



“High Risk Behaviors”

(James 4:11-17)

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For our ministry of the word this morning we are going to look at the closing verses of chapter 4 where James warns us about a couple of what I think we can call high risk behaviors. These are things that can create real problems in churches, and yet can be easily avoided if we receive his counsel and act on it. So join me as I read for you the text of James 4:11-17.

SCRIPTURE: JAMES 4:11-17

11 Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother and judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 12 There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?

[Let me just pause here to say a word about James’s references to the law. Why would he use this terminology? It strikes us as a little peculiar. We would expect to read instead, “He who speaks against a brother speaks against the Scripture and judges the Scripture,” or something to that effect. It helps here to remember that James’s reference to the law actually is a reference to Scripture. James has no New Testament. He is writing its first book. The law, which is shorthand for, “The Law and the Prophets,” which in turn we—though not James—would say is shorthand for “the Old Testament.” James regards the Old Testament properly as his Bible. It’s all the Bible he has.]

13 Come now, you who say, “Today and tomorrow we will go to a particular city, spend one year there, buy and sell, and make a profit,” 14 though you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is just a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. 15 Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” 16 But now you boast in your pretensions. All such boasting is evil.

17 Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.

WARNINGS AGAINST TWO COMMON PRACTICES

Against judging (4:11-12)

In this little paragraph, James addresses something that he has been observing in the churches that he is writing. There is an awful lot of tongue-wagging going on that is hurtful and not productive. So, in verses 11-12, he tells his readers to cut it out.

Correctly understood

Now I am afraid that verse 11 has suffered in the house of its friends, because there is a clear and often repeated mistake in translations in most modern versions. I checked ten recent translations and eight of them translate verse 11 as, “*Do not speak evil of one another.*” The problem is that the Greek word for *evil* does not appear in this verse. The prohibition is much broader. He says, as in my translation you see it, “*Do not speak against one another.*” Speaking evil is very different and is much narrower. We speak evil of a person when we accuse them of some sinful behavior in their lives. It is often some form of slander. It can be made up out of whole cloth. Speaking evil is accusatory. Speaking against someone may or may not be accusatory.

Speaking against someone may be telling the truth about them with an intent to injure. It may even be telling the truth to them. In fact, James makes no distinction between talking *to* a person and talking *about* a person. Either can be a violation of this prohibition. Kent Hughes says something very interesting about this:

Some reject running down another behind his or her back, but believe it is okay if done face to face. These persons are driven by a “moral” compulsion to make others aware of their... faults. Fault-finding is, to them, a spiritual gift. I once knew a young man who, after reading the list of the seven gifts mentioned in Romans 12, decided he had the gift of prophecy. The prophets, he observed, were confrontational, acerbic, and sharp-tongued, just as he was, so he must have the gift [of prophecy]! Thus he had a spiritual rationale for an abrasive, critical personality. He was called to conduct spiritual search-and-destroy missions—or so he thought.¹

Personally, I would say that this self-appointed prophet does not have the gift of prophecy but rather has the gift of discouragement, a gift that the church can generally do without. Most people are acutely sensitive to their own failures and flaws and are trying to do something about them. They don’t need much help and if they do, they will likely ask for it. It is entirely understandable that they don’t appreciate self-appointed moral critics making appointments to call attention to what they already know.

The prohibition against judging in verse 11 is not about how you *think* but about what you *say*. You can only violate it when you open your mouth. “Speaking against” a brother, James says, is judging.

Incorrectly twisted

There is another problem with verse 11 these days, and that is the way that the culture uses it. The prohibition against judging is broadened today to include holding any kind of moral opinion or conviction on any subject whatever. If you have an opinion that goes

against my opinion, by definition you are judgmental. That strange twist issues in two fairly obvious outcomes. This strange twist of verse 11 leads very readily to...

A moral vacuum in the culture

The cultural disaster that we see going on all around us is the product of a world in which ideas are all regarded as equal, all lifestyles are regarded as equal, and all moral opinions are equal. You can no longer debate ideas, because if you criticize my idea you're being judgmental.

Someone has said that Christianity is egalitarian about people but exclusivist about ideas, and modern philosophy is just the opposite. It is exclusivist about people and egalitarian about ideas. Biblical faith says, "Take a very hard and unforgiving look at ideas. Make sure that what claims to be the truth is the truth. On the other hand, be gentle with people, and quick to overlook their flaws."

Modern philosophy says exactly the reverse. It insists, "The unwashed masses are too stupid to know how things are. We the enlightened, by contrast, know that every opinion and claim to truth is equally true and valid. Nobody knows what truth is, and anybody who claims to know it is by definition arrogant." So the twisted view of verse 11 certainly helps to uphold the moral vacuum that currently exists in western culture.

There's a lot more that we could say about that; but for the moment let's consider the other problem. The twisted view of Jesus' prohibition of judging leads to...

