

THOU SHALT NOT TALK BEHIND EACH OTHER'S BACK

James 4:11-12

Here is yet another way James' readers struggled with their tongues (1:19, 26, 3:10-11). Some were "speaking evil" of fellow Christians. They were talking behind each other's backs and slandering people who were not present to defend themselves.

It is important we correctly understand what James is addressing. James is not forbidding confronting one another's sin. If that were the case, much of James' letter would violate this prohibition. There are many Bible passages that make it clear we are our brother's keeper (Matthew 18:15-20; Galatians 6:1-2).

James forbids us to speak against our brother behind his back; he does not prohibit us confronting his sin face to face. James does not forbid us to confront a sister when she has clearly violated the Word of God. Our motive must be love and our goal restoration.

Let us be very clear; we only have authority to confront one another regarding actions clearly defined in Scripture as sin. If you find Bob Bushes' tractor in my garage without Bob's permission, you would be right to confront my stealing. But if you complain to others I dishonor Jesus by not wearing a suit on Sundays, you are in the wrong. When we go beyond the Scriptures and negatively judge a brother who is not living according to our standards, we are creating our own law. If I wear my hair long and you talk about my long hair with others and declare I am dishonoring Jesus by my long hair, you are creating your own law, a standard not required in Scripture. James tells us that when our standards are not clearly biblical standards, we are actually passing judgment on the law. We are placing ourselves above the law, rather than under it. We are saying, in effect, "God's law does not go far enough." When we go beyond the law, we judge the law as inadequate. We insist our opinion is the standard by which my brothers and sisters need to live. I exalt myself as the lawgiver and the judge. We put ourselves in the place of God.

Another way we speak evil against a brother or sister and put ourselves in the place of God is when we claim to know another person's motives. Only God knows the motives of the human heart. We have no business judging a brother or sister based on what we can only guess is their motive. But it happens all the time. Years ago a lady who played piano on the worship team left the church after I scheduled practices for Saturday mornings. When I sought her out as to why, she insisted I wanted to play so I scheduled

practice on Saturday mornings because I knew that was when she got her hair done! I had no idea she got her hair done on Saturday mornings. If I had known, we would have found a different day and time. And we still could. But she could not be dissuaded. I was guilty. She was judge, jury and executioner.

Is it ever appropriate to speak in a negative manner about a brother or sister who is not present? It is appropriate only if you are seeking wisdom in how to navigate that relationship. Where there is conflict with another person, you keep the circle of involved people as small as possible. If you're not seeking wisdom then you simply do not talk about that person. Period.

James 4:11-12 teaches we are not to talk about our brother or sister behind their back. If they are not present, we speak about them in positive, praiseworthy ways. If we are in conflict, we speak about them with someone from whom we are seeking help. We keep the circle as small as possible. We are never to speak evil of a brother or sister by claiming to know their motives and condemning them. Nor are we to judge and condemn a brother or sister on the basis of a nonbiblical standard we impose upon them. Particularly in this case, we are judging God's law as inadequate, imposing our law and playing God. Judging is God's business, not ours. God is both the author and the interpreter of the law. God alone is the lawgiver, and He alone has the power to save or to destroy. When we judge our brothers and sisters, we completely lose sight of our proper place in God's scheme of things. Setting ourselves over others, and over the law, is exceedingly arrogant.

Finally, talking behind each other's back is a wicked violation of the law of love. It makes the church an unsafe place to be open and honest with one another. It works directly against our need for love and acceptance in this process of sanctification. The last thing we need are brothers and sisters criticizing and condemning us for our shortcomings. I trust you hate this sin as do I and that you will commit yourself afresh to using your words to only and ever build up your brothers and sisters in Christ.

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