

James 4:11-12
Defaming Others

1

Introduction

The world does not rank “slander” high on their list of “serious sins”. Slander, however, is a particularly destructive sin. Slander strikes at people’s dignity, defames their character, and destroys their reputation—their most priceless worldly asset (Prov. 22:1; Eccles. 7:1). Human society recognizes the gravity of slander and passes laws allowing those whose good name is slandered to sue for defamation of character.

2

Introduction

In the temptation in the Garden of Eden Satan slandered God’s integrity in Genesis 3:1 (“Has God said ...”); in verse 5 he slandered God’s motives (“For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil...”), implying God was selfishly withholding something good from Adam and Eve. Thus, the first act of slander in human history led directly to the first sin. Slander is a very serious sin that God both hates (Prov. 6:16–19) and will judge (Ps. 52:1–5).

3

Introduction

The biblical injunctions against slander do not prohibit rebuking those who persist in unrepentant sin. On the contrary, such public exposure of sin is commanded in Scripture (Matthew 18:15–17).

James’s words “Speak not evil one of another”, do not forbid exposing sin with righteous intent, but rather lying with malicious intent. The Greek word translated “speak” refers to mindless, thoughtless, careless, critical, derogatory, untrue speech directed against others.

To help believers control their tongues and avoid slander, James exhorts us to examine four areas of our thinking: what we think of others, the law, God, and ourselves.

4

James 4:11-12

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. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?

5

What We Think of Others

James 4:11a

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.

James uses a threefold repetition of “brethren”, “brother”, “brother” and reminds us of the family relationship we share with other Christians. Slander is the antithesis of what is expected and acceptable in a family, whose members are to love, support, and protect each other. While Christians are to expect slander from outside the church (1 Pet. 2:12; 3:16), slander within the church is unacceptable. Paul warned the Galatians, “But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!” (Gal. 5:15).

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What We Think of Others

James 4:11a

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Closely associated with the sin of slander is that of being judgmental. After cautioning his readers to “do not speak evil of one of another”, James warns the one who is judging his brother to stop. The word “judges” does not refer to evaluation, but to condemnation.

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What We Think of Others

James 4:11a

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.

If fellow believers are viewed as those chosen by God before the foundation of the world, for whom Christ died, who are loved and honored by God, and with whom we will spend eternity in heaven, we will seek to honor, love, and protect them. The first step in avoiding the sin of slander is not keeping one’s lips sealed but keeping one’s thoughts about others right.

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What We Think of the Law

James 4:11b

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. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

Loving God and others is the essence of the law (Rom. 13:8; James 2:8), and slander is failing to love others. The law is love codified; it is the expression of how to love others. Slander therefore is a violation of the basis of the law.

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What We Think of the Law

James 4:11b

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. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

Because the law is an articulation of the principles of love, Jesus, when asked to name the greatest commandment in the law, replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”³⁸This is the first and great commandment.³⁹And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:37–40). God gave His law to regulate people’s love for Him and their fellow human beings. James, then, does not condemn slander only as a violation of personal affection, or human kindness, but of God’s holy law.

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What We Think of the Law

James 4:11b

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. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

Since slander is a violation of the law of love, a slanderer “speaks evil of the law and judges the law” and is showing disregard for the divine standard. And if you place yourself above God’s law, James warns, “you are not a doer of the law, but a judge”.

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What We Think of the Law

James 4:11b

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. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

The implication is that the one who disregards God’s law in effect claims to be superior to the law of God. He is not bound by it or to be subject to its authority. By such fearful disrespect the sinner judges the law as unworthy of his attention, affection, obedience, submission—all of which is blasphemy against God.

Experiencing victory over slander requires us to take our proper place under the law’s authority.

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What We Think of God

James 4:12a

There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy.

By placing himself above the law, the slanderer places himself above the only true Lawgiver and Judge—God Himself. Such folly places the sinner on a par with Satan, who sought unsuccessfully to usurp God’s throne. His five “I wills” in Isaiah 14:13–14 expressed his desire for the place of supremacy: “I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.”

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What We Think of God

James 4:12a

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The desire to usurp the place of God has been the essence of every sin ever committed. Sin seeks to dethrone God, to remove Him as supreme Lawgiver and Judge and rule in His place.

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What We Think of God

James 4:12a

There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy.

James points out the folly of the sinner seeking to usurp God's place, noting that "**there is one Lawgiver**". The Greek text literally reads "one is the lawgiver and judge," stressing that God alone is the sovereign ruler and judge of the universe. "**Lawgiver**" refers to one who puts the law into place. "**Judge**" refers to one who applies the law. God, and God alone, is both lawgiver and law-applier (cf. Isa. 33:22); He gave the law and will judge men by His law. Because He knows the hearts and motives of men (1 Sam. 16:7; 1 Kings 8:39; Prov. 15:11), He alone can perfectly apply the law He has given.

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What We Think of God

James 4:12a

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God, James continues, is able both to save those who place their faith in Christ and to destroy unrepentant sinners; that is how He applies His law (cf. Deut. 32:39; 1 Cor. 1:18). The angel told Joseph that Jesus would "save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21), while Jesus Himself described His mission as "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Paul wrote that the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). The writer of Hebrews declares of the Lord Jesus Christ, "He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). Those who refuse to repent, however, God will destroy. The word for "**destroy**" used here does not refer to annihilation, but to eternal destruction in hell (cf. Matt. 10:28; 25:46; 2 Thess. 1:9).

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What We Think of God

James 4:12a

There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy.

James warns, that the sin of slander is no trivial matter. It is reckless treason against the Sovereign lawgiver and judge of the universe. To control the sin of slandering others we must recognize the seriousness of sinning against the supreme lawgiver and judge.

17

What We Think of Ourselves

James 4:12b

Who are you to judge another?

Those who slander others declare an exaggerated view of their own importance. In a stinging rebuke to them, James demands, “who are you to judge another?” In Romans 12:3, Paul exhorted the Roman believers, “For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith”. Judging or slandering others is the antithesis of the humility James commanded his readers to manifest (4:10).

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So What ...

Our tongues are a mirror of our hearts. It is not enough merely to control our speech. We need to yield our hearts to Him. Listen to the words which come out of your mouth this week. What will they reveal about your heart?