

# James 4:11-12 “Who Do You Think You Are?”

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Date: 31 May 2026

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[ 0 : 00 ] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Good morning. All right, that was good. Let's try it again. Good morning. All right, that's more like it. Now, before I get started, look at my skin.

It's brown, okay? I am a product of the African-American church tradition. And that means that if you speak back to me while I'm preaching, I might cut the sermon a little short.

Because in the African-American tradition, the sermon is a dialogue, not a monologue. So if y'all talk back to me, if I say something God-glorifying, Jesus-exalting, and your spirit agrees with it, don't hesitate to say amen, okay? All right.

All right. Again, that might cut the sermon just a little bit shorter. Now, I've got my phone up here. I promise you I am not texting. I am going to start a timer. That's for you, okay?

[ 1 : 07 ] So that I don't have y'all in here all day. Now, just before I get into the body of the sermon, you can go ahead and open up your Bible now, though, to James chapter 4.

And we're going to look at verses 11 and 12. But I want to give you a little bit of an update about Hope City Church and also share a brief testimony of sorts.

Now, you all have been praying for me and giving toward the work of mission that we're doing in the urban inner city context.

Pull it back. Okay. Is it my beard is scruffing it? Okay. Is that good? Okay, great. Thank you. All right.

All right. You all have been praying for the work of ministry that we're doing in the inner city urban context here in the city of Huntsville. But many of you may not even really know who Amos Williams is.

[ 2 : 10 ] And so I'll take a brief moment to introduce myself to you all and then kind of share an update about Hope City Church. And I promise you we'll get into the text because that's actually what I'm prepared to do.

All right. So I was born in Decatur, Alabama to Amos Williams, senior and Christine Williams. Now, my story, I always tell people, I call myself a JAG.

And what that stands for is an acronym. That means just a guy. I'm just a guy. But I'm connected to probably some of the most interesting people in the world.

And I mean that sincerely. My dad came of age during the civil rights movement, during the black power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. My dad was a member of the Black Panthers.

And he was also a member of the Nation of Islam. Down in Montgomery, Alabama, you can read about it. It's in the Montgomery records. My dad was involved in a shootout with the police down in Montgomery, Alabama, because he was a revolutionary.

[ 3 : 24 ] He was trying to empower people of color in the urban inner city context. But he just didn't have a good vision.

But he was trying his best to serve the people in his community and eventually went down the wrong path. Was involved in a shootout with the police.

Absconded from justice. Was on the run from the police. And the FBI became one of the ten most wanted men in the United States by the FBI during the 1960s and 1970s.

All right. Finally, they caught him. He went to jail. He was in prison for 15 years. In prison. Was radically converted from Islam to the Christian faith.

My dad has been walking with the Lord ever since. That's about 40 something years. I'm 37. I never knew that side of my dad. I only knew the disciple maker, Amos. That's all I've ever known.

[ 4 : 26 ] He married my mom, who grew up in government housing. Very poor. Had a ninth grade education. And when I was little, my mom trafficked drugs out of our house.

She done other illegal things. Do y'all know the word bootlegging? Is that a familiar? Okay. We're in the south. That's probably, you know, moonshine, all that stuff.

But my mom was a bootlegger and a drug trafficker. She did that. We were involved in a car crash when I was five years old. The car flipped on Highway 20.

We were headed west on Highway 20. The car flipped about five or six times into the eastbound lanes on Highway 20 in my dad's 1986 Cutlass.

It was a very nice car. Drug dealer car, just being honest. It just is what it is. And after that event, my mom had a radical conversion to the faith.

[ 5 : 39 ] And from that moment on, she never smoked another cigarette. She never smoked another reefer joint.

She never trafficked drugs again. I grew up in a household where I only knew Jesus. We were very poor. Being that my dad was a felon, it was hard for him to find work.

And so I grew up very poor. But my dad had a vision to help people in the inner city. My dad had a heart to help the urban poor.

And that stuck with me growing up. And so when I became an adult and the Lord gave me my own call to ministry, I always wanted to do something to help people like me.

People like that little kid, Amos, who grew up in government housing on Section 8 with food stamps and EBT cards. Well, we didn't have the card back then.

[ 6 : 40 ] We had the paper money. Y'all don't know what I'm talking about. The paper EBT. And I came to myself at the Village Church.

And I said, you know, I want to do ministry there. Not just, I want to say it right.

I don't want to just do mercy ministry. I don't want to just give people child support. I want to be present. I want to be a presence in the community.

