

Healing Sinful Criticism and Judgmentalism (Jas. 4:10-11)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on Jan. 17, 2010

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Imagine that we are all in a human courtroom, and there are several people who are accused of various crimes together. What would you think if one of the accused ones who by the evidence appears to deserve to be sentenced, if in the middle of the trial, he gets up from his seat where he has been accused and disregards all authority and protocol and approaches the bench, walks around it, and excuses the judge and says “I’ll be taking over from here, your honor, you can go back to your chambers, you can thank me later.” And then this person who has now usurped the role of judge says, “Ok, bailiff, please excuse those who are on trial here and their attorneys because we don’t need them to be here to convict them. I’ve got good 2nd-hand evidence against them and a little bit of first-hand information I have about their heart motive from my perspective that I think is plenty to convict.”

And once the others that were on trial with him leave the courtroom, this fellow criminal sitting up above everyone else proceeds to read to the audience his own personal accusations and complaints about offenses these other criminals committed against him, using his own selective interpretation of the law and how it condemns the others and not him, and giving only his side of the story since they’re all not there ... and the audience just sits there and listens, no one saying anything in reply. And this guy who has presumed himself the role of judge doesn’t actually ask the jury to weigh any evidence or allow any cross-examination or evidence or arguments from his opponents, and he isn’t explicitly even calling the audience to make their own judgment, but he has essentially done it for them, mercilessly and for all intents and purposes he has brought down the gavel on these others and declared them to be guilty. You would say, “what shocking arrogance for one in his position to presume that seat! What a breach of justice! That is an unfair trial, that person deserves to have the book thrown at ‘em!”

And you would be right. And James 4 wants you to know that’s exactly what you have done and some of you have done very recently towards other beloved brothers and sisters in Christ:

¹¹ *Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it.*

¹² *There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but **who are you** who judge your neighbor?...*

In the context of the book of James, this isn’t the first time James has warned against merciless judgmental sinful speech:

2:13 *judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy...*

James 3 also speaks much about merciless speech to each other. But in chapter 4, v. 6, there is hope for this universal and chronic problem we all have in our heart that overflows in many mouths. Behind judgmental and critical words and hearts is pride, and ...

4:6 ... *God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble*
v10 *Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up*

Many sermons cover v. 11-12 together but I want to cover v. 10-11 together today because the sin of lifting self up (v10) links w/ sin of putting down others with words (v11), and v10 looks back to v6. Grace is the only way we can fulfill the 10 commands in v. 7-10 or the demands of our text (v. 11) but humility is the only way to get grace. Apart from grace at work within us, we're all like that guy in the courtroom, until we plead guilty and plead mercy. God the Judge resists proud plaintiffs but He receives repentant criminals. If you elevate yourself to presume His role, you're goin' down. But if you lower yourself humbly in His sight, He will lift you up.

Humble repentance is necessary to receive God's grace, but God's grace is also necessary for our humble repentance to even take place! Salvation and sanctification is all of grace and all a gift, though human responsibility and repentance is involved. It's not mere free will or the flesh's effort. Grace empowers submission to God. Phil. 3:21 says God's power is what submits all to Himself. Repentance is not a mere *work of man* but a *gift God grants to man*

Acts 11:18 ...*God has granted repentance to the Gentiles...*

2 Tim. 2:24 ... *God may grant them repentance ...*

Humility starts knowing salvation is all of grace, and that's not just true of salvation, but all that we are and all we have is all of grace.

In 1 Cor 15:10, Paul said: *But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.*

But recognizing “*by the grace of God I am what I am*” does not negate our labor, it should motivate our labor, as Paul said in that same verse it caused him to labor more than all by God's grace. It is in Christ we live, with Christ, by Christ, from Christ, through Christ, to Christ. Paul says in Galatians 2 (KJV) ²⁰ *I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God ...* ²¹ *I do not frustrate the grace of God ...*

God's grace doesn't exclude our effort, it empowers it. Grace is not license to do as we please, but the power to do as we should. We don't just believe in saving grace, the grace that regenerates a spiritually dead sinner and makes him alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:5), we also believe in sustaining grace, sanctifying grace (James 4:6) that we need continually, more grace, future grace.

