

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?

Now James adds additional insights as to why the sin of slander is so very egregious. The one who slanders or gossips within the local assembly of believers is one and the same with “spreading strife among brothers,” which is the very sin which concludes the list of things God hates:

There are six things which the LORD hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood; a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers. (Prov 6:16–19)

Note also Psalm 101:5 where similar expressions are used.

Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, him I will destroy;
No one who has a haughty look and an arrogant heart will I
endure. (Ps 101:5)

The poetic parallelism in this wisdom-saying of Solomon in Prov 6:16–19 is obvious:

- a. Haughty eyes
 - b. a lying tongue
 - c. hands that shed innocent blood

- a¹. a heart that devises wicked plans
 - b¹. feet that run rapidly to evil
 - c¹. one who spreads strife among the brothers.

The selfish person is characterized as being self-centered and thus having “haughty eyes” (עֵינַיִם רְמוֹת, *einaim ramot*), that is, one who is constantly “raising eyebrows” in the sense of looking down upon others. This is paralleled with “feet that run rapidly to evil.” The person who is self-centered is quick to put himself before others and thus to seek to put himself in a position of superiority by finding ways to make others appear as beneath him.

A “lying tongue” is the manner in which the self-centered person seeks to present himself as superior by spreading lies about those he wants to surpass. His “feet run rapidly to evil,” i.e., he is quick to tell

lies about others. These outright lies are the pathway to slander.

Finally, “hands that shed innocent blood” uses the metaphor of “murder,” not in pertaining only to physical murder but also to describe “character assassination.” Thus in the parallelism of the Hebrew poetic lines this is coupled with “one who spreads strife among the brothers.” To degrade another person by slander and gossip may well create a situation of hatred that cannot be controlled or stopped. Even physically murdering a person always begins with the seed of hatred which can be encouraged and enlarged through listening to slander.

James’ point in our verse is that to act as the ultimate judge of one’s neighbor is, in a practical sense, to attempt to usurp the very seat of judgment which belongs only to God. That is, the ultimate application of God’s law is in the hands of the Law giver Himself. To condemn one’s neighbor by declaring him “guilty” through degrading his character by slander, is to act as though one comprises both “the judge and the jury.” One cannot act as the one appointed to enact the penalty of the law by transgressing the very law they pretend to uphold.

God who is the Lord of the law and the Lord of all the world
is, as the conclusion of the verse shows, contrasted with the
person who outrageously violates the authority of the law.¹

The Greek of the opening phrase of our verse, “There is *only* one Lawgiver and Judge” (εἷς ἐστὶν ὁ νομοθέτης καὶ κριτῆς) has the definite article attached to “Lawgiver,” (“one is the Lawgiver and Judge”).² As such, this forms a recognized rule of Koine Greek which emphasizes that the “Lawgiver and “Judge” apply to the same person, in this case, God Himself.³ If, however, the definite article is not original but added later, the emphasis would be on the fact that the word “one” (εἷς, *heis*) is put first in the clause and thus emphasizing the uniqueness of one being both Lawgiver and Judge. Thus the NASB, “only one Lawgiver and Judge.”

Interestingly, the Greek noun “νομοθέτης” (*nomothetēs*), “Lawgiver,” is found only here in the Apostolic Scriptures and only once in the LXX (Ps 9:21) where the Hebrew “Put them in fear, O LORD” is rendered by

1 Martin Dibelius, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* in *Hermeneia NT* (Fortress Press, 1975), Vol. 20, p. 229.

2 There is a textual variant here, in which some manuscripts do not contain the definite article “the.” The manuscript evidence seems to be evenly balanced between whether the definite article here is original or not.

3 This is referred to as the Grandville Sharp construction.

the LXX as “Appoint, O LORD, a lawgiver over them.”

...*the One who is able to save and to destroy* – Here James is referring to the ultimate judgment of God, that which determines the eternal destiny of an individual. Thus, for a person to judge another person as beyond the ability of God to redeem by slandering their character as unworthy of God’s love, is to diminish not only the sovereignty which God alone possesses, but also to diminish the infinite nature of His saving love in Yeshua. It is, then, to put one’s self in the place of authority which God alone possesses.

