

One Lawgiver *and* Judge



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *James 4:11–17; Acts 17:11; Heb. 4:15, 16; Luke 12:13–21; Eccles. 2:15–19; Titus 2:14.*

Memory Text: “There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?” (*James 4:12*).

Our attitude toward law, whether God's law or humans,' affects how we relate to others and even how we relate to God Himself. Have you noticed that sometimes the rich and famous act as if they are above the law? Even some who make the laws, or enforce them, may look for ways to write those laws for their own personal gain. Disrespect for a society's laws, then, can involve disrespect for other people, because laws govern how we relate to each other.

At the same time, those whose attitude toward law is rigid and unbending may also have difficulty in their interpersonal relationships. At a deeper level, our view of the law depends on the degree of respect we have for the wisdom of the lawgivers and the fairness of their laws.

This week's lesson begins with a look at the law but then leads into some important words about a form of arrogance and self-dependence that we might not be aware of but which we are warned about as being sin, a violation of God's law. In fact, we're given here, in James, another way of looking at sin.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 29.

Judgment or Discernment?

“Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it” (*James 4:11, NIV*). How does judging others amount to sitting in judgment of the law?

The initial phrase in verse 11 that is literally translated “speak against” could include several sins of speech, including slander, bearing false witness, and angry words (*see Lev. 19:15–18*). On the one hand, it seems that James uses milder language here than in chapter 3; yet, the implications of speaking against one’s brother or sister seem more serious in that doing so calls into question the law itself. By placing ourselves on the judgment seat, we ignore our own weaknesses (*see Matt. 7:1–3*) and focus instead on another’s wrongdoing, as if we were somehow outside of or above the law. Such a focus also fails to love our neighbor as ourselves (*Lev. 19:18*). Thus, we are not keeping the law.

At the same time, however, while we should not be judging others, we must learn to have spiritual discernment.

Identify in the following passages the areas in which spiritual discernment is called for: *Acts 17:11, 1 Cor. 6:1–5, 2 Cor. 13:5, Phil. 1:9, 1 John 4:1, Gal. 6:1.*

We are to compare what people teach and preach with the Word of God. We should also, as far as possible, encourage church members to settle their differences among themselves rather than in courts, where the judges may or may not be guided by God’s Word. Most important, we should examine ourselves as to the health of our faith relationship and whether what we dwell on is uplifting and excellent or detrimental to our Christian experience.

It’s so easy to criticize and judge others, especially when they do things we don’t like. How can we learn to know whether we have crossed the line from being spiritually discerning to being judgmental toward God’s law?

The Lawgiver Is Judge

All the laws of the Old Testament are from Jesus. They are sometimes called the laws of Moses because they were given through him (*2 Chron. 33:8, Neh. 10:29*), but it was Jesus who led the Israelites through the wilderness and spoke the Ten Commandments to them at Mount Sinai (*see 1 Cor. 10:1–4*). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus clarified and amplified the law. He is the “Word . . . made flesh” (*John 1:14*), and it is by His Word that we will be judged (*John 12:48*).

“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 4:12, ESV*). **What do the following verses tell us about Jesus as our Judge?** *Isa. 33:22; 11:1–5; Heb. 4:15, 16; Rev. 19:11–16.*

Only someone who knows the law very well is qualified to judge whether or not it has been broken. Lawyers study for many years before taking bar exams, which test their readiness to begin their practice. The scribes in the time of Jesus (many of whom were Pharisees) diligently studied also, and not only the Mosaic laws but also the accumulated legal traditions. The fact that Jesus did not agree with many of these traditions resulted in serious conflict with the leaders. But as the One who gave these laws, He was and is uniquely qualified to explain what they mean and to assess whether or not they have been transgressed. So when He comes again, His reward is with Him to give to all according to their works (*Rev. 22:12*). Furthermore, by taking on human nature, living a sinless life, dying in our place, and being raised victorious over sin and death, Jesus is able to save us from sin.

“God has committed all judgment unto the Son, for without controversy He is God manifest in the flesh.

“God designed that the Prince of sufferers in humanity should be judge of the whole world. He who came from the heavenly courts to save man from eternal death; . . . He who submitted to be arraigned before an earthly tribunal, and who suffered the ignominious death of the cross—He alone is to pronounce the sentence of reward or of punishment.”—Ellen G. White, *Maranatha*, p. 341. As both Lawgiver and Savior, Christ is uniquely qualified to be our Judge.

Either reward or punishment, we will face only one or the other. What’s your only hope of reward?

