

Text: James 4:11-12

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Series: James

Title: Who are you to judge?

Five ways to turn a sheepdog-sheep back into a normal sheep and cure a critical and judgemental character

1. Stop biting other sheep (11a)
2. Never bark at the Shepherd's rules (11b)
3. Obey like every sheep should (11c)
4. Fear the Shepherd (12a)
5. Join the flock (12b)

Open your Bibles to the letter of James, written for Christians scattered throughout this world.

It appears from this first God-given letter to His Church so many years ago, that judgmentalism is a serious problem for Christians.

In chapter 1 the quickness to speak and get angry introduced us to the sense of self-superiority that often dominates our hearts.

In chapter 2 the superficial opinions of others that we harbour in our hearts was attacked head-on and corrected by the royal law of "love your neighbour".

In chapter 3 our tongues got a verbal beating for the way they blurt out disdain of another in a moment of hypocrisy. Chapter 3 then continued attacking our inflated sense of self-importance by pointing us to the devil to see where the ungodliness of self-esteem comes from.

In Chapter 4 the sin of self-pleasing was found to be at the root of all our fights and quarrels.

It is a sad reality in the church of Jesus Christ when a believer thinks much of self and little of one another. When we continuously find fault with others, place ourselves on the seat of judgement over others, consider ourselves exalted enough to pass a critical remark on another, or when we add a touch of malice to our words about another and speak evil of them, then we have fallen deep into the pit of sin that has plagued Christians from the beginning.

Listen to what Pastor James wrote to his scattered congregation in the early years of the Church.

READ James 4:11-12.

Who are you to judge another? In the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgement 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?

Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye?

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

It is true that we need to judge the evil, falsehoods, and divisions among us. 1 Corinthians 5:13 "Purge the *evil* person from among you." Galatians 1:9 "If anyone is preaching to you a gospel *contrary* to the one you received, let him be accursed". Titus 3:10-11 "As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned."

It is true that we need to judge the sin and evil and falsehoods among us, *but even then*, consider "who are you to judge?"! Jesus said in John 7:22 "Judge with right judgement", not, as the Pharisees did, "with your own authority".

We, in modern Christianity, even have a word for the bad kind of judging: "judgementalism".

Today is about this evil judgementalism that exists in Christianity.

Consider in all your fault-finding with others, all your evil speaking of another, all your critical remarks, all your opinionated statements, all your slander, all your talking down to another, consider: "who are you to judge?".

James 4:6 warned us that God opposes the proud. James 4:10 ended with a command to "humble yourself" and let God, not you, exalt you.

All your fights and quarrels are because you already think too highly of yourself. You think that your preferences, expectations, rights, and desires are more important than another, and so you fight and quarrel. You believe that you are in the right, or at least less-wrong than the other, and so that the fights and quarrels *continue*.

Then, you start *talking* about the fights and quarrels to your like-minded friends. You speak evil of the other person, you degrade them in your side of the story, you break down their reputation a little, you blab on about them hoping for affirmation of how bad they are and how noble you are.

But "Who are you to judge another?" Are you in the place of God? Even Job, rightly defending himself before his friends still put his hand on his mouth when *God* spoke.

The haunting question that must always linger somewhere in our hearts is this question that ends verse 12 "who are you to judge your neighbour?".

This question is the safeguard against the proud sin of judgmentalism and all its evil cousins.

The main flow of thought in these two verses is very simple.

Beginning of verse 11, "Do not slander a brother", because, rest of verse 11, to slander a brother is to slander, yes judge, the law, and, verse 12 adds, to judge the law is to usurp God.

For us to be assured of true saving faith, we need to stop our judgmentalism.

Today the Word of God addresses this sin that comes from a critical and judgemental character. There is a simple prohibition that starts our passage for today, but then some very serious explanations are given, forcing us to an obvious answer to the question that ends these verses.

Pastorally I want to put a finger on any and every form of ungodly judgmentalism in our hearts today.

It won't be pleasant, but it will be easy for two obvious reasons. First, it is easy to expose judgementalism in our hearts when we have verses from God like the ones before us today—just explain the verses (that's good preaching), and God's Spirit will do the work.

Secondly, it is easy to put a finger on any and every form of ungodly judgmentalism in our hearts today, for my heart was the experiment of this all week already, and when it comes to the common acceptable sins among mankind, our hearts are all the same.

I want you, by way of an outline today, to consider a sheepdog among sheep. A true sheepdog obeys the shepherd in loving

care of the sheep. But, when a sheep acts like a sheepdog, raising itself over the sheep, as some sort of judge of the sheep, then you have a problem.

