November 27/28, 2010

Are You God?

Practically Christian: A Study in the Book of James

James 4:11-17

Pastor Bryan Clark

Do you think you are God? It seems like kind of a silly question, doesn't it? I am going to guess that over the weekend there won't be a single person who will answer that question by saying, "Yes, I think I'm God." But when you go from God (capital "G") to god (small "g"), it's probably a different discussion. James has been reminding us of our tendency to seek to become god of our own lives and the consequences of that. But you know there's this interesting thing that happens. If you spend enough time functioning as god (small "g"), you actually do start to think you are God (capital "G"). That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have your Bible, turn with us to James, Chapter 4. Again James has a couple of very practical topics that we need to talk about.

I want to go back and do just a little bit of review to keep connecting the dots. Again it's really important to remember that when these letters were written and delivered to the recipients, they didn't have printing presses. They didn't all have copies of James in their possession. It would have been read to them. It would have been read to them orally and it would have been read to them cover to cover. To read James from the beginning to the end takes between 12 and 15 minutes, so we understand that what you hear in chapter 1 would be about 12 minutes removed from what you would hear in the last chapter.

Now that's very different for us. We started this in September and we will finish in December. Because of that span, it's easy to lose sight of how all the pieces connect together. In Chapter 1 James said that temptation appeals to *thee* lust within us. Not *the* lust within us, but *thee* lust. It has a definite article. It's referring to that core lust or desire within us. John uses this word the exact same way in 1 John, Chapter 2. As a matter of fact there are a lot of similarities between I John 2 and the book of James when he is defining the world and all that is in the world, "...*thee* lust of the flesh". We are people made in the image of God; that's a marvelous thing. When David was talking about the image, he said we are "...crowned with glory and majesty." But one of the difficulties is that, as people made in the image of God, we have a tendency to think we can become our own god, that somehow life will be better with *me* in charge, somehow life will be better with *me* running the show. And James has been talking about the effects of that, the ways that that manifests itself in our lives.

In Chapter 1 he talked about temptation appeals to *thee* lust within us. Temptation is the solicitation, the invitation to meet a legitimate need through illegitimate means. "I'll do it myself as my own god." Every time we give into temptation, that's what we're doing. We're saying, "Now as my own god, I'll meet my own need." He went on to say that this causes problems with partiality—of judging people on the basis of externals—in valuing them. It leads to a faith that doesn't have any works. It leads to wearing masks. It leads to drawing our wisdom from the world, the flesh and the devil. It goes so far as to cause us to become a friend of the world, which makes us an adulteress against God. We actually create hostility between us and our relationship with God to the point that we actually declare ourselves to be enemies of God—if we've made ourselves friends with the world. With that in mind then, we work in to our passage today, Chapter 4, Verse 11:

Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother, speaks against the law, and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it. (*NASB, James 4:11)

Do not speak against...the grammar here would indicate that this was something that they were doing and needed to stop doing. Some of the translations say, "Do not slander". The Greek word would include slander but it's much broader than that. It would include slander; it would include gossip; it would include backbiting; it would include trash talking, whatever we're doing that basically harms the reputation of another. It's really important to understand what's really at play here is the *intent*. Is my talking about someone else, does it have the intent of doing harm? There's a big difference between talking with someone about someone else in order to process, in order to think through something, in order to make good decisions, in order to do the right thing. That's a necessary thing. That's very different than when our intent is simply to do harm. There's nothing good that can come out of this discussion. Now when we're talking about gossip, or talking, or backbiting, or trash talking, we're talking about what comes out of our mouth; we're talking about e-mails; we're talking about Face Book. We're talking about any communication that talks about someone else with the intent to do harm. Now oftentimes you will hear people say, "Now this isn't gossip because I know for a fact it's true." Whether or not it's true is really irrelevant. What's relevant is why am I saying this? Am I talking about this person as part of a process of doing the right thing? Or am I talking about this person simply to put them down, simply to slander them, simply to diminish them to destroy their reputation? Which raises an interesting question: Why do we do that? Why do we get behind closed doors and put other people down?

