

One Lawgiver and Judge



SABBATH—NOVEMBER 22

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: James 4:11–17; Acts 17:11; Hebrews 4:15, 16; Luke 12:13–21; Ecclesiastes 2:15–19; Titus 2:14.

MEMORY VERSE: “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge. He is the One who is able to save life or destroy it. But who are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:12, NlrV).

HOW DO WE RELATE TO OTHER PEOPLE? How do we relate to God? How we relate to people and to God depends on our attitude (thought or feeling) toward the law (both human law and God's law). Have you noticed that sometimes rich and famous people act as if they are above the law?¹ Even some who make the laws, or enforce them, may try to write those laws for their own personal gain. Disrespect for a society's laws can involve disrespect for other people. This is because laws rule how we relate to each other.

At the same time, those who favor strict laws may also have difficulty in their relationships with other people. At a deeper level, our attitude toward the law depends on how we respect the wisdom of the lawgivers and the fairness of their laws.

This week's lesson begins with examining the law. But our study will lead us into some important words about a special kind of pride that we might not know about. James warns us that this kind of pride is a sin that breaks God's law. James also shows us another way of looking at sin.

DEFINITIONS

1. above the law—to feel that you do not need to follow the rules of society because you think you are better than other people.

JUDGMENT OR WISDOM? (James 4:11)

“My brothers and sisters, don’t [do not] speak against one another. Anyone who speaks against another believer speaks against the law. And anyone who judges another believer judges the law. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it. Instead, you are acting as if you were its judge” (James 4:11, NIV). How does judging others compare² with sitting in judgment of the law?

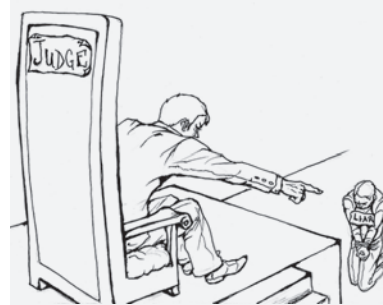
The first wording in verse 11 (translated “speak against”) could include several sins of speech, including saying something untrue about someone and angry words (read Leviticus 19:15–18). It seems that James is using softer language here than in chapter 3. But speaking against one’s brother or sister seems more serious. This is because doing so means questioning the law itself. By putting ourselves on the judgment seat, we ignore our own weaknesses (read Matthew 7:1–3). And we focus on another person’s wrongdoing, as if we were somehow outside of or above the law. By doing so, we fail to love our neighbor as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18). So, we are not keeping the law.

At the same time, we should not be judging others. Instead, we must learn to have spiritual wisdom.

Identify in the following verses the areas in which spiritual wisdom is important: Acts 17:11; 1 Corinthians 6:1–5; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Philippians 1:9; 1 John 4:1; and Galatians 6:1.

We are to compare what people teach and preach with what God says in His Word (the Bible). We should also encourage church members to settle their differences among themselves rather than in courts. Why? The judges may or may not be guided by God’s Word. Most important, we should examine ourselves to know how we stand in our faith relationship. And we should test ourselves to see if our attitude is spiritually healthful or harmful to our Christian experience.

It is so easy to criticize and judge others, especially when they do things we do not like. How can we learn to know the difference between being spiritually wise and being judgmental toward God’s law?



By sitting on the judgment seat, we focus on the wrongs of others.

DEFINITIONS

2. compare—to show how two or more things are the same or different.

THE LAWGIVER IS JUDGE (Hebrews 4:15, 16)

All the laws of the Old Testament are from Jesus. They are sometimes called the laws of Moses because they were given through him (2 Chronicles 33:8; Nehemiah 10:29). But it was Jesus who led the Israelites through the wilderness and spoke the Ten Commandments to them at Mount Sinai (read 1 Corinthians 10:1–4). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made the law clearer and strengthened our understanding of it. He is the “Word [the law of God] . . . made flesh” (John 1:14). And it is by His Word (the law of God) that we will be judged (John 12:48).

“There is only one Lawgiver and Judge. He [Jesus] is the One who is able to save life or destroy it. But who are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:12, NlrV). Read Isaiah 33:22; Isaiah 11:1–5; Hebrews 4:15, 16; and Revelation 19:11–16. What do these verses tell us about Jesus as our judge?

