

• *Respectable backsliders are often very legalistic*

Respectable backsliders are often very legalistic and think they keep the law of God. Yet they tend to become very quarrelsome and critical. Soon they get rather bored with the gospel and perhaps their interest in getting rich takes pre-eminence in their lives. All of this was happening in the lives of James' friends.

Admiring the law is incompatible with criticism and gossip

James insists that it is illogical to think we admire the law of God if at the same time we are critical and gossipy. *'Brothers and sisters, do not speak against one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother or sister, is speaking against the law, and judging the law'*¹. The law (in its original literal form) included a command not to kill. The Christian keeps 'the law of liberty', a fulfilled and upgraded rule of life – the life that flows from the presence of Jesus within us, and fulfils everything Moses was pointing to. For the Christian the law is read in a transformed manner, and a critical spirit is really a subtle form of murder. It is trying to get rid of the other person. It is exactly the same spirit that is at work in the violent killer. It is simply a more quiet and respectable way of being a murderer! In one way or another it is opposing 'the law' – the requirement of God over our lives coming to us in a new way through Jesus.

1 4:11

• *Respectable murder!*

• *The critical spirit is actually spiritual blindness*

The critical spirit is actually spiritual blindness. It is knowing without doing. *'But if you are judging the law, then you are not a doer of the law, but a judge'*¹. It is failure in doing, failure in obedience. It is a judgemental spirit towards others and even a judgemental spirit towards the requirements of God over our lives.

1 4:11

• *It is failing to let God be God*

It is failing to let God be God. *'There is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to rescue and able to destroy. But you – who are you to judge your neighbour?'*¹ This is the key question. 'Who are you ...?'. The trouble with the respectable backslider (and we have all been one at one time or another) is that we forget who we are and start talking as if we were sinless, or even as if we were God the law-giver.

1 4:12

The same spirit shows itself in self-confident decisions about the future

The same spirit shows itself in self-confident decisions about the future. James comes back to the question 'Who are you?' from another angle, and now asks 'What is your life?' The moral backslider does not spend much time with the poor but he does have definite plans about money-making! *'Come now, you people who are saying "Today or tomorrow we will go into this city, and stay there for a year, and do business and make money"*¹. *Really? You do not know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? For you are like the morning mist, that appears for a little time, and then vanishes away altogether'*². *Instead of that you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we shall live, and we shall do this or that"*³. *But what you are doing now is glorying in your boastfulness. All such boasting is evil'*⁴.

1 4:13

2 4:14

3 4:15

4 4:16

• *It is alright to make plans but there is a right and a wrong way of doing it*

It is alright to make plans, but there is a right and wrong way of doing it. The respectable backslider tends to become very confident about what he is planning to do. We are not to be passive people; we are to have goals and aims. However we do not plan things in an arrogant manner. The arrogant people of James 4:13 thought they could control the timing of their lives ('Today or tomorrow'), the places of their lives ('such and such a town'), the length of their stay ('a year'), the content of what they did ('doing business') and its results ('making money'). What arrogance! The truth is they are again acting as if they are God. Actually God is in charge

of the length of our life. He is in control of times and places and activities. 'Trade Centres' may be high-standing buildings one day but a heap of rubble the next. It is typical of a certain kind of respectable backslider that he gets very interested in himself and does not feel that he needs bother about the Lord's will in any detail.

• *But their planning is subject to God*

• *Balanced – neither self-confident nor lazy*

But James is not against all planning for the future. He says 'You ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that."' They are expected to know they will live, and have plans as to what to do. But their planning is subject to God. This is a balanced position. It is neither self-confidence, nor a 'whatever-will-be-will-be' laziness. We are to have spiritual desires. We are to press forward to achieve our life's work and to accomplish something for God. Yet we are in God's hands. We need to be much in prayer. God's kingdom is more important than money-making. And God's will is powerful and can take us by surprise. We are just like the morning mist if we are without God's presence. Only the powerful will of God at work within us can make us achieve anything that will last.

A challenging definition of sin

• *Not 'transgressions of the law'*

• *There can be a sin where there is no written law at all*

• *Sin is anything that goes against what is right at all times and even right at this moment!*

James comes up with a challenging definition of sin. *'To the person therefore who knows what is the good thing to do, but does not do it, for that person it is sin'*¹. This is a far better definition of sin than 'Sin is transgression of the law' (and 1 John is best read in the New Revised Standard Version where it will be discovered that John never mentions the law at all!)¹ There can be a sin where there is no written law at all. God may be leading you to do something for a poor neighbour. There is no law about it. You can be moral and upright and yet do nothing about the poor person nearby. But sin is not 'the transgression of the law' (1 John 3:4 should be translated 'sin is lawlessness – *anomia* – living without principle at all except that of self-interest'). Sin is anything that goes against what is right at all times and even what is right for you right now at this moment! James' friends are ready to forget the church, forget the needy, and rush off to do business in some faraway city. James says 'You are a respectable backslider.' Start considering the will of God for your life. To the person who knows what is the good thing to do, but does not do it, for that person it is sin.

¹ 4:17

Note

1. See in detail M.A. Eaton, 1, 2, 3 *John* (Christian Focus).



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Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His *Preaching Through The Bible (PTTB)* books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.



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