

Faith with Hands and Feet
Part Fourteen: Honoring One Another
James 4.11-12

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Two weeks ago I got to be with my covenant group brothers for our annual get-together. I started the group with a bunch of fellow pastors after I graduated from seminary. One of the guys has gone on to be with the Lord, so there are 12 of us now who get together for four or five days every year to play together and pray together and study Scripture and enjoy each other's company.

Every year we play eighteen holes of scramble golf, with a whole host of special rules, like a tee buster, and a free throw, and a club length to move the ball to a better location, plus a mulligan for each nine holes. Can't figure out why we all come in about eight under par . . . Masters, here we come!

A mulligan, as you probably know, is a stroke that doesn't count.

You swing and you top the ball on the tee and it hops ten feet and rolls to a stop, or you swing and you shank the ball and it flies sideways off into the woods and you hear it ricocheting off three or four trees, deeper and deeper it goes, and you just tee up another ball and swing again without any penalty on your score.

When it comes to the things we say, the words that come out of our mouths, we love to give ourselves mulligans, don't we?

This is not only true for us as individuals, but for whatever historical reason it seems to be true of the American evangelical church as well. We just dismiss the cost of our words.

We're not so quick to hand out mulligans to others, but we think nothing of dismissing unkind or hurtful words that come out of our mouths, and just going on as though we never said them.

But from the perspective of the Lord Jesus, our words matter – a lot, all of them – and living a faithful life means, among other things, that our faith should shape our speech.

In fact, as we saw a few weeks ago, Jesus says in Matthew 12.36 that we will have to answer to God on judgment day for every careless word that comes out of our mouths.

Yes, if we are followers of Jesus, the penalty for those idle words is paid by Jesus on the cross, but we still need to answer for them before God.

Turns out there are no mulligans when it comes to our speech.

And the reason is because words are dangerous. They're like power tools. They can be so helpful, but if we're not careful, one slip and someone gets hurt. Deeply hurt.

This year at covenant group, in the midst of all the fun and games, a bit of competitive spirit began to surface. Then one of the guys accused another guy of cheating.

Everybody thought he was just joking around, but it soon became obvious that he was serious. The rules had not been well explained, and the two different people had two different versions, which made it easy to wonder if the rules were conveniently being changed along the way.

To make it worse, that initial accusation of cheating was followed by turning to others who were nearby and making the same accusation against this brother.

It was such a painful moment that the man who was accused of cheating ended up in tears, deeply hurt. And both of the men ended up alienated from one another for much of the remaining time we had together, even though they were both working at it.

When it comes to our speech, there are no mulligans. There aren't any things we say that just don't count.

* * *

For the past several months we've been walking through a letter in the New Testament that was written by a man who was both a follower of Jesus and his brother.

The letter of James to the early church was a practical project to equip the church to learn to *live out* its faith.

What does it look like, in tangible ways, ways that we can see and hear, to demonstrate our allegiance to Jesus as king? Not just a largely ceremonial king, like we saw crowned yesterday. But a real king. *The* king. How will our devotion to our king find expression through our hands and feet?

As we've been working our way through this letter it's become pretty clear that our title for this sermon series, *Faith with Hands and Feet*, isn't sufficient. It should really include something about our mouths too

As we've discovered along the way, James has had a LOT to say about our speech.

In 1.19-20: he says we should be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to get angry, because angry words don't bring about the righteous life God desires

In 1.26: he says if we are devoted followers of Jesus we need to learn to keep a tight rein on our tongues

In 3.1-12: James reminds us that our tongues are incredibly difficult to control; he points out how often it happens that with the same tongues we praise God and curse men – and he says that simply should not be

In 3.13-18: he contrasts the self-at-the-center wisdom of this world with the wisdom that comes from above and is characterized by words that are peace-loving, considerate, and full of mercy

Then, as we heard last week in Rob's message, in 4.1-2: James addresses the problem of fights and quarrels between brothers and sisters in the family of faith, which come from looking other than to God to get our needs met; again, he says those have no place within the body of Christ

And now, in the passage we're looking at today, we come to his final comments on how we are to speak:

James 4.11-12

Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are 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?

