

## The Serious Sin of Slander

James 4:11-12

January 5, 2025

Please turn in your Bibles, if you're not there already, to James 4. Today we come into a section of Scripture that I do pray God would use to preserve our church and to strengthen our church, that each of us today might have our eyes opened and hearts softened to the severity of one of the most common and accepted sins within Christian culture.

This is the dangerous sin of slander, to speak against someone, to make an accusation of sin or wrongdoing about someone with incomplete information, almost always without the other's knowledge, in order to bring the person down a bit in the eyes of others. That's kind of what slander is, a working definition of it.

And I just, I feel like I need to address what's most likely going to be the elephant in the room for many of us right away. It is the sin of slander that Satan has used to great success to bring a fair amount of pain and hurt and division into our church over the last year and a half or so.

And again, don't get me wrong, I don't want to dwell on that. We have been overjoyed in recent weeks and months to see how God has used that which Satan intended to destroy our church to bring about a greater joy, a greater unity in so many, to expose and fortify places of weakness and to bolster the confidence of so many of you that I have talked to, so many of you in our church, to draw you even closer into the church than you were before. Our God has been so good over these last few years, and that becomes clearer with every passing week.

And so it's my hope that this would continue to be the case through the exposition of this text this morning. This is just the next passage as I go through James and James 4.

But the reason I wanted to make sure to bring up the painful recent past that many of you are familiar with, and if you're not, I'm sure you can think of times of slander in your life where you have been hurt, I wanted to bring up this painful recent past in the outset because, first, I think it's going to be impossible for many of us not to think of it as we look at this text and to be tempted to start applying it to past situations or other people who might not even be here right now.

And I just want to take a moment to make sure we understand that this text, this sermon, is for us today who are here right now, in our situation right now, to draw implications and applications for ourselves right now.

And second, it is my hope that in God's kind providence in coming to this specific text this morning, with that kind of as a backdrop, that the hurt that I know a lot of you, and I've even talked to this this week, that still feel from some of the hurtful words, the disdainful countenance, the cold shoulders you've received in recent months from those whom you have loved and prayed for so much, that those things would add a greater

weight to the importance of this passage today, that God would use the fresh wounds that I know many of you are still nursing to make you more sensitive and more aware of the danger of this sin, a serious sin that again is so often neglected and dismissed because it just seems so common, and it doesn't rise to the level of those, you know, those bigger sins, and because of what you have seen and experienced that it will no longer be common and small to you.

So because of the hurt, the confusion we've experienced, because of the slander that you've seen and experienced, I pray that when someone points to its possible presence in your own speech, or when you see it or hear it around you, that you would now treat it with all of the seriousness of someone who discovers a rattlesnake in a baby's crib.

So with that in mind, let's read these two verses in James 4, James 4:11-12. "Do not slander one another, brothers. He who slanders a brother or judges his brother, slanders the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you're not a doer of the law, but a judge of it. There is only one law-giver and

judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?"

What we should notice immediately in this text is that there is really only one command. There is really just this one imperative: "Do not slander one another." That's the command: "Do not slander." That's the command. That's the point of the text. That is the application from today's sermon. I'm giving it to you here six minutes in. That's the application.

It's not difficult to understand what it is. There really isn't a lot of mystery to what you're supposed to do with this passage, what you're supposed to do with this sermon. You shouldn't go out of here today wondering what God wants you to do based on today's sermon. Obey the command. That's what you're to do. It's a clear, it's an unmistakable application.

And everything following the command and some of what comes before is just there to help us to understand the logic of the command and the importance of the command. But even though God didn't need to say anything else about the command, he does. A

command by itself is enough. It should be enough for us to know what we're supposed to do. But once again, we see the kindness of God toward us, toward our weakness, and that God gives the command, but he also desires for us to see this as he sees it, to understand why it is slander is so wicked.

So that's what we're going to focus on in the outline this morning. We will see four evil realities that are present whenever slander occurs. God has shown us these points. He's revealed them to us, and everything that follows the command in verses 11 and 12, he's shown them to us in order to snap us out of the complacency that we might have been tempted to have towards this devastating sin.

