

Series on James

Aligning with God's Will

James 4:13-17; Jerry Truex; October 24, 2010

A. Introduction

Today, we continue our series on James. James has three major themes:

1. How to face trials or temptations,
2. How to respond to the poor and rich, and
3. How to be wise in our use of speech.

The passage we look at today concerns how to face the temptation of leaving God out of our plans and our lives. James offers four injunctions.

- Include God in your life and your plans
- Learn to submit to God
- Cultivate humility
- Don't sin by failing to do what is right

B. Don't Boast about Your Plans (vv. 13-14)

¹³ Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money."
¹⁴ Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

¹³ Ἄγε νῦν οἱ λέγοντες· σήμερον ἢ αὔριον πορευσόμεθα εἰς τήνδε τὴν πόλιν καὶ ποιήσομεν ἐκεῖ ἐνιαυτὸν καὶ ἐμπορευσόμεθα καὶ κερδήσομεν· ¹⁴ οἵτινες οὐκ ἐπίστασθε τὸ τῆς αὔριον ποία ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν· ἀτμὶς γάρ ἐστε ἢ πρὸς ὀλίγον φαινομένη, ἔπειτα καὶ ἀφανιζομένη.

1. Rebuke: Don't shut God out

Beginning with verse 13, James calls his readers to pay close attention to what he is about to say. He is, in fact, about to rebuke or reprimand his audience. He says, "Come now" (Ἄγε νῦν). This is a command to accept what he is about to say.

James is reproving believers "who plan their lives, their future, without thought of God and his plans or sovereignty."¹ Notice the two rather vague or imprecise phrases in verse 13:

- Today or tomorrow we will go (σήμερον ἢ αὔριον πορευσόμεθα)
- To such and such a town (εἰς τήνδε τὴν πόλιν)

¹ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 207.

These general statements—“today or tomorrow” and “such and such”—indicate that James has in mind *anyone* who makes plans without considering God, without being mindful that contingencies of life are in the hands of God.

Notice the verbs in verse 13. They are all in the future tense:

- We will go (πορευσόμεθα)
- We will spend (πολήσομεν)
- We will do business (ἐμπορευσόμεθα)
- We will profit (κερδήσομεν)

James is focusing on people who are boasting. They are boasting about what they *will* accomplish. They are over confident about what they *will* do and what *will* happen.

They intend to travel, stay in a foreign city, and do profitable business. They will do this, this, and this ... and so it will be. They are boasting as if they are God. They confused their plans with God's, which is idolatry. James wants them to be more open and flexible to God's future, whatever that might be.

It might be tempting to consider this as a rebuke of those who want to make a profit; that is, a rebuke of capitalism. But that is not the point. James is not rebuking merchants for planning to make a profit.

Rather, I think James is rebuking merchants for three things:

- a. *Practical atheism*; they neglect God in making their plans
- b. *Over-confidence*; they neglect to consider the contingencies of life that lie outside of their knowledge and their power
- c. *Neglecting the poor*; in leaving God out of the picture, it is easy to forget about God's concern for the poor

2. Reminder: We're dependent on God

In verse 14, James points out the folly of making plans without God. We tend to forget that we are mere human beings who are finite. We do not know what tomorrow will bring. Only God has that ability.

Only God is infinite and all-powerful. We are finite and frail. To remind us of that, James compared us to mist. Mist (ἀτμίς) can also be translated “smoke” or “vapor”. It is a prevalent OT metaphor for the transitory nature of life. Like vapor or mist, life *appears* (φαινομένη) and then *disappears* (ἀφανιζομένη). I think James is saying that we have about as much control over *our lives* as we have control over *the mist*.

Verse 14 highlights that our lives are not our own. Human beings are radically dependent on God. Dependency on God is being neglected by James' audience. They think their wealth allows them independence from God.

But this denies who we are as human beings. We need God day by day. Our job is to *radically accept* the reality God gives us moment by moment—not to reject what God gives us and not to complain about what God gives us—but to radically, thankfully accept whatever God gives.

I believe that is the “submission” that James talks about in 4:7-8: “Submit yourselves to God ... drawn near to God and he will draw near to you.” That requires trust in God; that God has you in His/Her hands; that you can turn your will and your life over to the care of God.

“For James the real question is how to approach life when the outcome is uncertain. His answer is to trust in God’s graciousness, not in human plans.”²

C. Humbly Accept God’s Will (vv. 15-16)

¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.” ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.

¹⁵ ἀντὶ τοῦ λέγειν ὑμᾶς· ἐὰν ὁ κύριος θελήσῃ καὶ ζήσομεν καὶ ποιήσομεν τοῦτο ἢ ἐκεῖνο. ¹⁶ νῦν δὲ καυχᾶσθε ἐν ταῖς ἀλαζονείαις ὑμῶν· πᾶσα καύχησις τοιαύτη πονηρὰ ἐστίν.

1. Humility: “If the Lord wills”

James begins verse 15 by saying, “You ought to say.” Speech is very important for James. Our speech reveals *and also* influences the attitudes of our hearts.³

What we ought to say is, “If the Lord wills” (ἐὰν ὁ κύριος θελήσῃ). This is in sharp contrast to the four “we will” verbs of verse 13.

