SEA CHANGE CHURCH

THE CURRENT

Storm Proof: A Study in James · S2E4

Who Are You to Judge?

A 7-Day Study

"Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?"

James 4:11–12 ESV

Pastor Harry Wilson · November 1, 2026

THIS WEEK'S MEMORY VERSE

"There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?"

James 4:12

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Each week, The Current walks through a piece of Sunday's passage: a short verse study, encouragement, journal questions, and a daily prayer.

Take one day at a time. There's no need to rush.

DAY 1

Wolves on a Leash

> JAMES 4:11 ESV
>
> *"Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge."*

VERSE STUDY

James wrote to church people. His first readers were Jewish believers who had likely grown up going to synagogue, who knew the Scriptures and the shape of a religious life. Where Paul's letters often confront sexual immorality or false teaching, James keeps returning to the tongue: quarrels, backbiting, and the slow damage words do inside a community of faith.

The word translated 'speak evil' is katalaleō: to speak ill of, to speak evil, to slander. James puts it in the imperative. It is not a gentle observation but a command: stop speaking against one another. The law had said the same thing long before: "You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:16).

Harry described once passing a man in La Jolla who had what was unmistakably a full-grown gray wolf on a leash. Wolves are not domesticated animals, however calm one looks at the end of a lead. That is a picture of how we treat certain sins. We work hard to avoid the ones we think of as major, and meanwhile we adopt a few small, hidden ones and keep them as pets: a little gossip, a quiet cutting remark, a story passed along about someone who is not in the room.

Those pets are more dangerous than they look. The Greek word for slanderer, diabolos, is the same word Scripture uses as a title for the devil. Slander is not a minor personality flaw. It bears the family resemblance of the enemy, and over time a sin we thought was tame can consume a person and a whole community.

TAKE HEART

Naming a domesticated sin is the first step in letting it go, and God does not expose our pet sins to shame us. He shows them to us because he wants us free of them. The same Lord who commands us to stop speaking evil also gives grace for the moment we finally admit we have been keeping a wolf on a leash.

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. Which "small" sins of speech have we grown comfortable with, because they seem harmless next to others?
2. Where in our circles (work, family, friends, church) does gossip most easily slip into the conversation?

DAILY PRAYER

Before we pray, let us spend a few quiet minutes with today's verse: read it slowly once more, or simply sit in silence and let it settle. Then, when we are ready, let us pray this over the day ahead:

"Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer."

Psalm 19:12–14

ACTION CHALLENGE

For one week, notice every time a conversation turns toward someone who is not present. Pause before adding to it, and where possible, steer it elsewhere or say something kind about that person instead.

NOTES

DAY 2

The Seat Is Taken

> JAMES 4:12 ESV
>
> *"There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?"*

VERSE STUDY

James gives a second reason slander matters. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, he says, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. To a Jewish believer that was a startling claim. When we set ourselves up as judge over a neighbor, we ignore what God's law already says about slander and, in effect, place ourselves above it, as though the law were ours to apply rather than ours to obey.

The word for judge here can also carry the sense of condemn. James is not talking about ordinary discernment. He is talking about the posture that hands down verdicts on other people, usually behind their backs. And he answers it with one of the plainest sentences in his letter: there is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy.

In other words, the judgment seat is already taken. God will judge between right and wrong, and under his law every one of us stands in need of Christ. When we start pronouncing judgment on our neighbors, we are trying to climb into a seat that belongs to the living God, and as the message dryly observed, that is not a seat anyone should try to take.

Paul makes the same point to the church in Rome: "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (Romans 14:4). A few verses later he gives the reason: "we will all stand before the judgment seat of God" (Romans 14:10). The same judge who sees our neighbor sees us.

TAKE HEART

There is real relief in not being the judge. We do not have to carry the weight of weighing everyone else's motives and handing down verdicts. That seat belongs to a God who is perfectly just and able to save, and who is far more merciful than we would be in his place. We can set the gavel down and simply be his children.

