

The Soil of Slander

War & Peace Part 8
James 4:11-12 8-2-2015

Summary: James commands that we not speak against one another for three reasons: 1) because speaking against a brother comes from a judgmental heart, 2) it comes from a low view of God’s law, and 3) it comes from an inflated view of self. The solution to negative speech is loving one another, restoring one another, and placing ourselves under God’s law instead of above it.

Introduction.....	1
The Command: Do Not Speak Against One Another	2
Definition	2
Why Is It Wrong?.....	2
1) It Comes from a Judgmental Heart.....	3
Out of the Overflow of the Heart... ..	3
The Lens of Judgment	3
The Lens of Mercy	3
Whose Side Are You On?	4
Proper and Improper Judgment.....	4
1) Judging unmercifully.....	4
2) Judging legalistically.....	4
3) Judging superficially	4
4) Judging self-righteously	5
5) Judging prematurely.....	5
6) Judging ignorantly.....	5
Discernment is Not Knowledge of Motives	
Walk in Backwards	6
2) It Comes from a Low View of God’s Law	6
Judging Brothers = Judging Law	6
The Power of Slander	7
Judges Are Non-Doers.....	7
3) It Comes from a High View of Self.....	8
There’s Only One Judge (and it’s not you).....	8
Solution.....	9
Love People	9
Restore.....	10
Place Yourself Under God’s Law	10
Application Questions (James 1:25)	11

James 4:11 Brothers, do not speak against one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges his brother speaks against the law and judges the law. When the law you judge, you are not a doer of law but a judge. 12 There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

Introduction

Are you a plus person or a minus person? A plus person is someone who, whenever they talk about someone else, they add to that person’s reputation. They build that person up in the eyes of whoever they are talking to. They notice good things about people, and they talk about those things. A minus person is the opposite. When they see you make a mistake – people are going to hear about it. If you do something good, they may not notice. But they have eagle eyes for noticing your mistakes.

How would it hit you if you found out today that you had a reputation around this church of being a minus person? What if you found out that the people in your prayer group have to be careful what they say when you're around, because they see how you talk about other people to them, and they figure you must talk the same way about them when they're not around. On the other hand, how would you feel if you found out that you had a reputation around this church of being a big plus person? That would be pretty cool, right? Now one more question – is there any chance of that in your case – that you are known as a plus person? If you are like me, there is probably been multiple times in your life when you resolved to become a plus person, only to find that your speech patterns stay pretty much the same. Why is that? What is so hard about just having edifying speech instead of tearing people down?

We have been studying verse by verse through the book of James and we come to a passage today where James is going to dig down beneath the surface and show us some attitudes and perspectives that push us towards putting each other down instead of building each other up. He starts by giving us a command.

The Command: Do Not Speak Against One Another

James 4:11 Brothers, do not slander one another.

Definition

The Greek word translated **slander** in the NIV literally means *to speak against*. I am not sure why the NIV translates it *slander* the first time, and *speak against* the other two times, but all three times in this verse it is the exact same Greek word, and *speak against* is a very direct translation. *Katalaleo* – *laleo* – to speak, and *kata* – against. It is a broad term that can be used to describe any kind of speech that is against another person. That would include false accusations or lies (1 Pe.2:12, 3:16). It would include gossip – speaking about someone in a way that hurts their reputation (Ps.101:5). In Numbers 21:5 it is used to describe the people grumbling against leadership. It can be done behind the person's back or in front of their face. It can be false things or true things. It can be done by putting the spotlight on the person's weaknesses. It can be done by divulging secrets. It can be done by telling what the person did wrong but you leave out the parts about mitigating circumstances. Or maybe you drop subtle hints that lead people to assume they had bad motives for what they did. It can be done by overstating the person's faults, or even understating their graces. You talk about their good points, but you do it in a way that does not really cause people to think more highly of them. There are a thousand ways we can speak against one another. Basically - any kind of speech that you wouldn't want said about you – that is what is in mind here.

And it is an extremely common problem because all you have to do to commit this sin is observe reality. All the people around us are constantly sinning, constantly making mistakes, constantly exposing weaknesses and failures and faults and inadequacies. So all you have to do to commit this sin is observe what people do and talk about it. So this is an incredibly easy sin to commit. And not only easy to commit, but easy to justify.

“All I'm doing is observing reality. I don't mean him any harm. How can I be faulted for just stating the facts?”

Why Is It Wrong?

