

Do Not Judge Others (James 4:11-12)

Expository Lessons from the Letter of James

I. Introduction and Review

- a. This is an extremely *practical letter* to help Christians who are striving to follow the way of life laid out by Jesus.
- b. In prior lessons, we discussed the well-known passage that explains that both our faith and our works (obedient action on our part) are necessary for us to be saved. We also looked at the great dangers that can come upon us individually and as a church if we do not control what comes out of our mouths.
- c. In the passage we will study today, from the first half of **James 4:11-12**, on judging others, we will look at another important aspect of living the Christian life.
 - i. Once again, let us consider the great extent to which James' teachings are reinforcing and applying things that Jesus taught in the gospels.

II. First, Framing the Discussion that will Follow

- a. **Personal Analogy (from my engineering background): "Pigging"**
 - i. Early in my career (environmental engineering), one of the first things I was involved in designing was a "pig launcher." This rather colorful name is related to designing a pipeline that will carry yucky material. In this case, transporting digested biosolids (a/k/a sewage sludge) through twin pipelines under Boston Harbor to a biosolids processing facility across the harbor, in Quincy, MA.
 - ii. When the pipeline began to clog, we designed a system to insert a "pig" (an inflatable plug with brushes around its exterior) that we would "launch" into the pipeline under high pressure, to scour out all the accumulated you-know-what.
 - iii. Similarly, our spiritual lives and our local church can start to accumulate sinful habits that can eventually choke us out if we do not blow them out occasionally, with strong preaching and teaching.
 - iv. The message that follows is with the picture of that analogy in my mind. So you have been forewarned!

- b. **Question:** In Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, which contains the core of His teachings about the kingdom of God (**Matthew 5-7**), what was the *last specific sin* that He addressed?
 - i. **Answer:** We will provide the answer to that question in the rest of this lesson.

III. Whoever Speaks Evil of or Judges a Brother...

- a. Read **James 4:11-12**.
- b. The issue: Christians *speaking evil of* and *judging* other Christians.
- c. A key term used here is: "law" (Greek word: νόμος / *nomos*).
 - i. It is used four times in this passage.
 - ii. It says that anyone who speaks evil of a brother or judges him, thereby speaks evil of "the law" and judges "the law."
 - iii. **Question:** In this passage, what "law" is this referring to?
 - 1. The Greek word *nomos*, translated "law" here, appears many times in the LXX (the Greek Old Testament) as well as in the New Testament. It means "law/rule/ordinance."
 - 2. It is used in the Scriptures, depending on context, to refer to several different "laws" (depending on context) such as:
 - a. The Law of Moses (the most frequent use, by far); OR
 - b. Civil laws, the laws of the nations.
 - i. For example, the laws of the Persian Empire, in **Esther 1** and throughout that book, in the LXX; OR
 - c. Laws given to us by Christ.
 - i. While some Christians may insist that there are no laws under Christ, the Scriptures actually say otherwise. There are.
 - ii. Some examples of the ordinances handed down from Christ and the apostles, as being referred to as "laws" include:
 - 1. "... Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when *I will make a new covenant* with the house of Israel and with the

house of Judah ...this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put *My laws* in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” (**Hebrews 8:8-10**, NKJV; quoting from **Jeremiah**)

2. “For the *law of the Spirit of life* in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.” (**Romans 8:2**, NKJV)
 3. “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill *the law of Christ*.” (**Galatians 6:2**, NKJV)
 4. “But he who looks *into the perfect law of liberty* and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.” (**James 1:25**, NKJV)
 5. “If you really fulfill *the royal law according to the Scripture*, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you do well....” (**James 2:8**, NKJV)
 6. “So speak and so do as those who will be judged by *the law of liberty*.” (**James 2:12**, NKJV)
3. It seems to me that in **James 4:11-12**, the “law” James says we are breaking when we slander and judge a brother is the law of Christ, the same “royal law” or “law of liberty” he was referring to in **James 2:8-12**, namely that we love our neighbor as ourselves.
- d. When people ask me, “Are we, as Christians, under laws anymore?”, my initial response is that they first need to clarify in what sense they mean “law.”
 - i. If they are asking whether we still need to follow the *Law of Moses*, the answer is an emphatic *no*.
 - ii. On the other hand, there is a different response if they are referring to the *laws of Christ and of His kingdom*.

