

## Marks of a Faith That Works

### *A Faith that Works...* ***Leaves Judgment with God*** James 4:1-10

I ask that you stand with me in honor of God and His Word as I read James 4:11-12.

Don't speak evil against each other, my dear brothers and sisters. If you criticize each other and condemn each other, then you are criticizing and condemning God's law. But you are not a judge who can decide whether the law is right or wrong. Your job is to obey it. God alone, who made the law, can rightly judge among us. He alone has the power to save or to destroy. So what right do you have to condemn your neighbor? James 4:11-12 NLT

Two of the best commercials shown during Super Bowl XXXIX were sponsored by Ameriquest Mortgage Company. Both had the same message: "Don't judge too quickly."

In one ad, a convenience store shopper is standing at the counter and talking on his cell phone. He says to the person on the other end, "You're getting robbed." The two clerks hear those words and react by squirting the man with pepper spray, slugging him with a baseball bat, and then zapping him with an electric cattle prod.

In the second commercial, a man is preparing a romantic dinner. He chops vegetables with a large knife, while tomato sauce simmers on the stove. A white cat knocks the pan of sauce onto the floor and then falls into the mess. Just as the man picks up his tomato-splattered cat, his wife opens the door. She sees him holding a cat dripping with red sauce in one hand and a large knife in the other. The scene appears to be unmistakably horrific.<sup>1</sup>

As these ads show, things aren't always as they first appear. And that's probably the number one reason that we so often as Christians give into this very prevalent sin of judging others. As someone said, a sport that almost everyone enjoys is *jumping ... to conclusions*.

Nothing is easier than judging others; no talent, no self-denial, no brains, no character are required to set up in the judging business. One has said, "Most of us are like umpires, we like to call balls and strikes on somebody else."<sup>ii</sup> When we judge others, we are playing God. And this is no sport; it is a most serious sin.

#### **I. WHY IS JUDGING OTHERS SUCH A SERIOUS SIN?**

James uses two different words in these verses to describe what we call judging others. The first word is translated by the NLT "to speak evil against." The NIV calls it "slander." I like how the Message translation puts it: "Don't bad-mouth each other."<sup>iii</sup>

James is certainly referring to the quarrels, fights and division already mentioned in verses 1-3. And as we saw last week, at the heart of this are selfish pleasures, worldly pursuits, and ultimately *demonic persuasion*. Most of us simply do not realize the degree to which Satan is

having a hay-day when you and I judge and criticize one another. That's why James tells us to "resist the devil" (verse 7). The word for "devil" is *diabolos*, meaning "slanderer, accuser." Do you catch the connection? If you are judging, accusing, and criticizing, then you are doing the devil's work. On the other hand, resisting the devil means laying aside the judgment and criticism that the devil wants to sow in the community of believers.<sup>iv</sup>

Our tendency to judge others usually takes place when the person being talked about is absent. Why is this? More often than not it is because we are too fearful to go directly to the person being talked about. Bottom line, we are afraid of rejection. We are more concerned with protecting ourselves than protecting the person we are talking about.

We often excuse our judgmental, critical statements about others with phrases like:

"Now stop me if I'm wrong, but..."  
"Now I don't mean to be critical, but..."  
"Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but ..."  
"Now this is to be kept absolutely confidential..."  
"Let me share with a prayer concern about..."

To judge another doesn't necessarily mean that what you are saying about the person is false. It could be true. Some people think that it's OK to talk about someone else's *perceived* faults or sins as long as what they are saying is true. But this idea, too, is inspired by hell itself.

But there's a second reason why judging others is such a serious sin. Not only is it demonic; it is also *self-condemning*. Jesus says,<sup>v</sup>

"Stop judging others, and you will not be judged. For others will treat you as you treat them. Whatever measure you use in judging others, it will be used to measure how you are judged. And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log from your own eye; then perhaps you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye. Matthew 7:1-5 NLT

I love Jesus' sense of humor. The Hebrews loved to exaggerate in order to get their point across. Here Jesus paints a picture of one man trying to take a speck of sawdust out of his friend's eye, all the while having a telephone pole hanging out of his own eye. Jesus is saying this: Judging is so such a serious sin because it blinds us to our own faults. We are great speck analyzers of what's in our brother's left eye and all the while there's a log jam in our right eye...and sometimes in both eyes.

