

Wisdom and Warnings: The Book of James

Watch What You Say!

James 4:11-17

Mark Vroegop

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor? Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So, whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.(James 4:11–17)

Wisdom and warnings. That's what James 4-5 is all about.

These final two chapters move back and forth between instructions designed to highlight the path of wisdom and passages with additional warnings about how to live in a world filled with all kinds of evil. This is one of the many reasons we love the book of James.

It's practical. It's punchy. It's convicting. And in that way, it's incredibly helpful. James lives where we live.

Last week Brad helped us understand the invitation to experience the grace of God by submitting to God, resisting the devil, pursuing God, and repenting of sin.

In our text today, James 4:11-17, James returns to the subject of our words. If you've been tracking with this series, you will probably remember that we've covered this topic before—actually multiple times.

The hardship and difficulties experienced by these Christians were highlighting important areas of growth. The pressure was surfacing issues that required the application of their faith in new ways.

I'm sure you resonate with this. I certainly do. Hardship and testing are hard, not just because they are difficult, but also because of the challenging issues that surface when we are pressed.

One of my favorite illustrations around this subject is the "Bump the Beaker" story. Some of you may have heard me share an illustration that I heard from John Piper years ago. Namely that our lives absent of suffering look clean and pure because the sediment on that bottom lies undisturbed. But when you

bump the beaker, the sediment is released. It's a helpful illustration. At the beginning of 2020, we gave each of our staff members a small vial which I then invited them to fill with some oil and food coloring. I wanted it to be a reminder of what our lives are like relative to suffering. I smile now, looking back, because the vial was much too small!

Hardship shows us things that are hard to see.

And among all the issues that emerge, there two that we find in our text today related to the issue of pride: evil words and presumptuous words.

When our beakers get bumped, you'll often find that pride surfaces in our words in how we talk about others and how we talk about the future. In other words, we need to watch what we say.

Let's look at these two categories to see what we learn today and how the gospel speaks into these two problem areas.

Evil Words

I think we all know that evil words lie in our hearts. But hardship tends to cause them to surface. What's more, the pressure of difficulty makes it easy to justify evil words.

James has a lot to say about our words. Early in our study, he made a direct connection between the validity of a person's religion and how we handle issues related to the tongue.

- In 1:26 he said, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless."
- In 3:6 he said, "The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness...setting on fire the entire course of life and set on fire by hell."

And then in chapter four, James turns to evil words specifically in the context of the community of faith. In verse one, he addresses the question about where quarrels and fights come from. Apparently James sees controversy and quarreling happening in the church, and he attempts to address the source of these conflicts as it relates to misguided motivations.

James continues that theme but he moves from motivations to manifestations—specifically, evil speaking.

The challenge here is that we all know evil speaking is wrong and sinful. We know we shouldn't do it. But the circumstances, pain, or conflict cause us to "go there" anyway. So, this section is helpful, perhaps not in making us aware that evil speaking is wrong, but in having a better understanding of what it is so that we can fight against this prevalent sin issue.

Let's look at two questions here: (1) What is evil speaking? and (2) Why is it sinful?

What Is Evil Speaking?

Verse 11 says, “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.” The Greek word is a combination of the word for speak and the word that means to oppose, be against, or contrary to. The ESV translation is spot on: speaking evil. It’s interesting that other translations render the word as “slander” (NIV) and “criticize” (CSB).

Commentators tell us that this is speaking maliciously or with the intention of harm. It’s often associated with false accusations or attacking the name and reputation of someone. It’s helpful to see how the word is used in other places in the Bible. Sadly, our humanity and the people of God have a long story when it comes to evil speaking.

- The first temptation in the Garden of Eden involved Satan slandering God: “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God. . .” (Gen. 3:4).
- In Numbers 21:5, the people of Israel spoke against Moses and against the Lord when they were tired of manna and found themselves hungry.
- The psalmist (in Ps. 101:5) sings about God’s destruction of those who slander in secret.
- First Peter 2:12 anticipates the world slandering Christians and that is why they’re commanded to “keep your conduct honorable.”
- Slander makes the list of the things that characterize our collective rebellion against God that is in Romans 1:30.
- Paul writes to the church in Corinth expressing concern that their church is marked by quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.

A survey of the Bible, and even life itself, would surface many examples of evil speaking. In fact, it might be safe to say that it is surprising when we don’t find evil speaking because of how pervasive and common it is.

In the context of James, the evil-speaking was happening between believers. Commentator Doug Moo writes: “James is referring to personal attacks and slanderous accusations—the kind of inner-church debates that too often degenerate into name-calling and even the questioning of one another’s Christian convictions.”¹

I’m sure you know what this looks like, and I’m sure you’ve participated in it at some level. It’s so easy to do. We create labels and put people in them. We make suggestions to cast doubt on the motivations of others. We relay information (perhaps even true) that is designed to hurt people. It happens all the time.

Why Is it Sinful?

¹ Douglas J. Moo, [*James: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 193.

Now, this doesn't mean that we never talk about negative things. Nor does it mean that every controversy is necessarily sinful. However, it does mean that our posture in talking about people is not coming from a place of pride and judgment. That's the key. And that's what makes it so hard and why it's so wrong.

