

**James:
Worldly Speaking and Christian Speaking**

James 4:11-17

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

October 13, 2002

If you have your bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to James chapter 4. As we've worked through this very practical book, we noted that in James 1:26, 27 James actually gives us a three-point key to some of the important topics that he addresses for the rest of the book. He deals with the issue of worldliness in that passage he also talks about our speech and about our care for those who are in need...Let's hear God's Word:

Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you--who are you to judge your neighbor? Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God we ask that You would show us through the instrument of our speech a window into our hearts. That You would reveal what is there and if it is worldliness, we pray that by the grace of Your Spirit that You would root it out and that you would establish Christ in our hearts. We ask O God that You would help us to understand Your word this day, and to see its application first to ourselves, rather than to others, lest we seeking to instruct them in the removal of a speck in their eye, might miss the log in our own. We ask these things, in Jesus' name. Amen.

James has been talking about worldliness and we've said that very subject hits home to us. We are bombarded with every temptation to worldliness on all sides

in our culture and our own hearts are infected with worldly desires. And in this passage today James is going to point to two indications of speech that there is a worldly self-centeredness, a worldly lack of humility in us. And I'd like you to see two or three things that James makes very clear to us in this passage today.

I. Christians are not to slander, defame or denigrate a Christian brother.

First, if you look at verses 11 & 12. You will see James addressing the issue of speech that is destructive of our brethren or our neighbor. He sees that kind of speech which tears down fellow believers, or which tears down our neighbors, to be a mark of both worldliness and a lack of humility. His point of course is that Christians are not to slander or defame or denigrate a Christian brother in speech. And when we hear verses 11 & 12, of course, behind them we hear Jesus' words echoing from Matthew chapter 7:1, "Do not judge lest you be judged." And we need to pause here before we give a positive exposition of this passage to say what this passage does not mean, because that praise of Jesus and this statement of James has often been used wrongly when James says that we are not to speak against one another. He does not mean that believers are not to exercise discretion or judgment about the things that they hear other people saying. He does not mean that we are not to evaluate a person or that person's actions biblically. He doesn't mean that we're to go into judgment autopilot and never evaluate anyone or their actions from a biblical point of view. Nor does he even mean that we are never to say anything negative about another person.

If he meant those three things, I want to point out that James would have already violated those things in this book. He's had some fairly hard things to say about people who claim to have faith and yet don't show it in their life. Even in this passage, if you look at the second half of verse 11, James passes a judgment on people who judge. James himself is willing to exercise discretion and make evaluations.

So, what does James mean when he says, "Do not speak against one another?" Well, he is speaking about speech that tears down a fellow believer or a neighbor. He is talking about backbiting. That's actually a good translation which William Tyndale gave us many years ago. He's talking about speech that is often not in the presence of a fellow Christian, which tears them down. It builds us up at there expense.

So, how do we check that kind of speech, because we all struggle with it. Even Isaiah had to pray, "I am a man of unclean lips." We all struggle with these kinds of sins of speech. How do we check them? How do we check hurtful, divisive, destructive speech? That's a particularly poignant question to ask as we come to the Lords Table, because at the Lords Table we're not only celebrating our communion with Christ, but our communion with one another. And destructive

speech disrupts that communion. It is one of the great sins that brings disunity in the Christian church. So, how do we check that kind of speech? Well, in this passage James offers five hints in verses 11 & 12. Take a look at them with me.

The very first phrase of verse 11, James says in order to check destructive speech, remember about whom you are speaking. Who is it that you are about to tear down? Listen to James' language, "Do not speak against one another, brethren." In the next phrase he twice calls us, *brothers*. And then, if you look at the end of verse 12, you'll see him speak about neighbors. Now James is reminding you of this simply to point out that brethren ought not to be hurting brothers and sisters and neighbors. We ought to be cultivating close and friendly and encouraging and mutually helping relationships in our speech. So, he says when you're getting ready to tear down someone, remember about whom you are speaking. It's a brother, it's a sister, and it's a neighbor.

Secondly, he says in verse 11, remember against what you are speaking. James was speaking to people who had a high view of God's word, and they had a high view of God's law. They wanted to obey God's law. And he says, when you speak against a brother, you are actually speaking against God's law. It's not just your brother's reputation that you're breaking. It is God's law that you're breaking. He who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother, speaks against the law, and judges or condemns the law. When you speak against the brother you are condemning the law.

