

“If the Lord Wills”

Texts: James 4:13-17; Job 7:1-21

The Ninth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of James

We live in an age of remarkable technological advance. At the touch of a keystroke, the world is at our finger tips via the world-wide web. When we launch men and women into space, we hardly even pay attention, because it is now so common place. We live in a country which has more wealth, and greater prosperity than any country the earth has ever known. On average, we live longer than our forbears, we are taller, stronger, and medical science can cure much of what ails us. We have cracked the human genome, and advances in DNA research hold out great hope for curing disease and extending life. As Americans, we are proud, confident, self-sufficient, and beholden to no one. We live at a time when fifty is the new forty, youth culture dominates, and we act like we'll live forever. Yet behind the facade of life in modern America is the stark reality found in the end of the fourth chapter of James. As James dares to remind us, when viewed from the perspective of eternity, our lives are nothing but a mist (a vapor). We appear for but a short time and then we quickly disappear. While some may take James' assertion as an expression of the futility of life, nothing could be further from the truth. James is poking a very large hole in sinful human pride, and is continuing his exhortation that Christians must humble themselves before God. None of us will seek grace, unless and until we see our need for grace. This is James' point in the final verses of James chapter 4. The surest way to be humbled is to consider the precarious nature of human life and be reminded that God determines our future and that we do not.

As we continue our series on the Book of James, we now wrap-up chapter four, as we cover verses 13-17, which is actually part of a larger section which runs all the way to James 5:11. Although there is a good case to be made for treating this entire section of James at one time, the point James makes about the fleeting nature of human life in the final verses of chapter 4, is one which is especially important given the fact that we've recently lost a beloved member of our congregation, and we have been reminded yet again of just how short life can be. While we don't like to talk about it, all of this forces to face our own death and to realize that the sovereign God controls our future. More to the point, it is good to be reminded that we must live each day in the light of eternity. That is what James is doing here. James is giving us the best possible reason to humble ourselves—in light of eternity, our lives are very short. The truth is that we do not control our destinies, God does.

Even though there is great temptation for us to allow our great technological advances and material prosperity to hide the fact that we will not live forever, James reminds us of the stark reality that life can be very short, and that God holds our destinies in the palm of his eternal hand. People who think they control their own destinies will have a very hard time humbling themselves, or seeing their need to draw near to God. To use James' terminology, people who think they control their own future will very easily become friends with the world. They are well-satisfied with the wisdom of this age. These are people who like to hear, but they never quite get around to doing. Such people do not seek grace from God, and remain enslaved to their sinful passions. They see no need to change anything. They have heard, professed, and are remarkably self-sufficient. What more do they need to do?

When people live life with this attitude, they are often jealous of others, and they seek their own way even if that means leaving their footprints on the backs of others. Such people—despite their profession of faith in Christ—will think nothing of causing quarrels, or murdering others in their hearts. They have

no interest whatsoever in reaping the harvest of righteousness which James mentions as one of the wonderful blessings that the Lord is willing to grant his people. In fact, such people—those whom James calls “sinners” “enemies” of God, and “adulterers”—even use the law of God as a self-righteous club on struggling sinners, all the while they break the very same commandments they accuse others of not keeping. Christians must fight against our sinful passions. Doers of the word will prove their faith in Christ through those good works which are performed because God brought them forth through the word, and then planted that word in them.

As we saw in the opening verses of this epistle, the churches of the Dispersion were facing all kinds of persecution and difficult trials. In the face of these difficult circumstances, members of these churches were discriminating against the poor while favoring the rich. James exhorts believers to tame their tongues, to seek wisdom from above, to resist the devil with the truth of the gospel, and to humble themselves before the Lord. James must remind these struggling Christians that God has not called them to suffer these trials only to leave them on their own. If they draw near to God, he will draw near to them. If they resist the devil, he will flee from them. If they seek wisdom from God, God will give it to them without measure or limit. Of course, as we have seen, all of these things are found in Jesus Christ, who is the wisdom of God and in whom the grace of God is poured out upon us. All of this, James says, depends upon looking outside ourselves to the mercies of Christ. In light of this, James now reminds us of *why* we must humble ourselves—life is short, and God controls our destinies. Clearly, this is best reason we have to humble ourselves and renounce that kind of self-reliance which sees no need to draw near to God, and receive grace.