So every time you slander someone and every time you hear slander taking place, make no mistake that these four evil realities are present in the situation whether you sense them to be or not. Whenever slander takes place, number one, the gravity of sin is diminished; number two, the law of God is disregarded; number three, the character of God is disparaged; and number four, the Gospel is distorted.

Those are going to be our outline points today, and they come from the words surrounding the command itself. And I realize that I probably messed up a bunch of you note-takers right now.

But before we really get into the outline, I want to spend some time talking about and thinking through the beginning of our command, which is the beginning of our text, which is the command itself: "Do not slander one another." "Do not slander one another."

The word translated is "slander," here, and in most translations it's translated as "slander," is *katalaleo*, *katalaleo*. It's used actually three times in this verse. It has a literal meaning of "speaking evil against," as seen in some translations just to translate it that way, speaking evil against another.

And it can be used more broadly of sinful speech. But it is usually seen as different than sins like gossip, even though the two generally do go together. But actually, in a couple of vice lists in the New Testament, we see both terms side by side, indicating that they are different but that they belong together.

Romans 1:28-32, Paul says, "And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them over to an unfit mind to do those things which are not proper, having been filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil, full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice.

"They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, violent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful. And although they know the righteous requirements of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same but also give hearty approval to those who practice them."



So in that vice list, one of the more famous vice lists in the New Testament, you see the two words used here. They're separate words, but they're together indicating that there is a difference, but there is some relation there. But also notice, just quickly, just notice that this is in the list of sins that mark those who have been given over to judgment by God. They are marked by slander.

Also, 2 Corinthians 12:20, Paul is listing the things he's concerned he's going to see when he comes to the Corinthian church. He lists the two words next to each other, but separately again. "For I am afraid that perhaps when I come, I may find you to be not what I wish, and may be found by you to be not what you wish, that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances."

So again, we see them both together. Gossip is to spread news or stories which might even be true to people and in places where it has no business going. If you are sharing about someone's sin or issues with someone else, and they are not part

of the problem or the solution, then you are gossiping. And we're not talking directly about that today, but feel free to bring in the same conviction into your life if you are gossiping.

Slander is to spread false or partial truth with no godly intention, with no God-honoring desire to help the person whom you are speaking about or against, and no real concern to make sure you have the facts straight.

It's usually done when the person's not around because if they were, then they might contradict what's being said or add information that you really don't want or feel the need to obtain. It usually assumes and assigns motives that can only be known by God.

Slander is also always an accusation of wrongdoing or sin in some sort of way. It has the intent of, of negatively shading the way that someone is seen, to do some sort of damage to their reputation in some way in the eyes of the person who is hearing. So it's not slander to say, "I heard from, you know, I heard

from Jim that Chuck's a great guy." That's not slander. Slander has the intent of doing some sort of damage. It's negative, the reputation.

It's important to note that there are some situations where you might share an accusation you heard about someone with someone else for the sake of helping that person. So maybe going to a parent because you heard something about their child that they might want to investigate, or possibly going to an elder or someone else who is in a good position to help that person.

But the intention, what is important to see, the intention, there, is to help. There is a motivation of love, a desire to actually shine the light of truth onto the situation, to bring about clarity, to bring about righteousness. The intention is not to bring about, as it is with slander, doubt, distrust or disdain.

But if there is no intention to help the person and to help the situation, no intention to bring about righteousness, even if there is no perceived evil intention in yourself, then

anytime you spread accusations, complaints, poor reports, and you do that without certainty, without all the information, anything that has the potential to damage the reputation of the person being talked about, whenever you do this, you are committing the dangerous sin of slander, and we must be on guard against it.

It's so common that many times those who are slandering, like it's so common that they don't even see the issue. They don't even realize they're doing it. Not all the time. A lot of times people know what they're doing, but it's so common that people do it without even noticing. They might even convince themselves that they are doing a service to others by warning them about something or someone that they heard about.

But by spreading things they don't know to be fully true, they're not really serving anyone. They're certainly not serving the truth. And others might not even realize they're spreading half truths or lies. They're just trusting what they heard from someone else. They're just not being careful, wise, discerning as they share what was shared with them.