Thirdly, if you look at verse 11, he says, if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it. And so he's saying to remember what you are contradicting or deeming deficient when you speak against a brother. You're saying, well God's law is wrong. I'm going to do that anyway, even though that God's law tells me to not speak about a brother that way, I'm going to do it anyway. Therefore, God's law is wrong. Or maybe you're simply putting yourself above obeying God's law and thus becoming a judge of God law. Remember whom you are contradicting and becoming and deeming deficient. Imagine a defendant in a courtroom that's been accused of a serious crime, standing up and claiming to be above the law. Imagine his attorney cringing as he does this before judge and jury. I think all of us have been shocked in the last days about the card that has been left by this sniper in Maryland and Virginia, proclaiming himself to be God. Well, James is saying, that's exactly you're doing, when you decide to go right ahead and hurt a brother with words. You are pronouncing yourself to be above the law. You're pronouncing yourself to be God who is the judge and lawgiver.

And that leads us to the fourth thing that I want to say. He also, if you look at verse 12 says that we need to remember who we are claiming to be and who we are claiming to displace. There is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. God Himself is the judge. And when we set ourselves up in his place in tearing down and condemning another, then we are claiming to take his

place.

And then finally, James in verse 12 says, remember who you are. Who are you to judge your neighbor? Humility is the prime Christian grace.

Now what's James been saying? He's saying that your words can reveal a self focus, self centered pride and lack of humility, a worldliness and this is exactly what he does in this diagnosis here in verses 11 and 12. He shows how destructive speech is actually a sign of self centered, self-focused, un-humble worldliness. When we see that kind of speech, James say's trace it back to its origin, the heart and realize that you need God's grace to change you in that area.

II. Christians are not to think and speak presumptuously.

The second thing he says, and you'll see it in verses 13 through 17, is that it is not just destructive speech that shows a self-centered worldliness that lacks humility. It is presumption in speech. Actually, even before the speech, presumption in attitude, presumption in attitude and speech is a mark of worldliness and lack of humility. Now, let me quickly say that verses 13 — 17 belong together. If you notice the opening words of verse 17, it begins with a *therefore*. James is drawing a deduction at least from verses 13 — 16, in verse 17, in fact he may even be going back further in that therefore. But I'm going to separate them for our consideration in order to bring out a point that James makes.

But, in verses 13 — 16, James is pointing at the problem of presumption in speech and he's saying that just like destructive speech about our brothers and sisters and neighbors shows the problem of worldliness, so also does presumption in speech. Christians are not to think and speak presumptuously. We are to think and speak, mindful of the providence of God.

James says that presumption in speech betrays a worldliness in heart, and he uses a business illustration to make his point. That is very important for us. We live in a day of personal digital assistants, futurist conferences, and planning mania. And the very mindset of the culture around us encourages us to be presumptuous in our approach to life and even to planning. Now, James is not assaulting planning. James is not saying, "Don't plan." James is not saying, "Don't be good stewards of the resources that God has given you." He's not saying, "Don't budget." He's not saying any of that, but he is talking about a worldliness that can invade our own thinking and can manifest itself in our speech if we are not careful. The cultural mind set can influence Christians without our even realizing it.

And he points our several things in verse 13 that show a worldly presumption and

lack of humility. In verse 13 he speaks about a presumption of time. "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow.'" James reminds us that our time is in God's hands. We can't say *today* or *tomorrow*. Our times are in God's hands. He speaks of a presumption about place. We will go to such and such a city. You know, you can see the businessman doing the demographics and saying a restaurant will work there, a bank will work there, a service business will work there. They need this or they need that, the demographics have been done such and such a place. And, yet James says a favorable situation does not insure success. He speaks of presumption about duration, "We will spend a year there."

We can think to ourselves, "We've got all the time in the world," but how much time does the world have? Many of us have heard people speak in the last year or so about the people who were on their way to work in the World Trade Centers on September 11th, 2001, not realizing that it would be their last day on this earth. You didn't have to work at the World Trade Center to be liable to thinking about life as if another day is going to follow another day. We all can slip into that mind set. James indicates a presumption about the program of effort that these people are going to engage in, "We will engage in business." And he speaks about presumption of the results, "We will make a profit."

Now, what is noticeable in this very short one sentence illustration is God doesn't factor in it at all. And that's James' point. Understand that James is not talking to pagans. James expects pagans not to factor the one true God into their planning. James is talking to Christians who are not factoring God into the stuff of their lives. God is isolated on Sunday morning for an hour, but, in the business of life He doesn't factor. There's no mention of God. There's no mention of His providence. There's no indication of prayer. There's no humility about what might or might not happen tomorrow. James is indicating a person who is not factoring a very important factor into all of life, God.

And, James in verses 14 and 15 gives an antidote to this. Instead of speaking and thinking presumptuously he says, we need to remember four things:

First, of all in verse 14, he says we need to remember that we are ignorant of the future. "You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow." We don't know the future. We may work hard at it, but we don't know the future. And that's James' first word to us in showing the proper wisdom and humility.

