

“Words that Destroy”

James 4:11-12

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(Tongue, the; Words)

Author Claire Colvin wrote of herself: “Pictures of me as a little kid are really cute – curly blond hair, a quick smile and eyes always looking for the next adventure.

I had the confidence that comes from knowing you are truly loved...

I was the product of an almost perfect childhood, but I didn't stay that way.”

“Around grade six I became the kid everyone picked on.

Maybe I didn't wear the right clothes, maybe kids are just mean sometimes, for whatever reason, it started and it kept going.

By high school there was a group of four or five guys who every single day told me I was stupid and ugly.

**I believed them.**

It is amazing what you accept as truth when you hear it enough times.

“As my confidence faltered and my self-esteem withered away, I stopped talking in class, in groups, or in the hallways.

I dreaded lunch hour, never stepped foot inside the cafeteria and the thought of class presentations literally made me sick.

I stopped smiling. They tell me I went a whole year and never smiled once.

“My whole life revolved around being as invisible as possible.

I thought that I couldn't get hurt if everyone forgot I was there.

I had so little respect for myself and I was so afraid that I considered suicide.

Claire Colvin. “The Power of Words” <http://powertochange.com/changed/ccolvin/>

**What we say to others and about others is a big deal.**

The words that come from our mouths matter.

And they matter to God.

We should remember that one of the issues that made the list of the Ten Commandments is “you shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.”

In a sermon from three years ago entitled “Sticks and Stones...” from that commandment in Exodus 20:16 I learned that this commandment prohibited not only telling something untrue about another but also prohibited even telling something true, if the intent or even the result is to harm that person’s reputation.

Our words matter; so much that it made God’s “top ten” list.

Likewise when we come to the New Testament and hear Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount talk about the 10 commandments, we find again that words matter.

In a sermon from five years ago entitled “The Theology of Planks and Specks” from Matthew 7, I learned that when Jesus said “Do not judge...” he was speaking even of the intentions behind our words.

How we speak of others was a principle theme of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

So important is this matter to God that the Apostles Paul and John speak much about it throughout the New Testament.

And likewise in our current study we have found that James gives it a great deal of attention.

Three weeks ago, from James 3:1-12, we learned that the words that come from our mouths are a primary gauge of the genuineness of our faith.

So important is this matter that James picks that theme up again in our text for today in James 4.

James 4:11-12 “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. <sup>12</sup> 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?”

The command is strong and clear: Do not slander one another!

The Greek word translated “slander” at the beginning of verse 11 is basically the same word that, later in the same verse, is twice translated “speaks against.”

Our English word “slander” technically refers to saying things about someone that are **not** true.

Using subtle distinctions to rationalize our words, we like to ask, “Is it slander if it’s true?” or even more subtly, “Is it wrong, if it’s right?”

But the Greek word use here by James is broader and includes both the untrue **and the true** things that we say about another that have the intention of demeaning that person’s reputation.

Thus various other translations of this word “slander” include “criticize” (NLT), “speak evil against” (NRSV, ESV), “malign” (Berkeley), “disparage” (TCNT) and “backbite” (Tyndale). (from Blomberg’s, unpublished commentary)

“Speaking against” is **not so much about the truthfulness** of what is said **as it is about the intention** behind saying it **or the result** of saying it.

Helmut Thielicke wrote, “All human judgment has a touch of egotism. When I judge (another person) I put myself above the other person and imagine that I am better than he is. This is the secret Pharisaism that dwells by nature in the judge. In judging I elevate myself and seek to put the other person down. (Thielicke, *Sermon on the Mount*, 151)

John Calvin spoke of it as fondly exalting ourselves by putting others down. (Calvin in John Blanchard, *Truth for Life*, 304)

Isn’t it odd, we think that if we lower others it raises us?

The truth is we have just lowered everyone including ourselves.

Our speaking against others is not just harmless idle speech – it is about our twisted pride and it is the very opposite of what James had just instructed when he wrote, “humble yourselves before the Lord...”

**So what does this “slander,” this “speaking against,” sound like?**

As you’ve undoubtedly heard, “confession is good for the soul but bad for the reputation,” nonetheless I’ll tell on myself.

A long-time pastor friend called me last week admitting an adulterous affair. He has resigned from the church he served.

