James 4:11-12

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[0:00] When our oldest son was in nursery in Edinburgh, and I haven't warned him that I'm going to mention this, but there you go.

But when he was in nursery in Edinburgh, he would periodically and solemnly inform us of certain actions that were forbidden, and he would indicate very solemnly what was forbidden.
Just the way he pronounced the word and the gravitas with which he pronounced it still is etched on my memory. Daddy, that's forbidden. Now, I think we'd all agree that there are actions that are or should be forbidden.
Of course, the tricky question is, who decides? Well, at the Grassmarket Nursery School, there was little doubt as to who determined what was forbidden.
Our son's nursery teacher very much had that prerogative. Now, our text this morning begins with a prohibition, behavior that, according to James, is forbidden.
[1:22] Brothers, do not slander one another. Now, when we read that prohibition, and as we maybe contemplate spending some time thinking about it, your thought might be similar to my thought when I read that verse was, well, listen, we all agree with that, right?

You know, what can you say other than, listen, that's the prohibition, just obey it. Is there really that much that you can say other than simply read it out and repeat it?
As I say, I would think most of us would not quibble with that being a reasonable prohibition. Do not slander one another. But I think as we consider what James says here, not only the prohibition itself, but perhaps more significantly the reasons provided by James as to why such conduct is forbidden prove revealing and very relevant for us living in 21st century Scotland.
So, what we're going to do this morning is that we're going to tackle the text, these two verses in James chapter 4 in the following way. We're first of all simply going to notice what it is that is forbidden. And what we'll need to do, although James doesn't do this, the language that he uses does almost oblige us to make the point about what is not forbidden.
Now, that may sound a little bit cryptic, but hopefully it will be clear in due course. So, we're going to think about what is it that's forbidden, and then as a kind of little aside, just to be clear, what is not being forbidden.
[2:59] But then particularly focus in on the reasons that James gives. So, why this prohibition? And we'll spend a little time thinking about that.

And then finally, and we also find it in the verses here, an indication, certainly a hint, as to the consequences that there will be for us if we are guilty of doing that which is forbidden.
So, that's more or less the manner in which we want to tackle these two verses. First of all then, what is forbidden? And as I say, we're going to subdivide the question in two. What is forbidden and what is not forbidden?
What is forbidden? Well, it's clear enough. There in verse 11, brothers do not slander one another. And then James goes on, anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it.
It's the first two-thirds of the verse that we're concerned with at the moment. James here uses two Greek verbs to identify what is being forbidden, what we ought not to do.
[4:13] And the first word that he uses is a word that's translated in two ways in verse 11.

It's translated, first of all, by the word slander. Notice there at the beginning of the verse, brothers do not slander one another. And then immediately on in our translation, it says anyone who speaks against his brother.
And it's the same word, simply translated in a different way to draw the sense of the word. So, the same word translated in these two different ways, by the word slander and by the word speak

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against.
Now, the actual Greek word that is translated there is a composite word made out of the two words against and speak. And so, the translation speak against is very literal and very accurate and precise.
And I think that is the sense. It is this broad picture of speech that is harmful to others, speaking against others.
[5:19] Slander is one way of speaking against others, but of course there are others. So, this is what is forbidden, to slander or to speak against.

We could think of other ways in which we can speak against our brothers and sisters or neighbors, to broaden it out as James himself does when he, at the end of verse 12, speaks about our neighbors.
False or uninformed or careless accusations are a way in which we speak against our neighbors, our brothers and sisters.
And it's not just false accusations. Perhaps we are less likely to be guilty of that, though perhaps some of us have been guilty of that. But I think we can be and often are guilty of careless accusations, of uninformed judgments about others that we express, and in doing so we harm them and we damage them.
We can gossip about others, others within the fellowship and others more generally. And that's another way in which we are guilty of not obeying this prohibition of doing that which is forbidden.
[6:39] Speaking about or to others in a mocking or disparaging or patronizing way or tone, I think also comes under the umbrella of this verb, do not speak against your brother.

So this is what is being forbidden by God through James. And I think for the avoidance of doubt, what we write, perhaps unthinkingly, on social media also counts as we think about what is being forbidden.
It's not just words that are verbally spoken, but words that are written or typed that we also need to be careful about. Such speaking against is forbidden.
And before we go any further, I think we need to just pause and ask ourselves the question, well, are we guilty of doing that which is forbidden? And I would suggest that we don't need to spend too long thinking about it.
Trust me, you are guilty. We are all guilty of this sin of speaking against others. In one way or another, it can be in a very scandalous and vulgar way.
[7:55] And so very evidently, a breaking of this command. Or it can be in a much more subtle way that maybe others don't even realize. And maybe we ourselves don't realize that in actual fact we are guilty.

