

MBC – 11/21/2021 – Pastor Doug Thompson
 JAMES: TESTS OF A LIVING FAITH
“Defamation of Character”
 James 4:11-12

Intro – Remember the Gospel!

Before we turn to James this morning I want to turn our thoughts to the Gospel – James doesn’t say much about the Gospel in his letter because he *assumes* it. It’s behind every word he writes: remember he was the half-brother of Jesus. He grew up in the same home, and yet he was an *unbeliever*. He did not trust in Jesus as His Lord and his Savior. His entire life, was all about being an upright, Law-keeping Jew, to *earn* – to be *deserving of* – God’s favor.

That was *until* Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to His brother James. Scripture doesn’t tell us about that conversation between Jesus and James – But I imagine it something like this—

“My dear brother James! It’s really Me. The grave could not hold Me. James, you are one of the best people I know. You are so serious about obeying God, but you should know that righteousness before God can never come by your good works. James, I bring you very good news: “God has shown a way to be made right with Him apart from keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. You can be made right with God by placing your faith in Me. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who they are. “

James, the death that I died on that cross was not for My sins, but for the sins of all who will trust in Me, including you. And now, if you confess with your mouth that I am your Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Me from the dead, you will be saved.”

James *did* believe, and became one of the most beloved leaders of the early church. So why then, did he write this letter that is so full of commands? It almost sounds like James is teaching what he *used* to believe: that we are right with God by our good works! But that would be to miss the whole point of this letter. What James is saying this—

“Yes, brethren, we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone – and not just *saved* from our sins, but *transformed*; we are born from above! So make every effort to show off how our Lord Jesus has changed you: “Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven!”

I’m going to write some hard things in my letter. The standard will be very high – but remember that in the Gospel of our Lord Jesus, you have received *power* as well as *pardon*! You have the Holy Spirit in you, to help you live out this new life of Christ. And when you fail – and you *will* fail – your salvation is still secure. There is no condemnation for those who are in Jesus, and nothing can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus – even your sins – because they were cancelled at the cross!

So don’t despair as you read my words, instead, be encouraged: God is for you. He is at work in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure. And if the devil himself accuses you when you sin, just remember: “Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.”

(Pray)

Now let's look at our passage for this morning—

- James 4:11–12 ¹¹Do 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. ¹²There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

This sin of speaking *evil*, or speaking *against* another goes all the way back to the Garden: the serpent called spoke against God. He called Him a *liar* when he said to Eve, “*You will not surely die!*” I.e., “You can’t trust God to speak the truth.” And maybe that’s why God hates this sin so much – He has been a victim Himself! He put it in the Law of Moses—

- Leviticus 19:16 ¹⁶You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people.
- Exodus 23:1 ¹“You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness.
- In Psalm 15, David asks the question: “O Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent, who shall dwell on Your holy hill?” Here is his answer: “he who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend.”
- Psalm 50:19–20 “To the wicked God says: ¹⁹“You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your tongue frames deceit. ²⁰You sit and speak against your brother; you slander your own mother’s son.”
- And in Psalm 101:5, David speaks as King of Israel when he says: ⁵“Whoever slanders his neighbor secretly I will destroy.” Capital crime in David’s kingdom!

Proverbs has over 60 references to this sin, Here are just a few—

- Proverbs 10:18 ¹⁸The one who conceals hatred has lying lips, and whoever utters slander is a fool.
- Proverbs 20:19 ¹⁹Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babbler.
- Proverbs 18:8 ⁸The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.

We all know exactly what this means, don’t we? “Oh, you’ve got some juicy gossip? Tell me!” But as soon as you listen, it goes deep inside, where it changes your heart and your attitudes toward others. And sooner or later, it will come up again. Jesus said, “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, for out of the heart comes. . . *slander.*”

- Proverbs 16:28 ²⁸A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends.

Have you ever seen that happen? You meet up with a friend you haven't seen for awhile and there is a coldness – and you can't figure out why? Could be that a whisperer has said something about you and those words separated close friends. I have seen it happen. It's happened to me: false words, hurtful, defaming words – and a close friendship was over.

- Proverbs 11:9 ⁹With his mouth the godless man would *destroy* his neighbor. And—
- Proverbs 18:21 ²¹Death and life are in the power of the tongue.