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. Where have we been quietly acting as judge over someone, at work, at home, or in our neighborhood?
2. What changes when we remember that the one judge is also the one who is able to save?

DAILY PRAYER

Before we pray, let us spend a few quiet minutes with today's verse: read it slowly once more, or simply sit in silence and let it settle. Then, when we are ready, let us pray this over the day ahead:

"Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen."

Book of Common Prayer, The Collect for Purity (Holy Eucharist, Rite Two)

ACTION CHALLENGE

Think of one person we have been putting on trial in our minds. Each day this week, pray for that person by name, asking God for their good rather than for their correction.

NOTES

DAY 3

True Is Not Enough

> LUKE 6:45 ESV
>
> *"The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."*

VERSE STUDY

Most of us keep a ready list of reasons our frustration with someone is justified: the coworker who never pulls their weight, the neighbor who starts the lawnmower at five in the morning. Surely it is fine to talk to somebody about it? The message gave an honest answer: mostly no, except to one person, the person. Jesus laid out that path: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother" (Matthew 18:15).

Christians can be skilled at disguising gossip. We call it processing, or getting something off our chest, or seeking wise counsel, or just venting. Sometimes those are real needs. But a new label does not change the substance. Talk about someone that would not survive being said in front of them is usually gossip, whatever we call it.

Another defense is accuracy: what we are saying is true. It may be entirely true. But something being true does not mean it needs to be said. James cares about more than the accuracy of our words. He cares about the posture of our hearts, because, as Jesus said, "out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45).

The pattern we are given is God himself. When God speaks, life happens. "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). He breathed into the first man the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). His Word became flesh (John 1:14), and Jesus came that we may have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). The slanderer's words do the opposite, bringing death and deception. Every conversation puts the question to us: whose example will our words follow?

TAKE HEART

God's words over us are words of life, and he is able to make our words the same. The goal is not a careful silence born of fear but a heart so full of his goodness that what overflows from it builds others up. Every private word of concern, and every story we choose not to repeat, is part of that change.

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. Which phrases do we use to make gossip sound acceptable (venting, processing, just being honest)?

2. Is there a conflict where the next right step is a private conversation with the person rather than about them?

DAILY PRAYER

Before we pray, let us spend a few quiet minutes with today's verse: read it slowly once more, or simply sit in silence and let it settle. Then, when we are ready, let us pray this over the day ahead:

"O LORD, I call upon you; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to you! Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice! Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips! Do not let my heart incline to any evil, to busy myself with wicked deeds in company with men who work iniquity, and let me not eat of their delicacies!"

Psalm 141:1–4

ACTION CHALLENGE

If there is someone we have been talking about rather than to, take the Matthew 18 step this week: ask God for a gentle heart, then reach out to that person directly and privately.

NOTES

DAY 4

Restoration, Not Condemnation

> GALATIANS 6:1 ESV
>
> *"Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."*

VERSE STUDY

James says do not judge, yet other passages give the church instructions for addressing sin among its members. How do the two fit? The answer comes back to the heart. There is a judgment that aims to condemn, the speaking evil James forbids, and there is a judgment made for the sake of the other person, humble and aimed at their good.

Paul describes the second kind in Galatians 6:1. Recognizing that someone has been caught in a transgression is a judgment call. What makes it Christian is the posture and the goal. The posture is gentleness, and the goal is to restore. The goal of Christian correction is restoration, not condemnation.

It also requires humility, because we are made of the same stuff. Paul's warning to keep watch on ourselves is a reminder that whatever we see in someone else, we are capable of too. A few honest questions help before any word of correction: Is this coming from a spirit of gentleness? Is the aim their restoration? Are we approaching this with humility and empathy?

There is a simple test as well. Slander usually feels good. Talking about someone behind their back, with no consequences, quietly lifts us up in the eyes of everyone listening. Correction offered in love rarely feels good at all. It is hard, it is private, it risks hurting someone we care about, and it earns no credit from anyone. When a conversation about someone feels satisfying, that is often the sign it is the wrong one.