Planning Ahead

Read James 4:13. (Compare Luke 12:13–21.) **How do we balance prudent planning for the future with our need to live each day in expectation of Christ’s imminent coming? How can we avoid the trap of merely building bigger “barns”?**

It may seem very reasonable to plan a year in advance or even more. Businesses commonly have short-, medium-, and long-range plans. Individuals and families need to save for the future and to make provision for unexpected expenses. On the other hand, we also believe that Jesus is coming soon and that, someday, all of our earthly possessions will be consumed by flames (see 2 Pet. 3:10–12).

These two approaches to life are not necessarily in conflict. Someone has said, “Plan as if Christ were not coming for years but live each day as if Christ were coming tomorrow.” This is good as far as it goes, though long-term planning can make it difficult to take one day at a time. Many of Jesus’ hearers (and no doubt many Christians today) would consider that the rich man who decided to build bigger barns was prosperous because God was blessing him. But Jesus reveals to us the man’s inner thoughts: “ ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry’ ” (Luke 12:19, NKJV). In short, his overarching concern was to lay up treasure for himself.

Most important, rather than making our plans too definite, “Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that’ ” (James 4:15, NKJV). This means more than simply appending “d.v.” (*Deo volente*, Latin for “God willing”) to the end of a sentence about our future plans. It means we should submit all our plans to God. We can pray, “God, I want to know Your will. If You are not pleased with these plans, please show me.” Then, if our plans are not good, God will show us that—as long as we remain attentive and willing to correct our plans or even change them entirely.

Read again James 4:13. Though on the surface nothing really seems wrong with what is being said, obviously there’s a problem—not in what the people want to do but in their attitude about it. How can we be careful not to get caught up in that same attitude, even subconsciously?

A Mist

Read James 4:14. What crucial point is being made here?

Life is uncertain. Every breath is a gift. James 4:14 uses a very rare Greek word (*atmis*), which is translated as “vapor” or “mist.” Like the Hebrew word *hebel* (“breath, vapor”), which occurs 38 times in Ecclesiastes and is often translated as “vanity,” it emphasizes the transitory nature of life. Who hasn’t, especially as we get older, experienced just how fast and fleeting life is? Well into his old age, well-known evangelist Billy Graham said, “I never knew that life went by so quickly.”

In other words, there’s always the imminence of death. We are all just a heartbeat away from it. Any of us, at any moment, for any number of reasons, could die in an instant. How rightly James says, “yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring” (4:14, *ESV*), including death.

“I will not here dwell upon the shortness and uncertainty of life; but there is a terrible danger—a danger not sufficiently understood—in delaying to yield to the pleading voice of God’s Holy Spirit, in choosing to live in sin; for such this delay really is.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 32.

Plus, not only is life so short but, in and of itself, it can also be so unsatisfying.

Read Ecclesiastes 2:15–19; 4:4; 5:10; 9:11, 12. How does the message of Solomon here only add to the point that James has made?

We see so much injustice, so much unfairness, so much that doesn’t make sense in this life. No wonder we all long for the promise of eternal life made to us through Jesus. Without that, we are just a mist that will be gone and forever forgotten.

Take stock: How much of this world holds you in its grip? How can you always keep in mind just how fleeting it all is?

Knowing and Doing What Is Good

Read James 4:15–17 in the context of the verses that come before it. What crucial point is he making here?

James here is dealing with the attitude of self-dependence. In fact, he calls that attitude “arrogance” and the words spoken as “boasting”; he says it is “evil.” That’s how important the right attitude is for the Christian.

Read verse 17. The Bible defines sin in two ways: (1) doing wrong; (2) not doing right. The first definition is given by John: “sin is the transgression of the law” (*1 John 3:4*). Many modern versions render it “sin is lawlessness,” but the Greek word *anomia* refers to specific violations of the law rather than to habitual lawless behavior (*see its use in Rom. 4:7, Titus 2:14, Heb. 10:17*). The second definition is given in James 4:17: “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.” We must therefore go beyond simply resisting temptation to do wrong. We are called to be “children of light” (*Eph. 5:8*) and to “let [our] light shine before others, so that they may see [our] good works and give glory to [our] Father who is in heaven” (*Matt. 5:16, ESV; emphasis added*).

Of course, one could get easily discouraged because, after all, who constantly does all the good they could possibly do every single day? But that’s not the issue. Even Jesus’ life was not a continual round of ceaseless activity. There were times when He withdrew to pray or simply to rest (*Luke 5:16, Mark 6:31*). Most important, He sought God’s will in everything He did (*John 5:30*). Jesus even compared doing God’s will to eating: “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work” (*John 4:34, NKJV*). Just as there are limits to how much we can eat at one sitting, so there are limits to how much we can do. That is why Jesus goes on to say that some sow while others reap but both “rejoice together” (*vss. 36–38*). As we work for the Lord, we will be encouraged to do more and will pray for a greater willingness to be used in every possible way.