Secondly, we are finite. Our days are numbered. You are just as "vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away." We have a ruling elder here at First Presbyterian Church, and if you're around him very long at all, you'll hear him pray something to this effect: "Thank you, Lord for giving us another day in which to serve You. Thank you for letting us wake up this morning." And in doing that he constantly reminds us that very act of waking up in the morning is a mercy of God, that He didn't have to grant that and that we didn't know whether he would grant that. And that is in the spirit of James counsel here. We are finite.

Our days numbered.

Thirdly, if you'll look at verse 15, James says that we are utterly dependant on God. "You ought to say, 'if the Lord wills we will live and also do this or do that.'" Now, James isn't just saying that we need to say *Lord willing or if God wills or God willing*, and that will somehow create a spiritual mindset. But, he is saying that needs to be profoundly our attitude of heart, and even reflected in our speech, to show that we are humbly dependent upon the Lord, rather than worldly self-centered, self focused and lacking humility.

And then finally in verse 16 notice that he reminds us of the important of humility. We're ignorant of the future, we're finite, and our days are numbered. We are utterly dependent on God and we ought to be humble. "As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil." James is saying something fairly striking. He's saying that when you plan without factoring these truths, and without factoring in the ultimate reality of God, then you are being arrogant and when you are being arrogant, you are boasting, and when you're boasting you are sinning. And so he is taking something that is fairly mundane, the act of thinking and planning without adequately being dependent upon God and prayer fully humble before him. And he's saying that is, in fact, the sin of arrogance and boasting. And that boasting is evil. Christians are not to think and speak presumptuously like that.

Now, one reaction that we might have to what James has said so far is, "Everybody I know struggles with this. Everybody I know, from time to time, says things about brothers and sisters in Christ that they shouldn't say. They say things about neighbors that they shouldn't say, and is from time to time, not adequately humble in factoring the plans of God and the will of God into their planning? Aren't we kind of making too big a deal of this?" And, James' response to that is, "No, not at all." In fact, James says that the way we function in this area is an excellent indication of whether or not we are spiritual or worldly.

III. Christians are to bear in mind how sinful it is to fail to do what God commands.

Look at what he says in verse 17. "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin." You see, we can say "Everybody struggles with these things. From time to time everyone says things about other people that they shouldn't say. From time to time everyone doesn't factor God in his presumptions. Some of the best people I know commit these sins. It couldn't be that big a deal."

And, James' response in verse 17, is "On the contrary, knowing what we ought to do and failing to do it is one of the best indicators of worldliness, because, our failing to do it is not a matter of ignorance, but of willful disobedience, lazy

disobedience and lack of humility.” In other words, James is saying in verse 17, that sins of omission are particularly acute signs of worldliness and a lack of humility. And Christians are to bear in mind how sinful it is to fail to do what God commands. God has commanded that we not be presumptuous in our speech and thinking. He's commanded that we not be destructive in our speech and in our thinking about brothers and sisters in Christ. And when we fail to do that it is a marker of our worldliness, our need for repentance and forgiveness and grace.

You know what the last words of Archbishop Usher were before he was burned at the stake, right before the Lord took him into eternity? Archbishop Usher prayed, “Lord forgive my sins especially my sins of omission.” And it's another reminder, my friends, of why we need the grace of Christ. Because, so often we think of our sins as those things that we have done to positively contradict law, those things which we have done which go against God's word, those laws of God which we have broken, those things that we have done, that we ought not to have done. And if we only think of sin in those categories, it is possible for us to fool ourselves into thinking that we are pretty good people.

But when we think of sins of omission, the thing that God called us to do, but which we did not do, then we see another aspect of our hearts. If you are here this morning and you've never trusted in Jesus Christ, you haven't repented of your sins and fled to Him for grace, you are struggling with sins of omission, as well as sins of transgression. And you need the grace of Christ to change, you can't change yourself. That's why there is this table. Because, there was a Christ on a tree dying in your place, living in your place, actively and passively obeying that you might fulfill the law of God and that you might be declared righteous, not because of your fulfilling of the law of God, but because of His fulfilling of it.

For those of you who are believers today, perhaps even thinking about these things is convicting. You realize that these are areas that you're struggling in and you recognize that there is worldliness apart. Again, there is this table that reminds you that you cannot sanctify yourself. The Spirit, by His grace, sanctifies us. And so you need to apply again to the Lord Jesus Christ, who not only died that you might be declared holy, but who died that you might become more and more like Him in your speech. Grant that in our speech to one another as believers we show a heart of humility, of others center ness rather than a worldly heart of self-centeredness. Let's pray.

“Our Lord and our God, teach us the truth, search us out with the truth, conform us to the truth by the one who is the way the truth and the life. This we ask, in Jesus' name. Amen.”

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No

attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the [First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement](#).

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).