

# (Judging - Part 1) Only One Judge

by Alistair Begg

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*Alistair Begg's sermon emphasizes the seriousness of slander and the importance of recognizing God's sole authority as judge.*

**Duration:** 33:34

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 32:39, James 4:11

**Topics:** "Judging"

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## Description

In this sermon, Alistair Begg focuses on the importance of not slandering or judging one another. He begins by referencing the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. Begg emphasizes the need for humility and self-awareness, acknowledging our own faults before criticizing others. He highlights the significance of knowing ourselves and learning to be silent in the face of others' faults. Begg concludes by reminding listeners that there is only one lawgiver and judge, and it is not our place to judge our neighbors.

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## Transcript

The following message by Alistair Begg is made available by Truth For Life. For more information, visit us online at [truthforlife.org](http://truthforlife.org). We're going to read from the Bible in James and chapter 4, verse 11 of chapter 4. 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're not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you, who are you to judge your neighbor? Father, we pray for your help as we turn to the Scriptures.

Show us ourselves and show us our Savior. For your name's sake. Amen.

If you're visiting this evening, a word of welcome to you. We are trying to study our way through James, and we dealt with just one sentence this morning. In verse 11, that's the first sentence.

Brothers, do not slander one another. And so we come back to those verses again this evening. And I want to begin by pointing out two things.

First of all, to point out how seriously the New Testament takes the sin of slander. When Paul writes a very straightforward epistle to the Corinthians, especially concerning their misdemeanors and their faults and

so on. He writes as follows in 1 Corinthians 5. I've written to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.

And then he quickly says, not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral or the greedy and swindlers or idolaters. In that case, you would have to leave this world. But now I'm writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother or a sister.

But who is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler with such a man. Do not even eat. And right in the heart of it, a slanderer.

And which of us evaded the challenge of this morning's study. The Bible takes this very seriously. That's the first thing to notice.

Secondly, to note, and I want to say this and get it out of the way because it's almost inevitably a question that follows. James, in what he now goes on to say, is not calling for us to set aside our critical faculties. Nor is he forbidding his readers from forming opinions about certain actions or ideas or people.

This is very, very important because it's not uncommon to hear people use Jesus warning against judging as a basis for accepting behavior, which the Bible actually condemns. All right. So, for example, let's say we have something that is clearly set out in Scripture as being unacceptable, whatever it might be.

And then someone says, I notice that Mr. X is involved in Y. And someone says, well, judge not that you be not judged. That's not actually what James is on about here. He's not asking us to sacrifice the clear mandate of Scripture to be able to exercise and execute church discipline.

To be able to point out to one another our faults in the experience of our own Christian testimony. Rather, what he is addressing is something rather different. Now, in order to help us execute this study with a minimum of fuss and length, let us just notice things under two headings.

First of all, the sad pattern that James provides for us here and then the sole prerogative of which James reminds us. The sad pattern is in verse 11b and following. Anyone who speaks against his brother and judges him or judges him speaks against the law and judges it.

When you judge the law, you're not keeping it, but sitting in judgment. And the whole pattern of events, he says, unfolds. When we speak against our brother or our sister, we are almost inevitably setting ourselves up as judges.

Slander and judging are almost inseparable. You will notice in the NIV it says anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him. In the authorized version, it says anyone who speaks against his brother and judges him.

And I think perhaps the AV points us in the right direction. In other words, this speaking against and judging and entering into judgment are almost synonymous with one another. So when we speak against a brother or a sister, what we're usually claiming is that they have failed to do what they should have done or that they've been doing something that they shouldn't do.

In doing this, says Tasker, the slanderer is going far beyond the bounds of what is legitimate for ordinary human beings. Because if you go to a court or you observe the proceedings of a court, you recognize that judgment is passed only when all the facts have been heard. But the problem with the one who speaks

evil against his brother or sister is that we're quick to pronounce judgment before the facts have been heard.

