

Resist the Devil

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois - May 1, 2016

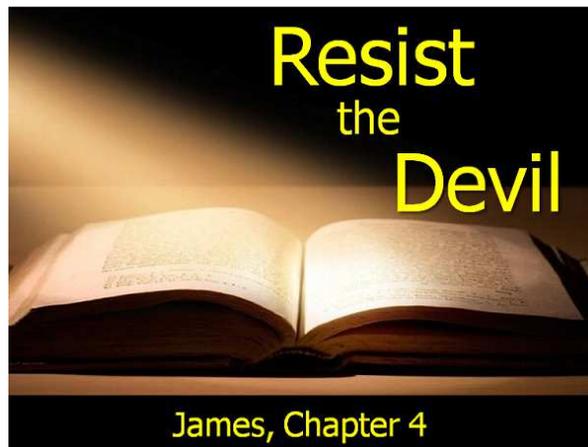
James 4:1-17 ESV

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

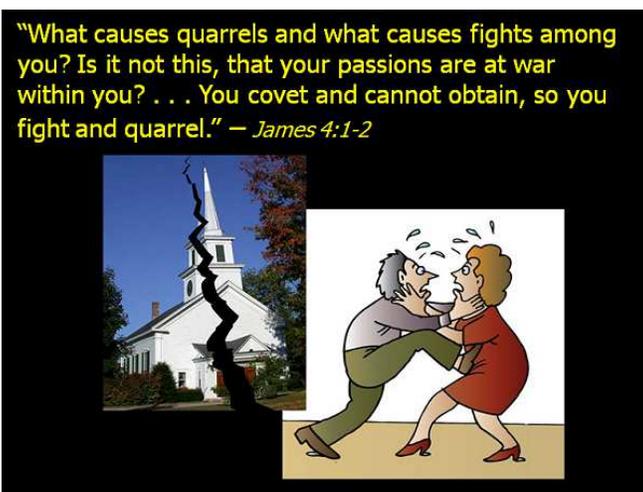
Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit" — yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.



Continuing our study of the Letter of James, we come this week to chapter 4. It's a short chapter, only seventeen verses, but it's packed with useful advice from the brother of Jesus, much of which reflects the teaching of the Lord himself, as we would certainly expect. Of course, while Jesus was preaching in Galilee, and later in Jerusalem, James wasn't one of his followers. But when the risen Jesus appeared to him, James got converted and became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. And, in one way or another, he picked up what Jesus had been teaching about life in the kingdom of God, and is passing much of that along to us in this letter which is, really, not a letter so much as it is a sermon.



James begins this section with a discussion about quarreling and fighting within the Christian community. Sadly, that's an issue we still have to deal with today, almost two millennia after James wrote to these first-century believers. Church history has been plagued by division stemming from disputes between different Christian groups, and local churches have been ripped apart by infighting over one issue or another — often relatively trivial issues. But it does no good to keep rehearsing the problem; we need to look into the cause of it, and how to deal with it. "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" James asks. And he gives

his answer: "Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? . . . You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel" (4:1-2).

Disputes arise because of "passions," James says — because of strong feelings or emotions. Now, feelings and emotions aren't bad in themselves; we all have them, because the Lord made us this way. Emotions, like anger or fear or tenderness, have a proper role to play because they give force to our actions. But if we act on the basis of emotions *alone*, without tempering them, we can get ourselves into trouble. (I could tell you stories about stupid things I've done because of uncontrolled emotions.) When we have strong feelings, we need to evaluate them to see if they're appropriate and helpful. The apostle Paul advised the Ephesians, "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil" (Ephesians 4:26-27). It's not a sin to *have* emotions; it is sinful to hang onto them and *let them control us*.

Apparently, in the churches James was writing to, some people were allowing their emotions to get out of control — even to the extent, he says, that they were killing each other. I doubt they were literally doing so, or the public authorities would have stepped in. Probably he meant what Jesus said, that being angry with someone is the moral equivalent of killing them (Matthew 5:21-22). But such anger is just as destructive of the unity of the body. And it arises out of one cause: *self-centeredness*. Focusing on ourselves — our personal hurts, our desires, our wants — is a way of making ourselves into our own god, which is the root of all sin.