So when 4:7 says “submit yourselves,” you must do this yourself but you can't do this *by yourself*, or any of God's commands (v.7-10) apart from grace. You can't *resist the devil* by yourself (v. 7), but as Paul says in Eph. 6, you can do so in the Lord's armor and in the strength of His might. You must “draw near to God” (v. 8), but we know from other passages that no man can do this without God drawing them first by His grace. When v. 8 commands us to cleanse our hands and purify our hearts, that is part of repentance, but we know that only God can purify our hearts and cleanse us (remember repentance is God's gift not our independent effort).

As John 1:16 says “*we have received ... **grace for grace***” (NKJV).

We need to do what James 4:7-10 says to receive grace, and we even need grace to do what v. 7-10 says, so that it's all by grace, a gift of God, not of works, so that no one may boast (and so God gets all glory)! This is the antidote to boasting critical words (v.11)

You can't speak down to others (the literal Greek meaning of v. 11) when you've already humbled yourself (v. 10) down as low as you can possibly go to the ground, there's nowhere lower than where you already are so you can't look down on or talk down to others lower than you. That's the posture of grace, but any other posture other than on your face before God will not receive grace and will not show grace to others. You won't whine about the sins of others as much if you weep more over your own sins (v. 9)! But if you speak to or about others in a way that only the Judge has the prerogative to, His Law says you're in contempt of His court. God is not a Judge you want to mess with, He is a Judge you need mercy from, because He is coming as a just Judge who must punish sin. Our natural position stands condemned before His bar of justice, so how dare we presume the position of condemning others with words! If God has given us grace, we must give grace.

James **5:9** *Do not **complain**, brethren, **against one another**, so that you yourselves may not be **judged**; **behold, the Judge is standing right at the door** [i.e., He's coming back soon, as end of v. 8 says]*

You better make sure your life is right with this Judge through the right Mediator, not the merits of your own case or own defense. If Jesus is not your Lord, He's not your attorney, He is your Judge.

Steve Lawson said that when Jesus returns to earth as judge: 'He is not coming to play games. He not is coming to dazzle. He is coming to dominate. He is coming to slaughter [that's the language of Revelation 19, the 2nd Coming]. He is the King of kings and He is the Lord of lords, and at the end of this age, He will bolt out of heaven on a white steed and His garments are dipped in blood, the blood of His own enemies and He is coming back to conquer and to damn. You need to make terms of peace with this coming King or you will be subjected in damnation forever ... and Jesus Christ has made terms of peace. *You need to settle out of court with Him.* You do not want to go into that final day of conflict with Christ. For He will be ruthless in the execution of His Justice ... but He offers you mercy today. He will agree to terms of surrender [in the words of James 4:7, surrender / submit to God]. He will agree to terms of peace but they are His terms of peace, not ours ... [Lk 14:32-33] You must transfer the ownership of all that you are and all that you have to all that He is ... You life is no longer your life, it is now His life. You time is no longer your time, it is now His time. Your possessions are no longer your possessions, they are now His possessions. Your future is no longer your future, it is now His future. Your treasure is no longer your treasure, it is His treasure. And you have transferred all that you are and all that you have to all that He is ... That's what saving faith is. It is coming to the end of yourself and completely and entirely trusting all that you are and all that you have to all that He is ... Oh, how we ought to search our hearts here today. Have I come to this place of total commitment in my life? Have I yielded my life to the sovereign lordship of Him who died upon the cross ... Don't play games. You must surrender to Christ.'¹

James 4:7 says: *Submit to God*. Verse 10 says *Humble yourself*. Self must be bent, self bowed, self must be broken (Ps 51:17).