So this command, this understanding about what slander is, should cause us to be extremely careful every time we open our mouths to speak about another person. Just like how the rumble strips, you know, on the side of the road make that noise that lets you know you need to start paying attention, be careful as you proceed ahead, so too, anytime we start to speak about someone who isn't there, some kind of internal alarm or rumble strip needs to go off in our heads that warns us to be careful how we proceed in this conversation, or if we proceed at all.

So with that little exposition of the command itself, let's now get into our outline and look at the four wicked realities that are present whenever we give in and commit the sin of slander.

First, the gravity of this sin is diminished. The gravity of this sin is diminished. Every time we participate in this common sin, we help to make it more diminished. We help to diminish it more in the eyes of other. We help to drop the

weight of it. So by this I mean the weight, the seriousness of the sin. That's what I mean by gravity.

So the idea behind this point is that slander is an incredibly serious sin that most of us have actually convinced ourselves isn't really that big of a deal because it's so common, and we become so comfortable with it. We might readily guard our children from certain sins, sex and violence and murder and lust and lying and all those things on TV, but slander will just go right by. We don't even notice.

So to make the point about how serious this is, I want to just point out a few things about the context about what we are seeing, here, in these verses. But we're actually going to see that the last three points all actually continue to just serve to make this first point even stronger.

But slander is something that, it's not that we think it's good. We would all recognize it to be sin. None of us would defend it or say that we should be allowed to slander. But as we just referenced, it's a sin that most people don't take

seriously, and we just kind of almost accept that it's going to happen. Many of us make peace with the fact that it's going on around us, might even be in us, but it's kind of too hard to pin down and really take seriously. It's a sin that we pray about, maybe. Like you might pray about it after this sermon, ask God to help you with it.

But it's not generally one that we take serious enough to get, like, an accountability partner for. It's not one that we see in our life. Then when we become so broken about our offense against the Holy God that we go to the biblical counseling office and ask for help and discipleship, that we might rid ourselves of this wickedness that's in us.

As with many of what Jerry Bridges has termed as the "respectable sins," most of the time we don't see any immediate damage or harm to others, so we tend to not worry too much about it. When we catch ourselves possibly slandering, if it's pointed out to us, it's not one of those sins that we lose sleep over. It's not one of those sins that causes us to doubt our salvation. Most of the time, we don't even notice it.

The language that James uses in these verses ought to restore a proper understanding of the seriousness with which God takes this sin. Look again at verse 11: "Do not slander one another, brothers. He who slanders a brother or judges his brother, slanders the law and judges the law."

So we've mentioned before, the commentators recognize in James's letter major references to a couple of places, major references to the teaching of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount, but also a lot of major references to Leviticus 19.

And most see James, once again in this command, drawing from Leviticus 19. In Leviticus 19:16, we read, "You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand against the life of your neighbor. I am Yahweh." In Leviticus 19, God gives many commands to the Israelites, and throughout the chapter of Leviticus 19, he continues to reinforce them with the repeated refrain, "I am Yahweh."



So James references Leviticus 19 all over the place. We know, we've talked about how his hearers probably have it in their mind as they're reading it. And so they're thinking these things, too. And I want you to be thinking them also.

In Leviticus 19, there's commands, just a bunch of commands about being holy, about honoring parents, keeping the Sabbath; commands against idolatry, laws about caring for and meeting the needs of the poor and the sojourner, commands about not lying, about being fair and just, about not hating, about not taking vengeance. There's laws about the land, purification laws, sacrificial laws, even laws against witchcraft, and sprinkled throughout all of those commands, we read, "I am Yahweh" or "I am Yahweh your God" over a dozen times.

But the point is that the same God who has commanded us not to hate or lie or profane his name or commit idolatry has also commanded, "Do not slander." This command to not slander that we are so quick to diminish, so quick to excuse is a command that God has placed his name upon. And when we hear the declaration,

"I am Yahweh," attached to anything, we need to take it with the utmost seriousness.

So in addition to this, in addition to that, notice how James, here, returns once again to the language of "brothers." "Do not slander one another, brothers. He who slanders a brother or judges his brother, slanders the law and judges the law." So he returns to the language of brothers when he's talking about their relationship to the one they're slandering.