TAKE HEART

God's own correction of us always aims at restoration. He does not point out our sin to push us away but to bring us home. When we learn to speak to others the way he speaks to us, gently and for their good, the church becomes a place where people can be honest about their struggles and actually be helped.

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. When has someone corrected us gently and for our good, and what made it possible to receive?
2. Before speaking into someone else's life, which of the three questions (gentleness, restoration, humility) do we most need to slow down and ask?

DAILY PRAYER

Before we pray, let us spend a few quiet minutes with today's verse: read it slowly once more, or simply sit in silence and let it settle. Then, when we are ready, let us pray this over the day ahead:

"Gracious Father, we pray for thy holy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in any thing it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ thy Son our Savior. Amen."

Book of Common Prayer, Prayers and Thanksgivings 7, For the Church

ACTION CHALLENGE

Before any hard conversation this week, write down the three questions from today and answer them honestly. If the honest answer is not yet restoration, wait and pray before speaking.

NOTES

DAY 5

Go and Sin No More

> JOHN 8:10–11 ESV
>
> *"Jesus stood up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.'"*

VERSE STUDY

The scribes and Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery and set her in front of everyone. They were ready to act as her judges and carry out the sentence, and they used her to test Jesus. His answer turned the question back on them: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). One by one, beginning with the older ones, they went away.

Left alone with her, Jesus asked whether anyone remained to condemn her, and then told her that he did not condemn her either. He did not speak evil against her. Yet he did not pretend nothing had happened either. He told her to go and sin no more. He still made a judgment call. The difference was that it was done privately, for her benefit, and in love, while the religious leaders' judgment came from pride and self-righteousness.

Self-righteousness is a common contagion that can turn Christians into Pharisees. It rarely announces itself. One of its first symptoms is an increasing awareness of everyone else's sin and a decreasing awareness of our own. When we find we can list other people's faults more easily than we can name our own, something has started to brew.

The message was candid that a passage like this confronts preachers as much as anyone. Spending a week with James 4 means letting it expose every careless word, every time we failed to bridle the tongue (James 1:26). Following Jesus is not supposed to be easy, and at times his word will confront us. That is a mercy, because it keeps us honest about how much we need the same grace we are tempted to withhold from others.

TAKE HEART

Jesus' refusal to condemn the woman is his answer to every one of us who comes to him. His mercy does not ignore sin. It frees us to leave it behind. The more deeply we receive that mercy, the less room self-righteousness has to grow, and the more naturally we extend it to others.

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. Where do we notice other people's faults more readily than our own?
2. How does knowing that Jesus refuses to condemn us change the way we see someone else's sin?

DAILY PRAYER

Before we pray, let us spend a few quiet minutes with today's verse: read it slowly once more, or simply sit in silence and let it settle. Then, when we are ready, let us pray this over the day ahead:

"The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust."

Psalm 103:8–14

ACTION CHALLENGE

Each evening this week, before thinking about anyone else's behavior that day, take two minutes to ask God to show us our own. Then thank him for his mercy in the words of Psalm 103.

NOTES

DAY 6

The Log and the Speck

> MATTHEW 7:3–5 ESV
>
> *"Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."*

VERSE STUDY

James had spent so long with the words of Jesus that he started to sound like him. As the message noted, scholars have traced dozens of echoes of Jesus' teaching in James's five short chapters, many of them from the Sermon on the Mount. This week's passage is one of them. Jesus said: "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:1-2).

Then comes one of his most memorable pictures. We fuss over the speck of sawdust in a brother's eye while walking around with a log in our own, offering to help with someone else's small problem while something enormous blocks our view. Anyone who has seen a three-year-old, face covered in pasta sauce, point out a small spot on someone else's shirt knows how absurd that looks from the outside.