Is it such an evil thing to just state the facts? It depends on which facts you state. No one states all the facts. Why are you stating the ones you're stating? Or to back it up a step, of all the thousands of things your mind discards as unworthy of being noticed or remembered, why did you notice and remember the ones you noticed and remembered? James is going to answer that question for us by once again taking us down to the source – inside the heart.

1) It Comes from a Judgmental Heart

Out of the Overflow of the Heart...

After giving us the command not to speak against one another, James tells us why. And when he tells us the reason, he introduces a new component – judging.

James 4:11 Brothers, do not speak against one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges his brother speaks against the law and judges the law.

If you have been with us in this study, it's not hard to see what James is doing here. Once again, he is pointing us to the heart. Unkind words come from a judgmental heart.

Matthew 12:34 Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks .

You say what you say, because of what was in your heart.

One poet put it well: “Your heart is a garden, your thoughts are the seeds. You can grow flowers, or you can grow weeds.”

Everything comes from the heart. So when you criticize and put people down or gossip or slander or grumble about them – that kind of speech is the fruit of a judgmental heart. James is always concerned about the sin beneath the sin – the heart issue that causes the actions and words. And the sin beneath the sin of gossip is judgmentalism.



The Lens of Judgment

You see, here is the thing about us – we are not just walking video recorders. We are judges. We don't just observe and report. We make judgments about the person, then we observe what they say and do through the lens of those judgments. That is why you judge people so differently based on how much you like them.

The Lens of Mercy

We never know all the facts. There are so many blanks in our knowledge of the situation. We don't know everything that led up to what they did, we don't know their motives, we don't know all the circumstances – there is so much we don't know - so many blanks in our knowledge, and your heart will fill in those blanks based upon your attitude toward the person. And if you really like the person, mercy will fill in the blanks in a positive way. Mercy will put the best possible construction on what they do. And that is essential for making right judgments. And if we evaluate each other without mercy filling in the blanks with good assumptions, we provoke God's wrath. James warned us about that back in chapter 2.

James 2:13 judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

In order for us to judge properly, there must be mercy in our hearts toward the person. And if that mercy is missing, you will render a wrong judgment. In Matthew 9, the Pharisees rendered a judgment and they were way off. They were condemning repentant sinners – instead of rejoicing over their repentance. And here is Jesus' response:

Matthew 9:13 But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'

They rendered a wrong judgment because they lack mercy, so Jesus told them to go study about mercy in Hosea 6:6. Three chapters later they are making another wrong judgment – once again condemning the innocent.

Matthew 12:7 If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent.

They routinely rendered wrong judgments because they refused to learn about mercy.

So back to that question – What’s wrong with just stating the facts? If the facts you state tend to be the negative ones, that shows you which lens you have been looking at that person through. It is not the lens of mercy. It is the lens of judgmentalism.

Think of how God is with you. God has a lot of dirt on you, right? There are thoughts that you have had in your head that if God decided to expose them to people, you would be ruined. Just think of how many negative things God knows about you that He doesn’t take public. He knows more bad things about you than you know about you. And yet, He still looks at you through the lens of mercy instead of judgment. God doesn’t even have any gaps in His knowledge, yet He still lets mercy govern His way of looking at you. If God does that with you, can’t you allow mercy to govern your assumptions about your brother or sister in the church?

Whose Side Are You On?

Think about those people who are down there at the bottom of your list right now - for whatever reason you just don’t like them or don’t get along with them. Ask yourself, are you for them or against them? Can you honestly say you are on their side? Satan is their accuser. Jesus is their advocate, making intercession for them in heaven. So whose side are you on – the devil’s side or Jesus’ side?

Proper and Improper Judgment

“Wait a minute. Aren’t there times when it’s necessary to make a negative judgment about a person?”

Yes. Jesus warns us to beware of false prophets, and tells us that we will know them by their fruit (Mt.7:15-16). That is a kind of judging that we must do. Jesus said that if your brother sins you should go to him and show him his fault (Mt.18:15). So yes, there are times when a negative judgment about a person is necessary. So what kinds of judging are forbidden?

We handled that topic in detail in the first two sermons of Matthew 7.¹ We don’t have time to repeat everything from those two sermons now, but I’ll just give you the summary: There are six kinds of judging that Scripture forbids. The first one we have already talked about: judging unmercifully.

1) Judging unmercifully

2) Judging legalistically

You grew up in a family or a church where certain things are no-no’s, even though they aren’t mentioned in the Bible, so if you see a Christian doing those things you look down on him.

