

*If the Lord Wills: James 4:13-17*  
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I think this passage in James is a timely word for us in many respects. I think of the economic difficulties that we're facing as a nation. Gas prices are very high, people are losing their jobs, we're having a credit crisis, the stock market is declining, banks are crumbling, and all of this ought to remind us that our lives are fragile and the securities of this life are fleeting. It reminds us that we ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." If the Lord wills, I'll be able to put gas in my car. If the Lord wills, I'll be able to stay in my house. If the Lord wills, I'll be able to continue earning a living and providing for my family.

I also think of the Presidential election that is quickly approaching. In just over three weeks we will elect either Barack Obama or John McCain to be the next president of the United States. And this, too, impresses upon us the uncertainty of the future. We don't know which of these men will be leading our government, or the decisions that either of them might make that would significantly affect our lives. We don't know what the future holds. And so we say, If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

I think of our church, too, and the uncertainties that we face in terms of our building search. We are investigating several different options, but we don't know what God has for us. We don't know which doors He will close and which doors He will open. And so we continue to say, "If the Lord wills we will live and do this or that. If the Lord wills we will continue to proclaim the Gospel in this city and have a building to use for corporate worship and for other ministries."

Also, on a very personal level, each of us can think of our own plans and hopes and dreams. Plans concerning relationships, family, career, ministry. And we're reminded in this passage this morning that in all of these plans we must acknowledge God's absolute sovereignty. "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

Two weeks ago we studied the passage that is so pivotal in this letter, 4:4-10. James begins that passage by saying, "You adulterous people," and then he warns against being a friend of the world. But then he also reminds us of God's grace, and he says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." And that section concludes in verse 10 with the instruction, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."

The passage we looked at last week, verses 11-12, warns against slander and judging, which are in stark contrast to humility. And, in our passage this morning, we see another kind of behavior that is filled with pride rather than humility. Slander and judging are manifestations of arrogance. Likewise, planning that ignores the sovereignty of God is also a manifestation of arrogance.

As we look at these verses together I want to ask two questions. The two questions are, “How?” and “Why?” First of all, how should we think and speak of our future plans? This text tells us very clearly what we should *not* say and what we *should* say. And the second question is: why should we think and speak of our future plans in this way. These verses give us reasons for the instruction.

### **I. How should we think and speak of our future plans?**

Verse 13 begins with the words, “Come now.” These same words begin the next section, beginning in 5:1, where James confronts the rich. The words are meant to get our attention—to say “listen up,” “be warned.” Then he states who he’s addressing, “you who say . . .” He’s addressing those who speak in a certain way about their future plans. But, of course, it’s much deeper than what we say. It’s about the intentions of our hearts and the attitudes of our hearts. Listen to what this person says, and then we’ll think about what might be wrong with it. “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.” James writes this in a general way so that we can all identify with it. These are the kinds of plans we all make, and must make. We plan where we’re going to live. We plan where we’re going to work. We make plans for education. We make travel plans. We make plans to buy or sell. We plan what we’re going to eat. Our lives are filled with plans. We’re constantly making plans for the future, whether it be for this afternoon or for next week or for 10 years down the road.

And we ask, What’s wrong with that? What’s wrong with making plans? Is James saying that we shouldn’t plan at all? Should we never make any housing plans or meal plans or business plans or education plans or travel plans? Is that what James is telling us? It’s hard to imagine life without any plans.

I don’t think James is telling us not to plan, and I think this is clear from verse 15, where we’re told to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” Those are plans. We will do this or that—that’s making plans. So the issue here is not the making the plans, but the attitude of your heart in making plans.

Let’s look again at verse 13. Notice how these plans are stated. We will go to a certain city. We will spend a year there. We will trade. And we will make a profit. There’s quite a bit of

confidence in those plans, isn't there? And we might want to ask some questions of this person, like, How do you know you'll spend a year there? Could it turn out to be less than a year or more than a year? How do you know there will be opportunities to trade? And how do you know that you'll make a profit.

Maybe the person has done all kinds of research and knows the opportunities for trading certain commodities and knows that there is the potential for profitable business. But the point is that the person James has in mind here is a person who makes his or her plans without the recognition that God is sovereign over all of my plans, and oftentimes His plans are different than my plans. So the point is not that we shouldn't make plans. The point is that we must not make any plans without acknowledging God's sovereignty over all things and understanding that our plans are always subject to His plans. God's will is ultimate, and we must hold all of our plans with open hands.

There's a clear contrast between verses 13 and 15. Verse 13 represents the arrogant attitude of someone who ignores God's sovereignty. Verse 15 demonstrates the alternative attitude: "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'" If the Lord wills. Those are wonderful words, humble words, words that show our dependence on God and our submission to Him.

They're not magic words. Don't think that by merely voicing this short phrase you are obeying the text. Again, it's about the intentions of your heart and the attitudes of your heart. I'm sure there are plenty of times when individuals say these words but are not truly submitting to the Lord's will. And I should make the opposite point, too, that the person who is submitting to the Lord's will does not necessarily say these words every time plans are made. Let's not become legalistic about this. It's not primarily about saying the words, but living with an attitude of dependence on God. And when we *are* aware of our dependence on God, it will be evident in the way we make our plans and in the way we speak about our plans.

