

Gossip, Slander and Sinful Judging

Series: The Power of Words and the Grace of God

James 4:11-12

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Sermon Summary/Outline:

In this passage, James has two very basic points. First, he commands us in vs.11 “do not speak against on another, brothers” And then in the remainder of the passage, he explains why we shouldn’t do that....And so this morning my two points are very simply– “don’t do it” and “why shouldn’t I?”

POINT #1: Don’t Do It

- In verse 11, James issues a clear command, “do not speak evil against one another.” In this verse, James isn’t playing politics; he is not schmoozing us; and he’s not just kindly making a suggestion– no, he is telling the people in the church or churches in Jerusalem that there is something that they must not do; namely, they must not speak evil against one another.
- The phrase – to speak evil against, “describes many kinds of harmful speech.”
- This is a hard word for us – because sins of the tongue come with being fallen men and women.
- Our nation’s enemies use Improvised Explosive Devices in Iraq and Afghanistan to kill our soldiers. They don’t put them out in plain view! The only IED’s that have ever hurt our soldiers are the ones have gone undeserved, undetected, and un-defused. Or maybe the HumVee driver did notice something that looked suspicious but decided it was no big deal. That can be a fatal mistake.
- In his book titled “Respectable Sins” and subtitled “Confronting the sins we tolerate” noted author Jerry Bridges has devoted an entire chapter to helping us discern sin, in the area of evil speech. He wants us to see the danger ahead. And I have taken the liberty of incorporating some of his thoughts into this section of my message in order to help us to think more clearly about those sins that fall into the category of “evil speech”.

- Bridges notes that we speak against one other whenever we speak words of gossip, slander, biting sarcasm, harsh criticism; whenever we utter insults or words of hurtful ridicule towards, or about one another.
- Some of these sins occur when talking *to* one another, while another's occur in talking *of* one another. Last week we talked about sin that occurs in the "to one another context" – in the context of conflict – and this week I want to focus in the "talking of one another" category; that is when we speak about one person to someone else, or to a group of other people. And when it comes to that category, perhaps the two most common ways that we tend to sin as Christians are in the areas of gossip and slander.

"Gossip is the spreading of unfavorable information about someone else, even if that information is true." – *Jerry Bridges*

"To gossip means to reveal or discuss personal facts about another person for no legitimate purpose; it often betrays a confidence." – *Ken Sande*

- What gossip is not: Gossip is not going to talk to your pastor, or some other appropriate person – such as a Care Group leader – for the legitimate purpose of seeking counsel for how best to deal with or serve another person.
- Illustrations: Husband struggling with wife, church member struggling with another church member.

Slander: "involves speaking false and malicious words about another person."
– *Ken Sande*

"Slander is making a false statement or misrepresentation about another person that defines or damages that person's reputation." – *Jerry Bridges*

"...do Christians slander? Yes, we do. We slander when we ascribe wrong motives to people, even though we can't see their hearts or know their particular circumstances. We slander when we say another believer is "not committed" when he or she does not practice the same spiritual disciplines we do or engage in the same Christian activities we engage in. We slander when we misrepresent another person's position on a subject without first determining what that person's position is. We slander when we blow out of proportion another person's sin and make that person to be more sinful than he or she really is."
– *Jerry Bridges*

- “Have you ever been guilty of ascribing sinful motives to people for acting or behaving in a certain way and then communicating your “sense” to another person?” Well that’s slander...and I have been guilty of it too.
- Have you ever been offended by someone, exaggerated their sin in your own mind, and then communicated how you feel to someone else? Most, of us have. Its quite sobering to realize-that’s slander; that we have just disobeyed James’s command to not speak against one another.
- These sins, slander and gossip can be both actively and passively committed. We commit these sins, not only when we speak words of gossip and slander, but also when we stand by passively by, listening to gossip and slander (insight from CJ Mahaney).
- One day soon, in the near future, you will be in some setting where someone will be speaking words of gossip or slander to you and you have a responsibility in that moment to stop the conversation and to kindly but clearly inform them of the inappropriateness of the conversation and suggest politely that perhaps they should speak directly with the person they are offended with.
- There is no marital privilege with relation to these sins. In marriage we must help one another to not gossip and slander. Sin is all too willing to hijack the blessing of the comfort we experience in marriage for its own purposes. If you need counsel or help, it is appropriate for you to go to your spouse for the legitimate purpose of seeking help – but it is not appropriate to simply share a “choice morsel” of negative information about another person.

