

We are continuing our study in the New Testament letter written by James. We come to a passage that will combine many of the themes we've already seen in this letter. James has written about wealth and how like a withering plant, *"the rich will fade away even while they go about their business"* (1:11).

He's written about the significance of our speech. He said, *"no human being can tame the tongue. It's a restless evil, full of deadly poison"* (3:8). And he's written about pride. He said, *"God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble"* (4:6).

This week we come to James 4:13-17, where he brings these themes together and addresses how they impact the way we think about and plan for the future. Some of you are planners. You like to look at your calendars and know what's coming — not just days but weeks in advance. You set up the playdates and doctor's appointments for the kids. You plan the vacations down to the minute. You make the dinner reservations. And, let's be honest, you get very annoyed at the non-planners in your life. They're so irresponsible.

But non-planners, you sort revel in your spontaneity and flexibility. "Easy come, easy go." If you're scrolling through Instagram and see a beautiful waterfall, you might just pack your bags right there and then and drive to Oregon to see it in person.

A lot of this comes down to how we view the future. Professor Mark Shiffman did a survey to discover why so few college students are studying the Humanities. He attributes the steady decline to fear of the future. Listen to what he wrote,

According to Amazon, the most highlighted passage in all books read on Kindle—highlighted almost twice as often as any other passage—is from the second volume of *The Hunger Games*: "Because sometimes things happen to people and they're not equipped to deal with them." Students want continual reassurance that they're equipping themselves. They clothe themselves in an armor of achievement that they hope will protect them against uncertainties—of the job market, of course, but also deeper uncertainties about their status, their identities, their self-worth. Disciplines that have (or appear to have) a technical character and a clear arc of accumulated knowledge and skills leading toward a foreseeable career goal reinforce the feeling that they are working steadily, assignment by assignment, toward gaining more control over an uncertain future.

Isn't that interesting? That sentence, "Because sometimes things happen to people and they're not equipped to deal with them," says it all. Whether we're a planner or a non-planner, the reality that we won't be equipped to deal with what could happen to us is daunting. And so, James addresses this subject and shows us how we should view the future, and even how we should think about planning for the future.

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them. James 4:13-17

Notice James mentions both what we should not say and what we should say. Remember what comes out of our mouth matters because it so often reveals what's in our hearts. And this is really important stuff to James. That is why he starts out, "Now listen..." This is like grabbing someone by the collar and saying, "Listen up! This is really important!"

What Not To Say

And so, he starts out and tells us what not to say regarding the future. Don't say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Again, it's not so much what's said that's so wrong, but the assumptions that lie underneath it. Notice this person assumes they're in control of their future as they plan four different things.

They plan where they'll go ("we will go to this or that city").

They plan how long they'll be there ("we will spend a year there").

They plan what they'll do ("we will carry on business").

And, finally, they plan what they'll accomplish ("and we will make money").

So they have it all figured out! Notice those two words, "We will." We will go to this or that city. We will spend a year there. We will carry on business. We will make money. There are no contingencies.

Throughout this letter, James has come down rather hard on the wealthy. There's no question the people he's describing here are people who have some means. Some of the people he wrote to were poor, others were wealthy. The time in which this letter was written was a period of great commercial activity. Some of these people were very successful in their businesses. But James isn't condemning that. Work is a good thing. Work is a gift from God. There was work in the Garden of Eden even before sin came into the picture.

Nor is he condemning making a profit. Proverbs says, "*All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty*" (14:23). As we'll see, he's not even saying we shouldn't plan ahead. Proverbs also says, "*A wise man thinks ahead; a fool doesn't, and even brags about it!*" (13:16) What he is condemning is an attitude underlying those actions: "Who needs God? I can do it all myself. I'm in control of what happens." Prosperity can give us a sense of independence that's dangerous to our spiritual state.

Why Not To Say It

And that lie is exposed in the next verse. He says, "Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." When we plan our lives as if we're in control, we forget a few things.

First, we forget we have limited knowledge. He says, "you don't even know what will happen tomorrow." You can't control everything. You're driving 65 miles an hour on the freeway. You're really careful. But you don't know what the guy in the car next to you will do.