Picture this.

You're in a conversation.

You have a difference of opinion. Or something gets said that turns the conversation sideways.

As so often happens, for some unexpected reason, the conversation takes a turn, and becomes personal. It moves from the merits of a position to the merits of a person.

Something is said and it pinches you. Maybe your motives are called into question. Maybe crass humor is used. Maybe an opinion is expressed that you strongly disagree with. Whatever it is, as a result . . .

You feel wronged, you feel hurt, you feel offended, you feel insulted, you feel accused, you feel slighted, you feel cheated, you feel embarrassed, you feel exposed, you feel misunderstood, you feel put on the spot.

Then what? What is your response?

James says in 4.11

Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them . . .

James starts by reminding us who this is we're dealing with. This is not some inconsequential nobody we're speaking with, someone who doesn't matter to us and is unimportant to God.

Twice in verse 11 he reminds us this is actually our sister or our brother we're dealing with – a member of our own family of faith. And in verse 12 he reminds us this is also our neighbor, whom Jesus has told us we are to love as an expression of our love for God.

Having reminded us who this is, a fellow image bearer of God, perhaps even a brother or sister in Christ, James cautions us: Don't *slander* each other. Then in the next line he refers to *speaking against* one another. These are actually the same word in the original Greek (*katalalia*).

The second way it appears captures its meaning perfectly. The word literally says, "speak against." The word is a wide and inclusive one. It includes all sorts of different things that could come out of our mouths. The two things these things have in common are 1) that they are words we say *about* each other to someone else, and 2) that they are negative or hurtful.

Let's circle back to the word slander. Not exactly one we use on a regular basis.

Sharon and I remember well the time when Sean was three or four and he said something negative to a friend about his brother Brandon. Sharon pulled him aside and told him that wasn't kind and that's not how we treat each other in our family. It was something the Bible called "slander," and it was wrong. So Sean went to Brandon and said, "I'm sowwy I swandewed you, Bwandon."

According to the people who keep track of such distinctions, slander is a *false* accusation that defames a person's reputation and causes hurt, and gossip is *true* information that defames a person's reputation and causes hurt. Both are included in this idea of speaking against someone that James is saying is unacceptable.

Then James moves us to a connected idea: he says when we speak against someone else, we are inevitably doing what the Bible calls "judging" them (*krino*).

Let's pause here for a moment and tease this word out a bit.

The root word behind this word “judge” is separating two things from each other. Homer uses it to talk about separating wheat from chaff, the leaves and seed pods and stalks that are of no value.

And as you might expect, there are two different senses of this word. One is a good one. It refers to something we are in fact called to do as followers of Christ.

I Corinthians 5.12-13

It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning. God will judge those on the outside.

For example, in I Corinthians 5, Paul says that the church has a responsibility to assess where its members are spiritually, such as when you determine who should be considered to serve as a pastor or elder or deacon, and it is important to be able to assess if someone has crossed moral lines. You could translate this “discern.” You are separating out behavior that is moral or right from behavior that is immoral or wrong – the wheat of right and the chaff of wrong.

But there is another meaning of this exact same word that you could translate “being judgmental” or “drawing a negative conclusion about someone and treating them in a way that shows it.”

This second meaning is what Jesus is addressing in Matthew 7 when he says

Matthew 7.1-2

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

This is when you start separating *yourself* from the person you see as immoral or wrong. You, the wheat, separate yourself from the chaff, the other person, who you throw away.

That's what James is addressing here when he speaks in the same breath about speaking against someone and judging them. He is talking about separating ourselves from others as though we were above them and morally superior to them, and they were beneath us.

Have you ever wondered what the opposite of judging is? Romans 14.1-13 says:

Accept . . . and do not judge. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master servants stand or fall. You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

According to Paul, in Romans 14, the opposite of *judging* someone is *accepting* them. This word throws *really* helpful light on what judging actually means.