Well let's back up a little bit and think about the train of thought. James talked to us about becoming *a friend of the world*. We become a friend of the world when we draw our wisdom from the world, the flesh and the devil. The basic operating system of the world is to believe that I can function as my own god and, in so doing, I determine my own significance; I determine my own value. The basic philosophy of that operating system forces me to be selfish to the core. James says that every day then is about *me*, about *me* determining my own significance, *me* determining my own value. He said we then are filled with selfish ambition.

We talked about that as a political term. It means to canvass for votes. Every day is about me canvassing for votes. "Vote for me because, if you vote for me, I have more value. Vote for me because, if you vote for me, I have more significance." So every day is about trying to get people to vote for me. Now there is a reality to that. If someone votes for *you*, you're not voting for *me*, so I have to figure out a way by which *you're* going to vote for *me* instead of *somebody else*. So how do I do that? I begin to discredit; I begin to trash talk; I begin to slander somebody else because, if I do that enough, you won't vote for them; you'll vote for me and what's at stake is my value. What's at stake is my significance.

This is exactly the way it works in the political arena. We've gotten to the point where rarely do political candidates actually discuss the issues. They just seek to discredit their opponents and whoever discredits the other one the most, wins. So that's the way it works in the political world. If I can discredit my opponent, you'll vote for me. Now that sickens us and we ask the question, "Why do they do that?" And the answer is: Because we all do that. The only difference between the politicians and us is that theirs is on TV and ours is not. But we operate the exact same way. In private we put other people down. We trash talk other people. We try to discredit them. We slander them and the reason we are doing that is, if I can diminish them, then you'll vote for me and I have to have your vote. That's what makes me valuable; that's what gives me significance. So I put them down in order to exalt myself. That goes to *intent*; it goes to *motive*.

What James says then is, when you do that, when you speak against someone else, when you judge someone else, what you are actually doing is speaking against the law. You're judging the law and when you do that **...you are no longer a doer of the law, but rather have become a judge of the law.** Now what is he referring to when he says **the law**? There's no question that what he's referring to is the *royal law* that he discussed in Chapter 2, Verse 8: "You should love your neighbor as yourself." Again, if you are just reading this through, it's three minutes from the time he talks about the royal law in chapter 2, verse 8, until this discussion in chapter 4. There's no question that is what he is talking about. He's talking about this *royal law.* Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is and Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind and strength and the second's like it—to love your neighbor as yourself." James refers to that as the *royal law*; it's the king of all laws. That's how we should live our lives.

But what happens when I begin to speak against someone else, when I gossip, when I slander, when I trash talk somebody else? What I am doing is speaking against that law. I am actually judging that law. I'm saying, "God, I've given this a lot of thought and I've really thought about your law and I've decided I don't really like it. I don't really like this law of yours; I think it is kind of bogus; I don't really think it works and so I've decided I'm going to abolish your law and I'm going to make my own law." So I have spoken against the *royal law*, I've actually judged that law and I've nullified it and I've said, "God, I really think Your law is bogus so my law is now going to be in effect." That's what then gives me permission to speak against somebody else. That's what gives me permission to gossip and to slander others. I have actually moved into the position where I now think I have the ability to make new laws, that I have the ability to say, "God, I'm going to nullify your law and I'm going to make my own laws." That's exactly what the serpent promised in Genesis, Chapter 3: "You can be like God, deciding for yourself what's good and evil." Therefore, when I do that, I am, in essence, saying that I now have raised myself to the position of being God Himself. I now have the right to decide which laws are valid and which laws are not, which laws should be followed and which laws should not be followed. I have, in essence, determined myself to be God. Now you say, "I'm not sure that's what he really means." Fine, verse 12:

> **There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?**

From verse 12 there is no question that's what he's saying. He saying, "Oh, wait a minute. Stop and think about what you're doing. There is only one Lawgiver; there is only one Judge, and guess what? It's not you!" You say, "Okay, what are the credentials?" The credentials of the Lawgiver, the credentials of the Judge are: *He is the One that at the end of the day is the One who saves and the One who destroys*. If, at the end of the day, you're not the one in charge of saving; if, at the end of the day, you're not the one who is in charge of destroying; in other words if, at the end of the day, you're not the one voice that matters, you're not the divine Lawgiver. You're not the ultimate Judge. James is reminding us that, at the end of the day, there is only One that saves and there is only One that destroys, and His opinion is the only opinion that matters.