You do everything you can do to invest your money wisely. You read all the books and act on all the best advice, but you don't know what world event might cause the stock market to crash.

You meet a person, and you fall in love. You're very careful not to fall too fast. You take plenty of time. You expose that person to your parents and your friends. You get counseling and finally decide this is the person you want to marry and spend the rest of your life with. But you don't know what might change that person into someone very different from what you thought.

Don't buy into the illusion you can control everything because you don't know. This is the opposite of what we're so often told today. It's like at the end of the movie *Back to the Future*. Doc Brown tells Marty, "Marty, the future is what you make it. Make it a good one!" That's a lie because you don't always make the future; sometimes, the future makes you.

Second, he says you have limited time. He asks the question, "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." When James says your life is a "mist," he's not talking about a thick San Francisco fog that sticks around all day. He's talking about Palestine, where water droplets in the air

formed by condensation near the sea would evaporate in seconds due to the scorching heat. It's like a puff of smoke — now you see it, now you don't. This is talking about the frailty of life.

I think of my mother. My dad was a dentist who practiced for 40 years and then retired at 65. They had plans to enjoy life, play golf, and travel the world. But two months after my dad retired, my mom died of a massive heart attack. What is your life?

I think of one of our former elders, who is a faithful and godly man. He retired, took a trip to Europe with his wife, came home, and had a massive stroke. He's been in a wheelchair ever since. He still loves Jesus and this church with all his heart, but in just one day, his life changed dramatically.

I think of a dear woman — part of this church. One bright, sunny day, she was driving north on 101 and turned off, heading east on Highway 92 when a branch from a Eucalyptus tree fell through her sunroof and speared her. She died later that day. How does that happen? What is your life? "...a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."

I heard a story about Kirk Cousins, the quarterback for the Minnesota Vikings. He has a rather odd sculpture outside his house. It's a glass vase filled with rocks. There are 720 rocks in total. For Cousins they represent each remaining month of his life, provided he lives to age 90. Kirk plans to remove one rock every month and carry it with him, reminding himself that once this month is over, it's gone. You can't get it back; it's gone for good. It is a visual reminder, right outside his front door, no less, that his time on Earth is dwindling. That may sound morbid at first, but it's also biblical. The idea came to Cousins when he read Psalm 90:12: "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." I like that. We need to understand our days are numbered. Hopefully, he knows, though, there might be fewer rocks in that jar than he thinks. He might have 720 months, or he might have one month or even one day.

What To Say

So that's what not to say. But James doesn't stop there. He goes on and tells us what to say in verse 15, "Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'" Now, this isn't some kind of superstitious tag line we add to every statement about what we're planning to do. Again, it's pointing to a deeper attitude and perspective on life, one that reveals both humility and dependence on the Lord. We don't know everything, but the Lord does. I was reflecting on that this week. Doesn't that just blow your mind? God knows everything that has ever happened or will happen in this vast universe and even beyond that. His knowledge even extends to the smallest details of your life. He knows and cares about whatever each of you are worried about right now. And that ought to bring us great comfort. J.A. Motyer says,

"To be sure the words, 'If the Lord wills' can be a protective superstition, but they can also be the sweetest and most comfortable reassurance to a humble and trustful spirit."

James says there are two things we're dependent on the Lord for. One, how long we'll live. And two, what we'll do. "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." It's like that old line that's been used so much it's become a cliché, "I don't know what the future hold, but I know who holds the future." It may be a cliché, but it's true. You see, the only thing we can count on is Him. He never changes. His promises never fail. He'll never forsake us. His steadfast love and faithfulness endure forever.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, this doesn't mean we can't make plans for the future. But simply that we make our plans with a humble recognition that God is in control. There's a healthy balance in life that needs to be maintained. It's the balance between our freedom and responsibility and God's sovereignty. If we place too much emphasis on our freedom and responsibility, life becomes a huge burden because it's all up to us. But if we place too much emphasis on God's sovereignty, then we do nothing, and everything is God's fault.

I mentioned last week that I was reading the biography of Steve Jobs, and it was this that caused him to reject the Christian faith. When he was 13, he saw a photo of starving children in Biafra on the cover of Life Magazine. He took it to Sunday school and confronted the church's pastor.