Friend, a critical, judgmental spirit is a serious sin. And if sins can be weighed in importance, judging another is far more serious in the eyes of God than the perceived fault we are calling attention to in someone else's life.<sup>vi</sup>

## II. WHY SHOULD I NOT JUDGE OTHERS?

James takes this a step further, however, giving us three of his own reasons why judging others is such a serious sin and why we shouldn't do it.

### A. It violates our spiritual family.

The first reason is not immediately apparent until you read this passage in a more literal, word-for-word translation. Here's how the New American Standard Bible translates verse 10:

Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law. James 4:10 NASB

Three times James repeats that word "brother." He is talking about the believing community. It's bad enough to judge someone outside the body of Christ (and Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 5 that we shouldn't do it!); but it is even worse to criticize and slander those who are part of the family of God.

We are *brothers* (and sisters). The word itself is formed of two parts that when put together signifies, "from the same womb." As believers, we *are* blood brothers and sisters, purchased by the very blood of our Elder Brother, Christ himself (Hebrews 2:11). The word "brothers" expresses manward what "children of God" expresses Godward.

When Saul was persecuting believers, Jesus stopped him on the Damascus road and asked, "Why are you persecuting me?" When you and I judge others, criticize others, gossip about others, not only are we attacking a spiritual sibling in the Body of Christ, but we are sinning against the Head of that Body, Christ himself.

*To judge a fellow believer is unchristian; it violates my spiritual family.* When a brother or sister is taken in a perceived fault or sin, I should be heart broken. Rather than talking about it, I should weep over it.

### B. It violates the law of love.

Not only is it unchristian. It is unloving. James says:

If you criticize each other and judge each other, then you are criticizing and judging God's law. But your job is to obey the law, not to judge whether it applies to you. James 4:11b

I love how *The Message* translates this verse:

Don't bad-mouth each other, friends. It's God's Word, his Message, his Royal Rule, that takes a beating in that kind of talk. You're supposed to be honoring the Message, not writing graffiti all over it. (The Message)

There are many reasons given in the Bible for not judging one another. But only James mentions that judging others breaks the law. What *law* is he talking about? In the law of the Old Testament, there are many passages that condemn the sin of judging one another. Take for example:

Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people. Leviticus 19: 16 KJV

I will not tolerate people who slander their neighbors. I will not endure conceit and pride. Psalm 101:5 NLT

“To hide hatred is to be a liar; to slander is to be a fool. Proverbs 10:18 NLT

But James is not there referring to the legalistic law of the Old Testament. He’s referring rather to the law of love that has been written on our hearts. He’s already talked about this law that he calls the “royal law” or the “law that sets you free” in chapter 2.

Yes indeed, it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: “Love you neighbor as yourself.” James 2:8 NLT

So whatever you *say* or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free. There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you. James 2:12-13

You and I are commanded to live by the law of love.<sup>vii</sup> But when we slander, criticize and judge, we are violating the law of love. We violate the law of love by refusing to follow the biblical mandate to go the person who offends us or hurts us. We take refuge in our own self-protective measures because we are insecure and afraid of what others will think of us. And when we violate the law of love, we set ourselves up as judges, not only of our brother, but of the law of love itself. But James says that we are not called to judge the law of love, but to obey it.

### **C. It’s unjustified...for only God can judge justly.**

To judge others is unchristian. It is also unloving. But lastly James says that it is *unjustified*, because only God can rightly judge.

God alone, who gave the law, is the Judge. He alone has the power to save or to destroy. So what right do you<sup>viii</sup> have to judge your neighbor? James 4:12

It’s unjustified for you and me to judge others, because we are not “on the jury.” And if you’re not on the jury, you shouldn’t try to reach a verdict.<sup>ix</sup> We are not called to play God in the life of someone else.

John Stott’s words are perceptive. Listen to what he says:

The secret of our relationships with one another in the Christian Church, especially when we have our differences, is “Jesus Christ is Lord.” To despise or stand in judgment on a fellow Christian isn’t just a breach of fellowship. It is a denial of the Lordship of Jesus. I need to say to myself, *Who am I, that I should cast myself in the role of another*

*Christian's lord and judge?* I must be willing for Jesus Christ to be not only my Lord and Judge, but also my fellow Christians' Lord and Judge. ... I must not interfere with Christ's Lordship over other Christians.<sup>x</sup>

I read about a church member who came to his pastor and said, "I have only one talent. But I don't know what to do with it." "Well, what's your talent?" the pastor asked. The man said, "I have the gift of criticism." The wise pastor said this: "Jesus once told a story about a man who had only one talent and went out and buried it. Maybe that's what you ought to do with yours."<sup>xi</sup>

Why should we bury our criticism? Because it is unchristian, unloving and unjustified.

