

Faith That Works: God's Eye View
By Jason Huff
September 27, 2020
Leviticus 19:16-18; Luke 18:9-14; James 4:11-17

Our final Scripture reading today is James 4:11-17. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you -- who are you to judge your neighbor? Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."

Things aren't supposed to be like this. It's not supposed to be this way. Those thoughts have been ringing in my head for months, but they've come to a fever pitch in the last several days. Take any issue that faces our nation today, from COVID lockdowns on down the line, and no matter if our positions differ from each other somewhat on certain issues, we still recognize, *things aren't supposed to be like this. It's not supposed to be this way.*

When I think about the tragic loss for our good friends the Reynolds this week, I think, *things aren't supposed to be like this. It's not supposed to be this way.* In the midst of our current crisis, in a very real sense multiple current crises over the last six months, we might cry out, "Where is God in all of this? What is God doing?" We may wonder if God is there, if He cares. When tragedies and difficult times strike in a short period, it's easy for doubt to creep in.

Now some things are tragedies no matter what era that happen, whether 800 BC or 2020 AD. But a great many things affect us differently because we have such a blessed frame of reference. No one under the age of 65 has been drafted into the Armed Forces. Crime is at its lowest rate in 55 years. We have technological devices the world couldn't even dream of 50 years ago, delivery of virtually everything you could want. We've had it surprisingly good for a long time, and so when things go badly, it feels far worse than it is. We live in such a blessed society that anything less than ideal can be a jolt.

But what about those truly devastating blows? What about those things where we know this isn't the way the world is supposed to work? We're exactly right. It's not. The only reason we could think that it's not supposed to be this way is because, in fact, God created the universe in His perfection and intended for us to live harmoniously in it. The creation was marred by human sin that has left a mark on all of it. And God sent Jesus Christ to redeem those who believe and trust in Him from our sin and from this broken world so that one day, we would join Him in His eternal Kingdom, perfected and made whole and made holy. That's the God's eye view of things, and God has let us in on it.

If there is no God, if defying all the physical laws we know, the universe came from nothing, then we cannot say, “It’s not supposed to be like this.” Because it’s all random chaos. Our ability to think and process, our choices between right and wrong, our very thoughts that something isn’t right – they’re just neurons firing in our brain due to chance and coincidences. Everything from COVID to injustice to death has no meaning or purpose. They just happen.

But we don’t actually believe that, do we? Even people who say they don’t believe in God instinctively ask questions and believe ideas that require God to be our loving Creator. This is where we tie into James’ lesson for us today. The two ideas James brings up don’t seem related until we realize that James wants us to have a God’s eye view, God’s perspective. In both circumstances, James confronts us when we attempt to remove God from His throne. Are we going to act like God isn’t there, or will we live in a way that always acknowledges Him?

The first issue James brings up is slander. Interestingly, James doesn’t try to get us to feel bad about slander by telling all the harm it will do to the other person, the repercussions, the damaged reputation. He goes right to the deeper issue of many of our sins, not just slander. When we slander someone, when we talk evil about them, it’s not just an issue with them. The issue is that when we do so, we slander the Law and, ultimately, God who gave us the Law.

This could be confusing, so let’s explain it a little more. Slander is false witness against someone – that breaks the ninth commandment. Because false witness was sometimes considered a legal issue, something that only mattered in court, God made it clear again in Leviticus 19. Don’t slander your neighbor, hate your brother, seek revenge, or hold a grudge. Ultimately, slander puts your neighbor’s life in jeopardy because if it’s believed, it makes him a pariah in the community, someone untrusted who no one will do business with.

Slander and judgment here – meant here as utter condemnation – are different from wise judgment and statements of fact. In Leviticus 19, where we find the laws against slander, it also says that we may correct and rebuke our neighbor in issues of sin so we don’t share the guilt. The issue here is not rightly calling out sin when it happens. The issue is condemning a neighbor and talking evil of him no matter what he does, deciding guilt in advance.

We’ve seen this recently, for example, with the calls against President Trump’s nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in the historic peace agreements between Israel and two of her historic enemies. We may not like or agree with everything that President Trump has done, but that agreement is amazing and President Trump deserves to be recognized with a nomination for what he accomplished. When we cannot acknowledge the good someone has done because of our other issues with that person, that’s slander.

And when we slander, we condemn the law itself and God as lawgiver. We put ourselves above the law. We do this on a regular basis with human laws, don’t we? Whenever we go over the speed limit, we say that we know better than the lawmakers what’s a safe speed to drive. And sometimes when you hit a speed trap, you’re right! The law isn’t there to protect anybody but to make some money. There are some bad laws on the books. Sometimes it’s even morally right and necessary to break a human law to keep God’s law. Sometimes we do have the moral high ground. Human lawmakers are far from perfect.

But God is the perfect Lawgiver. When we act in ways contrary to the Law – slander being one of them – we sit in judgment on the Law and its Maker. We’re saying, “This law shouldn’t apply to me. It’s an unworthy law. God didn’t know what He was doing when He made this a law.” Very few of us *think* we’re doing this. We don’t think we’re speaking evil of God when we speak evil against our neighbor. And yet that’s precisely James’ argument. It’s true *every* time we break God’s law, every law we break, but it’s clearest with slander – slander someone else and you wind up slandering God and God’s law. We put ourselves in God’s place.

And this asks us the very serious question: are we on the court bench or God? Because there’s only room for one. We might have nine Supreme Court justices, thousands and thousands of local courts, but in eternal matters, there is only one Judge. Not only does He make the laws, He determines if we’ve followed them correctly or not. He is the one who can pass sentence on us or determine us not guilty through the blood of Christ covering our sins. Do we have that power and authority? Do we have the knowledge, the wisdom, the perfection, to rightly judge every case perfectly? If not, then don’t slander God by passing final judgment on your neighbor. Only God has that right.

