

“Refusing to Wound”

July 4, 2010

Dr. Ritch Beorckel

Scriptural Foundation: James 4:11-12, ESV

Warning Against Worldliness

¹¹ 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. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹²There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

My nephew, Micah, is a student at Moody Bible Institute and he loves to share the Gospel on the streets of the Chicago. Almost two years ago he noticed another Moody student who shared his love for boldly talking with others about Jesus and he also noticed that this particular student was very cute. Micah got to know Jessica from some of the team ministry they had participated in together and he was becoming more and more interested in her. The day arrived when he decided he would to ask her out on a first date, so he worked up enough courage to call her from his cell phone. After the phone rang a few times Jessica's voice mail came on. Micah didn't want to leave a voice mail regarding this particular message so he hung up the phone.

His roommate was nearby and Micah began talking about Jessica with him. Micah told his roommate how much he liked Jessica and how eager he was to ask her out on a date and he really hoped she would say, “Yes” to him. He asked his roommate for advice about the best way to ask. He talked about the specific qualities that he really enjoyed in Jessica. This conversation went on for about fifteen minutes. What Micah did not know at the time was his entire conversation with his roommate about Jessica was being recorded on Jessica's voice mail. He had not successfully disconnected his phone from hers, but he was completely unaware of it. In his ignorance of what had happened, he, nonetheless, later found an opportunity to ask Jessica out on a date. She, at first, seemed like she was surprised by his request, she smiled, and she said “Yes.” Jessica did not tell Micah about the voice mail recording until after a few more dates. Three weeks ago Micah and Jessica began their lives together as husband and wife.

I tell that story for two reasons: first, I like it. But, second, because it is a great example of a person hearing what another person is privately saying about them. On this occasion, Micah's comments were high praise and very complimentary. They made Jessica very happy, but what would happen if every time we talked about someone else, our words would be recorded on their voice mail for them to listen? That thought convicts me. Would our words bring delight to them or discouragement? Would our comments heal or hurt? Would we be happy they heard what we said or would we be ashamed?

Occasionally, after a morning service I have left my microphone on by mistake. I will go out into the hall of the church and talk with friends about many different subjects. Unbeknownst to me, my words are being broadcast in the sanctuary for everyone to hear. Someone usually hurriedly approaches me and says, “Pastor, your microphone is still on!!!” So far I have not said anything in those moments I have regretted, but I always think how thankful I am I did not speak carelessly in those moments. Let us ask ourselves, “Would we feel comfortable having our conversations broadcast to all of God's people to hear?”

In Matthew 12, Jesus says,

³⁶ *“I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”*

James has already challenged us on this issue of the tongue, in James 1,

²⁶ If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

Then there is the classic section in James 3 which strikes me,

⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

James picks up this theme again in Verses 11 and 12. It is an important theme and James keeps driving home at us. James entire letter is given to help us evaluate whether or not our faith is real and authentic; whether it is living or dead. James provides a number of tests for us to evaluate the condition of our own soul and the mouth test is one such test.

Real faith transforms the way we talk to others and it transforms the way we talk about others. One evidence of the life of God in the soul of a man or woman is the humble and loving manner of speech they demonstrate in their lives. In this study we focus on this subject of evil speech, not as a lesson in good manners, but as a lesson in authentic Christianity: what does it mean to be Christian?

We are going to consider the true Christian's rejection of evil speech and then four specific reasons why gossip and slander is such a serious offense against God. James presents four reasons for us to reject evil speech. The first is: evil speech descends from a proud and graceless heart. The second is: evil speech destroys God's family. Third, evil speech disregards God's Law. Finally, evil speech defies God's sovereign authority.

First, we want to consider the command James gives us regarding the rejection of evil speech, as we see in Verse 11, which simply says,

¹¹ Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.

The New International Version says,

¹¹ Brothers, do not slander one another.

The New International Version may be overstepping by translating the term as "slander". This Greek term James uses simply means to "speak against" another. This term does indeed most often refer to speaking against someone in falsehood, but the term could reference speaking against someone in truth. This term simply means, "do not malign or disparage another person whether the weapon you use is a lie or whether the weapon used to malign a person is the truth". Don't do it! It acts against love and it acts against God's Law.

