

Playing God (Part 1)

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[0 : 00] Our scripture reading this morning, from where we'll look at in our sermon, is James chapter 4, verses 11 to 17 in the New Testament.

! There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour?

Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit. Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. Amen.

[1 : 23] C.S. Lewis in his famous book, *Mere Christianity*, talks about the difference in following the rules that God gives us and deep change.

And the way he describes this is through a metaphor. He talks about the difference in painting something and just slapping coats of paint on the outside of a perimeter versus taking a stain or a dye.

And a stain, a dye, you know, when you put it into something that can soak it up, it goes all the way to the middle. And he says in the letter, that's the difference. That metaphor is describing the difference between being a person who has professed faith and just then tries to go and follow the rules because you say, well, faith without works is dead.

And so I've got to believe and then I've got to go follow all the rules God's given me versus a person who is experiencing deep gospel change in their life all the way, soaking it up like a stain or a dye all the way into the center of their hearts.

And so with that metaphor, he then gives some of the very famous lines that you will probably have heard from C.S. Lewis. He says, you've got to go in for the full treatment.

[2 : 36] The church exists for nothing else but to draw people into Christ and to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, the pastors, the missions, the sermons are simply a waste of time.

God became man for no other purpose. Now we're back to James today. And James, just for a reminder, is the biological brother of Jesus, the little brother, the little bro of Jesus, we might say. And he was a skeptic. He did not believe in his brother as the son of God, as the savior, when Jesus was in his earthly ministry. And Paul tells us that when Jesus rose from the dead, he specifically appeared to James.

And from that moment, James believed and he became an apostle and he became a pillar of the church in Jerusalem. So it's from there that he's writing to the church around the whole Mediterranean.

So James 1.1 tells us that he writes to the dispersed exiles all across the Mediterranean. And he's talking there with an Old Testament metaphor about the church, saying that the church is the new Israel.

[3 : 45] That means that James is writing to us. He's writing to all of us today who are Christians. And it's a practical book. You'll remember that. It's a book about growth. It's a book about change, deep change, how to change.

And for that reason, there's a danger in it. We all want to change. We all want to be something more than what we are. We want to be less miserable than we are by putting away our impatience and becoming more patient.

We want to be less miserable by putting away our anger and our frustration and annoyance with people and being kind and meek. We want change, deep change. The danger is to read the book of James like the other epistles in the New Testament and read it just as a list of rules.

And there are a lot of rules in James. There are a lot of commands in James. And we've looked at all these to-dos. Bridal your tongue. Care for the orphan and the widow. Show mercy to the afflicted.

And the list goes on and on and on. We could list dozens of commands. And if you highlight a Bible, if you like to do that, and you take a highlighter and just highlight the commands that are in James, it would be an incredibly colorful text.

[4 : 56] The danger is that you remember James' line from James chapter 2, faith without works is dead faith. And you think, okay, first I've got to believe.

But if I'm going to stay in God's good graces, then I've got to do a lot of stuff. And I've got to follow the rules. And what James is actually doing is something very different than that.

Different church traditions have gotten caught up in that idea. But that's not what James is saying at all. And instead, he gave us the prescription of how to really change at the very end of the passage last time, just before what we read today in 8 to 10, chapter 4.

And here's what it is. He says, draw near to God. Come close to God. And he will draw near to you. And be wretched over your sin and your struggle. And weep over it.

And he will exalt you when you're humbled. Or you could say James 1, 21 to 23, where we were told, return to the word that has already been implanted in you.

[5 : 57] And what is that word? That is the word, the logos, Jesus himself through the word, the scriptures. And he's saying, weep over your sin. Know yourself, as John Calvin put it at the very beginning of his Institutes.

There are only two things for the Christian to do. Know yourself and know God. And then know yourself in the light of God. Return to God, knowing your sin, weeping over it, and really examining yourself.

And then looking at Jesus 10 times and saying, because of his grace, I want to become more like him. That's the difference in painting your life with rules.