Now we live in a culture where people want to believe all roads lead to God and all truth is relative and all different ways and religious truths all kind of come together and it really doesn't matter what you believe. But what James is saying is that, at the end of the day, there's only one Lawgiver that saves and there is only one Judge that destroys, and that is the only One qualified to change the law. That is the only One qualified to abolish the law.

He ends that discussion by asking the question **...who are you to judge your neighbor?** What made you think you were that person that has the ability to abolish God's law and institute your own law? Now what does he mean by this question related to...*judging his neighbor*? This is a concept that is really confused in our post-modern culture. As a matter of fact, you'll often hear even believers say, "Judge not, lest you be judged" and kind of that motto—that mantra—is used to say that you can't say anyone else's behavior is wrong. "Judge not, lest you be judged." So what does that mean? Let's talk about that for a minute. It's really important to understand that when people in our culture say that, it's built upon a philosophical belief that there are no moral absolutes. And because there are no moral absolutes, everybody is free to decide for themselves what's right and wrong, what's good and evil. Therefore, if each of us can function as our own god and decide for ourselves what's right and wrong, then we have no right to say to someone else, "Your way is wrong." The idea of, "Judge not lest you be judged" is built on the idea that there are no moral absolutes.

What James is saying is the polar opposite of that. It turns it exactly upside-down. He is saying there *is* a Lawgiver; there *is* an ultimate Judge; there *is* One and only One who is qualified to define what the law is—to say, "This is right and this is wrong". Think about it. James himself is judging them in this letter over and over again. He calls them on their sinful behavior. Last week he called them adulteresses who had created hostility with God. Clearly he's judging them, but he's judging them according to God's standard, according to God's law. So ultimately it's God's law that is the judge. It's God's standard that is the basis by which right and wrong is measured. When people say, "Judge not lest you be judged", they're quoting Jesus in the Gospels, but they've failed to realize that the context of that comment was Jesus talking to religious hypocrites who had a log in their own eye but they were worried about the splinter in somebody else's eye and in essence he was saying, "*Maybe you should worry about the log in your own eye before you worry about the splinter in somebody else's eye.*" In this context James is saying that these people have abolished the *royal law*. They have determined that God's law is bogus and they have instituted their own law. Therefore now they judge their neighbor on the basis of *their* opinion, on the basis of *their* law, on the basis of *their* standard and James is saying, "*Who are you to abandon God's law and now judge people based on your own homemade standard?"*

It's very important to understand that there is only one who has the credentials to be the Lawgiver—**the One who ultimately saves and the One who destroys**. He has defined what is right and wrong. He has defined what is good and evil. For us, as the people of God, to simply say this is what God says is right; this is what God say's is wrong is not judgmental. It's not being rigid and narrow-minded. It's simply saying, "This is what the Lawgiver has said." It's the law that judges them and it's ultimately God that will stand in judgment over them as the Lawgiver. For example, we as a church are pro-life because we believe God is pro-life. We are pro-marriage because we believe God is pro-marriage. We oppose gay marriage because we believe God opposes gay marriage. We believe that sex outside of marriage is wrong because God says sex outside of marriage is wrong. This isn't being judgmental and narrow and rigid. It's simply saying, "There's one Lawgiver and this is what the Lawgiver has said." He's the only One who has the right to define the law and you either obey it or you disobey it. Sometimes I hear people say, "Well we will just have to agree to disagree," as if God's opinion is just one of many opinions. That doesn't work with God. God is the Lawgiver. You either obey Him or you disobey Him. But unless you yourself will be the ultimate judge that saves or destroys, you're not qualified to nullify God's law and to redefine your own law. That's what James is saying here.

