

The unfolding of your words gives light.

Faith That Works

An Exposition of the Book of James

¹¹Do not speak against one another, brethren^a. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law^b; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it^c. ¹²There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy^d; but who are you who judge your neighbors^{e,f}

^a 4:11 **Do not speak against one another, brethren.** To “speak against” is to slander. The word can also mean “speak evil.” The noun form of this word has been translated “backbiter.” This is what the people did to Moses as recorded in Numbers 21:5 (see also David’s comments in Psalm 101:5). In context (see also 3:9-12), the way you speak about your brothers is an indication of your fellowship with God. Some people make fun of people who are not nice looking or not terribly intelligent. They need to know that we could never call someone to repent of being ugly or stupid, but we should rebuke those who make fun of people. This is what James is talking about.

^b 4:11 **He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law.** This needs some explanation. James is apparently referring to Leviticus 19:16 and other parts of that chapter. Moses told to people to love neighbors instead of slandering them.

I do not think James is speaking of those who dislike the Bible. I think he is talking about those who use it to their own selfish ends. When I become the standard by which others are judged I have supplanted God and his law. Someone who genuinely sees himself, apart from grace, as one worthy of judgment should have no aspirations toward ascending to the judge’s chair over his brother. Attacks on men are attacks on the law of God and the image of God.

The problem is not that our views are wrong. The problem is that we exalt our application of the commands to the same level of the commands themselves. So when I criticize you for the way you dress your daughter or the food you eat or your views of contraception I may be completely right in my opinion and still be attacking God’s word.

^c 4:11 **but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it.** Remember that James calls us to be more than merely hearers of God’s word (1:21-25). Too often the sermons we like best are the ones we know will really put some other sinner in church in their place (or we wish they had been present to hear it).

^d 4:12 **There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy.** Judgment is not only pointing out where the other guy has failed. It is prescribing a sentence. This is the difference between legitimate and illegitimate judging. If I come to you and lovingly call you to turn from a specific sin mentioned in Scripture I am simply a messenger of God’s judgment. If I criticize you for violating the way I apply God’s word or if I pronounce my own sentence on you for violating God’s law, I am illegitimately judging. God will make the ultimate call, which is why Jesus’ landowner in the parable of the wheat and the tares told his workers to wait until harvest to separate the two (Matthew 13:24-30).

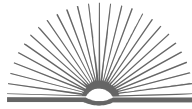
^e 4:12 **but who are you who judge your neighbor.** Certain circumstances require discernment about character and behavior, but we have a direct command to love our neighbors, not judge them (Leviticus 19:18).

^f 4:11-12 Standards are essential. Craftsmen use them. Try building a house when each subcontractor uses a different standard of measurement. Scientists and mathematicians use them. If your two and two does not make four we cannot get together and build a safe bridge. Likewise you want accurate standards when you are buying meat or gasoline. So when James

James 4.11-12
Steven Svendsen, Sr.

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speaks of judgment here he is speaking of standards. He is saying the same thing Paul taught the Corinthian church:

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? 1 Corinthians 4:5-7

Do not think we have left the subjects of leadership and humility. James is talking here about sinful judgment, a clear mark of pride that makes our preferences the standard by which others should be judged.

We have learned from James since the beginning of chapter three that God's kind of leaders care more about character than titles. In other words, good leaders are not the standard; they *teach* the standard. This is why James speaks of judgment here immediately after speaking of humility. Humble people cannot be negative and critical toward others. They are hard to offend because they have a great respect for God's straight standard and a great awareness that they are crooked. Steps that should keep you from judging people:

1. Make sure you have your facts straight. I legitimately associate this statement with this text because of the word "judge." Scripture commands us not to make judgments without sufficient evidence (Deuteronomy 19:15). Sometimes patience will reveal the rest of the story, save us from embarrassment and most of all honor God. God holds you accountable not only for the way you treat others but also for the way you think about others.
2. Remember that the person you are criticizing was created in the image of God. Anger toward others is rarely righteous and may be murderous (Matthew 5:21-22). We are even prone to judge people because they were not gifted with beauty or intelligence. Proverbs 31 says charm and beauty are deceitful and vain. Charm and beauty can cover up the heart and do not last. Just ask Samson.
3. Do not "exceed what is written." We get into trouble when we elevate our application of God's word over the word itself. You, your likes and your dislikes are not the standard by which others must be judged.
4. Remember your own failures. Admit that you also fail to measure up next to the real standard. Remember that you and the sinners around you need to be rescued.

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