

SERIES: Walk the Talk

SERMON: **When Christians Play God**

SCRIPTURE: James 4:11-17

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It's great to have our families all together in one service today. I applaud the decision to give our children's workers, youth leaders, and adult ABF teachers a break for the month before school starts. But even more importantly, I think it's wonderful to have our families worshiping together. We have a tendency to split families up when we come to church, and there are some good educational benefits to that. But it's also great for children to sit with their parents in worship.

Children, you've been studying James along with us. This morning we're just continuing where you left off. Last week Pastor Dan taught us that the way to prevent quarrels and fights in the church is to prayerfully and humbly submit our frustrated desires to God. It really makes sense, you know. If God is who He claims to be—a sovereign, good, all-knowing, and completely faithful God—then we don't have to take things into our own hands and solve every problem we face.

This has been a hard lesson for me to learn at times, because I have fairly strong opinions about justice and fairness. My tendency when I see something that isn't right is to try to correct it, and to do it now. But the older I get and the more I grow in the knowledge of how God works, the more I become convinced that God hasn't called me to eliminate all injustice from the world or even from the church. He has called me to be personally obedient to Him, to change what I can, to accept what I can't, and to pray about it all.

In our Scripture passage today from the book of James, the Apostle hints that if we fail to humbly submit our frustrated desires to God, we may actually become guilty of assuming God's place, i.e. of playing God, in other people's lives as well as in our own. And believe me, not one of us is up the task of filling God's role.

Let's deal with the first of these common tendencies as we read James 4:11-12:

We play God with other people's lives when we judge them. (11-12)

"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?"

When I first read this passage the immediate question that came to my mind was "What does James mean by judging?" He uses some form of the word six times in these two verses, and he makes it clear that we are to avoid doing it. Our current culture, of course, loves verses like these because tolerance is just about the only absolute virtue today. The only words of Jesus some people seem to know is "Judge not lest you be judged."

Yet there are many passages in the Bible that encourage us to make careful judgments. If someone is teaching false doctrine or living in open sin the church is *supposed* to judge and even to take disciplinary action. What then is being criticized here in James 4? A strong hint is given when James uses a synonym which is translated two different ways in verse 11 in the NIV—as “slander” and “speaking against.” The Greek word is defined as “mindless, thoughtless, careless, critical, derogatory, untrue speech directed against others.”ⁱ This causes me to conclude that by use of the term “judging” James is not forbidding discernment or careful evaluation of someone’s beliefs or behavior so much as character assassination. We are not to condemn one another—no matter what the other person’s perceived shortcomings may be.

I believe it would be helpful for us to draw some careful distinctions between the positive concept of discernment and the negative concept of judgment. As we look at various Scripture verses, one translation may read “discern” and another “judge,” and still another “understand” in the same verse. But the context will generally make it clear whether discernment is intended or judgment.

But first let’s define our terms. By discernment I mean the wisdom to make careful distinctions between truth and error, right and wrong, genuine and phony. By judgment I mean condemnation of another person’s character or actions without both the facts and the authority to do so. With that as our starting point, allow me to point out some of the biblical distinctions between discernment and judgment, which in turn will help us understand why James so strongly warns against judging one another.

1. Discernment is praised; judgment is forbidden. There are a number of places in the Bible where discernment is praised, particularly in the book of Proverbs. For example, in 2:3 we read these words: “If you cry for discernment, lifting your voice for understanding; If you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the Lord.” Discernment is so to be desired that we are urged to go on a treasure hunt for it.

Judgment, on the other hand, is roundly condemned and strictly forbidden. Matthew 7:1 is one of the clearest places, where Jesus says, “Do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” James, too, clearly forbids judgment.

2. Discernment is a gift and a skill; judgment doesn’t take any brains or practice. Discernment is sometimes a gift and sometimes learned. When Solomon was told by God that he could have anything he wanted, he asked for the gift of wisdom and discernment. And here’s how God responded in 1 Kings 3:11:

“Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself long life, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself discernment to understand justice, behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart.”

Yet there are also passages where discernment seems to be learned. For example, in Heb. 5:14 it

says, "Solid food (he's talking about spiritual steak and potatoes as opposed to spiritual milk) is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses *trained* to discern good and evil." We are born with the knowledge that some things are right and some are wrong, but God has also given to parents and Sunday School teachers and AWANA leaders the responsibility to train their students to distinguish more carefully between right and wrong.

This dual nature of discernment should not surprise us because most spiritual gifts have a skill dimension. Josh Black clearly has the gift of teaching, but nevertheless he has chosen to go back to school to become more skillful in his teaching and preaching.

Judgment, on the other hand, doesn't take any brains or practice; anyone can do it. It is neither a gift God has given to us nor a skill He wants us to develop. In a powerful passage in Romans 14 Paul asks, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant (implying that your fellow-Christian is *God's* servant, not *yours*)? To his own master he stands or falls." And with that James agrees entirely: "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge (and it's not YOU! Rather it's . . .), the one who is able to save and destroy." Since we have the power neither to acquit nor condemn anyone, we should quit playing God in other people's lives.

