

JAMES 4:11-17 | KINGDOM STANDARDS

VERSE 11 –

The Greek word for **speak**, used three times in this verse, is καταλαλέω [katalaleo], a rarely used word that meant *to speak evil*. In its etymology it is *to use every word*, implying the voicing of things that should not be said, either because they are untrue or they are simply unnecessary.

Because James says that the one that does this ultimately **speakeith evil of the law, and judgeth the law**, it requires that his audience are *law-keepers*. How would a Christian today **judge the law** just by judging another Christian? Furthermore, why would a Christian be accused of **not** [being] **a doer of the law** when we are free from the law? In short, this verse *only* makes any sense if the two parties are Torah observant.

Commentaries that do not come from a *rightly dividing* perspective (almost 100% of commentaries) inevitably either skip this verse altogether or put Christians under the Law. For example, The Holman New Testament Commentary (a Southern Baptist resource) says,

“...one who practices slander judges the law. With a fault-finding attitude I set myself up as a judge. I neglect God’s law, thus declaring that it is a bad law and worthy of being removed. God calls Christians to keep the law, not to sit in judgment on it. When we slander our neighbors, we show our opposition to the law of love and imply that we are exempt from observing it.”<sup>1</sup>

How much simpler it would be to simply read this verse as instruction to Torah observant Jews living in a time prior to the revelation of the Pauline mystery.

VERSE 12 –

Isaiah 33:22 declares **the LORD is our lawgiver**, and this is certainly the **one lawgiver** in mind here. As Jews, the recipients of the epistle were servants of God alone, and thus interpersonal judgment was prohibited under the Law.

VERSE 13 –

The English in the KJV is purposefully awkward, **Go to now**. While the phrase, an imperative, could be simply translated “*go, now*” (as in Young’s Literal), this would not alert the English reader to the unique form in which James uses the Greek phrase. Normally the Greek would be followed by a direct object, either expressed (John 11:15) or implied (John 11:16). This occurrence, however, does not have a direct object, but is rather used in somewhat an adverbial sense. The more modern, “Come now” (as in NKJV) fails to faithfully translate the Greek

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas D. Lea, [Hebrews, James](#), vol. 10, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 323.

ἄγω [ago], which is a word that means “bring” and not “come.” In modern English, perhaps, “*Bring [yourself] now*” would be best. While there is nothing major doctrinally in this issue, this awkward **Go to** phrase does remind the reader that *awkward phrases are good learning opportunities*. The Greek is likely a very strong indicator that a first century Jew wrote the words, the “everyday slang” being used in a way that would not be common otherwise. This is yet another reminder that serious students of the Word should study with a King James Bible and use the oddities for learning. The older English phrases **to day** rather than the modern *today* is also an opportunity to learn that the word became a compound after the work of the King James translators. The same is true with **to morrow**. Such oddities remind the student that language changes and thus the student should take care to avoid taking *today’s language and grammar* as the interpretive rule for words spoken hundreds or thousands of years ago.

Language issues aside, the verse is simple to understand, using a common occurrence of life as the basis for the point, which James will make in the next verse and beyond.

#### VERSES 14-15 –

This verse must be taken in its historical context, or it will elicit applications that are unhealthy and unbiblical. James was living in a day when Israel was “living on borrowed time.” James was trying to give a *wakeup call* to his readers. While in any age and for any person **know not what shall be on the morrow** (v. 14), and while it is always good to make our plans contingent upon what takes place in the future, the Jewish nation was at an especially dangerous time in its history, and prophetic interpretation showed that judgment was next on God’s calendar (compare James 5:3). After the writing of James’ epistle, Paul’s mystery would be revealed, and this would give an unforeseen dispensation of grace. But such was “a mystery” at the time of the writing of the epistle. Note that when Jesus spoke about someone who may be **intending to build a tower** (Lk. 14:28) he gave no similar chastisement for his presumption upon the future. In fact, none of the cross references give any similar material from the time of Jesus, yet modern preaching is filled with an anti-future bias for those involved in business as if this passage had a universal and direct application for all time, and especially for Christians.

#### VERSE 16 –

The word **boastings** is a Greek word that implies “mere bragging” (see Strong’s Concordance, G212) or “pride” (as translated in 1 John 2:16). The word **evil** is one which has a broader understanding than our modern usage. To boast in pride is *degenerate, sick, illegitimate, etc.*

#### VERSE 17 –

The truth in this verse is well-known, as even a quick look at cross references will display. James uses this truth to call his listeners to action. Their *omission* of doing what is good will be **sin**, so he prods them to action.

Evangelicalism has often used “sins of omission” to manipulate audiences to certain actions. The actions may be good and beneficial (pray more, study more, witness more, etc.). At times the actions may be driven by local agenda (“You know our children need this new addition to our facilities...”). But are these sins of omission something that align with the Pauline mystery? Paul instructs us to **not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not** (Gal. 6:9), but this is a different motivation than the negative motivation given by James. Since we live in an “age of grace” in which God is not imputing sins (2 Cor. 5:19, see also Rom. 8:3). While we can certainly do that which dishonors God and His gracious gift, or fail to do that which would honor the same, the rule of James 4:17 should not be made a basis for any doctrine of “sins of omission” in the body of Christ.