Lesson 9
James 4:11-17 Commentary
New Revised Standard Version

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Study Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the *International Bible Study Commentary* website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the *International Bible Study Forum*.

(James 4:11) Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, 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.

Do not speak "evil" means exactly that. If someone does evil and breaks a law, it is not "evil" to tell the proper authorities so the victim can be helped, public justice served, and future abuse and crimes prevented. It is not

evil for the proper authorities to punish someone who has been justly judged to have done evil. It would be evil for someone to do evil to pay back personally someone who has done evil to them. As Paul wrote in Romans 12:17, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.” It is simply wrong to do evil, and the Bible reveals thoughts and behaviors that God considers evil.

In the church and in other places, it too often happens that some will gossip about others and speak evil about someone to make themselves feel better or to hurt, defame, or do other evils. Gossip and even telling the truth about someone with the wrong intentions is evil. Paul wrote about these same concerns in 2 Corinthians 12:20, “For I fear that when I come, I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish; I fear that there may perhaps be quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.” These are all examples of what can happen when people in the church turn from trying to live as Jesus taught and lived. These are examples of the way the world lives, and not even the worldly are truly happy speaking and living in these evil ways.

James warned, “Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law.” When someone speaks evil of another person or judges (condemns) another person (usually to hurt someone in some way, perhaps to defame them or make

them suffer in public in some way), they are doing what is evil. When they do so, they are speaking "evil against the law" of God. They are judging that the law of God does not apply to them, that they are "above the law." They think they do not need to obey the law of God because in some way they or the situation is "special." Neither James nor Paul taught that it is evil to tell the truth about someone to report a crime or testify in a court of law or to help people as an act of love for them. It is not evil to uphold the law of God and try to help people by doing so.

James went on to write, "if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge." Some people judge others because they do not want to think about their own sins and failures. They are not doers of the law, but judges who condemn others—often condemning others for doing what they themselves do or wish they could do. If we judge that a law of God does not apply to us, we are condemning God and the law of God and not doing the law of God. We are simply a judge who believes he is greater than God or wiser than God (which of course is doing evil). Too many "this world" or "worldly" judges condemn God and the law of God by judging and saying our "man-made laws" or our "worldly laws" are greater than God's law—the Law of Love. But as Paul wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:8, "We know that the law is good if one uses it properly."

(James 4:12) There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?

No matter what those of "this world" think or how much "this world" thinking invades the church and the minds of those in the church, only God is the Lawgiver and Judge who can both save and destroy. A human judge in a government can save (not condemn) or destroy (murder) someone physically (legally, but immorally), but they cannot do either spiritually. Human judges who judge or condemn God's law will be judged by God, who is able to destroy them for the evil they do and have done to others.

Finally, there are some inside and outside the church who look for reasons to judge or condemn someone. They have set up rules or standards in their own minds that they expect others to live up to; then, they condemn, judge, or gossip about those who displease them—this too is doing evil.

(James 4:13) Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money."

James continues to warn us not to think we are wiser than God or God's law. He warns us not to think that we can control our circumstances, plans, and ultimate destinies without regard to God—we can only do so for a limited time. Some think only of making and spending money and have no regard for God. The love of money has become their god. They make plans with no thought of God. Even in the church, some can fall into the temptation of doing

things without going first to God in prayer for guidance and protection to do the right thing in the right way at the right time.

(James 4:14) Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

Only God truly knows what tomorrow will bring and how long someone will live. A tidal wave, an earthquake, or a volcanic eruption can change us and the world forever. We never know when we might become victims of an accident, an illness, or some evil person. No matter how long we live or how old we are, by comparison to a tall mountain that erodes each year, our life is like "a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." Thankfully, as Christians, we live daily by the grace of God and no one or thing can take us out of the loving hands of God; so, we need to live in ways that show we truly believe the truth about God and reality when we make plans—remembering that Jesus has given eternal life to all who follow Him.

(James 4:15) Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that."

In humility, Christians need to always make plans and acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ by praying to know and do the will of God in the power and protection of God. When we pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven," we need to recommit ourselves

to do the will of God here on earth as revealed in the Bible (see Matthew 6:10). We truly need to love God and our neighbor as the Bible teaches; if we do, we will not do the things James warns against in his letter. We will not make plans to do evil. We will want to do God's will in everything and submit our every plan to God and request that God's will be done.

(James 4:16) As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.

It is common to hear those of "this world" boast of what they have done and what they will do, which often shows their arrogance, pride, and self-centeredness. Christians should avoid boasting because it is evil. Churches should avoid boasting, which is an arrogant way of saying, "Our church is better than your church," which is evil. Christians and churches should always acknowledge that what good they have done has been done by the grace of God, by God's loving power and will and not by their own strength. We should say, "We have only done the will of God" (see Luke 10:17).

(James 4:17) Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

In this study, we have learned that the right thing to do is seek God's will, pray that God's will be done, and then do God's will to the best of our prayerful understanding. We need to humbly trust in God and not make plans without consulting God. We must place our plans in God's hands

without complaint. We must not condemn or judge others or look for ways to condemn those who do not live up to our expectations or standards.

We have learned not to judge or condemn God or God's law but do as the writer of Psalms 119:164-66 did when he wrote: "Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous ordinances. Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble. I hope for your salvation, O LORD, and I fulfill your commandments." In John 14:15-16, Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." From our study of the whole Bible and the teachings of Jesus, we know many right things to do (and as we grow spiritually, we will learn many more right things to do—how to better love God and our neighbors, for examples). If we do not do the right thing that we know to do, we commit sin. With increasing knowledge comes increasing responsibility and more opportunities to serve Jesus Christ, those who know Him, and those who need to know Him.

Thankfully, if we sin and fail to do God's will, we can confess our sins to God, begin doing the right thing with God's help, and look for more right things to do. We can trust in the forgiveness of God and God cleansing us from all sin—all made possible by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ who lived, died, and rose again to save us from our sins and give us eternal life no matter how short our life is in this world.

Remember what Paul wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:15-17, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, *Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life*. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." Jesus Christ came to save you and me, not condemn us—He is our example as we seek to save the lost by sharing the Good News of Jesus with them.

Remember what both Jesus and the Holy Spirit do today. *They pray for all Christians all the time*. They pray for all Christians to know the will of God and do the will of God with their help. These four verses should encourage you and help you remember what God does for you as one of His children.

First, Romans 8:26, "Likewise *the Spirit helps us in our weakness*; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but *that very Spirit intercedes* with sighs too deep for words."

Second, Romans 8:27, "And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because *the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God*."

Third, Romans 8:34, "Who is to condemn? It is *Christ Jesus*, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right

hand of God, who *indeed intercedes for us*."

Fourth, Romans 8:37, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors *through him who loved us*."

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. How can you not judge as James wrote in James 4:11-12, and also do what Jesus said in Matthew 7:15, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves"?

2. How should someone make plans, do business, and make money?

3. What did James say we should think about when we make plans to do something in the future?

4. How can we remind ourselves to always say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that"?

5. How might you encourage and help someone who tells you, "I know the right things to do but I fail to do them. I commit sins"?

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