Remember, in the previous passage, James uses this very strong language, referring to them as "adulteresses," referring to them as "enemies of God." In those verses that's the lens that they needed to see themselves through as they considered their relationship with God while pursuing a love for the world.

But the lens that they need to see themselves through when it comes to their sin of slander against one another is that of "brother." We're going to drive this home. James uses the word for "brother" three times in the beginning of verse 11 after he's taken a brief hiatus from it.

In Leviticus 19, the command is against being “a slanderer among your people.” And here James reminds them that those that they are slandering are their brothers. This is church language. This is the language of the church. This is the reminder that this is going on within the church, and that should add even greater weight to the sin. God loves his church, and any sin that has the possibility of bringing division or disunity into the body should be of great concern.

In 1 Corinthians 5:9-11, Paul tells the church in Corinth, “I wrote you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people. I did not at all mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the greedy and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is a sexually immoral person, or greedy, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard or swindler, not even to eat with such a one.”

That word translated as "reviler" is another word that can be translated as "slander." The concept of slander is certainly contained within it, and Paul says that if it is of such serious danger to the body of Christ, the one who calls themselves a brother but continues in unrepentant slander should not be associated with.

And why is this? It's because even hearing slander is that serious. When we hear slander, our natural response is to begin to kind of sow seeds in ourselves of suspicion and distrust. Something shifts at least a little bit. A little doubt starts to creep in, and over time, as you hear more and more slander, this just becomes greater and greater in the person to where they are now believing things about someone that they never would have believed just a few months or years earlier.

Once slander is out, the damage is done. Its damage has begun to take place. Several commentators referenced the illustration of, it's like pouring out a bag of feathers in the middle of Chicago on a windy day and then trying to go back and pick them all up. The damage is done.

Even if we immediately rejected the slanderous words, recognizing that as slander, they can still come to mind when we think of or talk to that person, and it can begin to shade conversations that we might have with them in the future. "Did you see how he did that? You know what? Maybe there is something to what so-and-so was saying."

It begins to lay a foundation of future distrust, so when a disagreement or a problem comes up with that person, there's already a foundation to start to accept it. Once it's out, there's nothing that you can do about it. The damage is done.

When someone makes a final judgment against someone or against, I mean just recently our church, because they've been influenced by the slander that they have heard and repeated, and they respond now by cutting off relationships or even leaving the church. We might not have been a part of that particular piece of slander that they ultimately believed.

But every time we spoke about someone who wasn't there, complained about a situation, or questioned a decision in the church that we haven't talked to the people directly involved about, or maybe just refused to accept that answer and continued talking about it, anyway, we do help to cultivate the soil that the worst slander eventually flourishes in.

For example, I was at a restaurant recently, and I just happened to overhear this conversation that one woman was having to these two other ladies. And again, because slander is so common to me, I should have said something, but I didn't think about it until later.

But this lady said to these two other ladies she was sitting with, "I just don't understand why he would make the decision to only have eight people on the worship team. He just doesn't understand how to make a schedule." They went on to talk a little bit about this pastor's inability to apparently organize.

And while I would doubt that anyone is ever going to, this wasn't anyone from our church, by the way, doubt that anyone will ever knowingly make the decision to, to oust that pastor, or leave that church, or doubt his preaching because he only has eight people on the worship team, it has now become a little easier for those other two women to accept some worse accusation later.

So you can see, right, why slander is so serious and then even more serious within the church. You can see why Paul says "not to even associate with one who calls himself a brother while speaking against another." Again, the term "brother" is also more generally a reminder that the people who they're slandering have been, again, united to them through the blood of Christ.

They are true family now. Just as Christ paid the penalty for your sins when you did not deserve it, and God the Father adopted you as his child, so has he done with this person who you slander. You're treating this person whom you are united to through Christ, you're treating them with suspicion, dishonesty,

and disdain. You're refusing to treat them as God has treated you.