And so the Lord Jesus, through various means, through you all's giving, through the Village Church, through other members of our presbytery, have sent us out to plant a church in the urban inner city context where we won't just be doing mercy ministry.

We will be doing actual discipleship. Because it's easy to pay child support. But who's going to walk alongside these people?

[ 7 : 50 ] People like me. People who are poor and struggling. Who's going to walk alongside them? A couple stats and then I'll get into the sermon.

Over 230,000 people in the city of Huntsville. That's an old number, so there's probably more now. Over 30,000 people live below the poverty line in Huntsville, Alabama.

Nearly 50% of all babies born in Alabama, as a whole, are born to unmarried women. 23% of families with children are headed by single mothers.

And that rate is actually higher in the inner city context. In Huntsville alone, there are 100 new homeless people every month.

In 2023 alone, there were 500 plus overdoses. And there were reported over 60 overdose deaths.

[ 9 : 02 ] And that was in 2023. I don't know if it's gotten better or worse. But who's going to walk alongside those people and dignify them?

Not just give them handouts, but to go and walk alongside them. Because the handouts are not really for them. It's for you to make you feel better about yourself. But who's going to walk alongside those people?

And that's what we feel called and led to do at Hope City Church. So if you think about Amos and if you think about Hope City Church, pray to the Lord Jesus that he will continue to be with us as we endeavor on this mission.

This mission. Thank you. James 4, verses 11 and 12.

This is God's word. This is God's word. So please listen carefully. 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.

[ 10 : 21 ] But if you judge the law, you're not a doer of the law, but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge.

He was able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

Father, glorify yourself in this moment. Hide me behind your cross. Speak, Lord. Speak, Lord, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Speak, O Lord. Amen. My brothers and sisters, if you listen to this sermon on today, and you think about someone else's sin and not your own, you need to repent.

You need to repent and ask the Spirit to reveal the sin in your own heart. Because oftentimes we listen to sermons and we think about other people.

[ 11 : 23 ] Ooh, I wish he or she was here to hear what the pastor just said. Right? But you need to ask the Spirit to continue to conform you to the image of Christ.

Because I'm going to say some hard things to all of us today. Honestly, some of you may not like me very much after today. That's okay.

I love you. But I feel led to speak prophetically into, and I don't mean like foretelling.

I don't get down like that. But I want to speak truth to power to us on today. And so may these words challenge us all.

And may these words also, though convicting, may they drive you to the arms of our loving and gracious triune God. Amen?

[ 12 : 20 ] Amen. My brothers and sisters, words have power. Words have immense and immeasurable power. And although they are invisible and intangible, they have power.

It is with words that God created the cosmos, ex nihilo. And with words, God cut a covenant, an everlasting covenant with his beloved people.

Proverbs 18, 21 tells us that death and life are in the power of the tongue. A few examples, my brothers and sisters, of words that have impacted generations of men and women.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We didn't land on Plymouth Rock. The rock was landed on us.

[ 13 : 25 ] El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, also known as Malcolm X. And still, I rise.

Maya Angelou. That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind. Neil Armstrong.

Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall. Ronald Reagan. A brief excerpt for our covenant children in the house today.

6'7". Words like these have had lasting impact. Maybe not the last one.

Words like these have had lasting impact on the world. And their sound continues to reverberate throughout generations. And in our passage, this is the second time in this letter that James has called our attention to the power of words.

[ 14 : 36 ] In chapter 3, James speaks of the deadliness of the tongue. He compares the tongue to a blazing fire and a deadly poison.

In chapter 3, verse 9, he describes how people can use their words on one hand to praise God, but then turn around and then use them to curse their brother or sister.

One who is made in the image of the God that they claim to worship. Now, my brothers and my sisters, one of my pet peeves is being asked or being told the same thing twice as if I didn't hear it the first time.

It's just something about hearing something a second time. It just kind of ticks me off a little bit. But James in this letter shows us that we are stubborn people.

So we need to be reminded again and again, lest we forget. And our two verses here, verses 11 and 12 in chapter 4, get to the heart of what James has been discussing over the last chapter and a half regarding speech and Christian character.

[ 15 : 51 ] And this is a reminder that we all need to hear, my brothers and sisters, especially given the state of the world. The United States is as polarized as it's ever been.

Relations among people of different ethnicities are as divided as they've ever been. And tragically, people who call themselves Christians, who are brothers and sisters in Christ, are divided as well. This text is yet another reminder that Christians need to consider who they are and whose they are before we speak.