Only someone who knows the law very well is qualified to judge whether or not it has been broken. Lawyers study for many years before taking their bar exams to become lawyers. These exams test to see if they are ready to begin their practice of the law. Many of the scribes³ in the time of Jesus were Pharisees.⁴ They very carefully studied Moses’ laws and Jewish-made laws. Jesus did not agree with many of the Jewish-made laws. This led to serious disagreement between Him and the leaders. But Jesus was the One who gave Moses’ laws. So, He was and is able to explain what they mean better than anyone and to know whether or not the laws have been broken.

“God has given all judgment unto the Son. Without any question He is God in human form.

“God planned that the Prince of sufferers should be judge of the whole world. He was the One who came from the heavenly courts to save man from eternal death. . . . He let Himself be arrested and brought to stand on trial before an earthly court. He also suffered the most cruel death of the cross. He alone is to give the sentence of reward or punishment.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Maranatha*, page 341. As Lawgiver and Savior, Christ is qualified to be our Judge.

Either reward or punishment, we will face only one or the other. What is your only hope of reward?

DEFINITIONS

3. scribes—men in Bible times who interpreted the meaning of Jewish law.

4. Pharisees—a group of religious leaders among the Jews in Jesus’ time.

PLANNING AHEAD (James 4:13)

Read James 4:13. (Compare Luke 12:13–21.) How do we balance wise planning for the future with our need to live each day expecting Christ’s soon coming? How can we avoid the trap of just building bigger “barns”?

It may seem very reasonable to plan a year in advance or even more. Businesses commonly have short-, medium-, and long-range plans. Individuals (persons) and families need to save for the future and to make plans for unexpected expenses. But we also believe that Jesus is coming soon and that, someday, all of the things we own on earth will be destroyed by flames (read 2 Peter 3:10–12).

These two views are not always opposed to each other. Someone has said, “*Plan* as if Christ were not coming for years. But also *live* each day as if Christ were coming tomorrow.” This is good. But long-term planning can make it difficult to take one day at a time. Many of Jesus’ hearers (and many of today’s Christians) act like the rich man who decided to build bigger barns. He thought he was doing very well because God was blessing him. But Jesus shows us the man’s inner thoughts: “ ‘I’ll [I will] say to myself, “You have plenty of good things stored [saved] away for many years. Take life easy. Eat, drink and have a good time” ’ ” (Luke 12:19, NIV). In short, his greatest concern was to save up money *for himself*.

Most important, it is wise not to make our plans too firm. “Instead, you should say, ‘If it pleases the Lord, we will live and do this or that’ ” (James 4:15, NIV). This means more than just adding “God willing” to the end of a sentence about our future plans. It means we should surrender all our plans to God. We can pray: “God, I want to know Your will. If you are not pleased with these plans, please show me.” Then, if our plans are not good, God will show us that. We must listen to Him, pay careful attention to His will, and be ready to correct our plans or even change them entirely.

Read again James 4:13. Nothing really seems wrong with what is being said. But there may be a problem with the people’s attitude about it. How can we be careful not to get caught up in that same attitude?

A MIST (James 4:14)

Read James 4:14. What important point is being made here?

Life is uncertain. Every breath is a gift. James 4:14 uses a very rare Greek word (*atmis*). This word is translated as “vapor” or “mist.” It is like the Hebrew word *hebel* (“breath; vapor”), which occurs 38 times in Ecclesiastes and is often translated as “vanity.” It means that life is short. As we get older, do we not know just how fast life passes? Well into his old age, well-known evangelist Billy Graham said, “I never knew that life went by so quickly.”

There is always death ahead of us. We are all just a heartbeat away from it. Any of us, at any moment, for any reason, could die quickly. How rightly James says, “You don’t [do not] even know what will happen tomorrow” (James 4:14, NIV), including the time of your death.

“I will not speak about how short and uncertain life is. But there is a terrible danger that people may not fully understand. It is dangerous to put off surrendering to the pleading voice of God’s Holy Spirit and to continue living in sin. Such delay is truly dangerous.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, page 32.

