
James 4:13-17

- 13 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”—
- 14 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.
- 15 Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”
- 16 As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.
- 17 So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

What is your life?

It’s a fitting passage, I think, in light of recent events. By now we are all aware of the tragic events that took place in Colorado at the showing of the new *Batman* movie. A man walks into a sold-out movie theatre wearing body armor and gas mask, carrying an assortment of weapons and firearms and begins shooting. Almost 60 people of all ages are injured, the youngest being a three-month-old baby. Twelve were killed – the oldest being 51, the youngest being 6, and a range of men and women from all different walks of life in between.

It’s hard to look at the details of this event and not be moved: parents losing children, children losing parents, spouses torn apart, families torn apart by what seems like such a senseless act. After events of this kind, we ask so many questions. The biggest and most general question is why. Why did this happen? If God exists, how could he let something like this happen?

Although we are not answering that question today – really there are no easy answers -- especially when you are in the midst of a severe trial like that – there are no easy answers. There are answers that come across as very trite and glib. There are answers that try to speak too much for who God is, what he is doing when we don’t know. So there are no easy answers. Sometimes we just don’t give very good answers in the midst of extreme trials like this. Although these types of incidents lead us to ask questions, they also help us and cause us to reflect on our own lives. They give us occasion to think about our own life. I think we hit a passage today that helps us to take stock of our lives.

James asks this question, “What is your life?” This is a good question. It’s a question we are going to think about for the next few minutes. If you were to rate your life on a scale of 1 to 10 – 1 being the worst, 10 being the greatest – what would you give it? What is the criterion you use to evaluate your life? Is it money in the

bank, how many children you have, if you are married, if you are single, if you are healthy, what kind of house you live in, what kind of car you drive? What are the conditions of your life that tip the scale one way or the other? It's good for us to think about these things. I think James has something to teach us from this passage about keeping our lives in the proper perspective because when events like what happened in Colorado happen, it allows us to think about years past. It allows us to think about life right now, but it also causes us to think about the future.

James asks this really important question because he is warning about living lives as though God does not exist. Although this passage doesn't speak directly to the "why" question about why things like this happen, the bible does. What this passage helps us to do is not necessarily answer the "why" question of these types of events, but what my life is all about. I think the whole book of James helps answer this question. We are talking about faith that works.

We just came off this passage a few weeks ago about worldliness and the first part of chapter 4 is James teaching us about worldliness. He asks some very good questions: Why do we fight? Why do we quarrel? He says our passions are at war within us. Why are they at war? Because we are becoming friends with the world. That's where we get that term worldliness. We love the world's way of doing things, the world's standards, the world system. Worldliness can find expression in our lives in so many different ways: fighting and quarreling like we looked at. James mentions showing partiality in chapter 2, speaking evil against one another, bitter jealousy, and selfish ambitious. This is how worldliness comes out.

James is just continuing the conversation about worldliness. He begins this conversation here about wealth and money. He is talking to merchants of the day – probably Christian merchants – who are trying to do their job. They are trying to earn a living, but they are doing it in a way that is very dangerous, in a way that forgets God's existence. This was a time when trade and commerce were growing. People were traveling more. They are going to other lands to trade, to make a profit. The allure of earning more money was taking center stage, and James is seeing it. So the merchants are making plans. They are confident about those plans. They are confident about the outcome of the plans, and the outcome of the plans in their mind is I'm going to make more money.

So James gives a bit of a rebuke in our passage, not because they are earning money, not because they are even making plans. He is rebuking this worldly, self-confident attitude that they are exhibiting and pursuing their goals at all costs. So he says what about God; does God play a role in any of this? You are giving your life to this business; you are giving your life to turn a profit, but what is your life? He wants us to get a bigger picture. We all get caught up in the day-to-day plans. We look out into the future and we see where things are going: I

want to do this, I want to go here, I want this to happen. James is saying, listen, it's not all bad, but you need to focus your attention on a bigger issue at stake which is do you even live as though God exists. What is your life? How would you answer that question?

