

## *Thoughts on James 4:11-12*

The passage reads:

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers [or brothers and sisters]. 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 neighbour?

Let us clear the decks. We know that James is writing to believers – Jewish believers, yes (Jas. 1:1) – but, most definitely, believers (Jas. 1:3; 2:1). They had been regenerated (Jas. 1:18), they were brother and sisters; James addresses them as such no less than fifteen times in his relatively short book (Jas. 1:2,16,19; 2:1,5,14; 3:1,10,12; 4:11; 5:7,9,10,12,19), even using the term ‘beloved brothers’ on occasion. They were justified by faith (Jas. 2:24), indwelt by the Spirit (Jas. 4:5),<sup>1</sup> church members (Jas. 1:9;<sup>2</sup> 2:1-2;<sup>3</sup> 5:14), called or known by the name of Christ (Jas. 2:7), and were awaiting the Lord’s return (Jas. 5:7-9). Oh yes, they were believers.

So, then, James, addressing fellow-believers, tells them:

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers [or brothers and sisters]. 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 neighbour?

He virtually repeats his words a little later:

Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door (Jas. 5:9).

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<sup>1</sup> Depending on ‘Spirit’ or ‘spirit’. Opinion seems divided.

<sup>2</sup> See NASB margin.

<sup>3</sup> Synagogue here means assembly.

It is not my intention to expound these verses. As my title makes clear, in this very short article I am simply concerned with jotting down some ‘thoughts’ on James 4:11-12.

I notice that James talks to believers about ‘the law’ and ‘the Lawgiver’. Now I find this very interesting, very interesting indeed. More, I think it highly significant. I say this because some new-covenant theologians assert that believers are under no law at all. They want to avoid talk of ‘law’ with regard to believers.<sup>4</sup> *But James has no such inhibition.*

Furthermore, it is also clear that James expects – he demands – that his readers – believers – keep the law in question. The passage pulsates with its sense of the believer’s accountability, duty, responsibility.

Above all, James lets his readers – believers – know that if they don’t keep the law in question, they are guilty of acting as a judge on that law, and that will get them into hot water! They need to bear in mind the One who gave the law and the fact that they are answerable to him. That is James’ unequivocal and repeated message in James 4 and 5. I know believers will never be condemned (Rom. 8:1,33-34). Even so, they will have to give an account, as Romans 14:12 tells us. Indeed, let me quote that passage in full; the parallel with James 4:11-12 is unmissable:

Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written: ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God’. So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother (Rom. 14:9-13; see also Matt. 16:27).

And we know how probing that judgment will be; it will take account of things down to ‘every careless word’ (Matt. 12:36).

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<sup>4</sup> I will not stop to deal with that here since I have done so at length in several works. See, for instance, my *Believers Under the Law of Christ; Liberty Not Licence*; ‘Stop Press! No Law for Believers! Really?’

Serious stuff!

Wait a minute! The believer has died to the law of Moses (Rom. 7:4-6). He is not under the law of Moses (Rom. 6:14).<sup>5</sup> And yet, here is James, speaking so highly of law when writing to believers! How can this be?

Because it is the theology of the new covenant; that is, it is scriptural. True, the believer is not under the law of Moses. That is certain. True, he will never be condemned. But as James makes abundantly plain, the believer most definitely is under law, he has a Lawgiver, and he is answerable to his Lawgiver, the One who is also his Judge as well as his Saviour (Jas. 4:12; 5:9). The question is: What law is this? For the reasons I have just given, it cannot be the law of Moses.

Objection! But James is clearly quoting the law of Moses! Here is his source:

You shall not oppress your neighbour or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbour. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbour: I am the Lord. You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbour, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord (Lev. 19:13-18).

This is a most interesting objection. Let me deal with it.

First of all, James is not *quoting* Leviticus 19; he is *alluding* to it. I am not nit-picking; I am sticking to the facts. *And this particular fact is very important.* The apostles time and again allude to the law of Moses, but they never quote it as a binding rule for the believer, but always as a paradigm or illustration of the point they are making.<sup>6</sup> This is precisely what James is doing

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<sup>5</sup> See the previous note for references to find my arguments.

<sup>6</sup> See my *Christ* pp279-294,528-542; *passim*; *Believers* pp291-303.

here. He is not imposing the law of Moses on believers. He is alluding to it.

What is more, let me take the objection back to the objector. I think I would be right to say that you are one of those who, with Calvin, claim that the so-called moral law is the perfect rule of life for the believer. Am I right? You also say, do you not, that all the rest of the more than 600 laws of Moses have been abolished by Christ, and are not part of the believer's rule. Very well. May I suggest that you try that argument on James' allusion to Leviticus? Leviticus 19 is not part of the so-called moral law, is it? So why, if you are right, does James allude to it? If, however, you insist that Leviticus 19 is binding on the believer as his perfect rule, what do you make of Leviticus 19:5-10, 19:25, and so on? Do you regard those laws as binding on the believer? Let me hasten to add that I treat those verses – as all the Mosaic commands – in precisely the same way as I do the passage in question; namely, as paradigms, nuanced by Christ and his apostles, for my behaviour as a believer. But you, if you are consistent, must insist on them as binding. Do you?

But, above all, the objection misses the point about Leviticus 19:18 altogether. *And it is a very **big** point!* Paul quotes the verse when he writes to the Galatians (Gal. 5:13). Why? Why this emphasis upon the 'love your neighbour' of Leviticus 19:18? This is noteworthy. Whereas before Christ's use of it, and Paul wrote his letters to the churches, there are no explicit references to the verse in Jewish writings, in clear contrast, in the New Testament this verse is the most frequently quoted passage from the Pentateuch (Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8, with an allusion here in Jas. 4:11-12). This can only mean that the emphasis on Leviticus 19:18 is particularly and specially a gospel or new-covenant emphasis, and must have come from Christ himself, who first used it in this way (Matt. 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27). I will say no more about this now, having done so at length elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> But the point is that James is not imposing the Mosaic law on believers. He is making a gospel – that is, a new-covenant – allusion to it.