### **III. HOW DO I LEAVE JUDGMENT WITH GOD?**

How then do I leave judgment with God? How do I break the habit of judging others, criticizing and spreading gossip? Let me offer several biblical principles that have helped me.

#### **A. Don't jump to conclusions.**

First, don't jump to conclusions about people's motives. Jesus says,

Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment. John 7:24

God had to remind Samuel of this when David was being chosen as the King of Israel. After all, David was the youngest, probably the scrawniest, and the most insignificant, out lost among the sheep! But God's reminder was, "I don't look at the outward appearance, but at the heart."

You and I often jump to conclusions, just like those clerks in the convenience store, because we don't have the whole picture like God does.

Let me give you some practical suggestions which will help keep you from engaging in this favorite "sport." First, if you find yourself about to pass on some juicy piece of information about someone or about to criticize someone, as yourself these questions:

- **T** – is it true?
- **H** – Is it helpful?
- **I** – Is it inspiring?
- **N** – Is it necessary?
- **K** – Is it kind?<sup>xii</sup>

James tells us to be quick to listen and slow to speak. We must learn to *think* before we speak and this little outline may be helpful.

But what if I'm on the receiving end? What if someone is coming to me offering information about someone else? How do I respond then? Here are some helpful questions helping us to detect gossip or slander. Ask the person...

- Why are you telling me this?
- Where did you get the information?

- Have you gone to the people named?
- Have you personally checked out all the facts?
- Can I quote you if I check this out?

### **B. Deal with the source of slander.**

This tendency to jump to conclusions is not just a tongue problem, it's a heart problem. Jesus said, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." (Matthew 15:19-20, NIV).

On the "Sixty Minutes" news report, there was a story about a widely circulated sensational weekly paper. They interviewed people who were buying the paper at the grocery store checkout counters. "Do you believe what you read in this paper?" the reporter asked. "No," came the reply, "but we like to read it anyway." There is something strangely fascinating about gossip.<sup>xiii</sup> Maybe that's why Spurgeon once said: "A lie can travel half-way around the world, while truth is still lacing up her boots."

Why such fascination? Because of the human heart. We push ourselves up by pushing others down. To read all about the latest infidelity and intrigue among Hollywood personalities, somehow makes a person feel that there's not so bad after all. And while not many of you read the *Globe* or the *Enquirer*, we essentially do the same things with our tongues. And our tongues reflect the state of our hearts.

### **C. Distinguish between essentials and non-essentials.**

Third, *distinguish between essentials and non-essentials*.

In essentials, unity;  
In nonessentials, liberty;  
In all things, charity. Martin Luther

What do I mean by "essentials" and "non-essentials?" Essentials are those doctrines and practices that are clearly taught in God's Word. Non-essentials are those areas where God has left us great liberty to act according to conscience. For example, Paul talks in Colossians 2:16 about three areas where believers have differing opinions: *days*, *diets* and *drinks*. He says, "Don't let anyone judge you by what you eat, drink, or in regard to the Sabbath day." Today we could expand that to include (to stick with the d's!) *dancing*, *drama* and *drums*. These are non-essentials, and in non-essentials there is liberty. When there is disagreement, whose side is God on? Well, the Bible tells us in passages like Romans 14 that God is on *both* sides, as long as there is love and not judgment or criticism of one another.

The greater portion of our judging others and criticizing others is influenced by our own traditions, expectations and "comfort zone," rather than by God's Word. This was the case for Peter who thought his separation from Gentiles was according to God's will, until he received a heavenly vision that showed him otherwise. And this is why, when talking about this very area of judging others, Paul says, "learn from us the meaning of the saying, '*Do not go beyond what is written*.'" (1 Corinthians 4:6). So ask yourself: Is any passing of judgment motivated by clear

biblical distinctions of right and wrong rather than my own personal preferences? Am I “going beyond” what is clearly stated in God’s Word? This leads me to the next word of counsel.

**D. Follow biblical guidelines in confronting another believer.**

*Follow biblical guidelines in confronting another believer about a perceived fault or sin.*

James wraps up his entire epistle with this recommendation:

My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. James 5:19-20 NIV

There is a great difference between a busy-body and a concerned friend, like the difference between a butcher and a surgeon: both cut meat, but for different reasons. You and I are called to be surgeons, not butchers.

