

A Judge Who Isn't the Judge

"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. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you – who are you to judge your neighbor?" (James 4:11-12).

"A new command I give you. Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

We fail, on a daily (if not hourly) basis, to grasp how pervasive sin is and how it controls us. Sin grips our mind, our will, and as a result our relationships. However many years we've been professing to be saved doesn't matter. Sin still is powerfully with us. Sin makes us think evil thoughts, which is why Paul said we're to bring our thoughts into captivity to Christ – something I find exceedingly difficult to do. One of the most deceitful and abhorrent of sinful thoughts is contempt for others. We need to dwell on that issue in this lesson.

In our verse above, James probably has in mind Leviticus 19:18, **"Love your neighbor as yourself,"** but love for another person suffuses all the Law. We are to submit to and obey the commands that God has given us. If we don't we are essentially saying that we're sufficient in ourselves to know what's wise, right and good, not only apart from what God has revealed but *in opposition* to what God has said. To not obey God's Word, as Israelites didn't obey the Law, is to say that the Law that God or the commands that God gave us, is not good, just or wise. But James' concern isn't primarily obedience but censoriousness.

We all have an intimate and deep experience of sin. It's built-in, exceedingly powerful, and continually operative in our lives. And sin alienates. The alienation was immediately in evidence in the Garden in Genesis 3, at the Fall. Alienation is painfully evident in our society today. The alienation results in a penchant for being critical of others. We not only don't have love for others, we judge them. We hold them in contempt. We have to, because of pride, because of self-love. We think we're good and righteous. But others . . . no, not them. There's much, way too much, in the lives of others to criticize. We love to judge others because it exalts us. It feeds our self-righteousness.

If we were to keep our contempt for others to ourselves, that would be bad enough. God knows our thoughts and finds them as ugly as our deeds. But we don't keep them to ourselves. In order to really exalt ourselves we must share our contemptuousness with others. It's worse than gossip, it's slander. It may harm that target of our judgment, perhaps grievously; but even if it doesn't, it expresses sin. It violates God's holy Law. It holds God in contempt.

The Persons of the Godhead, although distinct, are a unity. They eternally co-exist in love, joy and peace. God created humanity to live together, likewise, in love, as a corporate unity, reflecting His perfect character. Being judgmental, being critical of others, and being contemptuous says that we refuse to be godly. Worse, it says we despise God's lovely and good Person. We're not just discussing another expression of sin here, nor merely failure to fulfill God's will, but rebellion against God's very nature. This is why Jesus made love for a brother in Christ a command: We're to love each other *as He loved us*. How's that? Sacrificially, selflessly, even though the love is not deserved. By refusing to be critical, even though the criticism may be legitimate, we express love for others, grace, reflecting God's own glorious Person.

We must be assiduously careful about the matter of righteousness. Our self-righteousnesses are odious. Jesus came, lived an obedient and righteous life, died an atoning death and rose and ascended so that we might have His righteousness by faith. The Holy Spirit places us in Christ so that we have His righteousness imputed to us. God therefore sees us as righteous as the Son. Yet we must actually be righteous in this life in the here and now. And righteousness is showing love to others. **"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you"** (Matthew 7:1-2). This convicting verse has to do with being critical of others. God, after all, who has exhaustive knowledge of our lives and character (and thoughts and motives) has much to be critical of in us. And He's going to sit in judgment of us one day. If we don't want Him to judge us for how we've lived this life before Him, we'll learn to pursue loving others, regardless what there may be in those others to criticize. We leave the things we don't approve of to God to deal with.

Because the verse immediately before James 4:11 says, **"Humble yourselves before the Lord,"** commentaries say that the root problem in being critical of others is pride. If we're humble, we wouldn't be so critical. I'm not so sure about

that. Yes, pride indeed makes us look down on others. So when we see what we think is a fault, we express ourselves with criticism. But even those who are humble still can be contemptuous of others – and express it with criticism. That’s because of our incessantly operating, indwelling sin. Do we understand? We must have the forgiveness of sin that comes from Jesus’ atoning work, and His righteousness. And we really, *really* need also the on-going, intercessory work of Jesus on our behalf, all the time, because otherwise we’d be hopeless. Jesus is our Savior, constantly saving us, preserving us from the condemnation we fully deserve.

There’s more. We need to be discerning. We live in a nation saturated with distractions and idolatries. So we need to think carefully about issues and the acts of people we observe all around us. But we can – and must – do that in a spirit of grace. Refusing to be critical of others whom we deem to be in some way in the wrong merges imperceptibly with being forgiving. If we see brothers in the wrong, we forgive them, refuse to gossip about them, but decide for ourselves what’s right and commit to living in what we believe is the wise and godly way. David refused to be critical of King Saul although Saul certainly was deserving of criticism. David exhibited grace. So must we. However, Paul saw that Judaizing believers were in the wrong insisting that Gentile believers be circumcised and he made his criticisms clear, because that was essential to the Gospel. And a young believer at Corinth involved in an illicit sexual relationship drew Paul’s fierce condemnation. Wisdom is needed to exercise discernment, as well as love. We don’t and mustn’t tolerate gross public sin because that affects the entire body to which we’re united.

Jesus is the giver of the Law and the enforcer of it. He’s the Judge of the living and the dead. We will all have to stand before Him one day as He judges us. So we must be exceedingly careful about how we are in our character as well as our speech, our deeds, our motives, and yes, even our thoughts. If we’re going to be critical, let’s be critical of ourselves.

Let’s recall the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11ff). It’s really the father who is prodigal – prodigal in love. We should be like that father who had such a lovely heart of love. Instead, we’re too much like that older son, harsh and critical, self-righteous, unloving, ugly. (Even uglier is indifference toward others, but that’s a lesson for another day.)

Now someone will protest: “But we sometimes need to correct others. We can’t just be mushy tolerant of a brother who’s in sin or in serious error of some kind. Church is for correction and discipline as well as encouragement.” OK. True. But if the critique is really necessary (and careful thought needs be given to this), it should be private, done in love, and with the goal of seeing repentance and blessing. There are indeed some things that are intolerable, and we need to be discerning and in much prayer about how to respond to them. But if someone can’t be corrected in love and kindness, it should be left to God to deal with.

“The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear-minded . . . Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8b). If we were more clear-minded, we’d realize how much we need to make allowances for other people’s faults. Christianity is supposed to be a religion of love. So, where is the love? Followers of Jesus should be people known for their love. The first fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit is love. The singular, transcendent love of God should be our love for others. Instead, we’ve changed the will of God. We’ve made it so that we’re people who are “right.” We need to be right about everything, and so we call out those who are wrong. Let’s humble ourselves, mortify our sinful desires, and yield totally to the Spirit to let Christ’s love flow. As the Church Age nears its end, we need to see love in evidence as never before.

But perhaps we need to understand better exactly what love is, biblical love, that is, as used in John 3:16 and in the two greatest commandments. Biblical love isn’t an emotion, although that may indeed be involved. Love is as love *does*, and love is self-sacrificing in some way. Love for God is expressed by obeying Him, striving to be like Him, and by serving Him as He instructed us in His Word. Love for another person is expressed by seeking that other person’s good. (Love always expresses God’s goodness.) Love seeks for others to be blessed, for their lives to be enriched, and to help with their needs. Yes, there are lots of un-lovely people as well as people whose skin or ethnicity is different. But that’s irrelevant because we show them all love – even those who harm us. Again: Biblical love for others does not seek to exalt self; on the contrary, loving others involves some form of self-sacrifice. Thus, a critical spirit *despises* love.

May we grasp the seriousness of this lesson and commit to loving God and others, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Why? For the glory of God.