3) Judging superficially

John 7:24 Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment.

Making a judgment about someone’s heart based on external appearances - James talked about that back in chapter 2.

¹ *An Error in Judgment, and Logectomy* - available on foodforyoursoul.net.

4) Judging self-righteously

Judging self-righteously is looking at the person with an attitude that you are better than they. Jesus condemned that in Luke 18:9ff.

5) Judging prematurely

Proverbs 18:13 He who answers before listening-- that is his folly and his shame.

We form an opinion before we have all the facts.

6) Judging ignorantly

The last one is one of the most common, and it is a real problem in the church – judging ignorantly. Judging someone’s heart. We make terrible judges because we can’t see motives, we can’t see thoughts, and we can’t see affections. And we are not permitted to make assumptions about those things.

1 Corinthians 4:5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts.

“But what if the motives are obvious?”

It doesn’t matter – it is still forbidden. If you suspect they might have a wrong motive you can ask them about it, but you cannot assume you know.

Discernment is Not Knowledge of Motives

There are some people who think, “I don’t have to fill in the gaps with mercy, because there are no gaps. I know exactly what his motive is. He did that because he wanted this...” Sometimes people try to call that the gift of discernment.

“I have discernment - I can read people. I’m a good judge of character.”

If you know what is in people’s hearts, and you can discern their motives, that is not the gift of discernment – that’s proof that you are God.

1 Samuel 16:7 ... Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.

Only God has that ability. So if you can do that, that means you are God.

Discernment is not a free pass that allows you to assume you know people’s motives. Discernment is the ability to pick up on whether an idea is un-biblical. A discerning person can read a book and pick up on subtle errors that other people miss. But discernment is not the ability to read people’s hearts. You might be a lot better than average at guessing people’s motives, but it is still a guess. Maybe there’s a 95% chance that this person has a bad motive, but that means there is still a 5% chance that it is a good motive. And love (the royal law of Scripture) requires you to assume that 5%.

I find it interesting that people who claim to be such great judges of character, or who think they have the ability to discern motives – for some reason their main skill seems to be in spotting bad motives. But if they are such good judges of character, why are they so blind to people’s virtues? They have eagle eyes when it comes to spotting a weakness, but they are blind to strengths and virtues in people they don’t like. Judgmental people are about as good at assessing character as flies are at assessing meat. Their attention is drawn to what is rotten. How much of God’s good work do we miss because we are blind to the good things and focus on the faults? How many marvelous, wonderful things does the Holy Spirit work in people’s hearts, and while the Father and the Son rejoice in the work of the Spirit in that person, you and I miss it altogether because we are focused on the faults and negative things?

Walk in Backwards

Love covers over sin. Remember the account in Genesis 9 where Noah was drunk in his tent and he was lying there totally exposed, and his son Ham walked in on him? Not only did Ham look at him, but he called his brother's attention to the situation. The other two brothers had a very different response. Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders and walked into the tent backwards and covered their dad up without ever seeing him. They were commended and blessed for that, and Ham was cursed for what he did. That is such an important lesson on how we are to look on each other's shame. We don't advertise it, we don't draw attention to it, we don't even allow ourselves to gaze at it. Walk into the room backwards with a garment on your shoulders and cover it up.

So why is it so wrong when we speak against each other? Because that comes from a judgmental heart. You are not just observing reality objectively – you are observing what you are observing because of what's in your heart. And that brings us to the second reason why it is so wrong.

2) It Comes from a Low View of God's Law

11 ...Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges his brother speaks against the law and judges the law.

What law? The royal law of Scripture - love your neighbor as yourself.

James 2:8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right.

That law comes from Leviticus 19, which is also where the law against slander is found. Same paragraph.

Leviticus 19:16 'Do not go about spreading slander among your people. ... 18 " 'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.

Judging Brothers = Judging Law

So when my words about other people are critical and negative, that exposes a judgmental heart in me. And if I have a judgmental heart, that means I have looked at God's royal law about loving my neighbor as myself, and judged it to be unworthy of my obedience. When we trash others in our speech, it is because of a low view of the Bible.

Evangelicals are people who have a high view of God's Word. That is how the evangelical movement got started. The liberals came along and said, "The Bible has mistakes in it. Not everything in the Bible is true. It's just a human book. It has some good moral ideas and values, but you can't trust the historical statements." That is liberalism, and the evangelical movement started as a reaction against that. Men like George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards stood up and said, "No, there are no mistakes in the Bible. Every word in there is God-breathed." And that is what we believe at this church.