It never actually happens among real sheep, but it happens all too often among the flock of God. This sheep, that takes on the role of a sheepdog, is the picture of this sin of a critical and judgemental character among Christians. Since it is not a real sheepdog, but just a sheep acting like a sheepdog, we will call it a sheepdog-sheep.

So, by way of outline, Five ways to turn a sheepdog-sheep back into a normal sheep.

The first way to turn a sheep-dog sheep back into a normal sheep, and to cure a critical and judgemental character is: ...

STOP BITING OTHER SHEEP (11A)

Just like the first cure for food poisoning is to stop eating the rotten food, so the first cure for a critical and judgemental character is to stop saying all those bad things about others.

READ v. 11a.

After the "adulterers" address in verse 4, we are back to the pastorally warm address of "one another" and "brothers". Spiritual family, this is for us.

Sadly, slander after starts with the closest of relationships.

It is understandable that we tend to speak evil of one another more than we slander strangers because we know the

weaknesses and sins of those close to us better than we do the weaknesses and sins of strangers.

We are often together. We fellowship together. We pray for one another. We speak to one another in the ups and downs of life. We share each others burdens.

Consequently we know things about one another that is best not shared with others. Or, we observe things about one another that are best not dwelt upon or verbalised.

But, the temptation comes. The temptation to open your mouth comes, and we, all too often, speak evil of one another. Yes, fellow-believers slander one another. Christians, destroying another Christian's reputation, end up destroying their own reputation before the world.

We place ourselves as 'worthy judges' over one another. We make a major deal of minor flaws and minimise the honourable good of those whom we disapprove of. Even the necessarily Biblical judgement of one another is often littered with sinful judgmentalism.

A spelling mistake or mispronunciation in a good encouragement is exposed more than the encouragement is welcomed. Or the obvious spiritual gift of a brother or sister is ignored because of the human weakness that sometimes accompanies it. Non-attendance at church is noticed and confronted but the burden of the person is never lifted. A callous departure from one church to another is often shrouded in gossip and slander.

Personal preferences, church traditions, family habits, and unbiblical expectations of one another become a new law that

we strongly impose on another while openly disobeying the royal law of God to love one another.

Judgementalism seems to be a sin more common among believers than unbelievers!

To cure ourselves of such opinionated judgmentalism, we need, at the very least, in those moments, to simply stop talking. As my dad would say, "If you cannot say anything good about another, then don't say anything at all." That, by itself isn't enough, but it is the necessary beginning. Stop speaking evil against one another, brothers.

Stop biting other sheep.

This "speak evil against" practise includes many different expression. Judgmentalism is perhaps the most inclusive term, but it would include being overly critical of one another, being opinionated, talking down to one another; slander and insults are included, false accusations, unnecessary true accusations, exaggeration or repetition of true accusations while minimising one's virtues, all of these are included under "speaking evil against".

What makes these all so evil, is the subtle, or not-so-subtle, *malicious intent*.

If serious sin and falsehood is present among us, we need to deal with it very clearly. But as soon as a bit of malice enters the picture, no matter how subtly so, then we have crossed the line.

Thinking yourself superior to another is never the right position from which to help one another with real problems.

Vindicating yourself by discrediting another is never allowed between one another.

Manipulating another through their shortcomings, to get your way or to make them feel bad, is the wisdom from below.

"Brothers, sisters, do not speak evil against one another."

I was thinking of how to keep myself from doing this, and so I've added a little ever-ready, pre-packaged phrase to the inside of my cheek that I can use when I've started a story that I know is going to elevate me and is going to speak evil of another.

The following phrase is my pre-meditated and ready for use interruption of this sinful practice: "I'm sorry, I should not be telling you this story because I'm biased to myself."

By the grace of God, that will work, won't it?

Let us do what it takes to stop biting other sheep.

The second way to turn a sheepdog-sheep back into a normal sheep and so cure a critical and judgemental character is: ...

NEVER BARK AT THE SHEPHERD'S RULES (11B)

It is good not to slander, but the words are merely the final expression, and a deeper sin lies within. A sheepdog that bites a sheep is probably also a sheepdog who barks at the shepherd and his rules.

Back to our self-appointed sheepdog-sheep, this is a person who knows better than the sheep, and will even correct the shepherd if needed.

READ verse 11 a-b.

This is still the same judgemental person, but now the transition is made from "speak against" to "judge", and more importantly, the transition is made from judging a *brother* to judging the *law*.

This is a significant transition.