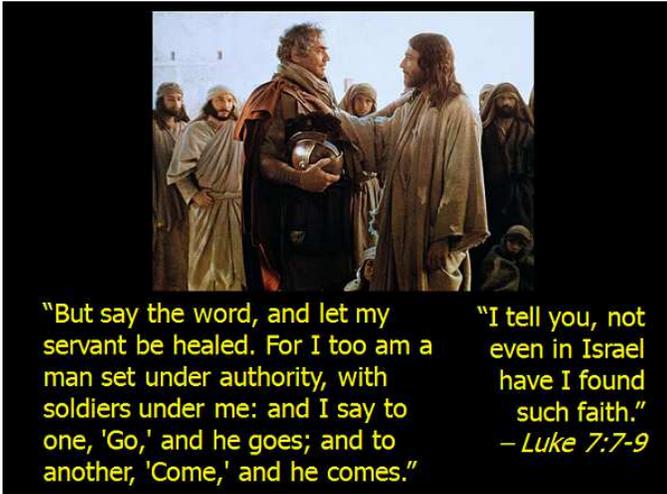
Sadly, that's what the world, or our human culture, is telling us: "Be yourself, have it your way, look out for Number One." This self-centeredness is what the Bible calls coveting. As Paul wrote to the Colossians, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you," including "covetousness, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5). Being prideful and self-centered is *the worship of a false god*, and that's the cause of division and strife within any group including the church of Jesus. That's why James comes down pretty hard on this kind of worldly pride: "God opposes the proud," he reminds us, "but gives grace to the humble" (4:6).

And James stresses that we won't get answers to prayer with a self-centered attitude. "You ask and do not receive," he says, "because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (4:3). If we ask only to satisfy our selfish desires, the Lord doesn't respond. Why not? Because we're asking the wrong god. "You have not," he says, "because you ask not" (4:2) — that is, we're not really asking God if we're "coveting," trying to force our own selfish emotions into the situation. If we're really going to ask, we need to ask from the right Source.

So James's counsel is to remember who really is God, and submit to him. As the older version of Psalm 100 says, "It is he that has made us, and not we ourselves." "Draw near to God," says James, "and he will draw near to you. . . . Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (4:8,10). If that sounds like we need to make ourselves into weaklings just to avoid being prideful, quite the opposite is the case. Submitting to the Lord's authority actually gives us greater authority over that which is evil and destructive in our environment.

James may be thinking about Jesus' encounter with the Roman centurion who asked him to heal his servant. "I'm a man under authority," the centurion said, "so I *have* authority to tell my men what to do and what not to do. I understand authority. You just speak the word, and my servant will be healed." And Jesus replied, "I haven't seen faith like this, not even in Israel!" (see Luke 7:6-9). We get answers to prayer not by pleading from our need, but by submitting to God's authority so that we, too, have the authority of the believer to speak blessing and healing into our situation.

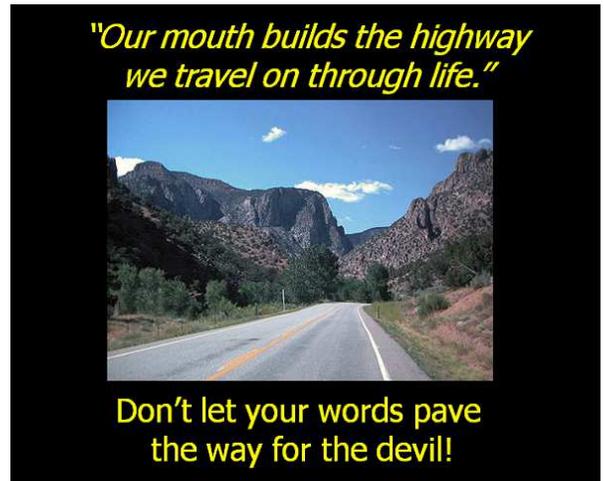




Therefore, says James, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (4:7). He doesn't say, "Roll over and let him walk all over you." Nor should we say, "Get behind me, Satan — and help push." We're to *push back against the enemy*. Because we're *under* the Lord's authority, we *have* authority over the devil and whatever he would bring against us. "Humble yourselves before the Lord," James says, "and he will exalt you" (4:10). As the Psalmist says, "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me, uttering slanders against me, my adversaries and foes, they shall stumble and fall. . . . And now my head shall be lifted up [that is, exalted] above my enemies round