A moral relativism in the church

The Apostle Paul warned Christians in Romans 12:2 not to let the world squeeze us into its mold. He wrote, "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may approve what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*" When Paul wrote that, it was this kind of issue he had in mind. Today even Christians have bought into the idea that we can behave as we please and if anyone expresses a negative opinion of our behavior they are guilty of "judging" us by definition.

The average Christian today thinks that if he disagrees with public policy on moral grounds—if he disapproves of abortion on demand, for example—he is guilty of judging. He can't speak up because that would be unloving. The average Christian thinks that if his good Christian friend decides to steal from his company or become sexually promiscuous, he can't say anything to him, because that would be judging. Christian leaders cannot be held to a moral standard, because that would be judging, and of course we know that all acts of judging are unloving by definition.

Of course, we can detest the world's philosophy and moral structure, but we must not detest the people who subscribe to it. We must love them for Christ's sake. But we must also exhibit holiness, or it will be all for naught. God designed the church to be a little island of holiness surrounded by an ocean of paganism. As long as the church is holy, it has something to say to the culture. The moment it imbibes the culture's theology it has lost its distinctiveness and nobody is going to be even slightly interested in it. All hope for the world is gone when that happens.

But the modern understanding of verse 11 has become, in effect, a biblical license for asserting that all claims of absolute morals are a form of unloving judgment. What about this? If that isn't what the passage teaches, what does it teach?

I can never teach on this without being careful to specify...

What Judging Does Not Preclude

I think you can see, on the basis of my definitions here, that judging is a fairly narrow and identifiable violation of the will of God. Verse 11 is not supposed to be held up as the critical principle by which all other biblical imperatives must be evaluated. You do not, for example, violate this command by...

Making accurate personal assessments of policies or people

Verse 11 does not prohibit us from coming to accurate conclusions concerning the moral health of other people. In fact, there are in Scripture many *commands* to do so. After addressing his command not to judge in Matthew, Jesus goes on to say, "*Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine.*" You don't have to be much of a Bible student to recognize that these terms *dogs* and *swine* are figures of speech for people. They are not completely complimentary terms, either, are they? But there is no way to obey that instruction if you cannot draw any conclusion about who are dogs and who are pigs. That requires sober evaluation. In other words, it requires intellectual judgment and insight into character.

So when do you violate this command in verse 11? If you must exercise mental judgment and that's okay, when do you cross the line? Answer: when you speak. If by speaking you talk against a brother, then you are guilty of judgment. In fact, you can only violate this teaching by speaking. That's how James defines it. It is when you speak against someone that you are guilty of judging them. If you say it about them, you're judging. If you say it to them, you're judging.

If you entertain a negative opinion of their character, that does not automatically make you guilty of judging. The moment you open your mouth to speak of them, to speak against them, you have crossed the line.

That leads us to the next item that is not precluded by verse 11. We are not prohibited from...

Being discriminating in conversation

Some people cannot stand to hear even helpful rebukes. They may have no capacity whatever to calmly listen to a caring rebuke from a friend. In fact, they may reject such a rebuke very violently. If you insist on sitting them down and telling them what is wrong in their lives, the only thing you may accomplish is to get yourself verbally torn limb from limb. You have to evaluate their capacities before you have your conversation.

We must be able to assess whether or not a person is capable of dealing with the spiritual truth that we might be able to share with him. If we conclude that he isn't, we won't be doing him or ourselves any favors by sharing it.

John Stott had it right when he wrote that the prohibition is "not an order to be blind, but a plea to be generous. Jesus is not saying we should cease to be men (by suspending

our critical powers, which help to distinguish us from animals), but to renounce the presumptuous ambition to be God (by setting ourselves up as judges).”²

Alexander Maclaren also saw the point: “The power of seeing into character is to be coveted and cultivated, and the absence of it makes simpletons, not saints... seeing into character is not what [the Lord condemns] here.”³

The fact is that God not only does not preclude coming to moral conclusions across the board, He insists that we make moral judgments constantly. Jesus said, “*Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment*” (John 7:24). In one place, He says “Judge.” In another, He says, “Don’t judge.” The difference is that the wrong form of judging is something you do with your mouth, and the right form is something that you do with your mind.

In fact, discernment—using one’s analytical powers to see through pretense—is *the* quality that is right at the top of God’s indicators of spiritual maturity. Remember the statement in Hebrews 5:14 that says, “*Solid [spiritual] food belongs to those who are mature, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*” Putting our brains and our critical faculties on the shelf and pretending not to be able to differentiate between what is right and wrong is not evidence of a superior love; it is evidence of an inferior holiness. It is also caving in to the spirit of the age.

Verse 11 also does not preclude...

Taking corporate action when society or ministries are threatened

Verse 11 is an individual prohibition. The language here is aimed at individuals. Judging is a sin committed by individuals. This prohibition does not in any way preclude, for example, a legislative body passing laws for the public good. If Congress enacts a law against murder, for example, it is not a violation of verse 11 nor does it testify to a lack of love for murderers.