He asked him, "If I raise my finger, will God know which one I'm going to raise even before I do it?"

The pastor answered, "Yes, God knows everything."

Jobs then pulled out the magazine and asked, "Well, does God know about this, and what's going to happen to those children?"

"Steve," the pastor said, "I know you don't understand, but yes, God knows about that."

Jobs walked away from the church and never went back. He concluded if God is all-knowing and all-powerful, and he allows babies to starve, he didn't want anything to do with him. But what he failed to take into account is the freedom and responsibility God has given us as human beings. God is sovereign, but somehow in his sovereignty he gives us freedom to choose, and our choices matter. The evil we have in this world is the result of our choices, not God's.

As we think about plans and for our future, we need to keep this balance in mind. I have real freedom to make choices — good ones and bad ones that have real consequences. It's a daunting freedom. But at the same time, there's a good, holy, loving, and powerful God who's sovereign over all of it. "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." We can't fully grasp and reconcile human freedom and God's sovereignty with our finite minds, but they're both true.

Why Is This a Big Deal

And one thing we need to realize about the pride that thinks we're the ones in control is it's a big deal. James says in verse 16, "As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil." I like how the Phillips translation puts it, "You get a certain pride in yourself in planning your future with such confidence." The pride isn't in simply planning the future but in your ability to plan the future and make it happen. And that's not just an innocent mistake. James says, "all such boasting is evil." Not all boasting is evil, but all such boasting is evil. There are several things the Bible tells us to boast in. We're to boast in God. We're to boast in the cross. We're to boast in our hope of sharing in the glory of God. All that is proper boasting. But arrogantly boasting about your ability to control your life and your future is down-right evil.

And it's not just what you do, but it's what you don't do. That's what James says in verse 17, "If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it's sin for them." This is talking about sins of omission. We can sin by doing something evil, like boasting, but we can also sin by not doing something good. Again, these are sins of omission. It's like earlier in James he says pure religion is to look after widows and orphans in their distress (1:27). To not do that, is sin. In the context of this paragraph we're looking at, what is the good we ought to do? It's to think about and plan for the future with a submissive and humble attitude and an eye to God's sovereignty. It's to say, "If the Lord wills, I will do this or that."

This has been so helpful for me to think about. I think of how, when Lynn and I came to CPC over 33 years ago, we really thought we'd be here two or three years. We thought this was just a temporary stop along the way. Little did we know, the Lord had different plans. And now I'm 63, and I get asked all the time by many of you, "Are you retiring?" I never know quite how to answer that question. Part of me wants to say, "Well, do you want me to retire?" But I'm at that age when people retire, although I prefer to think of retirement as "reassignment." But whatever you call it, you have to plan for it, right? You have to save some money, and you have to figure out where you're going to live, and when you're going to start collecting Social Security. You have to do all of that. But what I'm trying to do is hold all that loosely. To understand and internalize, "If the Lord wills, I will live and do this or that."

I think for all of us, whatever stage of life we're in, it comes down to five things. Let me offer these to you:

First, live dependently. Understand you're not in control; God is. You know Proverbs 3:5-6, "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.*"

Second, live curiously. You don't know everything, so live with an eye to learning more. Have a kind of playful curiosity in which you look for the surprises God will bring along the way.

Third, live gratefully. You don't know what tomorrow holds, but you can give thanks for today. Give thanks for the food on your table, the roof over your head, and your ability to come to church.

Fourth, live confidently. Again, you don't know what the future holds, but you do know who holds the future. And he's good. You have his precious and wonderful promises. So, don't fear the future, but face it with confidence in a good God.

Finally, live eternally. What I mean by that is to live for things that last. People last forever. God's Word lasts forever. One day there will be a new creation that lasts forever. Colossians 3:2, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." And here's the thing, every single one of us will live forever, the question is, where?

Those who trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior will spend eternity with Him in heaven. Those who reject him will spend eternity apart from him. None of us knows what tomorrow will bring, but we can know where we'll spend eternity. If you don't know Christ as your Savior, let me encourage you to make that decision today. If you don't quite know how to do that, please contact me by email or phone or another elder or deacon who will help you. You can find our contact information on our website at cpc.org under the "New Here" button.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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