3. Discernment is based on facts and Scripture; judgment is based on feelings and opinions. The discerning person does not have to have an advanced education or a high degree of intuition or unusual perception concerning human nature. But he must be one who is saturated with God's Word and obediently applies its principles to everyday life. Proverbs 28:7 says: "He who keeps the law is a discerning son." He also pays close attention to the facts of a situation. Proverbs 15:14 reads, "The discerning heart seeks knowledge, but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly." I think that means the discerning individual eagerly seeks biblical knowledge, as well as the facts of a case, before coming to a conclusion.

The judgmental person, on the other hand, "feeds on folly." That is, he scavenges for rumors and passes them on. His standard for judgment becomes his feelings and opinions rather than what the Lord says. In fact, James says, he actually sits as a judge on the Scripture. Since the Bible tells him not to judge, when he does so he is demonstrating that he doesn't believe or accept the Bible; he acts like he is above it.

4. Discernment edifies and encourages; judgment defeats and destroys. Proverbs 3:21-26 indicates the positive results when discernment is practiced:

"My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment; do not let them out of your sight; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble; when you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared."

The point here is that the discerning person is himself edified and encouraged. But so are those with whom he exercises discernment. Perhaps you remember the story when David got angry

with a nasty rogue named Nabal and decided to kill him. Nabal's wife Abigail made a passionate plea for her husband's life. Then David said to her (1 Sam. 25:33): "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment ("discernment" in NASB) and for keeping me from bloodshed this day."

Judgment, on the other hand, defeats and destroys. Paul warns against "destroying" the brother for whom Christ died through an inappropriate use of Christian liberty. James warns of destroying a brother through destructive speech. The fact is that most of us are umpires at heart; we like to call balls and strikes on other people. Some feel really important when they can verbally punch somebody out. But we need to think about how much hurt our words can bring into someone else's life.

I read a book two weeks ago that Judy Hollander loaned me. It is called, *Too Small to Ignore*, and it's a book about the value of ministry to children. In this book the Author, who is the head of Compassion International, shares a story from his own childhood when a teacher in a boarding school for missionary children judged him in a very painful way for not enunciating his words better. He was six years old.

I clearly remember hearing one of the first really big words I couldn't understand. It happened one morning when Miss Long must have reached her limit with my manner of both speaking and writing. I was in the dreaded situation of being singled out in front of the class to face her. I was trying to express myself when she grabbed the front of my shirt, picked me up off the ground, and screamed into my face, "Enunciate, you little idiot!"

I can still hear the screeching of her voice and feel her breath on my face and the stranglehold on my neck. My classmates sat petrified. She finally dropped me to the floor again. I stumbled back to my seat, choking back the tears, sat down, and wet my pants... I was a little animal, frightened and wanting only to survive.

I hope none of you children has felt judged like that, and I hope even more that none of us parents or teachers has judged our children like that. Children, of course, can also judge one another cruelly. Rarely does that happen when there are just two children; they seem to have a wonderful way of overlooking differences and relating to one another. However, sometimes in a group one child will judge another child and everyone will pile on. God wants us to defend the one who is being judged, not to join in on the judging.

Let's go back now and read James 4:11-12 again—this time from *The Message*—and see if what he is saying isn't clearer:

Don't bad-mouth each other, friends. It's God's Word, his Message, his Royal Rule, that takes a beating in that kind of talk. You're supposed to be honoring the Message, not writing graffiti all over it. God is in charge of deciding human destiny. Who do you think you are to meddle in the destiny of others?

But there is another way we tend to play God, besides sitting in judgment on others.

We play God with our *own* lives when we leave Him out of our plans. (13-16)

James 4:13-16:

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.

When James denounces those who develop detailed schedules for their lives, he is not suggesting that planning is ungodly. What he is condemning is the arrogant attitude that presumes upon the future and leaves God out of the plans. Again I think it is important that we define terms, for neither of these words, “planning” or “presumption”, is found in this passage, but the concepts are there.

I would offer these simple definitions. A *plan* is a flexible, detailed design for action based on careful consideration of all the facts. *Presumption*, on the other hand, is a superficial design for action built on partial knowledge, inadequate objectives, and questionable motives. James denounces presumption in no uncertain terms. Here are some biblical distinctions I see between these two concepts.

1. Planning recognizes the uncertainties in life; presumption ignores them. James chides the person who lays out his plans for doing business and making money without any consideration of the possibility that circumstances may change. The wise planner thinks carefully about what will happen if the breadwinner in the family suddenly dies, leaving the spouse and three or four kids. He has a will, a contingency fund, and both life insurance and disability insurance. Life is uncertain, and it is right and proper to plan for that uncertainty.

I use the term “plan” here advisedly. I am not suggesting that we should worry or fret about the uncertainties of life. Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount,

"Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" Then He added, "See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" (Matthew 6:26-30).

But after both of these sayings He made perfectly clear what His point was: “So do not worry.” He doesn't say or imply, “So do not *plan*.”

