

The Book of James, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 9: Do Not Judge or Boast About Tomorrow

James 4:11-17

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The doctrinal core of this lesson is the lordship of God as the one Lawgiver and Judge, and the humble dependence that befits creatures who do not control tomorrow. James teaches that to judge and speak against a brother is to usurp the place of God, who alone is able to save and destroy, and that to plan as though our futures were guaranteed is arrogant boasting that forgets our frailty. This connects to Jesus's teaching against judging and His parable of the rich fool. Help students see that both sins, judging others and presuming on the future, spring from the same root: forgetting that God is God and we are not.

There is also important teaching here on the sin of omission. James ends with a piercing definition: whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. This expands our understanding of sin beyond doing wrong to include failing to do the good we know. It also ties the chapter together, since the readers now know the right thing James has taught and are accountable to do it. This is consistent with the whole letter's insistence on doing the word, not merely hearing it, and with a faith that shows itself in obedience. Teach the seriousness of omission without crushing students, since the same gospel that exposes our failures supplies grace and calls us forward.

Formationally, this lesson confronts two very common and very respectable sins: critical judgment of others and self-confident presumption about our plans. Your aim is to help students step down from the judge's seat, hold their futures humbly in God's hands, soberly number their days, and actually do the good they already know. The tone should be humbling but not morbid, since facing our frailty and our accountability is meant to free us for dependence and obedience, not to paralyze us with fear. Teach the truth clearly, and let it produce humility before God and active goodness toward others.

Question 1

Student Question:

James writes, "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law" (v. 11). How does speaking against and judging a fellow believer amount to judging the law itself, and why does James treat this so seriously?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

James returns to speech, but now with a focus on judgment: “Do not speak evil against one another.” He then makes a surprising move, connecting our judgment of others to judgment of the law itself: “the one who... judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law.”

Unpack the logic, which students may find puzzling at first. The law commands us to love our neighbor (which James called the royal law in chapter two). When we speak against and judge a brother, we are setting that law aside as though it does not apply to us, effectively declaring it not worth keeping. In judging the brother, we judge the law that tells us to love him.

And to judge the law is to put ourselves above it: “if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.” The proper posture toward God's law is to obey it, to be a doer (echoing chapter one). The judgmental person abandons the humble place of a doer and climbs into the seat of one who rules over the law, deciding which commands bind them.

Apply it to the respectable sin of critical speech. We rarely recognize gossip and judgment as a kind of arrogance toward God's law, but James does. To habitually speak against others is to exempt ourselves from the command to love them, and that exemption is a quiet rebellion against the Lawgiver. This should make us take critical speech far more seriously than we usually do.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The connection between judging a brother and judging the royal law of love.
- The proper posture toward God's law as a doer, not a judge (James 1:22).
- Critical, condemning speech as a form of arrogance toward God's law.
- The seriousness of judgment that exempts us from the command to love.

Discussion Prompts

- How does judging a brother amount to judging the law?
- Why is the proper posture toward the law obedience rather than judgment?
- How does this reframe the respectable sin of critical speech?

Question 2

Student Question:

Be honest about your own speech and thoughts toward others. Whom are you most prone to judge or speak against, and what does that pattern reveal about your own heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves from principle to honest self-examination. Everyone has people or categories of people they are especially prone to judge. Invite students to name theirs rather than discussing judgment abstractly.

Help them notice that our judgments often reveal more about us than about those we judge. We tend to be harshest on the sins we fear in ourselves, or on people whose differences threaten us, or on those whose failures make us feel superior. The pattern of our judging is a window into our own hearts.

Be careful to distinguish sinful judgment from necessary discernment. James is not forbidding all moral assessment; Scripture calls us to discern right from wrong and even to lovingly correct one another. He is condemning the condemning spirit, the censorious, superior attitude that tears others down rather than seeking their good.