And sometimes we don't even want the facts to be heard because it impinges upon our ability to slander. If all the facts were to get out, then we wouldn't be able to say what we say. And so it's actually better for us to get it out even without the facts of the case.

And so the pattern is one of jumping to conclusions, jumping to judgment without any attempt to discover the truth. Perhaps the classic illustration of this, as we think of brothers at least, is to be found in the Old Testament in 1 Samuel chapter 17. And if you would like to turn there, if you have your Bible, you can just see where this is so that you can go back to it.

It's often helpful just to turn to it because it anchors it in your mind and it'll be easier to find later on. 1 Samuel 17, you will know if you know your Bible, is the chapter that gives to us the record of the great fight between David and Goliath. And you will remember that David, who was the youngest of all of the brothers, had been going back and forth to tend his father's sheep.

And in verse 17, we read as follows. Now Jesse said to his son David, take this ephah of roasted grain and these ten loaves of bread for your brothers and hurry to their camp. Take along these ten cheeses to the commander of their unit.

See how your brothers are and bring back some assurance from them. They're all with Saul and all the men of Israel in the valley of Elah fighting against the Philistines. Little did he know that they were in the presence of the Philistines, but they sure weren't fighting the Philistines, as David was about to discover.

And now if you fast forward to verse 28, when Eliab, David's oldest brother, heard him speaking. And what David had been saying was, why are you letting this big giant shout like this every day? Why doesn't it somebody go out there and chop his head off? That's a paraphrase. Why do you let him defy the armies of Israel in this way? Which, of course, was a legitimate response.

Indeed, it was a response of clarity and of bravery. And when Eliab, David's oldest brother, heard him speaking with the men, he burned with anger at him and asked, why have you come down here? And with whom did you leave those few sheep in the desert? I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is. You came down only to watch the battle, to which David should have said, what battle? We ain't got no battle.

But you see, his brother jumps to judgment, slanders him. I know, he says, how conceited you are. I know you have a wicked heart.

I know you only came down here to watch. Wrong, wrong, wrong. It's that kind of thing that James is addressing in this story pattern of jumping to judgment.

Why did Eliab address his brother in this way? Because he was absent the humility which recognizes that this prerogative belongs solely to God. Look at the text and see what James says is happening. The individual who speaks against his brother and judges him, speaks against the law and judges it.

When we enter into superficial, misguided, uninformed, cruel judgments, we're actually speaking against the law and expressing a judgment on the law. We're really saying, this doesn't apply to me. Now, when he says you speak against the law, I wonder what he's referencing.

It could be that he's referencing the verse from Leviticus 19 that we quoted this morning, where the word of God to his people is, you must not go up and down as a tailbearer among my people. Or perhaps more likely, in light of the 8th verse of chapter 2, he's referencing the royal law found in Scripture, which is love your neighbor as yourself. And he says, if you speak against your brother and judge him, you actually speak against the law and you're executing judgment on it.

Instead of seeing how it applies to me and keeping it, I end up sitting in judgment on it and I begin to become a law to myself. Now, let's remind ourselves of verse 6 and again of verse 10. The Scripture says God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Verse 10, humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up. You see, when we are honest enough with ourselves to acknowledge what we know of our own hearts and how wretched they are and how justifiably we ought to find ourselves in the dock, we will then be less prone to assume a position on the bench. But if we are deceitful about our own hearts, if we lie to ourselves about our position before God, if we refuse to humble ourselves before him, then in exalting ourselves and defaming others, we find ourselves right in the heart of this pattern.

Derek Prime, in a helpful sentence or two, puts it as follows. The knowledge of our own failings makes us more and more hesitant about expressing any form of criticism of others. The man who knows himself learns an increasing silence before other people's faults.

That's a great sentence. The man or the woman who knows themselves learns an increasing silence before others' faults. We ought not to misunderstand this.