The book *The Calvary Road* explains: ‘we are not likely to be broken except at the Cross of Jesus. The willingness of Jesus to be broken for us is the all-compelling motive in our being broken too [2 Co 5:14 NIV]. We see Him, Who is in the form of God, counting not equality with God a prize to be grasped at and hung on to, but letting it go for us and taking upon Him the form of a Servant - God's Servant, man's Servant [Phil. 2:5-9]. We see Him willing to have no rights of His own, no home of His own, no possessions of His own, willing to let men revile Him and not revile again, willing to let men tread on Him and not retaliate or defend Himself [1 Pet 2:21-23]. Above all, we see Him broken as He meekly goes to Calvary to become men's scapegoat by bearing their sins in His own body on the Tree [1 Pet 2:24].

*Lord, bend that proud and stiff necked I,
Help me to bow the head and die;
Beholding Him on Calvary,
Who bowed His head for me.*

But dying to self is not a thing we do once for all (Mk 8:34, Lk 9:23 adds "daily"). There may be an initial dying when God first shows these things, but ever after it will be a constant dying ... a constant yielding to those around us, for our yieldedness to God is measured by our yieldedness to man. Every humiliation, everyone who tries and vexes us, is God's way of breaking us, so that there is a yet deeper channel in us for the Life of Christ ... People imagine that dying to self makes one miserable. But it just the opposite. It is the refusal to die to self that makes one miserable. The more we know of death with Him, the more we shall know of His life in us, and so the more of real peace and joy. His life, too, will overflow²

The Puritan Thomas Brooks said: ‘Humility is both a grace, and a vessel to receive grace ... God singles out the humble soul to fill him to the brim with grace while the proud are sent empty away’

God opposes the proud (v.6) who speak down against others (v.11). Psalm 101:5 (NKJV)
Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, Him I will destroy; The one who has a haughty look and a proud heart, Him I will not endure [notice the parallel of slander and pride]

How do we know we've humbled ourselves (v. 10)? How do we speak of others (v. 11)?
Speaking down shows we're not down enough.

What type of speech is forbidden in James 4:11?

It may be *evil* (KJV/ESV) but not necessarily only *slander* (NIV). It may be true but unsolicited unnecessary ‘repetition of real faults ... critical, derogatory speech ... that deliberately calls attention to the faults of others while minimizing their virtues ... the point is not the falsity of what is said but rather its uncharitableness. The evil lies in the speaker’s hostile intention, aimed at eroding the position or character of the one spoken against. It is an activity related closely to the work of the devil, the slanderer (v. 7).’³

Kent Hughes points out in v. 11: ‘as the Greek has it ... it actually forbids more than slander. Literally the command is, “Do not speak down on one another, brothers,” or “Do not speak against one another, brethren” (NASB). Slander is malicious speech that is untrue. But the command here forbids *any speech* (whether it is true or false) which runs down another person ... any speech which intends to run down someone else, even if it is totally true ... Most people think it is okay to convey negative information if it is *true*. We understand lying is immoral. But is passing along damaging truth immoral? It seems almost a moral responsibility! ... many believers use truth as a license to righteously diminish others’ reputations ... [and on the other side, some others think the same type of sinful words are] OK if done face to face. These persons are driven by a “moral” compulsion to make others aware of their own faults. Fault-finding is, to them, a spiritual gift ... [one used the OT ‘prophet’ gift as] a spiritual rationale for an abrasive, critical personality [on a] spiritual search-and-destroy mission.’⁴

Not all critical speech is sinful. Feedback and criticism can be helpful, because we can be blind to our faults. Faithful are the wounds of a friend. In my seminary preaching class we would preach to a small class full of peers who would all have critique sheets and would be grading you as you preached, which wasn’t fun at the time but was helpful (ex: Jaime & my preaching videos:)

It’s one thing to be critical thinkers, in sense of discernment. We all should listen critically to our world, applying a biblical world-view to all of life using the mind and Scriptures God has given us to judge, examine, evaluate things carefully compared to the Bible (that’s a biblical duty). There is also a biblical form of constructive criticism which aims to help, confronting or challenging a fellow believer in love (John R. teaching on this in SS class right now). But the context of James 4:11 is clearly sinful criticism that is not produced by love but produced by pride. It hurts more than helps. It’s not aimed at the good of the one spoken of (to their face or behind their back) and it’s not bathed in love and humility. It’s not spoken in a tone of concern but a condemning judgmental tone.

v. 11b: *He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother ...*

What type of judging is sinful in v. 11?