Before we go any further, it is important for me to qualify my comments about self-reliance. Of course, if able-bodied, Scripture directs us to work hard, to provide for ourselves and our families, and not be dependent upon others. In this sense, self-reliance is a virtue and stands in sharp contrast to laziness and sloth. But the point that James is making is that a virtue like self-reliance, can easily become a vice. If and when we allow our sense of self-reliance to become an attitude grounded in independence from God, then we no longer think we need God’s help. Or we stop thanking him for our daily bread as we pray in the Lord’s Prayer. Because we take care of ourselves, we forget about God.

As a Christian virtue, someone who is self-reliant utilizes that which God gives them (health, jobs, vocations, personal gifts, etc.) in such a way as to acknowledge their dependance upon God, all the while fulfilling their personal obligations. But a spirit of self-reliance can easily obscure our sense of dependance upon God. A self-reliant person must struggle continually to trust in, and depend upon God’s gracious provision. The virtue becomes a vice when we forget that all that we are, and all that we have, comes to us from the hand of a gracious God. When we become so self-reliant that we develop an attitude of independence from God, or when we become apathetic in acknowledging our need of his gracious provision, then we engage in that conduct which James will challenge in the following verses.

With that in mind, we turn to our text, James 4:13-17.

With that in mind, we turn to our text, James 4:13-17. At first glance it is hard to connect this section at the end James 4 with what James says in the previous verses. But the theme of the passage is simply a continuation of James’ prior exhortation that Christians humble themselves before God. Since James identifies an exaggerated sense of self-reliance as one of the chief obstacles to a proper kind of humility, in the section following this one (the opening verses of chapter 5), James will return to address the conduct of the rich—those who were relying upon their wealth to sustain them in troubled times. As James will go on to say, these are people who were neglecting to come to the aid of the poor, who, because of difficult times, were going without the

essentials of life. Those who have much in the way of material goods and comfort are often times insulated from the suffering of others. Those who have much, often have a difficult time humbling themselves when it appears to them, that they have the resources to control their own destinies.

The irony is that the issue James tackles in verses 13-17 regarding a self-sufficient independence associated with wealthy merchants and land owners in his own age, applies to just about everybody in modern America. In these verses, James speaks of travel plans (typical of the merchants, traders, and land-owners throughout Palestine), as well striving to earn a profit, something also associated with merchants and land owners. Ironically, these same things are on the mind of virtually every modern American worker and family as we enter into a period of economic uncertainty. While these concerns in James' day can be directly associated with the more affluent (who will come under additional criticism in chapter 5), they are commonplace for us as we plan our lives, scurry here and there, often times completely pre-occupied with the business of life. Under such circumstances, we lose the biblical perspective on life (that it is short, and controlled by God), and we act as self-sufficiently and as independent from God as those whom James is writing to correct.

In verses 13-14, James pops the bubble of this kind of self-sufficiency. *“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.”* People who are overly busy and pre-occupied with carrying out the plans they make, never once stop to consider that God—not they—controls their futures and their eternal destinies. Despite all our best efforts to control our futures, not one of us here truly knows what tomorrow will bring. We were a different nation on September 10, than we were on September 12, 2001. John F. Kennedy had no idea as he rode in his motorcade through Dallas on November 22, 1963 that he would never give his prepared speech at the Dallas Trade Mart, and that he was about to enter eternity. Little did Lyndon Johnson know on the morning of November 22, that he would retire to bed that evening as the President of the United States, having endured the longest, most stressful day of his life, and now leading a nation in a time of national emergency and tragedy. I can go on, but you get the point. We may boast in our plans, see our activity as a mark of success and piety, and yet not of us knows what will happen tomorrow. This is what it means to be a creature, bound to both time and space. The reality is that our knowledge is very limited.

In these verses James reminds us of what we all know to be true, but don't like to face. We make all kinds of plans for our lives, our businesses, our day to day routines, our long term futures. We must. But despite all the planning, not one of us here can say what tomorrow will bring. The very thought of not knowing what will happen tomorrow creates a fair bit of anxiety. That is until we consider something absolutely fundamental to the Christian faith. The same God whom called us forth through his word, implanted that word within us, and who has given us faith in Jesus Christ, also knows what tomorrow holds because he is the author of tomorrow. The same God who has created us, has numbered our days. We may not know what tomorrow will bring, but we certainly know who will bring tomorrow.

As Jesus puts it in Matthew 6:24, *“therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”* Our Lord Jesus, who is wisdom incarnate, who has died for our sins, and who was raised for our justification, and who does know what the future holds for us, tells us not to be worried about it. Our Lord knows how we struggle to understand those things which are beyond our grasp. Jesus knows the fear in our hearts because of our uncertainty about tomorrow. And Jesus tells us not to worry. Why? Because he is the Lord of the future. His purposes for us and for our lives will be realized. That is why we are not to be anxious about the future.