Here's how I think James helps us answer the question. He tells us a few things. We are going to break this passage up into three parts. This is how I think he answers the question:

- **Your Life is Uncertain**
- **Your Life is Temporary**
- **Your Life is God's**

1. Your Life is Uncertain

We see this in verses 13 and the beginning of 14. Your life is uncertain, at least from our perspective, not from God's perspective but from our perspective. James tells us right away, "...you do not know what tomorrow will bring." He says, come on, you are saying you are going to go here and there. You work as though you know the future. You live, you breathe, you act as though you can plan everything out, but you don't know what tomorrow will bring.

So does this mean that all planning is wrong? Some of you are thinking, "I'm taking Financial Peace University, and all he talks about is planning: planning for the future, planning financially." Planning is not wrong. James isn't bothered that these guys were planning; he is bothered because they are planning as though they were in control of the future, control of their destiny. He saw something. There was an attitude. There was something that says you guys are missing it. You think that you have it figured out, that it is going to happen this way. So I think when we read that, we are forced to ask ourselves, "Do I see myself in that?" I think if we are honest, we all see ourselves in that a little bit, some maybe more than others.

This is an issue that is so practical for us because we can so easily drift. We can so easily slide into the role of the fortune teller. I remember one time when I was a kid, my mom took me to a psychic. It's okay to laugh. I still laugh. She was telling me about previous lives and space travel, the future. She was a fortune teller – probably crazy. There is no way of validating if any of it was true. Thankfully, my mom is not into that stuff anymore. Hopefully you are not either.

We laugh at that, but we do some similar telling of the future. We slide into those roles where we plan for the future. We have an idea of where we want to go, what we want to do and how we are going to

get there. Some of us are planners and detailed to the tee of how the next five – you've got your five-year plan down. In five years I know what I'm doing. In ten years I know what I'm doing. In fifteen years – bam, bam. We live and we make plans. We arrange all the details. We work so hard to ensure success, and we can easily forget that we just don't know what tomorrow will look like. Some of you know this truth better than others, but we all see it either in experiencing it or we see it from – not even from afar but from a little bit of a distance. There are always events that help us to remember this truth.

Some bought houses. Some bought stocks, thinking that the plan was sure. The formula was right. It was foolproof. Then everything changed. I know with my own life, I thought as a kid -- you don't think a whole lot about the future, you just kind of think things will be this way for a long time. I thought I had plenty of time with my biological father, my dad. I thought I had time to spend with him to learn from him. He could see me grow up, get married, have kids. One day I was seven years old and he was there, and the next day he was gone. Everything changed.

Some people just wanted to go see a movie the other night. As I sat back and just thought of this whole incident, I thought how many people went into that theatre thinking that was it. Everything changed. We just don't know. We don't know what tomorrow will look like. We make plans, but things can change in an instant. So the question becomes how do we respond when those plans change; how do we go into each day thinking about how the rest of the day and the week and the month are going to turn out. How does God want us to respond? How does God want us to think about these things? I know at the least he wants us to think about it.

I'm not trying to put a heavy weight on us this morning, but this is life, right? So often we just don't think. We don't think about these things. James is telling us tomorrow is not certain. Life is not certain. That's the first point, your life is uncertain.

2. Your Life is Temporary

The second point is your life is temporary, at least as far as this life is concerned. Not only is life uncertain, but we also see that it's temporary. He uses this word a "mist." Life is a mist or other translations say a "vapor." It is here one moment and gone the next. My little squirt bottle here...it's a mist. You see it. You see it reflecting in the light, and then it is gone. It's a mist. You think of all the little particles that fly out into nothing. It is just amazing how big our world is, how big our universe is.

You think about just our world. There are roughly 6 billion people that are alive today. Now you take that number and you spread it out across the span of human history. It is a lot of people. Just to give

context – numbers are just ridiculous these days with things like trillions of dollars in debt and hundreds of billion dollars and billionaires. They are just numbers, like, oh, yeah, billions, no big deal. A billion is *a lot*. Six billion is *a lot*.

If you take a billion pennies – are pennies big or small -- small, little pennies and you stacked them in an orderly way, they would fill five school buses. If you line them up in one row, they would span 987 miles. It is helpful for us to think about how small we are when compared to everyone who has ever lived in the history of the earth. We are here and then we vanish.

