

WHO CAN JUDGE?

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Text: James 4:11-12

■ At the turn of the century, the world's most distinguished astronomer was certain there were canals on Mars. Sir Percival Lovell, esteemed for his study of the solar system, had a particular fascination with the Red Planet.

When he heard, in 1877, that an Italian astronomer had seen straight lines crisscrossing the Martian surface, Lovell spent the rest of his years squinting into the eyepiece of his giant telescope in Arizona, mapping the channels and canals he saw. He was convinced the canals were proof of intelligent life on Mars, possibly an older but wiser race than humanity.

Lovell's observations gained wide acceptance. So eminent was he, none dared contradict him.

Now, of course, things are different. Space probes have orbited Mars and landed on its surface. The entire planet has been mapped, and no one has seen a canal. How could Lovell have "seen" so much that wasn't there?

Two possibilities: (1) He so wanted to see canals that he did, over and over again, and (2) we know now that he suffered from a rare eye disease that made him see the blood vessels in his own eyes. The Martian "canals" he saw were nothing more than the bulging veins in his eyeballs. Today the malady is known as "Lovell's syndrome."

When Jesus warns that "in the same way you judge others, you will be judged" and warns of seeing "the speck of sawdust" in another's eye while missing the plank in our own (Matt. 7:1-3), could he not be referring to the spiritual equivalent of Lovell's syndrome? Over and over, we see faults in others because we don't want to believe anything better about them.

So often we think we have a firsthand view of their shortcomings, when in fact our vision is distorted by our own disease. (Larson, 121)

Our text has several strong comments for us concerning the *judgments* we pass on others. Look with me at what James has to say about judging.

I. WE ARE NOT TO PASS JUDGMENT ON OTHERS (v.11).

- A. Judging involves forming an opinion or estimating the condition of another's heart.

■ In our text **judging means** literally “**to pronounce condemnation upon someone.**”

We must be very careful because only God can see and know the hidden thoughts and intents of the heart. We can only judge the deeds of another—and then only by the Word of God.

BUT ALWAYS REMEMBER, even if we see wrong actions we cannot always know a person's heart. Whenever we do see wrong actions we must give the person the benefit of the doubt. Why? “Because love thinks no evil.”

B. We must be careful not to slander another because we are brothers and sisters.

To SLANDER means to make false charges or misrepresentations that damage a person's reputation.

■ *It's been said, “Some people find fault as if it were buried treasure.”*

(Hewett, 136)

James is writing to a group of people who were digging up just such treasure.

C. He who speaks against his brother “speaks against the law and judges it!”

The law to which he is referring is Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The one who judges sits in judgment of the law and presumes to correct God's rules.

■ Curtis Vaughn explains, “The meaning is this: The man who deliberately breaks a law thereby disparages that law. In effect he sets himself above it and declares that it is a bad law, not worthy to be obeyed. Such a person removes himself from a category of a doer of the law and becomes a judge of the law.”

(Swindoll, 153-54)

D. He who judges, sets himself above the law.

■ “Rather than submitting to it and keeping it, he passes judgment on its validity and sets it aside.” (Burdick, 196)

II. GOD'S JUDGMENTS ARE THE ONLY ONES THAT COUNT (v.12).

A. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge.

The one who judges is assuming God's authority and position as Righteous Judge. The Holy Spirit is the agent God has chosen to bring conviction to an individual's heart—not us.

■ Oswald Chambers writes, “The Holy Ghost is the only One in the true position to criticize, He alone is able to show what is wrong without hurting and wounding.” (123)

B. James puts it all in perspective with the question, "But who are you?"

■ “With shattering bluntness, James crushes any right his readers may have claimed to sit in judgment over their neighbors. This is not to rule out civil courts and judges. Instead, it is to root out the harsh, unkind, critical spirit that continually finds fault with others.” (Burdick, 196)

C. Judging is the result of pride in a person's life.

Too often we assume that we are above doing what others have done.

■ A traveler, between flights at an airport, went to a lounge and bought a small package of cookies. Then she sat down and began reading a newspaper. Gradually, she became aware of a rustling noise. From behind her paper, she was flabbergasted to see a neatly dressed man helping himself to her cookies. Not wanting to make a scene, she leaned over and took a cookie herself. A minute or two passed, and then came more rustling. He was helping himself to another cookie! By this time, they had come to the end of the package, but she was so angry she didn't dare allow herself to say anything. Then, as if to add insult to injury, the man broke the remaining cookie in two, pushed half across to her, and ate the other half and left. Still fuming sometime later when her flight was announced, the woman opened her handbag to get her ticket. To her shock and embarrassment, there she found her pack of unopened cookies!

-John Ross Cranleigh in Leadership-Vol. 12, #2

When we sit in judgment of another, we have (at the time at least), a very high opinion of ourselves. ***This is dangerous.*** The Bible warns us not to “think more highly of ourselves than we ought.” There is also an admonition to “take heed when we think we stand lest WE fall.”

CONCLUSION

■ Oswald Chambers writes in his devotional *My Utmost for His Highest*, “Who of us would dare stand before God and say—‘My God, judge me as I have judged my fellow men?’ We have judged our fellow men as sinners; if God should judge us like that we would be in hell. God judges us through the marvelous Atonement of Jesus Christ.” (127)

When any of us choose to judge another, we choose to play God. Our ***judgments*** will be based on our own high opinion of ourselves—not on the Word of God. Judging should be left up to God, the only One who can see into the hearts of man and be fair and impartial.

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