

James 4:11-12 - Slander
Sign Title: Slander

September 18, 2011

Good morning Faith Church! Last spring we began working our way through the book of James. We will finish James in November; just in time for our Christmas series. This morning, we inch a little further through the book. We find James returning to one of his favorite subjects, the tongue. That is, how we speak.

Three weeks ago, we were reminded how sin in our lives looks to God in the message titled *Spiritual Adultery*. The anger we feel as we ponder what it would feel like if our spouse was unfaithful to us is a sample of the feelings in God's heart when we are unfaithful to him. Yet there is good news. Two weeks ago, we learned that, because of Christ, God always has more grace than we have sin. That is the good news of the Bible.

But James qualified it. God's grace isn't a blank check. Our pride shuts off the flow of God's grace into our lives while humility releases it. Since humility is so important to receive God's grace, last week James gave us ten steps to cultivating humility in our life. Today, James goes to the other side of the equation. He looks at a subtle way pride shuts off God's grace in the area of our speech.

The tongue is James' favorite illustration. While we may get tired of talking about our speech, this is the hardest area to avoid sin in our life. This is a practical application of our faith James has talked about many times.

- Be quick to listen, slow to speak (1:19)

- Keep a tight rein on your tongue (1:26)
- Our tongues reveal sinful discrimination (2:3-4)
- We all stumble in what we say (3:2)
- Our words are powerful and damaging (3:3-5)
- What we say reveals our spiritual condition (3:6-8).

The next discussion on the tongue is in our passage today.

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?... Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. James 4:11–12; 5:9 (ESV)

The outline is simple. It starts with a command: Don't slander. Then James explains why we shouldn't do it. In 5:9, he gives us the command not to grumble, then he explains why we shouldn't do it. So both times it is a command followed by an explanation. That is simple enough and that is the outline we will follow.

The Command - Don't slander/grumble against one another.

What does the Greek word for slander mean?

Slander - speak against; to speak evil of or to talk down to someone.

We have slightly more sophisticated words for slander today. We call it defamation of character, character assassination, belittling, using veiled innuendoes or saying things with double meanings.

Let me explain something very important. *The Greek word for slander has nothing to do with the truth of what is being said.* It simply deals with any form of dragging down a person's reputation.

A defamatory word may be perfectly true: we do not have to tell lies in order to defame. But the fact that it is true gives us no right to say it. (Motyer, James, pg. 157)

If you tell a slanderer to stop slandering, 99% of the time he/she will respond with, "Well, it is true!" People think that as long as something is true, it is free to be said. This verse doesn't say not to slander people unless it is true. It says, don't slander someone --- period.

The news media doesn't get this. It makes money on airing dirty laundry. If it isn't true, then the media gets in trouble. If it is true, it is news and it will get repeated. It doesn't matter how hurtful it is to the man or woman being reported on. That is not the way it should happen in the church. If it tears people down and is unhelpful, nobody needs to know it. Don't repeat it. I don't care if it is true. If it is unhelpful; it doesn't need to be shared.

Let's look at James 5:9 where it says we are not to grumble.

Grumble - groan, sigh or complain about others to yourself.

You know how this goes. People mutter under their breath all the time. I remember when my kids were little. They left Legos all over the house. When I walked into the kitchen late at night to get a glass of water, guess what I stepped on! What do you think I was saying under my breath?

Grumbling and slander are similar. *Grumbling is when we speak against someone to ourselves; slander is when we speak against someone to others.*

Both are sin. I know most of you just had your toes stepped on, especially with grumbling, because we think it doesn't matter when we murmur to ourselves. It does. It is sin in our speech.

Now let's look at the explanations James gives for why slander and grumbling are sinful.

What is the problem with slander and grumbling?

Slander comes from an inflated ego.

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. James 4:11 (ESV)

When we drag someone's name through the mud by saying things about them that are unhelpful, even when they are true, we are doing it because we have an ego problem. When we talk down about people, it is because we have a high view of ourselves. To explain how slander comes from a prideful ego James explains how it relates to God's law. Let me show you the relationship.

You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord. Leviticus 19:16 (ESV)

This is God's law. It is the guide for how we are to live. Once we know slander is sin and we choose to slander others by sharing unhelpful and hurtful information, aren't we choosing to set aside the law? Aren't we saying that God's law doesn't apply to me? Are we not saying we can set God's law aside when we feel like it?