Literally. Words can kill: Suicide among adolescents has more than doubled since 2008 – why? Cyber-bullying on social media.

And when we come to James, out of 83 verses in this epistle, almost 20% deal with the tongue—

- James 1:19 . . . let every person be quick to hear, slow to *speak*. . .
- James 1:26 ²⁶If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.
- Ch.3 contains his longest passage on the tongue, and it's not pretty: 3:8 “but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

And in 3:9, he explained that speaking evil of any person amounts to blasphemy—

- James 3:9 ⁹With (our tongues) . . . we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.

*Whisper a salacious story behind another's back, defame their character, pronounce your judgment on their actions – but remember that what you say, you say about an image-bearer: a creation of God who reflects His own image. God takes that *personally*! It is a sin against *God* when we speak evil of anyone. So let's look at this command—

I. “Stop defaming one another!”

- James 4:11–12 ¹¹Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who *speaks against* a brother or *judges* his brother – stop there.

“Do not speak evil: the word means to “speak against,” to run another person down with your words. To bad-mouth someone. And the issue here isn't whether or not what you say is true – it might very well be true – but the intent is malicious. The intent of your words is to *hurt* that person, or dirty their reputation. “Oh, I would never intentionally hurt another person.” But that was the effect. Are you saying that *wasn't* what you intended? And if it *wasn't*, why are you secretly happy that it took them down a notch or two?

- And what compounds this sin is that James addresses us as brothers – *adelphoi* – 3X. We are family! Brothers and sisters, all sinners, all blood-bought by the grace of God, amen? God is our Father, we are one in Christ, members of one body. God has joined us together to be His holy temple. How could we tear each other to pieces with our words, and cause division in His church?

Jesus said, “*What God has joined together, let no man separate!*” But our words can do just that, and they often do, even in Christ’s church. Some of us have experienced deep hurt, deep pain, from the words of our brothers and sisters – in the church. It shouldn’t be. Paul warned in Gal.5:15 “*But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.*”

- I just recently heard about some people saying unkind, untrue words about their pastor and his wife. Oh, they weren’t being malicious, they were ‘seeking understanding.’ But their words cut like a knife – and people began to take sides.
- This is the devil’s sin – in Rev.12:10 he is diabolos – the slanderer, it’s translated, “the accuser of the brethren.” He broadcasts our sins, he drags our names through the mud. *And how often are you and I his helpers?* How often does he use *our* mouths to do his dirty work? That’s a horrible thought.

We can so easily justify our words: “Well, I’m just gathering prayer support for so-and-so. . .” uh huh. If you care about that person, why don’t you go to them, and talk person-to-person instead of going to others. Isn’t that what Jesus told us to do?

- Matthew 18:15 ¹⁵“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him *alone*. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

*We should never repeat that which would hurt another person. Isn’t that the royal law, the law of love: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” and the Golden rule: “Treat others the way you would be treated.” You wouldn’t want them speaking evil against you – so don’t speak *evil* against them.

- The only exception is when concealing information could result in worse harm. Some things need to be brought to the light. Abuse is *often* covered up, even in the church, under the guise of not repeating slander or gossip. If someone is being hurt or abused, don’t keep it quiet, go to someone who can do something about it.

But we all know what James means here: it’s talk that is purposely hurtful and malicious. That is the motivation – it is “**defamation of character**” – and that is against *man’s* laws. How much more is it against God’s Laws, and how He wants His children to treat each other?

- There is an old Jewish story about a woman who repeated gossip about a neighbor. Within a few days, everyone in the village knew the story. The person she gossiped about heard what had been said and was devastated. The story wasn’t true. The lady who had spread the story was very sorry and went to the rabbi to ask what she could do to repair the damage.
- He said to her, “Go home and take a feather pillow, cut it open, then go to every house where you gossiped and put one feather on the doorstep. Then come back and see me. So she did as the rabbi said. She came back and said, now what should I do?” He said, “I want you to go back to every one of those homes and gather up the feathers.”
- She said, “Rabbi, that’s impossible, those feathers have all blown all over town. I can never retrieve them!” He said, “And so it is with your words. Once spoken, they can never be taken back. You may be sorry, but the damage is done.”