You see, if you were to judge rightly, you would be helping a brother overcome a sin of sorts, and you will honour the law both in exposing his sin and in how you speak to him.

But, when you are being critical and judgemental in the more common evil sense, you are, by speaking evil against the other person, placing yourself as the judge of that person. Also, because the standard of judgement is your own personal pet peeves, expectations and criteria, you have pushed the law of God aside to insist on your own ways.

If you bite another sheep, you've barked at the shepherd and his rules already too.

Turn to the passage in the Law of Moses that James clearly seems to have in mind as he writes these two verses.

Turn to Leviticus 19.

We are familiar with the end of Leviticus 19:18 "you shall love your neighbour as yourself".

Remember, back in James 2:8 that commandment was even used by James as the more timeless "royal law" for all believers. But look at the context here in Leviticus 19 as it builds up to the "love your neighbour" commandment.

READ Leviticus 19:15-18.

Verse 15 is about righteous judgement—no partiality, no personal standards or opinions, objective righteousness.

Verse 16 is exactly like our verse in James 4:11, do not slander one another.

Verse 17 tells you to check your motive so that the sin of your brother doesn't become an occasion of sin for you too.

Verse 18, don't take justice in your own hands, even if only, as James says, by speaking evil of one another.

Up to now this is concept-for-concept our passage in James, is it not?! And then, verse 18 ends, "love your neighbour as yourself" which we will return to at the end of James 4:12 in a few minutes. This is the law that James 4:11 is referring to.

We are all sheep under one shepherd. We all stand on equal standing with one another under the law of God—customised for the people of Israel in the law of Moses, and customised for NT Christians in the NT books like the book of James.

So if then, I disobey one of God's commands through a critical and judgemental verdict on you based on my own standards, then I have removed myself from an equal standing with you, and placed myself above you as your judge. Furthermore, I have also removed the Law of God from its universal rule over us both, and placed myself in its place.

I have thereby made myself both the judge and the law under which I subject you and under which I subject God's law.

No longer is the primary issue "evil speaking against a brother" (biting other sheep), now the issue is "judging the law" (barking

at God). Not only does my *speech* put you down, but my *standard* replaces God's law. This makes evil speaking against one another a whole lot more evil than just an act of slander.

The cure for this is therefore deeper than just stop biting other sheep. The cure for this is to never bark at the shepherd's rules.

How do we bark at the shepherd's rules? After biting another sheep, we bark at the shepherd's rules by our *excuses* for judgementalism. We act as though God's different laws are given to us at different levels. On top is worship God, and we'd never disobey that. But lower down you have laws like this one in verse 11 "Do not speak evil against one another", but either below or above it you have other laws too. And sometimes, at least we act this way, sometimes one law trumps another, and you *have* to disobey one to obey the other.

And so we always have an excuse! "Your sin of doing a half-hearted job justifies my sin of criticising you." "Your sin of not being at church, home-group, prayer meeting and Bible-hour justifies my sin of calling you out on it every time." "It is OK for me to break the commandment that begins verse 11, because you did something that deserves criticism."

God's law does not work that way! You don't get to decide that some laws trump other laws. That just an excuse to place yourself as judge over another and even as judge over God's law. God's law is a unified whole, not a hierarchy of commandments where one law trumps another.

Keep your mouth from biting one another, but also keep your mouth from barking excuses back at the shepherd's rules. Your

judgementalism of another is simply the tattle-tale of an over-opinionated heart.

Your speaking evil of a brother is evidence that you see yourself as the judge of your brother and as the newest interpreter of God's law. Your opinion on God's law and how it proves others guilty but vindicates you is as evil as the evil-speaking.

Stop both of them.

Stop slandering other Christians, and stop barking excuses against God's Law.

Now, up to now, we have put a stop to two serious sins.

What are the replacements?

The third way to turn a sheepdog-sheep back into a normal sheep and cure a critical and judgemental character is: ...

OBEY LIKE EVERY SHEEP SHOULD (11C)

Stop your mouth from speaking evil against others. Stop making excuses against God's Law. Stop all that, and just focus on your own obedience. Stop acting like a self-appointed sheepdog, and just act like a sheep should.

READ verse 11c.

If you are quicker to see the flaws of others than you are to see your own sins, then this is your sermon, your verse. Ouch, right?! It is all fine and well to talk about the law, and judging it, and how it all relates to evil speaking, and certainly the opinionated man of the beginning of verse 11 will probably have an opinion on this end of verse 11 too.

