



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

When Christians Play God

James 4:11-12

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Introduction

1. 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 prayer: "And, God, please help my brother to stop reminding me."¹
2. That story is cute, but it reminds us that we are prone to judging the failings of others. And what's cute with children is ugly among adults, as James shows us in chapters 3-4.
 - a. They who held to "the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jas. 2:1) were involved in "quarrels and fights" so serious that James accused them of "murder" (4:1-2).
 - b. They did that because they were pursuing their desires instead of God's will (4:1-3).
 - c. Identifying them as God's enemies and friends of the world, James told them to take sin seriously, repent, and humbly submit to God (4:4-10).
3. What would their repentance look like? 4:11-12 show us.

Body

- I. Christians with a God Complex.
 - A. We see the behavior that concerns James in his command, "do not speak evil against one another" (καταλαλέω, *katalaleō*, 3 times in v. 11).²
 1. This verb, used in varied ways in Scripture, shows the real cause of the fights.
 - a) It's used in the LXX (13 t.) for speaking against the divinely ordained authority of Moses (Num. 12:8; 21:5, 7), attacking Job in his integrity (Job 19:3), slandering a brother or neighbor (Pss. 50:20; 101:5), and speaking against God in the time of the prophets (Hos. 7:13; Mal. 3:13).
 - b) Peter is the only other NT writer to use the word, to refer to persecutors who were bringing false charges against his readers (1 Pet. 2:12; 3:16).

¹ Edward K. Rowell & Bonnie L. Steffen, eds., *Humor for Preaching and Teaching from Leadership Journal and Christian Reader*, 49.

² The first use of καταλαλέω in v. 11, a present imperative with the negative particle μή (*mē*), could be translated "Stop speaking against one another", a rendering that fits the context in James 4.

2. Different translations of James 4:11 show the word's range of meaning: "slander" (NIV), "condemn" (NJB), "criticize" (NLT), "speak evil against" (ESV, NRSV), "malign" (Berkeley), "disparage" (TCNT) and "backbite" (Tyndale).³
 3. To summarize, καταλαλέω "includ[es] destructive verbal attacks, gossip behind another person's back and false accusations."⁴
- B. This behavior was only a symptom of the real problem.
1. This is another example of the judging James has already addressed.⁵
 - a) The verb, κρίνω (*krinō*), is used four times in 4:11-12 and in 2:12 (cf. 5:9).
 - b) The noun, "judgment" (κρίσις, *krisis*), is used twice in 2:13 (cf. 5:12).
 - c) Compound words with κρίνω at their heart appear in 2:4 (διακρίνω, *diakrinō*, "distinction", cf. 1:6) and 3:17 (ἀδιάκριτος, *adiakritos*, "impartial" as a trait of the wisdom from above).
 2. By judging, they set themselves above the law.
 - a) Although he probably would include the wider teaching of Jesus,⁶ Lev. 19:16-18 is the specific law behind James's teaching (cf. 2:8-13).
 - (1) Verse 16 forbids slander and acting against a neighbor's life.
 - (2) Verse 17 speaks of hating a brother in the heart (cf. Jas. 4:2).
 - (3) Verse 18 contrasts such behavior with love for neighbor.
 - b) "[B]y choosing to ignore various commands in the law, especially the law of neighbor love . . . , we put ourselves into the position of deciding which of them we really think ought to be obeyed rather than allowing the law to shape our lives."⁷ We are thus not doers, but judges.
 3. As judges, they were playing God, not submitting to God, daring to judge their neighbors who were also created beings; they were guilty of blasphemy.

II. A Time to Judge and a Time Not to Judge.

- A. James's teaching has led some to charge Christians with inconsistency.
1. Bertrand Russell famously stated the charge in his 1927 essay, "Why I Am Not a Christian." "You will remember that Christ said, 'Judge not lest ye be judged.' That principle I do not think you would find was popular in the law courts of Christian countries. I have known in my time quite a number of judges who were very earnest Christians, and none of them felt that they were acting contrary to Christian principles in what they did."⁸
 2. More often, we hear it from those – outside the church, but also sometimes in it – who protest when an attitude or behavior is condemned as sinful.