You get the point. But how much more is that true when you put defaming words in a text or email, or tweet – where those words can go places you can't even imagine, and keep going and going, *forever*—

- Several years ago a person I didn't know well sent me a friendly email that made them look really silly – even though they meant well. It wasn't anything malicious on their part. I thought I would share it with a few people with the tag line: "Get a load of this!" And then I hit, yes, "*Reply to all*" – including the person. They were so gracious and understanding. But I was devastated. I mourned and grieved over my sin. God got my attention.

You're thinking, "Man, we need to pray for you!" Please! And there is another sin that is clearly implied here—

II. "Stop *listening* to character defamation."

This particular sin takes at least two people, right?: Someone to speak evil about a person, and another willing to listen. And our ears can be just as guilty as our lips when it comes to this sin—

- Proverbs 17:4 ⁴An evildoer *listens* to wicked lips, and a liar *gives ear* to a mischievous tongue.

It's sin to speak evil of others and it's sin to *listen*. But oh, we have itching ears, don't we? We love hearing juicy news – especially if we are the first to hear it. But those tasty morsels go right into our hearts. And you've done it. And I've done it.

- I remember sitting around a campfire with a group of Christian men. Someone asked how so-and-so (another Christian brother) was doing. I brought up some information, somebody else put a negative spin on it – and pretty soon, this brother's reputation was being trashed. I remember thinking, "What just happened here?" One of the younger men stood up and said, "Well I don't know this guy, but I know I don't need to be listening to this!"

And he was right, and we were wrong. Beloved, there is an easy way to stop this sin – don't listen. Someone came into my office once, we were talking about everyday stuff when suddenly they said, "Well you know that everyone in town thinks that so-and-so (from our church) is a crook. . ." I said, "Whoa, I don't believe it, and I'm *not* to it." They were very offended. I guess they thought I was insinuating that they were a gossip. And I guess I was.

- James said that the tongue can set a forest ablaze with just a few malicious words. God's people need to be like fire breaks – if those words reach us, they go no further. Just say, "I don't need to hear this."

And I heard something once that has always stuck in my brain. I hope it sticks in yours: "People who gossip to you are almost certainly, gossiping *about* you."

- James mentions another way, a specific way, that we *speak evil* against others: "The one who speaks against a brother or *judges* his brother – and he says it again:" But who are you to *judge* your neighbor?" And certainly he was thinking of what the Lord Jesus said about this, so let's turn there—

III. “Stop judging one another!”

- Matthew 7:1–6 ¹“Judge not, that you be not judged. ²For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. ³Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye. ⁶“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

This has to be one of the most abused passages in the entire Bible. A lot of unbelievers know *this* passage by heart because they use it as a shield to deflect conviction or criticism of their sins. How many times have you heard this: “Now don’t judge me! Jesus said ‘Judge not!’” They hide behind *this* command to disobey some other command. The best comeback for this is to say, “I’m not judging you, God’s Word is judging you.”

Obviously Jesus didn’t mean, “Never make any judgment on any person or action.” Sometimes we are right to judge, and sometimes we are wrong. Let’s look first at—

A. When it’s right to judge.

Jesus actually *commands* His disciples to make judgments in this same passage: In vv. 3-5 He tells us to first judge ourselves for logs in our own eye, *then* we’re ready to make a judgment about the speck in our brother’s eye. In v.6 He *commands* us to make a judgment as to who qualifies as a dog or a hog. So in just 6 verses, Jesus *commands* us to judge specks, logs, dogs and hogs!

And in the last half of this chapter He tells us how to *judge* who are false teachers.

The word for judge is *krino*, and it means to make a decision, an evaluation, draw a conclusion – make a judgment. God requires us to make Spirit-led, Scripture-informed judgments. Jesus said in—

- John 7:24 ²⁴Do not judge by appearances, but *judge* with right *judgment*.”
- Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:15 ¹⁵The spiritual person *judges* all things.

And we are to make judgments about others:

- 1 Thessalonians 5:14 ¹⁴And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

Now if you say, “But I’m not supposed to make judgments about people,” you might end up encouraging the idle and admonishing the faint-hearted! You don’t want to do that! Paul even said:

- 1 Corinthians 5:12 . . . Is it not those inside the church whom *you are to judge*?