And really soaking up gospel change like a dye, like a stain into your heart. And James is actually saying, because of the grace of Jesus, return to him and be replanted over and over and over and over again in his grace, so that you would become a little Christ, as C.S. Lewis put it, like him more and more over time.

Now today, we've got a command. We've got two commands. Judge not. Do not speak evil of a brother or sister, or you are judging them.

[7 : 06] And so you'll hear there the connection back to the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus said, Judge not, lest ye be judged, to put it in the King James line. And that command is not about the will as much as it is about the heart.

It's about deep heart change. How do we do it? How do we hear it and soak it in like a sponge, like a dye into a sponge? And so let's learn here for just a few minutes what it means to be fully human. What it means to be truly human by going back and looking at Christ and becoming like a little Christ in this command. Don't speak evil of a brother or sister.

Don't judge them. And what we're really being told here is of the danger of playing God. Because only God is the real judge and the lawgiver.

And so this is an invitation to be truly human, to be fully human is the idea. Now we read verses 11 to 17. And in 11 to 17, there's a connection between speak no evil of anyone.

[8 : 12] And you better say, if the Lord wills. And in both sections, it says, who are you? So there's a glue through those two questions. We're going to look at those two questions over two weeks.

So playing God part one today, playing God part two next time. And so just verses 11 and 12 this morning tell us about playing God versus being truly human, being what we actually are.

And so we learn here in verse 11 about playing God by judging people, firstly. And then secondly, of the problem of playing God by judging God deeper in.

So first, playing God by the problem of judging people. So you'll see it in verse 11. It's said so clearly. He says in verse 11, do not speak evil against one another.

So there's the line, speak evil. And then he explains it a little bit by saying, if you do speak evil, then you have judged your brother or sister. So two ways to describe one thing.

[9 : 12] Speak evil and judge your brother and sister. Now, just like I mentioned, you'll hear the Sermon on the Mount in that. But you also, as I've been studying James, I'm sorry to say that I didn't realize till this week that James is actually following Leviticus 19 and his prescriptions.

So you can go back later and read through Leviticus 19 and find how James is basically outlining it. And in Leviticus 19, verse 16, it says, you shall not go about as a slander among your people.

So there it is. And he's picking up on that Old Testament command, that moral law that just has not changed since the Old Testament. And so the word that he uses for speak evil here, katalaleo, is translated slander typically, historically.

And that's all it means. What does it mean? To speak evil or to slander means to talk down to somebody. It means to make them small.

To pull the rug out from underneath them. To make them feel weightless, like they have no grounding. And the idea connected to judging is as if you have taken your seat.

[10 : 19] You've stood in the judge's bench and put that person in the dock, the criminal's dock. And so you make them small. You speak down to them. You become their moral authority. You become their supreme, their judge of their life.

And that's slander. But the key is that you can absolutely tell the truth and be slandering. You can tell the truth about somebody and be slandering them.

You can tell the truth to somebody and be speaking evil against them. So in the book of Esther, the evil Haman, he went to King Ahasuerus and he spoke the truth about the Jews.

And what he said about the Jews was, They do not follow your gods. They do not follow your laws. They worship their own God and they follow the laws only he's given them. And that was absolutely true.

And he said, So in his heart he sought to destroy them. What is slander? What does it mean to speak evil? It means that you might be telling the truth about somebody around here in the community, but you do so in order to destroy them, to hurt them, to diminish them, to make them small, to take away their social capital among the community that they're a part of.

[11 : 33] The second word that gets used here is the word to judge. And it's just elevating slander. And the way it's doing so very probably means, refers to pronouncing somebody, condemning somebody like a judge as lost, as beyond grace, beyond hope.

So it's making some kind of pronouncement against somebody's soul and saying, There's no way they're a Christian. There's no way they could be a part of God's family and God's community and God's kingdom.

