually be criminal to diagnosis it that way. There's a reason your bad. There's a cause behind the cause behind the cause of your badness.

The cause is you have not let the judge of all the earth, judge you so

he can save you.

God destroys the proud and saves the humble. God destroys the self-righteous and saves the sinner. God destroys the law breakers who do not acknowledge their law breaking and he saves the law breakers who do.

That's it. That's the gospel, folks.

The Gospel

The gospel is that we have a judge that saves.

How can a judge save? Here's one thing for absolute sure: he can't do it by refusing to judge. Any judge who says, "Well, I know you're guilty, but oh well, I'll turn a blind eye." What do you do with a judge that does not uphold the law? You toss that dude to the curb. The law of the judge, the one and only law, is to uphold the law. If he doesn't do that, he's a worthless judge.

So if the judge does not save by overlooking, well how can a judge save? A judge that saves is one who puts on his robe, lets the gavel fall and condemns you. Next he takes off his robe, climbs off the judgment seat and serves the sentence he just decreed, in you place.

The Judge of the universe cannot possibly stop judging to save. It's on the cross, my friends, where Jesus Christ was able to save through judgment. This is how you get root access to those deep foundational structure of the heart. You must listen to the message of the cross.

How can God be holy/just and loving/salvific at the same time? Only by punishing Jesus on the cross. Jesus Christ is the Judge who saved through judgment. He never stopped judging. He never stopped being just, the gavel fell. The sentence was read. And then he climbs down, crawls up on the alter, he stuck his own neck on the block and took the ax as it came down.

He saved us through letting himself be judged.

Now there's a huge word here. THEREFORE. BECAUSE HE SAVED US THROUGH LETTING HIMSELF BE JUDGED, THEREFORE, he's the only one who deserves to judge.

How in the world can you possibly say that you are a better judge than Jesus? How can you say that you have a better sense of justice than that? How can you judge another person with slanderous words? Are you a judge like this?

God was willing to do that for you and for the one you slander? That's a beautiful being. Who do you think you are you that you would usurp this kind of judge?

Do you think you get to do something even Jesus didn't do? Jesus, when we sinned against him, absorbed it in himself and didn't pay back. When someone sins against you, are you going to do the very thing even Jesus didn't do? Jesus absorbed the sin and did not pay back. Are you now, if someone sins against you, are going to pay them back with slanderous words? Who do you think you are?"

We are all under the law. We are all sinners saved by grace. Oh, could we be a church that never forgets this?

This is not just the Judge; this is the Judge who saves through

judgment. This is the Judge who was judged so he could save.