

Speak No Evil ***James 4: 11-12***

Even today William Shakespeare is revered as one of, if not the greatest dramatists who ever lived. He wrote numerous plays including histories, comedies, and tragedies. Most people have seen or read some of them, like *Romeo and Juliet*, or *Macbeth*, favorites in high school textbooks. There are, however, a number of others that are not so well known. One is *Othello*. Like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*, it too is a tragedy because it ends on a sad note. An innocent life is taken because of the false rumors of a wicked adversary.

Briefly stated, here is the plot. Othello is a Moorish military commander serving in the Venetian army. He has recently married a beautiful and wealthy Venetian lady, named Desdemona. Passed over for promotion, Iago, one of Othello's officers, decides to take revenge upon his commander. Through his words and his actions, Iago weaves a web of lies and innuendos falsely accusing Desdemona of unfaithfulness. The resulting consequences are catastrophic. Not only does Desdemona die, tragically murdered by her enraged husband, but the lives of others are lost as well. In this play Shakespeare tells us in no uncertain terms, that language motivated by evil intentions can destroy a person's life.

Sadly, that is still true today and more so now than ever before. Not only can someone destroy a person's character and good name by unwholesome gossip, but they can also achieve that same goal through social media. Young people today are taking their own lives at unprecedented levels because of the mean-spirited things that their peers are saying about them. The internet is chock full of stories about parents grieving the loss of sons or daughters who were verbally bludgeoned to death by the words and comments of others.

James was also aware of this shameful behavior, and this is what he is addressing in his letter to fellow believers, Chapter four, verses 11 and 12. He says, "Don't speak evil against one another, my dear brothers and sisters." He knew that even Christians can be guilty of saying hateful things about one another. In fact, he used a special word to describe his distaste for this kind of behavior. The Greek word translated into English as "speaking evil" carries an even more nefarious connotation. It means "making malicious comments behind a person's back." In other words, it's not a face-to-face confrontation. The criticisms are whispered to others without the accused ever knowing who first uttered them. It's like being an Iago, secretly plotting to hurt another human being. It's harmful gossip with an evil intent with consequences that can go far beyond what was originally intended.

That's why there are numerous references in the Bible, both in the Old Testament and the New Testaments about such despicable behavior. Each of them uses the same word, "evil speaking" or one very similar to the one that James uses in his letter.

- In Psalm 101:5 the Lord says, "Whoever slanders his neighbor in secret, him will I put to silence."
- Speaking of the ungodly in Romans 1:30, Paul describes them as "gossips, slanders, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful."
- In 1 Peter 2:1, the apostle encourages believers to rid themselves of "all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind."

So, in light of what the Bible says and what James said in his letter about this pernicious sin, let's see if we can discern as to why it is so severely condemned. Amazingly in these two verses, James 4:11-12, he provides us with three reasons why we should steer clear of slanderous speech.

First, it breaks the royal law. Did you notice what James says at the end of verse 12? He stated, "But you – who are you to judge your neighbor?" James is reminding us of what he said in chapter 2. In that passage

of Scripture, he spoke about keeping the royal law. He said, "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right" (James 2:8). He was, of course, referencing what is recorded in Leviticus 19:18 in the Old Testament. We, of course, are also familiar with it because of what Jesus said. He told His disciples that the whole of the Old Testament, everything written by Moses and the prophets could be summed up in two commandments, loving God with all of your mind, soul and strength and loving your neighbor as yourself." I cannot think of anyone who would want someone to maliciously malign them behind their back. Can you? If we would not want someone to treat us in such a despicable manner, how could we, therefore, justify doing that same thing ourselves. Yes, indeed, malicious slander is a clear indictment that we have broken the royal law, the second greatest commandment and that, I believe, is a serious infraction of how God desires for us to live with one another.

Here's the second thing that happens when someone engages in gossip. It places them above the law. This is what James is getting at when he says, "Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it" (James 4:11). What does James mean when he speaks in this manner? James is not saying, "Judge not that you be not judged." Judgements about life and about people are unavoidable. For example, when someone does work for us, we have the right to determine whether that work was done correctly or incorrectly and to respond accordingly. In doing so we are passing judgement. What James is saying is that we cannot use our own standards to come to that decision. If, for example, the installation of a new window, meets the building codes of our state or locality, we can't create our own building code and then malign the installer for not doing the work according to the way we desired. The same is true in terms of morality and even within the realm of jurisprudence. Without going into a great deal of detail, let me simply state that in the past the laws of the United States and Great Britain were for the most part based upon the writings of an esteemed jurist by the name of William Blackstone. Guess what, the basis for his volumes on the practice of law were based upon the Scriptures. We have turned aside from his legal guidance in America today and consequently both our legal system and its application have become a complex, incomprehensible quagmire. In other words, it's very easy, whether we're speaking about personal relationships with others or legislative decisions, to put ourselves in a position where we place ourselves above the law, not just human law, but also the Law that has come to us from on High.

Here's the third thing that James is telling us about slanderous language. It usurps the authority of God. He says, "There is only one Lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and destroy" James 4:12. It's easy to play God and even to pronounce judgement when tempted to slander another human being. Going back to Shakespeare's Othello, that becomes immediately obvious as the play concludes. Innocent people meet a tragic end because an evil man has dressed himself in the robes of God to suit his own vengeful desires. The same thing unfortunately happens in our world today to individuals, businesses, institutions and even churches. More than one congregation has closed its doors because of a whispered, slanderous campaign to ruin the testimony of that congregation. With that in mind it would be well for all of us to remember who sits on the heavenly throne, the royal bench in eternity. Speaking to this very issue Paul said, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord" (Romans 12:19).

Let us, therefore, always remember that God has a way of setting things straight. Even when we feel that an injustice has been committed and we are tempted to set things right on our own with a little backroom gossip, let's not go there. Let's follow the example of the dear little lady who never had anything bad to say about another person. Wanting to trick her into saying something malicious about someone, two pranksters asked her one day, "That mean old devil, he really is a horrible rascal, isn't he?" In response the dear little lady said, "Well there's one thing I can say about him. He sure is busy!"