about me" (Psalm 27:1-2, 6). The most vicious enemy is that dark force we call the devil — *diabolos* in Greek, the slanderer — or the *satan*, the adversary or prosecutor. The devil doesn't exalt us, as the Lord does; the devil puts us down. But he's a liar; Jesus called him "the father of lies" (John 8:44). And the only way he can get to us is *if we believe his lies*.

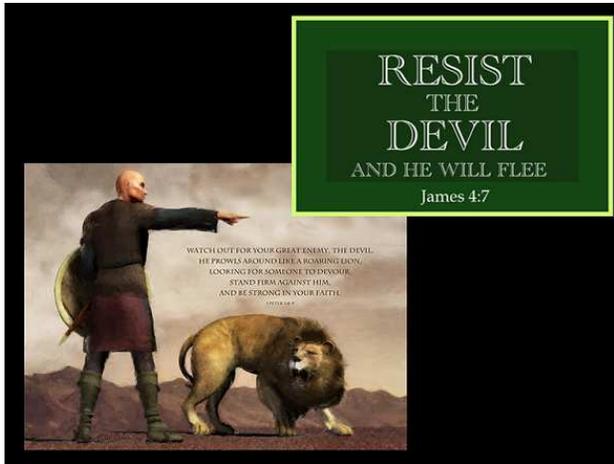
How does the devil lie to us? Often he *uses our own voice* to lie to us, through our unfiltered emotions and how we respond to those emotions. Anger, fear, defensiveness, discouragement — these things rise up within us in response to situations we encounter. If we give voice to these destructive emotions, we open the door for the enemy who lies to us *through our own mouth*. "I think I'm coming down with something." "I always get sick this time of year" "I'm just getting too old to deal with this." "I don't know how I'm going to pay this bill, I guess I'm just headed to the poorhouse." "I just can't seem to get along with my boss." "This job isn't working out for me." "My family's just never going to get straightened out, my kids are going to the dogs." "My marriage is failing, it looks like we're headed for the divorce court." "I'll never amount to anything, the deck is stacked against me." "I'm just a nobody around here." Remember, *our mouth builds the highway we travel on throughout life*, and negative speech like this is just paving the way for the devil to take advantage of us and steal our victory — for, as Jesus says, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10).



In the wilderness, Jesus defeated the devil's testing with the word of God: "It is written . . . it is written . . . it is written." We can use the same weapon, "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). Satan, the father of lies, has no defense against the truth, any more than darkness has any way to overcome light. You can't go into your bedroom at midday and turn on the "dark button." If you want the room darkened so you can take a nap, you have to pull the shades and cut off the light. But at night you can go into a dark room and turn on the light button, and darkness must flee. The Word of God is like that; as Psalm 119:130 says, "The entrance of your word gives light."

Like James, Peter warns us about the craft of the enemy. "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). The older version says, "seeking whom he *may* devour." I've got news for the devil: he *may not* devour me; I don't give him permission. You and I can resist his lies with the truth of God, and with the authority that comes from our

submission to a higher Authority. When Satan tries to attack a believer armed with the Word of truth, the "roaring lion" becomes a harmless pussycat.