How could any human creature then exercise such judgment? God’s judgment is not moral judgment of the conscience but the final judgment of the obedient and disobedient, the merciful and the unmerciful. Like the act of creation by the one God, only God can make a judgment by which He eternally saves or destroys the human creature.¹

...*but who are you who judge your neighbor?* – Thus, James calls upon his readers and us to do a proper self-evaluation. The order of the Greek in this phrase is interesting: σὺ δὲ τίς εἶ ὁ κρίνων τὸν πλησίον, literally: “You, and who are *you* who is judging the neighbor.” That the pronoun “you” (σὺ, *su*) is put first in the clause to invite an answer. We could understand it as akin to our modern phrase: “Who do you think you are?!” James’ answer is clear: to treat one’s neighbor as though he or she is unworthy of your love is to put oneself in the position as Judge, a position which is rightfully God’s and God’s alone.

That is, what a distance there is between you and God! What a sorry judge you are compared with him! ... It is good to shame pride with the consideration of God’s glory and our own baseness. He is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you... ?²

1 Richardson, *James in The New American Commentary*, p. 197.

2 Thomas Manton, *Epistle of James in The Complete Works of Thomas Manton* (Maranatha Pub., n.d.), vol. 4, p. 386.

13–14 Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.

It seems clear that James’ focus is now particularly upon those among the believing community who are more wealthy than the average person. They seem to be the well-to-do merchants who have professed faith in Yeshua and who are part of the believing community.

Though continuing a similar theme in 5:1–6 by directing his words to the wealthy, in this later context it seems quite certain that he has unbelievers in view, for he pronounces a verdict of condemnation upon “the rich.” It may well be that he addresses in this latter context those who have employed members of the believing community but have not dealt faithfully with them. They are gaining their wealth by defrauding their workers.

In our current verses, however, he urges those who are merchants and thus generally more wealthy than others, to acknowledge the Lord’s sovereignty in their lives, recognizing that it is by God’s providence that their plans would come to fruition. Further, in the following verses of our context James makes it clear that those merchants he is here addressing know what is right and pleasing to God and how they therefore are to submit to the will of God in all of life, including how they conduct their business.

The opening “Come now” (*Ἄγε νῦν*, *age nun*) is bold and confrontational, similar to our modern phrase “come on now!” He is requiring his readers to ask deep, heartfelt questions about how they view life and how they live it in light of the fact that a person who has professed belief in Yeshua as the promised Messiah and Savior ought always to view their life and work as entirely dependent upon God. It is God Who supplies the means to engage in one’s daily work, for He is the very source of one’s whole physical being and life. This He has made known in His word, clearly revealing His utter sovereignty and providence over all the affairs of mankind.

... “*Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.*” – James begins with “tomorrow” and extends the immediate to the distant future of “a year.” In this he emphasizes that even the immediate as well as the extended future must be viewed by the believer as fully controlled and given by God. James is not in any way discouraging or speaking against making

plans, something every person engaged in any enterprise must do if he or she is to be successful in their given business. But what is the point James is emphasizing? It is what he has already taught us in the opening chapter of this epistle:

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. (James 1:17)

And this includes those “common” things we might take for granted, like our ability to breath, to see, to hear, and to maintain our lives. What James is teaching us here is quite clear: to live our lives as though our every breath is not a gift from God is to live in the realm of arrogance and pride rather than in humble humility, acknowledging that all the good that is in our lives is given to us by God’s grace and love.

Paul stated this as he confronted the philosophers on the Areopagus and pointed them to recognize the God of Israel as the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of mankind:

...and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist.... (Acts 17:26–28)

And Yeshua affirms the same truth about Himself as He taught His disciples:

I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. (Jn 15:5)

The point James is making is quite clear: as we make plans for the future, whether for the near or distant future, we must always have in our perspective that we are not ultimately in control of our future but God is. We cannot and must not presume upon the future, but we must consistently submit our lives to our loving God and Savior, Who has the whole world and all who live in it in His hand.

...*Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.* – God alone can see the future. Surely we can consider the common “cause and effect” in our world, but even in this we must admit that only God sees

and knows the future, for He is ordering all things together in His divine plan to bring about His ultimate purposes.

