



The Final Six Messages in the Book of James Series

Dr. Strauss preached his last message on August 15, 2013. He went home to the Lord on September 11, 1993, after an ordeal with multiple myeloma (bone cancer). Because he usually worked six weeks ahead, he had completed the remaining messages in the James series. A booklet of these sermons was produced; the chapters are available at SpiritualGold.org, in separate PDF files for easy downloading.

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Except where otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New King James Bible.

Little Tin Gods

James 4:11-12

Purpose:

To encourage Christians not to criticize each other, or to speak about one another in a disparaging way.

Have you ever tried to play God in someone else's life? That's not a very flattering thing to suggest, but I think most of us have done it at some time or other. I know I have! I tried to tell them what was best for them, as if I knew all the factors involved. I acted as though their preferences were all wrong, as if mine were the only acceptable choices. I tried to tell them which way to go, as if I had a right to direct their lives. We might describe that as playing God. But we're pretty pathetic substitutes for the one true and living God. More like little tin gods!

At no time is our tendency to play God more blatant than when we judge other people. James is about to point that out as he continues to deal with the worldly attitudes with which we Christians struggle. One aspect of worldliness is "the pride of life" (1 Jn.2:16), elevating ourselves in order to get the praise of the people around us. We saw the antidote for the pride of life in James 4:10—"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up." We are to cultivate an attitude in lowliness

before God and He will exalt us at the time and in the manner that He knows is best. And when He exalts us, it will be far more satisfying than any self-exaltation could possibly be.

One of the most flagrant violations of that humility which allows God to exalt us is our detestable inclination to put other people down. Call it what you will—criticism, faultfinding, judging, backbiting, slander, gossip, whatever. It's a sin committed by the haughty and the proud. And the Bible says a great deal about it. If we are going to keep ourselves unspotted from the world, then we will need to overcome it. So we're not surprised that James chooses to deal with it next in his letter.

1. THE PROHIBITION AGAINST JUDGING, 4:11a

"Do not speak evil of one another, brethren." Or more accurately, "Stop speaking evil of one another, brethren." They were already doing it, and James wanted them to stop. It was probably contributing to the wars and fights he described in 4:1. The word he uses here for "speaking evil" (katalaleo) means literally "to talk another down." We would refer to it as running others down, putting others down, or putting others in a bad light. He goes on to write, "He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother..." In other words, he views speaking evil of others as being similar to judging them.

Jesus warned us against judging each other in Matt.7:1-5. He was speaking of a critical spirit, a faultfinding spirit, a negative attitude that picks at others for the things we don't like in them, then accuses them and blames them. It's a preoccupation with their faults rather than their strengths. The Apostle Paul added his admonition concerning judging. "Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things" (Rom.2:1). "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts; and then each one's praise will come from God" (1 Cor.4:5). That

doesn't mean we shouldn't confront sinful actions. In the very next chapter he tells them to discipline an immoral man in the church, and that's a judgment. But we aren't to complain about people's faults, or exaggerate their faults, or needlessly harp on their faults.

Somebody has suggested that "Nothing is easier than faultfinding; no talent, no self-denial, no brains, no character are required to set up in the grumbling business." We may never know how many marriages have been damaged by this kind of critical spirit. We find it difficult to put up with the little idiosyncrasies of our mates, so we pick at them, scold them and try to mold them into a perfect person who always pleases us. And in the process, we drive them away from us. Sometimes they just find other interests to occupy their time and protect themselves from our carping. But sometimes they find other people who accept them for who they are, so they ignore the warnings of God's Word and get romantically involved. Either way, the marriage is destroyed.

But this word "speak evil of" came to mean more than just a critical spirit. It means harsh judgment of somebody who is absent, calculated to lower him in the estimation of others. Maybe the information is true (gossip) and maybe it isn't (slander), but, in either case, it is intended to influence others against the person being spoken about. And in either case, it is sin! The noun form of the word is translated "backbiter" (cf. Rom.1:30; 2 Cor.12:20). And it is interesting that when it appears, it is associated with "whisperings." Now we're talking about the little groups that gather in corners and behind cars on the parking lot and pass on tidbits of information that destroy the good name and reputation of people who are not there to defend themselves.