Jesus said that the Bible is the Word of God, and we trust Him more than we trust anyone else. So as evangelicals, we pride ourselves on our high view of Scripture. But then James comes along and tells us, "When you put each other down or speak against one another, you are basically a liberal. If you disobey Scripture, that means you have a low view of Scripture – regardless of what you claim." We might claim to believe that the Bible is God's Word and that it is absolutely authoritative and that disregarding it is a big deal, but when we disregard it, our actions are saying we don't really believe that. Our actions are saying we think it's OK to take God's Word lightly. That is why we disobey. When God rebuked David for his sins of adultery and murder, this is what He zeroed in on.

2 Samuel 12:9 Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes?

The word **despise** means to think little of, or to take lightly. That is what we do when we disobey the love command. We become evangelicals in name, and liberals in practice.

We fail to take God's Word seriously, and we forget how much God loves that person that we are speaking against. If we had any concept at all of how much God loves that person we would be scared to death to speak against that person.

Numbers 12:8 ... Why were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"

God says, "Explain this to Me – how is it that you are not terrified at the idea of speaking against My servant?" In that case, it was especially true because of the fact that Moses was chosen by God to be their leader. That is significant, because very often people think that they get a free pass on slander if the person is in leadership. They gossip and grumble about leaders in ways that they would never dream of talking about anyone else, but they think it is okay because they are leaders. But the logic God uses in Numbers 12:8 goes in the other direction – if it's a leader, it is even more reason to be afraid to speak against him. But I would suggest that the principle would apply to anyone who is a servant of the Most High God, which is any Christian.

The Power of Slander

And don't forget the power behind the tongue. This is coming right on the heels of James whole discussion at the beginning of chapter 3 about the power of the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. It is like a wildfire ignited by hell itself. Maybe you would never dream of physically attacking someone, and yet you can bring 10 times the devastation into their lives through gossip than through a punch in the nose. Paul warns us about that in Galatians 5.

Galatians 5:15 If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

He says, "What do you think is going to happen if you keep on nipping at each other? Imagine two wild animals who attack each other and they are evenly matched. They just keep biting and clawing and scratching until they inflict so many wounds on each other that they both die." That is the picture here. We will destroy ourselves if we do this. People are all worried about the government threatening to put us in jail if we preach about homosexuality, or that persecution is coming. The government does not have the power to destroy the church, the IRS does not have the power to destroy the church - for us to be destroyed, we would have to destroy ourselves. And that is exactly what will happen if we have a practice of biting and devouring each other. And that's a very big deal because the church does not belong to us. It belongs to Christ. These people seated around you right now – this thing that we are doing here on Sundays, do you realize that it cost Jesus His life for this to happen? We need to think twice before we open our mouths and strike a blow at the bride of Christ.

Judges Are Non-Doers

So if we speak against one another, that is a symptom of a judgmental heart. And if we are passing judgment on each other, that is a symptom of the heart that despises God's law. And James goes on to say - **When you judge the law, you are not a doer of law but a judge.** Back in chapter 1 he talked to us about being doers of the Word and not hearers only (1:23-25). Learning God's Word is worthless if you are not a doer of the Word. And here James tells us that it is impossible to be a doer and a judge. You can't be both, because a doer submits himself under God's law, and the judge elevates himself above God's law.

This is one of the most fundamental crossroads you will ever meet in your whole life – what is your posture going to be before the law of God? Are you going to take a humble, submissive posture? Or are you going to be a critic? Are you going to pass judgment and give all your opinions about, "I don't like this in the Bible, I don't know if I accept that, the part there is hard to believe, I don't like that..." When

you read the Bible, are you looking up at it or down at it? Are you looking up from the posture of a humble servant? Are you looking down from the perch of the proud critic? Whichever one of those postures you take will determine the trajectory of your life, and ultimately your eternal destiny. When God forbids something that does not really seem all that evil to you, is your response, “But, but, but...” Or is it, “Yes, Lord”?

And this brings us to James third reason why we shouldn't speak against one another. Reason #1 is it comes from a judgmental heart. Reason #2 why we shouldn't do it is that it shows a low view of God's law. And then a third reason is this: speaking against each other reveals not only a low view of God's law, but a high view of self. If I am a judge and a critic of the Word of God, that means I must have an awfully high opinion of my own opinion. That is where James goes in verse 12.