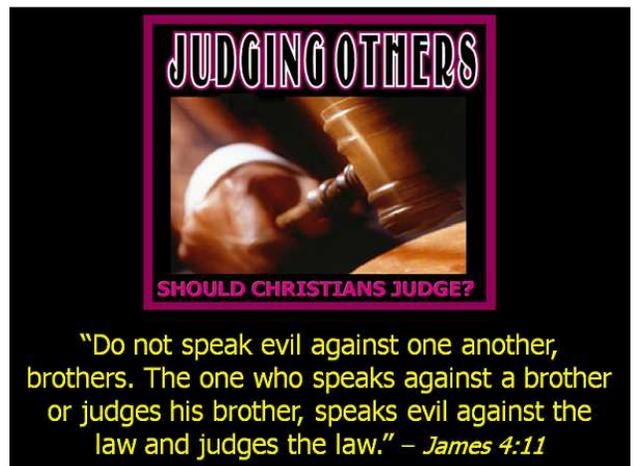


So, please, let's not give the devil credit for everything that bothers us. If we let things bother us, it's only because we've opened the door for Satan's lies through unchecked emotions and careless speech. Sometimes things go wrong because of simple human error; we make mistakes, or forget to take care of something, or don't plan ahead. That's not the devil's doing; don't give him credit for that. It was our own fault, and we could have avoided the situation by using the brains God gave us. Where Satan can get to us is through the lies he tells us, using our own voice to open the door to his thievery and destruction.

There is a universal phenomenon called *entropy*. Things tend to slow down if not kept moving; things tend to disintegrate and decay if not maintained. This is true in the physical world, and also in our human relationships. Our relationships can fall apart if we don't maintain them, and the devil can use our neglect to create problems for us. He uses that entropy to break things down. But there's also a universal force that upholds God's creation; as Hebrews 1:3 states, the Son of God is "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he *upholds the universe by the word of his power.*" The "word of power," the gospel of the Lord Jesus, is what prevents the "father of lies" from doing his evil work. We don't have to give in to his attacks. So let's remember what James tells us: "Resist the devil, and he *will* flee from you" (4:7). As a believer, you're much more powerful than any devil.

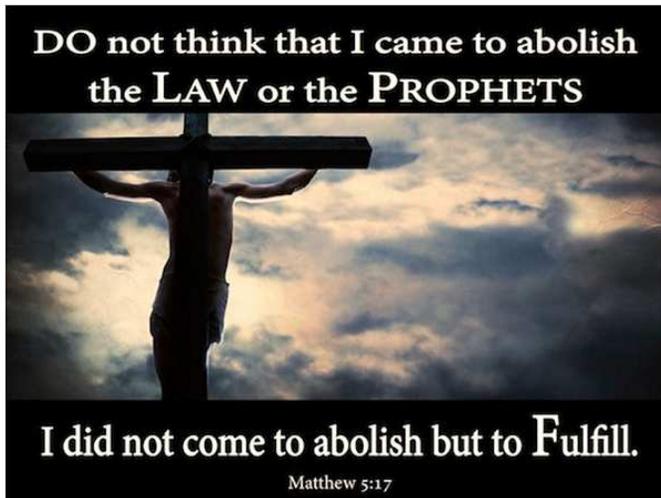
James then turns to the subject of speaking evil and judging others within the Christian community. "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law" (4:11). This statement raises some questions. First, are we not supposed to encourage one another in Christian conduct, and if so how can we avoid "judging" one another, in the sense of discerning when a brother or sister has stepped off the path in some way? Certainly James' entire letter is a critique of unhealthy practices in the church. And second, what "law" is James talking about when he says we're speaking evil against the law by judging another Christian? I hope I can work my way through these questions and come to a logical conclusion.

First, we know that Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, spoke to his disciples about judging: "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matthew 7:1). This is a favorite quotation by people who rebel against any standards of conduct; supposedly, we Christians are not to evaluate the behavior of others against any criterion such as biblical precepts. But people who quote this statement against Christians rarely know very much about the Bible; in fact, this is probably the only Bible verse they do know! They need to read the rest of what Jesus said: "For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:2-5). Obviously, Jesus isn't saying we're not to judge others, but that



before we do so we need to take a good look at ourselves. In Matthew 18 Jesus even laid down some rules for confronting sin within the church.

I think we have to understand what James says about judging in the context of what his brother taught about it. We're not to "judge" other believers in a way that destroys our relationship with them and breaks up the fellowship of the body of Christ. If we discern a grievous fault in a fellow believer, we're duty bound to deal with that in some helpful way that encourages that person's growth in the Christian life and promotes the health of the church. That shouldn't be considered "speaking evil" of another, or "judging" them. James, I think, is speaking about gossipy, vindictive criticism of another worshiper that leaves no room for repentance and reconciliation.

