8-11-24

James 4:11-12

James has a lot of focus on behaviour; on how we live out our Christian life. And bear in mind that this letter is written to Christians. As he has already pointed out, our actions, our works, play a very important role. While they do not bring about salvation, they are the evidence of it. A person who is truly a follower of Jesus Christ will demonstrate that fact in what they do and in the way they live.

A true Christian will perform good works; but more than that, they will think and act differently from the world. A follower of Christ will follow the commands of Christ and they will not be considered a burden. Their moral code or way of life will be based on what the Bible says is pleasing to God. As James has already said, they will not be double-minded, dependent on their wealth, and they will control their tongue.

Going along with this, James now tells the scattered Jewish Christian churches, “*Do not speak against one another, brethren.*” Perhaps the first thing to notice is that he has returned to the more endearing term, “*brethren*”. In the last several verses, James has been necessarily harsh with the sheep. He has called them “*adulteresses*”, “*sinners*”, and “*double-minded*”. But these things were necessary because the people were coming dangerously close to idolatry and acting in hostility toward God. They were on the path to being actually opposed by God. James was trying to get his sheep on the right path of repentance; so they could once again be in close fellowship with God through Jesus Christ.

Now he returns to “*brethren*”. James is again claiming them as his brothers and sisters in Christ. This is a good thing for all of us to remember: Christians will mess up. Sanctification, the process of becoming like Jesus, is a slow process; it takes a lifetime. When we mess up, sometimes a gentle word is needed; sometimes a stiff whack in the side of the head; sometimes even church discipline to the point of being shunned by the congregation. But all with the intent of bringing the Christian back into fellowship with Jesus and His church.

And this brings us into the sticky topic of judging. According to James, the very act of speaking against a brother in Christ is to judge not only the fellow Christian, but to judge the law of God also. To judge the law of God is to put yourself in a higher position than God Himself. This is what satan tried.

As Christians, are we to do any judging or not? We are all very familiar with the verse from Matthew 7, “*Judge not lest you be judged*.” Most of us have had this verse thrown in our face when pointing out wrong. It seems to be the favorite verse of non-Christians; used to shut down Christians who speak against moral faults; in other words, sin. Unfortunately, it is often effective because many Christians don’t understand the verse either.

Before considering what the Bible says, let me go ahead and answer the question: Yes, Christians are to judge. We must just be sure we are doing it properly and only what God allows us. Primarily, we do not judge who is going to heaven or who is going to hell; that is God’s call and His alone. As James says in our verses for today: *There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy.*

The key to understanding the verse, “*Judge not lest you be judged*” is the same key to every other verse in the Bible: context. We must consider the surrounding verses, the chapter and book that it’s in, and even the whole Bible. It is all God’s word and so it will all fit together. If we find anything contradictory, then we don’t understand it yet. That’s a good time to ask for the wisdom from above.

The immediate context of “*Judge not lest you be judged*” is Jesus admonishing His listeners to remove the log from their own eye before trying to remove the speck from the eye of another. To do this is hypocrisy. But then notice that Jesus finishes this discourse with instructions to remove the log from our own eye so that we may see clearly to remove the speck from the other. We can make a judgement, but we must do it without hypocrisy.

In the same vein, Paul says in Romans 2:1, “*Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.*” Again we see a Biblical call to avoid hypocrisy in judgement. So, we need to check our own hearts; and we must do so under the guidance of the Holy Spirit because without Him, we will justify ourselves.

Also, this does not mean we have to be perfect to judge. We can’t be perfect, yet we are to judge. We just make sure we aren’t living in gross sin; guilty of the same sin we are calling out; or trying to judge what is God’s alone.

There are also verses in the Bible that directly tell us to judge. Clear back in Leviticus 19:15, “*You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly.*” And then in verse 17, “*You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him*.” And in the New Testament, Jesus says in John 7:24, “*Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.*”

A good way to approach this is that we are to judge a person’s actions, not their heart. The moral code given in the Bible is very clear about what sin is; whether sins committed or sins of inaction. There are very few cases where we can’t tell immediately whether an action is wrong or not. But we cannot see into the heart of another. We don’t know the motives for their actions. Wrong actions still are wrong actions no matter what the motive; but the motive can be a factor in giving mercy.

As a simple example, a man who steals just out of covetousness isn’t going to have many people feeling sorry for him. A man who steals because he is desperate to feed his children will have more sympathy. The stealing is wrong either way, but it’s easier to have mercy on the man with hungry children.

