

**A Study in James**  
**Part 13 – “The Sin of the Critic”**  
**James 4:11-12**

TAKE YOUR BIBLES PLEASE...

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? (James 4:11-12 ESV).

A critical spirit is a worldly spirit. Whenever a man is overheard speaking critically of another, you can know that he is living by the standards of this world. This is the reason that James puts these two brief verses right in the midst of his warning about the worldly spirit.

We can see from these verses that some Christians in the church James writes to were guilty of speaking evil of others. This is a call for them to stop the practice at once. The phrase James uses, “to speak evil,” literally means “to speak down.” A. T. Robertson tells us that it was often used for speaking harsh words about an absent person. The word would include faultfinding speech, malicious gossip, slander, and all judgmental pronouncements. The speech of a Christian is always to express love and be constructive.

If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit we all fall into this trap from time to time. It just seems to be in our nature to use our tongues destructively, rather than constructively. However, serious consideration of this text will help you see why it is out of place in your life. **There are two serious charges set forth against a person who speaks evil of another.**

**First, the Sin of the Critic Is the Sin of Judging the Law of God.**

Look at verse 11 again:

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.

It is a matter of your relationship with God. Interestingly James adds judging to the speaking evil. To judge is to be a critic. Whenever you criticize your brother, you are judging the law of God. This may seem confusing at first, but it is actually very simply and convincing. The specific law James must have in mind is God’s law of love. Already James has declared it to be the “royal law.” We find it in the midst of Jesus’ teaching as he confronts the Pharisees:

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:34-40 ESV).

It is very clear that the man speaking evil, spreading gossip, passing on slander, or expressing criticism, is not loving his neighbor as himself. He is breaking this law of love. He is breaking this law of love. James might have had in mind the principle stated by Jesus. This is the law of His kingdom. Those who follow Him are to refrain from criticism of others.

However, James is talking about something more than breaking the law. He says that the critic is judging the law. Anytime we deliberately break a law, we are sitting in judgment of that law. By our action we are placing ourselves above the law. We declare the law is unworthy of our obedience. So, the person speaking critically of his brother is judging the royal law of God as being unworthy. He is condemning what God has declared as being true and declaring it to be untrue.

This is a most serious thing. Since the law of God is an expression of the wisdom of God, when we reject the law of God we are unconsciously claiming to have greater wisdom than God. We are claiming to know more about how life ought to be lived than God. Slander is serious. It destroys the object and at the one speaking.

### **Second, the Sin of the Critic Is the Sin of Playing God.**

This is the most serious aspect of this sin. James lists four false assumptions in 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?

1. **Lawgiving is a prerogative that belongs only to God.** As the Creator and Redeemer of man, He is the only one who has the authority and the wisdom to establish laws by which man live his life.
2. **Also, only God is able to save and to destroy.** Only God has the power to save life. Salvation is his unique work. Only God has the power to ultimately condemn and destroy life. He has never granted that power to any created being. The truth decalred here is so important. Any attempt on our part to judge critically our fellowman is an attempt to assume the role of God. The critic is playing God in the worst possible way!
3. **Another false assumption is that the person criticized has some kind of ultimate accountability to us.** If I sit in judgment upon another, I am assuming a role of authority over them. I am assuming the role of judge. Is there ever any basis for me to take such a role? Absolutely not! Only God has that authority. It is an authority established in who he is. He is Creator; I am created! Only the Creator has the right to demand answers from the created.
4. **The last false assumption is that we are morally qualified to judge.** In order to judge another, we must be morally perfect. The Scripture assures us that our lack of imperfection disqualifies us from passing judgment on our fellowman. Jesus indicated this when he charged his listeners to “get the beam out of their eye” before going on to remove a speck in another’s eye. God has no problem at this point. He is absolute moral perfection. He is able to look at each man without any imperfection or prejudice. So, when we set ourselves up as judges of our fellowman by speaking down to them, we are in fact playing God!

I like the emphatic way James ends this paragraph. Literally he says, “*And you, who are you to judge your neighbor?*” What he is saying is “Who do you think you are?” The truth is that we are nothing but puny, mortal, sinful pieces of human flesh. Compared with the mighty Creator Judge of this universe you are nothing!

James does not emphasize the importance of the personal aspect of criticism. Criticism is also sinful because of what it does to the one you criticize. But, the emphasis is on the Godward side of the sin. Sin against God is always the most basic and therefore serious of sin. It is the root of every sin. By our action of criticism of another, we are calling the wisdom of God into question. We are denying that he has made the right decision in establishing the law of love. We are setting aside the law as far as our life is concerned. And, even more, we are trying to take over his work. Since judgment belongs only to God, we are trying to be our own god. That kind of idolatry cannot be tolerated in our lives.

Surely David's prayer ought to be in our hearts:

Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (Psalm 19:13-14 ESV).