Move toward repentance and grace. The remedy for a judgmental heart is to remember our own standing under the same Judge and the same law, which the next verse presses. Ask students to consider how seeing their own need for mercy might soften their judgment of others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-examination of our patterns of judgment.
- Our judgments revealing our own hearts and fears.
- The distinction between sinful condemnation and necessary discernment (Matthew 7:1–5; John 7:24).
- Remembering our own need for mercy as the remedy for a judgmental spirit.

Discussion Prompts

- Whom are you most prone to judge or speak against?
- What might that pattern reveal about your own heart and fears?
- How does discernment differ from a condemning spirit?

Question 3

Student Question:

James says, “There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?” (v. 12). What does this teach about who alone has the right to judge, and how does remembering God’s unique role as Judge change the way we view others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 12 grounds the whole prohibition in the character of God: “There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy.” Judgment belongs to God alone because He alone is the Lawgiver, and He alone holds the power of ultimate destiny, to save and to destroy.

Help students feel the weight of God’s unique role. To judge another person’s standing, motives, or eternal worth is to claim a knowledge and authority that belong only to God. We see the

surface; He sees the heart. We are fallible; He is perfectly just. Usurping His seat is both arrogant and absurd.

Then comes the deflating question: “But who are you to judge your neighbor?” The question is meant to humble. It reminds us of our smallness, our limited knowledge, and our own accountability. We are in no position to render the verdicts we so freely hand out.

Apply it as a liberating truth, not just a rebuke. If God is the Judge, we are freed from the exhausting, self-appointed task of evaluating and condemning everyone around us. We can entrust people, and justice, to the one Judge who is able to save and to destroy, and get on with the humbler work of loving our neighbors.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God alone as Lawgiver and Judge, with power to save and destroy.
- The arrogance of usurping God's seat of judgment.
- Our limited knowledge versus God's perfect knowledge of the heart.
- Freedom from self-appointed judging by entrusting justice to God.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does judgment belong to God alone?
- How does the question who are you to judge humble us rightly?
- How is it freeing to leave judgment to the one true Judge?

Question 4

Student Question:

When you find yourself judging someone, what would change if you remembered that you, too, stand under the same Judge and the same law? How does that level the ground between you and the person you are judging?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies God's role as Judge to the moment of temptation to judge. When we judge, we instinctively place ourselves above the other person; James reminds us we stand under the same Judge and law.

Help students practice the mental move. When judgment rises, the corrective is to remember: I, too, am a sinner under this same law, dependent on this same mercy, accountable to this same Judge. This levels the ground. The person I am tempted to look down on stands beside me, not beneath me.

Connect this to the parable of the unforgiving servant and Jesus's teaching that we will be judged by the measure we use for others. Remembering the great debt we have been forgiven dissolves our sense of superiority over fellow debtors.

Encourage a concrete practice. When a judging thought arises about someone this week, students might pause and pray for that person and for themselves, recalling their shared need for grace. This habit retrains the heart from condemnation toward compassion.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Standing equally under the one Judge and the one law.
- The leveling effect of remembering our own sin and need for mercy.
- Being judged by the measure we use for others (Matthew 7:2).
- The forgiven debtor's compassion toward fellow debtors (Matthew 18:21–35).

Discussion Prompts

- How does remembering you stand under the same Judge change your judging?
- How does recalling your own forgiveness soften you toward others?
- What practice could turn a judging thought into compassion?

Question 5

Student Question:

James addresses those who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit" (v. 13). What is James exposing about the attitude behind such confident planning, and is he condemning planning itself or something deeper?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

James now turns to a different but related presumption: confident planning that leaves God out. He quotes the businessperson's reasonable-sounding speech: today or tomorrow we will go to such a town, spend a year, trade, and make a profit. It sounds prudent, even admirable.

Help students see what James is and is not condemning. He is not against planning, business, or profit; Scripture commends wise foresight and diligent work. What he exposes is the attitude of self-sufficiency, planning as though we control the future, as though tomorrow is ours to command and God is irrelevant to our calendars.

The sin is practical atheism in our planning, living and scheming as if God did not exist or did not matter to our futures. The businessperson maps out a year with total confidence and never once references the will of God or the fragility of life. That confident forgetting of God is the target.