So let's go back to our question. Do you think you are God? If you are going to say "No" to that, then I assume you don't slander; I assume you don't gossip; I assume you don't trash talk people; I

assume you don't backbite; I assume that you're intent is not to do people harm but rather your intent is to obey the law—"to love your neighbor as yourself". Second issue, verse 13:

> **Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow, we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.** (Vs. 13-14)

Now the language in verse 13, the word *saying* would indicate this is something they say over and over again. It's a way of life. But we would still ask the question, "What's the problem with that?" What's the problem with a business man or a business woman going somewhere, working hard, and making a profit? The question is answered in verse 14: They do this without any awareness of God's power and presence. In other words they have become self-sufficient. They have decided that they are in charge of their own lives. "I will decide what I do. I will decide where I go. I will decide what I make for a profit. I will make myself self-sufficient. I will be sufficient because I have money in the bank. I will be sufficient because I go to the gym and work out." I have now become responsible for my own life and my own death. I'm in charge. That's the attitude that James is reflecting and they have lost sight of the fact that life is actually but a vapor—here today, gone tomorrow. If it wasn't for God, I wouldn't even have breath today. So to carry this idea that I am self-sufficient—this idea that I can do it myself—because I am successful, because I have a certain position or a certain title or certain amount of money, that now I'm in charge of my own destiny, is to lose sight of reality. It's, in essence, to become my own god—to say," You know I have now put myself in this position. I will decide if I live. I will decide if I have provision. I will take care of myself."

Now this whole idea of a vapor is an interesting concept to think about. Let's imagine that you work sixty hours a week. You really hunker down. You save your money and you have lots of money in the bank and you have lots of stuff, you have a really good job, you have a really good title. By all the standards of the world, you have made it. What have you accomplished? It's right here. (Spray…) There it was! Wasn't that impressive? (Laughter) You're a mist! Here today, gone tomorrow. I give it absolutely my best shot and here's what I have to show for it. (Spray...) I mean you can think it through the grid of our own culture. People that we would say are highly successful—let's think of a Bill Gates—billions of dollars, highly successful, but when the story is told, what did all that amount to? (Spray……) - Right there. Go into the world of athletics—Brett Favre, great NFL quarterback, soon to be in the Hall of Fame for all he's accomplished. What did it accomplish? (Spray...) - Right there. You can move into the world of Hollywood with all of their celebrities—Johnny Depp; he's got a new movie coming out; there it is right there - (Spray….), Bryan Clark (Spray….), Mark Kremer (Spray….). Put whatever name you want in there. What James is saying is we get so impressed with ourselves—as if *we* have really done something. "Man, look at me. I'm now in control of my own destiny. I've got money in the bank. I've got this job. I've got this position. I am somebody." (Spray...) That's about what I am right there. It amounts to nothing. If it was not for God, I would not even have breath today. This idea that I am self-sufficient is absolutely ridiculous. So what should I do? Well, verse 15:

> **Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that."**

This is getting right to the basics. Now this isn't some sort of magic formula that we quote every day. It's the intent of the heart. But there's awareness, if it is God's will, I will have breath tomorrow. That's the only guarantee that I have. God is in charge, no matter how many days a week I go to the gym, no matter how careful I am with what I eat, no matter how much money I

have in the bank. I cannot control whether or not tomorrow the doctor says cancer. I cannot control very much in my life. The fact of the matter is if God says that's the end of your day today, there's nothing I can do to change that. I am not self-sufficient. I am dependent every day on God giving me life. Therefore the idea is that I need to ask God, "What do you want from me today?" The reason I have life today, God, is because of You. What do You want today with my time? What do You want today with my talent? What do You want today with my treasure, that I steward every day as a gift from God. This is the heartbeat of our *Decade on Purpose*—understanding that every day matters. If the Lord wills, I will live tomorrow. But what am I going to do with that day? How am I going to steward that for God's purposes, understanding that ultimately God is responsible for life and death? Verse 16:

But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.