Why would a Christian do this? Why do we do this? What causes us to treat the members of our own body like this? Well, it's not generally about them so much as it is about us. And this is where it's important to point to where we find the command within the context of James. So this section, verses 11-12 is shorter than any of the other independent kind of sections in the book, which indicates to most commentators that it almost certainly belongs in the section above it.

So remember, verse 10 leads into this. "Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord and he will exalt you. Do not slander one another, brothers." The final command from the previous section that is, remember, that is full of all of those imperatives that we looked at the last time I was up here, is to "humble yourself before the Lord," and then the command that immediately follows is "Do not slander one another."



So this is a reminder straight from the context of the text, that slander is only done as we act out of pride and arrogance. At the heart of our decision, usually, somewhere in there, to bring others down by spreading negative reports about them is the benefit that in doing so, that also kind of makes us look good in comparison.

Highlighting the faults that we hear about or making judgments about sinful motivations of others can't help but make us look a little better in the eyes of those who are receiving our slander. Whether it just shows that there's another person who doesn't have it all together, so I can feel better about the fact that I don't either, or whether it shows someone sinning in an area that I don't, the by-product is that I can look a little better by comparison.

So you might claim this is not why you are doing it. You might even claim it's out of concern for others, but by highlighting issues in others, you promote yourself, and you're even able to more easily excuse yourself from your own sins.

Slandering others also makes it so much easier to vindicate yourself from any future conflicts or disagreements with that person, current or in the future. It ensures that whether you are right or wrong in that disagreement, because you have slandered this person, you will have all you need to justify yourself to yourself or to others.

In that convicting passage in verses 4-10, we saw that pride is the enemy of our soul, that true repentance is marked by the longing to put pride to death and to put on humility. That's the only proper response of one who loves God and understands the Gospel.

So if that is you, if you are fighting, if you're still working out the applications from the last section from James 4, you're fighting to put pride to death in your life, then you must also be diligent to rid yourself of all slander because, again, whenever you engage in slander yourself, or even if you're just willing to give slander an ear to take up residence in, it's like throwing logs and gasoline onto the fire of pride in your life. It's working against your fight against pride.

When you push down on others, you can't help but push yourself up. So if it's your desire to mortify pride, then you will be vigilant to mortify slander.

So when we participate in slander, when we continue to reinforce the narrative that really isn't that big of a deal, when we just kind of make peace with slander in and around us while speaking strongly against other sins, we diminish the significance of what is actually an incredibly arrogant rebellion against God.

And we have the audacity to do this before those in our church, before those who we are trying to disciple and lead, before our children, our families. And therefore, in doing so, we virtually ensure, if we diminish slander, we virtually ensure that this wicked, divisive sin will continue to be used by Satan to great success in future generations of our church.

We diminish the gravity of a sin that he, that Yahweh our God, has given as a command. When we practice slander, we we diminish a sin that is not only against him, but against those

who are his adopted children, those who have received the same mercy that God has given to you, those whom God has united you together with through him as part of the church. We diminish a sin that can cause great hurt and division within God's precious church. We diminish a sin that is constantly giving greater life to the pride that we say that we hate.

So the sin of slander is of such serious danger that we must never treat it as small or common. And really what we're going to see now as we get into these next three points is that they actually work well to make this first point even stronger. The fact that when we slander, we disregard the law of God, disparage the character of God, distort the Gospel, that all shows just how serious the sin of slander is.

So point two, brings us to point two: The law of God is disregarded, or you might say the law of God is demoted. Again, look at verse 11: "He who slanders a brother or judges his brother, slanders the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not the doer of the law, but a judge of it."

So notice the connection that James makes between slandering and judging. The two are used almost synonymously, here. The result of doing either or both of them is that you slander and judge the law. That's what it says. "He who slanders a brother or judges his brother slanders the law and judges the law."

And it's important as we get into this, just as an aside, whenever we come to a passage that talks about sinful judging that we need to make sure, because of the culture that we live in, that we point to out the fact that not all judging is sinful. In John 7 Jesus commands a right judgment to be made. In 1 Corinthians 5:12, actually, the next verse in the passage I read before, Paul speaks of the responsibility for churches to judge those inside the church who persist on living in unrepentant sin.