How does prayer help us die to self and thus maintain an attitude of surrender to the will of God? Whatever your plans are, how can you learn to surrender them to the Lord?

Further Study: Read about the value of time in Ellen G. White, “Talents,” *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 342–346, and share with your Sabbath School class the points that impressed you.

“Let no one among you glory any longer against the truth by declaring that this spirit [of discerning the evil motives of others] is a necessary consequence of dealing faithfully with wrongdoers and of standing in defense of the truth. Such wisdom has many admirers, but it is very deceptive and harmful. It does not come from above, but is the fruit of an unregenerated heart. Its originator is Satan himself. Let no accuser of others credit himself with discernment; for in so doing he clothes the attributes of Satan with the garments of righteousness.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, pp. 936, 937.

“He who is guilty of wrong is the first to suspect wrong. By condemning another he is trying to conceal or excuse the evil of his own heart. It was through sin that men gained the knowledge of evil; no sooner had the first pair sinned than they began to accuse each other; and this is what human nature will inevitably do when uncontrolled by the grace of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 126.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Look at the last Ellen G. White statement above. How can we protect ourselves against doing the same thing: judging and accusing others so that we try to feel better about ourselves and our own shortcomings?
- 2 Dwell on the fact of just how fast life goes by. What should that tell us about what our priorities should be? Though we’re told by the special theory of relativity that time itself varies depending upon how fast we are moving in a frame of reference, one thing is certain: no matter how fast, or slowly, time goes by, once a moment is gone, it is gone forever. How should this sobering thought impact what we do with our time?
- 3 How do we deal with those whose sins need to be dealt with and yet not fall into the trap that James has warned us about?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *James 4:1, 11, 12*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Deepen his or her understanding of all that gossip encompasses in order to avoid it.

Feel: Be convicted to speak always with a loving spirit and a kind heart.

Do: Shun all forms of gossip, faultfinding, negative criticism, and presumption.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Speech Like Wild Horses

A According to James, why should we shun gossip?

B Why does James equate criticizing others with criticizing the law and the Lawgiver?

II. Feel: A Loving Spirit

A How can we steer harsh conversations away from gossip, faultfinding, and criticism?

B Why is having the right spirit as important as speaking the right words?

III. Do: Avoiding Flesh-Eating Words

A What are some strategies for handling gossip, rumors, and harsh criticism?

B How can you guard against presumption?

► **Summary:** When we gossip and criticize others, we are, as James reveals, really criticizing the law and the Lawgiver.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *James 4:1, 11, 12, 13, 16*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: When we gossip and criticize others, we are, as James reveals, really criticizing the law and the Lawgiver.

Just for Teachers: Help learners to expand their definition of gossip in order to recognize and avoid it in all its forms.

Opening Activity: Invite class members to read James 4:11, 12 in various versions of the Bible. How is the word *gossip* translated in each one? How do these different renderings enlarge our understanding of all that gossip encompasses?

Consider This: Think of a time in which someone you loved or cared about—including you—was hurt by a rumor or a false account circulated at work or in the family circle. How did it make you feel to hear others talking about the one you cared about? How did you react? What is the best way to handle gossip, rumors, and harsh criticism?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Deepen your learners' knowledge of all that gossip encompasses, and why, according to James, it must be avoided. Second, help them understand the dangers of presumption.

I. Speech Like Wild Horses (*Review James 4:1, 11, 12 with your class.*)

A single word can contain a world. Looking into its past, as it were, may enrich our understanding of its usage in the present. In Arabic, for example, at some point in history, a Bedouin or nomad must have watched a herd of wild horses careening across the desert, demolishing the dunes, and, thus, the word for “gossip” in Arabic was born. Ever after, any time one spotted a stampede of wild horses one was reminded of the destructiveness of evil speech.

The word for “slander” or “speak evil” that James uses in the Greek does not have such colorful roots as in Arabic, but it defines the nature of gossip as no less destructive. It derives from the verb *katalaeo*, which

means to slander or be a traducer. A traducer is someone who exposes another person to shame or blame by means of falsehood and misrepresentation. A true palimpsest in that it contains many layers of meaning, traducer harbors a darker nuance when its layers are pulled back—a sinister shade of meaning that exposes the motives behind the actions of those who traffic in slander. The word *traducer* originates in a root meaning “to lead,” which in and of itself may not necessarily designate anything malevolent; but in the context of speaking evil, it suggests active premeditation or deliberate intention to degrade or wound. Additionally, the noun form in the Greek contains the notion of being a *backbiter*; another word that is worth looking up in one’s own language. A backbiter is someone who doesn’t simply speak evil about others but is one who “says mean or spiteful things about someone” who is not present.