Let me share with you several examples from the New Testament. Our Lord taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). And then He modeled that for us in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done" (Matthew 26:42). And listen to these statements by Paul. In Acts 18:21 the Jews in Ephesus wanted him to stay longer, but he declined and said, "I will return to you if God wills." In Romans 1:10 he writes, "I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you." And near the end of the letter, also, he

asks them to pray “that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.” In 1 Corinthians 4:19, “But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills.” And 1 Corinthians 16:7, “I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.”

Jesus and Paul both model for us a humble submission to God’s will. We make our plans. We express our desires to God in prayer. But we do all of this with the knowledge and understanding that God is completely sovereign over all things. As it says in Ephesians 1:11, He is the One “who works all things according to the counsel of his will.” So as we plan and as we pray, we ultimately must say, Your will be done. If the Lord wills, I will live and do this or that. This is how we should think and speak of our future plans.

## **II. Why should we think and speak of our future plans in this way?**

The next question that we can consider is, Why? Why is this so? Why are we commanded to make our plans along the lines of verse 15 rather than verse 13? Why should we think and speak of our future plans in this way? Why should we say, “If the Lord wills” rather than just saying “I’m going there, doing this, and I’ll have such and such a result.” I see in these verses 4 answers to this question. Four reasons why we should think and speak of our future plans in this way.

### **1) We are ignorant of the future (verse 14a)**

First of all, we are ignorant of the future. This reason is given in verse 14, “yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.” This is a humbling thought. And it’s a humbling thought that we need to be reminded of often. Because if we haven’t had a major surprise in our lives lately, it can be very easy for us to think that tomorrow is going to be just like today, and next week is going to be just like this week, and next year will be just like this year. And we can begin to think that we *do* know what tomorrow will bring. But if you have lost a loved one in a sudden tragedy, or you’ve been let go from a job without any warning, or a relationship has taken an unexpected turn, then you’ve experienced the uncertainty of tomorrow. Don’t let the routine of today lull you into the delusion that tomorrow is going to be the same. We can tell ourselves that we know what tomorrow will bring, but in reality we don’t. We are not omniscient. We don’t know the future.

God, on the other hand, does know the future. He is omniscient. He knows all things, and He controls all things. He not only knows everything that will happen to you tomorrow and the next day and every day after that, but He is also sovereign over

each of those events. He knows your future, and He controls your future.

Therefore it is foolish for us to make our plans for the future without acknowledging this. It is foolish for us to think that we can plan out our future without recognizing our lack of knowledge and God's infinite knowledge, our lack of power and God's infinite power. How can we say with any level of confidence, "I'm going to go to this city, spend a certain amount of time there, carry out these plans, and achieve the intended outcome"? We don't know that! Only God knows what will happen, and we need to make our plans acknowledging His sovereignty and humbly submitting to His will.

## 2) Life is a mist (verse 14b)

The second reason why we must acknowledge our dependence on God is because life is a mist. This is what James says next in verse 14. "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." Have you ever thought about your life as a mist? A vapor? Think about waking up in the morning and looking out the window and seeing a dense fog. But then it's only a short time before the sun rises and the fog has cleared. That's how brief and fleeting our lives are. We think we're so permanent. We think we're here to stay. We think that we're invincible. But a heart attack or a car accident or cancer can end our lives so quickly. And if not, even for those who live into their 90s, those 90 years are but a vapor in light of eternity.

It's so crucial for us to realize that this life is quickly passing away. Whether we die today or in 80 years, this life is but a vapor. And therefore we must not put our hope and our trust in the things of this world—the enjoyments of this life. We cannot think that this life is what it's all about. This life is going to be gone, and then what? When you die, then what? Once the mist of this life has evaporated, then comes eternity. That's what counts. We will all live for eternity either in heaven or in hell. And so the challenge to each of us is to take this very short life and make it count for eternity.

The first step is to repent of your sin and trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior. The sinful life is the life that ignores eternity, ignores God, and puts oneself at the center of the universe. That is a foolish way to live, and a miserable way to live. It's foolish because you don't know when your time will come and you will stand before the lawgiver and judge of the universe (as we saw last week), the one who is able to save and to destroy. Do you know, friend, what will happen to you on that day? Will you be saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ? Or will you be destroyed because you persisted in unbelief

and rebellion against God? It is foolish to ignore eternity, ignore God, and to put yourself at the center of the universe. It's also a miserable life to live, because you will miss out on richest joys and pleasures imaginable. You will miss the pleasure of seeing and knowing God because you're so enamored with yourself, so engrossed in earthly things.

So instead of continuing in the foolish and miserable life of sin, the life that ignores eternity and God and puts oneself at the center of the universe, we have to see the big picture of God's universe and God's plans. We have to recognize that He's in control, not us. And when we submit to His will and trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, we will come to have a totally different perspective on life.