But a right judgment is made not based on hearsay, but on investigation and on confrontation. It's made when you refuse to come to a position based on what you hear about a person until you talk to the person. And even then, if sin is discovered, the

only people who are spoken to and involved in the situation are those who will be part of the solution of helping an erring brother or sister walk faithfully.

The difference between sinful judging and righteous judging is seen in the goal of helping the one who may in fact be in real sin, to warn, to help, and restore them in love, a righteous goal based on the love of God and love of your brother.

That's not the type of judgment that James is talking about. Slander is accompanied by sinful judgment. It has to be. So when you make the decision, this is what James is saying here, when you make the decision to pass along negative information that degrades or brings down another without verifying the facts with them, or when you assume motives behind actions, you have made a judgment about that person. You have pronounced them guilty of whatever they are being accused of based on whatever incomplete testimony or evidence you deemed sufficient to make your judgment.

Once one person slanders another person, they have taken upon themselves the position of judge. "He who slanders a brother or judges his brother slanders the law and judges the law." You have pronounced them guilty based on incomplete evidence. A brother or sister is found to be lacking in the sight of the one who, through slander, has now pronounced their judgment. They become a judge, and the worst kind of judge. It's the worst kind of judge. That's who we are when we slander. We're the worst kind of judge.

Imagine if you stood before a judge who pronounced you guilty before you arrived in the courtroom for the trial. They begin the trial saying, "Well, based on what someone told me about you in the courthouse cafe before the trial, based on some things I inferred in your tone in a conversation we had earlier, and based on the way you looked at me the other day, I pronounce you guilty. There's no need to hear from you because that would only add confusion to the decision that I want to have." That's what we do when we slander. You're an unjust judge, pronouncing verdicts without even hearing the case.

It's actually even worse than that. The point that James is making is that it's not merely that you have made yourself a corrupt judge over your brother. In slandering or judging your brother, you have slandered and judged the law of God itself.

How do we do that? How do we slander and judge the law? "I'm just talking about that guy. I'm not talking about God's law. I don't want to get into that." Well, the most obvious answer is that it is in the law that we read the command, "You shall not go about as a slanderer," or here, just simply, "Do not slander one another." That's in the law.

So it's actually crazy, and it should be embarrassing for us because within the church, most slander is seen in accusations of sin or attributing sinful motives to others and spreading stories and rumors as some sort of wrongdoing. And in those situations where someone is telling somebody else about the sin of another, the only sin that is actually certain in that situation is the sin of slander.



So when someone brings up their complaints about the sinful attitudes or wrongdoing of another person to you, you can and should respond by saying, "Well, I think you'd better go and talk to that person immediately. But in the meantime, there is some sin, here, that needs to be repented of, certain sin of slander."

James says, "You are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it." That should be terrifying since slander is speaking of perceived sin and wrongdoing, and the Word of God is the objective standard of what is right and what is wrong. When you make the decision to hold someone's perceived actions or perceived motives accountable to what Scripture says, while at the same time deciding that you're going to ignore the clear command of Scripture not to slander, you have placed yourself over the very law that you are trying to use to give weight to your verdict.

"You're not a doer of the law, but a judge of it." In this phrase, James intends to remind us of the conviction that we should have felt reading chapter 1, verse 22, the slightly more

famous verse, to "become doers of the word and not merely hearers who delude themselves."

Slander shows us to be worse off than those who are hearers of the Word and not doers. It's not that we just don't respond to the Word in obedience and conformity, which is bad enough, but we make ourselves to be judges of the Word, of the law. We have decided as we read the Word which laws are to be obeyed and which laws can be ignored. God is no longer the authority over his law in that case. We are.

This should be sobering, because one of the biggest excuses that people tend to make for their slandering of brothers and sisters in the church is that they've convinced themselves that they're actually, "Well, I'm actually protecting the church. I'm protecting people. I'm even maybe defending the church." That's an excuse that's easy for us to make.

And to be sure, God does use people to protect and defend the unity and the purity of his church, but he does it through

his means. He does it through those who will go to great pain and personal sacrifice in pursuit of truth and righteousness.

