

## Don't Judge! James 4:11-12

This week we're doing something a little different here at church.

Instead of the one sermon I thought we might have two sermonettes,  
and instead of the one preacher I thought we might hear two voices.  
And so I'm taking the first two verses  
while Emily will lead us through verses 13-17 of James 4 later in the service.

And so *my theme* is one of the **most quoted** but **least understood** ideas in the NT.

How often have you observed an argument (or maybe even been in an argument),  
where the Bible is being discussed and the things of God are being debated  
and one person declares that behaviour 'x' is contrary to God's word,  
and then the other person says "Aha! but the Bible says you shouldn't judge!"

Have you heard the command to "judge not" used as a kind of trump card before?  
*"The Bible says you shouldn't judge! Therefore" the argument goes,  
"Christians have no business speaking openly about certain behavior,  
certainly they have no business saying anything  
that might make me feel guilty, or uncomfortable, or judged"*

Have you seen this ugly cycle of debate? It's tiring isn't it?  
It's ugly and tiring, and I would suggest, a little bit confusing  
because the Bible seems to give us conflicting messages.

On one hand we hear the prophetic voices of Scripture,  
including Jesus on occasion,  
calling out sin and pleading for people to repent and seek forgiveness.

But on the other hand Jesus does tell us, "Do not Judge".  
And it's not only Jesus who says this but James the brother of Jesus does too.

So what do we make of this apparent contradiction?  
What *does* the Bible mean when we are commanded not to judge?  
Well, let's consider what James says in these first two verses  
and let's see if we can reach some clarity on the issue.

James ch 4:11 Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks  
against a brother or sister *or judges them* speaks against the law and judges it. When you  
judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. <sup>12</sup> 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?*

James returns to a theme we've already explored in this series, the use of our speech.  
And the type of speech James has in mind is the use of *judgmental language*:  
when you declare that someone else is in the wrong,

when you announce that someone else has made a mistake,  
when you condemn someone for what they've done or who they are.

"I think our friend Sam the one to blame for this mess  
I suspect that Sharon hasn't thought through the consequences of her actions  
I don't like Sarah, I just get the sense she's untrustworthy!"

These statements are ones that we've all spoken from time to time,  
but James cautions us to think twice before blurting them out.

Why is James so concerned about this?

The key is found *in his references to the law that is given to us by God.*

Here's the key idea of vs 11 and 12 as I see it.

James paints a picture where our judgment of others  
might sit *in contrast* to what the law of God *actually* says:

*We might say that another person's actions aren't up to scratch,  
but God's law mightn't have anything to say about what they're doing.  
And so it's possible, that when we start passing judgment on someone else,  
what we're actually saying is that the law of God isn't good enough;  
that the standards we've come up with are far better than God's ideas  
and so—to use James' language in v 11— in passing judgment on someone else  
we are actually passing judgment on God's law.*

Do you see the issue that James is concerned about?

It's when we promote our own erroneous human judgment  
over God's perfect judgment.

Now unfortunately, if you've been in church long enough

you would have heard some examples of what we're talking about.

I haven't heard any of these recently but these have all been said at one point.

"Drums have no place in church, I don't know why the pastor allows them"

"I was served communion by a woman wearing strappy sandals.

Has she no respect for the holy sacrament of Christ?"

"Why don't ministers wear clerical collars anymore?"

They must be ashamed of their savior"

What's the problem with these statements?

None of them can be supported by the word of God,  
and they elevate human preferences  
above those things that God actually cares about.

We believe God's word is our standard don't we?

We believe that God is the judge, and God alone,  
and so let's be a little more worried about what he has to say,  
and a little less worried about what others are doing,

lest we actually make a mockery of his law.

Now, just quickly, confusing human preferences with God's word isn't the only way to make an error of judgment.

We can also misjudge by assuming we know all the facts!

Just as God is the only lawgiver, so too is he the only 'all-seeing-eye'

This is where I often come undone; I confess my own judgmentalism here; I sometimes make assumptions about people's motives for doing something, when I simply haven't seen the big picture.

I got caught out just the other week.

Speaking of clerical collars, recently I saw a fellow minister walking down the street with his black cassock and white clerical collar. And I watched him pull out his keys and hop into a very, very, very expensive car. And not only that, he was parked in a handicapped spot! I thought "This is outrageous! That car is not appropriate for a minister! And he has no trouble walking whatsoever! How dare he bring my profession into disrepute!" And I pointed him out to Jas and we took a photo, which is what you do to record the wrongdoing! And as he reversed out in the car I noticed the little old immobile lady sitting in the passenger seat, whom, I now assume, was the owner of the car and whose priest had graciously driven her to the shops.

I couldn't see the full picture, could I?

But that didn't stop me from forming my own wicked judgment.

It's easy to do isn't it?

And it happens when we forget that God is the lawgiver,  
and that it's God and not us who's the one that sees everything.

So back to the type of scenario I mentioned at the beginning.

You're in conversation with someone

and the topic turns to a certain type of sin,

and whatever you say is shut down with an abrupt "Don't judge!"

Are you judging by making reference to an unpopular Biblical truth?

I don't think so, because for James, judgmentalism happens

when you take your eyes off the Bible, not when you draw people back to it.

There is a difference between *bearing witness* and what the NT calls *judging*.

In fact, James will end his letter with an encouragement for us

to turn sinners from the error of their ways—Can't do that without mentioning sin.

What Christians *can* be guilty of

is bearing witness in a cavalier or insensitive manner,

and unfortunately there's plenty of that which happens

*But* we needn't be ashamed of what is true,

we just need to be prepared to handle it carefully,

which means remembering that truth doesn't lie with us but with God.