POINT #2 Why shouldn't I?

What makes evil speech so evil that I should avoid it at all costs?

A. Reason 1: We Judge God's Law

- First he tells, us that vs. 11 “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 is saying that when we gossip, when we slander – when we speak evil against our brother or our sister -- we are speaking evil against the law.
- What James means here by “the law”

- James 2:8 “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well.”
- As far as James is concerned – and this agrees with the teaching of Jesus – loving your neighbor is a big part of obeying God’s law – and so when you sin with your tongue against your brother – you in effect *speak evil against the law; you judge the law* – as you fail to love your neighbor, your brother, your sister. You say, “God’s law, it doesn’t apply to me in this situation”. What you really believe about God’s law comes through in how well you obey God’s law.

B. Reason 2: We Judge Our Neighbor

- When we speak against others, James tells us that we not only judge the law, but we judge our neighbor as well.
- Verse 12: “There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?”
- What James is saying is that when you make condemning and critical remarks about your brother, your sister -- you stand in the place of God. In your own heart, you arrogantly usurp God’s exclusive right to judge and to condemn the other person. And James reminds us of WHO in no uncertain terms is the only Lawgiver and Judge—God Himself.
- And this is what sinful judging is. Its playing God as it relates to other people. We assume that we know their motives are and we condemn them for it.
- Illustration: From Ken Sande – person who sinfully judged their pastor.
- Proud people do not make charitable judgments.
- I don’t think it’s a coincidence that immediately after verse 10 where James says, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exult you” – that James transitions in verses 11 and 12 to exhort us away from sinful speech and sinful judgments.
- This suggests that if we want to be a people who do not participate in the various forms of evil speech and are charitable in our judgments, the pursuit of humility is not optional; in fact it is essential. For it is only we truly see ourselves, and not another person, as the worst sinner that we know, it makes it awfully hard to look down on our brother or our sister – and to gossip about them – and to slander them – or to sinfully judge them.

- Illustration: CJ quoted World Magazine: Judge and Criminal

CONCLUSION

- This morning as we gather, is there someone has sinned so many times in the same ways that you find it difficult to judge charitably? Is there someone that you are times tempted to gossip about or slander because of how that individual has somehow offended you? If so, there is another question that you need to consider—do you think that you are better in the eyes of God than that person? In other words, are you the worst sinner that you know?
- May God humble us all and help us to realize in the words of the prophet Isaiah: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”
- We are not God; just sinners, desperately in need of a Savior. Thank God, we have One.

Questions For Reflection/Discussion:

Some of these questions are best suited for individual reflection before the Lord.

- 1) According to this passage, how does God view evil speech?
- 2) What does it mean to gossip? What does it mean to slander?
- 3) What is the difference between gossip on one hand and seeking wisdom from legitimate means for how to serve/help other people.
- 4) If you are struggling with your spouse—and need help with how to respond to them—who are the appropriate individuals to seek help from (married couples should discuss this). If you are struggling with a fellow church member and need wisdom for how to respond to that person – who should you go to?
- 5) Are you careful to not speak negatively of others, in particular those who may have sinned against you or offended you in some way? Does your negative view of someone come through in your conversations with other people?
- 6) Where do you need to repent of bitterness and pride towards other people – producing sinful judgments, gossip, and/or slander?
- 7) Where do you need to repent of patterns of gossip and/or slander?

- 8) Take a devotional time and consider:
- a. In what situations am I most tempted to gossip/slander?
 - b. Who am I most tempted to gossip/slander about?
 - c. Who am I most tempted to gossip/slander to (spouse, friend etc...)? Consider making a confession to that individual and ask them to hold you accountable in this area. If you begin to venture down paths of gossip/slander, ask them to stop the conversation and to remind you of the inappropriateness of the conversation.
 - d. In what situations have I passively stood by as others gossiped about or slandered other individuals? Pray and ask God to give you grace to intervene when conversations begin to head down paths of gossip or slander. Without spreading specific details of the gossip you've heard, confess your sin of passivity with respect to gossip/slander to your spouse and perhaps someone in your Care Group and ask them to hold you accountable in this area.
 - e. Are there ways that I subtly imply negative things about others in my circle of relationships -- through side comments, humor, sarcasm etc...? Ask God to give you a sensitive conscience and to speak to you when you may be inadvertently headed down paths of gossip/slander.
- 9) What steps will you take to grow in humility and in your awareness that "I am the worst sinner that I know?"