



## TO JUDGE OR NOT TO JUDGE ...

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After a couple of week's break, it is time to get back into our study of the book of James! James has been talking about the importance of our behaviour lining up with what we say we believe. It is not enough to just say the right things, we need to do the right things as well. James explains that this is because our behaviour, our actions, reflect what is really happening in our heart. At the core of our being, we either LOVE God or love the world that is ruled and manipulated by Satan. Those who have turned to God and accepted His salvation will be essentially oriented towards God, but it is a process of a lifetime to learn to love God whole-heartedly. As long as we are in this world, we will always feel its pull and will need to consciously choose to love God above all else. What we love shapes our DESIRES, or what we think is most important to gain in this life. These desires, then determine how we THINK about what is right and good. Is our thinking aligned to the wisdom from above which brings life and peace, or is our thinking influenced by the wisdom of this world which is proud and selfish and turned against God? What we love, desire and think then shows itself in our ACTIONS. Only God can truly see a person's heart, but our actions often reveal what is going on in our hearts.

As we've said before, James' letter does not follow a clear, logical outline. He talks about one topic, which leads to the next, and to the next ... like steppingstones across a creek. He also sometimes takes a side-step to touch briefly on a related topic which doesn't seem to have a lot to do with what comes before or after. This is what we see in the two verses we are looking at today. Before he is talking about repentance for loving the world more than God. Next, he will talk about the wrong attitudes and actions which the richer members of the church may fall into. In the middle, he takes a side-step to talk about judging each other. Many commentaries join these two verses to either what comes before or what follows, but I think it is valuable to look at them on their own, especially since this is something which Jesus talked about on several occasions.

In these two verses, we see James using a common Jewish way to present an idea. When we present an idea, say in a sermon or paper, we usually state the idea and then list three or four reasons why that idea is true or important and then summarise it all in the conclusion. It is a very linear way of thinking – Point A (1,2), B (1,2), C (1,2). The Jews had a different way of talking about things which we find throughout the Bible. It is called a chiasm. You don't need to remember the name (!) but it is helpful to recognise when this is being used. A chiasm arranges information differently. Instead of a linear outline, it develops ideas by stating them and then restating them in reverse order: A1, B1, C, B2, A2. The most important idea, the one around which all the others are built, is at the centre of the discussion – point C. All the other ideas point to or are derived from this central concept. In the discussion we will look at this morning, A1 and A2 talk about the; B1 and B2 tell us why this is a problem; and C will tell us the solution.

## The Problem

**A1:** *Don't speak evil against each other, dear brothers and sisters...*

**A2:** *...what right do you have to judge your neighbour?*

First, we need to look at the context of these statements. Notice that James is once again calling them his “*dear brothers and sisters*” and he is addressing what they are doing to “*each other*”. He is talking about what should and shouldn't be happening in the church, between believers. He is not talking about our interactions with non-believers. That's another sermon for another day! Here, James is talking about what happens between brothers and sisters in Christ.

In addition, we have already seen that James is not hesitant to point out sin when he sees it within the church. We have seen him say “*this is not right!*” and he has even called them “*adulterers*” and “*sinners*”. Whatever James is saying, he is not advocating a tolerance of sin or a covering up of sin. This is important because sometimes these verses and the words of Jesus which we read have been interpreted to mean that we shouldn't address sin in the church. The context in James tells us that this is not what James is advocating.

Secondly, it is helpful to look at the words which James uses. We are told to not “*speak (evil) against*” others. The Greek word is just “*speak against*” but the translators have added the descriptor “*evil*” to emphasise that this word has a negative connotation. It is used for verbal attacks, slander, and false accusations. This is not about calling sin, sin but about attacking others and seeking to damage their reputation. James also uses the word “*judge*”. This Greek word has a range of connotations – not all negative. Even in these verses, we see James talking about God being the Judge, using the same root word. However, when seen in parallel to “*speaking against*”, it takes on a negative connotation, meaning to pass unfavourable judgement on a person, to criticise or condemn them.

So, the problem that James is addressing is not about seeing sin and seeking to correct it to bring people back into alignment with God's will. The problem that James sees is that some people in the church are criticising and even slandering other believers. The goal is to attack them and make them look bad – while making themselves look good in comparison! There is nothing positive or helpful about this behaviour.

