

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## THE SIN OF JUDGING OTHERS

James 4:11-12

By

Steven J. Cole

September 4, 2005

© Steven J. Cole, 2005

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to: [www.fcfonline.org/sermons](http://www.fcfonline.org/sermons)

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture  
Quotations are from the New American  
Standard Bible, Updated Edition  
© The Lockman Foundation

September 4, 2005  
James Lesson 17

## The Sin of Judging Others James 4:11-12

I once served on a jury for a drunk driving case. The defendant had a blood alcohol level twice the legal limit. The judge carefully instructed us that our job was to determine if this woman had, in fact, broken the law. I naively thought that the case was a slam-dunk. We shouldn't have to deliberate longer than a few minutes.

We got into the jury room and one guy piped up, "I can drink that much and drive without any problem!" Someone else chimed in with similar comments. Some ladies said how nice the young woman seemed to be. I couldn't believe it! They were totally ignoring the judge's instructions! After three hours of wrangling, another juror and I finally had persuaded everyone of the woman's guilt, except for one woman. She said, "I could never vote to convict her, because the Bible says, 'Judge not, lest you be judged.'"

It was late in the day, and I knew that if we didn't convict her, we'd all have to come back the next day. So I said, "None of us wants to come back tomorrow. We're going to convict her, so you just keep quiet!" That's how justice was done!

There is hardly any verse of the Bible that is more misunderstood than Jesus' words, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged" (Matt. 7:1). And there is hardly any verse that is more frequently disobeyed among Christians than that verse! For years I have had it on my prayer list for myself, yet I have disobeyed it many times. I'm sure that I'm not an exception. Also, keep in mind that it is a sin to judge another person in your heart, even if you keep your thoughts to yourself. Judgmental words eventually will flow out of a judgmental heart, but the sin begins in the heart. It is a manifestation of pride; we think that we're better than others are.

In concluding this section on resolving conflicts (James 4:1), James elaborates on Jesus' command against judging one another. His message is:

To resolve conflicts, stop judging others and submit to God's authoritative Word.

1. To resolve conflicts, stop judging others.

That command is easy to state, but it's a bit more complex to understand. So we need to carefully define this sin.

A. What judging others does *not* mean:

- (1) It is not judging someone to be discerning with regard to his character or teaching.

Many people cite Matthew 7:1 about not judging others, but they never bother to read down to verse 6, where Jesus says, "Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine...." He was talking about *people* who are dogs and swine! To obey verse 6, you must make some *judgmental* decisions about the person's character! "That guy is a dog! That guy is a swine!"

Also, if you keep reading (Matt. 7:15), Jesus says, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves." It takes a discerning sheep to recognize, "That's not a true sheep! That's a wolf dressed like a sheep!" It requires *judging* the man's teaching as false.

We live in times when tolerance, unity, and "love" (which usually means, being nice) are dominant themes in the evangelical church. If you dare to confront or expose sin, or if you label someone's teaching as unbiblical, or the person as a false teacher, you get accused of being judgmental and unloving. But the Bible is clear that a pastor is being extremely *unloving* to allow wolves to prey on the flock or to allow sinning believers to infect the flock without confronting and exposing them.

Note Romans 16:17-18: "Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting."

Some would say that it's okay to expose the false doctrine in general terms, but that you should never specifically name a false teacher. I've been criticized and have had people leave the church because I have named men like Norman Vincent Peale or Robert Schuller as false teachers. But in 1 Timothy 1:19, Paul mentions

that some have rejected faith and a good conscience, “and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith.” He doesn’t leave it there, but goes on (1:20), “Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme.” In 2 Timothy 2:17, he names Hymenaeus and Philetus, adding (2:18), “men who have gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and they upset the faith of some.”

In 2 Timothy 4:10, Paul tells Timothy, “Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me....” In verse 14, he warns Timothy about “Alexander the coppersmith,” who did Paul much harm. In 3 John 9-10, the apostle of love warns the flock about “Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them,” but “does not accept what we say.” Paul names two quarreling ladies, Euodia and Syntyche, urging them “to live in harmony in the Lord” (Phil. 4:2). He pointedly tells the church in Colossae, “Say to Archippus, ‘Take heed to your ministry’” (Col. 4:17). He named names!

The apostles were not, in any of these instances, wrongly judging others. So we must conclude that it is not judging someone to exercise discernment about ungodly behavior or false teaching.

- (2) It is not judging someone to speak to him (and, if necessary, to others) about sin or false teaching.

I’ve heard people say, “I could never confront anyone about their sin, because we’re not supposed to judge others. Let him who is without sin cast the first stone!” But this is to dodge a difficult, but loving, responsibility. If you see your child about to run in front of a speeding car, you would do everything in your power to warn him. If you see a brother in Christ about to ruin his life by sin or by believing false, damnable doctrine, love should motivate you to do everything possible to warn him.

In our text, James was not being judgmental by confronting this sin in the church. In James 5:19-20, he states, “My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”

On a personal level, such confrontation is the responsibility of every spiritual believer (Gal. 6:1). It should begin in private, unless

the sin is public to start with (Gal. 2:11-14; 1 Cor. 5:1-13). If the sinning person does not listen to you, then take another mature believer with you, or involve someone else who can try to minister to the sinning person. If he still refuses to listen, it may be necessary to tell it to the entire church and to remove the person from the fellowship (Matt. 18:15-18).