We are speaking against our brother or our sister. The second word that James uses here is the word that's translated judge.
Notice there in verse 11, Brothers do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother, so we've said that these two verbs are the same verb in Greek, or judges him.
So here he introduces another word. Now this word, translated judge, is a word that as a standalone word or verb is morally neutral.
Now the word to slander clearly isn't morally neutral. It's always wrong to slander. But the word judge is, if we can use that language, morally neutral. But given the manner and the context in which James uses the verb as a near synonym to speak against, it's clear that he is referring to what we might call judgmental speech that is intended or likely to harm or to hurt.
[9:10] And we do this when we look down on and condemn others in an unkind and precipitate way. We do this when we expect the worst in or of others.

We judge them, but in this harmful, in this negative, in this hurtful way. And this, James assures us, is forbidden.
So that's what's forbidden. But we do need to just very briefly point out or note what is not forbidden. Now, James doesn't do that. But given the language he uses, especially that second word, judge, it is probably necessary just to clarify that.
James is not laying down some absolute prohibition of coming to judgments about other people or indeed about other people's behavior.
Be that other believers, which seems to be in mind at the beginning of verse 11, brothers do not slander one another, or indeed others who are outwith the family or community of faith, which

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seems to be the case with the language that he uses towards the end of verse 12.
[10:21] But you, who are you to judge your neighbor? We are, James is not saying that we are forbidden from coming to judgments about people or indeed about behavior.

And of course, that includes our own. Why would James not be forbidding that? Well, for some very obvious reasons that, as I say, James himself doesn't highlight, but I think we can, in the light of the Bible, explain.
Why not? Well, the first reason is that coming to judgments about others is inevitable. It's impossible not to. We do it all the time. It would be impossible to live with other people without coming to judgments about them.
It's something we necessarily and inevitably will do. But it's not just that it's inevitable, that not some kind of necessary evil, well, it can't be avoided. No, coming to judgments about others is necessary. If you're planning to marry somebody, or if you're planning to go into business with somebody, or if you're planning to employ somebody, well, it would be very foolish not to come to a judgment about them, indeed about their behavior in certain areas of their lives.
[11:27] That is not only inevitable, it's necessary, it's sensible to come to judgments about others. Indeed, it is a good thing to do so. And I make this point because, I don't know if it's increasingly or not, but it's certainly true that a very effective means of silencing those who hold a different opinion to the one we hold is to play the don't judge me card.

Of course, we might do it ourselves. It's not just that others play that card with us. Many Christians, and those who are not Christians as well, love to play this card, and it sounds so spiritual or so reasonable.
Don't judge me, or don't judge these other people. Only God can judge. And it's a very, or can be a very effective way of just shutting people up and saying, we don't want to listen to your opinion. You don't have a right to that opinion. You mustn't be judging other people. Of course, that's nonsense. God has given us the data, His revealed will. He's given us the faculties to come to judgments about people, including ourselves, and about behavior in the light of God's Word.
So what is forbidden is speaking against others where the intention or certainly the effect would be to hurt them or to harm them. There is a malice of forethought.
[12:51] There is that element within it. That is forbidden. Let's move on to the second thing that we want to think about, and that is why is this forbidden?

Why is speaking against others forbidden? And the reasons that James gives are revealing, they're relevant, and they are of wider application to all forbidden behavior.
Obviously, our concern, particularly, is with what is stated in our text. Do not slander one another. Do not speak against one another. But the reasons that James gives would be reasons that would apply to any behavior that is forbidden in the Bible.
What are the reasons that James gives? Why we ought not to speak against our brother? Well, I think we can identify three reasons.
To slander or to speak against others is an attack on God's people. Indeed, an attack on all who are made in the image and likeness of God.
[13:57] An attack on God's people. Secondly, it's an attack on God's law. And thirdly, it is an attack on God's person, on God Himself.

So, why ought we to obey this prohibition? Why ought we not to speak against others?
Well, for these three reasons. Because it is an attack on God's people to do so. It's an attack on God's law. And it's an attack on God's person. And let's just think about each of them.
First of all, to speak against others is an attack on God's people. And of course, not only on God's people. Whoever the victim happens to be. In verse 11, clearly James is concerned with the manner in which believers relate to one another.
Brothers do not slander one another. That's his principle or primary concern. But it does seem that as he moves into verse 12 and speaks about not judging your neighbor, he broadens it.
[14:56] And so, to speak against your brother or your neighbor is an attack, of course, on the one that you're speaking against. That is so manifestly obvious.