We have all watched a western movie that features a town with a crooked sheriff. He chooses to ignore the law for his own benefit. When we watch one of those westerns, the popular cliché forms in our mind, "Nobody is above the law."

The sheriff doesn't get to set aside the law just because he feels like it. He is a crooked sheriff.

But somebody who slanders and thinks they have the right to set aside God's law is doing the same thing. They think they are above the law. They think they have the right to say when God's law applies to them and when it doesn't. That kind of disregard for the law of God is a serious crime.

I want you to listen to this carefully.

The crime of slander is a higher crime than anything you are needlessly repeating.

The reason slander is so serious is because it is someone intentionally choosing to overrule God's law. Think about this. What sin is more serious? Someone who has a moral failure and is struggling to repent or someone who intentionally chooses to ignore what the Bible says about slander and blabs about that moral failure all over town through the telephone, Facebook and text messaging.

Behind the motivation of a slanderer is someone with an overinflated ego who thinks they are above the law. They have a pride problem. They are comfortable talking down at people because they think they are so much higher than everyone else. The truth is, the sin of their slander is actually more serious than what they are gossiping about. We are *all* desperately in need of grace.

Slander demeans someone made in God's image.

With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. James 3:9 (ESV)

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27 (ESV)

People have asked me through the years what it means when the Bible says we are created in the image of God. There are books written on the subject so a complete answer is much more than we can get into this morning, but for now, let me give you this much of an answer.

We have a moral and spiritual self-awareness like God. We are the supreme created beings on the planet. Just as God rules everything, we were given the right to rule the earth. No other created beings on this planet are made in the image of God. Animals are not made in God's image. We are.

As a city boy, I had to get this through my head the first time I went hunting. Being raised in the suburbs of New York, I didn't grow up killing animals for food. Meat always came neatly wrapped in Saran Wrap at the grocery store.

So before I went hunting for the first time, I went to Genesis. I read how animals were given to us for food. I got my theology straight. That way I could pull the trigger with a clear conscience. I can eat Bambi for dinner because God told me I can.

Now don't misunderstand me, I love animals. We have a cat, two ferrets and two deer at home. We feed the cat and the ferrets every day. The deer feed us every day. While I love animals, they don't rank on the same level as human

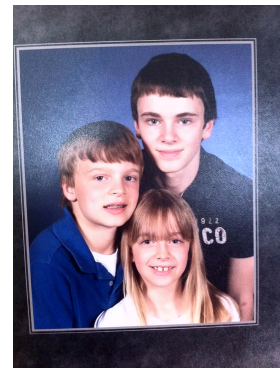
beings. We are image bearers of God. My ferrets, cat and the deer in my freezer are not image bearers.

As image bearers of God, God is extremely serious about protecting human life. In fact, every human life, bears the image of God and has inherent worth and value, no matter the age or the intellect. That is why murder was followed by capital punishment in the Old Covenant. The ultimate crime deserved the ultimate punishment. This was even true when it came to the taking of the life of a child in the womb. That child was not considered a mass of tissue, it was another person bearing the image of God.

“When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman’s husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. Exodus 21:22–25 (ESV)

Beyond taking a life, what about the taking of a reputation? What about destroying an individual’s honor, dignity and standing in the community. That is what slander does. It doesn’t just demean people, it insults God, whose image they were created in.

Let me explain it this way. If you were to come over my home, just inside the door, you would see a picture of our kids. Perhaps you came to our house because we are having dinner together. While you are waiting on the final preparations for the meal, you look at my kids’ picture and say, “Those are the ugliest kids I have ever seen.” I might have a few words with you. Cindy would chase you out of the house with her rolling pin.



You didn't just insult her children, you insulted her, because our children are created in our image.

That is what slander does. When we verbally drag people down, we are dragging down the God in whose image they are created. While Cindy will chase you out of our house with a rolling pin, I don't even want to know what God picks up when we insult his kids.

Slander is acting as the judge over your neighbor.

There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor? James 4:12 (ESV)

This is my favorite point of the bunch. Sometimes, when I am leading a group outside the church, the first-born-child nature in me wants to take charge and get things organized. When I act that way, somebody will inevitably say, "Who made you God?" In other words, who put you in authority over me? Implied in that statement is knowledge that there are some things only God has a right to do. This is what James is saying. Who gave you the right to be the lawgiver and the judge?