It's a Christian's *duty* to lovingly judge, warn, and confront other Christians. And if we follow Jesus' advice, we always judge ourselves first. Do you see what a cleansing, purifying, good thing this is for the church – if we are doing it?

The truth is, Christians need to do a lot *more* judging in the right way, but much *less* judging in the wrong way. This is the sinful judging that James was forbidding. So we need to see—

B. When it's wrong to judge.

1.) When it's constantly critical.

The command in Matt., “judge not,” is in the present, continuous tense, So Jesus is saying “Don't be constantly, continually criticizing and finding fault.” He means: Don't be judgmental. Judgmental people don't build up, they only tear down.

*But take a step back and ask yourself: Are you ever that kind of person? Are you a fault-finder? Are you negative, critical, *always* pointing out mistakes? Would people say that you are a nag? Maybe everything you say is true, and maybe some of it needs to be said – but is it a steady barrage?

- Proverbs 27:15 ¹⁵A constant dripping on a day of steady rain And a contentious woman are alike. (I do *not* have that kind of wife – but some men do.)

How about in your parenting?

- Colossians 3:21 ²¹Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

The NASB says, “Don't exasperate,” don't be always, always on their backs, pointing out their wrongs. It just discourages and disheartens them. You might say that you are just being ‘consistent in your discipline’ – but are you just as consistent in pointing out when they do something right?

**It could turn your life around to stop trying to catch those around you doing something wrong, and to start trying to catch them doing something right!*

- Before you ever confront another person, you need to ask yourself *why* you are doing it, and *what* you hope to accomplish. Is your goal love? To build up, to come along side and help out? Or are you just bugged and impatient? Look at the log in your own eye.

Remember how God treats you in Christ. He's not always on your back. He is patient, and kind – and so sparing, even in His discipline – amen? Judging is wrong when it is constantly critical, negative, fault-finding. And it's wrong—

2.) When it's harsh.

- 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15 ¹⁴If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame. ¹⁵Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish [warn] him as a brother.

Remember – he is your brother! Maybe he needs to be confronted, but what is the look on your face? What is the tone in your voice? Husbands, do you ever listen to the way you talk to your wife and kids? Ask your wife – if you ever sound harsh, or angry – what about your volume? If that is a problem, better to keep quiet and check your heart.

Spurgeon said that he could predict the success of any man in Gospel ministry by having him read what God called out to Adam in the Garden after he ate the fruit—

“Adam! where are you?” (or)

“Adam – where *are* you?”

Do you understand that? A man who would read it as though God is pointing a big finger from heaven, and ready to hurl lightning bolts – doesn’t understand the gracious heart of God toward sinners. Look what Paul wrote to the Corinthian church after they had been forced to deal with a man who was causing division in their church:

- 2 Corinthians 2:6–8 ⁶Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority, ⁷so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him.

And—

- Galatians 6:1 ¹Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of *gentleness*; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.

Do you hear that? Gentleness. And humility – always checking your own eyes for logs first. And always, always, with the goal and hope and prayer for *restoration*.

- Abe Lincoln said, “He only has a right to criticize, who has a heart to help.” That’s a good check on your attitude. Judging is wrong when it is constantly critical, when it is harsh, and when:

3. When it judges in grey areas.

What do I mean? I mean when you judge another person’s spirituality because of their behavior in an area where the Bible is not specific: you know: vaping, buying lottery tickets, watching ‘Dancing with the Stars’ – juggling cats, etc. But you don’t know how God is dealing with the conscience of another. This is exactly what Paul dealt with in Romans 14—

- Romans 14:4 ⁴Who are you to pass judgment 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.

Sounds like God cuts His children more slack than we do! C.S. Lewis said—

- *An individual Christian may see fit to give up all sorts of things for special reasons – marriage, or meat, or beer, or cinema; but the moment he starts saying the things are bad in themselves, or looking down his nose at other people who do use them, he has taken the wrong turn.*

I.e., MYOB. Fourth, related to this, judging is wrong—

4. When it judges hearts.

You might know *what* a person has done, but you don't know *why* they did it. And unless you have chapter and verse to prove otherwise, you don't know whether God is pleased with them or not! God can see their hearts and know their motives, but you can't—

- “Well I think that sister so-and-so is worldly for buying that new dress.”
- “So-and-so is just not committed. They should be more committed.” That's a big one with Christians.