1. Recall that Jesus rebuked those who believe in him but do not follow his commands as being “lawless” (Greek: ἄνομος / anomos).
 - a. “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice *lawlessness!*’”
(**Matthew 7:23**, NKJV)
- e. With that understanding of how James is using the word “law” in his letter, let us reconsider the meaning of what he has written in **James 4:11-12**.
 - i. “Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law [*referring to the ‘royal law’ identified by Jesus Christ, that we must love one another as ourselves*] and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge [*meaning that rather than following this law of Jesus, you are standing in judgment of it*]. There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?”
(**James 4:11-12**, NKJV)

IV. A Deeper Look at the Prohibition on ‘Judging’ in the New Testament

- a. **Question:** Does this teaching of James, that we must not judge our brothers, remind us of *anything that Jesus taught*?
 - i. **Answer:** This was the last specific sin (of many) that Jesus addressed in both the Sermon on the Mount (**Matthew 5-7**) and the Sermon on the Plain (**Luke 6**).
 1. “*Judge not, that you be not judged.* For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye;’ and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.” (**Matthew 7:1-5**, NKJV)
 2. “*Judge not, and you shall not be judged.* Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.” (**Luke 6:37-38**, NKJV)

- a. These statements do not supersede the other teachings of Christ. However, He makes it clear that if we judge others, it will not go well for us!
 - b. Jesus taught that God will treat us according to how we treat others. If we judge others, He will judge us with the same measure.
 - c. He then goes on to admonish us to remove the plank from our own eye first, so that we can see clearly to remove the speck from our brother's eye.
- b. **Questions to Consider:** How important is this topic for Christians? How important did Jesus and James see it? Do you see yourself, or even our church, as having a problem in this area? Do you come from a family or church culture where people were encouraged to judge and look down on others?
- i. Many of us were encouraged or even trained to judge others, influenced by how we were raised in our families of origin, or by churches we have been a part of.
 - ii. Two groups who tend to judge people, in my opinion, are:
 - 1. Non-religious people, and
 - 2. Religious people.
 - a. Repeatedly in the gospels, we see religious people who were rebuked by Jesus for looking down on or judging others.
- c. Francis de Sales, a French bishop, wrote the devotional classic, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, in France in the early 1600s. In it he addressed a number of sins that were rampant among Christians in his day. Four hundred years later, his insights remain quite relevant to us. His writing shows a deep and practical understanding of the Scriptures, the nature of men and women, temptations, and the strategies of Satan. The following is taken from a chapter entitled "*On Hasty Judgments*."
- i. "'Judge not, and you shall not be judged,' said the Savior of our souls; 'condemn not and you shall not be condemned' (**Luke 6:37**). And the Apostle St. Paul, 'Judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, Who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts.' (**1 Corinthians 4:5**) Of a truth, hasty judgments are most displeasing to God, and men's judgments are hasty, because we are not judges one of another, and by judging we usurp our Lord's own office. Man's judgment is hasty,

because the chief malice of sin lies in the intention and counsel of the heart, which is shrouded in darkness to us. Moreover, man's judgments are hasty, because each one has enough to do in judging himself, without undertaking to judge his neighbor. If we would not be judged, it behooves us alike not to judge others, and to judge ourselves. Our Lord forbids the one, His Apostle enjoins the other, saying, 'If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.' (**1 Corinthians 11:31**) But alas! for the most part we precisely reverse these precepts, judging our neighbor, which is forbidden on all sides, while rarely judging ourselves, as we are told to do."

1. (Source: Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, part 3, chapter 28; Vintage Spiritual Classics, 2002, p. 151)
2. De Sales starts by quoting Jesus (**Luke 6:37**) and Paul (**1 Corinthians 4:5**) to admonish us to *refrain from judging others*.
3. Then he reminds us that we are to *judge ourselves instead*, referring to the passage in **1 Corinthians 11:31**, where Paul warned us to *judge ourselves* before taking the Lord's Supper in order to eat and drink in a worthy manner.
4. De Sales gives two reasons why judging others is so evil:
 - a. First, because judgment has been left in the hands of Christ. By judging others, we are pushing the Son of God off the judgment seat and arrogantly assuming an office that does not belong to us.
 - i. Paul challenged the Christians in Rome, "...why do you judge your brother? ... For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ...." (**Romans 14:10**)
 - ii. James likewise asks the rhetorical question, "*Who are you to judge another?*" (**James 4:12**)
 - iii. Similarly, Paul asks, "Who are you to judge another's servant?" (**Romans 14:4**)
 - b. Second, our judgments are hasty and inadequate. The thoughts and attitudes of the heart are the source of sins. And these areas are shrouded from our view. God can see into the hearts of men; but we only see what is outside. So, we are prone to making wrong judgments.

- i. This reminds me of what the Lord said to Samuel when selecting the future king from among the sons of Jesse (ultimately selecting David after first rejecting his more impressive-looking brothers).
 1. “For man does not see as God sees; for *man looks at the outward appearance*, but *the Lord sees into the heart*.” (1 Samuel / I Kingdoms 16:7, LXX, OSB)
- ii. If you think you can tell what’s in a person’s heart by looking at outward appearances and making assumptions, you will end up being fooled (either by thinking they are righteous or thinking they are unrighteous) a lot of times!
 1. (Personal examples of me misjudging others)
 2. Clothing, family size, church affiliation, etc.
5. Francis de Sales “drops the hammer” on Christians by challenging them:
 - a. The Lord says we *should not judge our brothers*.
 - b. His apostle Paul told us to *judge ourselves*, instead.
 - c. HOWEVER, many Christians end up doing the EXACT OPPOSITE! Instead, they tend to judge others frequently, but judge themselves rarely if ever!
- ii. Later in the same chapter, Francis de Sales describes different types of hearts that readily fall into judging others.
 1. First, those *whose hearts are so bitter and harsh* that they are prone to be critical of almost everyone, and easily fall into the sin of slander.
 2. Second, those who are *prideful and conceited, considering themselves better than almost everyone else*. They exalt themselves by disparaging and looking down on others. Similar to the Pharisee who was praying in the temple, in one of Jesus’ parables:

- a. “Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, “God, *I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.* I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.” And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9–14, NKJV)
 - i. Note, the one who *judged himself* was justified, not the one who *judged another*.
 3. Third, those *who seek to justify their own sins* by looking around to find others doing the same. They then justify themselves by thinking, “Sure, I am guilty of this sin, but *so is everyone else!*”
 4. Fourth, those who *take pleasure in analyzing and dissecting others, “philosophically.”* They *enjoy examining others* and *noticing their faults* (and sometimes, when they occasionally get it right, they become incurably arrogant).
 5. Fifth, those who *judge favorably anyone who likes or favors them*. Conversely, they will automatically *judge critically anyone they personally don’t like*. They show partiality. However, when the flaws of someone they liked finally show up, watch out for their extreme negative reaction!
- iii. **Question:** Do you see yourself, or at least a tendency or weakness, that lines up with *any of these five root causes* that lead people to judge others? To summarize:
1. general bitterness;
 2. spiritual pride;
 3. wanting to excuse your own sin based on what you see in others;
 4. taking pleasure in analyzing others from a distance; or

5. showing *partiality toward those you* like (or who happen to treat you well), and *against those you don't* personally like.
 - a. Regardless of the cause, see how dangerous this is, and uproot it from your life! For some of us, the roots of this go very deep, even back to childhood and our families of origin. This may be hard to change, but it is not impossible! And this is foundational, going right back to the teachings of Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount.
- iv. To help his readers, De Sales then proposes some 'medicine,' practical admonitions to those suffering from this spiritual disease of feeling compelled to judge others.
 1. Those who are afflicted with pride, bitterness, and a critical spirit should "*drink freely from the healing medicine of love.*" Loving others is the greatest healer of these ills and tendencies.
 - a. He said, "If your affections are warm and tender, your judgments will not be harsh."
 - b. De Sales calls us to obey the royal law: to love our neighbor as ourselves.
 2. Strive to be *as charitable as possible*, realizing that we cannot see the hearts of others.
 - a. De Sales points to noble examples in Scripture, such as Joseph with Mary (after he realizes she is pregnant and has no reasonable explanation). He is described as a "just man" who left judgment in the hands of God.
 - b. He also points to Jesus on the cross, who is asking the Father to forgive those who sinned against Him out of ignorance.
 3. *Don't be a busybody*, someone who is preoccupied with things that are none of your business.
 4. *He offers a constructive analogy, taken from bees.* When bees see storm clouds on the horizon, they instinctively return to their hive. In a similar manner, *when we sense a tendency rising up within us to judge others, we should likewise return to ourselves* and refrain from judging others.

V. Are There Circumstances When We *Should* Be Judging Others?

- a. In the New Testament, there are passages that acknowledge certain limited circumstances when some judgments need to be made. Especially regarding those who are leading the church, who need to make judgments.
 - i. In dealing with extreme sin in the church, such as in **1 Corinthians 5**.
 1. “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? *Do you not judge those who are inside?* But those who are outside God judges. Therefore ‘put away from yourselves the evil person.’” (**1 Corinthians 5:11–13**, NKJV)
 - ii. Jesus directed us to confront serious sins in the church, providing judgment and discipline according to the instructions He gave in **Matthew 18:15-18**.
 - iii. In **Revelation 2**, Jesus commended the church in Ephesus for *testing and rejecting false apostles*. On the other hand, He rebuked the church in Thyatira for *tolerating Jezebel*, the false prophetess and seducer.
 1. “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars....” (**Revelation 2:2**, NKJV)
 2. “Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.” (**Revelation 2:20**, NKJV)
 3. So, Jesus commends the church in Ephesus for making proper judgments (about false teachers), while he rebukes the church in Thyatira for not making a righteous judgment (about a false prophetess).
 - iv. Parents, especially fathers, are called to disciple their children. *This requires them to make judgments* regarding what their children are doing, the heart behind it, and the most appropriate manner of discipline. (**Hebrews 12:6-11**)
 - v. In the case of legal-type disagreements within the church, Paul instructs us to bring our disputes before trusted brothers within the

church (rather than to the civil authorities) for judgment, in **1 Corinthians 6:1-6**.

VI. Conclusion

- a. Don't judge others. Don't be a judgmental person.
- b. This is not your job. It belongs to the Lord!
- c. Take stock if you have a problem in this area, and repent if you are guilty of this sin.
 - i. Religious people can be among the worst offenders in this area!
- d. This does not mean that we never, as a church, make judgments. The Scriptures are clear that there are certain situations where judging is appropriate, or even necessary, for the health of the church
 - i. But this is very clearly limited. To be exercised with caution, especially by parents and church leaders.