Apply it to our own culture of planning, goal-setting, and ambition. None of these is wrong, but they easily become arenas of self-sufficiency where we assume control we do not have and forget the God on whom every breath depends. James invites a humbler way of planning that holds the future in open hands before God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The legitimacy of planning, work, and foresight (Proverbs 6:6–8).
- Self-sufficient planning that forgets God as practical atheism.
- The illusion of controlling the future.
- Holding plans in open hands before God.

Discussion Prompts

- Is James condemning planning, or the attitude behind it?
- Where do you plan as if you control the future?
- What would it mean to hold your plans in open hands before God?

Question 6

Student Question:

Look at how you tend to think and talk about your own future plans. Where do you assume tomorrow is guaranteed, and how might a deeper awareness of your dependence on God reshape the way you plan?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the teaching to the student's own planning and ambition. Most of us speak and think about our futures with an unexamined assumption that tomorrow is guaranteed and largely under our control.

Help students notice the assumption in their everyday speech and thought: I will, I am going to, next year I plan to, all stated with a confidence that quietly forgets our dependence on God. The assumption is so normal we never question it.

Invite a reframing rather than an abandonment of planning. The goal is not to stop planning but to plan as dependent creatures, consciously submitting our plans to God's will and holding them loosely. This is the posture James commends in the next verse: if the Lord wills.

Encourage a concrete shift. Students might begin consciously submitting their plans to God in prayer, or adopt the genuine (not merely verbal) attitude of if the Lord wills as they look ahead. The aim is humble, God-dependent planning, not anxious paralysis.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unexamined assumption that tomorrow is guaranteed and controlled.
- Planning as dependent creatures who submit to God's will.
- Holding plans loosely while still acting diligently.
- Dependence on God as the right posture toward the future.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you assume tomorrow is guaranteed?
- How might dependence on God reshape the way you plan?
- What would genuinely submitting your plans to God look like?

Question 7

Student Question:

James asks, "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes," and urges us to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that" (vv. 14–15). What does the image of life as a mist teach about human frailty and the proper posture of dependence on God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 14 delivers one of Scripture's most sobering images: "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." James strips away our illusions of permanence with a single picture, the morning mist that the sun burns off within the hour.

Help students sit with the image rather than rushing past it. We live as though we are permanent fixtures, but measured against eternity our lives are brief and fragile. We do not even know what tomorrow will bring, let alone command the years we so confidently plan. This is not morbid; it is simply true, and facing it is wisdom.

Then note the proper response James prescribes: "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'" This is not a magic phrase to tack onto our sentences but a genuine posture of the heart that acknowledges our dependence on God for life itself and for every plan. Every breath and every tomorrow is a gift from His hand.

Apply it as the secret to wise living. Strangely, facing our frailty does not paralyze the wise; it frees and focuses them. Knowing life is a mist, we hold our plans humbly, treasure each day as a gift, and invest in what lasts. The awareness of brevity is a gift that clarifies what matters.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The brevity and fragility of human life (Psalm 39:4–5; Psalm 90:12).
- Dependence on God for life itself and every plan.
- If the Lord wills as a genuine posture, not a mere phrase.
- Facing frailty as wisdom that focuses rather than paralyzes.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the image of life as a mist teach you?
- What does it mean to genuinely say, if the Lord wills?
- How can facing life's brevity free and focus you rather than paralyze you?

Question 8

Student Question:

How does honestly facing the brevity and uncertainty of your life change your priorities? What would you give more of yourself to, and less, if you truly lived as a mist that soon vanishes?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the mist image into the student's priorities. Honestly facing the brevity and uncertainty of life has a powerful clarifying effect on what we give ourselves to.

Help students consider the reordering this produces. In light of life's brevity, what currently consumes their time and energy that will not matter, and what deserves more of them, relationships, faithfulness to God, eternal investments, love actually expressed? The mist reframes the priorities.