Clearly then, James raises the subject of the future in the context of his exhortation back in verse 10 to *“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”* Indeed, nothing can drive us to a proper humility before God than the simple reminder that while we may plan for tomorrow and then go about our business, we have no idea what the future will bring. We don’t even know what this afternoon will bring. That is why a little humility on our part is in order. We do not control the future, God does.

James now asks an even more pointed question. *“What is your life?”* While we may take comfort in the fact that the average life-span in America is 77.8 years of age, from the vantage point of eternity, 77.8 years of age is not very long. In fact, as James goes on to say, a long life pales in comparison to eternity. *“For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”* Now, we need to be clear here. James is not in any sense saying that we are worthless, or that life is pointless. We must understand what James say here in light of Psalm 139, that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. As James says earlier, we are created in God’s image and therefore have great value (3:9). But James is reminding us that the wages of sin is death, and while 77.8 years seems like a long time to us, the reality is that seventy-seven years is not all that long—especially when viewed from God’s perspective.

No doubt, James is echoing the words of Psalm 90:10, when the Psalmist says, *“The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.”* James sounds a bit like Job, when in the seventh chapter of Job (part of our Old Testament lesson), Job laments, *“Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good. The eye of him who sees me will behold me no more; while your eyes are on me, I shall be gone. As the cloud fades and vanishes, so he who goes down to Sheol does not come up; he returns no more to his house, nor does his place know him anymore.”* Life is short and will end. Eternity is a very long time.

If I may, this truth hit me in the face while I was doing research for my family history. I discovered that my great-grandfather, Albert Riddlesbarger, who died in 1932 was buried in Covina. When I found his grave (he is buried next to his wife, and my great-grandmother, Paulina), I noticed that Albert had been buried for several years longer than he had lived. No one in my family remembered his name, who he was, or even where he had lived. I was greatly moved by the inscription on their headstone, *“until he comes,”* a reference to our Lord’s second advent. Later, I found a old church record which identified them as *“Bert and Lina,”* told how fun-loving they were, and how beloved they were in their Grace Brethren church, where Albert was the chorister. I am certain that no one had visited their grave for many years. It hit me, that no one living on earth could recall knowing them. Other than me, no even cared that they ever lived. Yet, they are loved by God and in the presence of Christ *“until he comes.”* This is what James is pointing out to us when he says we are but a mist. We live for but a short time, and then we vanish soon to be forgotten. Yet, if we are Christ’s, when we die, we enter his presence, and he knows us and never forgets us. This is why we must humble ourselves and drawn near to God. But this is the very thing that the self-sufficient have so much trouble seeing. At some point, youth and self-reliance comes to an end. Death is the great un-doer of spirit of independence.

Since life is short, James reminds us, *“Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’”* While God expects us to go about our business, and to make those day to day plans associated with living our lives, James now gives us that proper perspective which enables us to be self-reliant, yet without becoming independent from God and turning self-reliance into a vice. James reminds all of us that instead of boasting, we should get into the habit of acknowledging that everything we do depends upon the will and purposes of God. *“If the Lord wills, we will do this or that.”* While life itself is uncertain because we do not know what tomorrow holds, the fact of the matter is that what will happen tomorrow is a certainty, because God has willed all things. Once again, James is drawing upon the words

of Jesus, who told us in the Lord's Prayer that this how we should pray, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven." The idea that everything depends upon the will of God was certainly not foreign to James original audience, primarily composed of Jewish Christians.¹

But to modern Americans, who pride themselves on their technology and self-sufficiency, the idea that God wills everything strikes many as a threat to human freedom. This sounds like an old Victorian dogma that went out with the advent of radio. Since James' now invokes the doctrine of God's providence—that God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass—as a means of humbling us, so that we seek to draw near to God so as to receive grace, it is important to take a moment and unpack the ramifications of James' comment. God's sovereignty is not a threat to our freedom, yet it is a reality which should bring a healthy dose of realism to those who live like tomorrow was something in our control.