It's great when we can go places to remind ourselves how small we are because it's so easy to think that we are big and important and special. I know in God's eyes we are each made individually, wonderfully, fearfully. We are precious, we are special, a workmanship created in God's image. I'm not undermining the importance of humanity. But sometimes we need a perspective shift, so it's good to go to the Grand Canyon and stand there and say, wow, I am small. It's good to go skiing in the Rockies and you just – whenever I used to go skiing, I used to just sit on top of a mountain by myself and just look out and go, oh, man, I think I'm so important sometimes. I think I'm so big and yet I am so small. That's just on our planet.

If we just think universally, and start going beyond the borders of earth... I have a few pictures to show you, some things that I find to be extremely fascinating. These are two overlapping galaxies. Not planets. Not solar systems but galaxies overlapping. The distance between the two: just throw a number out there as big as you can guess and that is somewhere in the ballpark.

The second is this picture of a star exploding. These are real pictures; we didn't draw them. They are taken by the Hubble space telescope. If you are ever interested in seeing these on your computer, they are just fascinating. This is a star exploding. The pale, starlike objects that are surrounding it, those bright objects, are hundreds of thousands of stars together. They look like one big star.

I just find these incredible. The third picture is just galaxies, five of them, galaxies filled with millions and millions of stars and all kinds of other space *stuff* – technical term. The distance between these range anywhere from 40 to 290 million light years. We are going to start talking about how long and far a light year is. It's far!

This last picture always gets me. What's that? It's earth. A piece of dust on a ray of light. Now, again, God filled that piece of dust on a ray of light with an amazing assortment of his creation. Thank God for

what he has done here. We just want to see how big everything else is. Now think about how big God is. He formed every molecule in the universe.

This picture comes from a traveling craft called *Voyager* – I believe that's right. They sent out two of them, *Voyager I and II*. *Voyager I* is traveling at 38,000 mph. It has been since 1977. It has not reached the end of our solar system yet. It is expected to reach the end of the solar system in 2014. The universe is unbelievable, and James had no idea about all of this when he says that we are a vapor. That's a vapor. That dot is a vapor and everyone on it.

Look, in the course of our lives we will be in certain places for an extended period of time, go to different schools, different churches, different places. While we are there, we may feel important; we may feel like we are known and contribute some legitimate things to those places, but eventually we will move on one way or the other. We might be remembered for a little while, some more than others, but eventually we are not going to be talked about quite as much as before. We won't be remembered as well as we once were. If you go and visit, you are not remembered as you once were.

I think back to Joseph's life. At the end of Genesis, Joseph is second in command of all the world, basically of all of Egypt. And in Exodus 1:8, there's just an amazing statement: "Now there arose a king over Egypt who did not know Joseph." I'm thinking, "If the second in command of all Egypt is not remembered in the next generation, what hope do I have? I have left little marks where I've gone, but I'm not in the mind of my teachers, my professors, the places that I've been."

We live to do so much here on this earth, to accumulate so much, to accomplish so much, but we can forget so easily that our life is a vapor or a mist. That's why we need verse 15. We can be talking about this and it can start getting a little depressing.

3. **Your Life is God's**

Our lives are uncertain, our lives are temporary, but our lives are God's. What do we do with the fact that we have uncertain and temporary lives? Because if that's all the news that we are given, then life would be pretty scary, right? I mean, hey, buddy, you really don't know what your life is going to look like tomorrow. It's kind of up in the air. It could be good; it could be bad. Oh, and by the way, it's not going to be very long. You're a vapor. It's temporary. Death could come at any moment. If that's the message we are all getting day in and day out, it doesn't make you want to get out of bed. We are not looking for people to say, "Cross your fingers and hope. Just do the best you can. Life is going to turn

out one way or the other. It's the flip of a coin." If that's where are left, there would be very little hope in this life. That's the life without God.

That's where the humanistic philosophy finds its end. Men like Machiavelli and Nietzsche help shape our culture's ethic by teaching that it doesn't matter how you get to the end, as long as you get there in a way that makes you the most happy. We say the end justifies the means. It doesn't matter what you do to accomplish your objective, only that you do what makes you happy. Why? Because for them the only ethic, the only goal is yourself because all that matters in your world is where your god is you. It's all that matters. If you make yourself your own god, then all that matters is you and what you need and what you want. See, our lives are uncertain and temporary, and if that is where the story ends, then we are lost. But that is not where are left; that's not where James leaves us; it's not where the bible leaves us; it's not where God leaves us. We aren't God, but there's a real God. Our lives are in the hands of a mighty, supreme, sovereign God, a God who is over every decision, our plan, every breath, every molecule. He cries out, "This is mine."

