

The Saints' Subtle Sins

James 4:11-17

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In James 4:11-17, James says, "Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law." Notice the repetition of "speak...speaks...speaks." "But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another? Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit'; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.' But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil..."—or "sinful"—"Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin."

We're all familiar with the parable of the prodigal son. The problem is that we too often focus only on the one son, the prodigal son. But the parable has two sons: the younger son, who "wasted his substance with riotous living"—that's where we get our word "prodigal" or "reckless living" from—and the older brother, who does everything outwardly correct but inwardly has a wrong attitude in isolating himself from his father and from his brother.

There are two categories exemplified in these two brothers: sins of the flesh or action sins that we commit shown in the younger brother, and sins of the spirit that are attitude sins. The Bible says that God "looks upon the heart." So the older brother was just as much a sinner as the younger brother, even though the older brother stayed home and did what his father wanted him to do. He committed sins of the spirit.

In our text, we are faced with two, common sins committed by Christians. They are what I call "subtle sins." Sadly, they are often also acceptable sins, because they are sins of the spirit and not sins of the flesh.

What are the sins that are commonly accepted by the saints today? Number one, is the sin of leaving God out of your speech, and number two, is the sin of leaving God out of your plans. So there are only two, main sins that are dealt with in this text.

First, in verses 11-12, is the sin of leaving God out of your speech. Verse 11 says, "Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother..." Notice James uses the word "brethren" or "brother" three times. So he's talking about how a Christian deals with a Christian. He's talking about the family of God and how we speak to one another. He continues, "...speaks evil of the law and judges the law." So if you judge your brother, you're speaking evil of the law. "But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?"

How does the sin of leaving God out of our speech manifest itself? In a critical, fault-finding, judgmental, censorious attitude that is manifest in our speech toward our fellow brothers and sisters. Whatever is in the heart comes out of the mouth. Jesus said, "For out of the abundance of the heart [the] mouth speaks," Luke 6:45. So if you have a wrong attitude toward someone, it's going to manifest itself in your speech.

Notice in verse 11 that James issues a command, and it's in the present tense. He says, "Do not speak evil of one another, brethren." So it is an imperative or command that we must obey. It would literally say, "Stop speaking evil one of another."

What does James mean by "speak evil one of another"? He's not forbidding all forms of judgment by Christians. We can judge a person's actions as sinful, if it's contrary to the written, objective Word of God. If you commit adultery, I can actually say, in love, "That's sinful."

I can't imagine how many people I've talked to who say, "I love that person. I know they're not my wife[husband], but I just connect with them, so I'm going to do it anyway." Or "I'm going to divorce my spouse," even though there is no Biblical basis to do so. The Bible says that's sin, and I have a responsibility to say, "That's sinful what you're doing."

You often hear people say, "You're judging me!" or "Don't judge me, bro!" We used to say that when we were hippies. Yet, "You're judging me that I'm judging you." I have an objective standard in the Bible. It's right for me to be discerning and say that it is sinful and unacceptable. "I love you. And because I love you, I need to 'speak the truth in love.'"

So this verse isn't saying that we can't make a judgment based on the Bible. We can judge that certain behavior is sinful.

So what is James saying? In Matthew 18:15, Jesus said that "If your brother sins against you..." what should we do? Slander, backbite, gossip? No. "Go and tell him his fault between you and him alone." Try to win him back. Privately talk to him about the issue. Many times as Christians we fail to do this.

And Jesus also said, "By their fruits you will know them," Matthew 7:20. Sometimes I say, "Well, I'm not a judge; I'm a fruit inspector. And right now, your fruit is rotten." So we can actually make those discerning judgments.

So what is James condemning? He is saying that we should "not speak evil" of a person. The words "speak evil" mean "talk against" or "talk down." It means to speak disparagingly of, to slander, to defame, to gossip or to backbite. Backbiting is saying something behind someone's back that you would never say to their face. Flattery is saying something to their face what you would never say behind their back.

Sometimes we use the expression, "I don't mean to be critical, but..." and then we go on and are critical. You may say, "Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but..." and then we say what we shouldn't say. Or we say, "I really like [so and so], but..." and then it comes out. We do this

because we want to put people down, so that we can lift ourselves up.

Romans 14:10, says, "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..."—or "bema," which is the reward seat—"...of Christ."

So James condemns this action, Paul condemns it and Jesus condemns it.

By the way, there is a great parallel between the book of James and the sermon on the mount. A lot of what Jesus condemned in the sermon on the mount is condemned by James in his epistle. In Matthew 7:1-5, specifically in verses 1-2, Jesus said, "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged." And in verses 4-5, "How can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank..."—or "log"—"...is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." So don't be judgmental, critical or have a censorious, fault-finding attitude toward others.

