

Place: Lurgan Baptist 14:11:2004

Reading: James 4:1-12

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

27. PLAYING GOD

The story is told of a happy little family that lived in a small town in North Dakota. Each evening the neighbours saw the husband and father being greeted at the gate by his wife and two small children. When the weather was nice, they would see the father and children playing on the lawn while the mother and wife looked on with a smiling face. *Then one day a gossip in the town started the story that the man was being unfaithful to his wife. It was more than she could bear.* That night when the husband came home there was no one to meet him at the gate. There was no happy children or smiling wife to greet him when he walked into the house. There were no happy sounds in the house or fragrant aroma coming from the kitchen, only coldness and something that chilled his heart with fear.

He found his family the three of them in the basement hanging from a beam. In despair reason left its throne and the young mother had taken the lives of her two children and then her own. *In the days that followed, the truth of what happened came out.* A terrible tragedy caused by a gossip's tongue and untrue story. That story reminds us of what gossip and slander can do. How often have others approached you by saying, "*have you heard? Have you heard that the Hysterical Concrete Memorial church is about to split? Have you heard that Ferdinand and Flo are divorcing? Have you heard that the pastor was asked to leave the church? Have you heard that their son is on drugs? Have you heard that she is a flirt watch out for her? Have you heard ...?*" Now its every evident that these Jewish believers to whom James was writing were having problems with their tongues. James mentions the subject in every chapter of this epistle. Do you recall the words in the opening chapter? "*Wherefore my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath.*" (1:19)

In (Ch 2) he warns them, "*So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.*" (2:12) In (Ch 3) he deals exclusively with the use of the tongue and now in these two verses (4:11-12) he warns his readers yet again of the great dangers involved in sins of speech. *Now do you see the context in which James pens these words?* He has been dealing with humility and pride and the

tongue is a major instrument for expressing human pride. How often we justify ourselves by judging others. We life up our own reputation by lowering the reputation of others. We promote ourselves by demoting others in what we say. We are a bit like the Pharisee who prayed, “ *God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.* ” (Lk 18:11) Do you see what he did ? He praised himself and he derided the other man. John Calvin says, “ *We fondly exalt ourselves by slandering others.* ” Oh, we can do it in such a way that makes us look so caring, so concerned, so spiritual, when all the time it is nothing more than a way of spreading gossip, sharing rumours, and lessening a person in the esteem of another. Now as we look at this subject of “ ***Playing God,*** ” there are two things that I want to take note off.

(1) A SIN THAT IS PREVALENT

Thomas Manton once said, “ *Censuring is a pleasing sin, extremely complaint with nature.* ” Is that not true ? Censuring, fault finding, bitterness, slander come so quickly to mind and to mouth. I mean we don’t have to work hard to find fault in others. Yet James says, “ *Speak not evil brethren.* ” Or as the Amplified puts it, “ *My brethren, do not speak evil about or accuse one another.* ” Now what is this sin that James is condemning ? Well, consider for a moment:

(a) ***THE MEANING OF IT:***

You see, James is not forbidding us to use discrimination or even to evaluate people. Christians need to have discernment. (Phil 1:9-10) We have to exercise judgement and discernment. We have got to make moral judgements, personal judgements, and doctrinal judgements. But that is not the kind of thing that James is thinking of. The words “ *speak not evil,* ” come from a word that means to slander. It describes someone speaking of another person in a disparaging way with the intention of putting them down. It is a word that describes the spirit of ever finding fault in others. It means to speak evil of someone else in that persons absence, to criticise, to insult, to slander someone when he is not there to defend himself. Its this harsh uncharitable spirit that is for ever finding fault with others whether to their face or behind their back.

A husband and wife were leaving the office of a marriage counsellor. The husband turned to his wife as they walked toward the car. He said, “ *Well, did what the counsellor say about being considerate and not criticising me finally get through your thick skull.* ” Somehow I don’t think that remark helped. But you know what I

am talking about don't you ? Of course you do for we've all engaged in it. Passing on little titbits of whispered information which destroy the reputation and good name of others. So often we say that our words of destructive criticism are only against principles, but the truth is that very often they soon involve people. Have you heard someone criticising the actions of others and then adding "*but of course there is nothing personal in this.*" So often that is a blatant lie. There is something personal in it. There is an intention to wound or to weaken. Are you using your tongue to devalue another person's character ? The word that James uses here for "*speaking,*" conveys the idea of "*talking down.*" Its as if he is saying, "*Don't think that you're such a superior person that you can afford to talk down from a great height about someone else.*" (a) But think of:

(b) THE MENTION OF IT:

For it is this sin that is repeatedly condemned throughout Scripture. The psalmist hears God saying, "*Whoso privily slandereth his neighbour, him will I cut off.*" (Ps 101:5) Paul writes, "*Let all bitterness, and wrath and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you with all malice.*" (Eph 4:31) Peter adds, "*Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word.*" (1 Pet 2:1-2) My there are few sins which the Bible so unsparingly condemns as the sin of irresponsible and malicious gossip. And there are few activities in which the average believer finds more delight than spicy gossip, to tell and to listen to the slanderous story is for most of us a fascinating activity. But have we ever paused to think about:

(c) THE MISERY OF IT:

For has this sin not brought misery and sorrow wherever and whenever it is committed ? My If the truth about a Christian is harmful then we should cover it in love and not repeat it. (1 Pet 4:8) If a believer has sinned, then according to the teaching of Christ we should go to him personally and try to win him back. (Matt 18:15-19 Gal 6:1-2) Yet so often we do the devil's work and become the accuser of our brethren. In (2:7) James stated "*Resist the devil you.*" The word "*devil,*" means "*slanderer, false accuser.*" In the book of Revelation he is called the "*accuser of the brethren.*" Would any Christian consciously do the devils work ?

My when you slander, speak of another believer in a disparaging way, you're doing the work of the devil.

D.E. Hoste, the former general director of the China Inland Mission, once made this challenging statement,

“ looking back over these fifty years, I really think that if I were asked to mention one thing that has done more harm, and occasioned more sorrow and division in God’s work than anything else, I should say tale-bearing. ”

Is this not one of the scourges of the church ? Is this the evangelical grapevine not always active with the passing on of rumour, of gossip, of stories that are tinged with something a little unclean, dishonest, critical. How are we to react when we hear such a story about a brother or sister in Christ ? Take it out of circulation and refuse to pass it on. *“ Speak not evil one of another, brethren. ”* 1

(2) A SOLUTION THAT IS RELEVANT

You see, James gives us four reasons or considerations why we should obey this particular commandment to

“ speak not evil one of another, ” and in so doing he brings before us a solution for this problem. How then are we to deal with this tendency to criticise believers in a defamatory way ? Well, we are to think of:

(a) THE LINK BETWEEN US:

Did you notice the way James appeals to his readers ?

He uses the word *“ brethren, ”* or *“ brother, ”* three times and the word *“ another, ”* or *“ neighbour, ”* in (4:12) You see, James is thinking about behaviour within the church fellowship, and he appeals to their relationship as brethren as a reason for not engaging in malicious tale-bearing. Would it not be good if we could get more of the brotherly attitude among Christians ? More of the sense of family, more of the spirit of fellowship ? In the Greek language the word *“ fellowship, ”* means *“ to have in common. ”* My we have much in common. We share the same life, the same Word, the same love for Christ, the same concern for a lost world and the same desire to glorify God. My we are brothers and sisters in Christ. But would you really think that when you consider the disgraceful amount of evil-speaking one of another ? And the result ? Often things go on very much as before.

Outwardly, there seems to be unity. The work plods on. There seems to be a measure of blessing, but the fellowship has been marred. Is there not a need for honest confession and wholehearted forgiveness in this whole area of Christian relationships ? James says, when you are tempted to speak *“ evil one of another, ”* think of the link between us, are in the same family. And then think of,

(b) THE LAW BEFORE US:

Look at (4:11) if you will ! What does James mean here by “ *the law,* ” ? It would seem that he is referring back to (2:8) You see, the royal law is this, “ *thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.* ” (Lev 19:18) Now its not only “ *royal,* ” because it is given by the King of Kings, but its “ *royal,* ” because it’s the King of all laws. For all our relationships with each other are to be governed by the royal law of love. Now here is a person who far from loving his Christian brother is defaming him in speech. In so doing, he is speaking against the law, that is to say he looks upon the law as a precept and breaks it. Now if a believer breaks this law of love and knows that he is breaking it, he sets himself above the law, he makes himself a judge of the law. Now don’t miss what James is saying ! He is saying, “ *You know the royal law of love is there, you know what it says, but you are deliberately setting it to one side and carrying out the Things you want to do. This is Christian permissiveness.* ” Are you guilty of that ? Do you realise that when you engage in slanderous, backbiting, tale-bearing activities that you are breaking the royal law of love ? My when around the dinner table in a short time you are tempted to “ *speak evil,* ” of another Christian think of the (a) (b) and then think of:

(c) THE LORD ABOVE US:

For James says, “ *but if to destroy.* ” (4:12) Now many translations insert the words “ *and judge,* ” after the word “ *lawgiver.* ” The real sense comes out well when we read it, “ *there is one lawgiver and judge, He who is able to save and destroy.* ” There is no doubt that he is talking about God. He is the one and only lawgiver. The word, “ *lawgiver,* ” speaks of one who puts His laws into place. Isaiah says, “ *For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our King He will save us.* ” (Is 33:22 2 Kings 5:7) Now why James take us to the Lord as lawgiver and judge at this point ? For two reasons. You see, he underscores here two qualifications that belong to God and to God alone. The first is:

1. AUTHORITY:

“ *There is one lawgiver and judge,* ” yet under this Divine authority there are many others. There are kings and rulers, presidents and prime ministers, all exercising authority over others. So do employers, and parents, and many others and our attitude to those is to be of submission and obedience. Paul says to Titus, “ *Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work. To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle* ”

showing all meekness unto all men.” (Titus 3:1) My if we are to be obedient to these earthly rulers, how much more submissive should we be to God and His law. (1) And now:

2. ABILITY:

For James says that God is “ *able to save and to destroy.*” And that is not only true physically but spiritually. That being so we can leave with God the daily issues of life. Is this not the real point that James is making here ? You see, so often our destructive criticism seems to be born out a conviction that we’re the only people who can possibly put the world right. When will we learn to behave in a way that confirms our faith that God is in control, and is working all things according to the counsel of His will ? Now tell me, have you been playing God ? Have you been playing God in the lives of others ? Have you said in effect, “ *Lord, move over, your throne has room for me, I am as capable to judge as you are.*” Its sad when Christians do the devils work for him, but ***its even sadder when believers try to do God’s work for Him.*** So when you are tempted to slander have a think about the (a) (b) (c) and:

(d) THE LACK WITHIN US:

“ *Who art thou that judgest another.*” (4:12) The Amplified renders it like this, “ *But you, who are you to pass judgement on your neighbour ?*” Do you see the contrast ? God has the authority and ability to give laws, to judge, to save, to destroy now says James do you ? In a nutshell James is asking, “ *Who made you God ?*” What right do we have to slander others ? What right do we have to talk about and tear down others acting as if we are God. Who gave you the role and the right to do so ? There are two things from which we all suffer and which should prevent us from judging one another.

1. Our Lack of PERFECT INFORMATION:

Have you ever been guilty of criticising someone, and then you have had to reverse your opinion of the situation when you’ve heard the other side of the story. John Wesley told of a man he had little respect for because he considered him to be miserly and covetous.

One day when that man contributed only a small gift to a worthy cause, Wesley openly criticised him. After the incident the man went to the Methodist preacher and told him that he had been living on parsnips and water for several weeks. He

explained that before his conversion he had run up many bills. Now by skimping on everything and buying nothing for himself he was paying off his creditors one by one. Wesley said, “ *I felt as if I had attempted to be the Distributor of the law, and vindicate myself by passing judgement on that man.* ” Do you see why you and I are incompetent to pass this kind of judgement ? Because we don’t know all the facts. (1)

2. Our Lack of PERSONAL INTEGRITY:

We ourselves are guilty people. Do you recall what the Saviour said to the woman taken in adultery ? “ *he that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.* ” (Jn 8:7) Do you know what the response was ?

“ *And they which heard it being convicted by their own conscience went out one by one.* ” (Jn 8:9) They recognised that they were disqualified by their own lack of integrity. But then its easier to see faults in others than in ourselves. Like the old Quaker who said to his wife,
“ *Everybody in this world is a bit queer, except thee and me, and sometimes I think thee a bit queer.* ”

**“ *Faults in others I can see
But praise the Lord there’s none in me.* ”**

Is this you ? Are you looking at the speck of dust in your brothers eye and failing to notice the plank in your own ?

Have you been playing God ? A wee boy was asked,
“ *how many Gods are there ?* ” To which he replied,
“ *there’s only one.* ” “ *How did you know that ?* ”

“ *Because,* ” he said “ *there’s only room for one.* ” Will you remember that the next time you’re tempted to slander ? Someone once said, “ *the critic who starts with himself will have no time to take on outside contracts.* ”
James says, “ ***Speak not evil one of another brethren.*** ”

