

The Book of James

Lesson 9: Do Not Judge or Boast About Tomorrow -- James 4:11-17

There is a particular tone of voice we slip into when we speak against someone who is not in the room. It feels almost harmless, even responsible, as if we are simply stating facts about another person's faults. James hears that tone and stops us cold. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges him speaks evil against the law and judges the law. We thought we were just talking about Bob. James says we have actually climbed onto the judge's bench, a seat that belongs to Someone else.

That is his point, and it is a sharp one. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy. When we set ourselves up as judges of others, we are not merely being unkind; we are quietly trying to take God's seat. Who are you, James asks, to judge your neighbor? The question is meant to deflate us, to remind us of our place. We are under the law, not over it; we are among those being judged, not the ones doing the judging.

Then James turns from the way we presume over others to the way we presume over our own futures. He pictures the confident planner: today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town, spend a year there, do business, and make a profit. It sounds perfectly reasonable, the kind of talk we admire. But James pulls back the curtain on a truth we work hard to forget: you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

He is not trying to frighten us into paralysis or to mock our planning. He is trying to right-size us before God. Instead of boasting in our own confidence, we should say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. And then he leaves us with a quiet, convicting line that ties judging and planning together: whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. So we come to this passage to be lifted out of the judge's seat we were never meant to occupy, to hold our plans humbly in God's hands, and to actually do the good we already know.

Group Discussion: Why do you think speaking critically about others who are absent feels so natural, even satisfying, and is often treated as acceptable among Christians? What does James help us see about what is really happening when we do it?

Personal Reflection: Where are you most prone either to sit in judgment over someone else, or to make confident plans for your future as though tomorrow were guaranteed? What would humility look like in that area this week?

Read James 4:11-17

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 7:1-5, judge not, and first remove the log from your own eye; Romans 14:4, 10-13, who are you to judge another's servant; we will all stand before God's

judgment seat; Proverbs 27:1, do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring; Luke 12:16-21, the rich fool who stored up for himself and was not rich toward God; Psalm 39:4-7, teach me to number my days; Luke 12:47-48, the servant who knew his master's will and did not do it.