The word "accept" is a compound word in Greek (*paralambano*), made from joining two other words. The words means "move toward" and "draw in." When I accept you, I move towards you. And I draw you in towards me.

So if judging is the opposite of accepting, that means when I judge you, I pull back from you and I push you away from me.

You've wronged me, you've offended me, you've insulted me, you've hurt me. And what do I do?

I pull back from you and I push you away from me. The most natural thing in the world. But when we feel hurt or offended, we aren't called to do what comes naturally. We are called to do what comes supernaturally.

Jesus says no. James says no.

Brant Hansen, in his wonderfully provocative *Unoffendable*, says,

Quit being shocked when people don't share your morality. Quit serving as judge and jury, in your own mind, of that person who just cut you off in traffic. Quit thinking you need to "discern" what others' motives are. And quit rehearsing in your mind what that other person did to you. 60

Don't speak against. And don't judge. Why?

James 4.11

Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.

What's James getting at here?

Let me take you back to the heart of the Old Testament moral code when it comes to the way we treat each other. It's found in Leviticus 19.

Leviticus 19.16-18

Do not spread slanderous gossip among your people. . . . Do not nurse hatred in your heart for any of your brothers. Confront people directly so you will not be held guilty for their sin. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

In case you didn't make the connection, this is the verse Jesus quotes when he says that, in addition to the command to love God with our whole heart and soul, there's another great law we're also called to obey as his followers, which is to love our neighbors as ourselves.

James calls that the royal law of love, and it stands at the heart of this letter of his.

Look at James 2.8.

Yes indeed, it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures:
"Love your neighbor as yourself."

When we separate ourselves from our brothers and sisters or our neighbors in judgment – when, because they offend us or hurt us, we pull back from them and push them away from us – we are contradicting the royal law of love.

When we do that, according to James, we are saying to the world – the same world that Jesus says will know we are Christians by our love (John 13.35) – we are saying to the world that we don't put much stock in what Jesus calls us to do. We separate ourselves from that law, like wheat from chaff, pulling ourselves out from under it, and rejecting its authority.

No, says James. Judging others is not our job.

James 4.12

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?

Hansen in his book *Unoffendable* puts his finger on why so many of us want to step in, put on the black robe, and pick up the gavel. Because we're afraid God won't do his job.

We struggle with trusting God to mete out justice. We're afraid He *won't* mete out justice, that people won't get what they deserve. So perhaps our entitlement to anger is our little way of making sure some measure of "justice" is served. 69

We pull back from others, and we push them away, *to give them their due*. Of course, we're quick to give ourselves mulligans. But others . . . ?

Lord, have mercy! Since when is giving others their due our job as followers of Christ?

In Titus 3.1-2 Paul admonishes Titus, a church pastor, to

remind the people . . . to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.

Hansen writes,

I used to think that to be Christlike meant to be alienated and put off by the sin of others. But it's quite the opposite. *Refusing to be alienated and put off by the sin of others is what allows me to be Christlike.* 79

The judging business is God's business. 89-90

So if judging others is not our job, what is? When someone wrongs us, hurts us, offends us, slights us, how should we respond?

The Scriptures don't leave us guessing.

First, if someone has wronged or offended us, God calls us to carry that hurt or offense straight to God, and to let him relieve us of the burden of it by asking him to help us love and forgive the person who has hurt or offended us. We take our hurt or offense straight to God.

Catherine of Sienna, writing in her *Dialogues*, says,

And if you should see something that is clearly a sin or fault, snatch the rose from the thorn. In other words, offer these things to me in holy compassion. 191

Second, if there is anything to be said on the horizontal human level, there is only one direction we are allowed to take it. Back to the person who has hurt or offended us. Nowhere else.

Not to our spouse, or our friend, or someone who is in our camp, or someone else who has an unresolved issue with that person.

I've shared with you before how impacted I was by Soren Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*, which is a study of the most important New Testament passages on love. It is so profound and so challenging.