3) It Comes from a High View of Self

There's Only One Judge (and it's not you)

12 There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

There is only one person in this universe who has the right to judge, and that is the Lawgiver Himself. When we drive home after church and gossip about whatever person did something we didn't like, we are elevating ourselves to the very throne of God. Only God has that right. If someone in the church wasn't measuring up to my standard, I am not that person's judge. What *am* I? If I am not his judge, what am I to him? Look back at verse 11 and see if you can pick up on it.

11 Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges his brother speaks against the law and judges it.

In the NIV they don't translate the word **brother** all three times. Instead, they just stick a pronoun in place of the third one - **Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him...** Evidently they thought it was a little repetitive to have **brother** repeated three times. In their right, it is. But it is just as repetitive in Greek as it is in English. I think James is making a point. He emphasizes our brother to brother, sibling relationship three times in one sentence to remind us of our true relationship to each other. I am not your judge, I am not your master, I am not your creator, I am not the lawgiver – I'm your brother.

What role do siblings have in evaluating each other and disciplining each other? Not their job, right? What you do if one of your kids gets in trouble and another one of your kids tries to discipline him? You tell him, “That's not your job – that's my job.” What if one kid gets in trouble and the other kid is saying, “You should spank him hard, and take away his games, and he should be grounded for a really long time, and he should have to clean up the whole basement...” You might turn to that child and say, “Is that how you want me to discipline you when you do something wrong?”

“No, when it's me, I want mercy.”

If your kids really love each other, when one of them gets in trouble, the others will be rooting for mercy, right? They will be saying, “I hope Dad isn't too hard on him.” That is the way we should be with each other. We should be rooting for mercy, because we are siblings. In Romans 14 the people in the church were judging legalistically. They were looking down on each other because of where they drew the lines on various judgment calls on debatable issues. Some of them were more strict and others were less strict on certain things. And the ones who are more strict looked down on the ones who are less strict: “Those people must not take their faith very seriously. They must not be very committed if they are engaging in that kind of behavior.” And the people who are less strict looked down on the other ones: “What a bunch of legalists. Don't they understand the freedom we have in Christ?” Both sides were looking down on the other side, and Paul rebukes both sides. Paul isn't even concerned with which side is right. He is more concerned with the fact that they are passing judgment on each other on debatable issues.

Romans 14:4 Who are you to judge someone else's slave? To his own master he stands or falls.

What are we doing evaluating each other? Why do you drive home on Sunday after church and talk to your spouse about what a bad job someone is doing? Is that person your slave? Did you die on the cross to purchase them so that now you own them, and it is your job to evaluate how well they are doing? Who are you to evaluate someone else's slave? I think this verse is fascinating because it implies that the only person you are allowed to judge is someone you own. If you don't own that person as your own personal slave then you have no business evaluating how well he is doing as a slave. When we do that we are usurping the place of God.

Only God has the right to do performance reviews on Christians. And it is interesting the reasoning James gives us for why that is. The reason God can do it is because He is **able to save and destroy**. That means in order to have the right to condemn, you have to have the power to save. Unless you have the power to take someone to heaven, then you don't have the right to consign them to hell. Unless you have the power to redeem someone's heart, you don't have the right to judge their heart.

So those are the credentials that give God the right to pass judgment. He is the lawgiver and the judge and the one who is able to save and destroy. He is the author of the Bible, He is the one who will sit on the judgment seat at the final judgment and determine the destiny of every soul who ever lived, He is able to send a soul to hell forever, and He is able to bring someone into eternal glory with Him in heaven. Those are His credentials. But then James says, **but you – who are you?** James says, "Oh, you're speaking against someone in the church? You're passing judgment on your brother? Here, let me see your resume. I just want to see the credentials that give you the authority to do that. I just want to see how many years of experience you have as lawgiver and judge, and how many people you have actually sent to heaven or hell. Oh, you don't have any of that on your resume? Well then you're way under-qualified for this job."

Speaking against our brothers is evil because when we do that, we are exalting ourselves to the place of God. Manton: "It is usual to condemn everything that doth not please us, as if our magisterial dictates were articles of faith." We turn our preferences into articles of faith, and we act like people are responsible to meet our standards.

Solution

So what is the solution to this problem? We know it doesn't work to just resolve, "I'm going to be a plus person from now on!" So what will work? What will work is if we deal with the heart problems that cause the negative speech. If we want different fruit, we need to have different soil. So what has James taught us today about the soil?

Love People

The most obvious one is the royal law – love your neighbor. You don't really have to discipline yourself to avoid bad mouthing the people you really love. If our speech about one another isn't what it should be, our love isn't what it should be. And that is where the problem needs to be addressed.