In the same way, church discipline is commanded in Scripture, and church leaders who exercise it are not violating the judging prohibition in verse 11. If the church cannot keep itself morally pure, it has nothing to say to the world anyway. Jesus and the disciples were constantly talking about what was right and wrong. Those discussions are not evidence of a lack of love, but of a commitment to truth and righteousness. Being part of a local church means making a personal commitment not to do things that would lessen people’s opinion of Jesus Christ.

When people decide to do things that are self-destructive, love doesn’t ignore that, or hope for the best, or pretend not to see it. The church together, through its commissioned leaders, can decide to step in and lovingly seek to put a believer back on course. Far from being a violation of what is right, failing to rebuke would be the sin in this case.

In a similar way, the Bible teaches that it is wrong for an individual to look to correct a wrong by taking personal vengeance. The community, however, acting together, can take the steps that are necessary to preserve the life of the community up to and including executions of capital offenders. To pretend that certain crimes are not wrong, or to turn a blind eye to them, is not loving; it is destructive. It is sacrificing life itself on the altar of personal freedom; and in the end failure to act will destroy civilization itself.

So use good judgment. Come to informed conclusions about other people's character. If you feel it is necessary for their good to talk to them about their behavior, first sit down and take a good hard look at yourself. If you can talk to them redemptively about the issue and you know you're not guilty of the same thing yourself, talk to them, carefully, privately, and gently. Leave the superior attitude somewhere else. And for goodness' sake, stand for something without worrying whether having firm moral convictions is a violation of what Jesus taught when he said, "Judge not." It isn't.

Now there is a second major prohibition in this passage, namely...

Against presumption (4:13-17)

Again we address a translational issue, this one not quite so serious. Most versions here say in verse 13, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to a certain city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit.'" Now that suggests merely a vague set of possibilities. But in most New Testament manuscripts the verse reads as in my translation: "*Come now, you who say, 'Today and tomorrow we will go to a particular city, spend one year there, buy and sell, and make a profit.'*" That's rather a different picture. They know exactly what they are going to do. It's going to be a two day trip. That is definite because they know exactly which city they're going to. They also know that they will remain there one year, and at the end of that year they will have made a profit.

But this is all hubris and arrogance. The Christians James has in mind know nothing of the kind. This is all off base and it's a violation of the will of God. First of all, it crosses the line into sin...

In view of the transitoriness of human life

Verse 14 makes this clear: "*You do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is just a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.*" They are saying they're going to make a two day trip. They don't even know if they'll be alive then.

Life is just like a mist. It goes away and most of the time nobody remembers. In one of the exclusive academies of the ancient world, on the day that students graduated and went out into society, they attended a solemn assembly in which their academic achievements were recognized, and then they were asked to make a choice. Seven blocks of granite were placed before them, and they had to pick the one they wanted to serve as their tombstone. It was a way of bringing them back to reality. I think it's a great idea, but I don't think it will find its way into many graduation exercises in our area, do you?

The presumption of this paragraph also crosses the line against...

In view of God's sovereign plan

Verse 15 insists, "*Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.'*" *But now you boast in your pretensions. All such boasting is evil.*" God is the one who decides your future, beginning with your next breath, which is always going to be a gift from him. God has a plan, and we don't know what it is. We do know how the end turns out, but we don't know what happens between now and then. So any sort of proud statement about what we are going to do that leaves God out of the picture is, as James says, mere pretension. It rejects the humility that he has been teaching about through this letter and amounts to mere bragging.

In view of the place of planning

Now I hasten to address the first question that is typically connected with these verses. Is James saying that there is no place for planning in your life? Is everything to be conducted on the spur of the moment, or can you set down and plot out goals for your next project or a budget or spending plans for a business?

Scripture has plenty to say about planning that is positive. You see it, for example in Proverbs 16:3, which says, “*Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established.*” That’s very different from presumption. Do the best job of planning you can, and if you’re thinking biblically you will know that none of it will happen unless you offer it to God for his revisions. (By the way, he will revise it. You may not recognize it in the end; but he has the perfect right to do that, and usually his plans will be far better than yours.)

You see planning again a few verses later, when the writer of Proverbs says, “*The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps*” (16:9). You get the idea here. The best plan of all is to offer your efforts to God and let him direct those steps. We show by doing that simply that we have good sense. We live in a world that God has made and who knows best how your designs can fit in with his purposes.

So, avoid the gift of criticism and exercise humility toward others.

And avoid presumption and exercise humility toward God.

As the writer of Proverbs said, “*There are many plans in a man’s heart, but it is the counsel of the Lord that will stand*” (19:21).

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1. R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith that Works*. Preaching the Word. Accordance electronic ed. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991.
 2. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian Counter-Culture*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 177.
 3. Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*. Accordance electronic ed. Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2006.