James gives us two reasons why this evil-speaking is sin. First, in verse 11, you're putting yourself above the law and are breaking the law, and as a result, "You are not a doer of the law." You are not keeping God's law. That's very clear.

And what is that law? In James 2:8, he says, "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you do well." So I have no doubt that the law you are not keeping is the "royal law." And the "royal law" is "Love your neighbor as yourself." That is taken from Leviticus 19:18.

Then the question is, "Who is my neighbor?" We want to pick and choose who our neighbor is to love, but the Bible makes it clear that anyone who has a need is your neighbor. So everyone is your neighbor. Biblically there is no reason for a Christian to hate anyone. We may not approve of their behavior, we may say that what they're doing is sinful, but we should have love for all people. We are to love our neighbor.

Also, you're not only putting yourself above the law, but you are judging the law as being no good, verse 11. "He who speaks evil of a brother...judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge." You are putting yourself above the law.

When I was coming to church this morning, I was driving up Whitewood. The speed-limit sign was posted at 45 miles per hour. I looked at the speedometer, and I was going a little bit over the speed limit. Going 45, I felt like I was going to get run over; it felt so slow! If I got pulled over by a policeman, and he said, "You were speeding," I would say, "I know officer, but the speed limit's too slow! It doesn't apply to me; I'm a pastor. I can speed if I'm on my way to preach. It's okay." No, it's not.

I would be putting myself above the law. I would be saying that the law is no good. That's what happens when we criticize, judge and find fault with other people. I would be saying the law of

“Love your neighbor as yourself” is no good, that it doesn’t apply to me. I’m above the law. But that’s not true.

The second reason that evil-speaking is sin is because you are putting yourself above the Lawgiver, who is God, verse 12. “There is one Lawgiver...”—that’s God—“...who is able to save and to destroy.” God is able to give life and judge and bring death. “Who are you to judge another?” My John Miller paraphrase of this question is, “Who do you think you are? God?” It’s saying, “Do you think you are above the law? That it’s no good?”

The point is that you are usurping the prerogative that belongs only to God. Don’t do that. We don’t have all the facts in a situation; only God knows everything. We are quick to judge. But remember that we are not omniscient. We get so critical that we don’t give people the benefit of the doubt. You don’t know what’s going on in their life. You don’t know fully what’s happening in a situation.

Chuck Swindoll tells the story of being in seminary where they would have chapel services. He was in charge of the chapel speakers, so he set up a missionary to come to speak. After the missionary spoke and Charles Swindoll was in the foyer, he said, “That was the worst message! What was he thinking?! He was rambling. It was really bad!” He was attacking the speaker. Then a student who heard him came up to him and said, “Chuck, what you don’t understand is that two hours before the service, this missionary got a phone call from his wife and was told their daughter had been murdered.” And not only that, but two months ago, his wife was diagnosed with cancer. Then Chuck realized how foolish he had been. He didn’t know everything, because he’s not God.

So don’t be quick to judge or to find fault and be critical. 1 Corinthians 13 says, “Love...believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.” So fulfill the “royal law” by “lov[ing] your neighbor as yourself.”

The second sin that James deals with is in verses 13-17. It is the subtle sin of leaving God out of our plans. This is a very familiar passage in the book of James, and it continues the theme from chapter 3 through chapter 4.

You may be a Christian, a child of God, but you don’t consult God as to His will, His purpose and His plan for your life. Verse 13 says, “Come now, you who say...” In verse 11, we had “speak” and “speaks” twice. Then in verse 13, we have “Come now, you who say,” and in verse 15, we have “You ought to say...” All these verses deal with the sin of speech. You’re either saying unkind, critical, judgmental words about a brother, or you’re saying that your life is your own and you’re making your own plans and disregarding God. You don’t pray and seek God and include God in your plans. So we plan but we don’t pray. And if we do pray, it’s only to ask God to bless our plans. These are both sins of speech.

Every chapter in the book of James deals somewhat with how we sin with our words. All of James deals with the sin of speech. It’s so interesting.

Starting with verse 13, “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy...’—I would add “low”—“...and sell...”—I would add “high”—“...and make a profit”; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life?” Notice the question mark. He answers his own question. “It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.” This is called “the brevity of life.” “Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.’ But now you boast...”—again, this is speaking—“...in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.”

This is called the “sin of omission.” This is the sin of the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. The younger brother committed sins; the older brother committed sins of omission, because he didn’t do what he should have done.

These verses condemn arrogance, self-sufficiency, being independent of God. And these sins can be committed by Christians. It is a Christian who is living his life like an atheist. This is called “practical atheism.” These are Christians who believe in God, but they live like atheists, who don’t believe in God.

