



September 28, 2016

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Lesson 9 — *Real Faith: Real Faith Rejects Worldliness (4:1-5:6), Part 3*

## INTRODUCTION

In James 4:1-5:6, James fleshes out what worldliness looks like in five areas. In other words, he contrasts how the friend of the world vs. the friend of God handles these issues: desires (4:1-3), attitude (4:6-10), conversation (4:11-12), planning (4:13-17), and money (5:1-6). **Because friendship with the world is enmity with God, you must live as God's friend.**

### CONVERSATION (4:11-12)

*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?*

In these two verses, Pastor James builds upon his teaching in chapter 3 concerning the tongue. He brings the issue of worldliness (i.e., being a friend of the world vs. a friend of God) to bear on our conversation. These verses are no longer general and theoretical like in chapter 3, but are specific and practical. They aim to explore the sinful and worldly use of the tongue (that deadly fire) in the way we talk to others about others. Scripture will elsewhere address lying (Ephesians 4:25), filthy talking (Ephesians 5:4), and course jesting (Ephesians 5:4), those immoral aspects of our speech. The intention of our passage is to specifically target what we'll simply label here, our "conversation"—that is, how we talk to others about others.

In a summary statement, Ephesians 4:29 describes the conversation of the "new humanity" (cf. vv. 20-24; Colossians 3:9-14)—"Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." Simply put, corrupt conversation is replaced with wholesome, edifying, appropriate, grace-giving communication. At our conversion, Christ rescued us from spiritual rebellion and deadness (Ephesians 4:17-19) and taught us a new spiritual ethic that puts off our old corrupt self, renews our mind, and puts on the new godly self (Ephesians 4:20-24). That process of sanctification applies to every area of our lives, including our conversation, as Paul goes on to show in verses 29-32. As new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17), our conversation is being transformed into the likeness of God who is never malicious, corrupt, unkind, or inappropriate in His speech to or about us.

In light of God's character and our ongoing transformation into that image, then, we must address corruption and worldliness in our conversation. There is a certain way that a friend of the world speaks to others about others, and we must repudiate that, repent from it, and replace it with godly communication.

In James 4:11-12, James expressly addresses corrupt or worldly conversation. We'll consider his comments under three headings.

#### 1. The command against corrupt conversation (v. 11a)

James writes, "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers." He then expands his command to include the one who "judges his brother."

##### a. Do not "speak evil against" others. (external)

This word (as a verb, noun, or adjective) occurs only a handful of times outside of James 4 (5x). In its etymology, it simply means "to speak against" (Gk. *katalaleo*), but its New Testament usage clearly adds the idea of lying about someone in the way you speak against them (cf. 1 Peter 2:12—"speak against you *as evildoers*", which indicates a purposely false accusation). Thus, this word may be defined this way: to speak against or accuse someone in a false, exaggerated, or degrading way; to defame or slander.<sup>1</sup>

- **This condemns hostile and malicious speech. (intent)**

The “kata” prefix on this word (meaning “against”) suggests that the primary error in this kind of conversation is in its hostility and ill-intent. It is speech directed “against” someone. Kittel states it this way, “It violates the early Christian commandment because of its uncharitableness rather than its falsity.”<sup>2</sup>

This hostile and malicious conversation arises, as we saw in verses 1-3, from selfish and sensual desires. We use and abuse other people, cursing rather than blessing them (cf. 3:9), because our hearts love the world (and its images [stuff]) rather than God (and His images [image-bearers/people]). Therefore, in violation of the two greatest commandments (Matthew 22:34-40), we speak against other people in resentment and contempt. This is wordly and wrong.

**Application:** Do you “speak against” other people? Are you hostile and malicious in the way you’ve been talking about someone else? Is your conversation characterizes by love that blesses others, or by lust that disparages others? Are you critical and derogatory about others?

- **This condemns false and deceptive speech. (content)**

The first aspect of this command dealt more with intent (“speaking *against*”); this aspect deals more with content (“speaking *evil against*”). We already mentioned that the New Testament emphasizes this dimension of the word. In our conversation with others about others, we must not attack people by spreading falsehood, exaggeration, or unsubstantiated claims. We must be careful not to defame or slander others, no matter our motive. This also is worldly and wrong.

**Application:** Do you “speak evil against” other people? Do you gossip, spreading rumors and bearing false witness? Do you talk about people

behind their back, tearing them down and defaming their reputation? Do you accuse and attack other people publicly, rather than addressing the issue to them individually?

Believers must put away this kind of conversation (2 Corinthians 12:20; 1 Peter 2:1), for it is characteristic of unbelievers (Romans 1:29-30). This is how they operate, and it is an inherent part of their worldview and practice. In fact, Kittel notes that this “word group...plays no vital role in the ethical exhortation of the non-biblical world. Even the lists of vices in the Stoics and Philo do not contain it, though it might have proved useful. As a warning against malicious or unthinking gossip it occurs first in the Psalms, Proverbs and the Wisdom literature.”<sup>3</sup> Clearly, then, evil-speaking or slander is a part of the system of this world, and the repudiation of it is a uniquely Christian ethic, being practiced by those who are friends of God. This is why we read so many prohibitions of it in the early church fathers.

**Application:** We see this hostile, slanderous speech everywhere in our society—in politics, in the church, between spouses, toward parents, in the workplace, etc. Wherever rivalry exists (cf. 3:14-16), so does malicious defamation. Therefore, we must be careful to resist worldliness in the first two areas—in our desires and attitude—if we hope to lives like friends of God in this area.

