

## **Sermon Manuscript**

James 4:13-17

As people who live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we find ourselves in a time of great technological advancement and extreme prosperity. Doctors are finding new ways to prolong human life through the development of medical technology such as artificial hearts, chemotherapy treatments, and magnetic resonance imaging. Clinical researchers are constantly developing new vaccines which are able to keep us healthy and protected against viruses.

Medical technology aside, the luxury and splendor we possess is incomparable to the generations who have lived before us. We drive automobiles capable of transporting us to our desired destination with great ease. Most of us own smart phones which are essentially mini supercomputers – able to tell us everything about anything via a quick Google search. We've sent manned and unmanned space missions out of the friendly confines of our atmosphere to explore our tiny, little corner of the universe.

And of what might be particular importance to us Arizonans is an invention many of us take for granted – air conditioning. This blessing from the Lord keeps us cool at the flick of a switch, and in some cases

can be monitored from a smart device. We live in unprecedented times, indeed.

Friends, it is easy for us, myself included, in this age of technological advancement and opulence to live self-reliant, independent lives. All of these discoveries and inventions are hugely beneficial and provide us with comfort and protection.

However, if left unchecked, our hearts can turn these comforts into idols, or at the very least we can begin to feel entitled to have them. This comfort and entitlement can blind us from recognizing how we are each dependent on God for every breath we take, which prevents us from becoming complete and mature believers.

We can become blinded to the fact that it is ultimately God, not our technological capabilities nor our wealth, who determines our future.

In our text this morning, James provides us with a clarion call and it is this – ***be careful of living a life of self-reliance; a life independent of God.***

Please join me in the reading of God's word from James 4:13-17.

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

it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

Throughout the book of James, we have been given many exhortations with the goal of helping us to become complete and mature Christians. James has told us to seek wisdom from the Lord. He has demonstrated for us the importance of not just being a hearer of the word, but also a doer of the word. James has taught us not to show partiality to fellow believers based on their socio-economic status.

We've heard the mandate to tame our tongues – the fiery organ that resides in our mouth that is capable of praising God and cursing people. Today is no exception, the exhortations continue, as James wants us to consider our tendency to make plans without recognizing the sovereign goodness of God.

Two points this morning: 1. The Danger of Self-reliance and 2. The Freedom of Godly-dependence.

### **1. The Danger of self-reliance**

James begins our passage by using what some commentators have referred to as a rebuke, when he writes “Come now...” What comes next is intended to grab the attention of his audience, as he uses satire to paint the big picture of what self-reliant living looks like.

“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”

James’ audience would have been well-acquainted with the imagery conveyed through this verse. The Jew of Ancient Palestine understood the need to plan because the Roman Empire in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was a sprawling economic complex, covering hundreds of thousands of square miles.

Due to its size and the nature of 1<sup>st</sup> century travel, Jewish tradesmen would have known that if they were going to become prosperous, travel was a must and they would have to plan their travel accordingly. You couldn’t exactly book a flight back then if you lived in Rome and wanted to travel to Thessalonica.

In verse 14, James again uses a phrase which the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew would have been intimately familiar – the image of mist vanishing. The sun-drenched, arid landscape– similar to the dry, arid landscape of Arizona, makes this image of mist vanishing by the heat of the sun real to them. James likens this vanishing mist to the duration of our lives when he writes: “For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”

Throughout the Old Testament, mist is used as a metaphor. The Lord refers to the Israelites as “the morning mist or like the dew that goes

early away” in Hosea 13:3. The audience James is writing to the idea being portrayed using this phrase.

Now, on the surface, this might not seem like such a bad thing, right? The need to plan and prepare, when done properly, leads to efficiency and productivity. The bible doesn’t speak ill of being prepared, because Proverbs 10:4 says “A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.” In fact, Proverbs is filled with this call to diligent, productive living and it is this way of living that is often linked to the way of wisdom.

James is not concerned with discussing the virtue of hard work in our passage. What he is addressing is our propensity to turn preparation and hard work into something more – into something ultimate.