Very interesting statement**...you boast in your arrogance**. What is he talking about when he is talking about our arrogance? He's talking about the fact that when we become a friend of the world, we buy into an artificial, man-made system by which we determine our value. In our arrogance we start to define what we think gives life value. So we say that if I perform this way, have a certain job, if I have a certain amount of money, if I have a certain house, a certain car, a certain success, whatever it might be—think about all the ways in our culture that we say someone matters— he says this, in your arrogance, is just an artificial standard that you have made up. But if that isn't bad enough, then you boast in the fact that when you compare yourself to your artificial made-up standard, you think you score well and so you boast that you are somebody. This defines our Western culture. We have created a completely artificial standard by which we measure value. And in our arrogance we've determined we have the right to say what makes us significant and valuable. And then when we think we score well—according to the artificial standard that we've made up—we're somebody!

James says that kind of **boasting is just evil**. That word *boasting* is an interesting Greek word. It only shows up two places in the New Testament. One is here in James and the second is in 1 John 2 when he is talking about a very similar discussion. He's defining the world as "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful (there's our word) pride of life." It's this idea that I think I'm significant; I think I'm somebody based on a completely artificial, ridiculous, made-up standard. I may have more money than anybody else on the face of the earth. (Spray...) There it is right there. I may be the greatest celebrity. (Spray...) There it is right there. I may be the world's greatest athlete. (Spray…) There it is right there. God is saying, "That's all it is?" It's completely artificial. It's made up. It amounts to nothing. The only thing that really matters is what you do with your time, your talent, and your treasure as it relates to God's plan and purpose. Every day I'm asking the question, "God, what do You want today? Today is a gift and what do You want with my time? What do You want with my talent? What do You want with my treasure?" Verse 17:

Therefore, to the one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin.

In typical, practical, James fashion, he calls it what it is. If you do not love your neighbor as yourself, then you sin. If you do not steward everyday your time, your talent, your treasure for God's purposes, you sin. To those who know the right thing to do and do it not, to you it is sin.

So let's go back to our question. Do you think you are God? If you are going to answer that question, "No", then I assume you don't gossip; I assume you don't slander; I assume you don't

trash talk people; I assume you don't back bite; I assume you don't talk about people with the intent to do them harm in your private conversations.

Do you think you are God? If you are going to say, "No" to that, then I assume that you steward every day for God's purposes and you're constantly asking the question, "God, because today is a gift from You, I really want to know what do You want with my time? What do You want with my talent? What do You want with my treasure?" If that's not how you live each day, then you don't really understand what it means to do the right thing. The right thing is to love your neighbor and it's to steward what you have been given. To him that knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

Our Father, we are thankful this morning that You love us so much that You tell us the truth. Lord, this world puts up this ridiculous artificial standard by which we measure ourselves and think we're something. And yet life is a mist, a vapor, here today, gone tomorrow. Lord, what matters is that we live our lives according to Your standard. Lord, help us to understand that. Help us to love our neighbors as ourselves and, Lord, help us to steward everyday for Your eternal purposes. In Jesus' name. Amen

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Practically Christian: A Study in the Book of James

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Opening Discussion

1. What is the difference between an atheist and a "practical atheist?" Can a Christian be a practical atheist? Why or why not?

2. List the symptoms of a practical atheist. What might this look like on a daily basis?

3. At what point does talking about other people move from discussion to gossip? Is it acceptable to speak negatively about someone as long as the information is true? Why or why not?

4. What might be a simple standard or guideline that can help us determine what discussion about people are right and what discussions are sinful?

Bible Study

1. James has given us many symptoms of someone who is a practical atheist. Go back through chapters 1-4 and list some of those.

2. Read James 4:11, 12. What is the issue James is addressing? Define "law" referencing 2:8ff.

3. In what way is someone assuming the role of god when he/she slanders, backbites, or puts down others in private? What defines God in this text?

4. What does James mean when he says, "who are you to judge your neighbor?" Does this mean we can't identify sin in the lives of others? Isn't James confronting sin in this letter? What exactly is he saying and not saying about judging in this context?

5. Read James 4:13-17. What is the problem James is addressing? Compare Luke 12:13-21.

6. How should we live each day? What are the symptoms that we are living each day submissive to God and what are the symptoms that we are arrogant and trusting ourselves?

Application

1. Are you God? From this text can you identify any areas where you are guilty of operating as a practical atheist?

2. What one main truth do you take away from this text that you'd like to focus on more? What are a couple of ways you can keep this truth in mind in the next couple of weeks?

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