As we read through the Bible, we can see that this is not a call for anyone, including the pastor, to monitor the church congregation looking for every little sin and calling it out. All of us know we each sin daily and need to turn to Christ in repentance. In a church setting, this is for bringing back a brother or sister in Christ who has strayed from the straight and narrow; as James called out those who were straying into idolatry and murder.

As examples, Paul rebuked the Corinthian church for accepting a member who was having a sexual relationship with his own father’s wife. And this is especially for church leadership: deacons and elders are to be “*above reproach*”. And again, any confrontation must be done in gentleness and love and with the ultimate goal of bringing the person back into fellowship with Christ.

These things are for those who claim to be followers of Christ. How about those who are outside the church; the non-believers? Well, since they are outside of Christ, nothing they do can be acceptable to God. Even if they do things we would consider “good”, the works are unacceptable to God because they are tainted with sin.

In the case of an unbeliever, we know all their actions to be evil, because they are still dead in their sins. In their case, we present the Gospel. Yes, part of the Gospel message involves their sin; but to try to clean them up first is a mistake and is not our job. Our job is to present the Gospel, and if accepted, to disciple them.

Christians are called to judge actions as being right or wrong. And the Bible even tells us to stay away from certain persons due to their actions; as in Proverbs 22:24-25, “*Do not associate with a man given to anger; Or go with a hot-tempered man, Or you will learn his ways And find a snare for yourself*.”

In 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, Paul gives an overview of judging or not judging the Christian or the non-believer: *I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.*

Christians should not be living immorally; if they are and will not accept correction, we are to disassociate with them. If they are not Christian, we share the Gospel. And we ought to be grateful that it is God who makes the final eternal decision; and not us.

James tells us: *Do not speak against one another, brethren*. He is talking about Christians in the church. In other words, do not slander. Slander is basically speaking badly about someone falsely. And I suggest that we need to be very careful speaking badly about someone even if it’s true. It is easy for us to justify gossip when it contains truth; but it is still a sin. If we reveal another’s faults, it better be for the purpose of bringing them back to Christ.

James gives us two reasons to avoid speaking badly about one another. First: *He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it.* Jesus summarized the law with: love God with all your heart; and love your neighbor. If we speak slanderously against a brother or sister in Christ, we are not loving them. We are then breaking the law of God. James is saying that if we break this law of loving others, then we are holding ourselves above it. And consequently, we are judging the law as not worthy to be followed.

Seriously, do you want to be in the position of claiming to judge God’s law? As James has pointed out earlier, we must show ourselves to be doers of the law, not just hearers; and certainly not judges.

The second reason James gives is verse 12: *There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?* If we put ourselves in the position of judging God’s law, then we are putting ourselves in a position that is above God. There are unbelievers who blatantly and arrogantly hold this attitude. As Paul mentioned earlier, God will deal with them. But consider that even as a Christian, our actions can betray this deep-seated attitude.

We are saved by the blood of Christ, but our salvation is revealed by our submission to God; by submission to God’s law. By submitting to God, we recognize that He is far above us. And following God’s moral law is the foundation for loving Him and our neighbor.

James says that God is the Lawgiver and Judge; the only One. In the context of judgement, this is eternal judgement because He is the One who is able to save and to destroy. In other words, assign to heaven or to hell. The God of the Bible is the only One who can do this; that is why we are prohibited from judging people’s final destiny. But we know right from wrong because God has given us the law; that we can judge.

Regardless, judgement is a difficult topic. It is not one we are capable of in our own strength. Turn to the giver of wisdom from above; ask Him before acting or judging. Request that He would remove the great logs that are in our own eyes. Ask Him to help us see clearly so that we may be righteous and judge righteously. All through Jesus.

Prayer

Lord God, Judge of all creation, Your word is truth, and so You judge perfectly the hearts of men; You alone are worthy to have the final say in the destiny of each and every soul. You alone have made the way for salvation in Jesus Christ Your Son; Your judgement has fallen upon Him for each of us who will claim Him as Lord and Saviour; so that You will be declared just and righteous.

Even though Jesus has saved us and You have pronounced us justified, our flesh and the world and satan still draw us away from You and even to rebel against You. Thank You that each of these sins have been forgiven in Jesus. But we also thank You for sanctification, that we may daily become more like our Saviour. Help us to crucify our flesh daily; and to break down the strongholds that raise themselves up against You.

We pray Lord Jesus, for this Your church, that we may continue in unity; that brotherly love would flow in this congregation. Help us to be merciful to each other and understanding. Help us to hold our tongues, except to glorify You and to build each other up.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name

Amen