

Series James

This Message Faith without Submission to the Will of God is Dead part 2 “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that”

Scripture James 4:13-17

James was deeply concerned about the spiritual condition of Jewish background believers, and the direction of their lives. We can get the sense of his concern from the very powerful, frank, and straightforward, yet sincere statements he wrote. For several years James had served as the leading elder in Jerusalem, and he had had an important pastoral role among the Jews who had placed their faith in Jesus. However, following the martyrdom of Stephen, “a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered” (*Acts 8:1*).

After the believers had to relocate, the Church was forced to go underground. Instead of a congregation of several thousand individuals, the church fellowships became small house churches. And instead of the encouragement and comfort and safety of membership in a large worshipping community, and the availability of teaching from leaders who had been closely associated with Jesus, most of the believers found themselves isolated in small clusters without an adequate spiritual support system. It was to these isolated believers that James wrote and circulated his letter.

We don’t know all the reasons why these Jewish background believers were abandoning their faith, and were taking up again the behaviors of their pre-conversion lifestyles. I think we can understand a little about their difficulties as the believers found themselves outsiders in the predominate Gentile society, and by their lack of acceptance by both civil and religious authorities. James did not accept these conditions as an excuse for forsaking their godly ways. In fact, he began this letter by stating that the “trials of many kinds” which were faced by the readers should have been a means of spiritual growth (*James 1:2-4*).

Perhaps the desire of the believers was too much focused on their physical survival and their efforts to achieve some measure of material sufficiency, so much so that they had neglected the fellowship of other believers, and their times of worship and prayer. This would explain their spiritual instability and their increasing “friendship with the world.” And it would explain the disorder and chaos, broken interpersonal relationships, and lack of love among the community of believers.

Last week we thought about the sin of “speaking against and judging the law.” The warning in verses 11 and 12 was that believers must not usurp God’s role as Judge. The verses today are a warning that believers must not usurp God’s role as the Master of human destinies.

Read James 4:13-17

Verses 11 and 12 gave us one example of human arrogance, humans presuming to be like God in matters of judgment. Now we are going to think about a second example of arrogance, humans presuming that the future is under their control. I’m sure you recognize that the theme of humility continues from passage to passage.

The overarching problem of the readers was their adoption of worldly thinking and actions. They were not acting like born-again believers — not paying attention to the Word of God, not drawing from the “wisdom which God was supplying from heaven.” The specific concern in these verses was that the believers were dreaming and scheming about future activities without taking into account their own mortality and God’s sovereignty over human destinies.

The opening words in verse 13 are a forceful demand for the attention of the readers. The meaning is “Now listen carefully.” James was preparing to reprimand those believers who had the self-confident assurance that they were in control of their lives.

The readers had obviously given a lot of thought to their business plans. They had picked out their destinations (“this or that city”), they were going to spend a specific amount of time there (“one year”), they were going to “carry on business,” and were expecting to earn a lot of money. However, something vitally important was missing. There was no mention of God at all. No mention about prayer for guidance and blessing. They had made their plans apart from any thought of God.

James called the attention of his readers to two factors that they had not taken into consideration. First, humans have no way of knowing what might happen even the next day. None of us are capable of accurately foreseeing and predicting the future. Most of us live as if tomorrow will be more or less like today. Unfortunately, there are all sorts of unanticipated events which can radically change the course of our lives. We need to remember the proverb which states, “Do not boast about tomorrow; for you do not know what a day may bring forth” (*Proverbs 27:1*).

The second reason why it was presumptuous for the readers to plan without God is that human life is like “a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. The implication is that our lives are insubstantial and of short duration and death is inevitable. In Psalm 90, Moses, the author, used a different metaphor to make the same point. He compared human life to the grass of the field. It sprouted in the morning but by evening, it had faded under the hot sun.

It was Moses’ purpose to contrast the length of human life with the longevity of God. God, he wrote, is “from everlasting to everlasting.” In other words, God has a perspective that is impossible for humans to have. God also has the sovereign power to control the destiny of all people and all earthly circumstances.

The problem was not that these businessmen were making plans for the future. Careful planning is, in fact, commended to us in Scripture (*see, for examples, Luke 14:28-32; Rom. 15:20-28*), but such planning is good only if it is done in recognition of our dependence on God and with regard for biblical priorities.

The problem that James was describing was the arrogant way that some of his readers were making their plans. Their trust was not in God, but in themselves. They were assuming that everything would go according to their plans.

As believers, they should have sought guidance from the Lord. They should have remembered the Biblical truth, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” This statement is an acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God and that He controls the future. He is infinite God; we are finite creatures. We must live our lives in the reality of the fact that God is sovereign over everything, including our lives.

For believers to leave God out of their life ambitions and goals is an arrogant assumption of self-sufficiency. To attempt to live without God is a declaration of independence from God. Sadly, some of the readers of this letter were “boasting and bragging” about their plans. The text in the original Greek declares that they “were boasting with arrogant pretensions.” According to James, “such boasting is evil.”

Verse 17 demands that the readers make a choice. “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do, and doesn’t do it, sins.” We could paraphrase the sentence this way: “Now that the matter has been explained to you, and you know your place in life, you have no excuse for holding on to your present attitudes. Stop your arrogant, sinful, and unacceptable scheming and act like true believers. Humbly submit yourselves to God and trust Him for guidance and help.”

James is telling us that we must recognize the sovereignty of God and have an attitude of dependence on Him. Each day our prayer should be, “Lord, here I am, ready to do your will. Give me eyes to see people as Jesus sees them. Give me a heart to be as compassionate as Jesus. Use me as a worker in Your Kingdom.”

Let me close with a quote from the writings of the Apostle Paul, “Be very careful how you live, not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is” (*Ephesians 5:15-17*).