Is that you? You believe in God, but you don’t seek Him, you don’t surrender to Him, you don’t obey Him, you don’t seek His will.

You should not only believe on Jesus Christ for salvation; you should surrender to Him as Lord of your life and let Him sanctify you. Let Him guide you, direct you, lead you all your life through. He then becomes Lord of your life.

Augustin said, “You love God and do as you please.” It has been turned around to “Do as you please and say you love God.” That’s so common. People say, “I love God, but I’m going to do what I please,” instead of loving God first and foremost, “Seek[ing] first the kingdom of God” and doing what God’s will and purpose and plan is as He puts His desires on your heart.

Ask yourself, “Am I planning my life without God directing it?” The Bible says, “The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in his way,” Psalm 37:23. So you should say, “Lord, I want you to lead me, guide me and above all else, I want Your will in my life.”

You don’t need to be afraid of the will of God. God gives the best to those who leave the choice to Him—who I marry, what I do, where I go, my life. It’s in God’s hands, and I want His will and purpose for my life. We should consecrate our all to Him as believers. “You were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body,” 1 Corinthians 6:20. It belongs to Him. So don’t plan without praying and seeking God’s purpose for your life.

What is it that is foolish about arrogant independence from God? There are three things in the text. First, because of the complexity of life, it is foolish to plan without God. Have you discovered that?

Remember the good ol’ days when you didn’t have cell phones? A while back I forgot my cell

phone when I was out and about, and I thought, This is awesome! No one can bother me. No one can pester me. This is wonderful!

Life is so complex, verse 13. “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell and make a profit.’” This was probably a hypothetical situation, but James probably heard it often. Someone said, “We set our own time, ‘today or tomorrow’; we select our own path and place, ‘we will go to such and such a city’; we decide the duration, ‘spend a year there’; we arrange the activities, ‘buy and sell’; and we predict the outcome, ‘make a profit.’”

The problem with this is they forgot God. I chuckle when I hear people talk about their one-year plan, their five-year plan, their ten-year plan. I think, Have you prayed about that? It’s okay to plan, but you put it in God’s hands. You say, “Not my will, but Yours, be done,” Luke 22:42.

Maybe you’re young and single, and you have your eye on that perfect person, and you want to marry them. Yet you know there are some Biblical reasons why you shouldn’t continue that relationship, but you don’t care. “I want her[him], in the name of Jesus!” Be careful! Maybe that marriage wouldn’t be good for you. “Well, I want her! She’s so cute!” And you don’t regard God’s purpose, plan or will for you.

Those of us who have been married for a long time and are older know how important it is to marry the right person. But let me add this: if you think you’ve married the wrong person, then treat them like the right person and you’ll find out that they’re the right person. Be obedient to the Word. Don’t say, “Well, I married the wrong person, so I have to get a divorce.” No, no, no! You’re married now. Treat them like God says in His Word, and God will bless your relationship.

And God will give the best to those who leave the choice to Him. If you’re young, seek the Lord. I like Solomon’s wisdom, in the book of Ecclesiastes. He says in chapter 12, verse 1, “Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth.” I’ve never met a Christian who said, “I wish I had waited to get saved! There were some parties I missed. There were some sinful things I could have done. I got saved and messed up my life!” No, no, no, no, no! But there are people who’ve said, “I wished I had come to Christ earlier, at a very young age, and given God my best!”

Maybe you’re middle age. “Oh, I remember ‘the destruction that lays waste at noonday.’” In middle age, there’s “the midlife crisis.” Guys have to get new clothes, a new haircut, get a new wife, a new car and then go dancing. They throw out their hip and end up in the hospital. It’s a very dangerous time of life. It’s during this period when a lot of divorces take place.

Guard your heart. Put the Lord first. Pray with your spouse. Seek the Lord’s will. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Desire God’s will for your marriage, for where you go, for your occupation—for all of your life. If you’re a senior, you may think, “Well, when I’m even older, it’ll be easy sailing.” No, it won’t; it’s difficult. Seniors need to reconsecrate their lives to Christ and ask God to lead them and guide them.

Someone said, "Often we make plans in the morning, and they go awry before the day is over." Have you ever had your daily plans go awry? "I'm going to go to the store and buy this and buy that," but the store doesn't have what you want, or the car breaks down. Something happens. We can't even plan our days without something going wrong, so we need to say, "God, guide me and direct me and have Your way."

The second reason it's sinful not to plan with God is because of the uncertainty of life, verse 14. "You do not know what will happen tomorrow." Life is complex, so I need God's wisdom to guide my life. And life is uncertain; we don't know what tomorrow holds.

When Job woke up that awful day, he didn't realize he would lose all of his children and all of his possessions. The only thing God gave him was his loving, supporting, encouraging, helping wife. She said to him, "Curse God and die!"