I make this distinction because we are tempted to console our consciences when we speak harmfully of another person by arguing with ourselves, "Well, I'm sorry, but it is the truth!"

Slander is speaking lies about another person. Gossip is speaking the truth about another person to the wrong people in the wrong context. Both gossip and slander come underneath this umbrella of "evil speech". Both speak against another person with no effect other than the damage of that person's reputation, of that person's influence, that person's relationships, or that person's joy. Gossip and slander are sins that unnecessarily harm another person who is made in God's image. Paul places both of these sins side by side in 2 Corinthians 12, when he writes to the church in Corinth,

²⁰ For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish--that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.

This idea of evil speech is no small sin in God's eyes. According to one Bible scholar, the Old Testament denounces the sin of slander more than any other sin listed and that surprised me when I read that.

In Leviticus 19, we read,

¹⁶ You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD.

This sin is awful and great, first, because it defies the Lord, but also because it devastates people and relationships within God's community. Proverbs 16 says,

²⁸ A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer (or slanderer) separates close friends.

In Proverbs 17, we read,

⁹ Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.

And, in Proverbs 11, we read,

⁹ With his mouth the godless man would destroy his neighbor, but by knowledge the righteous are delivered.

To speak against a brother or sister means we complain about their words or actions. It means we carry a story that is unflattering at best about that person. It means we judge their heart motives in front of others. It means we condemn them before a jury of our peers. Have you ever done anything like that? Have you ever left a conversation wondering why you said what you did? I hope we all think of ourselves when we read this command for we all surely miss God's mark on this.

The authentic Christian, however, resolves to reject this kind of evil speaking. We will not make it a manner of life for us and we wish to rid ourselves absolutely and completely of it. What do we need in order to reject all gossip and all slander from our lives? We need God's grace. We cannot bridle these tongues apart from God's grace. We, first, need the grace of heart change only the Gospel of Jesus Christ can bring which will cause our heart to move from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh; softness before God and pliability in God's hands and a desire to live rightly in Christ Jesus. We need God to change our hearts. Has God really changed your heart? Do you have a different heart today because of the work of God in your life, the work of regeneration, and the work of bringing His life into your own soul? Have you been born again?

After having this transformation, we need continuous grace from God, daily grace which God offers us in the Gospel to overcome our natural propensity toward sin. We still have a bent, a flesh inside of us, which moves us toward sin and we need daily grace to protect us and to hold us to obedience. We remember James taught us about receiving more grace from God, in the verses prior to these two, in James 4,

⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." ⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

We need grace so we respond to God to receive more grace.

Let me offer five practical words of counsel as you reject evil speaking. First, pray and ask God to purify your hearts and set a door over your lips. We need God presence and we need His Holy Spirit to intervene in our lives. In prayer, submit yourselves to God and yield the members of your body over to Him.

Second, be aware of circumstances which tempt you to gossip or slander another person. We are not always tempted to gossip and slander, but temptation could be just around the corner and we do not know it, so be aware of the circumstances which tempt you. Let me list of number of those circumstances for you. We will be tempted when we are jealous of another person. We will be tempted when we are hurt by another person. We will be tempted when we hear a juicy piece of gossip about another person. We will be tempted when we are in competition with another person. We will be tempted when we are confronted by another person. We will be tempted when we do not like the decisions another person makes.

The third practical word is watch over the thoughts you have of others. You may think, "Well, as long as I do not speak these thoughts, these thoughts are fine to hold onto." No, gossip begins in the heart and gossip works its way,

first, to the mind and then through the mouth. Not every one of our thoughts become a word, but to be sure, every evil word we speak began as an evil thought. Philippians 4 challenges us,