Just as there is a type of criticism that is not sinful, there is a type of judging that is not sinful, which is important to get right in our day and age of postmodern relativism that tells us we should never make judgments that a particular action or lifestyle is wrong (and in SF this week, that fury continues before an actual judge over the homosexual marriage clause’s constitutionality). But the King of Kings and Judge of Judges has given us His Law of absolute truth, God’s Word is absolute not obsolete. And no human relativism, rationalism, or radicalism can change it, and it’s not arrogant or judgmental for us to submit all to the verdict of the Judge of the Universe. It would be the height of arrogance for us little peons to kick out the Judge and take over the bench and make our own law!

But that’s exactly what happens when people haven’t humbled themselves (v. 10). Rather than being *under* God, they *usurp* God.

v. 11b: ... *He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it* [God's Law].

- "*speaks against a brother*" is one speaking down from a position presuming superiority looking down on an inferior (but you're his fellow brother, not his boss or lord)
- "*speaks against the law*" is an insult to the Law-giver God
- "*against the law*" suggests setting yourself above the law ('I'm standing on the Word,' vs. standing *under* the Word?)
- "*the law*" – especially the law of love to neighbor (2:8-10)
- "*judges the law*" suggests you're usurping the office of and prerogatives of a judge whose function is to determine if a man's actions come under the authority of a certain law
- "*not a doer of the law*" implies you neglect at least some of the law while you selectively judge others for other parts
- making the law bend to your life or standards, rather than making your life and standards bend and bow to God's Law
- determining you are not guilty as your own jury, rather than letting God's Word be judge and jury to pronounce where you're guilty
- Thinking you're qualified to enact a better Law than God's
- supplement your own rules with the same authority as God
- the one you're sentencing is your own brother (3x in v. 11)

Don't set yourself above God's law, submit yourself to it (v. 7a). We are not the Judge with authority over the Bible; the Bible is the authority over us in the hand of the true Judge (v. 12). In God's courtroom, we are all guilty; we are all in the place of the accused, not the attorney, much less not the jury, certainly not the judge.

'In court a judge must be impartial in evaluating the evidence, and be just in applying the law and passing sentence. The [one in v. 11], by contrast, generally neglects to learn the facts, avoids speaking in the presence of the accused, sets aside the law of love, and as a self-appointed judge hands down the verdict.'⁵

As one writer explains, this verse is not intended 'to rule out civil courts and judges. Instead, it is to root out the harsh, unkind, critical spirit that continually finds fault with others.'⁶

What should we do before we speak critically?

James 1:19 "*Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger ...*"

Ephesians 4:29: Only let come from your mouth that which is:

1. "*good for edification*"
2. "*according to the need of the moment*"
ESV "*as fits the occasion*"; NKJV "*necessary*"
3. "*that it may give grace to those who hear*"

NIV: "*only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*"

The principle could also apply to electronic words, text-messaging, etc. ... every bit of gossip is passed along quickly, spreading through the electronic grapevine like wildfire [as Jas. 3:6 says]

The best way to stop it is at the beginning (not when it's raging). If Christians knew and tried to consistently apply just this one verse (Eph. 4:29) before communicating, most conflicts would cease; family feuds, church family feuds, and other fights would die out.

What should we do when people criticize us?

Below is from Joel Beeke, "Coping with Criticism"

After preaching this message on coping with criticism to ministers, "I wish I had heard this 20 years ago, and the ministry I was in could have been salvaged," or "I wouldn't have left a church," etc.