Next, James gives a command to those who say this: "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Sounds pretty typical, right? We talk about our plans all the time. We have high school counselors whose job it is to talk to students to figure out what they want to do with the rest of their lives, steering them to a college that fits those life goals. A common interview question is, “Where do you see yourself in 5 years? 15 years?” The pragmatic church world does the same thing. Set goals! Have a hundred members in six months of launch! Have enough members to plant a new church in five years! Have this many baptisms, this many backsides in seats, these finances!

To be fair, planning can be a good and biblical idea. The proverbs tell us that the plans of the diligent lead to abundance, but haste leads to poverty. Jesus tells parables about the wise who plan for His second coming and the foolish who do not. The apostles in Acts made plans to visit certain regions and churches. And the Jewish calendar of festivals God Himself established gave Israel a pattern to follow, a plan for regular worship and refreshment away from work. So it’s not making plans that are the problem.

What’s the problem? The same as before with slander – putting yourself in the place of God. Paul and Timothy and Silas wanted to go into the province of Asia to preach, but the Holy Spirit kept them from going, so they didn’t go. Their plans were in God’s hands, and when God said “no,” they changed their plans. They had in mind a reasonable route, but they were sensitive to the Holy Spirit’s leading to head to Macedonia instead.

In comparison, we often make plans with no thought to what God wants, or even how little control we have over our lives. We brag about what’s going to happen when we have no idea if we’ll even see tomorrow. James calls us a mist that vanishes after showing up just a little while. But we rarely think that way. The other night, a friend and I were talking and he was like, “Where do you think you’d like to retire?” And I was like, “I don’t know where I’ll be twenty minutes from now, let alone twenty years from now!” He’s 58, closer on his horizon, but still. What a blessing it would be to make it to retirement – but that’s in God’s hands, not mine!

Sometimes we call these folks “big talkers,” people who brag about every sale they’ve made, every deal they’ve brokered, every car they’ve bought or whatever. And perhaps this just extends to them. But I also think that it extends to us in another way. It has to do with the control we want to exert over life. We want to look like we have everything together, our lives and homes and children are all perfect, all our ducks are in a row. We’re going to have this many children and they’re going to go to this school and we’re going to live in this kind of home (perfectly clean and spotless all the time, of course) and have this career and live this kind of wonderful life.

And maybe we’ll post a verse on Facebook about how we need Jesus and how crazy things are, but we’re still in the driver’s seat. And then life really happens. AD&D and autism and OCD and depression happen. The death of loved ones happens. Unemployment hits and COVID hits and wow! We’re not really in control at all. And we can either fight against it or turn back to God, who is the only one really in control.

James suggests we say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” The key to this is, it’s not a mantra. It’s not to get God’s blessings on *our* plans by saying, “Lord willing,” and then just doing what we want. It’s meant to affect how we live our lives. Are we genuinely considering the Lord’s will in our lives? How does God’s will affect how the future looks? What would we buy? What would we give away? How would we choose to spend our time and our funds? How different would our plans look then?

Because James says boasting about the future we’re going to have, bragging about what’s on the horizon without thought to God’s will, is evil. Not just arrogant, but immoral. Because it elevates us to the throne and sets aside God’s desires for us. Consider how many times already in James’ letter we have heard that God resists the proud but raises up the humble. It is ultimately our pride that causes us to talk about all the great things we’re going to accomplish, the idea that we are self-made, steering our own destiny. It’s very much like the sin that caused the whole human race’s misery – Adam and Eve, thinking to themselves that the serpent’s promise that they would become like God sounded like a pretty good deal.

James finishes off this section by saying, “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.” We’ve been given notice. Perhaps we said things we shouldn’t have in the past about others. Maybe we’ve talked trash about others and put ourselves on a pedestal. It was always wrong, but perhaps we didn’t realize the extent of our sin. We didn’t grasp that what we were doing was a serious offense against God. But now it’s in front of us. There’s no excuse for ignorance.

And ultimately, the good we must do starts with acknowledging God’s rule and authority over every aspect of our lives. Our human viewpoint on things is far, far too small. We need God’s view on things. And we can’t elevate ourselves to that level. Instead, we walk in humility, knowing that God will sometimes share the view from above with us. We won’t always have that view. We will be asking the question “why” a lot of the time. But we know that trying to take charge, take control, that isn’t the answer.

How do we get a better idea of God's perspective? Ultimately, it goes back to the simple roots of discipleship that we've been taught for many years – be in the Word of God, be in prayer, abide in Him. Because when the difficulties of life come, either we will have the assurance of God from being close to Him on a regular basis, or we will be anguished because we haven't practiced drawing close to Him and we feel separated from Him by circumstances.

Be in the Word, and you'll learn not to boast and slander. Scripture humbles us. We see the great people of faith stumble and fall, often. We witness the foremost follower of Jesus deny Christ three times. We read about mighty kings who amassed astounding wealth who lost it all in a moment when they attempted to take the glory due only to God. We learn how we are sinners that deserve God's punishment but receive God's grace solely due to His love and mercy. Walk with God closely over a lifetime, and you'll know you don't want His job. You'll find joy in realizing His plans for you are so much better than your own. The only boasting you'll want to do is in God who has provided for you in every circumstance.

Friends, may God bless us with His viewpoint on things so that we do not endlessly question why things are the way they are or try to wrestle control away from Him. May He remind us that despite the deep darkness that was Good Friday, Resurrection Sunday was on the way. May He bless us with enough vision to see that in spite of the fact that this world is not what it should be, a new and perfect world is on the way. May it be so for all of us.