As a general rule, the circle of those who are informed of the situation should be limited to those who can help or to those who need to be protected. The aim should always be to restore the sinning believer, to protect the church from sin, and to honor God. But it is not being judgmental and it is acting in love to confront sin and false teaching in the church.

- (3) It is not judging someone to evaluate spiritual maturity or doctrinal views for ministry or shepherding purposes.

To make wise ministry decisions and to shepherd the flock, you must make judgments about a person's character and doctrinal views. Sometimes you must communicate your evaluations to others that may be affected by the person's immaturity or unbiblical views. Sometimes I have to tell people that, in my judgment, they should not attend another church in town, based on my knowledge of the ministry there. This is not being judgmental if my motive is to help the person I'm talking with to grow in Christ by avoiding a church where holiness and sound doctrine are not priorities.

B. What judging others wrongly does mean:

- (1) You judge someone wrongly when you criticize him out of jealousy, bitterness, selfish ambition, or some other sin, rather than seeking to build him in Christ.

In other words, your motive is crucial! When James says (4:11), "Do not speak against one another," some versions translate it, "Do not slander one another." Slander, which means maligning someone or damaging his reputation by sharing false or deliberately misleading information, is always sin. But the word that James uses has a broader meaning that includes any form of criticism or running someone down from selfish motives. In other words, what you are saying may be true, but the reason you're sharing it is to make yourself look good and to put the other person in a bad light.

If your motive in criticizing someone is jealousy, selfish ambition, rivalry, pride, or hatred, you are judging wrongly.

- (2) You judge someone wrongly when you assume that you know all of the pertinent facts and motives behind the person's words or actions.

In Philippians 1:15, 17, Paul impugns the motives of those who were preaching out of envy, strife, and selfish ambition, trying to cause him distress in his imprisonment. I do not know how Paul knew their motives. He must have had solid evidence. If you don't, you're on shaky ground to judge another person's motives. We seldom know all of the pertinent facts to make such pronouncements.

Years ago in another church I had a secretary who was often abrasive in the way she dealt with people. She needed to grow in that area, but many of us would criticize her behind her back rather than help her. One day I asked her to type a story about a little girl whose father suddenly told her that he was leaving her mother. He promised his daughter that she could visit him often. But he walked out of that room and she never saw him again. My secretary told me, "That's exactly what happened to me." I sat down and listened to her story, and after that I was much more patient with her shortcomings. I wasn't as judgmental toward her because I now knew more of the facts about her past.

- (3) You judge someone wrongly when you set up human standards, rather than holding to God's word as the standard.

Paul devotes two chapters to this problem. In Romans 14, vegetarian believers were judging those that ate meat. Others observed certain days as holy and judged those that did not. In 1 Corinthians 8, the problem was that of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. But these are areas where the Bible does not give definitive commands. It is wrong to take your personal convictions in such areas and set them up as standards to judge those who do not share your convictions.

That was a major sin of the Pharisees. They had added dozens of manmade rules to God's law, and then judged everyone that did not keep these rules. They were majoring on minors and neglecting the more weighty provisions of the law, "justice and mercy and

faithfulness" (Matt. 23:23). They were focused on outward appearances, but their hearts were far from God. They neglected God's commandments and held instead to the traditions of men (Mark 7:6-9).

Christians often fall into this error. For example, the Bible never says, "Thou shalt not smoke!" Before modern medical science proved that smoking damages your health, many godly saints, such as Charles Spurgeon, Jonathan Edwards, and G. Campbell Morgan, smoked. If you smoke, I would advise you to quit. It's poor stewardship of your body and it wastes the money God has entrusted to you.

I've been to pastors' conferences, and I would guess that if one of the pastors lit up a cigar or pipe during the break, the others would think he denied the faith! At the very least, they would say, "Doesn't he know that his body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?" Yet many of these pastors have seriously overweight temples, which also is poor stewardship of the body and wastes God's money! I've watched these men violate self-control, a fruit of the Spirit, by piling their plates high and going back for seconds and then for dessert. So if we judge smoking to be wrong, why don't we judge gluttony to be wrong? It's easy to fall into judging by manmade standards, rather than by God's Word.

- (4) You judge someone wrongly when you do not first judge your own sin before trying to help him with his sin.

That is Jesus' point in Matthew 7:1-5. He does not say that it is wrong to help your brother get the speck out of his eye, but rather, before you try to do so, deal with the log in your own eye. If you went to an eye doctor to remove a speck from your eye and he had a log protruding from his eye, you wouldn't want him to touch your eye! And, from the other point of view, if you haven't removed the log from your own eye, you will come across as arrogant and lacking in compassion if you try to help a brother with his speck. Removing our own logs has a way of humbling us!

- (5) You judge someone wrongly when you share confidential or personal information with the wrong intent.

