

## The Danger of Playing God

Satisfied-Part IV

*James 4:11-12*

I never signed a card or filled out a subscription, but for some reason Forbes Magazine began showing up in my mailbox unannounced. It came for several months and then stopped just as quickly. The feature article began with the words, “We are fascinated by power. We stand in awe of those who apply it adroitly” I had to look that up which is probably not a good sign relative to this list. It means skillfully. “We stand in fear of those who abuse power. We lust for power. Everyone would rather be a hammer than a nail. The people on this list of the most powerful people on this list were chosen, because in various ways, they bend the world to their will.”

The article’s subtitle reads: There are 6.8 billion people on the planet. These are the 68 who matter.<sup>i</sup>

The article went on to provide bios on each of these people—heads of state, religious leaders and even criminals who run global crime syndicates. They made the cut because of the vast number of people they directed or the amount of money they had deposited in the bank or invested in Wall Street.

I couldn’t help but wonder how many men and women would look at this list of 68 and think, “Man, that’s where I want to be.”

I wonder how many bought the not-so-subtle message, “If you really want to be satisfied in life imitate this list.” Become like one of the 68.

Never settle for being a nail; make sure you’re the hammer. You call the shots . . . you put people in their place. And don’t ever forget,

their place will always be beneath you in status, or importance, or value.

Satisfaction means you finally become king of your mountain. You’ve just extended this list from 68 people who matter to 69, which brings up your primary obstacle to becoming number 69—other people!

If it weren’t for other people, you’d be number one. You’d be the class valedictorian too or salesman of the year or first string. Other people are in your way.

So how do you deal with other people who stand between you and the place of satisfaction you so deserve and long for?

There is one way. It happens to be a method used inside the church as adroitly as outside the church.

It is the ability to put people in their place verbally.

You learn to hammer with the tongue; to bend the world to your will by talking the most, the loudest, and the most defiantly.

In fact, I’ve watched this nature played out as instinct in little eaglets. I mentioned some time ago a live web cam attached to the top of a tree, focused below on a nest containing three eaglets only recently hatched there in the Norfolk Botanical Garden.

My wife and I check in on it every day now. We were looking at it the other day as the female stood on the edge of the nest and tore off bits of fish to feed the eaglets. You could just see their fuzzy little heads bobbing back and forth as they raised themselves up to get the tidbits from their mother’s beak.

And there's already trouble in the nest. The first one to hatch is stronger and already bigger than the other two. And when the mother first begins to feed, he literally pecks and wrestles his siblings into submission until they back down and he alone is there with beak raised up to get the fish. When he's satisfied, the others finally get to eat.

He evidently matters according to Forbes definition. He bends his world to his will.

We as human beings learn to hammer others into submission by maneuvering and conspiring, by slandering and gossiping, by whittling down your competitors character, and by dropping hints or suggestions. We are all by nature, fallen nature, skilled at this.

But according to God's standard, which we'll see again in a moment, those who are the most skilled at it are not necessarily the people who matter most.

In this larger nest called the church they may not matter at all in the progress of the gospel and certainly not to the glory of God. So, let's find out what matters to God.

Now, if you were with us in our last session, we expounded on nine imperatives from the letter of *James*, found in *chapter 4*.

I confused everybody with my outline when I bundled all nine imperatives into only four points, which evidently didn't help.

Well, since the text is inspired and my outline is not, let's get a running start and I'll point out the imperatives as they appear in the text.

These are nine imperatives—literally commands from the Spirit of God through James after which you could write an exclamation point; let me encourage you to do that right now.

Beginning at *verse 7*, the nine imperatives we looked at were:

1. Submit therefore to God!
2. Resist the devil!
3. Draw near to God! (v.8)
4. Cleanse your hands!
5. Purify your hearts!
6. Be miserable! (v.9)
7. Mourn!
8. Weep!
9. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord! (v.10)

Today we come to the final imperative. We'll spend our time looking at this one imperative alone, although I do have three points for this one. Last time I had nine imperatives and four points; today I have one imperative and three points, because I enjoy confusing you. No, I'll try to make it clear.

Some have called this final imperative in the list, the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment of James.<sup>ii</sup>

It's found in *verse 11. Do not speak against one another brethren!*

**Do not speak against.** The compound verb literally means, "don't speak down on." In our modern vernacular we'd paraphrase James to say, "Don't run somebody down."<sup>iii</sup>

Various translations put it, "don't criticize; don't speak evil against; don't malign; don't disparage; don't backbite."<sup>iv</sup>

All of them excellent translations of this compound Greek imperative that carries the nuance of running somebody down.

The verb refers to critical and derogatory speech that is maliciously intended to influence others against another.<sup>v</sup>

And would you notice that James is clearly talking about Christians. Three times in *verse 11* he refers to *brothers* or *the brethren*.

