

James

GOD AND GOSSIP

4:11, 12

“Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother, speaks against the law, and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it. 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?” (4:11, 12).

For the last year we have watched the media chronicle the fall of Jim Bakker and the PTL Club. News of it has been everywhere: in the network news programs, the weekly news magazines, and even the grocery store gossip rags. We have listened to the lawyers discuss the legal ramifications and heard the comedians tell the jokes (funny or not).

What is the reason for all the talk about such a revolting situation that is an embarrassment to people trying to serve God? We know that the devil delights in the fall of a man who is “supposed” to be a man of God, and the world does too. That is why the press reveled in the news that Pat Robertson’s oldest child was conceived out of wedlock. That is why the world delighted in the news that Oral Roberts had said that God was holding him hostage. That is why Jimmy Swaggart’s escapade was the lead story in the mass media. Not only does the world want to know the story; it also wants to know all the sordid details.

But is it just the world that loves to talk about such situations? We all do. I have even heard the comment that preachers are the worst gossips, particularly about each other. As much as it

pains me to admit it, I believe this is right. We usually know about who has been fired and why, the ones who have made mistakes morally or professionally, what salaries are available, etc. Let us face it. More often than not, Christians talk about other Christians. If one of our number commits a horrendous blunder, the news travels like wildfire. We all know of people who have quit attending services completely or switched from one congregation to another because of some tale that had been spread. Why is it that we delight in knowing and telling something bad on each other?

James, in his mission to get us to live as we believe, places the demand before us that we are not to speak against one another. Again, he focuses on a crucial point: The Christian, because of what he believes, must be different from the people of the world. Not only does James make the command not to gossip, he gives four reasons why.

THE REGULATION (4:11)

James begins in a simple, straightforward manner: “Do not speak against one another, brethren” (James 4:11a). With this plain command, the conversation of one Christian toward another is regulated. The original language gives the implication that the slander was taking place and that the brethren were to stop. That simple command really needs little explanation.

God has never had a high opinion of those who talk about others (Proverbs 20:19; 26:20; Romans 1:29, 30; 1 Corinthians 6:10). Why is it then

that we are so prone to involve ourselves in something so unsavory in the eyes of God? Maybe Will Rogers summed up our attitude about gossip best when he said, "The only time people dislike gossip is when you gossip about them." It may be that we feel better about ourselves when we know something bad about somebody else. That seems to be the only logical reason for gossip.

Before we move on to the reasons why we are not to speak against each other, let us make one other point. Sometimes we feel justified in talking about a brother if what we say is true. *But* that is not what James is saying! He allows no qualifiers on that command. James says plainly, speaking by the inspiration of the Spirit, that we are not to speak against one another.

THE RATIONALE FOR THE COMMAND (4:11, 12)

Regard for Them

The first reason we should not talk against each other is because of *the regard we should have for one another*. Within this text, an emphasis on "brotherliness" is evident. Verse 11 says, "Do not speak against one another, *brethren*. He who speaks against a *brother*, or judges his *brother*, . . ." (Emphasis mine.) Brethren are bound together by a love that is symbolized by family membership (Romans 12:10; Galatians 6:10). Scripture says that if we know something about our brother, instead of telling just anyone, we are to go to him about it. This is not the most comfortable or the easiest thing to do, but our love and concern for that brother's soul compels us. Talking to everyone else and not going to my brother is not showing the biblical regard for him.

Regard for the Law

Not only should my regard for my brother keep me from talking about him, but so should my *regard for the law*. Immediately, when we read, "He who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother, speaks against the law, and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it," we want to know, "What law?" Obviously, James would not be making a reference to the old law. From the context, it seems to refer to the "royal law" (2:8) and the "law of liberty" (2:12). He wants us to see the implications of what we are doing. First, we are

breaking the law which we were meant to obey. Second, we set ourselves up as being above the law. The law says, "Love one another," but by our actions we say that it is mistaken, that it should have said, "Criticize and slander one another." We are saying, in effect, that we know more than God did when He gave the law to man.

Regard for God

Third, we should not talk about each other because of our regard for God. James says, "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; . . ." (4:12). He says that God is the only Lawgiver and that only He has the right to change or nullify the law He has given. Our actions do not change the law; they only break it. It would be presumptuous on our part to think we know better than God who gave the law. Not only is God the only Lawgiver, but He is also the only Judge. He is the only One with the qualifications to judge. He knows all the facts, He is free from the stains of sin, and He knows us because He made us. Of course, the implication of what we are saying is that when we speak against our brother we are making judgments. God is the only One who can make such judgments.

Regard for Ourselves

Fourth, we should not speak against our brother because of how we are to regard ourselves. The NIV is weak in verse 11, but it really hits with full force here: ". . . But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?" (4:12). Wham! Right between the eyes! With all my weaknesses, struggles, problems, and sins, who am I to talk about my brother? I am afraid that Jesus might look down at me, see the way I act and the way I talk about another, and say, "Hypocrite!"

CONCLUSION

We probably regard "gossip" as a little sin. "It is insignificant when compared with some others," we say. In fact, the world has elevated it to an art form—with gossip columns and even TV gossip shows. But is that the way God sees it? It is a sin when we violate the family relationship of believers. We transgress the royal law. We put ourselves in the position of God and fail to realize our own sinfulness. Let us resolve to "not speak against one another."

—Bill Hooten