One of the most common examples of this is when someone says, "I wanted you to know about this situation so that you could pray." But you really have no need to know this information and you aren't part of the solution. The person sharing it just wanted to feel important because he knows what's going on. Or, another common way that this happens is to share damaging information about another person in order to make yourself look good or to win people to your side in a grudge you have against the other person. Often this information is either false or misleading. But the one sharing it wants to slant the truth against the person for some reason, often to hide his own sin.

- (6) You judge someone wrongly when out of a self-righteous spirit, you criticize or malign him over a minor or indifferent matter.

Perhaps you have insight on a matter that the other person lacks. Or, you have never struggled with a problem that the other person struggles with. In a conversation with a third party, you refer in a derogatory manner about this person's lack of insight or his struggle with this sin, and your motive is to show how "together" you are by way of comparison. That is judging your brother!

- (7) You judge someone wrongly when you make an authoritative pronouncement about his eternal destiny.

The Bible gives many tests that we can apply to ourselves to determine if our faith is genuine (e.g., 1 John). These tests are also valid to apply to others. Jesus said, with regard to false teachers (Matt. 7:16), "You will know them by their fruits." If a man's conduct or teaching is not in conformity with Scripture, you may rightly conclude that at best, he is an immature believer. At worst, he may not be saved.

But in the final analysis, only God knows the heart. We can say, "Based on the fruit, I question that person's salvation." In talking with a professing Christian whose life or doctrine does not line up with Scripture, we can say, "If I were in your shoes, I'd question my salvation." But we cannot authoritatively say to someone, "You're going to hell." Only God knows that for sure.

So James says that to resolve conflicts, we need to stop judging others. But he also reveals the reason we should not judge others: when we do so, we make ourselves judges of God's law, rather than doers of it. We usurp God's place as Lawgiver and Judge.

2. To resolve conflicts, submit to God's authoritative Word.

James calls God's Word "the law" to show its authoritative nature. God doesn't give suggestions for happy living. He commands us with His sovereign authority! Specifically, James' use of the word "neighbor" (4:12) probably shows that he has in mind the second greatest commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself. Judging your neighbor (in the sense that I have explained) is not to love him. It is rather to set yourself up in a position that belongs to God alone. There are two aspects of James' words here:

A. Submit to God's authoritative Word by actively loving others with your words.

Love does not tear down others; it builds them in Christ. If you speak against others and criticize them to make yourself look good, you are loving yourself, not others. You are not obeying God's law; you are setting yourself above it. Of course we must love others with our deeds, not in words only. But here James is focusing on how we speak to one another and about others who are not present. Our words need to demonstrate God's love.

B. Submit to God Himself.

James says (4:12), "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy." As Jesus said (Matt. 10:28), "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." If another person has wronged you, you do not need to judge that person, because God will! Instead, you should pray for his salvation, and remember that your judging the other person is a sin against God, who rightly could have sent you to hell! Submit to God by obeying His Word, which commands us not to judge others.

James ends these two convicting verses with a pointed question: "But who are you who judge your neighbor?" He is implying, "Do you think you are God? If not, why do you set yourself up in God's role?" Clearly, judging others stems from incredible arro-

gance! When you find yourself thinking judgmentally about others, judge your pride! God rightly could have judged you, but He didn't. He will righteously judge the one that you are condemning, but it is not your place to do so. Humble yourself before God!

### Conclusion

What should you do if someone shares damaging or critical information about another person with you? Bill Gothard offers some helpful questions to ask. He points out that often the person with the evil report will test your spirit to detect if you're open to hearing it. He may ask for your opinion of the person, or he may drop a negative comment about the person and watch your response. He may try to get your curiosity up by asking, "Have you heard about so-and-so?" He may pose as asking you for counsel on how to help this person, but you discover that he has no intention of helping the person. You may discover that he's already shared the situation with many others that had no need to know.

I find that sometimes I cannot stop the person before they share the judgmental information, but I try to ask at least the first question as soon as I can. The questions are: (1) *What is your reason for telling me?* If the only reason I need to know is so that I can pray, I probably don't need to know. (2) *Where did you get your information?* If the person will not reveal his sources, he is probably spreading rumors or unreliable information. (3) *Have you gone to those directly involved to seek to restore them?* (4) *Have you personally checked out all the facts?* If he has not gone directly to those involved and has not checked out the facts, he isn't interested in helping. If he really needs counsel on how to do it, he will not be asking for such help from several sources. I often say, "After you've gone to him, let me know how it went." This holds him accountable. (5) *Can I quote you if I check this out?* If someone is spreading judgmental falsehoods or half-truths, he won't want to be quoted!

Setting yourself up as judge leads to conflict and broken relationships. Humbly submitting to God and His Word and obediently seeking to love and build up others leads to harmony and restored relationships. The next time you're tempted to run down someone, remember James' pointed question, "But who are you who judge your neighbor?" Judge *yourself* instead!

## Application Questions

1. Where is the line between being biblically discerning versus being overly critical?
2. If you confront someone in sin or error and he says, "You're being judgmental," how would you respond?
3. How can you know when God wants you to talk to someone about sin or error, or when you should wait and pray?
4. How can someone who is overly critical battle this sin? What steps would help?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2005, All Rights Reserved.