³ Some translations use different words *within* v. 11. NIV - slander, speak against; NJB - slander, condemn, speak against; NLT - speak evil against, criticize. In the ESV, the distinction is not as pronounced: speak evil against, speaks against, speaks evil against. NASB (speak against) and NRSV (speak evil against) are consistent throughout the verse.

⁴ George M. Stulac, *James*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, 152.

⁵ For an elaboration of how this theme develops throughout James, see Stulac, 152-153.

⁶ Douglas J. Moo argues that "law" here is the "wider body of teaching focused especially on the teaching of Jesus" (*The Letter of James*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, 152).

⁷ Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 196.

⁸ Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, 15.

- B. We should give some thought to the question of judging.
1. Bertrand Russell cited Matthew 7:1, a famous text echoed in passages like Luke 6:37; Romans 2:1; 14:3-5, 10, 13, 22 – and James 4:11-12.
 2. We should notice that, if all judging is prohibited by such passages, James is guilty, for he judges their behavior and calls for repentance.
 3. Texts like 1 Cor. 5:12-13 (cf. 1 John 4:1) tell the church to do some judging.
 - a) They were to “purge the evil person from among you” as an act of judging “those inside the church” (vv. 12-13).
 - b) They were to do what Paul had already done and “deliver the [sinning Christian] to Satan” (vv. 3-5).
 - c) Verses 9-11 elaborate other offenses that should result in judgment.
- C. Sorting out the apparent inconsistency.
1. Like the English word “judge”, κρίνω had different meanings.
 - a) Sometimes, it means “to judge, condemn, and punish.”
 - b) Sometimes, it means “to approve, distinguish, consider.”⁹
 2. As with any word, the final determinant of the meaning is its context.
 - a) In Matthew 7:1-5, Jesus is clearly talking about something different than Paul has in mind in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13.
 - b) In Romans 14, Paul is talking about matters where there is room for different viewpoints and actions based on personal background, scruples, circumstances, etc. Verse 5, which talks about different ways people “esteemed” (κρίνω, used twice) special days, illustrates the point.
 3. Nystrom’s summary helps.
 - a) “God alone has the right to judge. He is the lawgiver, the author of justice and righteousness.
 - b) “God at times delegates that responsibility. He delegated it to Jesus, and in certain functions he delegates it to us.
 - c) “When exercising this role, however, we serve not as our own agents, but as representatives of God” (Nystrom, 255).
 4. We can illustrate from the area of civil law where policemen daily make judgments as authorized agents of the state, holding people accountable for breaking laws they (the police) did not initiate. Even court room judges act based on what the law requires (or in some cases, allows; hence, they are allowed latitude in “judging”).

III. There Is One God – and He’s Not You or Me.

- A. The most important factor is the principle revealed in v. 12: the way we treat others is grounded in the character of God.¹⁰
- B. 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, 255)

⁹ See David P. Nystrom, *James*, The NIV Application Commentary, 254, for this expression of this point.

¹⁰ “Commands against slander appear in countless religions and philosophies. James’s distinctive lies in his grounding his prohibition in the nature of God rather than in the character of interpersonal relationships among humans. See Giovanni C. Bottini, ‘Uno solo e’ il legislatore giudice (Gc 4, 11-12),’ *SBFLA* 37 (1987): 99-112” (Blomberg & Kamell, 197).

1. That requires us to look hard at our hearts and remember that we are susceptible to elevating our desires to the level of God's will.
2. It also requires us to keep looking at the Word of God to determine what is necessary and what is optional, a search that requires both *breadth* and *depth* that in fact focuses on the text and all it says, not a limited part of it.
3. Finally, it requires us to make an effort to tread lightly, granting the other guy the room to grow that we want others to grant to us.

Conclusion

1. "Most of us are umpires at heart; we like to call balls and strikes on somebody else."¹¹
2. In light of that tendency, we do well to remember the old adage that, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." James reminds us that God gives grace to the humble and that even the problem of wrongly judging others and playing God can be overcome. The question, then, is whether we have submitted and are continuing in humility.

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¹¹ Michael P. Green, ed., *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, 206.