"Thank you, sweetheart. I needed that encouragement."

Everyone needs an encouraging word at a time like that. But Job said, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." He had his eyes on God.

Proverbs 27:1 says, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth." The old saying goes, "We don't know what tomorrow holds, but we know who holds tomorrow." So we can trust in the Lord.

So don't forget God. We need His wisdom, His strength, His guidance, His provision and His protection. And don't forget to live in the present; don't live in the past or even in the future.

Notice, thirdly, it's sinful to forget God in your plans because of the brevity of life, verse 14. "For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away." It's like a vapor.

Have you noticed how quickly life passes? You say, "I just got out of elementary school, and now I'm going to a rest home! How did it all go so quickly?!" Someone said, "About the time your face clears up, the mind gets fogged up." How does this happen?

Psalms 102:11 says, "My days are like a shadow that lengthens, and I wither away like grass." Job 7:9 says, "As the cloud disappears and vanishes away, so he who goes down to the grave does not come up." And Psalm 103:15 says, "As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes." Psalm 90:6 says that grass is like "the flowers of the field [that spring] up fresh in the morning and then [wither] away."

The Bible affirms two things: the brevity of life and the certainty of death. Life is short and we will all die. It also says, "Better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men," Ecclesiastes 7:2. That's why the Bible says, in Psalm 90:12, "So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." Realize the brevity of life and the certainty of death, so you will apply your heart to wisdom. It's so very

important.

How then shall we live? Let me give you three ways, in light of the brevity and uncertainty and complexity of life. Look at verse 15. First, be dependent on God, seeking to do the will of God. “Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.’”

This isn’t telling us that we literally have to use the figure of speech, “if the Lord wills.” If you really mean it, it’s okay to say it. But if you just glibly say, “‘If the Lord wills,’ we’re going to go here and there and buy and sell and get gain,” and not mean it, what you really mean is that you’re going to do it whether the Lord wills it or not. You just want to look religious. The phrase you use with your mouth is not so important; it’s talking about the attitude of your heart.

I know it’s hard, because we have our plans, our goals, our desires, our time and our ambitions. But what you want is the will of God. It may be painful, it may be difficult, but God always gives the best to those who leave the choice to Him. Never fear; “Your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him,” Matthew 6:8. He gives only good gifts.

If a child asked for an egg, would a father give them a scorpion to play with? If a child asked for food, would he give them a rock to chew on? Jesus said in Matthew 7:11, “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more...”—from lesser to greater —“...will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”

I’ve been blown away these years that I’ve walked with God that whenever I surrendered my will to God, I’ve always found that it’s best. Whenever I’ve said to God, “Not my will, but Thine be done,” it’s always been best. When I said to God, “I’ll go where you want me to go, I’ll do what you want me to do, I’ll be what you want me to be and I’ll say whatever you want me to say, and I consecrated my life to God, He has blessed, guided and protected my life.

Psalms 23 says that when the Lord is your shepherd, you have everything you need. He’ll protect you, provide for you, He’ll be with you, and in the end, “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” The Christian life is amazing!

But you can have a saved soul and a wasted life. When was the last time that you, as a married couple or a single person, sat down and said, “Lord, what is your plan for me? What is your purpose for me? What do you want of me?” Whatever God has entrusted to you, whatever is in your hand—have you been a faithful steward of that and done His will?

Secondly, verse 16 tells us how to live. It’s in the negative: don’t live in self-boasting because it’s evil. “But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.” Don’t go around boasting. “I’m gonna do this! I’m gonna do that! I’m awesome! I’m smart! I’m intelligent! I’ve got it all figured out! I’m gonna make lots of money!” I don’t want to watch. And then when we crash, when we fall, we say, “God, I’m sorry! Help me!”

He says, “Yes; I’ve been waiting.” God picks us up, dusts us off and sets us back on His path.

How do we live? Notice it, thirdly, in verse 17. “Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.” If you know the right thing to do, but you don’t do it, it’s sin. If you know it’s right to do the will of God—to “love your neighbor as yourself,” to consecrate your all on the altar and say, “God, have your way and lead my life”—and you don’t do it, it’s sin.

A person may sit in his/her easy chair at home, not breaking any of the Ten Commandments, and yet be committing sin. You can go home and crank your Lazy Boy back, and God has a plan and purpose for you, but you don’t do it, that’s sin. When you know to do something that’s good and right and it’s God’s will for you, but you don’t do it—“I didn’t do it!” Well, that’s the problem: you don’t do what God’s will is for your life. That is a sin of omission and it’s a common sin of the saints. Don’t leave God out.

Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways...”—not in some of them, but in all of them—“...acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.” He’ll make your paths straight.