He's not saying, "Listen, you know how bad the world is out there about all this—stepping on each other in order to improve their own reputations, cutting people down to feel better about themselves, creating sides, slandering a teacher or leader to build their own following, or simply to give their own opinion—listen, brethren, you need to tell people out there to stop doing that to each other out there!"

No, James is writing to the brethren about what happens in here.

In fact, to make this text all the more convicting, whenever a present tense imperative is negative, the writer uses it to tell his audience to stop something they are already doing.<sup>vi</sup>

James is actually saying, "Stop it." The believers in the first century had the same problem believers have in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Stop running each other down.** He knows that whenever any assembly, in any generation, hears this imperative, they will all stand convicted—some more than others—but all to one degree or another.

Part of the problem is that most Christians believe it's okay to say something derogatory about someone else as long as it is true. If it's true it isn't gossip. If it's true it's not slander. I mean if it's true it's—well—you-need-to be aware of it.

We have come to believe that it is almost a moral obligation to pass along information about someone else, so long as it is true.<sup>vii</sup> No matter what it does to that person's reputation or character.

James isn't drawing a distinction on whether or not the information is true. He doesn't say, in **verse 11**, "Stop speaking against one another *if the information is false! Get it right . . . than you can share it with others!*"

Since the context would include a local assembly of believers, more than likely the information being passed along is true.

And to make matters even worse, when James writes the words, "**against one another**" he is telling us that both sides are at it.

They're going back and forth. There's no innocent party here. They are all engaged in a battle of words. No one is being helped and everyone in some way or another is being hurt.

There's an old folktale I've read about that originated in a forest up in Canada's Northwest Territories. The tale is about a small pack of porcupines who were trying to survive a terrible snowstorm. They were huddling together to stay warm as the winter winds blew fierce and cold. But because their bristles were so sharp, the closer they tried to huddle the more they pricked each other, which caused them to move away from each other. But before long, they would begin to shiver as the icy blasts of arctic winds increased, which forced them to shuffle back together again. Throughout the long winter night, this strange dance of the porcupines continued to repeat itself. The moral of the story was, "They kept needling each other, even though they needed each other."<sup>viii</sup>

The dance of the porcupines is dangerous and discouraging and divisive when it takes place in the assembly.

Now, James goes on in the next phrase to further clarify the issue. Notice **verse 11b**. ***He who speaks against a brother or—what?—judges his brother.***

You could translate it, "he is judging his brother."

The way James describes these two activities, speaking against a brother or judging a brother, indicates that they are the same activity only viewed by James from two different angles.<sup>ix</sup> Both happen at the same time.

When you run people down you are at the same time acting as judge and jury.

This is the condescending, censoring judgment of the Pharisees that caused them to consistently pass judgment on just about everybody else and view themselves as better than everyone else.

There are a number of passages where the believer is actually commanded to pass judgment and think critically.

- we're told to test the spirits – that is the teachers who would teach us spiritual truth (**I John 4:1**);
- we are to pass judgment on false teachers (**Matthew 7:15**);
- we are to judge someone who is openly living in sin and remove them from the assembly (**I Corinthians 5:1-3**);
- we are to judge someone as accursed of God if they preach a different gospel (**Galatians 1:9**);
- the spiritually discerning are to constantly make judgment calls between that which is good and that which is evil (**Hebrews 5:14**);
- one more, the Christian is actually told, and I quote, to judge all things (**I Corinthians 2:15**) – the same root word for judge that James uses here when he obviously tells us not to judge.

So is the Bible confused? Not if you understand the context of this prohibition.

What James is forbidding here is judgmentalism—a critical spirit that judges everyone and everything and runs everyone down.<sup>x</sup>

There is a difference between making a wise judgment and having a judgmental spirit.

There is a difference between judging and judgmentalism. There is a difference between thinking critically and being critical.

So, the issue isn't whether you judge, but how and why?<sup>xi</sup>

This morning you made a number of critical decisions. You made a number of judgments—what time to get up, what to eat, what shirt or blouse to put on.

You had to make a judgment call on when to leave the house this morning in order to get here on time—most of you made the right call.

That's not the kind of judgments James is talking about here.

James is telling us to stop the slander and gossip and criticizing and verbal abusing and any other form of speech that effectively takes your beak and beats down the competition or builds yourself up.

"I'm going to be number 69. I will be among the people that matter. And if you don't matter, I have a better shot at making the list.

James would say, "You're not a critical thinker; you're just a critical person; you're not making discerning judgments, you're just judgmental."

The truth is, there isn't a single person on the planet that we cannot fault with if we pay close enough inspection. James is speaking of that kind of inspector.