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

The battle in which we engage is: before we are tempted to speak words we must engage the battle with our minds. Our thoughts are like the blossoms on apple trees in the spring. We see the trees covered with blossoms, but most of them fall off and come to nothing. The blossom does not guarantee fruit. Sometimes no fruit springs forth from the many blossoms, but there is not one apple that does not come from a blossom. The mind of a man is covered with thoughts as a tree is with blossoms. These thoughts do not guarantee the bad fruit of evil speech, but there is no fruit of evil speech, whether that speech is slander or gossip, that does not come from some thought. In fact, there is no fruit of any speech, good or bad, which does not come from a thought. The more blossoms of good thoughts we have, the more fruit of good speech we will have. The fewer blossoms of evil thoughts, the fewer the fruit of evil speech we will experience. Proverbs 23 says,

⁷ For as he (a man) thinks within himself, so he is.¹

The fourth practical word of encouragement to reject evil speech is refuse to listen to gossip. We will not be tempted to repeat that which we have not heard. Furthermore, if we refuse to listen to gossip then we create a culture within Christ's church which helps others overcome this sin as well. We are not the only ones tempted with sin. In fact, we tempt others to gossip if they know our ears are eager to listen to gossip. We do not love those whom we tempt to sin and, in fact, we participate in their spiritual ruin.

The last word of practical counsel: confess your sin to God and to others. Seek forgiveness of those to whom we have spread gossip and to those who have listened to our gossip by saying, "Forgive me for telling you that story. I should not have done that. It was wrong of me. Please forgive me." If you know the person has been hurt by your words, go to them and seek forgiveness from them. God's glory depends upon humble confession.

Consider this, Jesus never once spoke an evil word of gossip or slander, but all His perfect life He was the recipient of slander. They said that he was a glutton and an alcoholic; a friend of cheats and sinners. At His trial the chief priests and elders sought out people who would bear false witness against Him. His condemnation and execution was based upon lies the people spoke about Him. They lied about Jesus' actions. They lied about Jesus' words. They lied about Jesus' motives. Anyone can be slandered.

Where does slander come from? It comes from the pit of Hell. Satan's other name is "devil", and the Greek word, "*diabolos*" literally means slanderer. When we are speaking slander we are speaking the language of the demonic realm.

James knows rooting this sin out of our hearts requires us to think about the ugly nature of this sin and to think about it deeply, so he gives to us four reasons why we are to reject evil speech in our lives. He gives us these reasons, first, to convince us, but do we really need convincing? I would say, "Yes, we really need convincing," not because our initial response is, "No, I want to participate in evil speech," but because we do not see it as deeply grievous and serious as God sees it. We need to think deeply about what God says regarding this particular sin.

The first reason is because evil speech descends from a proud and graceless heart. Remember the context of this command. It does not just appear out of no where; it appears after Verses 6 through 10, and Verse 10 says,

¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

God calls us to humble ourselves before Him and the first application of humility which God sets before us is the need to watch over the way we speak about others. Our external sins are not the main problem. The main problem is there

¹ New American Standard Bible

is dark sin which resides in our hearts. External sins are only the fruit and they reveal what is really inside of us and we must not think otherwise. We must not think that our evil words are aberrations from the otherwise goodness of our hearts. No, our evil words are the fruit of what is happening inside of us; they show us what is going on inside of us. All such sin is that way. Such words reveal a proud heart filled with anger or envy or jealousy or hatred. The mouth is just the symptom of one's inner world.

I had a friend in seminary, I will call him Tom, who was describing a hometown friend of his who ran amuck of the law and was presently in prison. Tom talked about the man's crimes of theft and mischief and at the end of his description, Tom said, "But you know, he had a good heart." I looked at him because I could not believe he said that. Tom meant to say this friend was not violent and only evil all the time, but Tom was wrong about that. His friend did not have a good heart. He had a heart that was resisting God's authority. He had a heart which was covetous. He had a heart which had turned away from God's goodness. His heart needed transformation by the grace of Jesus. His heart was deceitful and desperately wicked.

James follows Jesus in His teaching that our words reveal what is inside of us; that our speech discloses the kind of faith we possess. In Matthew 12, Jesus says to the Pharisees,

³⁴ You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵ The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. ³⁶ I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

James says evil speaking reveals a proud and graceless heart.

The second reason why this sin is so evil is because evil speech destroys God's family. Let's read Verse 11 again,

¹¹ Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother...