Evil speaking put us in a position that we're not designed to have. James Denny says, "The natural man loves to find fault; it gives him at the cheapest rate the comfortable feeling of superiority."²

James applies this superiority logic to issues related to the law in verses 11-12. Remember that James is writing as a Jewish pastor to Jewish Christians. The Old Testament law was not only highly revered as instructions for life, it was rightly regarded as the voice of God speaking into the world. It's the standard for what is true and right.

With that in mind, look with me at verses 11b-12.

First, we see that the person who speaks against or judges a brother, speaks against and judges the law. This means that the evil-speaking person sets himself creates a condemnation that can only come from the law. The evil speaker becomes his own law.

Secondly, James argues that in judging the law you are no longer a doer of it. It's not just that you are a law to yourself, it's that you take on a role that isn't right. Evil speakers act as if they are above the law.

Third, verse 12 points to God's role. He's the one lawgiver and judge. He alone has the power to save and to destroy. To speak evil about your brother is to take the role of God. That's why James says, ". . . who are you to judge your neighbor?"

Evil speaking happens so fast! And it's so common. But when we do it, we put ourselves in a position in relationship to God that isn't right. Kurt Richardson writes:

...In slandering another, believers slander the law of God; when believers judge another, they judge God's law...Believers should accept the law of God, but this law requires them to exercise mercy toward others since they have received and are putting their hopes on the mercy of God. Slander, then, offends not only the brother and constitutes judgment against him but also offends the law and constitutes judgment against it. In both cases the slanderers have placed themselves in a superior position. They are putting themselves in the place of God, whose mercy they themselves require.³

Did you hear the word "mercy"? The gospel should liberate Christians from evil-speaking. Why? Because we know and understand how much grace we have received. We know our failings. We can only guess about the failings of others. Evil speaking blows right past how much grace we have been given.

² Quoted in Pastors and their Critics, p. 60

³ Kurt A. Richardson, [James](#), vol. 36, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 195.

But it also puts us in a position of judgment. And those who have been covered by the blood of Jesus are grateful that a gracious God is their judge. Therefore, why do we act as if we are God when we've received so much mercy?

That's the problem with evil words.

Presumptuous Words

The second expression of pride or arrogance relates to words spoken without consideration of the limitations of life. To be clear, the words are not the only problem. The bigger issue is our place in life.

To make this point clear, James uses an example from business or the marketplace. Verse 13 would be something really common to say: "Come now, you who say 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.'" It's how life is normally talked about.

We make plans. We look to the future. Frankly, it's how commerce and business work. You anticipate needs and evaluate the best way to make a profit. It's how the markets work.

But verse 14 delivers a stinging rebuke. He bursts the bubble of their planning: "...yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring." James reminds them that life is far more uncertain than we realize. He rebukes his readers for the arrogance of living as if there is no uncertainty about the future. The presumptuous words are just another example of the self-deception that can often characterize our lives. With slander, we talk as if we are above the law. With presumptuous words, we talk as if we're above the sovereign plan of God.

To make this even more specific, James reminds us about the nature of our lives. He says, "What is your life? For you are mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (14b). Not only are we limited in our ability to predict and understand the future, but our lives are far more temporary than we care to admit. That's why he uses the imagery of a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

The illustration is powerful. It's designed to offset our arrogant tendency to assume that we are more in control of our lives than we actually are. In our words and in our actions, we can act as if we are ultimate and more powerful than we really are.

I don't know about you, but I think this is one of the biggest lessons that we must learn from the last year. The entire world changed almost overnight with the global pandemic. I knew nothing about pandemics before 2020. And I would have never imagined how instantly life can change. It's humbling, isn't it? It makes you realize how vulnerable we really are. Its causes us to feel our humanity in ways that are really uncomfortable.

That's why we've been so easily frustrated and angry. It's our attempt to regain control of the uncontrollable. But the global pandemic only showed us what was true all along – that our lives are far more tentative than we care to admit.

That's why James says, "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord will, we will live and do this or that'" (v. 15). This statement is more than just a convenient, spiritual tagline to add to our plans about the future. It's a philosophy of life. It's a theological orientation that puts our lives in the right place under the divine rule of God.

James is not merely suggesting that you need to add "Lord willing" to everything you say. That might be helpful and right to do at times. But he means that there needs to be an over-riding mindset where you know your place in the world. Christians should know and understand who they are in light of God's sovereign power.

The conclusion that James offers in verses 16-17 is stark and clear:

As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So, whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin (James 4:16–17).

James returns here to the main issue at hand: living arrogantly.

We know better. No one really thinks that their life is anything more than a mist. But we live and talk as if we are stronger and more powerful than we really are. James is concerned here about the pattern of simply forgetting who you are in light of who God is.

Evil words and presumptuous words reflect the same core issue: a wrong understanding of who we are. So, how does the gospel help us? How does the news that Jesus saves sinners by his death and resurrection affect these issues?

First, the gospel tells us about our rightful place in the created order. It reminds us that God is the sovereign and holy ruler over everything. The gospel humbles us by showing us who we really are.

Secondly, the gospel transforms us by the gift of God's grace. Because of Jesus, we receive mercy. Everything is a gift from God. Nothing we have is earned or independent of God's kindness. The gospel graces us by giving us what we don't deserve.

Third, the gospel changes how we live. If we have received the mercy and grace of God, then it directly affects how we view other people and our future. The gospel changes how we talk about others and the future because we see everything through the lens of God's grace.

The cross is that powerful! It has the power to transform what we say about others and the future.

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