

Pride and Presumption (James 4:13-17)

Introduction

I invite you to open your Bible to James chapter 4.

We will look at verses 13-17, for I want us to see what James the brother of Jesus says to a group of Christian businessmen about the way they plan their tomorrows as if they, and not God, are sovereign.

Now, as you may imagine, James rebukes these men. And though he does not use the words, he implies they are prideful, presumptive, and ultimately foolish. For God alone is sovereign and he writes all of our days according to his perfect plan, not ours. Therefore, James counsels these men to submit their plans to the will of God for his approval and if need be, his change and redirection. For not to do so is sinful.

And this wise counsel is good advice for all Christians, not just businessmen. For God has given us a fixed amount of time to live on this present earth and to make good use of this time, we like the Christian businessmen in James' epistle should leave space on the calendar, so if need be, God can re-write our schedule and change our plans according to his will.

That is what we see in James chapter 4:13-17. So, at this time let's read what James says to some prideful and presumptive businessmen who act as if they, and not God, determine how their days on earth unfold.

Sermon

The book of James is often referred to a New Testament wisdom book, similar to the Old Testament book of Proverbs. And there is truth in that comparison. For the book of James does have many wise sayings that communicate practical wisdom to its readers.

And one of the wise sayings is found in the verses we are concerned with this morning, where James speaks to Christian businessmen who make a serious mistake when they do not include God in their business plans.

And by way of the rebuke James gives these men, I want to show you two things he reveals about living in a world, where you never know what a day may hold.

First, James reveals, as we live in this world, We Should Never Presume to Know the Future.

You see this in verses 13 and 14.

In verse 13 – James writes: *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."*

While there is some question among commentators whether or not the businessmen James writes to are Christians, I see no reason to believe these men are not true believers in Jesus Christ. And it seems they are well off, in that they have the means to leave their present location and go somewhere for a year to trade and make a profit.

And of course, this is not wrong. Christians are free to own a business and to make as much money as they can by their good business skills. Scripture does not condemn wealthy Christians.

Now, it does warn us that wealth can easily ruin us if money becomes our idol and steals our heart from God. One of the many warnings God gives his people Israel just before they enter the Promised Land concerns the matter of forgetting Him in the midst of their prosperity.

In the book of Deuteronomy chapter 8:17-18, Moses tells the people of God: *Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.'* You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

It is not a sin to be wealthy. But it is a sin to forget who stands behind your wealth and gives you the necessary gifts – abilities – and providential circumstances to obtain it.

And that was the problem with these Christian businessmen. Their financial prosperity makes them forget the God who grants them success and leads them to make their future plans as though they can predict what lies ahead.

Like Wall Street traders who buy and sell with a measure of skill and are able to score big in the stock market, the Christian businessmen believe they have the winning formula. And you see this in their words.

They say in verse 13: Today or tomorrow or whatever day choose, we will go into such and such a town, or the best place to make money, and we will spend a year there to trade and make a profit, a big profit is what they have in mind.

But the question James wants them to answer regarding their stated intention is – “Do you have the Almighty power to make this happen?”

In other words, Mr. Business Man, “Can you guarantee your life will play out the way you intend?” You make bold assertions but have you considered God may have a different plan for your life?

It is easy to presume all things in life will go according to our plan, especially when we encounter a measure of success, and then, like these Christian businessmen give lip service to God as sovereign but by our attitude and actions act like we are the ones in charge.

Now keep in mind, James does not oppose people who make plans. In this case, the plan of the merchants to travel to another city and make a profit. He only rebukes their pride and presumption that leads them to believe they can make life happen just the way they intend.

Certainly, it is good to make plans, both long-term and short. As someone once said, “He who fails to plan – plans to fail.” So, let us make our plans, but as we do, let us never presume that we and not God will get the last word.

For only God has the final say in the plans we make. As the author of Proverbs writes in chapter 19:21 of his book: *Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.*

So, don’t presume to know the future, James says. God may determine there is another course for your life to take, so always leave room in your plans for God to change them. And to reinforce this truth look what James writes in verse 14.

After he reveals the businessmen pridefully presume they’ll go to such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit, James points out the obvious when he tells them: *...yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.*

The business men act like they know exactly what tomorrow holds. So, they make their plans without God in mind. Yet, they have no clue what will happen tomorrow. Only God knows the beginning from the end. Only God knows how a day will unfold because he is the One who unfolds the day. So, it is foolish to make your plans as if you knew the future, James implies. For, you do not know what tomorrow will bring.

As finite beings we have many limitations. And the older we get the more we realize this truth. And one of our limitations is comprehensive knowledge. We do not know all things, therefore, even our best plans are only educated guesses.

And I was reminded of this fact when I came across some predictions made over the years by some very qualified people about the future of technology as seen from their perspective at the time they lived.

For example, the British scientist William Thomson said in 1899:

Radio has no future. Heavier than air flying machines are impossible and X rays will prove to be a hoax.

Or consider Darryl Zanuch of 20th Century Fox who said in 1946:

Television won’t be able to hold on to any market it captures after the first 6 months. People will soon tire of staring at a plywood box every night.

Then there is Thomas Watson of IBM who said in 1943:

I think there is a world market for maybe five computers.

And finally, we have Albert Einstein who confidently stated in 1932:

There is not the slightest indication that nuclear energy will ever be obtainable.

Yet less than 13 years later, America drops the first atomic bomb. No man knows the future, only God. Therefore, we must not expect everything we plan to do will work out just the way we intend. God may have another plan in mind for our life. So, as we make our future plans, we must do so with an eraser close at hand in case the Lord desires a change of plan is in order for he alone knows our tomorrows.