The first step on the path to clarity is humility. Seeing clearly starts with admitting that something is obstructing our own vision. Our sin, our wounds and our upbringing all skew the lens, and we may not be seeing as clearly as we think. Jesus does not say the speck should never be dealt with. He says to deal with the log first, "and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

An old saying puts it sharply: before we see the cross as something done for us, we need to see it as something done by us. Jesus did not go to the cross because we were so impressive. His love moved him, and our sin made it necessary. We are all responsible for his crucifixion, and we all benefit from it. Seen that way, there is no room left for self-righteousness. The more clearly we see our own need for grace, the less inclined we are to withhold it from others.

TAKE HEART

Seeing the log in our own eye is not meant to crush us. It is the beginning of clear sight, and the cross that reveals how much we needed grace is the same cross that supplies it in full. Humility is not self-hatred. It is simply seeing ourselves truthfully in the light of a Savior who loves us anyway.

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. What might be obstructing our vision right now (a wound, an old pattern, a sin we have not faced)?
2. How does seeing the cross as something done by us, not only for us, change the way we look at others?

DAILY PRAYER

Before we pray, let us spend a few quiet minutes with today's verse: read it slowly once more, or simply sit in silence and let it settle. Then, when we are ready, let us pray this over the day ahead:

"O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"

Psalm 139:1–4, 23–24

ACTION CHALLENGE

Before offering any criticism this week, stop and ask God to show us the log first. Write down one honest thing he brings to mind, and bring it to him in confession before moving on.

NOTES

DAY 7

Words of Life

> GALATIANS 5:22–23 ESV
>
> *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."*

VERSE STUDY

In The Great Divorce, C.S. Lewis pictures a person who begins with a grumbling mood and, over time, embraces it, until the person is gone and only the complaint remains, "the grumble itself going on forever like a machine." It is a sobering picture of where a habit of complaint can lead. Many of us know the opposite as well: the more time we spend with Jesus, the harder it becomes to grumble. Days that begin in prayer, silence, worship and the Word tend to see the grumblings fall away and gratitude take their place.

That brings the week back to where it began: what is influencing us? If we are in Scripture, in prayer and in communion with Jesus, that is what will overflow. If our attention is buried in problems, the news, social media and our work, the stress and complaints of those things will overflow instead. The remedy for grumbling, gossip and slander is not simply more self-control, which tires like a muscle. The remedy is more time with Jesus.

Self-control is not the fruit of human effort but the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Paul lists it last among the fruit he names in Galatians 5. Following Jesus is not white-knuckling our way to a good life. It is less about sin suppression than self-reorientation: becoming so drawn to his goodness, beauty, kindness and love that whatever disagrees with him slowly, imperfectly, begins to fall away.

Harry closed by acknowledging how much it hurts to be wounded by the words of church people, something many of us have known. Jesus told his followers to expect it, and he called those who are falsely reviled for his sake blessed (Matthew 5:11-12). But a loud minority does not represent the body of Christ. When the world around us is full of slander, we can answer with Peter's words: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). As a church, we are called to be a refuge, a people who find life in his word and speak life with our words.

TAKE HEART

We do not have to manufacture a gentler tongue by willpower. The Spirit who lives in every believer is already producing his fruit in us, and every hour spent with Jesus gives that fruit room to grow. Where the words of others have hurt us, he has the words of eternal life, and he is able to heal what was spoken against us.

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. What has the greatest influence on our thoughts and words right now, and how does it compare with the influence of Jesus?

2. Where have the words of church people hurt us, and what would it look like to bring that hurt to Jesus rather than let it define the church for us?

DAILY PRAYER

Before we pray, let us spend a few quiet minutes with today's verse: read it slowly once more, or simply sit in silence and let it settle. Then, when we are ready, let us pray this over the day ahead:

"O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen."

Book of Common Prayer, Collect for Proper 19

ACTION CHALLENGE

Start each day this week with time with Jesus before picking up the phone: Scripture, prayer, and a few minutes of silence. Notice whether the grumblings of the day lose some of their grip, and end the week by speaking one deliberate word of life to someone who needs it.

NOTES

MEMORY VERSE

“There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?”

James 4:12

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