- b. **Do not “judge” others. (internal)**

While this Greek word (*krino*) has several senses, the one that is meant in this verse (and at the end of verse 12) is to “pass an unfavorable judgment upon, criticize, find fault with, condemn.”<sup>4</sup>

While such judgments are often verbally expressed (e.g., “criticize” or “speak evil against”), this verse initially addresses the internal activity of passing judgment upon another person. Now, Jesus Himself commends righteous judgment (John 7:24) that *evaluates* someone’s fruit to discern their spiritual veracity (Matthew 7:16). Nonetheless, our judgment can quickly become stained by hastiness,

ensorship, hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and a lack of love, and we can find ourselves acting like the world in the way we *condemn* others (cf. Matthew 7:3-5). Evaluation may be appropriate, but condemnation is not.

God's Word addresses a few areas, in particular, in which we must avoid rendering worldly judgment and engaging in corrupt conversation:

- **Externals (John 7:24; John 8:15; cf. James 2:1-13)**
- **Motives (1 Corinthians 4:5; cf. 1 Corinthians 13:7)**
- **Gray areas (Romans 14:3-4, 10, 13; 1 Corinthians 10:29)**
- **Sins (Matthew 7:1-5; Romans 2:1, 3; cf. 1 Peter 4:8)**  
— Of course, this does not undermine the biblical command to confront sin in each others' lives (cf. James 5:19-20).

**Application:** In contrast with such worldly judgment and sinful condemnation, Jesus exhorts, "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37). MacArthur writes, "If fellow believers are viewed as those chosen by God before the foundation of the world, for whom Christ died, who are loved and honored by God, and with whom we will spend eternity in heaven, we will seek to honor, love, and protect them. The first step in avoiding the sin of slander is not keeping one's lips sealed, but keeping one's thoughts about others right."<sup>5</sup>

## 2. **The consequences of corrupt conversation (vv. 11b-12)**

James lists three consequences of corrupt conversation.

### a. **It slanders the law (v. 11b).**

In 1 Timothy 1:8, Paul writes, "Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient." Rather than rejoicing in and respecting the goodness of God's law, slander undermines its goodness and violates it.

Slandering others "speaks evil against the law" — In your slander against others (which is prohibited by God's law), you are effectively saying, "The law isn't right, doesn't apply, etc."

Slandering others "judges the law" — In your slander against others (which is prohibited by God's law), you are effectively saying, "The law isn't good, helpful, etc."

By engaging in the very activity that God's law prohibits, you are arrogantly disparaging it, essentially saying that the Law isn't good, isn't right, isn't fitting, isn't enough, isn't relevant, isn't helpful. You're proud, breaking and badmouthing God's perfect law.

### b. **It usurps the law (v. 11c).**

Building upon the first consequence is the second. James adds, "But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge." By slandering others, you slander God's law; and by slandering God's law, you render judgment on it. And in so doing, you have usurped authority that belongs to God alone, the One who gives and mediates the law (v. 12), while abandoning your responsibility to be a doer of God's law (cf. 1:25).

### c. **It is condemned by the law (v. 12).**

The "Lawgiver and Judge" will rightly judge ("destroy") the worldly judge, but will "save" its victim.

## 3. **The cure for corrupt conversation**

Two questions arise from this text that help us consider a cure for corrupt conversation.

### a. **How can we combat corrupt conversation in our lives?**

- **We must revel in God's kindness to us (1 Peter 2:1-3; Ephesians 4:31-32).**

1 Peter 2:1-3 — "So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all *slander*. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk,

that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good [or, kind; cf. Luke 6:35; Ephesians 4:32].” God’s Word is the milk that we need, but the active ingredient is God’s kindness (cf. Ephesians 4:31-32).

- **We must recognize God’s family around us (Ephesians 4:25; James 4:11).**

Ephesians 4:25 — “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, *for we are members one of another.*” James alludes to this same principle by repeating the word “brother” three times in verse 11. Slander, defamation, and judgmentalism are like shooting yourself in your own foot. We belong to each other—we’re a body, a family—and so we must not destroy each other.

**b. How should we respond when we are the victims of corrupt conversation? (1 Peter 2:12; 3:16; 2:21-25)**

In both 1 Peter 2:12 and 1 Peter 3:16, Peter acknowledges that people will speak evil of us and judge us. He refers to “when” this happens, not “if” it happens; and he uses the same Greek word for “slander” that James uses in our passage. Each of us will be slandered at some point. So, Peter offers guidance on how to respond, and he does so with a helpful progression of thought.

- **We must maintain a godly lifestyle. (reponse)**

1 Peter 2:12 — “*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.*”

1 Peter 3:16 — “*Having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame*”

- **We must maintain a missional perspective. (reason)**

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1 Peter 3:16 — “*Having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame*”

- **We must maintain our focus on Jesus. (resource)**

1 Peter 2:21-25 — “*For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*”

- Jesus is our example, teaching us how to respond when slandered in righteousness, humility, and trust (vv. 21-23).
- Jesus is our salvation, paying the penalty of our proud slander and releasing us from its power (v. 24).
- Jesus is our Shepherd, who empathizes, comforts, and ministers to us when slandered (v. 25).

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> “to speak against, to accuse, someone,’ with a suggestion of the false and exaggerated” (Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–], 3). or to “speak ill of, *speak degradingly of, speak evil of, defame*” (William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 519).

<sup>2</sup> Kittel, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Arndt, 567.

<sup>5</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *James*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), 222–223.