And the big problem there is God tells long stories. And the question at the end of verse 12 is, Who are you? Who are you to judge your neighbor, to pronounce them lost, pronounce them forever gone?

You don't know. You don't know their story. You don't know their background. You don't know what's going on in their life right now. You don't know what God will do. Only God can say that. Only God can judge. And so Thomas Manton very helpfully summarizes this.

And he was the clerk of the Westminster Assembly. And he says that this is outside of our jurisdiction. There are three things outside of human jurisdiction. And that's to speak against the counsel of God from eternity, to speak against what the scriptures say, and to speak against the heart of a human being.

[12 : 48] Three things that are outside of our domain, outside of our jurisdiction. We can't do it. We can't see it. We don't know enough. We don't have enough information, he's ultimately saying here. Now, we could call this judgmentalism, which is what it's often been called.

And so judgmentalism has two layers to it in these two words. The first layer is motivation. So what's the difference in speaking the truth about somebody's life or into somebody's life in judgmentalism?

And the first layer is motivation. And so in motivation, you've got to ask yourself, am I telling the truth to tear down instead of to build them up? And then the second layer is verdict casting.

Have I pronounced guilt and condemnation upon them when I have no right to do so? No standing. I don't know enough information. I don't know what God's going to do ultimately with the end of their life.

All right. You will all know that in the contemporary world, the modern culture that we live in, this is a favorite of people to say, you see, the Bible says, don't judge people.

[14:00] Judge not lest ye be judged. But the problem is that religious people, and especially Christians, are incredibly judgmental. Sometimes we are. But is that what is being talked about here?

You know, people say, look, religious people are judgmental. Christians are judgmental because they say that other people's religions aren't true, that Christ, that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. There's no way else to the Father except through Him.

And that's judging other people's religions. And it's just important to be, for one minute, really clear. In the Bible, we're not being told here, number one, that we can never tell the truth.

And the authority of God's Word is so clear on that and calls us to tell the truth. The second thing we're not being told here is to never morally evaluate anything, anybody's behavior, what anybody is up to in life.

And instead, we've got a paradigm for that. Well, just think about it. If a person says, look, Jesus says, judge not, lest ye be judged. James says, don't speak evil, don't judge another person.

[15:01] You don't have the right to do so. You see, religious people are judgmental. That is a judgment. You know, you have to fall on your own sword in order to even say such a thing.

That's a moral evaluation. That is a moral proclamation. Religious people should not say that any other religion is wrong. It's falling upon your own sword. Of course we have to morally evaluate. We couldn't do life for one day without moral evaluation.

But instead, we have a paradigm for this in the Bible, and it's in Ephesians. And the paradigm is, speak the truth in love. Do not speak evil or judge.

And again, what does that mean? It simply means that you go and you tell the truth to somebody about a neighbor, about a person that you know. And you do it because you want to restore them.

You want to see them built back up.

You want to rescue them. You want to draw them back from the ways they're running away from God. Or do you do so because you hate them? You want to destroy them? You love and enjoy seeing a little bit of their life fall apart secretly.

[16:02] You say, you know, on the surface, it's such a shame about so-and-so. It's awful. I hate to hear it. But deep down in the heart, schadenfreude.

Apologies to our German friends. Schadenfreude is actually happening. What is that? That's when you secretly enjoy the demise of other people deep down in the soul. And that is slander.

Are you wanting to restore them? Are you wanting to destroy them? And of course, we all know that we have different degrees in our own lives of struggling with this problem. Notice in verse 11, what does he say?

He says, don't speak evil or judge a brother or sister. So he's talking about it in the context of the community of faith and using the language of family. Here's the difference between truth and love and slander.

Here, imagine parents. Imagine parents who are sitting in their living room late into the night and they're talking about their children.

[17:01] And they're saying of their eldest, their youngest, you know, our eldest child. The husband says to the wife, let me tell you about this dumb thing that they did.

And they're ruining their life. And, you know, they just have a good laugh about it. They sit late into the night just saying, ah, our eldest child, what a fool.