1. *Consider criticism inevitable* (people have strong feelings about worship, church, ministry, Christian life, etc.)
2. *Consider the source* (mature Christian, young Christian, fringe person, critical person in general, etc.) and don't underestimate or overreact to a given complaint; consider it
3. *Consider timing and prayer* (don't respond immediately or defensively, sometimes he may ask for time to meditate and consider and pray about it, and get back to them; Lk 21:19)
4. *Consider yourself* (critics are often God's gift to guard us from self-satisfied and self-destructive tendencies, to keep our pride down; the worst thing you can do is latch onto the exaggeration or one part of the feedback, ignoring the rest; Be quick to say "will you forgive me?" or "I forgive you")
5. *Consider the content* (what are they criticizing you for? It may not be 100% right but it's rarely 100% wrong. If there is a misunderstanding, explain briefly and humbly if you can, but if there is partial truth in the complaint, work on that part, and then you need to *move on*; don't let it fester!)
6. *Consider Scripture* (ex: Rom. 8:28-29 may help you trust God has a good purpose in this, Gen. 50:20, etc.)
7. *Consider Christ* (1 Pet 2:21-23; Heb. 12:2-3, etc.)
John Brown, *The Christian Pastor's Manual*, said if Christians criticize you and even say things falsely against you and you're angry, get down on your knees and thank God that they don't know the half of what sin is really in your heart (they just picked the wrong sins!). Beeke says "whatever drives you to the Lord is worth the price."
8. *Consider Biblical saints* (ex: Nehemiah, Joseph)
9. *Consider love* (pray with your critic, for your critic, for your heart to discern how to lovingly respond, put away whatever inhibits love [1 Pet. 2:1], put on loving actions]
10. *Consider long-term vision, especially eternity*

What if critical speech about others is shared with you?

1. Don't receive it if you can help it (Psalm 15:3, Prov. 17:4)
2. Avoid critics/gossips/slanderers when you can (Prov 20:19)
3. Confront critics/gossips/slanderers if you can of their biblical responsibility (Matt. 18:15, Lk 17:3-4, Gal. 6:1-2)

4. Don't pass on the negative info (Prov. 26:20, 11:13, 17:9)

What should we do when we have sinfully criticized a brother?

1. Confess your sins to those you've sinned against (Jas. 5:16)
2. Make right with those you wronged (Zaccheus principle)
3. Pray for a changed heart/speech (Mt 12:34-35, Ps 51:10,15)

We need to resist Satan (James 4:7b) but we need to resist self first and foremost. It is true that the end of James 3:6 says the fuel that sets on fire our tongues is set on fire by hell, but James 1:14 reminds us we can't blame the devil, because the flammable fuel is in us. It only takes a spark in our sinful critical hearts to reignite unresolved un-forgiven resentment, records of wrongs. James 4:1 reminds you the source of your conflict isn't really the occasion of conflict or the person you're in conflict with; it's inside of you.

We'll never get to the heart of dealing with the problem of sinful critical speech until we realize our problem is our critical heart, the desires in us that elevate themselves and us above others in pride and on our pedestal we speak down on others from. But those who lower themselves, humble themselves (v. 10 - to see their critical spirit behind their critical speech) can receive heart-changing grace

Sinclair Ferguson, in *The Power of Words*, applies this further:

Realize That the Depth of Your Sin, the Pollution of Your Heart, and Your Need of Saving Grace Are All Evidenced in Your Use of the Tongue

This is the method of grace from beginning to end. It is nowhere more starkly illustrated than in the experience of Isaiah. There is no more powerful passage in the Old Testament than Isaiah 6; but it is often read as if it were detached from Isaiah 1–5. By reading it in isolation we inevitably miss a very clear pattern into which it fits. Isaiah has been ripping up the consciences of his sinful contemporaries. He does so in a series of six woe pronouncements (Isa. 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22) ... But for the sensitive Bible reader the appearance of six woes creates an expectation that a climactic seventh woe is about to be pronounced. Against whom will Isaiah pronounce the ultimate woe? The answer follows in chapter six. The prophet meets with the exalted God whose majestic presence seems to flood the temple.

Isaiah sees creatures who are perfectly and perpetually holy cover their faces before the glory of the One who is eternally, infinitely, inherently, un-createdly holy. Everything around Isaiah seems to be disintegrating. Everything within him seems to come apart. He is "lost," or "ruined" (Isa. 6:5). The language expresses the stunned silence felt in the presence of major disaster or death. This is Isaiah's "twin towers" day, the 9/11 moment in his spiritual experience. From his assumed security he had pronounced six devastating maledictions. Now he realizes that the last and climactic woe must be pronounced against—himself! And why? "*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!*" (Isa. 6:5).

