

**WHEN YOU SPEAK AGAINST A BROTHER**  
**JAMES 4:11-12**

**INTRODUCTION:**

The news carried the story of some tragic deaths due to "friendly fire" this week. A navy jet in a training routine dropped a bomb on some American personnel and Kuwaiti's. The outcome was a tragic thing - the death of several people. "Friendly fire" has always been a danger in military operations. In this situation, you have those who are on the same side militarily destroying each other.

My friend, Ron Dunn, has written a book about "friendly fire" in the Church. It is his observation after many years of effective ministry that God's people are often guilty of destroying each other with "friendly fire." This is a part of what James has in mind in this admonition. Actually, the Greek structure would lead us to translate it "Brothers, stop speaking against one another." The tense of the verb indicates that they were already in the habit of speaking hurtfully against one another, but James is urging them to stop. The word that he used "speak against" has been translated in several different ways. The NIV translates it "slander one another." In his new paraphrase The Message, Eugene Peterson renders it "bad-mouth each other." The root idea of the verb is to speak against or to speak down to one another. There are a number of ways that a Christian can do this. My list is not exhaustive but it suggestive.

The word includes finding fault with another person. This fault that you find is shared in speech. It is most likely shared with out the person being present. It could also be

translated "to speak disparagingly." In this case, you would be calling into question the worth and the value of the person. You would be acting as their judge.

It is also inclusive of the idea of gossiping maliciously. All of us know about gossip. One Christian writer has wisely declared: "Gossip is a deadly form of violence—it damages our own spirits, builds a climate of suspicion and mistrust, and injures the other persons reputation without his being able to defend himself." The damage done by gossip is incalculable when you consider the history of the church. It is so common in our contemporary society that it has almost become an accepted way of life.

Did you hear about the three pastors who went on a fishing trip together and decided to do some personal confession while they were there? One of the pastors confessed, "I confess that I have dipped into the collection plate on occasion. I've been guilty of misappropriating some funds." The second pastor said, "I confess that I have been having an affair." The third pastor confessed, "I want to confess to you that I am a gossip and I can hardly wait to get home." For every thief in the room, we probably have a dozen gossips. Here is a text that declares to us that all such use of speech must stop.

Another translation translates the word "defame." That appears to be a very helpful word. Defame is the opposite of fame, so when you defame a person you are tearing down their reputation instead of giving them fame, building it up. As I have already reminded you the NIV translates it "slander." Slander is an ugly word. When you slander a person you are knowingly and intentionally tearing that person down. The thing that you are telling may be partially true, but you are telling it with the intention of hurt. This is the thing that

James is condemning in our text. He is saying that all such use of the tongue must cease. It is unbecoming among persons who are brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. You have already noticed that these words are addressed to "brothers." We are family. In the family we do not speak against one another.

In order to support this negative admonition James puts before us two profound truths. He so states the truths that you might miss the force of them if you do not think them through carefully. Let's make sure that we understand what James is saying so that we will understand the seriousness of speaking against one another.

### **I. YOU ARE JUDGING THE LAW OF GOD.**

This is the first supporting truth that James states: "Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it." A careful look at these words of James will indicate two different aspects of this sitting in judgment upon the law of God.

#### **1. You are treating the law as unworthy of your obedience.**

In understanding this statement by James we need to consider what he means by "law." Is it a reference to the Old Testament Law as a body of revealed truth? Or, could it be that it is a reference to the "royal law" that he referred to in the second chapter? You will remember that the "royal law" is the law of love--"Love your neighbor as yourself" (James 2:8). This royal law is applicable to every one of us. It is obvious that when you speak against a fellow Christian you are not acting lovingly. The point that James is

making is that you are not only giving love to your Christian brother, but either knowingly or unknowingly, you are judging that royal law. By your actions you are declaring that the royal law is beneath you. "It is unworthy of my obedience, I am above it. While it might be a good law for you, it is not a good law for me. It is better for me to be able to say what I want to say about you whenever I want to say it."

Now, I doubt that is a thoughtful conclusion that you have reached logically whenever you engage in gossip. But this is where you are! You are choosing to ignore, or better to put yourself above the most basic and fundamental principles that God has laid down--- "Love one another." We do not gossip, or slander, or bad mouth, or speak disparagingly, of people that we love. Whenever you hear me speaking against another person, you can immediately know that I do not love that person. Love will speak no ill toward the person that it loves.

2. You are ignoring the purpose of the law.

James continues his application of this point when he writes, "When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it." Have you considered why God gave us these wonderful principles of life? Why did God give us the royal law? Why did God say to us, "Love one another as I have loved you?" Was it so that we might have a standard by which we could measure each other and judge each other, or was it because we needed a standard by which to judge our own behavior? The answer is obvious. James says that when we pass judgment upon the law we are not "keeping it." God gave us the law so we could observe it. God gave us the law so we can live it out in the relationships

of life. When we use it as a standard by which to condemn our fellowman we have been guilty of abusing the law.

So, the first truth that we need to realize is that when you speak against a brother, you are judging the law of God. And we need to keep in mind, that God will use His law as a basis for judgment for us when we stand before His awesome White Throne. It is important that our relationship to His principles of life be one of obedience and not one of abuse.

I think you will agree that none of us know enough to judge or criticize another person.

Surely the unknown poet was right who wrote:

Pray, find no fault with the man who limps

Or stumbles along the road,

Unless you have worn the shoes he wears,

Or struggled beneath the load.

There may be tacks in his shoes that hurt,

Though hidden away from view,

Or the burden he bears, placed on your back,

Might cause you to stumble too.