## Why this is a Problem

**B1:** *...if you criticise and judge each other, then you are criticising and judging God's law.*

**B2:** *God alone, who gave the law, is the Judge. He alone has the power to save or destroy.*

The reason this is a problem is that they are leaving God out of the equation. James reminds them that it is God's law. God alone determines what is right and wrong and we all stand equal under His judgement. The law was given to us to show us how to reflect God's righteousness, goodness, and love. If, in judging others, we are unloving and hurtful, are we behaving in a way that reflects God? If not, how are we any better than the ones we are criticising and condemning? Are we saying that their sin, whatever that might be, is greater than our own sin of lovelessness? Remember what James said earlier in his book:

*For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God's laws. (2:10)*

The standard which we are called to is obedience in all areas of the law. We don't get to choose or judge which laws are more important. And in fact, after loving God, Jesus said that the second most important command is to “*love your neighbour as yourself*” which James calls the “*royal law*” (2:8). This must control how we interact with others in this area. It is interesting to notice that in the

original context of that phrase in Leviticus we also see strong cautions against speaking against other people in unloving ways. It always has been a human temptation to put others down.

This reminds us of Jesus' words about judging others. He cautions against being so concerned for possible sin in the lives of others that we don't notice the sin in our own lives. To get this across, Jesus paints the humorous picture of trying to take a speck of dust out of someone else's eye while not being able to see around the log in one's own eye! We need to have an honest self-awareness of our own sin before we can appropriately help another person become aware of their sin.

Does this mean that we can never "judge" sin? I don't think this is what James is saying nor is this what he demonstrates in his book. However, in order to judge correctly, we need to understand our role and have the right attitude. God is the ultimate Judge and only He can condemn or forgive. When we are tempted to pronounce final judgement on individuals and say whether they are heading for heaven or hell, then I think we are moving into God's territory. But this does not mean we can make no judgements at all. God does call us to be discerning about what is right and wrong. As we grow closer to God, we will increasingly sense what is aligned with His righteousness, goodness and love and what is not. God has given his people the job of helping each other to see sin for what it is and to help each other to turn away from sin and turn to God's ways. We have a role to admonish and correct. However, we should never be arrogant about this because as we grow closer to God, we will also see more clearly our own sin and need for God's action in our lives to cleanse us and enable us to do what is right.

### **The Solution**

This takes us to the heart of the matter – our own heart attitude towards the law.

*C: But your job is to obey the law, not to judge whether it applies to you. (NLT)  
But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. (NASB2020)*

God calls us to obey His law – not because He likes to tell us what to do or restrict our lives, but because He knows it is what is best for us. He has given us His law as an expression of His love for us. We do not have the right to stand above the law and judge what parts of it we will follow and what parts are not important. While it is true that there are ceremonial regulations in the Old Testament which no longer apply to us today, Jesus affirmed the moral law and it is still to guide us. We need to place ourselves under the God's law and be a doer of it.

Only then can we, in love, help others to become doers of the law as well. James alludes to this in the final two verses of His book.

*My dear brothers and sisters, if someone among you wanders away from the truth and is brought back, you can be sure that whoever brings the sinner back from wandering will save that person from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins. (5:19,20)*

The goal is not condemnation, but restoration and that makes all the difference. Condemnation holds another down but loving admonition pulls another up. This kind of action is born of loving concern and not prideful scorn. One commentator described this attitude as follows: "I love you enough to want to help you, and tomorrow, you will need to correct me." This kind of actions ends up with all of us at the foot of the cross, seeking forgiveness for our sinfulness and desiring wisdom and strength to get back up again and do better next time.

And I think that this is why James makes this little detour in his letter. He knows that it would be easy for his readers to start pointing fingers at others who they think are falling short in the areas He talks about. But James wants to turn their eyes away from the failings of others and back to themselves. He wants them to be reminded that we all have work to do in our lives, and we need to make sure we aren't trying to take a speck of dust out of our neighbour's eye while being blind to the log in our own eye. May we always look first at ourselves before we look at others.