"Some people's idea of keeping a secret is lowering their voices when they tell it." One writer says, "There are few activities in which the average person finds more delight than spicy gossip; to tell and to listen to the slanderous story—especially about some distinguished person—is for all people a fascinating activity."¹

"Cut it out," says James. It has no place in the life of one who professes the name of Christ. It's interesting to note that Peter uses this verb twice (1 Pet.2:12 and 3:16), both times of unbelievers speaking evil of Christians. Slander is the work of unbelievers, not true Christians. And incidently, James has just warned us to resist the devil (4:7). May I remind you that the word "devil" means "slanderer." The Christian who puts others in a bad light is doing the devil's work for him.

The story is told of Winston Churchill, who in the twilight of his career attended some official function. Two dignitaries were seated three or four rows behind him, speaking in whispers. One said, "There's Churchill. They say he's failing badly." The other replied, "So I've heard. They say he's not only feeble, but growing more and more senile." As Churchill was leaving at the close of the session, he paused, leaned over to speak to his detractors and said, "They also say he's hard of hearing."

I wonder how much of our conversation would be stifled if we knew that the people we were talking about could hear us. That might be a good measuring rod to use when we're tempted to talk about somebody who isn't present. Would I say this if he were here? If not, leave it unsaid. "Do not speak evil of one another, brethren."

2. THE PROBLEM WITH JUDGING, vs.11b-12

James isn't going to leave it with a simple prohibition. He's going to explain to us what's wrong with judging. We can sum up what he says in three simple statements:

a. It elevates us above our brothers (whom we are to love)

Notice how many times James refers to brothers. "Do not speak evil of one another, brothers. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law." All of us who have trusted Christ as Savior are brothers and sisters in the family of God. That means we're all on the same level. No

member of the Body is superior to any other member. All are of equal value and all are equally important to the effective functioning of the Body. "Talking down" would imply that we are above them, and that is not acceptable behavior.

At the end of 4:12, James uses another term. The older manuscripts read, "Who are you to judge a neighbor?" Neighbor! Fellow Christians are not just brothers and sisters, but neighbors. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus identified our neighbor as anyone whom God brings into our lives with a need. And we are true neighbors to them when we meet that need in a spirit of care and concern. We are not to "talk down" to them or about them, but reach out and minister to them in self-sacrificing love. Again, to "talk down" would imply that we are above them.

Denigrating and disparaging other people is a bad habit that begins in the mind. We allow arrogant, critical attitudes to fester in our minds long before we verbalize them. But we can determine what we allow to linger in our minds. That's why Paul told us to think on things that are of "good report" (Phil.4:8). If it has derogatory and defamatory overtones, forget it. Put it out of your mind. Think of something praiseworthy instead. That will lead you to say something complimentary instead of something critical. And the more we practice the Word, the more of a habit pattern it will become. Eventually we will be known for our positive spirit rather than negative.

While we think we are elevating ourselves and making ourselves look good when we talk about the faults of others, we are actually exposing our own shortcomings. Remember what Paul said, "...for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things" (Rom.2:1).

I read an interesting story of a man who was having difficulty communicating with his wife and concluded that she must be getting hard of hearing. So he decided to conduct a test without her knowledge. One evening he sat in a chair on the far side of

the room. Her back was toward him and she could not see him. Very quietly, he whispered, "Can you hear me?" There was no reply. Moving a little closer, he asked again, "Can you hear me now?" Still no answer. Quietly he edged closer and whispered the same words, but still no response. Finally he moved right in behind her chair and said, "Honey, can you hear me now?" To his surprise and chagrin, she responded with irritation in her voice, "For the fourth time, Yes!" His hearing wasn't any better than hers after all.

So judging others elevates us above them, when instead we are to love them. Furthermore...

b. It elevates us above the law (which we are to obey)

"He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge" (James 4:11b-c). What law is James talking about here? Most commentators refer back to the royal law in 2:8, that great summary of all the Old Testament laws dealing with our relationships with one another—"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." We obviously are not going to share some derogatory information about a person and put him/her in a bad light if we are looking out for his best interests as much as our own. If we love them as we love ourselves, then we're going to lift them up, not put them down. We're going to encourage them, not tear them apart.