Now, James doesn't dwell on this, maybe because it is so obvious. But it is perhaps the most obvious reason why speaking against others is forbidden. To speak against others, to slander, to gossip, to mock, to lie about, to judge unfairly, all constitute an attack on the well-being of others.

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It's cruel. It's unkind. It's harmful. It not only damages the immediate victim. It also threatens the fellowship. And I think James is concerned about that on this occasion.
You know, when one believer is speaking against another believer, those involved aren't just those two people. These things kind of spread and leads to division and disharmony and disunity in the fellowship and broadly, or more broadly also, perhaps in the communities that we belong to, the workplace or wherever it is.
When people are speaking against one another, that causes damage. That is damage. Now, I don't need to tell you that. You know that for yourself. And so, again, we could maybe just pause and say something very obvious, but let me say it all the same.
[16:15] Let's just stop doing it. Seriously. Just don't do it. You do do it. There are occasions when you do it. You're guilty of it. You, in your better moments, as you reflect, will acknowledge that.

Just don't do it. Why? Because it is an attack on others. It is harmful and hurtful to others. It's an attack on God's people. But also, James, and in fact, James particularly focuses on what I'm calling the second reason, and that is that it is an attack on God's law.
This is a reason for the prohibition that James does explicitly highlight and draw attention to. Now, what is his logic here in verses 11? Particularly in verse 11.
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.
What is he saying? What is the argument? What's the logic that he's employing? Well, I think we can draw it out fairly clearly. James' logic is as follows.
[17:21] First of all, it is that God has given us his law. He has given us his law. Within that law, there is specifically, and it's James' particular concern, there is specifically a law that forbids slander, speaking against others.

So, God has given us his law. Among that body of law, there is this very specific and clear prohibition of speaking against others. And if we break that law, or to use the language that James uses there in verse 11, if we are not keeping that law, then we are effectively, though sometimes unwittingly, affirming that we are not subject to this law.
And so, what are we doing? Well, we are judging the law, or sitting in judgment over it. So, God has given us the law, and we say, well, we're going to break that law.
What are we doing? We might not even be thinking about it, but what we're doing is, we're saying, well, that law doesn't apply to me. I don't agree with that law. I'm not subject to that law. I am above that law.
And so, you're judging the law. You're sitting in judgment over it by not keeping it. Now, you maybe don't go through all that thought process, but effectively, that's what you're doing.
[18:39] You're judging the law and sitting in judgment over it. You are attacking God's law. It is perhaps helpful or worth noting that James possibly, we might even say probably, has in mind, or is at least echoing, the law against slander that is found in the passage that we read in Leviticus chapter 19.

Now, we've already read those verses from verse 16 to verse 18. Verse 16 in particular, do not go about spreading slander among your people.
It's really those exact words that James repeats, if you wish, here in the passage in his letter. And one of the reasons why I think it's reasonable to think that James does have this in mind is the way in which in his letter, he begins by speaking about the brothers, but then moves on in the following verse to speak about our neighbors, picking up more specifically on the kind of language that we find in Leviticus.
It's also interesting to note when we read in Leviticus how slander is, we might say, associated with other sins or other laws that we are guilty of breaking.
So, if we notice what it says, do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. You might say, well, that's just a separate command. Well, it is a separate command, but it does seem to be that they are in some way connected and gives you an idea of the gravity of slander.
[20:14] You know, it's alongside endangering your neighbor's life. It's also instructive in the light of what we were saying a moment ago about what is not being forbidden, that in the immediately following verse, we read, do not hate your brother in your heart, but then we read, rebuke your neighbor frankly, so you will not share in his guilt.

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So, there it's very clear that in Leviticus, this prohibition of slander, of speaking against others, is not a prohibition of coming to judgment about others. Indeed, we are instructed to rebuke our brother when he is behaving in a manner that is amiss, and that's a duty that is laid upon us.
And that, of course, involves to coming to a judgment about him or her and their behavior. It's also, I think, important to notice how within those verses that we read in Leviticus, God establishes very clearly, and it leads into really our third reason for not breaking this commandment, when God identifies himself with these very solemn words, I am the Lord.
Not just anybody who is giving you these instructions for life. I am the Lord. So, in summary, to disobey this law is an attack on God's law. It is to judge or sit in judgment over it.
And this is our great sin. We are proud. We want to decide what is good and bad in our lives. We want to be the judge of that.
[21:49] You know, we use that expression, I'll be the judge of that. Don't we often say that? We think that I'll be the judge of that. And what James is identifying is, well, no, you won't be the judge of that.