Here's one of the things he writes about the temptation to talk to others about how someone else has hurt us or offended us, which he calls *scandalmongering*.

It is only too clear that every man, unfortunately, has a great inclination to see his neighbor's faults and perhaps an even greater inclination to want to tell about them. 269

One does not judge lightly of this witnessing to a neighbor's faults, as if everything were all right if only the factuality of what was told had been determined. 269

Scandalmongering is like setting fire to a whole community! 271

Jesus in Matthew 18 says

Matthew 18.15-17

If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church.

If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense *to them* – not to the rest of the world! The only time we should include others, as James makes clear, is if we get stuck, so they can help us work things out with that person who has hurt us, *not* to talk about the person behind their back and bring the other person down in someone else's eyes.

And the third responsibility is to accept those who wrong us or hurt us or offend us instead of judging them; to move toward them and draw them toward us, not to pull back from them and push them away from us – to accept them in just the same way that Jesus did with us.

Romans 15.7

Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory.

This passage makes it clear – and so does Jesus' own way of befriending prostitutes and tax collectors – that accepting a person and condoning what they've done wrong are two completely different things. We are called to accept one another even if we disagree with one another.

Catherine of Sienna urges Christ followers to recognize the other person as a fellow sinner who is equally in the debt of God's mercy, which allows them to be gentle with those who wrong us, just as God has been gentle with us. She writes,

Souls such as these have . . . clothed themselves in a new nature, the gentle Christ Jesus . . . and they follow him courageously. . . . Those who live in this gentle light . . . are always peaceful and calm, and nothing can scandalize them because they have done away with what causes them to take scandal, their self will. 189

When they see something that is clearly sinful they do not pass judgment, but rather feel a holy and gentle compassion, praying for the sinner and saying with perfect humility, "Today it is your turn; tomorrow it will be mine unless divine grace holds me up." 190

Listen to how Kierkegaard takes this one step further and suggests the practice of what he calls *mitigating explanations*, something I have found incredibly helpful.

Maybe the person is under lots of pressure, or has been hurt by someone else, or is feeling insecure, and is responding out of that. That's exactly what happened when our covenant group brother suddenly got upset and started lashing out. He had been in an incredibly stressful ministry setting, with the previous pastor calling his leadership into question.

Kierkegaard says

Every event, every word, every act . . . can be explained in numerous ways.

Let the judges, let the detectives, labor to discover guilt and crime; the rest of us are enjoined to be neither judges nor detectives – God has rather called us to love; consequently, to [offer a] mitigating explanation. 272

The mitigating explanation removes [offense] by showing that this or that was . . . not sin. [Then] Forgiveness takes away what nevertheless cannot be denied to be sin. 273

By forgiveness, the one who loves . . . *believes* the sin away. 274

It is blotted out. It is forgiven and forgotten, or, as Scriptures [Isaiah 38.17] say of what God forgives, it is hidden behind his back. 274

And this is the very way in which the one who loves forgives: he forgives, he forgets, he blots out sin; in love he turns to the one he forgives, but when he turns toward him he simply cannot see what lies behind his back. 275

Romans 15.7

Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory.

God, make it so.

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Here's how I'd like us to conclude this morning.

I love this line from Paul's letter to the Ephesian church, which ties all these themes together that we've been talking about this morning. I'm going to read this passage out loud. Then I'm going to lead us in our shared reading.

That will lead us into a time of silent prayer as we respond to what God has been saying to us this morning. Respond to God in whatever way he leads you – confession, invitation, conviction, resolve.

During that silence the worship team is going to come up and then they'll lead us in singing a song that will be a continuation of our prayer. We'll just remain seated and sing that quietly together.

Ephesians 4.31-5.2

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life of love, following the example of Christ.

Shared Reading

We are the beloved of the Lord.
In love He created us.
In love He came to us.
In love He died for us.

In love He makes us His own –
folding us into His love
transforming us by His love
sending us out in His love

By our love this world will know that we are His –
by our love this world will see Him in us –
as He lives His life of love in us and through us,
to the glory of God.