Furthermore, as James reveals, we have no clue how many of our tomorrows yet remain. Look what he writes in the remainder of verse 14: *What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.*

Here James points out how quickly life passes. What is your life? He asks the men who make their plans as if death will not come knocking at their door.

How many years do you have left on this earth? James questions. You make your plans like tomorrow is always promised. You say, I will go to such and such city and I will stay there for a year and make a big profit. But how do you know you will live to make this happen? How do you know God will not require your soul tomorrow, as the rich fool discovered in Luke chapter 12 when God required his life on the very day, he boasted to himself: *“Soul, you have ample supplies laid up for many years, eat, drink, and be merry.”*

Your life is like a mist in the morning, James says. It is only here for a short time then it vanishes. And you are wise to keep this mind, he implies, as you make your future plans.

The Bible has much to say about the temporal nature of life.

For instance, in addition to the “mist that appears for a little time then vanishes,” we are compared to the grass that is green for a season but later browns with the sun and dies. Or to the flowers of the field that bloom for a time and then they are gone.

We also are told in Psalm 90, we have 70 years to live or by reason of strength 80, which is a figure of speech, since some people die earlier than 70 and other people later than 80. But the point is, all people eventually die.

Hebrews chapter 9:27 states the truth plainly when the author writes: *It is appointed unto man once to die and after that comes the judgment.*

And that is the point James makes in verse 14. Remember, he says, you are human not divine. And you do not know what will happen tomorrow, or even how many tomorrows you have.

So, as you make your plans do so wisely. Do not make them as if you are God and know the future. And furthermore, as we now see in verses 15-17, James tells the businessmen, Do not make your plans without planning to include God, for to do otherwise is sinful.

And that is the second thing James reveals about living in a world where you never know what a day may hold. We must never make our plans without planning to include God.

Look at verses 15-17. James writes: *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.*

So rather than boast – Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit, James tells the businessmen they should say instead, “If the Lord wills we will do this or that.”

Note the difference. In the first instance the businessmen pridefully boast as if they are able to make their plans succeed by the force of sheer will. “We will do this tomorrow,” they say, “And we will make it happen.”

Whereas in the second instance, the course James commends, the businessmen confess their plan will succeed only if it accords with God’s will and he prospers the work of their hands.

Now as I previously mentioned, James is not opposed to people making plans. We should not live by the “seat of our pants.” And we have many examples in Scripture of people who were wise planners.

You might remember how Joseph advises Pharaoh to store up grain for seven years because a famine is coming to the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh wisely listens to Joseph. And when the famine arrives, he has plenty of grain to feed the people and keep them alive because he plans for the future famine.

And the apostle Paul was also a planner. He makes plans to visit churches and various countries where the gospel has not yet been preached many months and sometimes years before he intends to travel.

God tells his people to be planners. But to make our plans wisely, we must always include God in our plans. And James reveals the way to nail this truth to our hearts is to always submit our plans to God and acknowledge if he so wills our plans will prevail. And if they do not prevail, it was because God has a different plan that is far better.

And as we live in this uncertain world, where God alone knows our tomorrows, to rest our plans in the hands of God is the best place to be.

For if I make my plans to do this or that and something happens and my plans do not succeed, I can have peace of mind when I know God prevents my plan from prevailing because he has something better in mind.

Now this of course does not mean I won’t get frustrated at times when life does not go as planned. But it does mean my frustration is not forever and once I get over my failed plans and see my life from God’s eternal perspective, I can rejoice and give thanks to him because I know he does everything for my good and his glory. And that is the testimony of Scripture.

Think again of Joseph. He spent 12 years in prison because his jealous brothers sold him into slavery. Now, was this a part of Joseph's plan for his life? Did he write down in his diary, one day I plan to be in prison through no fault of my own? One day I intend that 12 years of my youth will be spent behind bars?

Was that Joseph's plan for his life? No, of course not. Prison was not Joseph's plan but it was God's. And over time Joseph came to understand this truth and see God's plan was for his good. To the point that many years later when he is a prince in Egypt and with no bitterness of heart, he is able to tell the same brothers who sold him into slavery as recorded in Genesis 50:20: *What you meant for evil against me God meant for good.*

Even better than Joseph, consider the death of Jesus Christ. As we know from the gospels this was not the plan of the apostles. So, each time Jesus mentions his impending death and resurrection they tune him out in the same way we'll mute the sound on the TV when we don't like what's being said.

For the apostle's plan is for Jesus to defeat their enemies and set up the earthly kingdom of God. Therefore, a crucified Christ makes no sense. The death of Christ was not the plan of the apostles. But it was the plan of God to save his people from the eternal punishment our sins deserve. And which plan was better? Which plan would you rather have? The apostles plan or God's plan?

James reveals in verses 15-17, the wisest way to live in this uncertain world where no one knows what a day may hold is to always include God in our plans then rest those plans in his hands and let him decide whether or not our plans will prevail. For God alone knows our tomorrows and what is best for our lives today.

So, let us continue to make our plans for today, tomorrow, and even the next five years, if that's what you like to do. But however you plan, James says, Do so wisely.

And that means first of all, do not presume you know what a day will hold, for God alone know the future. And secondly, when you make your plans, plan to include God, for to do otherwise is sinful. And then of course, when you do make your plans, hold them loosely and keep an eraser close at hand in case the Lord directs you in a way you had not planned to go. For as the author of Proverbs writes: *Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.*

So, as we live in this imperfect world full of uncertainties, let us rest our plans and all our concerns in the hands of a good and gracious God who not only holds all our tomorrows, he holds on to us and promises he will never let us go but he will be with us forever.

And that, friends, is a whole lot of tomorrows to be with the God who holds us in his hands!

Let us thank God and praise his holy name!