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<sup>7</sup> See my *Christ* p285; *passim*; *Believers* pp96-106.

So, I repeat, James cannot be saying that the believer's law is the law of Moses.<sup>8</sup>

So what law is it? James does not tell us! I am bound to say that it strikes me that he takes it for granted! Leaving that to one side, the fact is, he does not, in so many words, tell us which law he is speaking about.

But all is not lost! Let me re-phrase my question: *Whose* law is it? James gives us more than enough information to answer *that* question. The believer's Lawgiver is his Judge: 'There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, he who is able to save and to destroy'. And whoever that person is, we are talking about his law.

Can there be any doubt who this Lawgiver and Judge is? The Lord Jesus Christ lays it on the line:

The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father... He has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man (John 5:22-23,27).

Paul states it plainly:

God... has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, those who follow the Puritans and stretch the ten commandments to include everything from Genesis to Revelation and beyond, are not fazed by this. They think that every member of the human race from Adam to the end of time has been, is, and will be under the Mosaic law, usually whittled down to the so-called moral law. Indeed, some think angels are under it. Some think the Mosaic law will rule in eternity. It would not surprise me if they thought Martians are under it! And all the time, Scripture plainly tells us that the Mosaic law was introduced 430 years after the promise to Abraham (Gal. 3:17), was given to Israel only (Deut. 4:1 – 5:33; 7:8-12; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 2:12-14; 9:4; 1 Cor. 9:20-21), and was designed to last only until the coming of Christ, the Seed promised to Abraham (Gal. 3:16-25), who fulfilled it (Matt. 5:17-18) and thus rendered it obsolete (Rom. 10:4; 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Heb. 8:13).

The believer's Lawgiver is Christ.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, it can only be the law of Christ that James is talking about.

Let me sum up. The believer is not under the law of Moses, but he is under law, he is under a Lawgiver. The context makes it clear that that Lawgiver is Christ. The believer therefore can only be under Christ's law, the law of Christ, 'the law of liberty' of James 1:25; 2:12, 'the royal law' of James 2:8 – literally, 'the law of the King' (see NASB, margin),<sup>10</sup> by which he will be judged (Jas. 2:12). As for Christ's law, see, for instance, Matthew 5 – 7, John 12:48 – 16:33, fleshed out by the apostles in the post-Pentecost Scriptures in accordance with Christ's promise (John 15:16-17; 16:12-15).

In short, although the believer is not under the law of Moses, he is not law-less; he is under the law of Christ. And he is obligated to keep it. The believer really is free – in particular, set free from sin (Rom. 6:22), and free from the law of Moses (Gal. 5:1), having died to it (Rom. 7:4-6). But liberty is not licence. There is a rule for believers to live by. They are 'under law towards Christ', that 'perfect law of liberty'. They are ruled by 'the law of Christ', following 'this rule', 'walk[ing] by the same rule', having taken Christ's 'easy yoke', being taught by the Spirit 'to observe all things' which Christ commanded (Matt. 11:28-30; 28:20; 1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2,16; Phil. 3:16; Jas. 1:25; 2:12). Obedience to that law is essential. Believers are accountable to their Lawgiver and Judge. The law of Christ is more penetrating than the law of Moses.<sup>11</sup> The book of Hebrews, which speaks so powerfully of the new covenant, also contains the most serious warnings, and the writer issues those warnings in comparison with – rather, in contrast to – the old covenant. He stresses 'how much more' serious is disobedience to Christ than

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<sup>9</sup> Ultimately the LORD is the lawgiver (Isa. 33:22). The law of God for Israel was the law of Moses; the law of God for the believer is the law of Christ. See my forthcoming article on Isa. 33:22.

<sup>10</sup> Christ is the believer's King (Ps. 2:6; John 18:33-37; Acts 17:7; 1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 19:16, and so on).

<sup>11</sup> See my 'The Penetrating Law of Christ'; *Believers*.

Moses (Heb. 9:14; 12:25). See Hebrews 2:1-3; 3:12-14; 4:1,11; 6:4-8; 10:26-39; 12:14-17,25-29.<sup>12</sup>

In conclusion, I address those new-covenant theologians who continue to insist that the believer is free of all law. I hope this brief look at James 4:11-12 will do something to cause you to think again. In addition, I hope this short article will help to explode that ill-informed prejudice which moves not a few to dismiss new-covenant theology as fuzzy and antinomian, and, I might add, usually do so without having given it serious thought. As John G.Reisinger said, when openly challenging R.C.Sproul over the issue:

Dr Sproul, please explain why your magazine labels new-covenant theology as antinomian when we not only affirm just as strongly as you that the Christian is not only under clear objective ethical commandments in the new covenant, but we also insist those new-covenant laws are even higher than those written on stone. How is it possible for our belief in a *higher* law to be turned into *anti* law? Your September [2002] issue of *Tabletalk* condemns us as heretics simply because we believe that our Lord Jesus Christ is a true Lawgiver in his own right and, as such, gives higher and more spiritual laws than anything Moses ever gave. Why do we deserve the odious label of ‘antinomian’ simply because we believe that Christ replaces Moses as the new Lawgiver in exactly the same way he replaces Aaron as high priest?<sup>13</sup>

Well?

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<sup>12</sup> See my *Christ* pp233-236.

<sup>13</sup> John G.Reisinger: ‘An Open Letter to Dr R.C.Sproul’, *Sound of Grace*, Frederick, Vol.9 number 4, February 2003, p3, emphasis his.