Don't sneer at the man who's down today,

Unless you have felt the blow

That caused his fall, or felt the shame

That only the fallen know.

You may be strong, but the still the blows

That were his, if dealt to you  
In the selfsame way at the selfsame time,  
Might cause you to stagger too.  
Don't be too harsh with the man who sins,  
Or pelt him with words or stones,  
Unless you are sure, yes, doubly sure  
That you have not sins of your own.  
For you know, perhaps, if the tempter's voice  
Should whisper as soft to you  
As it did to him when he went astray,  
'Twould cause you to falter too.

## **II. YOU ARE USURPING THE ROLE OF GOD.**

Without doubt, this is the most serious thing that James says in the passage. "There is only one law giver and judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy. But you—who are you to judge your brother?" Whenever we speak against, or slander, or hurtfully malign a brother, we are putting ourselves in a place that belongs only to God. We are acting like we are God to that person and not a brother. We are denying that we shared their humanity and are declaring that we are in some way uniquely suited to be their critic and their judge.

1. God alone has the wisdom to establish the law.

In these words, James gives us some wonderful insight into the nature of God. When he declares, "There is only Lawgiver," he is setting forth something unique about the one

God. There is only one being in this universe that has wisdom enough to establish the principles of life by which the human beings that He has made should live. This One Being is the eternal God. None of His creatures, not even the angels, have insight and wisdom enough to know what is right and what is best for the human beings that God has put on this planet. Do you see how presumptuous it is when you put yourself in the role of a lawgiver or legislator, to your fellowman? By your actions, you are indicating that you feel that you have wisdom enough, insight enough, judgment enough to determine what is right and what is wrong for your fellowman. God takes offense whenever any mortal man usurps the place that belongs only to Him. He desires to be acknowledged and worshipped as the only rightful, all wise lawgiver, legislator, of the universe. God has made known in the words of Holy Scriptures what He has wisely established as the law for our lives. In His wisdom, He established as the first of these laws that are to govern our relationships to each other -- "Love one another as I have loved you."

2. God alone has the power to administer the law.

In the second part of our verse, James declares: "There is only one judge, the one who is able to save and destroy." This is a truth that must never be forgotten--He is the only one who has the authority and the power to be the judge of all men. This one who has the power is none other than God Himself.

This includes the truth that God alone has the discernment to know who is guilty and who is innocent. In His omniscience, He knows everything—even which one of us deserves judgment and which one of us do not deserve judgment. With our limited understanding

of even what we see with our own eyes, we would make terrible misjudgments if we had the power to administer it.

Things are not always what they seem to be. I have tried to caution myself in recent years to never pass judgment on what I see until I have heard the whole story. The truth is — we never hear the whole story while we are on this earth. What we hear from each other is our perception of the whole story. I remember some years ago when we were still in Fort Worth, the experience of being an eyewitness to a murder. While Alice and I were driving home one Saturday evening through the north side of Fort Worth, we saw a woman shoot a man with a gun. It happened at a stoplight on N. W. 28th Street in Fort Worth. Both of us knew what we had seen. We had seen a woman take a gun out her purse, point it at a man, pull the trigger, and fire it. We had seen the man crumble to the pavement from the force of the bullet. Sometime later, the man was shoved from a car onto the pavement at the county hospital, where he bled to death. Our perception of what happened was that this woman had killed this man in cold-blooded murder.

However, when the police got her side of the story, her act took on a completely different perspective. They had just left a local bar on the north side, and the man had abused her physically and verbally in public in the bar. They were not strangers to each other. Instead, he was her live-in abusive man friend. He had driven her to the point of despair where she saw shooting him as the only way out. When it comes to knowing everything that is involved in any act, even that which I see with my own eyes, we are not qualified

to be judges. Only God can know what was in the person's heart, why they did what they did, and what their intentions were at the moment.

Furthermore, God is the only one who had the power to impose the penalty for breaking the law. He is the one who has the power to save and to destroy. This is a consistent claim of scripture from both the Old and the New Testament. One of the unique things about God as the judge of all the earth is that He has the power to do what ever the circumstance may require. If a person needs to be healed and delivered God has the power to do that. If the person needs to be consigned to destruction, He has the power to do that. Indeed, as Jesus said, He has the power to cast the person both body and soul into the lake of fire forever. Do you see how puny our acts of judgments look in light of the power that belongs to God? It is never a light thing when a human being presumes to play God. That is what we are doing when we are using our tongue to destroy another person with malicious criticism, with gossip, with disparaging put-downs, with bad mouthing them, with doing hurtful things, with words, we are doing something that only God has the right to do.

The question with which James closes this paragraph is probing—"But you - who are you to judge your neighbor?" The answer is obvious. Instead of judging our neighbor, we along with our neighbor are subject to God's judgment. What our neighbor needs is a brother who will help him get ready for the day of judgment — not a malicious critic that will make his life more difficult as he moves toward that final and eternal day of judgment. So, the two truths are there for us — one, when you speak against a brother,

you are judging the law of God. Second, when you judge a brother, you are usurping the role of God. Now, if you find yourself sensing guilt in light of this text, what would you do? The only answer to overcoming the inclination to be critical and judgmental is love. And the secret of love is in the Holy Spirit who lives in you. The only way your tongue will ever begin to speak differently is for it to come under the control of the Spirit of Love who lives in you. The very first fruit of the Spirit is love! So you need not only to say to God, "Forgive me Lord, I am a gossip!" You need to go a second step and say, "Holy Spirit, fill me so much with your love that the words that come out of my mouth will build my brother up and not destroy him!"