In some of the preceding verses of chapter 4, James uses a stern tone with some of his readers, calling them sinners and double-minded.

In verse 11, he addresses them as brothers and sisters. Now, calling them brothers and sisters signifies that he has a relationship with them ethnically.

[ 16 : 59 ] I will call your attention to the beginning of James' letter where we discover that the recipients of this letter are persecuted diaspora Jews.

So James, who is also the half-brother of the Lord Jesus, who is a Jewish man, is connected to his readers ethnically. But he also shares a unique relationship with them as ethnic Jews who have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, James loves the imperative. This is a very short letter, but if my exegesis serves me right, I think he uses the imperative almost 50 times.

An imperative is a command. I'm sure you all know that. In verse 11, James commands his brothers and sisters not to speak against one another.

Speaking evil against one another can be understood as slander or slandering. And this is not simply holding someone accountable with firm speech because accountability is necessary.

[ 18 : 09 ] And in all actuality, it's what James has been doing throughout the entire letter. So again, accountability is necessary, but what James is forbidding, he is forbidding degrading speech that is dehumanizing.

This is the type of speech that denies and rejects the very image of God that makes us human. It's what people refer to as defamation, right?

Slander affects not only individuals, but it impacts the community around them. Hence, James commands for his brothers and sisters not to slander one another.

Because he understands the devastation that words can have. Now, a while back, my wife and I, we watched a movie about a man named Brian Banks.

Now, Brian Banks was a football player who aspired to play in the National Football League. He was a college football player. And Brian was what you call a shoe-in, right?

[ 19 : 22 ] He was a sure thing to make the NFL. He was incredibly talented and some would even say gifted to play football. But Brian's life was derailed because he became the victim of slander.

He was falsely accused of a sexual crime and was imprisoned. An innocent man locked behind bars because of slander.

An innocent man taken away from his family because of slander. His dreams were crushed because of slander. And the pain from being slandered didn't stop with him.

Because Brian was slandered and subsequently convicted of a crime that he did not commit, it was difficult for him to find work. It was difficult for him to create meaningful relationships.

And he lived for a time at the margins of society. Because the slander he experienced, not only did it impact him, but it also impacted the people in the community around him.

[ 20 : 29 ] And my brothers and sisters, the world is as polarized as it's ever been right now. This nation is polarized. Even the church is polarized because many of us are at each other's throats, accusing our brothers and sisters of things that are simply not true.

He's a cultural Marxist. She's too woke for me. He's one of those far right Trump crazies. And the worst thing that I have observed about many of the comments like these that are thrown around is that they are mischaracterizations that are simply not true of one another.

And many of these comments come from the mouths of Christians. But my brothers and my sisters, now is not the time for us to slander our brothers and sisters in Christ, especially if you do not know a person and you do not know what they stand for.

Because it creates discord among the people of God. And the danger of our speech has been amplified by mass communication. Our Twitter fingers or aches fingers.

Our Facebook posts. We have the audacity to make comments and pretend as if our words are not filled with vitriol when they are.

[ 21 : 59 ] We have mastered the art of masquerading our condescension as polite critique or genuine concern. Oh, I'll pray for you.

We've mastered the art of slandering people with Christian ease by dressing up our vitriol with a few out of context Bible verses that make us comfortable with our pride, with our biases, with our racism and our idolatry.

But James is telling us that this type of behavior is unbecoming of Christian character. And it is dangerous. It is cosmically dangerous.

In verse 11b, we see that the reason that slandering a brother or sister is dangerous is because when we do so, we slander and judge the law of God.

In Leviticus 19, verse 16, slandering your neighbor is prohibited because it is unloving. It is characteristically unloving. And slander is directly contrary to the love commandment, which is also found in Leviticus 19, 18.

[ 23 : 14 ] And earlier in James's letter, James calls love for one's neighbor the fulfillment of the royal law. He says that in chapter 2, verse number 8.

And the law that James is speaking of here is the Mosaic law as it is obeyed by Christians through Christ's death and his resurrection within our new covenant context.

So, by slandering your brother or sister in Christ, you are being unloving and you also defame God's law and you set yourself above it.

This is the holy law of God. And by slandering your brother or sister in Christ, you say, in essence, that God's law is inadequate.

It is insufficient. You arrogantly say to yourself, I know what's best. I know what's right. I know what's good without God.

[ 24 : 12 ] In your mind, in your mind, you take God from the throne and you say, God, you're just not getting the job done. You arrogantly say to yourself, I know what's best for me and I know what's best for other people.