Like the man Zodhiates referenced in his commentary on this text who was always finding a way to judge and criticize his fellow man:

If it was a poor man he was criticizing well he was a poor manager; if he was rich then he was dishonest. If he needed credit it because he couldn't get it; if he had plenty of credit everyone wanted to do him a favor. If he was in politics it was for personal gain; if he stepped out of office he was no good for his country. If he didn't give to charitable causes he was stingy; if he did it was for show; if he regularly attended church he was just another hypocrite; but if he wasn't interested in church he was a terrible sinner; if he showed compassion he was too soft; if he didn't show compassion he was too cold; if he died young well, he missed a great future ahead of him; but if he died old well, he probably missed his calling.<sup>xii</sup>

Listen, this guy would probably pat himself on the back and say to you, "Well, I'm just brutally honest."

I've just about come to the conclusion that the person who likes to applaud himself for being brutally honest enjoys the brutality as much as he does the honesty.<sup>xiii</sup>

Ever met anyone like that? Truth is they were born in the accusative case. They will hurt themselves and their family; they can hijack a church or a business.

The truth is this kind of person was reflected back to us all in the mirror this morning. We are all guilty to one degree or another.

That's why James can write to all the Jewish believers scattered throughout the Roman Empire and make this judgment, "This is to all the brethren . . . to all of you . . . this is to us . . . all."

Stop running people down!

Now having delivered the prohibition, this is what we're to stop doing, and having described for us by his descriptive words the practice of a critical spirit and judgmentalism.

Now James goes on to give us three reasons why this practice is such a serious problem.

Here's why you should avoid it at all costs . . .

1. **First, when you engage in this kind of speech, you disregard the standard of God**

Not the standards we've set up, by the way, but the standard of God. *Notice verse 11. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks against the law . . .*

Again James is saying in context the person with a judgmental, critical spirit who passes along to others derogatory, cutting, unkind words is violating the law. Now, what law?

When James refers to "the law" here in *verse 11* in the original language the definite article is lacking.<sup>xiv</sup>

Now I know that kind of information is so exciting to so many of you, but you need to know that James is not referring to *the law*, that is the Mosaic Law, but law . . . in general.

So what kind of general law would James have in mind? The same law he's referred to most recently in this letter, a few paragraphs back, in chapter 2 where he called it the royal law—"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

It's the law of love which fits perfectly with this command in chapter 4; you don't run somebody down that you love.

You don't try to destroy the reputation of someone you love. You don't gossip and slander someone you care about.

You pray for them; you challenge them; you correct them; you seek to restore them.

- Do you judge their sin? Yes.
- Do you tell your child what you did was wrong and you aren't allowed to do it again? Yes.
- Do you correct another believer, "Listen, what you said or did or taught was wrong . . . let me show you the scriptures that apply." Absolutely.

That's love. Church discipline is love. It is born out of a desire to challenge and reprove and warn to the point of withholding fellowship so that person will come to their senses and see what they are forfeiting and desire to be reconciled to Christ and Christ's bride—the church.

The unloving thing is to let them wander without any warning.

Would you ever allow your three year old to wander out of the front yard and into the street? It is actually loving to tell them not to and then if they do, to discipline them so that they feel a lesser consequence than if they were struck by a car.

Someone who is unloving really doesn't care. They just derive pleasure out of spreading the news about whomever it was who either wandered into the street or got close to the curb.

Ethyl was known for being the church gossip – the primary grape on the grape vine. One Saturday she was driving down the street in one section of town and lo and behold, she saw the truck that belonged to one of the men in her church, parked outside a tavern. Before the day was over, everyone in their little church had gotten a phone call from her that Frank was an alcoholic . . . he had obviously been struggling and only recently, she assumed, he'd fallen off the wagon. Of course she added, "We need to pray for Frank." The next day when Frank showed up to church, everybody was buzzing with the news. Frank never said a word when he heard what Ethyl had reported. He never even responded. But late that night, he had a friend follow him over to her house where he quietly

parked his truck in her driveway and left it there overnight.

Don't do that, by the way.

The truth is, you don't pray for people you gossip about, and you probably won't gossip about people you pray about.

James writes, "Stop running each other down. You're violating God's law of love."

You disregard the standard of God.

## **2. Secondly, you disrespect the statutes of God**

*Look at verse 11 again – He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it.*

What James is saying here is that the judgmental, slandering, critical person is breaking the law of love, while at the same time holding another believer accountable for breaking a different law.

And in so doing, he effectively decides what law he really thinks ought to be obeyed; thus setting himself as judge outside of and above the law.<sup>xv</sup>

He's like the guy who says, "I'm a safe driver and I never exceed the speed limit, but I never wear a seat belt because that shouldn't be required."

In fact, I read just a week or so ago about a guy who actually took out, as in, removed his car's seat belt, and then fashioned it into an actual belt for his trousers so that he could say when he was stopped by the police that he was wearing his seat belt. The judge thought otherwise.

