

James 4:11-12

Years ago Eric Berne wrote a best-seller entitled *Games People Play*. In it he exposed the subtle ways people manipulate others without those people even being aware of what's happening. Three years after this book was published, another one, *Games Christians Play* came out, taking readers behind the scenes in the Christian community to reveal the games played beneath a religious veneer.

For example, have you ever encountered the **"When you have been a Christian as long as I have..."** type of person? These players either were born in a choir loft or saved at age two. Their favorite ploy, making sure everyone knows that they know everything, is the well-placed put-down.

Let's say you're an excited new Christian, and you share with one of these smug pillars of the faith that you just discovered the book of Habakkuk. This is the typical put-you-in-your-place response you can expect: "Oh, so you're just now getting into Habakkuk? Well, you'll just love it when you discover the Chaldean taunt-songs in chapter 2. Why, I remember studying that years ago when I was a missionary living with a migrant family. Of course, when you've been a Christian as long as I have..."

Another game believers love to play is: **"I'd love to, but..."**

Imagine your children's pastor asks you to teach a peer group in the Sunday school. What do you do? If you hesitate, you're a goner. So, you say immediately,

- "Oh, I'd love to, but I have seven small children under four..." or,
- "My pet ocelot died and we're holding a memorial service..." or,
- "My invalid aunt lives with me, and she's afraid of the dark..."

to which the children's pastor says, "Oh, that's a shame," and you reply, "Maybe next time. Do try me." After this happens once or twice, however, when your name is mentioned

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someone will automatically mumble, "Can't. ...dead ocelot...afraid of the dark," and pass to the next name.

The practice illustrated in scripture

You may think these games and others like them are unique to this century, but they're not! Games were present among first-century believers as well. In fact, James 4:11-12 introduces us to the most widely played game among Christians then and now: It is called *playing God*.

James gives some very pointed instruction on this. Listen to 4:11-12

"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. 12] 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?"

Do you see the game Christians were playing here? Slander and nonredemptive judgment are distorted expressions of playing the "God game." James explained in 4:1-10 about church fights and the quarrels that had been raging in the church. He explained that when it comes to having our desires met, we can either fight or we can humbly pray and ask God to fulfill them by submitting to His control. So James urged humility, but knew there were many who would choose to "play God" instead.

What happens when we choose to play God and our life is void of humility, prayer and submission? Those who have observed a church fight or relational breakdown know the fight is often perpetuated by rumor and slander from the participants (2 Cor. 12:20)—*"For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder."*
(See also Proverbs 26:20.)

This is a description what happens in the church (or in any kind of friendship/relationship

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among believers) when we want what we want when we want it. When we are unwilling to wait for God to give us what we need in His way and according to His schedule, we play God by seeking to get our own desires fulfilled by every tactic available, e.g., gossip, anger, quarreling, factions, judging, slander.

This is the reason we have war, strife, vendettas, the breakup of nations, homes and friendships. James seeks to take some fuel from the fire in 4:11.

The Prohibition of Slander

v. 11a—*"Brothers, do not slander one another."* The command means literally to "stop speaking against your brother." The words imply this was an ongoing practice, but Scripture in many places identifies it as sin—1 Pet. 2:1; Rom. 1:30; Rom. 14:4,10,15.

To **slander** means to defame, to denigrate, to talk down to another, to speak against, to question legitimate authority, to bring incorrect accusations. It is the idea of talking about one person to another, with the goal/result of lowering the listener's estimation of that third person. Between the lines, this is the objective of all "God play"—"I am superior to this other Christian, so I can put them down/slander them."

To **judge** means to divide, to separate, to make a distinction/decision, to pronounce final judgment. In this context, it means nonredemptive judgment. There is a legitimate form of judgment we can carry out, which we will discuss later, but for now, we will focus on inappropriate slander and judgment. With that in mind, look at verse 11a again and let's ask a few questions:

1. Who's present when this game is being played?

Those being belittled or slandered are not around to defend themselves, and usually the facts about this person are not checked out; there's no accuracy.

2. Why don't we feel guilty about this sin?

We indulge in it without feeling much guilt, because we have devised ways to disguise or camouflage it.

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"Stop me if I'm wrong, but..."

"Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but..."

"I don't mean to be critical, but..."

Our criticism can even take the form of an expression of concern or care for others, such as eliciting prayer for them, while in fact we are criticizing them in the same breath. James says about this practice, "Do not"! This is a command for all of us.

Many of us are guilty of adopting a superior position and lowering a listener's estimate of another Christian. This practice has sadly become very prevalent in the Christian community. Let's apply these verses, then, to ourselves:

The Problem of Slander

4:11-12—*"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. 12] There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?"*

James gives us two primary reasons why nonredemptive judgment and slander are wrong:

First, judging elevates me above my brother whom I am to love—vv. 11b-12.

