



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

When Christians Play God

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A woman named Linda Pace told how she and her children prayed every morning on the way to school. One day, when she asked her three-year-old if he wanted to pray, he said, “God, please help Sissy not to suck her thumb.” Sissy quickly added her own prayer: “And God, please help my brother to stop reminding me” (Rowell and Steffen 1996, 49).

We humans do seem prone to pointing out the failings of others, don’t we? And, while the tendency is perhaps cute in small children, it is often quite ugly when seen in grown-ups. James provides a snapshot into one such incident, reporting how some who held “the faith in our Lord Jesus” were engaged in “quarrels and fights” because they were pursuing their own desires instead of God’s (Jas 2.1; 4.1–3). To resolve the problem, he challenged them to recommit and humbly submit to God, take sin seriously, and actively repent (4.4–10). But he didn’t stop with general principles. He went on to “make the explicit application to the problem with which he began—the problem of anger, impure speech and judging within the Christian community” (Stulac 1993, 151–152).

Christians with a God Complex

Using another of his fifty-four imperative verbs, James begins with the pointed command, “Do not *speak evil against* [καταλαλέω, *katalaleō*] one another, brothers” (v. 11a). Repeating the

verb two more times in verse 11, he explains his rationale for the injunction: “the one who *speaks against* a brother or judges his brother, *speaks evil against* the law and judges the law.” James was likely aware that *katalaleō*, which means “*attack verbally, disparage*” (Danker 2009, 191), appears multiple times in the LXX in texts that refer to speaking against the divine authority of Moses (Num 21.5, 7), attacking Job’s integrity (Job 19.3), slandering a brother or neighbor (Pss 50.20; 101.5), or speaking against God (Ps 78.19; Hos 7.13; Mal 3.13). Other New Testament appearances of the word are limited to 1 Peter 2.12 and 3.16 which refer to Christian opponents who were speaking against them. The word had a range of meanings and nuances, as evidenced by the different ways it is translated in our text: “speak evil against” (ESV, NRSV), “slander” (NIV), “criticize” (NLT), “malign” (Berkeley), “disparage” (TCNT¹), and “backbite” (Tyndale) (cf. Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 196). Broadly speaking, *katalaleō* “could include destructive verbal attacks, gossip behind another person’s back and false accusations” (Stulac 1993, 152).

It is important to note, however, that, even though he uses *katalaleō* three times in verse 11, speaking against someone was only a symptom of the deeper problem. That becomes apparent in the four uses of the verb “judge” (κρίνω, *krinō*) in verses 11–12. This is an important theme in the letter; James previously used the verb in 2.12 and will use it again in 5.9. In addition, he used the noun “judgment” (κρίσις, *krisis*) twice in 2.13 and again in 5.12, as well as two compound words that have *krinō* at their heart—διακρίνω (*diakrinō*) in 1.6 and 2.4 (where it means “distinction”) and ἀδιάκριτος (*adiakritos*), “impartial,” in 3.17. “Speaking against” others was another form of the same problem addressed in those verses.

Verses 11–12 show why it was a serious problem. In their judging, they were setting themselves above the law, becoming law-givers instead of law-doers (cf. 1.22–25). While James probably had in mind the wider teaching of Jesus here (cf. Moo 1985, 152), his admonition is ultimately rooted again in Leviticus 19 (cf. 2.8–13):

“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” (Lev 19.16–18).

Verse 16 forbids slander and acting against a neighbor’s life. Verse 17 speaks of hating a brother in one’s heart (cf. Jas 4.2). And verse 18 stresses that to engage in such behavior is to fail to practice neighbor-love.

But notice that the commands enumerated in Leviticus 19 are ultimately grounded in the identity and action of YHWH: “I am the LORD” (vv. 16, 18). And that is the real issue with which James is concerned. Unlike other religions and philosophies, where commands against slander also appear, “James’s distinctive lies in his grounding his prohibition in the nature of God rather

¹ TCNT refers to the Twentieth Century New Testament.

than in the character of interpersonal relationships among humans” (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 197). In fact, to presume to act as God is an impossibly futile course, for “there is only one law-giver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?” (Jas 4.12). Like us, our neighbors are beings created in God’s image; and he, not them or us, is the only one who may announce the law that provides for what we need and protects from what will harm us. In daring to judge other people, we arrogate to ourselves the right to decide what those created beings ought to do. But we are not the one who created them. Thus, James is saying that, when we do this, we are in effect guilty of blasphemy.

Letting God Be God

Certain principles follow from James’s teaching here. First, we need to consistently practice the adage that there is but one God—and neither you nor I are him.

Second, we need to underscore and review often the idea illuminated in Leviticus 19 that the way we treat others—and indeed everything in God’s law—is not an arbitrary rule, but an application of a principle that is grounded in the character of God.

Third, while true that “face-to-face rebuke [is] necessary at times,” for “Christians do make mistakes” and should be held to account before God’s law, those necessary censures must be addressed “to their faces” and done “for their good. Backbiting fails at both these points and its results are always damaging” (Hubbard 1980, 99–100; in Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 196 n. 60).

Fourth, even when God permits us to judge, we are not to follow our own preferences, nor “even our personal convictions, but only ... the standards of God” (Nystrom 1997, 254). That requires us to look closely at our hearts and remember that we are susceptible to elevating our views to the level of God’s will. It also requires us to keep looking to the word of God to determine what is necessary and what is optional; that is a search that requires both *breadth* and *depth* of study, focusing on the text and all it says, not selective parts of it.

Finally, it requires us to make the effort to tread lightly in our dealings with others, extending to the other person the space to grow that we hope she or he will extend to us.

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Additional Thoughts on James

“A carefree, ‘devil-may-care’ attitude is typical of those who are ‘friends of the world.’ They live the hedonist philosophy ‘eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die,’ a worldview that ignores the terrifying reality of God’s judgment. But even the committed Christian can slip into a casual attitude toward sin, perhaps presuming too much on God’s forgiving and merciful nature. James’s words in this passage [4.9] directly counter any such attitude. He wants us to see sin for what it is—a serious breach in our relationship with a loving, heavenly father, a breach that, if not healed, can lead to both temporal and spiritual disaster.”

~ Douglas J. Moo. 2000. *The Letter of James*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 195

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