



Who's the Judge?

James 4:11-12

"Do Not ..."

- ❑ In his letter, James writes, "Don't criticize (speak against)¹ one another" (4:11a). People speak against others (even people in their own church or group) for various reasons.²
- ❑ Read James 4:11-12. James connects "criticizing" (speaking against) with "judging."³
 1. According to verse 11, why must we *not* speak against or judge one another?⁴

2. According to verse 12, why must we *not* "judge the law?"⁵

Personal Reflection

- Recall the last time you "spoke against" or "judged" another person. How do you feel about what you did? Watch for times this week when you speak against others.

- ❑ James' teaching reflects the teaching of Jesus. Read Matthew 7:1-5.

3. What warning does Jesus give concerning "judging?" How can we avoid having a judgmental attitude?⁶



4. Is it okay to speak against someone as long as we are sure it's the truth?⁷ Why or why not?

¹ 'criticize' (*katalaleō*) – 'speak evil against' (ESV), 'slander' (NIV); verb *katalaleō* used three times in verse 11.

² Reasons may include self-righteousness; pride; envy; selfish ambition; ignorance; prejudice (favoritism); revenge (vindictiveness); low 'self-esteem' – thus trying to raise oneself by lowering others

³ 'judge' (*krinō*) has a wide range of meaning, including 'discern,' 'evaluate,' and 'make a just decision.' However, in this context, the word means to 'pass an unfavorable judgment upon, criticize, find fault with, condemn' (*BAGD*, p. 452). This type of 'judging' reveals a critical or condemning attitude.

⁴ If we speak against others, we 'speak against the law.' If we judge others, we 'judge the law.' James 2:8 mentions 'the royal law prescribed in the Scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself.' To judge others is to violate the law of love. When we willingly violate the law, we deny its authority in our lives – we 'sit in judgment on it.'

⁵ If we judge others, we assume God's role, but God is the only rightful authority in judging people, including us!

⁶ If we judge others (in the negative sense), God will judge us for judging. Jesus warns us about hypocrisy. We tend to see the faults of others, but not our own. Sometimes we see our own faults in others, and by judging them we maintain our self-righteousness without the pain of repentance (turning from our own sin) and change. Before we make any judgments about others, we better make sure we have examined our own lives first.

⁷ If our speech is negative and destructive, it is *not* okay, even if it's truthful. That doesn't necessarily mean we never make critical remarks, but there should be some positive reason for them (that is, 'positive' as defined by God). The Bible says, 'Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful in building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen' (Ephesians 4:29, NIV).

5. What should you do if someone speaks against another person in your presence?⁸

Good Judgment?

- ❑ James 4:11-12 and Matthew 7:1 say, “Do not judge.” However, this doesn’t mean we should avoid making any kind of judgments about others.⁹ While Matthew 7:1-6 prohibits ‘judging’ in a negative sense, obeying the passage actually requires that we make judgments.¹⁰
- ❑ In addition, the Bible gives instructions regarding the need to rebuke, correct, discipline, and restore fellow ‘Christians.’¹¹ Sometimes “constructive criticism” is needed. This requires discernment, evaluation and judgment.

6. How is “constructive criticism” by a Christian different from “speaking against” or “judging?” How can we stay “constructive?”¹²

📖 “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently.” (*Galatians 6:1, NIV*)

📖 “Do not rebuke mockers or they will hate you; rebuke the wise and they will love you.” (*Proverbs 9:8, NIV*)¹³



- ❑ However, we must be careful. “Constructive criticism” can easily turn into “destructive criticism” in our hearts and words. We must always remember “who’s the Judge.”

Reflection/Application

- To apply this lesson, we need to examine our hearts. We need hearts of humility, biblical discernment, and love. We need true wisdom. This week, reflect on this lesson, and be sensitive to your thoughts and words concerning other people. Ask God to change your heart.
- In order to truly follow the teaching of this lesson, we need “new hearts” received through faith in Jesus Christ. Do you need to receive Him as your Lord and Savior?

⁸ We should not join in with them. It should be noted that a smile, nod, or even silence can give the impression that we approve of their judgmental speech. If possible, we should try to respond in a way that promotes mercy and humility in consideration of others, hopefully helping the person to see their own pride and lack of love. If the person is a Christian, we may need to gently rebuke him/her in an appropriate way.

⁹ This point goes beyond the teaching of James 4:11-12, but it’s important because Matthew 7:1 is frequently misapplied. Jesus does not say, ‘Mind your own business’ or ‘Cease from moral and theological discernment.’ We are *not* told that we shouldn’t remove the speck out of our brother’s eye. We are told to remove the log out of our eye first, and *then* we can remove the speck out of our brother’s eye. The main concern of this passage is a self-righteous, judgmental and/or hypocritical attitude.

¹⁰ ‘Judgment’ can refer to evaluation and discernment (that is, a positive use of our critical faculties). On one occasion, Jesus told his opponents, ‘Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment’ (John 7:24). Matthew 7:6 requires that we make a judgment about people. If we are to obey this command, we have to *discern* whom the ‘dogs’ and ‘pigs’ are. In Matthew 7:15, Jesus tells us, ‘Beware of false prophets.’ Again, this takes discernment, because they come in disguise. But Jesus tells us we can identify them by their ‘fruit,’ that is, their character and behavior (7:20). This takes evaluation and judgment.

¹¹ For example, see Matthew 18:15-17; Luke 17:3; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15; and Galatians 6:1-2.

¹² Judging is wrong for the reasons given earlier. ‘Constructive criticism’ is motivated by love – first of all, love for God, and also, love for others. It is done in humility and gentleness, and has a redemptive purpose.

¹³ This lesson focuses on *our* ‘criticizing’ or ‘judging’ others, but it’s also important to think about how we should handle being criticized or judged by others, whether positively or negatively. Concerning being rebuked by others, Proverbs 15:31 says, “If you listen to constructive criticism, you will be at home among the wise.” (NLT)