Why don't we see this? Notice the use of the words "brother" and "neighbor." Our brotherliness is emphasized in the repetition; our neighborliness is emphasized by being mentioned last. This emphasis reminds me that as brothers and sisters in the Lord, we are all at the same level—we all stand shoulder to shoulder. It is wrong for us to claim or exercise superiority over another; none of us is firstborn. We are simply equal family

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members.

Remember Jesus' words to His disciples: *"One is your teacher, and you are all brothers"* (Matt. 23:8). We are all family, regardless of our looks, education, financial status, or jobs. To elevate ourselves above another is sin.

The word "neighbor" in v. 12 conveys the love which manifests itself in care and concern—the love that sees the need and reaches out to meet it. If we think about the Lord's definition of neighborliness in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we can see there is no room for talking down about another person; rather, we are to identify with the hurting and their needs and be selfless enough to meet them.

Judging elevates me above the law I am to obey.

vv. 11c-12—*"...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?"*

These are very strong words! James says, when we judge our brother or sister we are, in affect, judging the Law as well. In James 2:8, James defines the Royal Law: all the Law is summed up in this one statement: "love your neighbor as yourself." When I choose to slander or judge my brother, I elevate myself above the Law and exclude myself from it. I become, in essence, a judge of the Law instead of a doer and thus seek to override God's authority, placing myself above the Law and becoming a judge of what is right and wrong, loving or not. Not wanting to *love* my neighbor as myself, I choose to *judge* him/her and to *slander* him instead.

James says, *"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?"* —v. 12. This is dangerous ground to be playing God, for there is only One who can give the Law, and One who can save and destroy. That's why James uses a strong and rebuking question: who do you think you are? How can you usurp His authority? How dare you play God? Or, in the words of Romans 14:4, *"Who are you to judge someone else's servant?"*

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Only the One who gave the Law can be judge, because of what is required to judge rightly. In order for us to be the ultimate judge of another, we would have to know everything about not only his/her circumstances, but inner thoughts and motives. This is impossible with our finite nature, for we can never be certain of what is happening inside another—1 Cor. 4:3-5.

Ruth Calkins aptly describes our condition in this poem:

I spoke to her at the bus stop
But she turned the other way.
My immediate reaction:
A rush of resentment—She's ignoring me
She really doesn't like me
I've always suspected it, Now I know.

Suddenly she looked toward me
Startled, but sincere:
"Forgive me—I didn't see you."
(Until then I hadn't noticed the agony lining her face.)

A hesitant pause
A catch in her voice—
"I just came from the doctor's office,
Our little boy has leukemia.
It's all a terrible nightmare."

Lord, Lord
What loathesome selfishness.
A mother stricken with grief
Her heart soaked with pain
An hour of black catastrophe
And I thought only of me.

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Cleanse me, Lord. Sensitize me
Until my first concern is for others
And my last concern is for me.

The Bible does speak about a redemptive act of judgment that is needed in our relationships, but along with the limitations of James 4:11-12, there are various tests we must take before we enter into such judgment.

The Proper Tests for Redemptive Judgment—Gal. 6:3-5; 1 Thess. 5:19-22; 1 John 4:1; 2 Cor. 13:5. The Eye Test

Do I have any beams or sins in my life that might keep me from seeing clearly to bring redemptive correction to another? Matt. 7:1-5—

1] *"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. 2] For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. 3] Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? 4] How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5] You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."*

Before we can correct/help others, we must involve ourselves in the removal of the beams of hypocrisy/sin as our first priority—vv. 1-5a.

Once the beam is removed, we are to remove the "specks." We are called to be available to help others with their problems. With hypocrisy removed, humility takes its place and we can readily recognize our own frailty and faults. Only then can we see clearly to help

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others rid themselves of their blurred vision—v. 5b. We will be judged too, but the quality of that judgment will be identical in nature to our own judgment—vv. 1-2. These verses remind us that the quality of judgment we receive will be the same as we give. If we judge in a loving, yet honest and biblical fashion, that's what we will have measured to us. If we want to be judged fairly and lovingly the rest of our lives, we had better judge/correct in a way we want to receive it.

The Purpose Test

It is important we ask the question, why am I making a redemptive correction? Am I doing this to restore and/or win my brother/sister over? Gal. 6:1-2; Matt. 18:15. Redemptive confrontation isn't designed to punish the person sinning. It is to restore and win over.

Gal. 6:1—*"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently."*

Matt. 18:15—*"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."*

Restore means to make fully ready, put in full order; especially what is broken or out of joint. It also means to refit, repair, restore. This word has the same root as "prepare/equip" found in Eph. 4:12.

The Spiritual Test

Am I spiritually qualified to bring redemptive correction?

Gal. 6:1—*"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted."*

Immature or unspiritual people should not be involved in this kind of correction because of the potential for temptation/sin (vv. 1b-5). The prevention is spiritual testing: Gal. 6:3-5;

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Rom. 12:11; 1 Cor. 2:14-15; 3:1-4; 1 Pet. 2:2-5, etc.