We’ve said that the authority to judge resides with God. But in certain cases delegates this authority to judge. He did so with Jesus (John 5:22) and he does so with the Church. When we come to this last verse in James, we’ll talk more about the biblical guidelines for confronting a brother or sister who is in sin.

**E. Remember how merciful God has been to you.**

James 2:13 says, “Mercy triumphs over judgment.” It is said that the Sioux Indians have a prayer that says, “O Great Spirit, let me not judge another until I have worn his moccasins a moon or two.” There is no sin or perceived fault in another’s life that can even begin to compare to the seriousness of our own sin before God. When you are tempted to criticize another person, remember just how merciful God has been to you. Then extend that same mercy and understanding to those you are most critical of. In this way, mercy triumphs over judgment.

There are four frames in an old picture story taken from a Life magazine in the late 1960s. In the first frame you can see a little house in the middle of a wheat field. The sun is going down, and a young boy is wandering out of the house into the cold night. In the second frame you see people racing back and forth through the field in search of the little boy. The attitude among the people is one of panic. In frame three, we see the sun beginning to rise and the people joining hands to walk through the whole field together at the same time. And in frame four you see the father carrying the limp form of his son into the house. Underneath the fourth frame are the only words found in this picture story. The caption read, “If we had only joined hands a little sooner.”<sup>xiv</sup>

This is what James is calling you and me to in this passage. Behind the quarrels and fights in any church is a judgmental spirit. May none of us say, “If we had only joined hands a little sooner.” God calls us to this unity and mutual encouragement *today*.

<sup>i</sup> As seen during Super Bowl XXXIX (2-6-05)Clipped from [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com). Illustration submitted by Richard Kauffman, McDonald, Pennsylvania.

<sup>ii</sup> Leo Aikman in the *Atlanta Constitution*. Date unknown.

<sup>iii</sup> The second word used in this passage is the Greek word *krino*, translated “to judge.” But the Greek word itself translated three different Hebrew words: (1) *sapat*: to judge or to rule; (2) *dyn*: to judge, to punish or to obtain justice for someone; (3) *ryb* “to quarrel” “to carry out a lawsuit.” This already hints at the difference between exercising correct judgment as delegated by God and a quarrelsome criticism or slander that operates outside of God’s approval.

<sup>iv</sup> The NIV translation of 4:11 states: “Brothers, do not *slander* one another.” However, the word “slander” does not translate the word *diabolos* in this verse.

<sup>v</sup> Don’t pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults – unless, of course, you want the same treatment. That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging. It’s easy to see a smudge on your neighbor’s face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, “Let me wash your face for you,” when your own face is distorted by contempt? It’s this whole traveling road-show mentality all over again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your face and you might be fit to offer a washcloth to your neighbor. Matthew 7:1-5 *Msg*.

<sup>vi</sup> Here are several of the key passages in the Bible that speak of the seriousness of slander, criticism and gossip: Lev. 19: 16 “Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people” KJV; Ps 101:5 “I will not tolerate people who slander their neighbors. I will not endure conceit and pride” NLT; Prov 10:18 “To hide hatred is to be a liar; to slander is to be a fool” NLT; Rom 1:29-30 “They are gossips, slanderers”NIV; 2 Cor 12:20 “For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.”

<sup>vii</sup> This law of love is already formulated in the Old Testament and then repeated in the New. Compare Lev. 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Galatians 5:14-15.

<sup>viii</sup> The word order in this verse is best translated: “*You*, who are you to judge...? The you appears first in the sentence. Same as in Romans 14:10 “You and I are the least qualified to judge another’s motives and heart.”

<sup>ix</sup> See Romans 14:4 “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand;” 14:10-11 “You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat;” 1 Corinthians 4:5 “Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.” All from the NIV.

<sup>x</sup> John R.W. Stott in *The Gospel, the Spirit, the Church*. Christianity Today, Vol. 34, no. 14 as clipped from [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).

<sup>xi</sup> Clipped from message “How to Quite Playing God” by Rick Warren, [www.pastors.com](http://www.pastors.com).

<sup>xii</sup> Originally suggested by Dr. Alan Redpath. Clipped from a message by Kely Randolph “Contempt for God’s Court,” [www.sermoncentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com).

<sup>xiii</sup> Interview with Billy Graham in *Christianity Today*, November 17, 1978. Clipped from illustration files Dallas Theological Seminary.

<sup>xiv</sup> Clipped from message by Freddy Fritz, “Do Not Slander One Another” James 4:11-12 at [www.sermoncentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com).