

Censoriousness

James 4:11-12

“There is [a] disease innate in human nature, that every one would have all others to live according to his own will or fancy. This presumption James suitably condemns in this passage, that is, because we dare to impose on our brethren our rule of life...we confidently condemn whatever does not please us.”

John Calvin wrote those words 480 years ago, and he hit the nail right on the head. Though the world in which we live has drastically changed over those years, nothing has changed about human nature. Nothing is different. “We confidently condemn whatever does not please us.” “We dare to impose on our brethren our rule of life.” That is what James is addressing here in our text this morning.

I have called that inclination “censoriousness.” I don’t use that word to impress with you my ability to use big words, but rather because it accurately defines this trouble. This sin. Censorious means to be overly critical, to be quick to censor other people, quick to criticize and condemn others. And to impose on other people the standards by which you live your own life.

This tendency abounds in the visible church of Jesus Christ. Christians, often otherwise mature Christians, are quick to find fault with one another. Quick to condemn, as if everything in life were equally black and white. For example, I have known of churches split over the issue of education--homeschooling families insisting that is the only biblical way, families with children in Christian or church schools insisting that is the best way for every Christian, families with children in public schools condemned or ostracized. Other churches deeply troubled by those who insist that age-graded Sunday School classes are

wrong. Divisions have come over the conviction that there is only one acceptable method of courtship and dating leading up to marriage, only one acceptable method of disciplining children. That a wife ought never to work outside the home, or that she ought to always wear a dress, that a young woman should never go to college, or that jazz music is sinful. Other issues would include the use of alcohol, liturgical forms within the worship service, style of music, whether or not you use wine in the Lord’s Supper, what view you hold with regard to the future millennium, and whether or not you eat meat, use alcohol in moderation, or use bottles to feed your babies. The list would go on and on. “We confidently condemn whatever does not please us.”

Sadly, those who are counted among the reformed churches are particularly prone to this trouble, for often the very evident trouble among those who are well trained in the reformed faith is,

I. THE PARTICULAR SIN OF CENSORIOUSNESS.

That spirit is captured by the expression, “If you don’t do it the way I do it, you are wrong.” People who see everything clearly through their own eyes. So today we have all sorts of very tiny denominations, very much within the reformed tradition, filled with people that simply started their own church because everyone else was doing it wrong. But that is not what we are instructed to do in the Scriptures.

Eph. 4:1 “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

There is the goal that is set before us, even with James’ words of warning. How shall we maintain unity and the bond of peace? We must all live “with all lowliness and gentleness, with

longsuffering, bearing with one another in love.” In that context, it is obvious that peace and unity do not mean uniformity. Peace and unity do not mean that we must all act the same way, look the same, and speak the same. They do not mean even that we must all believe exactly the same, for that won’t come to pass until after Jesus returns in glory. Rather, unity and peace are built upon the willingness to bear with one another in love. “With all humility and gentleness.”

That is the spirit which James seeks to stimulate with these words of warning, where he identifies this sin of censoriousness as,

A. Speaking evil of your fellow Christians.

v.11a “Do not speak evil of one another, brothers.”

That is a very high standard, prohibiting speaking evil against a brother. Or a sister. Speaking in way that brings harm to that brother or sister. Speaking in a way that damages his reputation or the honor of his good name. Our Shorter Catechism gives this answer to the question, “What is forbidden in the ninth commandment?” “The ninth commandment forbids whatsoever is prejudicial to truth, or injurious to our own, or our neighbor’s, good name.” That is what is required by the command, “You shall not bear false witness.”

Speaking evil of someone means to speak about them in a way that injures their good name! And that is where the idea of slander comes in, which is very much at the heart of James’ words here. Speaking evil, or speaking against someone, is one and the same as slander. And at this point, even things that might be truthful can still be slanderous, for you can speak things which are true and yet have as a primary objective causing harm to others.

And do you know where this comes from? From your heart! From your own pride. Calvin also writes this: “We see how much labor James takes in correcting the lust for slandering. For hypocrisy is always presumptuous, and we are by nature hypocrites, fondly exalting ourselves by [slandering] others.”

Pride. That’s where slander comes from. That’s the source of evil speaking. Exalting ourselves. Notice the connection between the two in,

Ps. 101:5 “Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, Him I will destroy; The one who has a haughty look and a proud heart, Him I will not endure.”

So this is the standard for your speech, all of the words you use,

Eph. 4:31 “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. 32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.”