What James is saying is don’t make your plans under the presumption that you know exactly what will happen tomorrow. Don’t plan ahead thinking that things will always turn out the way you expect them to – only God is capable of determining the future.

To the outsider, the one who hasn’t been along with us in our journey through James, it might appear that James is the grumpy old man who gripes and complains about everything. You know, the one that says “get off my freshly manicured lawn!”

But we know that James is helping us to think about what it means to become complete and mature in Christ. And, at times, James does so by recalling the words of his half-brother, Jesus.

Let's read Matt. 6:25-34 and notice the similarity between what Jesus says and what James is saying in our passage:

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

Jesus deals with anxious living, and James addresses the root of anxious living. The root of anxiety is not trusting God to come through. God is in control. These were people who were anxious. Anxious over how they were going to eat and be clothed. Anxious about providing a future for

their families. But anxiety and strategic planning can often lead to shattered expectations.

Just like Jesus explicitly told his audience, James is implying don't be anxious! Don't worry about all of the details because God is the One who provides.

We see this in the very next verse. The beauty of this passage is he doesn't just give a stern warning – he gives the proper response.

## **2. The Freedom of godly-dependence**

While verses 13 and 14 paint a picture of what self-reliance looks like, verse 15 tells us about what our mindset should be as believers.

V. 15

**“Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’”**

It is easy to recognize that all of human life is like a vapor, a mist, that is here and just as quickly as it arrives is gone. Everyone believes that – whether you are a Christian or nonbeliever – you must come to terms with the fact that life in this world will one day end, and it often times ends abruptly. Essentially, understanding verses 13 and 14 should be easy for anyone watching this livestream.

But verse 15 is a totally different matter. It confronts secularism and deals a blow to the person who undermines the sovereignty of God. How does it do this? Notice the language James uses in this verse – “*Instead* you ought to say, “If the Lord *wills*, we will *live* and do this or that.”

The word “instead” conveys that what James says in verse 15 is the very opposite of the secular mindsight we see James addressing in verses 13 and 14.

What James says here is a gamechanger. **IF THE LORD WILLS, WE WILL LIVE.** What does this mean? What does it mean if the Lord wills, we will live? Well, simply stated it means God is active in preserving our lives. He is actively engaged in sustaining his creation.

What I meant by this being a blow to the secularist is that James assertion that life itself is upheld by the will of God is a counterclaim, or a rebuttal to what the atheist or secularist might believe.

If you are watching this online and you believe there might be a God, but he is certainly not involved in what is going on in the world today, this statement from James says you are wrong. Or maybe you are an atheist who makes the claim that Christians are silly for believing there is a god, because a good God cannot be seen in what is going on right now, James says this is also false.



**If the Lord wills, we will live.** By the very word of Him who has fashioned the stars, the planets, the sun and moon and has set them in their place, we will live. Conversely, at the very word of Him who has made all things can our very lives, or the lives of our loved ones, be taken from us.

We can exercise, meal prep, eat clean and be healthy – **but if the Lord wills, we will live.**

We can strategically plan and budget, and pour money into 401ks, and have a diversified portfolio with the hopes of having a comfortable retirement – **but if the Lord wills, we will live.**

We can buy homes with security systems, firearms to protect us from intruders, and gates to guard us – **but if the Lord wills, we will live.**

The gracious providence of God is seen in how he wills for us to live. It is seen in how God upholds us, even when it seems like everything is stripped away.

You see, nothing we do in this world guarantees us a return tomorrow, because we don't know if there will even be a tomorrow. Because if the Lord wills, we will live.

Now, some might recoil at the thought of a God who *wills* people to live and to die. The providence and sovereignty of God is often misinterpreted as the callous coldshoulder of a distant being; one not concerned with the welfare and beneficence of his people. But let's hear what Thomas Watson, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan preacher has to say about the providence of God:

“Some say, there are many things done in the world which are very disorderly and irregular; and surely God's providence is not in these things. Yes, the things that seem to us irregular, God makes use of to his own glory. Suppose you were in a smith's shop, and should see there several sorts of tools, some crooked, some bowed, others hooked, would you condemn all these things, because they do not look handsome? The smith makes use of them all for doing his work. Thus it is with the providences of God; they seem to us to be very crooked and strange, yet they all carry on God's work.”