The Gentleness Test

Am I committed to restoring a brother who is caught in sin with gentle restoration and gentle instruction? Will I use a gentle tone? Galatians 6:1 and 2 Timothy 2:25 make this an important factor. (See also Prov. 15:1.) A harsh, critical presentation/correction and restoration is forbidden. That kind of spirit will actually work against the process and become the focal point, rather than the sin. Watch your vocal tone and spirit!

The Respect Test

As I give hope to the person who is in need of restoration and help, am I committed to giving the answer/solution with gentleness and respect?

1 Pet. 3:15b—*"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..."*

If the person I am trying to restore is over me in the Lord, or is older, and I have some questions about his teaching and/or life, do I hold this person in highest regard and respect as I bring my questions and/or concerns? 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 instructs this: *"Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. 13] Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other."*

See also 1 Tim. 5:1.

The Word Test

Is the basis for my redemptive action an explicit violation of a specific passage of Scripture—a sin? Have I found specific passages of Scripture that are being violated?

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2 Tim. 3:16—*"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17] so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

The only way we should bring redemptive correction is when a person has willfully or ignorantly violated a specific passage of Scripture and therefore is guilty of sin. Gal. 6:1- *"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin..."*

We cannot judge in the area of a person's conscience or motives. Only God knows this!

1 Cor. 4:5b—*"He (the Lord) will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts."* (Read the whole section—vv. 1-5.)

If my concern with a person has to do with preferences, expectations, or personality quirks that are not sinful, I have no basis for redemptive correction. If I do talk to them at all about these items, it should be as a friend with a question or advice, not as a rebuke or correction.

With these limitations in mind, if a person is living in rebellion against a passage of Scripture, am I willing to go to him/her and wash his/her feet with the Word of God? (John 15:3) This is redemptive judgment, which builds up and encourages, causing growth, not discouragement or anger. It puts people back together again instead of tearing them down and fragmenting their relationships with others. This is a legitimate act of love, and James 4:11-12 is not forbidding it.

With those tests completed, there are some principles that should also guide our application of these tests:

The Principles Needed to Monitor Redemptive Judgment

Failure doesn't disqualify a brother or sister from the Christian community.

Forgiveness and restoration must always be possible—Gal. 6:1-2; 2 Cor. 2:5-11. Even a

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person who has willfully sinned and left the community or been asked to leave (Matt. 18:17)—if he/she has repented—should be forgiven, comforted and reaffirmed in love by the church—2 Cor. 2:5-11.

If a person is ignorant, or in error in his understanding of some doctrine, we must give the time and specific gentle instruction to help him to grow.

Don't just criticize and avoid the person. Take the responsibility to make clear what is lacking in their understanding or application. All teachers of the Word especially need this ministry—Acts 18:24-28. Aquila and Priscilla give us an example of how such a person should be approached with respect, confidentiality and with the needed Scriptural teaching—Acts 18:24-28.

Correction done with the guidelines of this teaching will be appreciated, and will strengthen the teacher and his ministry—vv. 27-28. If there is a serious difference of opinion involving some issue other than the core doctrines of Orthodox Christianity (e.g., modes of baptism), it might be necessary to agree to disagree in love.

Don't try avenging God through your redemptive judgments/corrections—leave that to Him (Heb. 10:30).

30] For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," [Deut. 32:35] and again, "The Lord will judge his people." [Deut. 32:36; Psalm 135:14]

Remember that our part in redemptive correction is gentle instruction, and it is God's part to grant repentance.

We are not responsible for the sinner's repentance—God and the sinner are. 2 Tim. 2:25—*"Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth. . ."*

Understand, people in need of repentance are not thinking clearly and are in a trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

2 Tim. 2: 26—*". . . and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the*

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devil, who has taken them captive to do his will."

Sometimes they won't understand you initially, so be patient and prayerful, and continue to instruct. Because of the traps of the enemy, both you and the other person must resist Satan—Acts 4:1; 1 Pet. 5:9.

Judging another when it comes to disputable matters is to be avoided—Rom. 14:4-23.

We should not be looking down on one another—v. 3,10b. On the other hand, we are to be careful not to put any stumbling block in another believer's way—vv. 13-18, 20-21. The highest goal should be peace and mutual edification—v. 19.

Defend yourself against slander by a good life and clear conscience—

1 Pet. 3:15b—"*...Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 16] keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.*"

Remember that confidentiality is to be maintained in all redemptive judgment.

- Matt. 18:15—"*...just between the two of you...*"
- Prov. 11:13—"*A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.*"
- Prov. 20:19—"*A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much.*"
- Prov. 25:9—"*If you argue your case with a neighbor, do not betray another man's confidence.*"

Of course, if a law is being broken, or serious harm is happening to another, then those who can do something about the problem should be consulted. That includes situations where harm is coming physically, sexually or verbally.