I would never steal from a department store, but not disclosing everything on my 1040 tax forms – well, taxes are higher than they should be anyways.

These people are setting themselves up as judges over the law – that is, they are deciding which laws are worthy of keeping and which laws are unimportant.

That's James point here. To set yourself up as a judge over God's timeless commands—deciding which ones you'll keep and which one's you'll break is to disrespect the statutes and commands God's word.

The Pharisee who tithed his mint leaves and dill seeds—the minutia of his garden—yet stole from widows and dishonored their aging parents were judges over the law, determining what was important and what was not.

We can do the same. We can keep some commands of Christ and really be passionate about them and totally disregard the law of love toward others, and when we do, James says we are acting as judge over and against the law.

We disregard the standard of God;

We disrespect the statutes of God;

One more . . .

### **3. We displace the supremacy of God**

*Notice verse 12. There is only one lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?*

James is being extremely frank here, paraphrased for our ears today, James is asking, “Who do you think you are . . . do you think you can play God?” There’s only one who can save and one who can destroy. There’s only one God and you’re not it.

God has never run an ad for an administrative assistant. There’s only one, and He’s quite capable of playing judge and jury, executioner and savior.

To save and destroy summarizes God’s supreme right and power that belong to Him alone.

Again, James isn’t ruling out civil courts and judges, critically thinking Christians, discerning believers, and spiritual leaders who render judgment, he’s rooting out the harsh, unkind, critical, judgmental spirit that lives to find fault in someone else.<sup>xvi</sup>

Why? Because they want to matter more than anybody else! They want to make the list. They want to be number 69 among those who matter most!

James says, look one more time at the end of *verse 12, “who are you to judge your neighbor this way?”*

The placement of pronouns in this text emphasizes the bluntness of James question. It can literally read, “You there . . .<sup>xvii</sup> You there . . . who are you to treat others this way?”

You know why James is blunt and passionate because he knew the danger. When we treat people this way, we cooperate with the devil. He is chief among those who slander; he is the accuser.

So we are bringing into the family of our Heavenly Father, the activity of the father of Hell whose very name, Devil, means accuser—slanderer.

The language of the devil is “failure” and “guilty”; the language of our Lord is “forgiveness” and “grace”.

Isn’t it ironic that those who want to play God end up in reality playing the Devil?

To slander and accuse and gossip is to imitate that angel who wanted to be God; he wanted to be first on the list; he would be the hammer! He would bend heaven and earth to his will.

Listen, if you really want to act like God, then act like God. Dispense grace every time you can.

Let me offer a challenge that I’ll join you in attempting, do you think you can go 24 hours without saying something unkind or critical about someone else?

Can you go 24 hours? Not one unkind or denigrating, demeaning words about another person—the president, the governor, your neighbor, our professor, your pastor—try to make it through lunch on that one—even your schoolmates.

Even if it’s true; even if you’d say it to their face; can we go 24 hours without running somebody down?

If someone can’t go 24 hours without drugs they are addicted to drugs; if they can’t make it 24 hours without alcohol they are addicted to alcohol; if they can’t go 24 hours without smoking they are addicted to nicotine, right?

Well, if we can’t go 24 hours without saying something negative about someone else would that mean we might be addicted to criticizing others? Surely not! Don’t be unreasonable!

Let’s obey this! Now if you fail, restart the clock. Some of you aren’t gonna make it out of the parking lot without resetting the clock three times . . . that’s okay . . . confess what you said and then restart the clock.

It's going to be a challenge, you know why? Because all the way back in the first century, the Apostle James told every one of them to stop it!

We are by nature accustomed to reacting in the accusative case.

I was sent this email from a church member named Carolyn a couple of weeks ago. The note at the top of the email she wrote, "I don't know what this will illustrate, but it is funny."

A man hopped in a taxi at the airport and gave the driver his address and they took off. Halfway there, the passenger leaned up to ask the driver a question and gently tapped him on the shoulder. The driver screamed, lost control

of the cab, nearly hit a bus, drove over the curb and stopped just inches from a large department store window. For a few moments everything was silent in the cab. Then the driver turned around and said, "Are you OK? I'm really sorry, but you scared the daylights out of me." The badly shaken passenger apologized to the driver and said, "I didn't realize that tapping you on the shoulder would startle you so much – it's really my fault." The driver said, "No, no, it's all my fault – today is my very first day driving a taxi – you see, for the past 25 years I've been driving a hearse."

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 03/02/2011 by Stephen Davey.

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xv Blomberg & Kamell, p. 196

xvi Hiebert, p. 244

xvii Charles R. Swindoll, James: Practical and Authentic Living (Insight for Living, 1991), p. 154