

Evil-Speaking and the Lawgiver **James 4:11-12**

Introduction

On first reading the book of James, it reads as a book full of wisdom and yet somewhat disjointed. The more you read and study it, though, the more you start to see that James' letter is less like a collection of wise sayings and more like a musical composition, like a theme and variation or point and counterpoint. In this passage, James returns to some of his themes about the tongue. Remember, this come on the heels of addressing some evident divisions among the audience. Where do wars and fights in a community come from? James teaches that it comes from the envious lusts of our hearts (4:1-5). The antidote is to humble ourselves before the Lord, confessing the envy and demonic wisdom, trusting that He will lift us up. Having done so, there are additional checks that keep Christians from giving way to fights and quarrels and slanderous divisions. In this vein, James exhorts believers not to slander or speak evil of one another.

Evil-Speaking

To "speak evil of" here is sometimes translated "slander" (NIV) or "backbiting" (n., 2 Cor. 12:20). It is the way unbelievers speak about believers to smear their reputation (1 Pet. 2:12, 3:16). Evil-speaking is any sort of speech intended to hurt or cut down another. There are three reasons James indicates for the exhortation not to speak evil of one another. The first is because they are brethren. It is not fitting for brothers and sisters who have all been saved by and now serve the risen Lord Jesus to speak of one another like to speak in this way. It is not a new expectation (cf. Lev. 19:16), but in the new covenant it is utterly contrary to the Christian life (cf. Col. 3:12-15, James 3:9-10). While wars and fights arise out of envy (v. 5), we also know that the untamed tongue will start fires (3:6).

Second, to speak evil of another believer is tantamount to placing yourself over the law. At first, this seems like a bit of a logical jump. But James says that to speak evil of your brother and then to pass judgment over him is also to speak evil of and pass judgment over the law. God's law requires the love of your neighbor (Rom. 13:9-10, Lev. 19:18), and so to speak evil of your brother while then trying to apply other parts of God's law (or some other addition to it) is to act as one not under the law yourself. This is why James explains that to do this means you are not a doer of the law (cf. James 1:19-22).

Third, speaking evil of another believer and then placing oneself over the law also usurps the authority of the true Lawgiver. In your evil speaking and judging your brother, you are essentially claiming to know better than God. You can apply the law (or again your own addition to it) to others but will not submit your own tongue to it. You have placed yourself in the seat of the One who spoke the law. This is directly opposed to the kind of humbling oneself in the sight of the Lord that James calls for (vs. 6-10).

Playing God

Why do we fall into this? We speak evil of one another usually because we are trying to put the other person down. Often it goes along with envy (coveting another's success, or being threatened by it) or with a vengeful spirit (wanting to get another back for some wrong

done, cf. 2 Cor. 12:20, Ps. 15:3). In both these cases, such evil speaking fuels the fights and quarrels that divide Christian communities.

This is easy to fall into also in differences between believers that are not of first importance (e.g., consumption of alcohol, methods of education, methods of medicine, liturgical practices). In all these sorts of things, there are biblical principles and limits that guide our decisions, but there are often multiple faithful options. In Rom. 14:1-4, Paul says that there are those who are able freely to eat all things and those who are weak (whether because of stronger temptations or a more tender conscience) who are more restrictive. Paul warns both sides: "Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat." It is easy to look down on those who do not have the same liberty of conscience as you. "And let not him who does not eat judge him who eats." It is also easy for those who are more conscience bound to try to apply their own restrictions as though they are the law of God. Falling into the temptation to speak evil of others about these things divides communities. This does not mean we cannot or should not discuss these things. But it must be done charitably and without this evil-speaking or passing judgment on the other. If not, according to James, we quickly set ourselves up in the place of God. Since the beginning, we have wanted to play God.

We rarely think of the use of our tongues with such application. When you slander another person or speak evil about them, even in small ways, do you consider that you are usurping the authority of God? We can see these things even with our first parents in the Garden. When Satan comes to Eve, he speaks evil of the Creator, hinting that God was withholding good from His image-bearers. Satan did so, himself seeking to usurp the authority of the Lawgiver ("Did God really say...?"). And Eve, by believing the slanderous lies of the serpent (and thereby herself effectively slandering God), places herself over the law that God had given instead of submitting to it. Additionally, one of the things this shows us is that it is not only evil to slander, but it is also evil to believe slander.

James' warning about judging one another does not mean that brothers cannot confront one another or bring the law to bear (cf. Lev. 19:17, Gal. 6:1). The problem is not in the judging itself. Jesus describes a similar problem in Matt. 7:1-5. You cannot speak evil of your brother and then in any righteous way bring the law to bear. You have a log in your eye. You cannot refuse to love your neighbor (speaking evil of him) and then try to judge him by some portion of the law summarized by the law of love. This is double-minded (v. 8) instead of trusting God and seeking His wisdom (1:5).

Conclusion

James bluntly says, "Do not speak evil of one another." If individuals and communities took this to heart, it would spare many from the raging fires that are ignited by our tongues. How do you do this? Humble yourself before the Lord (again, vs. 6-10). And then bridling your tongue from speaking evil will help to extinguish the sparks. Of course, Jesus is our example for this (1 Pet. 2:22-24). He has given you His Spirit, and the self-control He yields is more than enough to follow Him in this. Further, this is just one more way in which we learn to count it all joy in our various trials, trusting in God's work instead of backbiting.