

James 4:11-12 Harmful Speech

In our text today we have a command: **“Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.”** And after the command, James tells us why.

1. What does it mean to “speak evil” against another person? Before answering this question, it is important to know our boundaries on harmful speech. The context of James is the body of Christ, with a particular application on the local body. The context is “brothers.” This is clear because we’ve seen a lack of peace as the people quarrel and fight and use their tongues in ways that harm. (See 3:1-12). But, this application also applies to non-Christians as well. I say this because in v. 12 James mentions our “neighbor.” Therefore, it is a sin to use our speech to harm anyone.

Now, let’s move on to the meaning. What is harmful speech? Well, have you ever called someone a name to their face or behind their back? Have you ever harmed your spouse with your words? Have you ever gotten upset at the news media and then uttered some kind of evil speech against that person? Well, these examples are certainly included in what James means by “evil speech.” But there is so much more. The literal translation of this word is to “speak against.” But, it is often translated as “slander.” It is speech that harms another person in some way. And it is a sin; which is why James commands us not to take part in harmful speech. As I looked in both the OT and the NT, to “speak evil against” or to “slander” has many applications that have to do with harmful speech. Let me mention some of these.

Harmful speech can be the wrongful questioning of legitimate authority. One example is when the people of Israel questioned the authority of Moses and God. In Num. 21:4-5 we read: **“And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.”** Children, do you question the authority of your parents and then speak to your siblings or friends about their authority? Does anyone question the authority of a boss and then grumble and complain to co-workers? Have you ever questioned the authority of your pastors and then used your speech to harm them? Does anyone use harmful speech against government officials? These are good questions to ask.

Another example. Harmful speech slanders someone else in secret. Again, to slander is to do someone harm by making a false statement. And this usually comes as a result of questioned motive. In other words, you think you know WHY someone did something, and you speak in a harmful way about them. The questioning of motive and then saying something as if it were true must be the GREATEST way to sow discord in the body of Christ than any other way! Let me say that again. The questioning of motive and then saying something as if it were true must be the GREATEST way to sow discord in the body of Christ than any other way! And then, we do this in secret. In other words, we question motive in our hearts and then we do not approach our brother or sister and give them a chance to explain. And then we tell someone else, all the while thinking we are just telling the truth. *“Hey, I’m just telling the truth.”* In Ps. 101:5 we find some very strong words indicating how much God hates those who slander in secret. **“Whoever slanders his neighbor secretly I will destroy.”** In Prov. 6:16-19 we read: **“There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies . . .”**

One more example, which may be the most obvious. Harmful speech makes incorrect accusations. This really follows our previous example, because even if we think we are right in our judgments and speech, we may be wrong. And when we make these kinds of accusations, we are simply wrong, and don't know it. But, this one also includes purposeful false accusations. This is often what the world does when it accuses Christians. 1 Pet. 2:12 says, "**Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.**" During Jesus' trial, untrue accusations were made against Jesus. This happened with Paul during his trial with the Jews as well. And it has happened with the martyrs throughout history.

There are other examples I have certainly missed. To speak evil against someone covers any speech that harms another person. And this is sinful. Now, this doesn't mean we are doormats. It doesn't mean we don't question authority or use our tongues to express truth. I will come back to this in a moment. But, we can use our tongues without engaging in harmful speech. Now, let's move to WHY harmful speech is wrong.

2. Why the command? It is one thing to say, "don't do something." And it is another to say, "*Don't do something,*" and then give the reasons why. This is what James does here. I have 3 reasons harmful speech is sinful. Whether harmful speech is directed against a brother in Christ or a non-Christian, it is a sin no matter what. However, James' context is particular for Christians in a local context.

i. Harmful speech is sinful because it judges a brother wrongly. Look at v. 11: "**The one who speaks evil against a brother or judges his brother . . .**" Here, James is equating harmful speech against a brother/sister with some kind of judgment. At least in James' context, one brother or sister was judging another person wrongfully. And this was evident in harmful speech. James is following the words of Jesus who says in the Sermon on the Mount, "**Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?**" One may say, "Do not eat this. Do not drink that." Paul says "*one person esteems one day as better than another while another person esteems all days alike*" (Rom. 14:5). One person has a strong "biblical" position on a matter of ethics. Another person also has a strong "biblical" position on the same matter of ethics. One person says, "*I cannot watch that movie.*" Another person says, "*It is ok.*" One Christian says, "*dating is good and ok for my little girl,*" while another says, "*it is only good to court.*" This MAY also apply to the wearing of masks. There are all kinds of reasons we may judge one another wrongly and then find ourselves harming one another with our speech.

ii. Harmful speech is sinful because it judges the law. Now, as we've seen with a couple earlier passages when James speaks of the law, I do believe James is referring to Mosaic Law. After all, Lev. 19:16 says, "**You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people.**" And, to slander someone falls under the general command not to bear false witness. At the same time, I believe James is referring to how the law of God has been fulfilled in Christ, and is now referred to as the "law of love." When we judge our brother wrongfully, we do not fulfill the royal law, which is the law of love. Unjust criticism of a fellow believer contradicts the demand that we love our neighbor, as Christ has loved us. And when we judge our brother wrongly, as evident

with harmful speech, we judge the law, and put ourselves above the law. How do we do this? Look at v. 12 as we move to reason #3.

iii. Harmful speech is sinful because it judges God. V. 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.”** When you speak about a brother or neighbor in a harmful way, judging that person wrongfully, you take the place of God, who gives the law. Do you see James’ reasoning? Here it is: When you speak in a harmful way and judge wrongly another person, you break both the specific command not to slander and the royal of love. And when you do this, you also commit idolatry by placing yourself in the place of God. James makes this clear. **“He is able to save and to destroy.”** God is the judge. God is the lawmaker. And when we presume to know the spiritual state of another person in such matters, we make ourselves out to be God himself. Now, before moving to some applications, let me recap James’ argument on why harmful speech is sinful.