He does not do it through those who, for reasons of pride or fear or comfort or laziness, refuse to allow their speech and accusations to be measured before all, who refuse to let their speech be examined in the open, their accusations brought into the light.

When someone works their way through the congregation spreading slander and accusations that they are not willing to bring out into the light, no matter what they might tell themselves, they're not protecting the church. They're not purifying the church.

Rather what has happened is what James is pointing out, here, that they have actually removed themselves from the community of believers that sits together in submission under the law of God, and they have now placed themselves over the law as judge. So it is impossible to engage in slander without

showing contempt and disregard for the law of God and even demoting it to below yourself.

And this continues to ramp up in seriousness because there is only one Law-Giver, and brings us to point three: The wickedness that is always present when slander is present is that the character of God is disparaged. The character of God is disparaged.

Look at the beginning of verse 12: "There is only one law-giver and judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy." When we slander, we act like this is not true, that this isn't true about God. Notice, "there is only one," an immediate condemnation on those who have placed themselves there, reminding us that we have absolutely no business placing ourselves above the law of God.

He is the law-giver. The law is his law. The reason that it is right to obey the law is based on his character, on who he is. The right and the wrong that we may claim to care about in

our slander only has any meaning because he has given the law.  
He is the only judge. He is the Law-Giver.

These statements should humble the slanderer as we're reminded just whose seat it is we are trying to place ourselves on when we start proclaiming judgments through slander. He is the only judge because he is the only one who can perfectly see our keeping of the law.

Unlike us in our slander, God is able to judge our motives and our actions perfectly because he and he alone can know what is in our heart. Unlike the slanderer who makes his judgments based on incomplete information and from a heart that's already tainted and can be easily persuaded based on how we're treated, God judges with perfect knowledge of all possible information.

And he does so as one who is immutable and self-sufficient. So he needs nothing and he cannot change. So there's no chance that his judgments will be motivated or persuaded in any way by, by him trying to gain something.

It's with this truth in mind that those of us who are prone to slander come soberly to that next statement: "There is only one law-giver and judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy." The perfect judge who sees all that we say about others when they are not around, the one who perfectly discerns our hearts and knows our motivations, he and he alone is the one who is able to save and destroy.

This phrase from James reminds us of Jesus' words in Matthew 10:28. Again, reiteration of the teachings of Jesus is everywhere in James. So it makes sense James might have this saying on his mind as he writes. Matthew 10:28: "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul, but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

Many also, in fact most commentators, also see in these words a reference to Deuteronomy 32:39 which says, "See now that I, I am he. There is no God beside me. It is I who put to death

and give life. I have wounded and it is I who heal. There is no one who can deliver from my hand.”

Ultimate power belongs to the perfect Judge. This is important to remember because there is a bit of a sense of power that the one whose slanders wield over the reputation of someone. And to be sure, they can do real damage in this life. They might have some control or be able to persuade someone to hold to the same judgments that they have. They might wreck relationships. They might cause hurt, could have a major impact on a person or on a church. But the true judge whose seat they are trying to sit on is the one with power to save and destroy.

The reminder of who God is and the true power that he alone wields is meant to begin to put us back in our place, to place an appropriate fear of God in us when we begin to diminish the seriousness of slander in our lives, or we’re trying to excuse it.

So when we think about the serious sin of slander and how much God hates it because of the damage that it can cause within

the church that Christ died for, it should strengthen our resolve to totally weed it out of our lives, motivated by the fact that he and he alone is able to save and destroy. When we slander, we act like God isn't the law-giver, that God isn't the judge, that God isn't the one who is able to save and destroy. We disparage the true character of God.

And then finally, point four, in our slander the Gospel is distorted. The Gospel is distorted. We can see that in the last phrase: "But who are you who judge your neighbor?" The switch from the word "brother" to the word "neighbor" is intentional. It's no doubt to remind us of the violation of the second greatest commandment, which is to "love your neighbor as yourself," which is also in Leviticus 19. It's already in their minds as another reminder that you have made the decision to stand outside of the law in order to judge.

But here we see that not only does slander against our brothers show that we are not thinking rightly about God, but it shows that we have forgotten what is most important about ourselves: We are those who are in need. We have no business



judging our neighbor because we are fundamentally in the exact same position.