We see one word appear three times in this text and that word is "brother". James is reminding us of our special family relationship we have as a result of our union with Jesus Christ. We are now children of God and a part of His family. When we speak evil against a brother, we are not only hurting that individual, but we are hurting the entire family of God. We tend to think only in the realm of the individual. We forget that God receives glory not in individuals living for Him, but in a community of individuals living for Him. God loves His church and He loves us gathered together. He loves His people in right-relationship with Him and with each other. He cares about His churches' peace and unity! Listen to what 1 Corinthians 12,

²⁴ But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

Paul's argument to the church which was in strife and conflict, and filled with gossip and slander, was, "Listen and consider how God has created this body, this one unit, so it would be comprised together of many members so there might be harmony and peace and unity within it."

Jesus said, in Matthew 12,

²⁵ *"Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand."*

Will we allow God's church to be laid to waste because we harbor resentment toward a brother or sister, because we are jealous or envious, or because we do not like what a brother or sister has done or said? We do not naturally think of it that way, do we; that we want the church of Jesus to be laid to waste when we gossip or slander, but God thinks of it that way and that is the point.

We have to ask, “Who am I serving when I speak evil against a brother?” Paul taught us in Ephesians 5,

²⁵ . . . Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle...

Jesus loves His church, the bride. He presented His body and He offered up Himself so the bride might be spotless and beautiful. Slander throws mud on the wedding garments Jesus has been working on so diligently to cleanse. Do you understand that? Do we embrace that? When we speak against a brother or sister in Christ to another person, to do harm, we are really spattering mud upon the church which Jesus is working diligently to purify and to present one day as a spotless bride.

A few years ago I was driving down Knoxville Avenue minding my own business when I heard a honk from a car next to me. The car contained a couple rowdy teenagers who wanted my attention. As they pulled alongside of me one of them spit on my car and they laughed and drove away. They technically did not spit on me, but they did spit on me because they spit on something that was mine and that I cared about, something which at that time and in that context represented me. Jesus loves His church much more than I love that car. Gossip and anger soil the church Jesus is working to clean!

If we perceive our brothers and sisters in Christ as part of our family we will love them and protect them and pursue their good, not their harm. Gossip and slander are intrinsically unloving.

We do not gossip and slander ourselves, do we? Has anyone ever gossiped or slandered about themselves and spread a malicious story to ruin one's own reputation? I never have, not purposely anyway. Why don't we say things about ourselves which will ruin our reputation in the eyes of others? We do not because we love ourselves. That is natural. What is interesting is so often this sin is so deceitful because we can actually gossip about other people and in the very next sentence say, “But, I really love him!” No, you don't! You would not gossip and ruin their reputation unnecessarily if you really loved them. They are family.

The third reason is: evil speech disregards God's Law, as we read at the end of Verse 11,

¹¹ The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

James is pointing out gossip and slander is an open rejection of the Law of God and ultimately a rejection of the Law of God is a rejection of God's Person. James is saying, “When you are condemning your brother, you are condemning the Law that God gave us to obey; a Law which is all about love and gossip and slander cut at the very center and the very core of God's Law. That is why this is so serious. Listen to Jesus summation of the whole of the Law, in Matthew 23,

³⁷ “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

The first four of the Ten Commandment have to do with “love the Lord, your God” and the last six of the Ten Commandments has to do with “love your neighbor as yourself”.

Paul would say, in Romans 13,

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

James is saying, the person who speaks evil against a brother or sister thinks that the Law of God somehow does not apply to him or her and somehow they are actually superior to the Law and immune to its authority. They have rejected the Law as a force upon their lives and have placed themselves in a position of superiority to it.

Interestingly, most gossips and slanderers feel very justified in their actions; they feel right about it. They do not feel as though they are guilty of breaking the Law or feel as though they are guilty of grave sin. For a time, gossip and slander often feels as it is the “right thing to do”. The reason for this is the heart of such a person has become hardened to God’s Law and the conscious has become seared. God’s Law is worthy of our attention, of our affection, of our obedience, and our submission.