Evil speaking there is sometimes translated “slander,” and those are both good translations. It is actually the Greek word for “blasphemy.” That’s a good translation, too. Blasphemy is not only speaking against the honor of God. But also speaking against one another! Immediately before those words from Paul in Ephesians 4 he writes:

Eph. 4:30 “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”

The obvious connection there is that slander grieves the Holy Spirit! Evil speaking, speaking against your brothers and sisters in Christ grieves God! And so we studied in,

James 3:8 “[The tongue] is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we

curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. 10 Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.”

James goes on in his description and definition of this most dangerous sin, warning against,

B. Judging your fellow Christians.

Speaking against one another James calls “judging.” They are the same thing!

v.11b “He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law.”

And our text ends,

v.12b “But who are you to judge another?”

This judgment is in direct contrast and opposition to that royal law which James mentions in,

James 2:8 “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well.”

So it is that this censorious judgment with which we speak against other people is the very opposite of godly, biblical love. It is the same subject Paul addresses in,

Rom. 14:1 “Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. 2 For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. 3 Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. 4 Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.”

That exhortation is emphasized with these words,

Rom. 14:10 “But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother?”

So it is that we are not called to being judgmental. We are not called to pass judgment upon one another, for that is to despise him. We are not to quarrel over opinions! Translated in the NKJV, “doubtful things.” In the NIV, “disputable matters.”

I should note that there are some things that are not disputable, and in those things, God has specifically granted to the elders of the church the right to judge. Those things which are specified clearly in his revealed will, in the law, are not mere opinions. So, for instance, we read in,

1 Cor. 5:1 “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father’s wife! 2 And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. 3 For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. 4 In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, 5 deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus....12 For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? 13 But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person.”

So there a form of judgment is entrusted by God to those in the church who watch over your souls, whom the Holy Spirit has made overseers. But two absolutely crucial things need to be clear. The authority is actually God’s. The elders are merely ministers of God who are responsible to exercise his authority.

The power and authority of the Elders is ministerial and declarative. We declare what God has said. We minister the Word of God, not our own opinions and ideas. And secondly, in doing all of that, our authority as Elders is therefore limited to those things which God has revealed. We have no authority otherwise.

Neither Paul in Romans 14 nor James in our text today is contradicting the right exercise of authority within the church, applying the law of God as it is revealed. Rather, both declare that individually, judgment is not to be exercised. And that in no case are we allowed to judge one another on the basis of our own opinions and convictions. We must not speak evil of one another. We must not “dare to impose on our brethren our rule of life.”

For there are some very serious implications of doing so.

II. THE IMPLICATIONS OF CENSORIOUSNESS.

Look at how James describes it,

v.11b “He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law.”

If you speak evil against your brother, if you speak evil or slander your brother, you speak evil or slander the law! But what does that mean? Simply this, that you are putting yourself above the law. That’s the slander. Whether you realize it or not, you are judging the law by claiming to be your own judge! And that, beloved, is a matter of great pride.

A. Pride in putting yourself above the law.

Pride to think that you can judge where the law itself DOES NOT JUDGE. Pride to think that you can sit in judgment upon that law. Pride to reject the position of one who is subject to the law and to assume the position of one who is above that law. And

that is what you are doing, if you judge one another! You place yourself above the law.

Now, the benefit of this emphasis is that you would not likely think about it this way yourself. And thinking about it this way ought to keep you from doing it. If you judge someone for being different from you, if you judge someone who thinks or acts differently from you, if you speak against them, you are placing yourself above the law of God.

And James even goes a step further. You are actually exempting yourself from that law that God has revealed. Such is the self-righteousness of those who are censorious, those who judge others on disputable matters!

B. Self-righteousness in exempting yourself from the law.

I want you to understand exactly what James is saying here.

v.11c “But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.”

You are not a doer, as one subject to obey the law, but you claim the right to sit in judgment upon it. And if you claim that right, you are rejecting your proper position of submission. You are exempting yourself. Calvin understands it perfectly. “When you claim for yourself a power to censure above the law of God you exempt yourself from the duty of obeying the law.”

In other words, you cannot be in submission to the law and an authority higher than the law at the same time. Thus the accusation of self-righteousness. And so it is so obvious in people who are censorious. They are often proud and smug in their pharisaical hypocrisy, for they not only judge others but they fail to judge themselves. So great a danger is this pride of self-righteousness.

Jesus knew that, of course, and that is the emphasis of his words in,

Mat. 7:1 “Judge not, that you be not judged. 2 For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. 3 And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? 5 Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

The point is not that you are forbidden to help your brother deal with his sin! Actually, just the opposite. You are to help your neighbor with that speck in his eye. But first, examine yourself. The point is that God will judge you with the same standard you use on others. “With the measure you use it will be measured to you.”