The presumptuous person, however, ignores the uncertainties of life, so James chides him: “Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow.” This statement is based on Proverbs 27:1: "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth." You're making decisions, says James, as to where you're going and what you're going to do, but you haven't stopped to think about what you'll do if war breaks out or sickness develops or you get

laid off. How foolish!

2. Planning recognizes the brevity of life; presumption ignores it. The godly planner never considers himself indispensable to his plans. Whether he is building a business or a church or a home, he is, in a sense, trying to work himself out of a job. That is, he is training someone—whether it be a business partner, an associate pastor, or his children—to take his place should God say, “Tonight your soul is required of you.”

But James challenges the presumptuous man for not thinking about the brevity of life: “What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” Don't presume just because you have something on your schedule that you're going to be around to do it. And don't presume that your loved ones are going to be around indefinitely. I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say at a funeral, “I was thinking about calling or visiting, but I got too busy and I didn't do it; now I feel terrible.”

3. Planning considers the will of God; presumption ignores it. Proverbs 3:5-6 is very well known but not so well practiced: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” Proverbs 16:3 adds, “Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed.” The point of that verse is not, of course, that you can devise something wicked and just so long as you commit it to the Lord it will succeed. The implication is clearly that you have sought the Lord's will, you believe your plan to be in accord with it, and then you commit the action to Him.

But the presumptuous person ignores God's will. Look at verse 15: “Instead (i.e. instead of making your own plans independently of God) you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'" Now I personally don't think James is suggesting that we repeat that phrase every time we decide to do something. “Honey, I'm going to the grocery store and I'll be back in 45 minutes, if the Lord wills.” I've known a few people who talked like that constantly, and it gets really obnoxious. I think the point is that we ought to say that in our hearts always, and perhaps often enough with our mouths to remind ourselves and those around us that our plans are constantly subject to the will of the Commander-in-Chief.

I wonder how often we really do take the Lord's will into consideration. Kent Hughes writes,

*So pervasive is our culture's arrogant independence of God that even many (most?) Christians attend church, marry, choose their vocations, have children, buy and sell homes, expand their portfolios, and numbly ride the currents of culture without substantial reference to the will of God. More Christians never seriously pray about God's will regarding their vocation, family direction, or entertainments than actually seek God's will. They change Augustine's “love God and do as you please” to “Do as you please and say that you love God.”*ⁱⁱ

The early Methodists had a tradition of signing their letters with their names and then the initials, D.V., which is Latin for *Deo Volente*, if God wills. I like that.

4. Planning is rational and humble; presumption is irrational and boastful. The very heart of planning is reason. We think through the facts, we consider the people that will be affected, and we prepare for contingencies. But a godly planner will also be humble. That is, he will recognize that he is not omniscient and so he will seek the counsel of others. Proverbs 15:22 says, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." He will also recognize that even with the counsel of others a plan will only succeed if God wills it. In Proverbs 16:9 it says, "In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps."

The presumptuous person, however, is irrational and boastful. His goal is to make money, as indicated in verse 13, and by its very nature that is an irrational life-goal, for as Jesus made clear, "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Not only are his goals and priorities irrational; he is also a braggart. Here's James' indictment: "As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil." I can't help but think about Donald Trump when I read something like this—conceit coming out of his pores, putting his name on everything from yachts to skyscrapers to airliners, acting like God on his TV program. It's all built on an irrational greed and lust for power, on pride and boastfulness. But he's not alone. Maybe we need to ask, "Could it be that I am building my own little empire, certainly much smaller and less noticeable than Trump's, but am doing it the same way?"

Friends, instead of playing God in other people's lives, and instead of playing God in our own lives, ...

We need to let God be God. (17)

On the surface that almost sounds silly. He will be God, of course, whether we let Him or not. But I'm talking about our perspective. For our own benefit, we need to acknowledge Him as God. This involves two things:

We must learn from Him the right thing to do. The last verse of our chapter reads, "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." That sounds like a universal principle that fits everyone and every situation. And it is. But in the context of this particular passage I would suggest to you that James is going back to the point of verse 10: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up." If you know you should be humble, if you know you should quit playing God with other people's lives, if you know you should quit playing God with your own, and yet you don't do it, you sin. But even more importantly, ...

We must start doing the right thing. We must actually surrender our desires and our frustrations, our judgments and our presumptions to Him. He's quite capable of defending our rights and meeting our needs, and He's quite worthy of our trust.

A little boy walked down the beach, and as he did, he spied a rather matronly looking lady sitting under a beach umbrella on the sand. He walked up to her and asked, "Are you a Christian?" "Yes," she replied. "Do you read your Bible every day?" She nodded her head, "Yes." "Do you pray often?" Again she answered, "Yes, everyday."

With that came his final question, "Will you hold my dollar while I go swimming?"

Everyone is looking for someone to trust. I want to assure you today that your heavenly Father's credentials for trustworthiness are even better than that lady's. Let Him be God; let Him be your God.

i. John MacArthur, *James*, 221.

ii. R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, 202-3.