But when you do this, my brothers and my sisters, you swap places with the living God. You put yourself in the place of God Almighty.

You try to reverse roles with God. You no longer are a humble doer of the just and holy law of God, but you have pridefully made yourself into an idol.

And we all know what God loves to do with our idols. He crushes them. He destroys them.

So in verse 12, James is quick to remind us that there is only one lawgiver and judge.

[ 25 : 26 ] He who was able to save and to destroy. And the language of saving and destroying reminds us of Jesus's words in Matthew 10, 28, where he says, And do not fear those who can kill the body, but cannot kill the soul.

Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. My brothers and my sisters, God is not Congress. He is not parliament.

He does not sit on the Supreme Court of the United States. But back in the old days in the black church, they would say, he is the one who rules and super rules the entire cosmos, the entire universe.

He is the king of kings. He is the Lord of lords. He is God almighty, the alpha and omega. He is the one and only lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy.

Psalms 2 says he sits in heaven and laughs at the schemes of his enemies. This is the God who humbles kings and rulers just like he humbled King Nebuchadnezzar.

[ 26 : 37 ] He made the Egyptian Pharaoh bend the knee and he questioned Job and asked Job, where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

So in verse 12, after James makes it clear that there was only one lawgiver who was also judge, the one who was able to save and to destroy, there was only one question that remains.

So he asks, who are you to judge your neighbor? In other words, who do you think you are?

So my brothers and my sisters, the next time that we feel the urge to say something bad about our brother or sister in Christ, I recommend that you remember that question, who do you think you are?

Because that person is made in the image of God. That person is beautifully, fearfully and wonderfully made. That person is your brother or sister in Christ, bought by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus.

[ 27 : 45 ] So how dare I approach God's beloved and precious child with such disrespect and dishonor?

Ask yourself, who do I think I am? Because my brothers and my sisters, there is one who took slander on our behalf.

He was ridiculed. He was slandered. And if Jesus already took this burden of being falsely accused and slandered, defamed, degraded, and dehumanized, if he's already taken that from your brother or sister, don't put that burden back on them.

Jesus, whom the book of Revelation reveals to us as the lawgiver and judge, is the only one who could look down on people in a condescending manner.

But he doesn't. He never does. He chooses to love us instead. And then he commands us to love one another.

[ 28 : 57 ] So if what may proceed from your lips could be described as unloving, if what you are preparing to post on Facebook could be considered unloving, I plead with you, my brothers and my sisters, reconsider.

And I encourage us all to repent for even allowing the thought to enter our minds. Again, I do want to emphasize that I am not saying don't hold people accountable.

And if you think that that's what I've been talking about the entire time, my brother or sister, you have missed the point. We need accountability these days.

But that is an altogether different conversation. So again, if the words that are about to proceed from your mouth do not glorify God, please reconsider whether to speak them.

Now here are three metrics that you can use before your Twitter fingers get to going and before your Facebook fingers get to going.

[ 30 : 11 ] Don't assume the worst about your brother or sister in Christ. Where you see malice, there may actually be ignorance.

Ignorance does not excuse error. But if there is ignorance rather than malice, there may be an opportunity for education and discipleship.

And through prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit, perhaps even an opportunity for genuine conversion and heart change.

Number two, get the log out of your own eye before you try to get the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

Now, what does that mean? How can a log fit in your eye? It can't. It's about perspective and proximity.

[ 31 : 09 ] The speck in your eye should appear as large as a log. So get the log out of your own eye before you try to get the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

Number three, ask yourself a series of God-honoring, God-glorifying questions before you say or do anything that could harm your neighbor.

Does this need to be said? Does this need to be said? Does this need to be said by me? Does this need to be said by me right now?

Does this need to be said by me through this particular medium? And most importantly, does this glorify God?

So my brothers and my sisters, let your speech and your attitude be seasoned with salt. And let everything that we do glorify God.

[ 32 : 16 ] Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you do not slander us, even though our adversary and enemy brings accusations against us all the time.

Father, most and many of them being true. But you have laid down your life for your beloved. And so when our enemy reminds us of our past, Lord, help us to remember our future.

Our future in you that is beautiful. Our future in you that glorifies and honors you.

Lord, help us to be people who would glorify you in all that we say and all that we do. It is in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that I pray.

Amen. For more information, visit us online at [southwood.org](http://southwood.org). Thanks for joining us online at [southwood.org](http://southwood.org).