

Pride, Presumption, and Practical Atheism

James 4:13-17

Pastor/Elder Phil Layton, GCBC, May 30, 2021

Phil Johnson story of Wrigley Field, the most perfect moment of his life:

I was on vacation—no pressure. My kids were loving it ... A heroic aura seemed to surround me. The Cubs were comfortably out in front, and we had front-row bleacher seats on a day when the weather was as close to heaven as Chicago ever gets.

And the thing I remember most about that moment was what I said to Darlene when she started nagging me about putting on sun screen. She was warning me that I'd be sorry later if I didn't.

I said, "This is a perfect day. We've got perfect seats at the perfect game on a perfect day. The Cubs are in first place. They're way out in front in this game. The weather is perfect. *Nothing* will ruin this day." As soon as those words escaped my lips, James 4:15 came to mind ("ye ought to say . . .") and my conscience smote me. But before I could tack on the words "...Lord willing" to the end my sentence, a home run from the bat of some Philly sailed right over my head ... By the end of the inning the score was tied 10-10. But that was only the beginning of troubles. The final score was 16-13. The Cubs lost. And in the last two innings a thunderstorm blew in from Lake Michigan. The sky turned incredibly dark—so dark they had to turn on the lights. Lightning was hitting the buildings all around Wrigley field. And at the very moment the game ended, it began to rain so hard that by the time we got to our car, we could not have been more wet ... the windows were steaming up from the humidity. It was miserable. We were soaking wet. The traffic was terrible. The kids smelled like—well, wet kids. We were facing a ten-hour drive that evening to get to my sister's house in Missouri. And my sunburn was already killing me.

Later that night, several hours into our long drive to Missouri, Darlene looked at me sweetly, and said, "You're right. This was an absolutely perfect day. *Nothing* could've spoiled it." [he says] then she whacked me on the knee, right where my sunburn was the worst.¹

My example from Tuesday – TMS plans. We all had plans in March 2020

4:13–17 (ESV) *Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"—¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.¹⁷ So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.*

The sin in v. 13 is not profitability or business per se:

- OT & NT speak of God-honoring business and stewardship (class)
- Jesus taught about investing wisely for profit (Matt. 25)
- God set up the nation of Israel as a nation of traders. He told them that as they remained faithful to him they would prosper, so that they would lend and not borrow.
- Jews engaged in commerce all over ancient world, incl. godly women such as Lydia, Priscilla, Proverbs 31, etc..
- Commerce was in NT times and beyond, a great vehicle for spreading the good news to all people groups and lands.

The sin in v. 13 isn't profit, nor is it planning in and of itself

- Proverbs commends wise planning and James is saturated with language from Proverbs, perhaps James' favorite book
- In Scripture, it is the fool who doesn't plan, not a wise man
- But the same Scriptures say it's the fool who says in his heart there is no God (Ps 14, 53). I don't know if you ever noticed, but that famous Scripture text doesn't say the fool says *out loud* necessarily that there's no God – he says it in *his heart*. James argues in this biblical tradition

that how you live reveals what your heart really says and believes. This passage is written to us who are practical atheists too much the time (all of us at times?) though we profess Christianity. We foolishly live and speak as if there is no God often.

- v. 15 we should say at least in our heart, speak to self, think this

Psalm 10:4 (NIV) speaks of the one who *'in his pride ... does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God.'*

That's what's sinful in v. 13, not profit/planning, but presumption, pride, practical atheism (v. 15-16). James writes this to Christians (at least professing ones - word "brothers" 3x in v. 11). This is not an apologetic to professing atheists, it's for churchgoing practical atheists like we can be.

You won't see this check-box for religious affiliation on a survey, but Philip G. Ryken argues it's the religion with the most numbers. 'To be a practical atheist is to live as if God did not exist. Even many people who claim to be religious live as if they did not believe in God at all. They leave God out of their work, their entertainment, their daily conversation, and their plans.'² That's what v.13 leaves out, God. It's what we *don't say* that's a problem.

PROVIDENCE – define – scriptures?