Matthew 6:19-21, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Do you look at life just in terms of this life? Or do you look at life in terms of eternity? When God opens our eyes to see that this life is a mist, it's only then that our lives can become truly significant. It's only then that our lives can count for Christ and count for eternity. Remember: Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last.

In Luke 12:13-21 Jesus shares a parable of a rich fool. He tells of a man whose land produced so plentifully that he didn't have enough space to store his crops. So he began to make plans, and they were plans that did not acknowledge the sovereignty of God nor did he acknowledge the brevity of life. He said, "I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." He had stored up much treasure here on earth, and he planned to enjoy it. The parable goes on, "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

May these things be vivid reminders to us that life is a mist. We won't be here long, friends, and therefore it's foolishness to get too comfortable here. It's foolishness to store up our treasure here. When we welcome people into our homes, we'll sometimes say, "Make yourself at home." But God's Word tells us, Don't make yourself at home here. This is not your home. We are sojourners here, merely passing through on our way to our eternal home.

### **3) Planning that ignores God's sovereignty is arrogant (verse 16)**

A third reason why we must acknowledge God's sovereignty in our plans is because planning that ignores God's sovereignty is arrogant. This is in verse 16, "As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." The word for arrogance here is found in only one other place in the New Testament, and that is in 1 John 2:16: "For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and *pride* in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world." And the next verse says, "And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever."

Arrogance is bound up with self-centeredness, and the idea of autonomy and independence. Like the rich fool in Jesus' parable, who thought he had it made. He didn't need anybody's help. He didn't need to depend on anyone. He was living under the illusion that he was completely independent. And that illusion is accompanied by much pride. The same is evident in James 4, where the person who makes plans without acknowledging God's sovereignty and without submitting to God's will, is said to be boastful and arrogant and evil.

Paul Tripp, who is one of the pastors at 10<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, preached a sermon on this passage entitled, "The Delusion of Self-Sovereignty." That's really what this is about. We live with the false notion that I'm in control, that I'm independent, that I can make it on my own. This is boastful and arrogant, and it is a total delusion.

Proverbs 27:1 says, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring." That's exactly the point that James is making. You don't know what tomorrow will bring, he wrote in verse 14. And your life is a mist. Therefore it's ridiculous to boast in your plans or your wealth or your talents. Instead say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

### **4) Planning that ignores God's sovereignty is sin (verse 17)**

Finally, we come to verse 17 and find another reason why we must think and speak of our future plans in this way. And the reason is this: Planning that ignores God's sovereignty is not only arrogant, it is sin. It's not immediately obvious how verse 17 fits into this section. It says, "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." This is what we would call sins of omission, and it can be eye-opening to realize that we are all guilty before God, not only for sinful deeds that we have actively committed, but we are also guilty because of the good things we have failed to do. We primarily think of our sin in terms of the

wrong things we have done. We are guilty because we have lashed out in anger, or entertained lustful thoughts, or spread gossip and slander, or we have harbored bitterness in our hearts, or we have lied, cheated, stolen. We have actively committed a variety of sins in our actions and our thoughts and our attitudes. But have you ever thought about the fact that we are also guilty because of the things we have *not* done? We have not served one another as we ought. We have not been bold enough in sharing the Gospel. We have not demonstrated love to our spouses as we should. We are not as diligent in prayer and Bible reading as we ought to be. For these sins of omissions, we must seek the Lord's forgiveness.

I think James makes this point here to show us that our plans for the future can be sinful in this way. They can be sinful by omitting a clear acknowledgement of my dependence on God. The plans themselves might not be sinful. Notice that the plans stated in verse 13 are not inherently sinful. It's not as though the person is saying, "we will go into such and such a city and spend a year there and lie, cheat, and steal and thus leave with a tremendous profit." No, the assumption is that it's a legitimate business venture. The problem is that the person fails to acknowledge his or her dependence on God. And this is sin.

We've seen this morning, first of all, *how* we are to think and speak of our future plans. We are to acknowledge, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." And then we've also seen 4 reasons *why* we should think and speak in this way about our plans. We are ignorant of the future. Life is a mist. Planning that ignores God's sovereignty is arrogant, and it is sinful.

I want to close with some lyrics from a song by Bebo Norman, which I like very much. The song is "I Will Lift My Eyes," and he sings, "I will lift my eyes to the Maker of the mountains I can't climb; I will lift my eyes to the Calmer of the oceans raging wild; I will lift my eyes to the Healer of the hurt I hold inside; I will lift my eyes, lift my eyes to You." I think those are appropriate and encouraging words for us at the conclusion of a message like this. We must lift our eyes away from the plans and the pleasures and the pains of this life, and we must lift our eyes to the One who is powerful and eternal. So with all of your plans for the future. With all of your worries concerning the future. With all of your hopes and dreams and concerns and disappointments, look to Him. In our ignorance of the future, look to the One who knows all things and controls all things. With an awareness of how fleeting this life is, look to the One who is eternal. Say, Lord I trust You. And *if You will*, we will live and do this or that.