I prayed with him and then when the conversation was over I prayed for him.

Later when I saw my wife, I said “did you hear” and I told her what had happened. WHY?

I didn’t then have in mind that we would pray for him and his wife.

I didn’t even have in mind then that we would reach out to them in some way to comfort them.

I just told her because it was interesting in a perverse sort of way.

What was I doing? I was “speaking against” my friend.

Years ago we had to ask a staff member to resign.

He was very angry with me and vindictive in his words to others about our church and me.

When later I heard that he had been fired from his next pastoral position, I said to the staff, “did you hear” and I told them. Again, why?

There was no redeeming motive or result from repeating what I had heard. It had only one effect – to reiterate his failures and make us/me look “right” in our earlier decision.

It was “speaking against” him.

**The following scenarios are ones I imagined but it wasn’t hard to do:**

Another kid beat Brad's son out of the last starting position on the high school basketball team.

Brad's own pride was so tied to his son that Brad was embarrassed and angry.

When he tried to explain to a friend that his son didn't get the position he added "did you hear" the other kid had had a personal coach for a couple of years and that he'd heard the kid was even taking some special performance enhancing "vitamins."

Tom had been ridiculed and criticized by a fellow salesman for not having what it takes to close deals.

It wasn't long until that salesman lost one of the company's largest accounts due to his aggressive and deceptive methods.

The next day Tom was at the water cooler asking "Did you hear..."

Tom found himself reveling in conversation about the other salesman's failure and future.

Meredith had always been irritated by how everyone seemed to think another woman in the church was some kind of super-mom shepherding perfect kids.

When one of those "perfect" kids went AWOL Meredith couldn't wait to get on the phone with her friends – "Did you hear?"

The Sunday school class leadership was discussing whether to invite John to join the teaching team.

Everyone else was talking about his knowledge of the Scriptures and his ability to express himself when you felt compelled to add, "Well, I've heard that his employees have a slightly different take on John; let's just say they don't think he walks on water."

Three high school girls were talking about another girl in the youth group who was going to a special event with the best-looking guy in the group when one of the girls says, "I know how that happened; I heard she just threw herself at him."

I know there are many ways that this "speaking against" is expressed, but when you hear these words coming from your own mouth or the

mouth of another watch out: “Did you hear...? “You’ll never guess what I heard... “Can you believe...? “Has anyone told you...? When I think of the many things I have said or repeated about others, I realize that too much of it falls under this heading of “speaking against.”

James demands that we re-think the way we talk.

As I thought of this, I couldn’t help but think of the short video we watched here together on Mothers’ Day.

A young man was making a video of himself talking about mothers.

We could only see him but off camera we could hear his mother making suggestions to him throughout the recording.

At one point, after he criticized his brother, she said that if he couldn’t say something nice he shouldn’t say anything at all.

At which point he promptly and rather obnoxiously simply sat there saying nothing at all.

That’s almost the way I feel when I read James’ command – it would so radically alter our speech that maybe just being quiet is the only solution.

James goes on to describe this “speaking against” someone when he writes, “Anyone who speaks against his brother **or judges him**...”

I brought it up earlier, but here again this “judging” gets at the causes behind the “speaking against.”

Jesus said, “do not judge...”

As we have seen on other occasions, he clearly didn’t mean we are never to make judgments – for in fact he commands us to judge properly.

**What he prohibited was being judgmental.**

We are told to be discerning just not damning.

The judgment we are told to suspend is the judgment of condemnation.

Judging is fault-finding – quickly noticing and even looking for the negative.

Judging is to assign negative motives to others' actions and being ungenerous toward their mistakes.

There is a deeply rooted and sinful human tendency to judge others.

A woman walks into church with a neckline that's a little too low and a skirt that's a little too tight.

**Judgment: She's immoral.**

You learn that your daughter is hanging out with the kid from school whose father is perpetually unemployed and whose mother is absent.

**Judgment: He's white trash.**

You're about to go into business with a man when you discover that he had filed bankruptcy several years earlier.

**Judgment: He's irresponsible.**

You confided a weakness to your best friend who promptly told someone else.

**Judgment: She can't be trusted.**

Someone in your Bible study group "goes on" about the great weekend they had gambling in Las Vegas.