There is only one lawgiver and judge. There is only one who has the right to save people and destroy them. Yet the slanderer thinks we have the right to destroy people verbally. It's God's job to judge and destroy, not ours. Remember, we are sinners just like the person we are judging.

Note - This does not mean we should fail to use good judgment.

On the other side of the coin, lest we think we should be just mindless accepters of everything, we should talk about the most misused passage in the Bible.

“Judge not, that you be not judged.” Matthew 7:1 (ESV)

This is important stuff. There is a lot information on Matthew 7:1 in this week's small group worksheet, because we don't have time to dive into this too deeply.

Many people think *Judge not, lest you be judged* means we cannot make judgments about anything or anybody. They think everybody should mind their own business and not say anything about the actions of others. Ironically, this verse is often quoted by someone when they are confronted about sin in their lives.

What does this verse mean? Does it mean we shouldn't use discretion in personal relationships? Should we give our car keys to anyone who asks for them? It can't mean that because only five verses later Jesus requires us to make a judgment about people's spiritual state.

“Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.” Matthew 7:6 (ESV)

We have to judge who the dogs and the pigs are to obey the command.

In Matthew 7:15-20, we are told to make judgments about teachers because some of them are heretics. In fact, in another passage of Scripture, Jesus commands us to make judgments.

“Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.” John 7:24 (ESV)

In Matthew 18, the leadership of the church is told to make judgments and exclude from membership and fellowship those who refuse to repent of sin in their lives. Colossians 3:16 tells us to admonish one another, which means we

are to have loving confrontation when we see something ungodly in our brother or sister's Christian life.

What is Jesus talking about in Matthew 7? Read it in context and it is clearer. Jesus is not telling us that we can never exercise judgment, but he is condemning the judgmental nature of the Pharisees. They were quick to pick out every little thing people did wrong. Your hair is too long. Your hair is too short. You didn't pray long enough. You didn't sing loud enough. The key to understanding the type of judgments Jesus is talking about is seeing what they look like in Matthew 7:3ff. He said, *why do you worry about the speck of sawdust in somebody else's eye when you have a plank in your own?* Instead of spending your time trying to point out everybody else's problems, work on your own. Then he follows it up by saying first take the log out of your eye, *then you can see clearly to help somebody else.*

We all know people like this. As I talk about this, names and faces are coming to mind of people who always have a problem with everything.

Now before we wrap up, I want to get very practical and give you some help getting over the slandering tongue and the grumbling heart.

How to overcome a slandering tongue and grumbling heart.

Ask, what is my motive in speaking?

Is my motive for speaking to build a person up? To help them? To meet their needs? The Christian motive is always to love, which is always shooting for the good of others and, according to Philippians 2:3, to consider others better than ourselves. Why do I want to say what I am about to say? Is my motive to

love others and build them up? If not, we should put a cork in it until we change our channel.

Don't talk about people but to people.

Of course, we will talk about people. How can grandparents not talk about their grandchildren? But when our talking involves saying something about someone that the person would rather not be said, zip the lip. Some of you will tell me that if the person you are talking about was there, you would say the same thing to their face. Good! Go to them and say it to their face and nobody else's. Don't tell me and 500 other people. If something needs to be said, it needs to be said to the person, not about a person.

Let God render the final verdict.

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. 1 Corinthians 4:5 (ESV)

One of the great mistakes we make is we feel we need to judge people, especially those who have hurt us, and we do it with our mouth. First of all, we never know all the circumstances so our judgments are never perfect. Second, God is the judge, and he promises he will do a good job of judging others and us. Rather than slander someone who has hurt you or grumble about them in your heart, love them. Speak to them about the piece of their life that doesn't look like it makes good spiritual sense.

Conclusion

In life, and even in the church, this can be extremely hard. Sometimes people do things that are downright hurtful. Everything in us wants to say things

to others that will tear them down and show others why we are right and they are wrong.

When those times happen, and they will, I have one model for you. His name is Jesus. The worse thing ever done to someone was Jesus' crucifixion. He didn't deserve it. He was innocent. His character was defamed. What was said about him was a lie. Remember, it was all done by church-going people who thought they were honoring God. What did Jesus do? Rather than slander, he refused to open his mouth. On the cross, we don't find a grumbling savior. He entrusted himself to his heavenly father. He loved his enemies and became obedient to death. One of the last phrases out of his mouth was, "Father, forgive them."

How could Jesus, with confidence, entrust his life to his father's hand even when it looked like he was facing disaster? The answer to that question is the subject of next week's message.



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