He's doing everything wrong. His life is going to be absolutely ruined. And they're just joking and trivially about it. Do you? No, of course. There's no parent who sits in the living room late into the night and says, my son is ruining his life.

And it's, you know, it's a shame, but oh well. No, what do they do? They weep into the night because they love their son or daughter.

And they say, I would do anything to help bring them back, to restore them, to seek their good. And that's the difference. What does he say? Brother and sister, family, church community.

[17:59] Do you talk about one another as if it is your family? That's the difference in truth and love and speaking evil and judging and slandering. Am I judgmental?

That's the question James is asking. And I don't mean me specifically, though it does apply to me. Don't shout out. Am I judgmental? But the question is, am I judgmental?

And here's just a couple ways to think about that. One, do you have an instinct to criticize first? Do you enter into a space and look for what's wrong before you ever say anything about what's right?

Do you, again, schadenfreude, do you hear that news about that person who has had to resign because of public sin? And while you say it's awful on the outside, deep down in your heart, you have a little bit of delight because you say, at least I'm not them.

They make me look better as they go down. Do you find that it is your instinct to say something like, you know, I'm just an honest person. It's just my personality to tell the truth.

[19 : 05] These are signs of a spectrum of judgmentalism, of moving toward speaking evil and struggling with this. And, of course, we can all come today and say, this is me to some degree, every single one of us.

In the pre-modern world, it took a long time to spread the whispers of the community. You know, you had to take it on horseback, village to village. But today, you can take a screenshot. And when you take a screenshot of what that person texted you, you send it to three people. And then what happens? They send it to three people. And they, their three people, send it to three people. And before you know it, a thousand people are all talking about whatever issue there is before you.

And that means that we are incredibly prone to this sin more than even a pre-modern person ever would have been because of the capability we have to slander. What do we do about it? Camp is coming up.

My kids are going to camp. We're having discussions in our house about our younger kids going to camp. And whether it's the right time or not, I'm all in, by the way. And you know what happens at camp is when a, I used to be a camp counselor.

[20 : 16] And you find that when a child is homesick, sometimes it expresses itself by them really acting out a lot and misbehaving and making camp kind of miserable for all the other kids.

And you can go to that child and you can say, you've got to obey the rules. Let me get out the code of conduct again and read it for you. And that's probably not going to change anything because you're just painting the exterior.

But if mom and dad send a letter and that letter says, son, daughter, look, I know you're struggling at camp, but I just want you to know you came to camp. We sent you to camp, not because we don't love you.

We love you desperately. We wish you were at home, but we think this is good for you. And we want you to receive this letter from home and know the love of mom and dad. Then that has the possibility of actually letting the rules, the code of conduct soak into the heart.

Why? Because now they're safe. Now they're in a state of grace. Now they know that obedience is actually about the health of everybody else because they feel healthy. They feel loved. They feel beloved.

[21 : 20] What do you do with your slander, with your speaking evil, with your judgmentalism? You got to come back to Jesus and re-receive the implanted word. Just like James says, draw near to Christ and he will draw near to you.

Don't just say, I better not do this because it's against the rule. No, come to Christ and look at him and say, what is he like to me? He is my elder brother. He is also judge of all the earth.

The judge of all the earth had every right to condemn me. Had every right. Yet, what did he do? He did not speak slander against me. He died for my slander.

That's what my elder brother did for me. Therefore, how can I be judgmental? How can I be judgmental if the God of all the earth did that for me? That's the heart of change. It's a gospel change. It's got to soak in like a dye, like paint.

Be wretched for your judgmentalism. Cry out to God and he will draw near to you. And in your humility, he'll exalt you. He'll lift you back up. He'll change you from the inside out. And then, let me give you this paradigm.

[22 : 20] Here's the paradigm. Number one, before I speak words about anybody in our church community to anybody else, number one, is it true?