Bear in mind: even if the one we gossip about is not there, God hears every word. We are told that we shall give an account in the judgment for every idle word we speak (*Matt. 12:36, 37*). The gossip says, “If you don’t have anything nice to say, come sit next to me.” While humorous, it reminds us of the destructive potential of words. The origins of the word *sarcastic* remind us, as well: it means “flesh-eating.” Its close cousin *sarcophagus* means “coffin”—a box for a corpse. Every time we gossip we may not literally kill, but we make corpses, nonetheless, of the characters we bash. We shudder with revulsion at cultures that persist in the savage practice of eating other humans; yet, every time we gossip or feed on the scandals of others, are we not, in a sense, guilty of cannibalism?

James gives two reasons for condemning and refraining from evil speaking: (1) the traducer or slanderer, in maligning and criticizing his brother or sister in Christ, is actually maligning and criticizing the Law and judging the Law (*James 4:11*). How? Because such practice runs contrary to the golden rule: “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself’ ” (*Luke 10:27, NKJV*). To attack another is, really, to attack God; it is to find fault with the very law that condemns the attack. (2) Faultfinding is not only passing judgment on one’s neighbor, it is usurping the very prerogatives of judgment that are God’s alone to exercise.

Notice how James refers to his audience: “brethren” and “brother,” in verse 11, and now “neighbor” (*James 4:12, Amplified*). Through such word choices, James reminds us of the close familial ties that should exist between believers. As John said, “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friend” (*John 15:13, NKJV*). True love acts the opposite of slander. Instead of taking the life of a brother, it is willing to sacrifice its own to save him. James’s use of the word *neighbor* brings

to mind Jesus' use of it in the parable of the good Samaritan in answer to the question, " 'Who is my neighbor?' " (*Luke 10:29, NKJV*). As the parable shows, and the writings of Ellen G. White attest, "Our neighbor is every person who needs our help."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 376. Each Christian was that man left for dead on the road. And each is God's Samaritan, healed to save others left for dead. Such understanding should forever elevate us to treat with courtesy and respect all with whom we come in contact.

Consider This: In what sense can gossip be equated with murder? What do the origins of the word for gossip in the Greek reveal about the meaning of the word? How does that deepen our understanding of just how inimical gossip is? What reasons does James give for condemning gossip? Why is criticizing another equivalent not only to criticizing the law but usurping the prerogatives of God as Judge?

II. A Wisp of Vapor, A Puff of Smoke (*Review James 4:13, 16 with your class.*)

These verses attack the heart of presumption—overstepping the bounds of what is reasonable and fair. James is saying that it is not reasonable—therefore it is presumptuous—to make plans for our lives independent of God's will. Scripture gives us several reasons why this is so, one of which is: "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?" (*1 Cor. 6:19, NKJV*). Christ Himself says that denying self is requisite to carrying our crosses. We can't carry our own ambitions and at the same time shoulder the cross. We will drop the cross.

To press the point home, lest believers delude themselves with thinking they can safely postpone committing all to Christ, James, in language that echoes Ecclesiastes, asks, "What is the nature of your life? You are [really] but a wisp of vapor (a puff of smoke, a mist)" (*James 4:14, Amplified*). These images imply that, when life ends, there is nothing to suggest we once existed at all—no trace left. Therefore, all our plans, all our desires, come to an end.

James is not saying that we should not make plans; he is saying that we should remember (1) that we are God's intellectual, emotional, and material property; (2) the means He gives us to conduct business is a gift from Him; (3) that, as a safeguard against presumption, we should lay those plans and gifts at His feet first, before devising what we will do; (4) adopt the following attitude: "You ought instead to say, If the Lord is willing, we shall live and we shall do this or that [thing]" (*vs. 15, Amplified*). Such an attitude acknowledges God's absolute sovereignty over every aspect of life and

recognizes that the purpose of all we do is to carry out His will, first and foremost. It subordinates self to the King of the universe and acknowledges our total submission to and dependence on Him. After all, the only thing that survives death is “the spiritual and moral character.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 259.

Consider This: What is presumption, according to James? What is its opposite? What does presumption reveal about the heart? What does it mean to do something according to “the Lord’s will”? Why is this a vital part of all our planning?

►STEP 3—Apply

Application Questions:

❶ What can you do to avoid gossip? List some strategies you can use when people around you are talking negatively about someone (for example, changing the subject, silent prayer, saying something kind, et cetera).

❷ How can you guard against presumption?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Use the following activity to help learners grasp the futility of existence, apart from Christ, and the importance of guarding against presumption.

Activity: Describe what happens when a rock is thrown into a lake. (For example, the water breaks open, leaving a gash. But then, in seconds, it is sown over, and very soon, even the ripples that the abrasion created disappear, leaving nothing to reveal that the rock ever broke the surface.) How does this illustration reveal the frailty of our human existence and of the importance of laying everything at the cross in submission to Christ?