If the command is not to be *against* one another, then the solution is to be *for* one another. A good question to ask yourself – "Am I for that person or against him?" You are talking to your husband, "I passed so-and-so in the hallway at church and I said hi to her, and she didn't even acknowledge me. Just walked right past me like I didn't even exist. It's like she's too important to be bothered with someone like me." What would you do if Jesus walked up to you right then and said, "The way that you are talking about her right now makes Me wonder – are you for her or against her?" If you want to become a plus person, don't just try to avoid putting people down. Love the person. Consciously think about what you can say that would build that person up, or build up their reputation in the sight of others. Appoint yourself as the PR director for everyone in the church.

And one thing that really helps with this is praying for the person. I was in a conversation not long ago about someone that I was concerned about, and my sister was sitting there in the room. She didn't

know that person, but as soon as I expressed some concern, she said, “Well, since we’re talking about him, let’s pray for him.” That’s some great logic, isn’t it? Since we are talking to each other about the person, why not include God in the conversation? What better way to keep our speech on a loving track? Ever since that day Tracy and I have been trying to do that – whenever we have a concern about a person, or situation at church, or anything else, we apply that logic – as long as we’re talking about them, let’s pray about them. That has been really good for us.

Restore

“But what if the person is doing something wrong? Am I supposed to just overlook it? What if it’s too serious to overlook?”

If it’s too serious to overlook, then deal with it. But the way to deal with it is not by slandering the person or gossiping about the person or denigrating the person; the way to deal with it is by restoring the person.

James 5:19 My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

We speak against each other because it is so much easier to curse the darkness than it is to turn on the light. But what good is exposing problems if we don’t do anything to fix them?

Galatians 6:1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.

If you want a more thorough study of that, I would recommend the book *The Peacemaker*. Ken Sande does such a great job in that book of handling all the various scriptures that teach about dealing with conflict in relationships. If you are dealing with any kind of relational conflict in your life right now, I highly recommend that book. In fact, I would love it if every person in this church would read that book.

Place Yourself Under God’s Law

But for now, let’s just remember the royal law of Scripture – love your neighbor. Our task is to place ourselves under that law instead of above it. If we have been guilty of bad mouthing people in the church, that means we’re guilty of bad mouthing God’s law and passing judgment on it. And that is a mark of monumental pride. James has been talking to us about the problem of pride ever since chapter 3, then he gave us that big humility sandwich in chapter 4, and he is not going to let up. The whole rest of the book chips away at pride. And this passage is no exception. We have elevated ourselves above God’s law, and James is trying to bring us back to the proper relationship to God.²

The next time you are tempted to speak negatively about someone, go ahead and answer James’ question. When James asks **who are you to judge your neighbor?** that is a rhetorical question. But let’s go ahead and answer it anyway. Who am I? I am a man under grace. I am a man who has been shown mercy beyond what I can even understand because my guilt is beyond what I can understand. I am a man who deserves to be punished severely forever for my sin, but instead I am forgiven and I am going to be given all the riches of Christ. I am a man who has hurt people – thousands of times. I am a man who has sinned against God and against everyone in my life. A man who is deeply in need of patience from everyone around me. That is the answer to the first half – **who are you...?** So what is the answer to the whole question – **who are you to judge your neighbor?** Answer: I’m nobody. I’m certainly not anybody who is in a position to pass judgment on fellow servants. I am the guy in Matthew 18 who has been given

² in chapter 3 James pointed to worldliness as the cause of pride. And with that in mind, you can see how this passage gathers in all three of the marks of true religion that James spoke of in 1:26, 27. The marks of true religion are controlling the tongue, loving others, and avoiding worldliness. This passage shows how all three of those are bound together.

an unfathomable debt – 10,000 talents. An infinite debt wiped completely clean – all my sins forgiven, simply because I placed my faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. To forgive that debt cost Him His life. And so He simply asks me, “Since I had that much mercy on you, will you have mercy on your brother? That is how the world will know that you belong to Me.”

Benediction: Ephesians 4:29-32 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

- 1) Which of the forbidden types of judging are you most prone to? (Judging unmercifully, legalistically, superficially, self righteously, prematurely, or ignorantly - assuming motives)
- 2) Which of those do you find you do well?
- 3) Can you remember a time when someone treated a sin or mistake or weakness in your life the way Shem and Japheth treated their dad's shame (covering rather than exposing)? Sharing that story with the group might help others understand how to do it.