But this is where God stops you and me right in our tracks. Verse 11 does not end with some further explanation of God's law and the right view of it. It simply points to *your responsibility* to the law. The law requires, not analysis, opinion, personal interpretations, or elaborate views, it requires obedience.

This reminds us of Jesus' ministry to the woman who had committed adultery, and was caught in the act and brought before the experts of the law—the scribes and Pharisees.

John 8 recounts that event for us. Remember, they come to Jesus to expose her, and they quote the OT law that "command us to stone such a woman ... so what do you say, Jesus?" John 8:6 "This they said to test him".

They had already judged her, they were just first going to have a debate on the various interpretations and applications of the law. Jesus, you remember, ignores them at first. He starts drawing pictures on the ground! (or something or another, we are not told except that he wrote with his finger on the ground).

They keep harassing Jesus, because they are self-proclaimed experts on the law, hoping to use the sins of this woman to judge Jesus too. Eventually Jesus stands up again, you can probably hear a hush as the Pharisees stop their attacks to hear Jesus' reply. Remember what He said? He didn't share his interpretation of the law and discuss it with them. He didn't rank the commandments or categorise them according to some personal artificial criteria, Jesus drew out the full force of the divine intent of the law, and said: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." (John 8:7).

And then, stooping down, Jesus continues his writing, and slowly everyone leaves with a *conviction* from the law of God regarding their *own* obedience-shortcomings.

Jesus, from his crouched position, probably seeing the feet shuffling away awkwardly, looks up a little later and sees that all have left. The only people remaining under the conviction of the real intent of the law was the lady who didn't really have a choice, and the one who was truly without sin, our Lord Jesus.

What did Jesus say to her? Did He stone her? No, He affirmed her need to change and sin no more, and then let her go with no condemnation.

Not one of us here today is without sin. Therefore our biggest care should not be the sins of *another*, but the sins of *ourselves*.

If Jesus, the sinless one, didn't condemn that lady but rather sent her away with an exhortation, certainly we should be even slower to speak evil of one another! Even the scribes and Pharisees eventually walked away because, in spite of all their hypocrisy, they couldn't deny their own sinfulness.

How much more should we, who hate hypocrisy, not be quick to realise our own failures to obey all that God has commanded us.

Turn your clear vision of the sins of others into a clear vision on your own sins. The cure to speaking evil against one another is to see what evil is still remaining within ourselves. The cure to judgementalism is submission to the point of obedience.

Instead of placing yourself *above* the law of God in your judgemental application of it on another, place yourself *under* the law of God, right next to the one you criticise so much.

Stop acting like a sheepdog, and act like a real sheep again. Be a doer of the Word, not a judge of it. If you will speak evil against a man, speak evil against yourself, for certainly you are more informed of your own secret sins than you are of the sins of another.

If you will analyse the law and make yourself to be some sort of self-proclaimed expert on God's law, then prove your expertise on God's law with an expert obedience to it. As one pastor once exhorted me: the more godly, actually act more godly.

The best of sheep, act like sheep should—submissive, obedient. You would think this would end the discussion, but James still has one more verse on this topic.

But, before we get to verse 12, give verse 11 another thought. What is true about slander, evil speaking against another, and judgementalism that will make verse 11 not enough to convict you?

Is it not this, that you will even use your obedience to justify your judgementalism?! Is it not true that we only judge others for the things we tend to be *less* guilty of?

"I *do* tithe of everything I get, that is why I berate you for giving so little." "I *do* have consistent family worship, that is why I'm exposing your lack of it." "I *do* attend every church function, that is why I'm rebuking your absence last Sunday."

But that is not the obedience in mind here. The obedience here is not only in the one matter in which you judge another. Think back to John 8—the Pharisees with the woman caught in adultery. They didn't leave the presence of the Lord because they were all guilty of adultery too (perhaps some did). They left because, as Jesus put it, they were not "without sin".

Jesus didn't say, "all those guilty of *her* sin, leave, so that only those who are *obedient* in that regard can stay to judge her". No, Jesus said "he who is *without* sin (*any* sin!), cast the first stone".

We stop our critical, judgemental, evil speaking of another by focussing on *all* the areas in which we are not yet obeying the law of our God. We cure judgementalism by turning our laser sharp eyes onto *ourselves* to "cleanse *ourselves* from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God" (2 Cor 7:1).

Obey like a sheep should.

Obey the shepherd, don't sheepdog the sheep.

Which brings us to the fourth way to turn a sheepdog-sheep back into a normal sheep and cure a critical and judgmental character which is: ...

FEAR THE SHEPHERD (12A)

READ verse 12a.