This is not cowardice or softness, but rather it is Christ-likeness and it is tenderness. Christ-likeness and tenderness. That's the pattern and now the prerogative in verse 12.

There is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy. It is more than likely that James, with his knowledge of the Old Testament, has in mind a verse from Deuteronomy chapter 32 and verse 39, which I will quote for you. You needn't turn to it, although you might like to turn just to verify that it's there.

And God is speaking and he says, See now that I myself am he. There is no God besides me. I put to death and I bring to life.

I have wounded and I will heal and no one can deliver out of my hand. Now if you turn back to James and he says, There is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy. You say that is good.

James obviously knows his Bible. And what he's reminding the readers of and reminding us of this evening is that there is only one who issues laws that are permanently valid. One of the interesting things about civil jurisdiction and jurisprudence in general is that new laws are to be enacted all the time in order to keep up with or catch up with the changing, developing circumstances of life.

And there is a great distinction in the laws that exist from state to state. Scott's law in the United Kingdom is different from law in England. And there is a divergence and a discrepancy between many of these things.

And what James is saying here is that there is only one whose laws are permanently valid. And there is only one whose judgments are of eternal significance. Now, in saying this, he's also not suggesting that there is no place for human legislation.

That would be a misinterpretation of the Bible, wouldn't it? Someone says it says in the Bible in James 4.12, There is only one lawgiver and one judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy. And so, your honor, I do not accept your existence. That would not be a smart move on a number of fronts.

Because it would reveal that the individual has not been reading the rest of the Bible, where it makes very clear that God has appointed civil jurisdiction for the punishment of those who do wrong and for the praise of those who do right. No, what James is saying is this. Not that there is no place for human legislation, but rather that the foundation of all such legislation is in the revealed law of God.

What legal scholars refer to and many contemporary scholars disdain now as being natural law, which is actually supernatural law. It is the oughtness of moral conscience. It is the oughtness of human society, which scholars wonder at.

Why does anybody say we ought to do this or we ought to do that? Where does oughtness come from? And at the high levels of philosophical debate, this notion is absolutely poo-pooed. But, says James, there actually is only one lawgiver and judge. Human courts may get it right.

Human courts may get it wrong. But ultimately, the judge of all the earth will do right. Because God is the only one who is able to detect absolutely accurately, to convict with absolute authority, and to punish with absolute fairness.

God alone. And that, incidentally, and in passing, is why the foundations of civil liberty in this nation, and the fundamental place of the Ten Commandments, is so vehemently opposed by those who reject God and His authority. Because such individuals understand the direct link between this one lawgiver and judge who executes his judgments with validity and with authority.

God alone, he says, is able to judge. He's the one who is able to save and to destroy. And it is in light of that, that, for example, we read the words of Jesus when, in Luke chapter 12, He says to His followers, You ought not to be concerned about the people that can kill the body.

I tell you, my friends, don't be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear. Fear Him who, after the killing of the body, has the power to throw you into hell.

That's the real judgment, He says, you ought to fear. And that, incidentally, and in passing, is where everything will be brought to rights. Is it possible that civil jurisdiction gets it wrong? Absolutely.

Is there human error? Without question. Does that mean that we should not do what God says we should do in relationship to the execution of justice? Absolutely not. Does that mean that things will be faltered all the way through to the end? Not at all.

All will be put to right on the day when, before the bar of God's judgment, things are settled. And those who think that they got off will find that they didn't. And those who fear and feel that they were punished unjustly will be vindicated at the bar of God's assignation.

That's why it is so important that we take seriously these exhortations, lest we seek to remove God from His throne and put ourselves there, and grow impatient of God to exercise His judgments, thereby seeking to advance the case by executing them ourselves. It is absolutely wrong to bomb abortion clinics. It is absolutely wrong to shoot people who conduct abortions.

It is absolutely wrong to do abortions. But God will deal with the issue in His time. He, the judge of all the earth, will do right.