The last point James makes is evil speech defies God’s sovereign authority, as we see in Verse 12,

¹² There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

First, this verse does not forbid us from exposing sin and confronting sin in each other’s lives. Matthew 18 is very clear,

¹⁵ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

In other words, we have to say, “On the basis of your life, we can no longer affirm your Christianity and that you are a part of God’s family.”

Later in James 5, James says,

¹⁹ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

James is not saying, “Don’t ever go up to somebody and judge them by saying, ‘Hey, brother, what you are doing is a sin according to God’s Word and I am calling you away from sin.’” That is not the application. He is not calling us to ignore sin in other’s lives and pretend it does not exist. So what is James teaching us?

Listen to John MacArthur describe the meaning of Verse 12, “There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?” “Do you know what that means? There’s no room for you on the bench. Get off. There is already a judge there. Who in the world do you think you are? There are no vacancies in the Trinity. God is not waiting for you to show up and call the shots. When the slanderer puts himself above the Law, he takes the bench and he endeavors to dispossess God.” That is pretty strong, but I believe it is true.

Gossip and slander are the essence of pride because these sins claim God’s prerogatives. They are not content with allowing God to be the Ultimate Judge, but they say, “We have to be judge, jury, and executioner. We have to make sure this person pays the price for what they have done. We are going to make sure that happens through our gossip. We are going to declare what we know to be absolutely true and we feel just in it.” John MacArthur says, “Get off of the bench. You are not the judge.”

Someone may ask, “What are we to do when we get upset at another’s words or actions?” Let me walk with you through five practical pieces of counsel. If you believe someone has done something wrong, do we sit by passively without telling anyone? No, that is not what we do.

First, you are right to go and talk to the person directly about your concerns. Go humbly and go assuming you may not have all the facts, but first you want to find out all of the facts. Go humbly to them, seeking to restore them out of love for them and out of love for their soul. Go to them face to face if at all possible. Do not use e-mail for this. If you cannot go face-to-face because of geography, talk with them over the phone, but go to them directly.

The second step is you are right, also, to go talk to someone who is in a position to help the person. If the purpose is this person you will talk to will actually take some positive action to help that person, you are right to talk with them. For instance, you would be right to talk to a teenager’s parents about what you know of that son’s or daughter’s

actions, because you know the parents care for their son or daughter and they have the ability to act upon any word you may give to them.

Third, you are right to hold your tongue from telling anyone about the flaw or sin who cannot do anything positive with the information. We should ask ourselves, “After I tell this person this information, what godly result do I expect to come of it? What will they do to bring glory to God as a result?” If we cannot think of any action they would take, we must hold our tongue!

Fourth, you are right to be careful of sharing prayer requests which may put another person unnecessarily in a poor light. Prayer requests are often a spiritualized form of gossip and slander. Be careful not to use an instrument God has given to us to multiply grace so that it becomes an instrument which multiplies sin.

Finally, take the matter to God in prayer and leave it with Him. You can trust Him to act wisely, lovingly, graciously, and justly.

I want to close with this observation of this little phrase in Verse 12,

¹² There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy.

All of human history is moving toward a culmination and that culmination is the Day of Judgment when each one of us will give an account of our lives, every word, every thought, and every action to God Himself. I ask you, are you ready to meet God on that day? God is able to save and He is able to destroy. He is a God of love and grace and He is a God of righteousness and justice. If God has not saved you, then God will destroy you on that day. This is a somber thing to think about. The question to ask yourself is: have I been saved by God from the penalty of my sin, because God is able to save and to destroy and He will do both, depending upon how people have responded to His Son Jesus.

If you have never responded to Jesus by calling out and saying, “God, I know you sent your Son. He is God come in the flesh and He died upon the cross for my sin, to rescue me from the punishment of my sin and to save me. I now trust in Him as my personal Lord and as my personal Savior.” If you have never embraced Jesus, believed in Jesus, and trusted in Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, then you one day will meet a God who is able to destroy and it will be such a fearful and awful day. There is no need to meet the God who is able to and who will destroy. There is no need to meet the God who is still angry with you for your sin, because God has made a way and that way is Jesus. I urge you to come to Him and to trust in Him as your own Savior, for God is able to save you.