The trouble is, beloved, that this pride of self-righteousness is a clever enemy. Few of you will ever consciously realize that it has come upon you. Few of you will realize that you have actually developed and displayed a censorious spirit, that you judge one another. Few of you will do it consciously and intentionally. But we still do it, so deceptive is the pervasive presence of sin that remains in our hearts and lives.

I doubt any of you will self-consciously declare yourself to be above the law, a judge of the law. I doubt you would admit at all that you think yourself exempted from the law. If you did, it isn’t likely that you would even be here, or claim to be a Christian. So the great danger is the way in which this plays out secretly in your own heart, unknown even to your own consciousness.

Yet, Heb. 4:12 “...the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. 13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.”

May each of us have the humility to search our own hearts, and wherever this censorious spirit might be found, that you would identify it for what it is, and repent! And, that you would then “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

One more thing in all this. One more reason for the seriousness of the whole subject. Something again which I doubt you would ever think about on your own, were it not revealed in Scripture. The willingness to speak against one another, the willingness to judge your brothers, is actually,

III. A DENIAL OF THE GLORY OF GOD.

So this is no little matter! Again, a quote from Calvin, “the whole majesty of God is forcibly assumed by those who claim for themselves the right of making a law; and this is what is done by those who impose as a law on others their own nod or will.”

Look at,
v.12

You who are judgmental, James says, claim to be God! At least, you claim the rights of God, which really is the same thing. But “there is only one lawgiver and judge.” There is only one God. And you aren’t he!

A. God alone bears authority to give the law.

Obviously, then, you do not bear that authority! You do not have the right to hold anyone else accountable to you. You do not have the right to speak against one another simply because they don't agree with you!

Simon Kistemaker puts it well: "Ultimately, God is the only lawgiver...God, therefore, receives the honor of being the final authority in establishing the law and judging man. He alone is the divine judge. He cannot allow man to assume the position that belongs to him alone."

That's the real point here! It is not simply that you make yourself rather obnoxious to other people, which, by the way, you will if you are in the practicing of passing judgment on others. It is not simply that you create disunity and sow discord among God's people in the church. You will do that, as well, but that's not the point here. It is not simply that you are proud and self-righteousness, even if you don't recognize it. The point is that you have assumed the position that belongs to God alone, the authority as lawgiver!

And God alone bears authority to judge, according to that law. God reserves that right to himself, and ultimately it is blasphemy to assume it for yourself. I read earlier from Romans 14, where Paul deals with this same subject. Listen to Paul's conclusion there,

Rom. 14:10 "But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. 11 For it is written: "As I live, says the LORD, Every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall confess to God." 12 So then each of us shall give account of himself to God."

Do you see the point? You are not allowed to judge your brother, because you and your brother both will have to give an account of yourselves to God! You and he are in the same position before God. You cannot be judge because you, too, shall stand before God. And, as James puts it in verse 12, God alone is the one "who is able to save and to destroy."

B. God alone bears authority to judge according to the law.

So who are you to attempt to do so? "Who are you to judge your neighbor?" God alone is the lawgiver to rule our souls.

Where does that leave us today? First, humble yourselves before the God who has redeemed you by his grace. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and admit the possibility that this sort of censorious spirit might well be within your own heart. So examine your own heart, examine your own impressions and evaluations of other people with this great thought in your mind: Am I judging them according to my own standards? Ask yourself the question: Am I imposing upon them my own opinions in disputable matters? Am I actually judging them?

If the answer is yes, then recognize that you are assuming for yourself that right to judge which God reserves for himself. Repent of the sin of placing yourself above the law, a position to which God alone is entitled. And never, never forget that...

Rom. 14:10 "...we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; 11 for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." 12 So then each of us will give an account of himself to God."

Paul goes on to tell you what to do instead of judging your brother.

Rom. 14:13 "Therefore let us not judge one another anymore,

but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way...¹⁹ Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another."

And if find yourself being judged by others, this, too, is your encouragement, that it is God with whom you have to business. Not another man. It is God before whom you will stand, the God who is able to save by his grace. So if your conscience is clear before God, if no clear commandment of his moral law is being violated, then don't allow anyone else to make you feel guilty! Don't let anyone else's opinions become a rule for your own life. The Bible alone is to be that rule!

Therefore, v.11 "Do not speak evil of one another, brethren."

And rather than speaking evil of one another,
Eph. 4:32 "...be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you."