But since when are we omniscient and know all the facts? We have no idea what's going on between another person and God. Maybe they've been through stuff you have no idea about. Have you ever judged a person wrongly?

Many years ago Janice and I were invited over to John and Pat MacArthur's home for a special evening with folks who had been sent out from Grace Community Church in different ministries. It was a real honor to be a part. And when we arrived we immediately noticed a couple: the wife was wearing a lot of makeup, jewelry, and obviously was wearing a poofy blonde wig. We didn't say anything, but we looked at each other like, “Why would she come to John MacArthur's house looking like Dolly Parton?” Just not appropriate.

So after we had dessert, John asked this woman to come up and share her testimony of how God had sustained her – through her recent brain cancer and chemo which caused her to lose all of her beautiful hair. . . Paul writes:

- 1 Cor. 4:5 ⁵Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

You might be right about that person's motives – but keep it to yourself, and leave it to God.

And one more thing we have to say here: At the heart of all sinful judging is *pride*. Arrogance. Putting someone down, so that you can be just a little higher: “Well, I might not be perfect, but at least I didn't do what you did. . .” Reminds me of someone else I read about in—

Luke 18:11–12 ¹¹“The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’

But Jesus said that tax collector is the one who left there justified. Not the judgmental Pharisee. All judgmentalism is arrogance. And it betrays the heart of the person judging.

III. James the Prosecutor's closing argument.

James commands us to *immediately stop* these sins of judging and defaming others. He wants us to be deeply convicted so that we will thoroughly repent. These are exactly the kinds of sin we should mourn and weep over. So just like a brilliant prosecuting attorney, he gives his closing argument and lays out the case against us in vv.11-12—

1.) *“When you defame or judge a brother or sister, you are judging God’s law.”*

James is thinking specifically of the “royal law,” the law of love in 2:8 “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” So he says, “You *know* this law, but when you speak evil of a brother – or sister – you apparently think this law doesn’t apply to you. You’re above God’s law because you have a special gift of “*discernment*,” you can see into people’s hearts and know their motives. You are justified when make judgments on others. No—”

2.) *“When you judge God’s law, you aren’t obeying it.”*

“Don’t you see that you can’t put yourself above God’s law and also be a doer of the law? You are saying in effect that you are not bound by God’s Law – other people are – but not you. So here is what you are doing—”

3.) *“You are setting yourself over God, the Lawgiver!”*

“When you judge the law – it is deficient because it doesn’t make allowances for special people like you – you are judging the Lawgiver, who is God! You know better than Him, you really should have His place. And I believe that is where Satan got his start, isn’t that right?” No answer? One more question—

4.) *“Who do you think you are to judge your neighbor?”*

This is God speaking to us: What pride, what arrogance for you and I to speak against our neighbor – how much more when that neighbor is a brother or sister in Christ! Who do we think we are?

- There is so much of this sin in the church today: Christians speaking against other Christians, judging each other for their where they stand on this issue or that issue. And the watching world hears us and says, “Just like us.” When we should be arm-in-arm, showing them the sin-covering love of Christ in us.

“How do you plead?”

Beloved, we should be wretched, mourn, and weep. And we should humble ourselves before the Lord. Shouldn’t we? I want you to imagine God the Father saying to you this morning: “You have heard the charges read against you, how do you plead?” I hope you plead “guilty as charged, Your Honor.” because this is what God promises His children when they plead guilty of their sins—

- 1 John 1:9 ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to *forgive* us our sins and to *cleanse* us from all unrighteousness.

Isn’t that beautiful? Forgiven and cleansed! Acquitted of all charges! And no one will riot in the streets when the verdict is read, but the angels will rejoice in heaven!

And the reason we know that the outcome is certain is because of Who represents us before the Father—

- 1 John 2:1–2 ¹My little children. . . if anyone *does* sin, we have an *advocate* (a divine defense attorney!) with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ²He is the propitiation (satisfaction – payment) for our sins.

All of your sins were punished in Jesus, the penalty was paid *in Him*, you have been exonerated and acquitted by the Judge of heaven and earth! “No wrath remains for us to face, we’re sheltered by His saving grace, and sprinkled with His blood!”