1) It is sinful because we judge our brother; And 2) When we judge our brother with harmful speech, we judge the law; and 3) When we judge the law, we judge God, placing ourselves above God himself. With this in mind, I have some applications.

Application: We can and must make right judgments, both in the world and in the church. As regards the people of God in the church, we must discriminate rightly. We have a right as a congregation to do our best in “judgment” to decide if a person is a Christian or not. And, we have every right as those who have the “keys of the Kingdom” to exclude unrepentant persons from fellowship. And we have every right to determine what is right and wrong among ourselves. This is not the kind of judgment James is talking about. Again, he is speaking about wrongly judging and speaking evil against a brother or neighbor by taking the place of God and the law, questioning another person’s faith, condemning them wrong in the sight of God.

This is the same type of judging Paul condemned. Look with me to Rom. 14 as an example. In vv. 1-4 we read: **“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”** And then in v. 5: **“One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.”** And then in vv. 10-13: **“Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.” So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.”**

Application: The world will direct harmful speech against us. But Peter tells us how to respond in 1 Pet. 3:14-17: **“But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope**

that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil."

Application: Even if something is true about a person, we should not speak it to another, unless there is absolute reason to speak it. Think about all the times we merely share the "truth" when it does not help our brother or sister, or neighbor.

Application: James' command not to speak evil or slander extends to everyone. However, it is most destructive in a local group of believers. For this is where we live, who we hang out with, etc. But, it is a sin to speak evil in this way against ANYONE. Parents, when we sit with our kids and watch television or sit around the table as we discuss life, school, sports, politics, religion, etc., do we speak evil of anyone. It is ok to point out the truth in someone's error, but we must refrain from speaking evil, questioning their motive. What I am talking about here moves us further along to maturity. This could be one of the "nitty gritty" points of sanctification. We should take the advice of my grandmother who said, *"If you can't say anything nice, don't say it at all."* And if we want to take it to its logical conclusion, we must move all the way to the heart. Even if we refrain (which is good), maybe our slander continues in the heart.

Application: If you are not willing to confront your brother or sister about their sin against you (or perceived sin against you), then let it go. Forget about it. For love covers a multitude of sins. This should be our test. If you think your brother or sister is sinning or has sinned against you, go to the person in love and talk to that person. If you are NOT willing, then you should forget about it and treat it as if it never happened. And if it continues to bother you, pray to God for love for your brother or sister. And if it continues, go see the person. If not, love covers a multitude of sins. This is maturity!

Application: Speaking evil (critical speech in James' context) is almost always accompanied with other sins. Jealousy (2 Cor. 12:20; 1 Pet. 2:1), selfishness (2 Cor. 12:20), quarrels (context of James), pride, and double-mindedness (see James at 3:13-4:10). Harmful speech is exactly what it is! It harms, both us and our neighbors! Quarrels over most issues usually end up including personal attacks and judgmental attitudes. A good example is a church split.

Application: Notice the depths of sin we find even within a local body. Up until this time James addressed them as "adulterous" people, "double minded," etc. Now, he addresses them as "brothers."

Application: Can you gain from harmful speech? The world thinks it can gain something by harmful speech. But, in the end, it is sin. And judgment will find its course in due time. As Christians, we must be different! And I must say that this can only be accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Application: Christians, that is, those who have the Holy Spirit, receive instruction well. I say that because this topic is always the most difficult to evaluate and receive. For often we honestly don't know if our speech is harmful or not. Or, we are just immature; we are not very wise with the use of our tongues and to move forward in this area is SO difficult. For it requires

HUMILITY. We want what we want, at the expense of harming our brother or sister. **“What causes quarrels and fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?”** (Does this sound like James speaking?) As a pastor, I say to you brothers and sisters, “Move on to maturity!” Watch your tongue! Bite your tongue! Get down on your knees and pray that God would move your motive to love for your brother and sister! In this way we love another. And we become more and more, LIGHT in this world, instead of acting like the world! As James says, **“You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?”** (4:4).

At the end of the day, how we do what I am asking? We look unto Christ, the author and finisher of our faith! First consider him as the perfect example. How many times was he misunderstood, questioned, looked down upon, thought of as a fool? How many times did he bite his tongue? Actually, I don't think Jesus bit his tongue because he didn't have a sin nature; his thoughts were always righteous. But, at the same time, He spoke critically in righteous anger often!

Second, look unto Christ as the one who forgives you for ALL your harmful speech! (This is the good news of the gospel!)