The answer to the rhetorical question, "Who are you to judge your neighbor?" is essentially, "I'm no one to do that. I'm just another sinner who's in desperate need of the mercy that I'm intent on denying to the one that I'm slandering. I have no business placing myself as a judge over that person, let alone the law that condemns us both."

We are those who have received mercy rather than condemnation. So what does it say about the Gospel in our lives when we speak slanderously and give our judgments rather than mercy?

When you come to understand that you have sinned against a holy God, not only have you sinned, you're a sinner through and through. You've never had a day go by where you didn't sin against him in speech, in actions, and in your thoughts. Your whole life is tainted with sin. You're living as an enemy of God on your way to hell. It's so sinful.

He is so holy that even the best that you could ever offer him to gain his approval would be nothing more than a filthy rag. When you've come to see that there was no hope for you, no hope for you unless the God who is able to save and destroy decided to save you. Only hope.

And that's what he did. That's what he has done. Jesus Christ came, truly God, truly man. He lived a perfect life of perfect obedience to the perfect law from the perfect Law-Giver, and though there was no sin in him, he went to the cross and took the full wrath of God upon himself for all who would believe. And even though this truth is a glorious truth, he still had to open your eyes so that you would see it and believe.

And now with eyes opened, when you repent of your sins and trust in this Gospel, the perfect life of Christ is given to you, the indication that you had no perfection in yourself. You needed a gift-righteousness. It's given to you. And not only that, but your sins are now reckoned as paid for in full on the

cross. The perfect judge has pronounced you innocent, not because of anything that you have done, but only because of what he has done for you in Christ.

You had nothing to give, nothing to offer. You know better than anyone else. That is who you were, and now who you are is one who belongs to God, one who has been adopted as his child and made a part of his body along with your brothers and sisters in Christ, with him as the head.

So when the question is asked, "Who are you to judge your neighbor?" the answer is obvious: "That's who I am. I'm nobody. I'm a redeemed sinner, a redeemed sinner who is now found innocent in heaven's court because of what has been done for me. And therefore I have no business ever slandering or judging anyone."

In fact, the way that one who understands this Gospel to be applied to themselves would respond to a slanderous report, would be to extend, now, the love and mercy that has been shown to him.

So if I hear a report of issues of sin or immaturity or wrong thinking, I understand immediately that those are all areas that, if true, demonstrate a need in my brother or my sister. And just as with any other need, I'm going to want to live out the Gospel, now, by showing them the mercy that I've been shown, by trying to help them with that need, not to slanderously proclaim it to others.

As one who has been saved from darkness into light, I'm going to be uncomfortable allowing anything about my brothers or sisters in Christ to be passed around in the darkness. I'm going to long to bring every accusation into the light.

This Gospel, it really is the answer to our problem with slander. It becomes so evident why James ends this section by posing this question, "Who are you to judge your neighbor?" and then just leaving it hanging there.



The one who sees the constant need for the grace of God in his life, the one who understands the command not to slander is a command from the only Law-Giver and Judge, who has the power to save and destroy, and to fail to take this command seriously is to disregard his law, to disparage his character, to distort his Gospel. The one who desires to walk humbly before this God will find it increasingly difficult, and hopefully almost impossible, to participate in slander. Let's pray.

Father, thank you for your Word. How kind you are to give us not just your commands, but to even unpack your heart, your mind with us, to desire to give us a command and then help us to see that command as you see the command, to see its importance the way you see its importance.

Father, we are so thankful for the Gospel that we have just heard and thought through together. Lord, would you help us to apply this message, apply this teaching, apply these verses, to be diligent to do so, to hate slander, to set up all kinds of ways and to warn ourselves when we're in that danger, that we would truly believe how dangerous allowing that sin to continue



on can be, that you would use these verses and their application in your people to bring protection and unity to your church.

Lord, I pray that you would kill and destroy the pride in us as we think through these things, as we examine our own lives, that you would humble us before you, and that we would rejoice and long for you to receive all glory, for all glory to be to Christ, and it's in his name we pray. Amen.