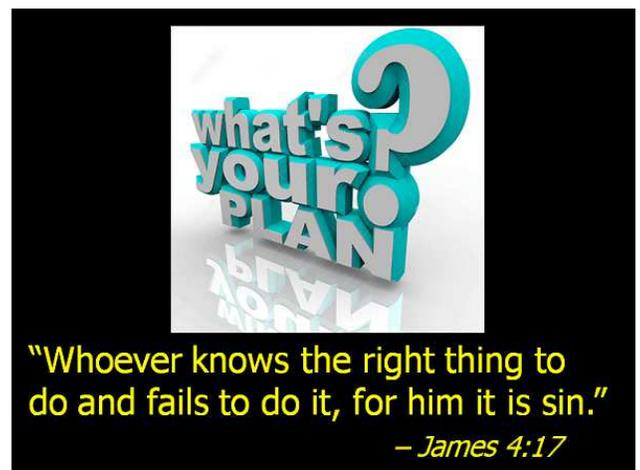


Why do I believe that? Because of what James says about "judging the law" by speaking evil of others. Earlier in this letter James has referred to "the law of liberty." Quite obviously he doesn't mean the Jewish law, the Torah of Moses. Christian faith doesn't nullify the law God gave his people on Mount Sinai, but it goes beyond it. In fact, Jesus said he didn't come to do away with the Hebrew Scripture but to fulfil them (Matthew 5:17); Paul said that "the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Galatians 5:14), and James calls that "the royal law" — that is, the law of the King, Messiah Jesus. I think that "law," the law of care and concern within the church, is the law James says we judge when we speak evil of one another. In this letter

James has written plenty about caring for the needy, especially the needy within our own Christian fellowship; he could easily have written what Paul wrote to the Galatians: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). We "judge" that "royal law" if we ignore it, placing ourselves above it and refusing to follow it. Let's be sure we continue to observe it, so this house of worship remains a beacon of concern for others within this community.

In this connection I have to tell you about a gentleman from the Peoria area who came to the funeral for George Clark. He attends a large church at home, but he spoke to me about how impressed he was with our church and what we do to serve our community through the Food Pantry, the Boy Scouts, AA, the meal the ladies served after the funeral, and the rest. In fact, this gentleman tried to donate toward the cost of the meal, but he was told that wasn't necessary — that's just something we do to bless people. So he couldn't say enough good about what a caring congregation we must be. Folks, let's keep it that way!

Finally in this chapter, James turns to the way we plan our activities. "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit' — yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that'" (4:13-15). At first this remark is puzzling; knowing what we know about how the Lord values human life, and how we've been created in his image, it seems strange to hear our life compared to a mist or vapor that doesn't amount to anything and soon disappears. That's not a Christian view of life, which the Scriptures tell us is precious



in the sight of God. I think James is talking about someone who doesn't know the Lord, who just goes ahead and makes plans for his life without taking God's will into account. Frankly, in our culture that's how most people live; the Lord just isn't on their radar screen. James is issuing a warning: you do need to take God into account, or you really won't "know what tomorrow will bring" and your life really won't amount to anything.

But that's not where we are, who know the Lord. We *do know what tomorrow will bring*, because we have the ultimate promise of the resurrection in the last day. Not only that, we have God's promise of blessing, health, and prosperity *now* if we live according to the precepts of biblical wisdom and the principles of the kingdom of God. So *we can plan for the future*, because we know it's the Lord's will for us to be successful in life — and by "success" I mean having the resources and the ability to do what God calls us to do, whatever that may be for each one of us. We don't have to say, "If the Lord wills," if we set out to do what we already know is his will for us. I think that explains the last line James writes in this chapter: "Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin" (4:17). If God has called you to do something for him, go ahead and make plans to do it; for *that's what faith is: doing what God calls you to do*.

Text ©2016 Richard C. Leonard
Images from Internet sources