We are not in that position. We are not in that position. And incidentally, this is the same reason why, in a different vein, when Paul addresses the Corinthians, and he says, you know, we should be regarded as servants of God, and those who are the servants of God should prove faithful, and then he says, I care very little if I'm judged by you or by any human court.

He's not being dismissive. He's not being arrogant. He's just saying, you're not the issue.

You know, you can scare me a wee bit, but you don't scare me a lot. I don't care if I'm judged by you or by any human court. He says, I do not even judge myself.

My conscience is clear. But that doesn't make me innocent. It is Yahweh who judges me.

Therefore, judge nothing before the appointed time. Wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness, and will expose the motives of men's hearts, and at that time, each will receive his praise from God.

Now, that kind of expression is, I think, grounded in what James is making clear here in the twelfth verse. The absurdity of taking upon ourselves a prerogative which is God's alone should not be missed. Hence the closing sentence.

But you? Who are you to judge your neighbor? Who are you? Now, my family will just crawl under the seat when I go to where I'm going now. But that's all right. They'll get back up later.

I couldn't go to this question, but you? Who are you? Without going to one of my favorite court scenes in one of my favorite old movies. This dates me dreadfully. The movie is What's Up, Doc? Featuring Ryan O'Neill and Barbara Streisand and Madeleine Kahn, who sadly died of cancer a few years ago.

And if you remember the movie at all, after the great fiasco and the chase down the windy street of San Francisco and smashing through plate glass windows and disrupting everything and creating massive havoc in the city. They are all eventually assembled before the judge who comes out a wizened little man with a black cloak. And he sits and he looks out of this vast company and he sees them all there.

And he immediately goes underneath his desk and gets out some Tylenol or whatever it is. Takes a big thing of them and drinks down the water. And then he gets these these steel balls that are the stress things that he begins to move around in his hands.

And when he eventually got himself ready, he says, you know, OK, you know what's going on here. And one person says one thing and one says another. And then eventually a fellow says, I demand to be heard right out of the blue.

This is Madeleine Kahn's would be shooter. And the judge says, who are you? And remember, he says, I'm Hugh. And the judge says, you're me.

He says, no, I'm Hugh. The judge says, stop saying that. And then he turns to his bailiff and he says, tell him to stop saying that.

And the bailiff says, stop saying that. And so the man says, I demand to be heard. I'm a doctor.

And the judge says, of what? Of music. Can you fix a stereo? No. Then shut up.

It's a great little piece of writing. I demand to be heard. Who are you? I'm Hugh.

Oh, you are? That's what James is saying here. Who are you? I'm Hugh. Oh, you are? Very good.

Good for you. Sit down. I'll call on you if I need you.

So far, the judgment of the universe is in safe hands. You can relax, Charlie. You can relax, Mrs. We don't need you.

Indeed, it is an absurdity. It is an utter futility. It is a rash presumption.

It is infinitely pathetic. That we should not only demand to be heard, but that we should seek to assume the judge's place and rush to judgments unfounded and unwarranted and all on our own, as if somehow or another we are able to judge even the motives of one another's hearts. Well, I think that's what these verses are addressing.

And I want to conclude by turning to two of my heroes, one from the 21st century for some points of application and one from the 19th century for some directives going on from here. From the 21st century, I'm referencing Jerry Bridges and the work that he's done over the years as a member of the Navigators and I keenly look forward with others to him coming here for our pastor's conference God willing in May of 2008. And in this little book called *Respectable Sins*, which I referenced this morning, he has an entire chapter on judgmentalism.

And in order that we might at least have some kind of points of application, let me just give you a couple of his illustrations of what he has in his own mind when he thinks about the danger of judging one another. You may be surprised by them. And what I'm going to do is I'm going to start to read them and then I'll just trail it off.

It'll just go dot, dot, dot, dot, dot, which is an incentive for you to go and buy the book and to read it. I grew up in the mid-20th century when people dressed up to go to church. Men wore jackets and ties, usually suits and ties, and women wore dresses.