And if we do put them down, then we disobey the royal law, a law we were meant to obey. And if we disobey that law, we are saying, in effect, that we don't agree with the law, that we consider it a bad law, that our standard is better than the standard of the law. In other words, we elevate ourselves above the law and pass judgment on the law. What a proud, egotistical stance to take. Yet most of us have never realized the position we have taken when we have picked incessantly at somebody's faults, or passed on some juicy, unflattering information about someone. We become judges of God's law. Dear Christian, our responsibility is not to sit

in judgment on God's commands, but to obey them. And obeying God's commands always turns out for our good.

We may not understand how for the present. We may think we're going to do more good criticizing our mates, or our children, finding fault with their performance, putting them down. But it never works out that way. We accomplish a whole lot more by affirming them, encouraging them, commending them, expressing our appreciation to them. We may think we're doing the Body of Christ good by spreading dirt about other Christians, but we are sowing seeds of discord. God wants us to talk to them about their sins, not to others.

In a court of law the judge must know all the facts and then evaluate the evidence impartially. The slanderer, on the other hand, seldom knows all the facts and cares less about uncovering them. "Who are you to judge another?" (James 4:12b). He doesn't want to talk to the accused lest he learn the truth. As a self-appointed judge, he has already handed down his verdict of "guilty." And, as such, he has elevated himself above God's law of love.

This poem by Ruth Calkins caught my eye:

*I spoke to her at the bus stop
But she turned the other way.
My immediate reaction:
A rush of resentment—
She's ignoring me
She really doesn't like me
I've always suspected it
Now I know.*

*Suddenly she looked toward me
Startled, but sincere:
"Forgive me—I didn't see you."
(Until then I hadn't noticed the
agony lining her face)
A hesitant pause
A catch in her voice—*

*"I just came from the doctor's office,
Our little boy has leukemia.
It's all a terrible nightmare."*

*Lord, Lord
What loathsome selfishness.
A mother stricken with grief
Her heart soaked with pain
An hour of black catastrophe
And I thought only of me.
Cleanse me, Lord
Sensitize me
Until my first concern is for others
And my last concern is for me.²
—Ruth Calkins*

Judging elevates us above our brothers (whom we are to love), it elevates us above the law (which we are to obey), and finally...

c. It elevates us above God Himself (who is supreme over all)

The NIV Bible translates 4:12 like this: "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?" That about says it all. When we criticize or malign someone, we not only judge God's law, we judge God Himself, the giver of the law. And in so doing, we elevate ourselves above Him. We imply that we know more than He knows and that our way is better than His way. We play God! When we are nothing but little tin gods.

There is only one true Lawgiver and Judge who stands supreme above all others—only one who has the power to detect every infraction of His laws, and to hold every violator accountable. He alone is able to save or to destroy. "To save" means to deliver from danger and destruction, to rescue from perishing, to heal and restore. Every member of the human race suffers from a sickness called sin. Our inclination to judge others is only one indication of our sinfulness. And the consequences of our sin is eternal separation from God—eternal

conscious punishment. That's the meaning of "destroy"—not to annihilate, but to impose eternal loss.

The Lawgiver and Judge who can save and destroy is the supreme Lawgiver and Judge. Nobody can be elevated above Him. "But you," James adds, "Who are you to judge your neighbor?" God's Word is clear—we have no right at all to judge one another. Let's take the Word seriously. When we are tempted to criticize someone, or to say something derogatory about them behind their backs, let's remember the truth of the Word. We don't really want to elevate ourselves above them, do we? We don't really want to exalt ourselves above God's law of love, do we? And we certainly don't want to imply that we are above God Himself! So let's back off, and then think of something positive and encouraging to say. Because love doesn't tear down. It builds up. Be a builder, not a breaker. Let God do the judging. He's the only one who can do it fairly and justly.

He will judge! You can be certain of it! And He will either save or destroy. The issue will be whether you have admitted your sin and trusted Christ. God is reaching out in love, seeking to forgive and to receive you to Himself. The sin problem separates us from Him, but He sent His Son to pay the penalty for that sin, the penalty that we deserve. He bore our punishment on the cross so He could forgive us and receive us to Himself. Put your faith in God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as your Savior from sin.

¹The Letters of James and Peter," William Barclay, Westminster Press, p.131.

²From sermon by Gary Vanderet, "The Skill of Living Humbly, Cultivating a Faith That Endures," (James 4:11-5:6), No. 3993, March 8, 1987.