There is a law that God has established, and it is God's law that will determine or that does determine what is good and what is bad, what is allowed and what is forbidden. It's not for you to claim or seek to assume that prerogative.
We so often rebelliously wriggle in the face of laws that we see are unreasonably imposed by God. And we need to just pause and reflect on how foolish and how far-reaching this conduct is.
Well, first of all, how foolish it is. Here we are, all of us here gathered this morning, finite and limited creatures presuming to know better than God. We imagine that God's law is a menu that we can pick and choose from, a tin of quality street where we can pick and choose what sweeties are to our liking.
Yes, I'll have that one, but no, I don't like this one. This one really isn't suitable. This one's very old-fashioned. This one's way too harsh. We'll just forget about that one. And James is saying, no, you can't do that.
[23:05] That is to stand in judgment over God's law. That is to place yourself above God's law. It is an attack on God's law. It's foolish. This conduct is far-reaching.

Every time we disobey God's law, we are guilty of sitting in judgment over it, even if we're not consciously aware that that is what we're doing. We do this as individuals.
We do it as a society. The list is as long as my arm, but one obvious example in our society where we do this, where we stand in judgment over God's law, is in the whole realm of sexual ethics. We've decided that we know better. God has said this, but we think that's wrong. We know better. And so we stand in judgment over God's law. Now, James' concern here is particularly on don't slander one another.
We do want to focus on that. But, of course, the application of this is broader than just this one prohibition. But thirdly, the third reason why we ought not to disobey this command is that to do so constitutes an attack on God's person.
[24:13] Now, this is implicit in what we've already said concerning God's law, but James makes the matter explicit in verse 12. Notice what he says. There is only one lawgiver and judge.

There's only one lawgiver and judge. To ignore or disobey or modify or supplant God's law is to attack not only the law, but even more significantly and seriously, the lawgiver.
And James wants that to be very clear. This isn't just some abstract law. These aren't just some sets of rules that somebody there a long time ago decided on. No, God has determined these things.
So when you attack the law, you're attacking the author of the law. You're questioning the one who has given these laws. And so to disobey is to attack the lawgiver.
Now, this constant and persistent attack on God has a long history. It goes back to the Garden of Eden. God said to Adam and Eve, do not eat.
[25:17] And what did the serpent say? Well, if we can paraphrase what he said, he approaches Adam and Eve and he says, ah, it's not that serious. You know, you guys do your own thing.

You guys do your own thing. Go on, have a bite. Do your own thing. You decide what's right and wrong. You decide what laws there ought to be and what laws there ought not to be.
And notice how this verse, verse 12, very profoundly invites us to reflect on who God is. There is only one lawgiver and judge. Now, that clearly is not an exhaustive description of who God is, but it

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gives us truth concerning one reality about who God is.
He is indeed the one lawgiver and judge. But it also gives us an insight into who we are. And particularly in the question that is posed, the accusing question that is posed at the end of the verse.
But you, God is the lawgiver and judge. But you, who are you to judge your neighbor? You see, when we slander or speak against others, there's a way in which we're behaving like the celebrities who, when they are stopped for speeding or refused entry to a nightclub or party, are heard to pompously declare, Do you know who I am?
[26:49] You know, we hear the stories on the news. This celebrity, this football star, this pop star, they were, I don't know, given a speeding ticket or they weren't allowed into an event. And they say, Oh, do you know who I am?

Of course, we think, Oh, that's shocking. You know, Oh, who do they think they are? And really what James is saying is that we do that all the time. God gives us prohibitions. God tells us you ought not to do that.
And we respond, Do you know who I am? I'll decide what I do. And I'll be the judge of what is right and what is wrong.
What God is doing in these verses through James, He's calling out that behavior when He says to us, Who are you? Who are you to do that which I forbid?
But let's move on to the third aspect of this more briefly that I highlighted we would touch on. And that is, what are the consequences of doing what is forbidden?
[27:47] Well, James doesn't explicitly give us those consequences, but I think he does point in the direction of an answer to this question when he adds a further truth about God in verse 12.