Sometime in the 1970s, men began to show up at church wearing casual pants and open-collar shirts. Many women began to wear pants. For several years, I judged them.

Didn't they have any reverence for God? Would they dress so casually if they were going to an audience with the president? That sounded pretty convincing to me. Only, I was wrong. You see, there's nothing in the Bible that tells us what we ought to wear in church.

And as for dressing up to meet the president, that's a cultural thing centered in Washington, D.C. If you were invited to meet the president while he's vacationing at his ranch, you would probably show up in blue jeans. Reverence for God, I finally concluded, is not a matter of dress. I also grew up in the era of the grand old hymns, sons of the accompaniment of piano and organ.

It was majestic. To me, it was reverent worship of God. Today, in many churches, the grand old hymns have been replaced by contemporary music and the piano and organ with guitars and drums.

Again, I was judgmental. How could people worship God with those instruments? But the New Testament churches had neither pianos nor organs. Yet they managed to worship God in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

I still have a preference for church music, sung as we did when I was younger. But it's just that, a preference, not a Bible-based conviction. So let's avoid being judgmental.

I'll take it up, give you two more, shall I? Enjoying this? Want to buy the book? I wrote somewhere that I had finally come to the conclusion that in most instances, the Bible teaches temperance, not abstinence. I had to work through that issue also because, again, I found myself being judgmental when I would see Christians having a glass of wine at a restaurant. However, after I wrote what I did about temperance, I received a polite but firm letter from a dear lady who really took me to task.

She was convinced I was selling out a foundation stone of Christian morals. I understand her concern, but she did not give me any evidence from Scripture. It was her personal conviction.

Many of us know that doctrine is important, and because we believe that's true, we can easily fall into the sin of judgmentalism. For example, the doctrine of Christ's substitutionary atonement for our sins and the complementary doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone are to me crucial doctrines. These are the kind of doctrines where I, so to speak, draw a line in the sand and say, no compromise, none whatsoever, period.

However, some writers and teachers who consider themselves evangelicals are denying Christ's substitutionary atonement. To them, Christ did not die in our place to pay for our sins. Instead, he went to the cross solely as an example for us to follow when we suffer.

Others downplay the death of Christ on the cross, saying we should focus not on the cross of Christ, but rather on his life, which we should follow as an example. Whenever the subject of my teaching or speaking warrants it, I take issue with these folks, and I think I am right in doing so. But I confess, I have at times slipped into the sin of judgmentalism.

I disagree so strongly with what they are teaching that I have sometimes demonized them. I don't think I'm alone in this sin. And then back into the 19th century to Charles Simeon, who was a vicar in Cambridge, had a tremendous influence in the 19th century amongst the intelligentsia of Oxbridge.

And in writing to a colleague in the ministry, he gave him these directives. He said, the longer I live, the more I feel the importance of adhering to the rules which I have laid down for myself, which are as follows. Number one, to hear as little as possible what is to the prejudice of others.

Two, to believe nothing of the kind until I am absolutely forced to it. Three, never to drink into the spirit of one who circulates an ill report. Four, always to moderate as far as I can the unkindness which is expressed towards others.

Five, always to believe that if the other side were heard, a very different account would be given of the matter. And he used to say to his friends, let us sit upon the seat of love instead upon the seat of judgment. Let us pray.

Lord God, you search us and you know our hearts. Cleanse us from our sins. Put a right spirit within us.

Forgive us when we sin with such ease, especially in these apparently respectable areas. When we justify our unkindnesses simply because we feel we're telling the truth. But everything that is true doesn't need to be stated.

And forgive us for using that as a crutch for our own desire to do down others and so exalt ourselves. And it is with confidence that we come to you, our God and King, because in the Lord Jesus Christ we have discovered afresh your amazing love for us. And in Christ's name we pray.

Amen. You've been listening to Alistair Begg. You're welcome to pass this message along to others.

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