Connect to the parable of the rich fool, who planned for many years of ease and died that night, having stored up treasure for himself but not being rich toward God. James echoes Jesus's warning against an existence consumed by accumulation while neglecting what lasts.

Encourage one concrete reprioritization. Perhaps a relationship to mend now rather than later, a word of love to speak today, a kingdom investment to make, a lesser pursuit to release. Living as a mist means doing the important things now, while there is time.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Life's brevity as a clarifier of true priorities.
- Being rich toward God rather than storing up for ourselves (Luke 12:21).
- Eternal investment versus consuming pursuits that will not last.
- Doing the important things now, while there is time.

Discussion Prompts

- What would you give more of yourself to if you truly lived as a mist?
- What currently consumes you that will not finally matter?
- What important thing should you do now rather than later?

Question 9

Student Question:

James concludes, "As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil," and then, "whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin" (vv. 16–17). What does this teach about the sinfulness of self-confident boasting, and about the reality of the sin of omission, failing to do the good we know we should?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

James draws the planning section to a sharp conclusion: "As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." The confident, God-forgetting planning he described is not merely unwise; it is arrogant boasting, and James calls all such boasting evil. The root sin is pride that exalts self and forgets the Creator.

Then comes the famous final verse, which functions as the climax of the whole chapter: "Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." This is the heaviest doctrinal note of the lesson, so dwell on it. James defines the sin of omission: sin is not only doing what is wrong but failing to do the good we know we ought to do.

Teach the significance of this expansion of sin. We tend to measure ourselves by the wrong we have avoided. James insists that the good we have neglected also counts against us. The priest and Levite who passed by the wounded man did nothing wrong by commission, yet they sinned by omission. This searches us far more deeply than a list of prohibitions.

Apply it with both seriousness and grace. The verse lands with special force here because James's readers, and we, now know the right things he has taught throughout the letter: to do the word, to love impartially, to bridle the tongue, to humble ourselves, to leave judgment to God. Knowing these, we are accountable to do them. Yet do not leave students crushed; the same gospel that exposes our omissions supplies grace and empowers obedience. The point is to move us to actually do the good we know, in dependence on Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-confident boasting that forgets God as evil rooted in pride.
- The sin of omission: failing to do the good we know is sin.
- Sin as more than avoiding wrong; it includes neglected good (Luke 10:31–32).
- Heightened accountability for those who know the right thing (Luke 12:47–48).
- Grace that empowers obedience, not merely condemnation for omission.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does James call self-confident boasting evil?
- What is the sin of omission, and why does it search us so deeply?
- What good do you already know to do that you have been failing to do?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage. James calls us down from the judge's seat, holds our plans humbly before God, and presses us to do the good we already know. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to humble dependence and active obedience this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone draws the whole passage together and asks for one concrete step of humble dependence and active obedience. The lesson has called students down from the judge's seat, humbled their plans before God, and pressed them to do the good they know.

Help them integrate the threads: leaving judgment to God, planning in dependence, numbering their days, and obeying the good they already know. Where is Jesus pressing on their life, in a judging spirit to lay down, a presumptuous plan to surrender, or a known good to finally do?

Encourage a single, ownable commitment, ideally one that joins humility and action, such as stepping down from judging a particular person and instead doing them good, or surrendering a plan to God while taking the next faithful step. The passage unites humble dependence with active obedience.

Close by holding together humility and hope. Facing our frailty and our omissions is humbling, but it frees us to depend on God and to actually live the good we know in the time He gives. Lift students' eyes to Christ, who alone is the righteous Judge and who graciously empowers His people to do the good He calls them to. Let them leave humbled, dependent, and ready to act.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The union of humble dependence and active obedience.
- Leaving judgment to God while doing good to others.
- Living the known good in the time God gives.
- Sanctification through humility before God and obedience in daily life.

Discussion Prompts

- In one sentence, how is Jesus calling you to humble dependence and obedience this week?
- Is there a judging spirit to lay down, a plan to surrender, or a known good to do?
- How can humility and action go together in your next step?