Life is so short. And, at times, it can be so unsatisfying.

Read Ecclesiastes 2:15–19; Ecclesiastes 4:4; Ecclesiastes 5:10; and Ecclesiastes 9:11, 12. How does the message of Solomon support the point that James has made?

We see so much injustice and so much unfairness. There is so much of both that life often does not make sense. No wonder we all desire the promise of eternal life made to us through Jesus. Without that, we are just a mist that will be gone and forever forgotten.

Think about it: how much of this world holds you in its trap? How can you always keep in mind just how short it all is?



Life is uncertain. Every breath is a gift. So, yield to God’s Spirit today.

KNOWING AND DOING WHAT IS GOOD (James 4:15–17)

Read James 4:15–17 in comparison with the verses you have just studied. What important point is James making here?

In these verses, James is dealing with the attitude (thought or feeling) of self-dependence. In fact, he calls that attitude “arrogance [boasting]” and says it is “evil.” That is how important the right attitude is for the Christian.

Read verse 17. The Bible describes sin in two ways: (1) doing wrong and (2) not doing right. The first description of sin is given by John: “Sin is the transgression [breaking] of the law” (1 John 3:4). Many modern Bible versions explain that “sin is lawlessness [against the law].” But the Greek word *anomia* means certain actions of breaking the law rather than habitual lawless behavior (actions) (study its use in Romans 4:7; Titus 2:14; and Hebrews 10:17). The second description is given in James 4:17: “So when you know the good things you should do and don’t [do not] do them, you sin” (NIRV). So, we must do more than just refuse to give in to doing wrong. We are called to be “children of light” (Ephesians 5:8). And we also are to “let [our] light shine before others, so that they may see [our] good works and give glory to [our] Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16, ESV; emphasis added).

Of course, one could get easily discouraged because who can do all the good they could possibly do every single day? But that is not the issue. Even Jesus’ life was not filled with working all the time. There were times when He withdrew to pray or simply to rest (Luke 5:16; Mark 6:31). Most important, He asked God’s will in everything He did (John 5:30). Jesus even compared doing God’s will to eating: “ ‘My food is to do what my Father sent me to do. My food is to finish His work’ ” (John 4:34, NIRV). There are limits to how much we can eat at one sitting. There also are limits to how much we can do in one day. That is why Jesus goes on to say that some sow while others reap. But both “rejoice [are glad] together” (verses 36–38). As we work for the Lord, we will be encouraged to do more.

How does prayer help us die to self and so show an attitude of surrender to God’s will? Whatever your plans are, how can you learn to surrender them to the Lord?



Shine your light so that others may see your works and praise God!



By judging another, you hide or excuse the evil of your own heart.

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read about the value of time in Ellen G. White, “Talents,” in *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pages 342–346. Then share with your Sabbath School class the points that impressed you.

“Let no one among you seek glory [praise and honor] by judging the faults of others and saying you are simply doing this out of faithfulness to God and to defend the truth. Such wisdom has many admirers, but it is very deceptive and harmful. It does not come from God. But it is the fruit of an unconverted [unchanged by God] heart. Satan himself starts this evil. Let no one who judges others credit himself with having spiritual wisdom. Because, in so doing he hides the character [thoughts; feelings; actions] of Satan with the clothes of righteousness [holiness; goodness].”
—Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 7, pages 936, 937.

“He who is guilty of wrong is the first to suspect wrong. By judging another he is trying to hide or excuse the evil of his own heart. It was through sin that men gained the knowledge of evil. When Adam and Eve sinned, they began to accuse each other. This is what human nature will do when it is not under the control of the grace of Christ.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, page 126.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Look at the last Ellen G. White quote above. How can we protect ourselves against doing the same thing: judging and blaming others so that we try to feel better about ourselves and our own weaknesses?
- ② Think deeply about how fast life goes by. What should that tell us about what should be important to us? Scientists tell us that time is fast or slow, depending upon how fast we are moving in life. But we can be sure of one thing. No matter how fast or slow time goes by, once a moment is gone, it is gone forever. How should this serious thought influence what we do with our time?
- ③ There are people who are doing what is wrong and need help. How do we deal with them without falling into the trap that James has warned us about?