... I think I hear Isaiah say ... "I have felt the pollution on my tongue. The light has exposed the darkness in its every crevice. Alas for me, it is in the very instrument God has called me to use, in the very area of my life in which others call me 'gifted,' that sin has most deeply entangled itself. I am a wretched man! Woe, woe, woe is me!"

We foolishly assume that our real struggles with sin are in the areas where we are “weak.” We do not well understand the depth of sin until we realize that it has made its home far more subtly where we are “strong,” and in our gifts rather than in our weaknesses and inadequacies. It is in the very giftedness God has given that sin has been at its most perverse and subtle! But when we are brought to see this, stripped bare of our layers of self-deceit, and led to repentance, then God may make something of us ...

Recognize That You Are a New Creation in Christ [James 1:18]

... I may not yet be that mature man I want to be. But thank God that I am not the old man that I once was! What a great way to think about an ordinary Christian life! We live in a created order marred by sin. That sin has twisted and polluted our speech. But God has begun his work of new creation and has inaugurated aspects of it that will be consummated when Jesus Christ returns ... How important for us to recognize the power of new birth to create new affections, which in turn come to expression in the new speech patterns of the gospel!

Continue in the Word

As the heart hears with open ears the Word of God again and again, it is renewed and begins to produce a transformed tongue. The principle is this: what comes out of our mouths is more and more determined by what has come out of “the mouth of God.” The sanctification of the tongue is a work in us that is driven by the Word of God coming to us as we hear it and indwelling us as we receive it ... As words that have been formed in God’s mouth are digested as the bread of life by us, they begin to form our thinking, affections, and volitions in a wonderful way ... We need to see that we live by every word that comes out of God’s mouth. God’s Word sanctifies us. The more I awake in the morning and feed myself with the Scriptures and the more I am saturated with the Word under a biblical ministry, the more the word of Christ will do the sanctifying work in me and on me, and consequently the more Christ will train my tongue as his Word molds and shapes me ... [Christ] was willing to be “oppressed and afflicted.” As he experienced this in his trial and condemnation, “he opened not his mouth” (Isa. 53:7).

... He was silent because of every word that has proceeded from your lips; because of every word that provides adequate reason for God to damn you for all eternity, because you have cursed him or his image [Jas 3:9]. The Lord Jesus came into the world to bear the judgment of God against the sin of our tongues. When he stood before the high priest and the judgment seat of Pontius Pilate, he accepted a sentence of guilt. But that was my guilt. He bore in his body on the tree the sins of my lips and my tongue. Do you wish you could control your tongue better? Do you want to follow the example of Jesus? Then you need to understand that he is Savior first, and then he is Example. You need to come, conscious of the sin of your lips, and say:

God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

I thank you that Jesus came and was silent

in order that he might bear the penalty of all my misuse of my tongue.

All the guilt can be cleansed away! Christ can deliver you from the misuse of the tongue. And when you come to him conscious of that sin, you discover what a glorious Savior he is. Delivered, albeit not yet perfected and glorified, your tongue now shows forth his praises. Taken out of the pit and from the miry clay, on your lips is now a new song of praise to your God. Then people not only hear a different vocabulary, but they hear you speak with a different accent [when people hear Christians speak they should wonder where we’re from]. That is what leaves the lasting impression of the power of Christ and the transformation of grace in your life.⁷

¹ Steve Lawson, “It Will Cost You Everything,” www.resolved.org (video clip excerpt available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JQOBMi4QS8>)

² Roy Hession, *The Calvary Road*, p. 2-4.

³ Hiebert, 241.

⁴ Hughes, 194.

⁵ William Hendriksen, *James*, Baker NT Commentary, p. 144.

⁶ James Burdick, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12:196.

⁷ *The Power of Words*, edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor, Crossway Books, p. 61-65.