**Judgment: He's an immature Christian.**

Someone doesn't say hello to you in the hallway.

**Judgment: They're angry with me and so I'm angry with them.**

Your child gets hurt playing at the neighbors'.

**Judgment: the adults are irresponsible and the neighbor kid is a bully.**

When we judge another person in the way Jesus prohibits, what are we doing?

We are drawing **a conclusion** and drawing **a line**.

We draw **a conclusion that they are different** and we draw **a line that excludes them from us**.

We see something worthy of condemnation and we turn it into someone worthy of condemnation.

And then consciously or otherwise, we administer the condemnation with our words.

One man wrote, “Defamation begins and lives on in the mind. It is something we say to ourselves long before we pass it on.” (Alec Motyer, James, 158)

## So why is “speaking against” someone so wrong?

James gives us two reasons; the first is in verse 11:

“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.

## How is speaking against someone, speaking against the law?

James assumes we are conversant with the Old Testament and with Jesus’ words.

Leviticus 19:15-18 “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. Do not go about spreading slander among your people...Do not hate your brother in your heart...Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”

Jesus certainly reiterated those commands both about not being judgmental and about loving our neighbors as ourselves.

James himself has already referred to this law when he wrote in James 2:8 “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.

So James is saying that **when you speak against someone, in direct contradiction of what God says, you are putting yourself above the law** – you are judging or deciding that this command is not important enough that you should have to obey it.

I was driving through the town, the speed-trap, of Bow Mar last week.



I know the speed limit is 25 I didn't pay attention to it.  
 I wasn't consciously, intentionally attempting to break the law, but I had such low regard for the law that I wasn't careful to obey it.  
 And yes, I got a ticket!

You see, I know stealing is wrong and I make every effort to avoid stealing in any of its forms – whether by padding an expense account or using the office postage meter. I'm careful!

But I also know "speaking against" someone is wrong but I don't hold that prohibition in the same high regard so I don't guard my tongue.

What is so disturbing about it, when we think about it, is that we have become the judge of the law.

Behind the disobedience is an attitude, a heart that is so proud as to say, I don't have to obey this law.

One man wrote, "To speak against a brother is tantamount to saying, "That command of God is stupid, ridiculous, insane; I will not bother to even think about it." "Blasphemy," you might say. And I fully agree with you. But when we speak against a brother we have fallen into the blasphemous pit of denigrating God's law.

Phil Newton of Southwood Baptist Church [http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/james\\_04.11-12.html](http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/james_04.11-12.html)

### **James also gives us a second reason why it is crucial that we not speak against someone else.**

James 4:12 "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy."

God is the one who makes the law and God is the one who ultimately judges how anyone does in keeping the law.

And how serious is this point to James?

James reminds us that God is the judge who has the power to save us or destroy us.

When we "speak against" another person and thereby judge them, we are putting ourselves in God's place – we have usurped God's place.

We push God out and put ourselves in the place of both lawgiver and judge.

When we feel like lashing out at someone or even speaking ill of them to another we must remember what God has said about our role and his: Romans 12:16-19 (Deuteronomy 32:35) “Live in harmony with one another... Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.

Instead we are tempted to become jury, judge and executioner with our words.

And in doing so, we assume the position of God.

Does James really mean that?

Look how he finishes the thought: James 4:12b “But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?”

There are two persons mentioned here – God and us.

James says he knows who God is – he’s the lawgiver and judge who has the power to save and destroy.

But you, who are you?

Who are we to speak against someone?

What right do we have?

Earlier James told us our place: James 2:12-13 “**Speak** and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,<sup>13</sup> because **judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.** Mercy triumphs over judgment!

The only “right” we have is to show mercy.

The Apostle Peter said it this way in 1 Peter 4:8 “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

Have you ever noticed how you and others will do most anything to protect the reputations of those you love?

You wouldn't think of broadcasting the failures of someone you care about.

You will even confront those who are saying things that are critical of the one you love.

That's what Peter is talking about; when you care about someone you cover, you squelch, critical conversation.

Proverbs 18:8 "The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts.