God's Providence, Presumption and Practical Atheism:

1. You Don't Know (v. 13-14a)
2. You Don't Own (v. 14b)
3. You Don't Control (v. 15-16)

1. You Don't Know (v. 14 *Yet you do not know ...*)

'In the year 1902, a young English boy came down to breakfast to find his father reading the newspaper which carried news of preparations for the first coronation in Britain in sixty-four years. In the middle of breakfast the father turned to his wife and said, "Oh, I am sorry to see this worded like that." She said, "What is it?" "Why," he replied, "here is a proclamation that on a certain date Prince Edward will be crowned king at Westminster and there is no *Deo volente*, God willing." The words stuck in the young boy's mind for the very reason that on the appointed date the future Edward VII was ill with appendicitis and the coronation had to be postponed.

At this time, at the end of Queen Victoria's reign, the political, economic, and military power of the British Empire was at its zenith. Yet for all its great might, Great Britain could not carry out its planned coronation on the appointed date.

Was the omission of "God willing" from the proclamation and the subsequent postponement of the coronation merely a coincidence, two events without any relation to one another? Or did God cause Prince Edward to have appendicitis to show that He was "in control"? We don't know why ... One thing we do know, however: whether we acknowledge it ... or not, we cannot carry out any plan apart from God's will.'³

There's a difference between making God a part of our plans from the beginning as opposed to asking God to bless *our plans* at the end, tack on

James reminds us, and God will remind us, "you don't know." Repeatedly both OT & NT remind you and me "you don't know."

Solomon said in Eccl. 11:2 "... **you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth.** ³ *If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth; and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies* [any of us experience that in a storm?] ⁵ *Just as **you do not know** the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so*

you do not know the activity of God who makes all things ... you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good.

James says *you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.*

Isaiah said “*But evil will come on you Which you will not know ... disaster will fall on you ... And destruction about which **you do not know** Will come on you suddenly.*” (47:11). God in Job 38-41 goes through 70 questions w/ the same point *you don't know* (cf. Dt. 29:29). But the proud think they do.

Last week was 10-year anniversary of Harold Camping predicted return of Jesus (May 21, 2011) – remember billboards? Oct. 21 for end of the world?

The sovereign Lord Jesus Jesus said “***you do not know which day your Lord is coming***” (Mt 24:42) “***you do not know the day nor the hour***” (25:13)

“You do not know” is how God intentionally designed the future. The sun will come up but you don't know if you'll be to see it. You don't know, #1

2. You Don't Own

v. 14b ... *What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.* ¹⁵ *Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills...*

A mist vapor is only visible briefly and then it quickly vanishes. We're just a vapor and we can be vaporized at any time! We don't own anything in this temporary and transient world, our own very life is temporary and transient.

The image here is the brevity or quickness of our life, here today gone tomorrow, and what we have is here today, gone tomorrow.

Luke 12:15b: “...*not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.*” ¹⁶*And He told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man was very productive. ¹⁷“And he began reasoning to himself, saying, ‘What shall **I do**, since **I have** no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸“Then he said, ‘This is what **I will do: I will** tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there **I will** store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹“And **I will** say to my soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.”’ ²⁰“**But God said to him, ‘You fool!** This very night your soul is required of you; and **now who will own** what you have prepared?’ ²¹“So is the man who **stores up treasure for himself**, and is not rich toward God.”*

That's the problem with the plans of James 4 – storing up for self with no thought toward God. “I will” or “we will” instead of looking to God's will. This person in the parable may be attending church every Sunday, but he's a practical atheist Monday-Saturday and Jesus calls him a fool who says in his heart *and in his life* that there is no God who owns his possessions/plans

Job 7:6 “*My days are **swifter than a weaver's shuttle**, And come to an end without hope.*” ⁷ “Remember that **my life is but breath** ...” ⁹ “When a cloud **vanishes, it is gone**, So he who goes down to Sheol does not come up ...”

TOMBSTONE – Dash between dates – that's life

Psalm 39:5 “Behold, You have made my days as handbreadths, And **my lifetime as nothing in Your sight**; Surely **every man at his best is a mere breath**.”