Have I checked the facts? Why? Because Zechariah 8.16 says, speak the truth to one another. Number two, is it loving?

Would I want the same to be said about me in another conversation? Why? Because Ephesians 4.15 says, speak the truth in love. Is it loving? Number three, is it edifying?

Does the word I'm sharing build up? Why? Because Ephesians 4.29 says, do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up that it may

benefit those who are listening to you.

And lastly, is it needful? Is it the right time and place for this? Am I accomplishing what is good for this person in the right moment, the right time, the right place, the right audience?

[23 : 22] Why? Because only say what is helpful and beneficial to all the parties involved.

Ephesians 4.29. Secondly, and very briefly, not only are we told here not to play God by judging other people, but we're told here not to play God, to take God's place in the bench by judging God.

Now, that's not on the surface of the text, but James does imply here that slander against a brother or sister in the church is actually putting God in the dock.

It's slander. It's judging God. So you can see how he puts this by implication in 11b down through chapter 12. What does he say? The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks evil, and here it is, against the law and judges the law.

But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge. So here's how he says it. He says, when you speak slander against somebody evil, you judge the law. Confusing language.

What does that mean? The law. What's the law? Again, I just started to awaken to this a little bit more this week because I realized the connections between Leviticus and James more.

[24 : 32] But the law that James refers to in James chapter 2, the royal law, comes from Leviticus 19, the first place we see the Lord tell us, love your neighbor as yourself.

That's the royal law. And James repeats that for us like Jesus repeats it in the Sermon on the Mount. And when we break the royal law by slandering somebody, speaking evil against somebody, what we've done is the law in the Bible is like the judge, and we're in the dock.

We're lawbreakers. We're the ones underneath the law, hearing God's moral vision for our lives.

But when we slander somebody, what we do is we take the law, God's law, His word, and we put it in the criminal's dock, and we stand in the bench, and we look down and say, Lord, thank you for writing these laws down for me, but I find them not fit for my purposes.

And I'll make my own law, and I'll make my own way, and I'll make my own path. And so we become the judge of all the earth who is then judging the law and saying, the law is not good enough for my life. That's what it means to judge the law.

Now, by implication, because God is, verse 12, the law giver. The law simply reflects His moral character. That means that when we speak evil of one another, we have actually put God in the criminal dock and said, thank you for expressing your moral vision for us in the Bible, but it is not fit for our purposes.

[25 : 54] We will make the laws for ourselves. We will decide what we're going to do. And so we judge God. We judge the law. Well, every time we judge other people and we speak slanderously about other people, three reasons, three ways, I should say, that you can judge the law.

Number one, by simply ignoring it. Number two, by taking laws away from the Bible, by saying, yes, I recognize God has commanded these things, but I don't like that law.

I don't recognize that law. We call that progressivism. Or number three, and this one's more subtle, by adding laws to the law, by taking laws that aren't in the Bible, and this is where judgmentalism can really destroy a community, by taking things that are not prescribed in God's Word and creating laws that we think must be there for a person to really be religious and adding those to people's lives and beating them over the head with it exactly like the Pharisees.

Thomas Manton, again, the clerk of the Westminster Assembly, he said, adding laws that God hasn't named, making more sins than God has made, binding others in chains of your own making, presenting your own austerities and rigorous observances and duties upon another, that is what it means to judge the law of God.

Now, here's three reasons why we cannot play God in that way. Number one, verse 12, there is only one lawgiver.

[27 : 22] What does that mean? It means that God is the creator of the world, not us. We're not the creator, only He is. And so only the creator of something can tell you what it's for and how you're supposed to live in it, live unto it.

So we're not, we don't have any right to add laws, to take away laws, to ignore any of the laws of God because God made them. Only He has that right. Number two, there is only one lawgiver and judge, verse 12 says.

What does that mean? That means that only God is righteous enough to actually judge people.

Because every single one of us is a sinner and because we didn't make the law, we have no right to

pronounce condemnation upon anybody.