What Watson is telling us is our God is in complete control, and that at times his providential dealings may seem strange, they may even seem cruel – but they are meant for our good.

We as believers can trust in the providential dealings of God because we know that what He does is meant for our good as Romans 8:28 reminds us. This belief, this trust, frees us to depend on a good and gracious God.

The proposed Christian mindset of verse 15 stands in stark contrast to that of verse 16. James tells his audience in v. 16 that boasting is akin to

evil. What he is saying is these people, his audience, were not just living a life of self-reliance, but they were boasting and bragging about it.

And now we get to our last verse, which I will use as a segue into some application.

V. 17

“So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”

A basic understanding of the English language would lead us to think there must be a connection between this verse and the previous verse because of the word “So” as rendered by the ESV, or if you are reading a NASB it is rendered “therefore.”

So, what is the therefore, therefore? Well, in verse 16 James calls out a specific sin – the sin of arrogance and boasting. Verse 17 calls out another type of sin – the sin of omission, or of knowing the right thing to do and failing to do it.

James essentially wraps up this passage by bookending it with the sin of omission.

He covers quite a broad range of sin in this passage, doesn't he?

Don't plan apart from God, don't boast, don't be arrogant, and now, don't fail to do the right thing you know you ought to do.

Many of our messages in James have been tough messages. They've dealt with the condition of our hearts, how we tend to judge others, and how we can be double-minded. How we can be tempted to quarrel with one another.

What makes this message particularly difficult is how James deals with very relevant sins. Considering what James has said, in just 4 verses, I stand guilty and condemned of each sin.

When it comes to preparing – I sometimes plan out what I'm going to be doing in 2-3 years without any consideration of what God would have me to do. I am guilty of boasting and of being arrogant and proud. I also fail to do what I know to be the right thing – and I do this a lot.

But praise God we know Jesus – the One who never failed to seek his Father and live under his father's sovereign goodness. Praise God we know and belong to Jesus – the One who never boasted, nor was filled with pride nor arrogance, although He had every right to be. And praise God we serve Jesus – the One who never failed to do what He knew to be the right thing, and who did everything perfectly.

Friends, Jesus is the only reason we can do any of the exhortations James call us to. It is only because of His perfect submission to the Father's will that we have the same ability to submit to the sovereign care of the Father.

It is only because of Jesus' humility which led him to a cross to die, are we also able to humble ourselves and not boast or be filled with arrogance or pride.

We can only do the right thing because we serve the One who always did the right thing, and this is wonderfully good news.

If you are watching and are not a believer, James poses a question in the middle of this passage which is tailor-made for you. The question is found in verse 14 when James writes "What is your life"?

What is your life?

- Are you consumed with money and wealth and have very little time for the Lord?
- Do you live arrogantly boasting about all the things you have done or will do, without giving any regard to the God who allows you to do them?
- Do you know what is right but fail to do it because it might inconvenience you or make others feel awkward?

I pray you would find conviction in James' words this morning. Turn to the Lord because He is gracious and kind. Turn to Him because he loves you and cares for you.

If you are a believer and find yourself struggling with conviction this morning, I pray you would find comfort today. Find comfort in knowing although we may sin and struggle with our arrogance or pride, we serve One who has conquered all sin and who frees us to live dependent on Him.

Let's pray.

*Father, we thank you for the written word. We are grateful for the words of James, and how he calls us to be wary of self-reliant living. And we thank you for the assurance that in Jesus, we can live godly-dependent lives.*

*I now ask that by Your Spirit you would help us to take this passage and what we've learned in this sermon series and walk in the truth of Your word.*

*In Jesus name, Amen.*

**Benediction:** As you are about to turn off your streaming device, I leave you with this benediction from Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians:

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."