Psalm 90 ⁴*For a thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it passes by, Or as a watch in the night.* ⁵*You have swept them away like a flood, they fall asleep; In the morning they are like grass which sprouts anew.* ⁶*In the morning it flourishes and sprouts anew; Toward evening it fades and withers away...* ⁹*For all our days have declined in Your fury; We have finished our years like a sigh ...* ¹⁰*As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, Or if due to strength, eighty years, Yet their pride is but labor and sorrow; For soon it is gone and we fly away. ...* ¹²*So teach us to number our days, That we may present to You a heart of wisdom.*
 ... ¹⁷*Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; And confirm for us the work of our hands; Yes, confirm the work of our hands.*

This is the right attitude in light of life's brevity and fragility, to pray for God to confirm or establish the works of our hands, and to pray that His favor would be upon us and His wisdom to teach us how to be good stewards of God-given time, talent, and treasure.

We're just here for a little while, James says, soon vanishing like a vapor or like steam coming off a stove or like visible breath on a cold day.

Our possessions and plans are not our own but must be submitted to God as we depend on Him for everything: *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread ... For thine is [not mine is as if I own or can even get bread on my own]*

Doug Moo: 'Illness, accidental death, or the return of Christ could cut short our lives just as quickly as the morning sun dissipates the mist or as a shift in wind direction blows away smoke.'⁴

You Don't Know ... You Don't Own ... 3rdly: You Don't Control

3. You Don't Control

¹⁵ *Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that."*

Isn't this the source of so much of our problems? When we don't get what we want (v. 1-2) and aren't submitted to what God wants (v. 7). Maybe a better term than *a-theism* would be *I-theism*. One way to spot false teaching: lifts up man instead of God (v10). Prosperity gospel – talk as if you control

Benny Hinn: "Never, ever, ever go to the Lord and say, 'If it be thy will....' Don't allow such faith-destroying words to be spoken from your mouth." (Benny Hinn, *Rise & Be Healed*, Page 47)

Fred Price: "If you have to say, 'If it be thy will' or 'Thy will be done' if you have to say that, then you're calling God a fool...."
 (Fred Price, "Ever Increasing Faith", TBN, November 16, 1990)

God's Word calls that mentality boastful (v. 16), if not blasphemy. It's the arrogance of heretics. The Son of God Himself prayed *Thy will be done* – according to Fred Price, Jesus was calling God a fool in saying that?!

Paul Crouch: "Quit this old cop out prayer, 'if it be thy will' -- it's bunk!" (Christianity In Crisis, audio-tape, C.R.I.)

Kenneth Hagin: "It is unscriptural to pray, 'If it is the will of God.'" (Kenneth Hagin, *Exceeding Growing Faith*, Page 10)

But James 4 says you ought to say and pray "If is the Lord's will," and those who don't are arrogant and all such arrogance is evil (v.16). King Jesus taught His disciples to pray *Thy will be done*, and it

was the LORD Himself who prayed these words in Matthew 26:39 “O My Father, **if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.**” ... ⁴² Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, “O My Father, **if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done.**”

Listen to a true prophet, the Apostle Paul, and how he prayed: Rom. 1:10 “... **always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.**”

Even though Paul supernaturally knew the future at times, listen to how he and other apostles and early Christians spoke of their plans

- Paul in Ephesus “*I will return to you...**if God wills**” (Acts 18:21)*

- to Corinthians (1 Cor 4:19) *I will come to you soon, **if the Lord wills**, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant*

1 Cor 16:7 *I hope to remain with you for some time **if the Lord permits***

- the writer of Hebrews (6:3) ... *this we will do, **if God permits.***

The Jerusalem leaders: “*since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, “The will of the Lord be done!” (Acts 21:14)*

Peter: ‘*it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.*’ (1 Pet 3:17)

There’s at least 7-8 different wordings of the phrase and variations of the language James uses in v. 15, suggesting this was not just a catch-phrase or empty tradition or mere words they used to tack on to a sentence, but this was what the perspective of their heart was and so it couldn’t help but overflow into their speech at times. Not every time they spoke of the future did they say the phrase out loud but every time we think of the future we must at least think in these terms in our heart, James would insist, and it would do us good to say it often to remind ourselves God is God. It’s the fool who thinks in his heart and plans in his calendar as if there is no God.