It didn't bother James that people were making plans. I know I've said this over and over again. I want us to hear that. Making plans is good. There is wisdom in making plans. We don't just want to wander through life going with the flow never thinking about what tomorrow may bring or may not bring. That's not a sign of super spirituality; it's a sign of stupidity. We need to think. God has given us minds to think.

Proverbs tells us all over the place in so many words: "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice." There is a sense in which we gather information. We hear things and we make decisions. We do make plans. Planning is not the problem for James. What bothered him was that people made plans as though God did not exist. Tomorrow I'll do this. Next week I'll do that. Next month I'll do that. In their minds God had nothing to do with anything in their plans. They were in control of their destinies and God was forgotten.

We all do this. We all have the tendency to live like this. We have our plans, we have our agenda, and we can so easily make our decisions in a way that unknowingly or knowingly profanes the name of the Lord. It profanes the Lord, especially if we call ourselves Christians, and then we live as though he doesn't exist. Something is wrong.

James calls it arrogant. He says when you live like that, it's boasting in your arrogance. It's arrogant to think that we know the future, that we can plan, that we can do all these things on our own, in our own

strength that in a way forgets that there is someone who made that vast universe that we were just looking at. It's living a life that elevates my own will above everything else, my own agenda above everything else, my own plan above everything else. Even if the plans are good – and we talk about this a lot – even if good plans are made, they can easily become wicked when we do it in a way that eclipses God's rule and authority in our lives. We just elevate our plan -- this is what we're going to do. It just shaves away God and what he is wanting and trying to do in our lives.

I'm not saying that our plans thwart God's plan. I'm saying from our perspective how are we viewing what is happening in our day-to-day lives. We forget that there is a plan and an agenda, a will that is better than anything that we could ever come up with on our own. A will, a plan and an agenda that we should desire more than anything else.

Every day we can so easily go about our lives in the same way as these merchants did, possibly to earn money, possibly to do something else, but verse 15 should be our greatest desire. This is what we want. We want the Lord's will accomplished in our lives. Isn't that what Jesus taught us to pray? Let your kingdom come, let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We pray that as the model prayer: Your kingdom come, your will be done more than anything else. We see it at the end of his life as he is praying in the garden before he is to be crucified. What does he say? He says, "Let this cup pass...not my will but yours be done."

Jesus lived and spoke in complete agreement and in complete accord with the will of the Father, and that is what we want. It means stepping back and saying God's will is better than mine no matter what it looks like. What God wants is better than what I want because he is perfect. He is holy. He is loving. He is just. He is merciful. Even in the midst of a horrific event, we can stand back and say, "I don't understand, but, God, your plans are always good and right."

That is hard to tell people who are in the midst of such trials. But it's the only hope that we have. It's our only hope. Our hope is not in securing more movie theaters, securing more churches, more public areas with more armed guards. Evil will be done in this world. There is a holy and perfect God who is above all of that and moving in ways that we just don't understand. Even in the midst of the most horrific pain imaginable – I was just looking at the lives of these people who were lost in the shooting and weeping myself, thinking their families have experienced something they never dreamed they would ever experience. Yet there's hope and there's comfort. We want God's will. We want God's plan.

As we go and plan and we make our own arrangements, then we can rest in knowing that God's will *will* have His way. When things don't go the way we plan, how do we respond? That's why James says that we should instead say, "If the Lord wills, I'll go here or there." It's a simple way of acknowledging God's rule in our lives. It acknowledges it for the people around us and it acknowledges it to ourselves. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves, "God, if you will, then this is what is going to happen."

Friends, we know this, right, this is more than just tagging on this little catch phrase at the end of all of our sentences. Some people who have no idea about the things of the Lord do that. It's just a phrase. "God willing, God willing, Lord willing." It's more than that, right? It's more than words. It's more than a catch phrase. It's more than some glib, trite sentence-finisher.