...*You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.* – Some may consider the words of James here to be “morbid” or “pessimistic.” But they are neither, for James, being carried along by the Spirit as he wrote these inspired words, intends to “wake us up” from the anesthesia of our sinful flesh and recognize that our lives, the very breath we breathe, is a gift from God and that when we consider our lives against the scope of eternity, we are, as he says, “just a vapor” that vanishes.¹

The biblical worldview is that “we receive another day neither by natural necessity, nor by mechanical law, nor by right, nor by courtesy of nature, but only by the covenanted mercies of God.”²

15 – Instead, *you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.”*

In v. 13, if one were to read the Greek literally, the verbs would be: “we will go,” “we will stay a year,” “we will engage in business,” and “we will make a profit.” Everything is “we will, we will, we will, we will.” This graphically emphasizes the arrogance of the fleshly mind that considers oneself to be in control of one’s future. James makes it clear that this ought not to be the mindset of the child of God, for the one whose life has been redeemed by God’s grace and who is in the process of becoming more and more like Yeshua, must constantly have the perspective of the truth that God is both the giver and sustainer of life, and that only by His grace and His sovereign will are we enabled to be living witnesses of His love and greatness. Indeed, the growing desire of the maturing child of God is to know and live out the truth that all of life is a gift from God to be lived out for His glory. An old hymn says this well:

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- 1 Cp. Ps. 39:6, 11; 102:3; Hos. 13:3. Note also the word “vapor” (*ἀτμίς, atmis*) can have the sense of “smoke,” blown quickly away by the wind. It is found only one other time in the Apostolic Scriptures, Acts 2:19 (quoting Joel 2:30 [3:3 in the Hebrew and Lxx]).
 - 2 Stulac, *James in the IVP Commentary*, p. 160, quoting Motyer, *The Bible Speaks Today*, (IVP, 1985), p. 162.

My times are in thy hand; my God, I wish them there;
My life, my friends, my soul, I leave entirely to thy care.

My times are in thy hand, whatever they may be;
Pleasing or painful, dark or bright, as best may seem to thee.
My times are in thy hand; why should I doubt or fear?
My Father's hand will never cause his child a needless tear.

My times are in thy hand, Jesus the Crucified;
Those hands my cruel sins had pierced are now my guard
and guide.¹

Only as the believer grows in faith is he or she more and more able to commit every aspect of life into the hands of the Lord, that is, to constantly know and be settled in the all encompassing and glorious truth that God “causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” (Rom 8:28)

16–17 But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

Here James reminds us of the stern warning he gave in v. 6 of our chapter when he quoted Prov. 3:34, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” In our current text he addresses the wealthy merchants who, though apparently confessing faith in Yeshua, were still acting with pride over their business accomplishments. They apparently saw their wealth as that which they rightfully earned through their own strength and business intellect.

James has already taught us that there is a place for “boasting” in the life of the believer, but this is to boast about the goodness of God and to give Him the glory for the unspeakable gift of salvation, for as we submit our lives to the Lord, even when in humble circumstances, we affirm that we are seated with Yeshua in the heavenlies.

But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; (James 1:9)

Here, in 1:9, the Greek word *καυχάομαι* (*kauchaomai*), translated “to glory,” is the same word found in our current verse, translated by the English

1 Hymn by W. F. Lloyd. Source: *Trinity Hymnal*, #684.

“boast.” Thus, to “glory in his high position” (1:9) is to “boast about the goodness of God.”

However, once again James makes it very clear that to boast in one’s own achievements is to be arrogant and that such self-centeredness is evil, for it accredits to oneself what rightfully belongs to God.

... *Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.* – Here James is not warning us about the sin of commission, i.e., when we willfully do that which is sin, but he warns us about the sin of omission, that is, when we fail to do what is right and particularly when we fail to give God the glory in all aspects of our lives. It is in the “not doing it” that constitutes sin, and what is it that, in this context, is the sin of omission? It is failing to give God the glory for all things, and to live in such a way that even when we encounter difficulties, we are able to trust and rely upon God knowing that whatever comes into our lives is meant for our good and His glory, and thus glorifying Him by trusting Him and His promises.

In summarizing James 4:13–16, Kistemaker writes:

The proverbial saying conveys a stern warning against the sin of neglect. Not the sin of commission but the sin of omission is mentioned. That particular sin raises its ugly head when man ignores God, makes plans, is successful, and brags about his achievements.¹

1 Simon Kistemaker, *James & I–III John* (Baker, 1986), p. 150.