You see, there he says, There is only one lawgiver and judge. But then what does he go on to say? The one who is able to save and destroy. I think what James is really saying to us, if we can paraphrase or maybe popularize what he's saying here, he's saying to us, Don't mess with God. That's what he's saying. Don't mess with God. You see, God is not only the one lawgiver and judge, He's the one who can save and destroy. So don't mess with Him. Don't imagine that your disobedience and your proud rebellion will go unnoticed and unpunished.
And, you know, we read that and we wonder, well, has James, in using such seemingly harsh and threatening language, has he failed to understand the love and grace of God?
Well, all James is doing is echoing what Jesus said. If we read, or if we remind ourselves of what he's recorded as saying by Matthew in chapter 10 and verse 28, listen to the words of Jesus.
[29:02] Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

And these are the words of gentle Jesus, meek and mild. You see, James is pointing out to his readers, there are consequences of disobedience.
You see, you're messing with God. You're messing with the one lawgiver and judge. You're messing with the one who has the power to save and to destroy. Don't do it. Don't mess with God. James is just telling us like it is.
Well, let's take a step back and see where we are or where we've got to. God has given us his laws. In particular, he has forbidden us from speaking against others.
We have broken this law. In breaking this law, we have attacked God's people. We have attacked God's law. And we have attacked God himself.
[30:03] We stand guilty as charged before the one lawgiver and judge who can save and destroy. And in the light of that rather somber summary, the question that arises is, well, is there hope?

Is there hope for those who are guilty as we are? Well, yes, there is hope. Because what did we just notice that James said about God? The last thing that we highlighted that James said about God, James says this, Yes, he can destroy.
He can save and destroy. Yes, he can destroy. But he can also save. And that is what he loves to do. God can and does save us from ourselves.
God is able and willing to forgive you your sin of slander. For all those occasions that you have spoken against others, you have spoke hurtfully and harmfully and proudly and rashly and cruelly, all those occasions where you have been guilty of not abiding by this prohibition, each and every one can be forgiven.

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And indeed, not only that sin, but every sin that you are guilty of, God is able and willing to forgive you, to save you from yourself, from your own sin.
[31:19] God has provided for your salvation and forgiveness in the person and work of Jesus who died on the cross in your place, enduring the punishment for your sin.

Just think for a moment of Jesus hanging on the cross, being subjected to the very slander that God forbids. There he was, hanging from the cross. And what was happening?
Those around him, they were vilifying him. They were mocking him. They were taunting him with cruel and slanderous accusations. The very thing that is forbidden.
And how did Jesus respond in the face of his slanderers? Well, he prayed to his father, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. Yes, we are guilty, but we have a God who is able and willing to forgive us, who has provided the way by which he is able to do justice to his own righteousness and justice, and yet still forgive the sinner.
And he has done that through the person and work of his son, Jesus, and his death on the cross. It may be that for some of us, maybe for somebody here this morning, you didn't realize the gravity of your sin until now, speaking against others.
[32:37] Well, it's not that big a deal. I can say sorry. We can move on. It's not that big a deal. I hope that in the light of God's Word, you realize that this sin, as with any other sin, isn't only an attack on the apparent or real victim of your sin, but it's an attack on God's law, and it's an attack on God itself.

And it's not a very smart thing to do, to mess with God. That's what James is saying. That's what he's warning us about. Well, maybe you didn't realize the gravity of your sin until now.
Maybe you didn't realize that sharing that piece of gossip constituted an attack on God's law and on God Himself. Well, in the light of what we just said, don't despair.
Rather, acknowledge the seriousness of your guilt and repent of your sin. Ask God to forgive you, and He will forgive you. And also ask God to give you that wisdom from above that James speaks about in the previous chapter.
Wisdom that is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Ask for that wisdom, and God will grant you that wisdom.
[33:55] 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.

But there is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who's able to save and destroy. But you, who are you to judge your neighbor? Let's pray.
Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the manner in which we discover in Your Word who You are and what You are like. We acknowledge You as the one lawgiver and judge.
But we also acknowledge You as the one redeemer and Savior of sinners, of those who are guilty of breaking Your law. We come and we confess our sin.
We have sinned against You in this matter. We have done so repeatedly and carelessly. We have done so imagining that it is no big deal. And we pray that in the light of Your Word and by the work of Your Spirit in our hearts and in our minds, we would be brought to appreciate the gravity of our guilt, but also that we would turn to the One, turn to You, the God who is able and willing and ready to forgive us and to save us.
[35:17] And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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