If the Lord wills should be our mindset, but not a mere mindless motto tacked onto every sentence to try and sound super spiritual.

Still, I don’t think our danger is saying this too much, but thinking it too little. The Latin of the phrase *Deo Volente* used to mark the speech of Christians in past centuries, in traditions ranging from Puritan to Methodist. D.V. was written in correspondence.

“If God wills” must be written over student’s plans ... all everyday activities. Older people need to say “If God wills, I will spend my time ... If God wills, my children will become ... If God wills, I will take up this ministry ... If God wills, I will wake up tomorrow.” All of us should have this heart attitude.¹⁵

¹⁶ *But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.*

Yiddish proverb – wanna make God laugh? Tell Him your plans

Proverbs 27:1 ¹ *Do not **boast about tomorrow**, For **you do not know** what a day may bring forth.*

[you don’t know or control]

The Greek word for “boasting” in James 4:16 is only used in one other NT passage: 1 John 2:16 “pride” or “boastful pride” of life, or as one translation renders it: “boasting of what he has and does.”

‘The Greeks called this boastful pride *hybris*, and Homer in *The Iliad* depicted in imaginative detail the havoc it wrecked when Achilles succumbed to it.¹⁶ Arrogance is our achilles heel as well.

J. B. Phillips paraphrases: *What, after all, is your life? It is like a puff of smoke visible for a little while and then dissolving into thin air ... As it is, you get a certain pride in yourself in planning your future with such confidence. That sort of pride is all wrong.*

17 Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

If we know the right way to think and speak from v. 15 and we don't apply this message, we are in sin. If we look at the mirror of God's Word and immediately forget what kind of person we are and walk away unchanged, James 1:22 says we deceive ourselves. It's the fool who says there is no God, and in the way we live, it's not only foolish, it is sinful, v. 17 tells us.

Note: sins of omission in v. 17. Sin of commission, the whole law, 2:10

As we realize the depth of our sin and our inability to do anything on our own to not sin today or tomorrow, as we remember our own frailty and how infected we truly are with sin and the subtle pride James exposes here as manifested in our lack of acknowledging God in all our ways, as we look in the mirror of God's Word and see that *we are practical atheists* too much of the time, what then?

Come to the endless fountain of grace for the humble in v. 6:

- submitting to God (v. 7) your plans and thoughts and life
- resisting the devil (v. 7b) whose subtle strategy may not tempt Christians to hate God but to simply forget God
- repent (v8), be broken over your sin (v9), humble self (v10)

All 3 of today's points can be convicting and depressing, but they can also be comforting and refreshing. You don't know; God does! You don't own; God does! You don't control; thankfully God does

This is very good news for us sinners who don't know and don't own and don't control that there is a God in heaven who knows all, owns all, controls all and is working all for His glory and our good Praise God that the God of all knowledge, all resources, and all power is the Almighty One in charge of every event and every element in the universe from supernovas to subatomic particles! And this merciful and mighty God is sovereignly constantly working through our plans and our pain, even personal mistakes and sins (ours or committed against us) working all things together for good if we love God and are called according to His purpose.

Friend, if you don't love the Lord yet, I plead with you to repent.

- *You don't know* when you will die or when Jesus returns
- *You don't own* what you think you do
- *You don't control* your destiny or future
 - o GOD is in control, God owns you, God knows you and God in His grace has allowed you to get out of bed this morning and to hear of His grace and if you have not repented and trusted in Christ, come to the Lord who gives grace to the humble who repent
 - o By God's grace you can leave your sin, live for Him, love Him, trust Him, because God judged Him in your place on the cross, the One who before that event prayed to the Father words that must also be ours, "*Not my will but your will be done.*"

¹ <https://www.thegracelifepulpit.com/sermons.aspx?code=2013-10-13-PJ>

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Discovering God in Stories from the Bible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1999), 84.

³ Jerry Bridges. *Trusting God*. Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, p. 35.

⁴ Douglas Moo, *James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, 204.

⁵ Hughes, 206.

⁶ Moo, 207.