- We will go (πορευσόμεθα)
- We will spend (ποιήσομεν)
- We will do business (ἐμπορευσόμεθα)
- We will profit (κερδήσομεν)

Not “we will,” but “if the Lord wills.” It’s an expression of submission and humility.

“If the Lord wills” is a common ancient Middle Eastern expression (cf. 1 Cor. 16:7). For example, we hear Muslims say, “*In šā’ Allāh*,” meaning, “God willing” or “If it is God’s will.”

Surat Al Kahf (18):24: “And never say of anything, ‘I shall do such and such thing tomorrow. Except (with the saying): ‘If God wills!’ ...”

² David P. Nystrom, *James* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 252.

³ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 208.

Technically, James is using a third-class conditional (“if,” ἐάν). It means that speaker thinks something will probably happen, but it all depends on God.

James says, “If it is God’s will, we will live and do this or that.” It depends on God. We should not even take even living for granted, because our very lives depend on God’s grace.⁴

In verse 15, James uses another imprecise phrase, “this or that” (τοῦτο ἢ ἐκεῖνο). This shows that this “exhortation applies to every circumstance.”⁵ In every circumstance where we are making plans, we should say, “If the Lord wills,” because that expresses the attitude of radical and thankful acceptance of God’s reality.

It is important to stress that James is not excluding human planning. It assumes human planning. So don’t stop setting goals. But what it does mean is we submit to God’s will (the reality that God gives us) during and after planning. There is human and divine interaction and cooperation, though everything begins and ends with God.

2. Haughtiness: Boasting

Verse 16 states the contrast: Boasting about one’s plans as if you were God. Boasting is presumptuous bragging. It is the opposite of submission to God.

- Boasting is “telling God what will happen.”
- Submission is “listening to what God is saying.”

The phrase, “you boast in your arrogance,” probably means that James’ readers were boasting (καυχάομαι) about their arrogance (ἀλαζονεία).⁶ That is, they were continuing to brag (present tense) about their independence or self-determination as a matter of pride⁷—“Only I decide what I do and when I do it; God has nothing to do with it.”

James thoroughly condemns this arrogant attitude of independence from God.

D. The Sin of Omission (v. 17)

Finally, verse 17 offers what appears to be a strange conclusion.

¹⁷ Anyone, then, who knows the right [good] thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

¹⁷ εἰδότες οὖν καλὸν ποιεῖν καὶ μὴ ποιῶντι, ἁμαρτία αὐτῶ ἐστίν.

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 209.

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB, Vol. 37 A (New Haven, Yale University, 1995) 297.

⁶ The other possibility is to take “in your arrogance” (ἐν ταῖς ἀλαζονείαις) as an adverbially as an instrumental of manner as Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB, Vol. 37 A (New Haven, Yale University, 1995) 297.

⁷ So Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 210.

This could be read as a stand-alone proverb about the “sin of omission.” This refers to omitting or failing to do something we should; for example, if we fail to help the poor.

It is contrasted with what is called the “sin of commission,” which refers to committing some evil or doing some wrong; for example, if we slandered someone or God.

However, the “therefore” (οὖν) links this proverb with what precedes it. So James has something specific in mind here. What is the sin of omission in this context?

The context suggests that:

- It would be a sin of omission, if we omit God from our planning.
- It would be a sin of omission, if we fail to submit to God.
- It would be a sin of omission, if we neglect to consider we are frail human beings created by God.
- It would be a sin of omission, if we did not attempt to radically and thankfully accept the reality God give us.

In the context of James, it would be a sin of omission, if we failed to care for the widow and the orphan, since that is God’s will for us.

E. Summary

The passage we looked at today concerns how to face the temptation of leaving God out of our plans and our lives. James offers four injunctions.

- Warns us to include God our of our lives or planning
- Reminds us to submit to God
- Encourages us to cultivate humility by saying, “If the Lord wills”
- Warns us not to sin be failing to do what is right

F. Reflections

I think the first-century readers of James would have looked with suspicion on the merchants (v. 13), who were planning to travel to foreign cities to make a profit. Their apparent wealth that allowed them to travel and their focus on profit would have contrasted sharply with most of readers of James. About 90% of the people living at that time lived close to the subsistence level. The merchants would have been in the top 10%. They had a “project management” style of doing business that included time, purpose, place, goals, and reward; but they left God out and didn’t consider their role in God’s economy.

Today Americans are engrossed with money and financial abundance. Our culture is intent on affluence and captivated with material goods. In this regard, we are not far removed from the merchants whom James knew. And, like the first-century, there is a widening gap between the affluent and the poor in our world. It seems to me that an affluent culture easily turns away from God; we fill up with stuff, but are not fulfilled.

Arthur Simon wrote: "The problem is not that we've tried faith and found it wanting, but that we've tried mammon and found it addictive, and as a result find following Christ inconvenient."⁸

Lastly, the phrase, "If the Lord wills," has often been said to apply only to some prayers, but not others, such as the "name it and claim it" variety. The imprecise language of "such and such" (v. 13) and "that or that" (v. 15) clearly indicates that all prayers and all planning are contingent on God's will. The "name it and claim it" variety of prayer turns prayer into "magic" or "manipulation" or some other attempt to "force" God to give us what we want. That replaces the sovereignty of God with human presumption, which was what the merchants were doing.⁹

⁸ Quoted by Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 211-212.

⁹ Ibid.