One British pastor wrote, "That is what keeps scandal alive, the delight in hearing of others' misfortunes. Sin has done this to our hearts. Scandal is like pornography, those people trapped by it can't get enough of it. But if it were ourselves they were speaking of, if we had had the baby out of wedlock, or been charged with some offence, or we did not have children, or we were single, or been divorced, or if our marriage were going through a rocky patch, or we had had a fall some time ago, or we were seeing a psychiatrist then we would not want half the world to be talking about it and getting the story wrong. You love your neighbor as yourself, and you resist the sweetness of bad news. . . . Geoff Thomas <http://www.alfredplacechurch.org.uk/sermons/james20.htm>

Imagine if, before we spoke about someone else, we remembered both the negative and positive commands of scripture!

James 4:11 "Do not slander (speak against) one another.

And then the positive from Ephesians 4:29 "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may **benefit** those who listen.

What if before I spoke negatively of others I actually trained myself to ask three questions:

Is it true?

Is kind?

Is it helpful?

Claire Colvin, whose story I began with today, said the words of junior high and high school classmates had so destroyed her that she considered suicide.

She writes, “I got as far as choosing a method but decided that I couldn’t go through with it. Suicide is something you can’t take back. I was still thinking clearly enough to be able to consider what it would have done to my family...”

Halfway through her junior year of high school, **again words made the difference**, this time bringing healing to what other words had so greatly damaged.

Others in her church youth group reached out to her, living out the words she then heard from God:

Isaiah 41:9-10 "I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." Claire Colvin. "The Power of Words"

<http://powertochange.com/changed/ccolvin/>

**Yes, what we say matters, it matters to others and James says, be warned, it matters to God, and to us.**

James 4:11-12 “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. <sup>12</sup> 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?”

Further notes:

See [www.Soundliving.org](http://www.Soundliving.org)

“Sticks and Stones...”

Exodus 20:16

“The Theology of Planks and Specks”

Matthew 7:1-5

“The verb “speak against” (*katalalevw*) can sound overtones of unjustified speech against someone (hence NIV “slander”), and it can parallel the more negative meanings of “judge” (*kriwnw*--such as “condemn;” cf. NJB). But it may also refer to broader oral mistreatment, including “destructive verbal attacks, gossip behind another person’s back and false accusations.” (from Blomberg’s unpublished commentary on James)

Satan is called the accuser of believers. When we pass along hurtful, demeaning information, we are doing the devil’s work. (Blanchard, 304)

James has repeatedly touched on this subject of our sinful propensity to destroy each other in our pursuit of self:

- James 1:14-15 “but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. <sup>15</sup> Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.
- James 1:19-20 “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, <sup>20</sup> for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.
- James 3:6-9 “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body...no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup> With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness.
- James 3:16 “For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.
- James 4:1 “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?”
- James 4:12 “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?”

“Defamation begins and lives on in the mind. It is something we say to ourselves long before we pass it on. But if our minds were drilled in biblical attitudes, then love for our brothers would begin to root out censoriousness. Consideration for our neighbors would begin to replace the hurtful and arrogant word by helpful and caring pastoral concern.” Alec Motyer, James, 158)

“Judgmental words eventually will flow out of a judgmental heart, but the sin begins in the heart. It is a manifestation of pride; we think that we’re better than others are.

- (1) You judge someone wrongly when you criticize him out of jealousy, bitterness, selfish ambition, or some other sin, rather than seeking to build him in Christ.
- (2) You judge someone wrongly when you assume that you know all of the pertinent facts and motives behind the person’s words or actions.
- (3) You judge someone wrongly when you set up human standards, rather than holding to God’s word as the standard.
- (4) You judge someone wrongly when you do not first judge your own sin before trying to help him with his sin.
- (5) You judge someone wrongly when you share confidential or personal information with the wrong intent.
- (6) You judge someone wrongly when out of a selfrighteous spirit, you criticize or malign him over a minor or indifferent matter.
- (7) You judge someone wrongly when you make an authoritative pronouncement about his eternal destiny.

Steven Cole

[http://www.fcfonline.org/search\\_methods.asp?search=1&search\\_method=advanced&sermon\\_book=James](http://www.fcfonline.org/search_methods.asp?search=1&search_method=advanced&sermon_book=James)

**Stulac suggests three ways in which Christians are often too quick to criticize: “judging the motives behind others’ words or actions in church business, judging how others spend money and judging how others are rearing their children.”** (George Stulac, James, 155)