You might have raised yourself above a brother or sister. You might have raised yourself as an expert of the law even. But,

God still looks *down* at you. All your self-elevation was pretend. Only you believed it.

The reality is that God is still looking down at you positioned alongside all the rest of mankind. "There is only one lawgiver and judge" and it is not you. There aren't even *levels* of law-giving and judging. You are either the one who *gave* the law, or the one who needs to *obey* the law—there is no mid-management supervisor role. In God's flock, there is no sheepdog! He is the shepherd, you and I are just another sheep.

Learn to fear the Shepherd again.

It is good to be reminded of our non-God-ness from time to time, isn't it?

Back to the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery, the one two people left was Jesus, the law-giver and judge, and the sinful woman—all the self-appointed representatives of God left ashamed, admitting their own sinfulness. Jesus *saved* that woman that day, and Jesus *destroyed* the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

Those whose sins are obvious and come to the law-giver and judge in humble confession leave forgiven! But those who come to the judge accusing others of their many sins leave self-condemned.

I grew up with a strong sense of judgmentalism—my parents were more faithful than most other so-called Christian parents, and I boasted in it!

I knew my Bible (well, part of it at least). I knew my meticulous obedience (again, small portions of it). I knew the

commandments everyone else was breaking. I tithed even my pocket money! I memorised key verses from the Bible—in 200-year old English (the common 1769 edition)!

In my youthful zeal I was "holier than thou", but in reality my theology was shallow, my Biblical understanding selective, and the list of sins worthy of judgement excluded all my sins.

What was it that softened my heart and added some pastoral warmth and care to my fellowship with the saints? This very thought summed up so well in James 4:12 - God is God, and I am not. The sheep had learned to fear the Shepherd.

And if God, as proven so clearly in the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus, will save, rather than destroy a sinner, and I am that sinner, then surely I should stop pretending to be everyone's sheepdog.

Raise your view of God!

Stop rehearsing your rebukes of another, and rehearse to yourself the Isaiah chapter 6 on the holiness of God. Recognise that God can save or destroy whomever He chooses and that He will not be consulting you. Recognise that God is quick to save rather than quick to destroy. Recognise that God saved you when destruction might have been more appropriate. Recognise that there is only one who can save and destroy, and that it is not you.

Learn again to fear the Shepherd, and then, what always happens as a necessary consequence of a high view of God,

... the fifth way to turn a sheepdog-sheep back into a normal sheep and cure a critical and judgemental character is: ...

JOIN THE FLOCK (12B)

What "a withering question" [Hiebert 244] ends verse 12!! "but who are you to judge your neighbour?"

"If we are prone to be critical rather than be changed, we should put our hands on our mouths." [Piper, *Providence*, 14]

That's a quote from John Piper's oversize book on God's Providence. Let me say it again. "If we are prone to be critical rather than be changed, we should put our hands on our mouths."

James changes the object of our judging from "one another" to "our neighbour" here.

This change accomplishes two purposes. First of all, it *broadens* the conviction. Verse 11 prohibits speaking evil of another Christian, but verse 12 extends that prohibition to all critical judgementalism of all people.

But, second, this change from "brother" to "neighbour", especially in the context of "law", brings us back to royal law of 2:8, right? Chapter 2:1-9 is all about the superficial opinions that we judge others by. Within that section, 2:8 says "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself", you are doing well."

That is the law we break when we slander other Christians. That is the law we break when we spout forth our excuses against God's law. That is the law we ought to be obeying, rather than judging.

If you obey "love your neighbour", you won't be so critical of them. If you obey "love your neighbour", you won't harbour personal opinions against them. If you obey "love your neighbour", you will sense your responsibility under the law more than you will see the faults of others.

Lower your view of self. You are not without sin. You are not allowed to speak evil against another. You are not the judge of any man. You are not the expert on the law of God. You are not the judge. You are not the law-giver. In fact, exactly "who are you, to judge your neighbour"?

May we all answer as Job did, when he felt the full weight of God's God-ness Job 40:4-5, "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further."

Stop acting like a sheepdog, judging your neighbour, instead, sense the significance of the word "neighbour" here, and submit again under the royal law of Christianity, to "love your neighbour as yourself."

Join the flock again in true Christian neighbourly love.

How do you fix a sheep with a sheepdog disorder?

First, stop biting other sheep.

Second, never bark at the Shepherd's laws.

Third, obey like every sheep should.

Fourth, fear the Shepherd who is able to get rid of you too if you don't change.

And fifth, re-join the flock; love one another—as a fellow sheep.

Amen