If our lives don't match those words, then they are just words. It's easy to just say "Lord willing." It's hard when the plans change and we're required to respond to those changed plans. Saying "Lord willing" may make us sound extra spiritual, extra godly, but then at the first moment of things going differently than we want, we just fall apart at the seams. When that happens, those words are meaningless. We are not trying to just put on this appearance of godliness. "Oh, well, I'm going to go to lunch today, Lord willing. I'm going to go on my vacation next week, Lord willing." We are not trying to just sound godly. We want this to penetrate to our core that God's will *is* better, that his way *is* right. "I think this is where I'm going. I think this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to pay for this. I'm going to buy my house because I think in 30 years it's going to be paid off. I'm going to do these things." Inside we should say, "God, whatever you want. It's not my life; it's yours."

Listen to one of our favorites, Charles Spurgeon, and what he says about this.

Whether you write, if the Lord will or not, always let it be clearly understood and let it be conspicuous in all your arrangements that you recognize that God is over all and that you are under his control. When you say, "I will do this or that," always add, in thought if not in words, "if the Lord wills." No harm can come to you if you bow to God's sovereign sway.

That's one to just tuck away in the memory. He says "let it be conspicuous. " Let your life scream this type of trust in God, that I don't just say I believe in God. I don't just say "Lord willing." I don't just say "if God wills," but my life is a declaration of this truth that says, "Whatever you want, God, it's enough."

Now, this is a fight. It's a battle. It's a real battle. It's not a battle to speak it; it's a battle to live it. I know this because I struggle with my own fears, my own anxieties, my own plans, my own disappointments. I live this every day. I read passages like this, I hear quotes like that, and I am just

broken to the core because I say so often that I believe God for X, Y, Z, and my life inside and possibly out can so easily deny it.

So we all fight to make this a reality in our spirits and in our own hearts and we say, “Lord, would you help me to believe you more than what I’m seeing. I don’t *just* want to speak in a way that declares your rule; I want to *live* in a way that declares your rule. I want to *act* in a way. I want my heart to be rooted in this truth, because when it’s in my heart, then it’s going to come out in my speech, and it’s going to be genuine.

What is your life? Our lives are more than a bunch of random events. Our lives are more than a bunch of plans for tomorrow. As much as we prepare and plan for future events, we have to remember that we live for something greater. We are living to do the will of the Father, that God wants us to live for him, in him, through him. He doesn’t want us to live with him in mind but to truly live for him, so that in even the smallest things, something as simple as just speaking about my future plans, reflects that my life is his. My life is in his hands and under his control.

We remember that it is because of Jesus that we can even do that, because he has come. He was sent by the Father to save us, to take our sin, to live the life that we should have lived and to pay the penalty of our sin. We can have this kind of relationship with the Father.

So in all things we can give God glory even in our future planning. And we want this truth to affect our lives. So how does this look in our lives? You are starting to think already in ways that this applies to you. How do I live as though my life is temporary, as though it is uncertain, as though it is God’s? Jesus told us, look, there is enough trouble with one day, to worry about what is going to happen tomorrow, so we live for today, we see today, and we take advantage of the opportunity that God has given us in this day.

Maybe it’s living with one another in a way that thinks along the lines, “Well, tomorrow may not happen or it may not look the same way I thought it was going to look.” Maybe it means being a little more intentional with our wives. Maybe it means being a little more intentional with our husbands. Maybe it means taking that extra time with our children when we are tired and going the extra mile with those that we love, not because we are living some horrific fear that doomsday is coming tomorrow. That’s not the point. The point is we live knowing that God has given us this day as a gift. We don’t want to squander that gift. We want to take the extra time with our friends who are in need even when we don’t want to.

Moses in Psalm 90:12, prayed. He says, “Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” There is wisdom in just thinking that I don’t know what God’s plan is, and so I’m using today to live for His glory,

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to spread His gospel, to speak for Him, to tell others about Him, to do good works in His name. So that whenever that number comes, I will stand before God, and He will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

What is your life? God has given us life and breath and everything. We want to live as though this is true. We want to live as though that is a reality. Our prayer is for God to take this life that he has given us and use it for his glory, not for our own, in whatever he sees fit. His plan, His purpose, His will!