To begin with, the fact that God is in control of the future is intended to bring us great comfort—not make us fearful or to paralyze us. That God (not us) is in control means that our future is not left to chance, nor to fate, nor to ourselves, or even to others. When we are told we are but a mist—here today and gone tomorrow—that declaration is intended to humble us. When we are told that God foreordains the future, that declaration reminds us that the future is in very good hands. We know this to be true by simply looking back at redemptive history, and observing how God has always kept his promises, and how he has always turned evil into good on behalf of his people. While we may not know what tomorrow holds, we do know that God has ordained it. So as we plan our lives, and go about our business, we proceed as we must, knowing that whatever happens, God has ordained it and will turn all evil to our good. This is why Christians need not live in fear, nor fear whatever the future might hold.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* speaks directly to this subject in questions 26-28 (Lord's Day Nine and Ten).

Lord's Day 9

Q 26. What do you believe when you say: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth?"

A. That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who of nothing made heaven and earth with all that in them is, who likewise upholds, and governs the same by His eternal counsel and providence, is for the sake of Christ, His Son, my God and my Father, in whom I so trust as to have no doubt that He will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul; and further, that whatever evil He sends upon me in this troubled life, He will turn to my good; for He is able to do it, being Almighty God, and willing also, being a faithful Father

Lord's Day 10

Q 27. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. The almighty, everywhere-present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come not by chance, but by His fatherly hand.

¹ Moo, *The Letter of James*, 204-205.

Q. 28. What does it profit us to know that God created, and by His providence upholds, all things?

A. That we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and for what is future have good confidence in our faithful God and Father, that no creature shall separate us from His love, since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move.

The fact that God wills the future should make us supremely confident about tomorrow, as we submit all our plans to God. “If the Lord wills,” then what we’ve planned will come to pass. If God has other plans for tomorrow than the ones we’ve made, then so be it, his will be done. Therefore, whenever we affirm, *‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that,’* we are affirming the goodness of our heavenly father, who loves us, and has promised to provide us with all good things. When we affirm “if the Lord wills,” we are also renouncing that form of independent self-sufficiency to which we are so prone.

As we come to verse 16, it is now clear that James is dealing with human pride throughout this entire section. “*As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.*” Because we are sinful and don’t like to submit our plans to the will of one greater than we are, we push God out of our lives (consciously or otherwise). Instead, we trust in our technology, or our self-sufficiency, and we forget that all good things come to us from the hand of a gracious and sovereign God. If we heed James’ reminder that we do not know what tomorrow holds, that we are but vapors who are here today and gone tomorrow, then we see the foolishness of arrogantly boasting about our plans as though we were sovereign. In fact, James even says it is a sin to boast in ourselves, our plans, our self-reliance. It is a sin, because the degree to which we trust in our own plans, is the degree to which we do not trust in God’s sovereign control of the future. It is not only sin, it is foolishness.

While the final verse in this section (verse 17) seems awkward and out of place here—“*So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin*”—the fact of the matter is that mentioning sins of omission fits very naturally here. Those who do not humble themselves, those who do not seek God, those who do not resist the devil, those who boast about tomorrow, have failed to do the right thing, and therefore have sinned. There is no excuse for a Christian not to humble themselves, especially in light of all that James has said here. There is no excuse for a Christian to fail to seek grace when we so desperately need more grace. There is no excuse for not resisting the lies and heresies of the devil. And because we are but vapors, there is no excuse for planning for tomorrow without submitting our plans unto God through our prayers, as Jesus instructs to do us in the Lord’s Prayer.

What then do we say by way of application?

W Beloved, not one of us knows what tomorrow holds. We do not know what the Lord has planned for tomorrow, for next week, for one year, for the rest of our lives. But we know that God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass. And so let us heed James’ exhortation by submitting all of our plans and aspirations to the Lord with the simple prayer, “if the Lord wills.” This is in keeping with not only these words from James, but also with the prayer taught us by Jesus.

While we may not know what the Lord wills for the future, we know that it was God’s will for Jesus to die for all of our sins and then be raised up Lord of life. We know that it was God’s will to call us to faith in Christ, implant his word within us, and then bring forth those good works which are the evidence that God is accomplishing his purposes in our lives. So, when we pray “if the Lord wills” we pray that prayer with the confidence that God has already willed the best for us in the person of his son. In Christ, God has given us all we will ever need despite the uncertainties of tomorrow.

In looking back upon what God has done for us in Christ, suddenly the fear and uncertainty of future, vanishes in light of the blood and righteousness of Christ. This is why the prayer “if the Lord wills” is not prayer of despair and anxiety, but a prayer offered in the confidence of faith. It is a prayer framed by the cross of cross and the glories of the empty tomb. It is a prayer through which we humble ourselves, so as to receive grace, more grace. Amen.