Only God is the righteous judge and lawgiver. And then thirdly and lastly, what does verse 12 say? Because only He is able to save or to destroy.

Because God is the creator of all law and all law reflects His person, only He has the right to judge and therefore only He, the judge, has the right to save somebody from the law or to destroy them because of the law.

[28 : 26] How then could anybody standing in the dock as a lawbreaker be found or righteous or saved?

How could anybody be saved? How could any of us, if we're a lawbreaker standing in the dock before the great judge, how could any of us be saved? And that's what makes the cross of Christ so incredible.

God is the righteous judge and He can't, He won't, He refuses. No justice would allow God to say, when we stand in the dock, you know, you've committed these sins, these crimes against the universe, against humanity, against me, the judge, the righteous judge.

Let's just forget about it. Let's just all go home and forget about it. Just mercy. And that would mean that God is not righteous judge. He is not just. He is not the lawgiver.

Remember, the expression of the moral vision of reality is not the expression of His moral character. But because God is just, how in the world could He save? And this is what makes the cross of Christ so incredible, that the judge of all the earth came and stood in the dock.

[29 : 35] That the only one who is righteous enough to judge humanity is the one who was judged by humanity. What makes the cross so incredible is that in the cross, you have the justice of God, God expressed, and the mercy of God expressed to sinners where they meet in Jesus Christ, the great judge who was judged in our place.

This passage is really telling us, you know, we don't have any right to play God, to pretend like we're the judge of all the earth. But 2,000 years ago, we stood in the court.

All of humanity stood in that court, and we said, crucify Him, crucify Him, crucify Him. We played the judge. We put Him in the dock. We murdered Him.

He was judged in our place. And that, you see, their mercy and justice kiss. And we've got to look up and say, if Jesus Christ, the great just judge, was willing to die for my judgmentalism, surely that's got to break my judgmentalism.

Surely that's got to change the way I approach other people. Surely that's got to soak down into the core of who I am. And I'll finish with this word. Kelly Capik, who is coming to speak here on May the 30th in his great book, *You're Only Human*, he talks about American late-night television.

[30 : 52] And if you've seen any of that, Jimmy Kimmel, people like that, Jay Leno, if you want to go way back, David Letterman, they used to do this thing, and they probably do it here, but I don't watch enough live TV to comment.

They go out into the New York City streets, and they ask people, they ask Americans, regular Americans in New York City, you know, who's the vice president? Here's a map.

Identify this. They point to Scotland, and they say, identify this nation. What is this island in world geography? And, of course, no American can identify where the UK is or name the vice president. And that's what the shows are always about, and it just further embarrasses us on the global map. Kelly asked, if you went around to churches, as churches get out today, and you ask, why should a Christian be humble?

He guesses that in his book that the answer would be, we would all say, well, because we're sinners. sinners. And that's absolutely true, but the question is, were Adam and Eve called to be humble in the holy garden, the righteous garden?

[32 : 00] And the answer is absolutely yes. You see, what's the antidote? At the very end of this passage, James just leaves you with this question, who are you? And you could hear that as saying, who are you, you sinner?

And that's very true. We are sinners in need of grace. But before that's the right answer, the first right answer is this, who are you? And you should say, I'm only human, and I'm gloriously human. It's good to be human. It's good to be what you are. So don't be judge of other people's lives. Let God be God, because you're just human, and it's right to be human. It's humble to be human, and humility is the condition of your creatureliness.

It's not just a product of sin. It's exactly what you are. Let God be God. God is comfortable with that. And God is very comfortable with all of us just being human. So let's go and be human.

The words of Psalm 15.3, A citizen of Zion is one who has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong, and who casts no slur upon his fellow man.

[33 : 03] Let us pray. Father, we ask that you would help us to rest secure in the judge who was judged in our place for our judgmentalism. And so we ask, Lord, that instead you would take the paradigm, speak the truth in love, and soak it down into our hearts like a sponge.

And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.