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Lesson 9 — *Real Faith: Real Faith Rejects Worldliness (4:1-5:6), Part 4*

INTRODUCTION

In James 4:1-5:6, James fleshes out what worldliness looks like in five areas. In other words, he contrasts how the friend of the world vs. the friend of God handles these issues: desires (4:1-3), attitude (4:6-10), conversation (4:11-12), planning (4:13-17), and money (5:1-6). **Because friendship with the world is enmity with God, you must live as God's friend.**

PLANNING (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.

In verses 6-10, Pastor James contrasted the attitudes of friends of the world with those of God's friends—the world and its friends are characterized by divinely-resisted pride, while friends of God have the aroma of humility about them. In verses 11-12, James applied those contrasting attitudes to our conversation, how we speak about others to others. Now, in verses 13-17, he shows how humility and pride are manifested in our planning. This is another area in which friends of the world differ drastically from friends of God.

Brothers and sisters, although we think ourselves to be religious (1:26) and others say that we are wise (3:13), we may be double-minded in this area of planning, behaving more like those who love the world than

those who love God (4:4). Therefore, let us give careful consideration to this passage in order that we may demonstrate our loyalty to Christ even in the way we consider our future.

It is striking to read this passage and discover that it ends with the idea of "sin" (v. 17). James declares that to be a friend of the world in the way we plan for the future is to sin against God. That is not an exaggeration—although the issue of planning may not seem like a big deal to us, it is to God. This issue is important for us to consider for several reasons.

#1 — God's Word emphasizes the importance of doing God's will, not our own agenda.

- *David delighted in doing God's will* (Psalm 40:8; 143:10).
- *A true believer is described as one who does God's will* (Mark 3:35; Matthew 7:21; 1 John 2:17).
- *Doing God's will is the proper Christian focus in life* (1 Peter 4:2; Matthew 6:10).
- *A heart of humility is demonstrated by submission to doing God's will* (James 4:6-8).
- *Man's will is inherently faulty and deadly* (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25; Isaiah 53:6).

#2 — Christ exemplifies the righteousness of doing God's will. He took every step in submissive sensitivity to the will of God rather than His own agenda (Hebrews 10:57; John 5:30; John 4:34; Matthew 26:39). However right/best He felt His agenda to have been, we are the direct beneficiaries of His humble submission to the will of God, who really did know best and who really was working all things together for good. And, His humility was vindicated with God-given exaltation (4:10; cf. Philippians 2:5-11). What an example our Lord is!

#3 — Many factors distract us from being concerned with doing God's will.

- *In the present:* laziness, selfishness, immaturity, apathy, idolatry of secularity, lack of faith, lack of spiritual sensitivity

- *In the future* (In other words, we end up living in the future, concerned with our goals, rather than living in the present, concerned with God’s will.):
 - The “growing up” years keep us constantly looking ahead.
 - Career advancement and individual development keep us pursuing the next step.
 - Human control and anxiety is dominated by trying to predict and affect the future.
 - Normal life progression (i.e., we live on a line, not on a dot) forces us to have some level of concern for the future.

Basic theology, however, teaches us that the future belongs to God alone. We invest a lot of time, thinking, planning, and conniving in order to mold the future to match our agenda—and in so doing, we deceive ourselves into thinking that we have usurped a realm that God alone controls, and we have struck a God-rejecting friendship with the world.

Yes, we are committing a sin of worldliness if our planning for the future is devoid of the humble sensitive that says,

*Have Thine own way, Lord!
 Have Thine own way!
 Thou art the Potter;
 I am the clay.
 Mold me and make me
 After Thy will,
 While I am waiting,
 Yielded and still.*

May God help us to live with confidence in the present and dependence about the future. May we demonstrate a friendship with God that provides clarity for us in how to navigate the tension between today and tomorrow.

1. The rebuke of worldliness in planning (vv. 13-14a, 16)

Adopting a familiar Old Testament prophetic style (cf. Isaiah 1:18), James proclaims, “Come now!” or “Listen up!” or “Get this!” He has something to say to us that we must be careful not to miss. He

wants to rebuke us for our natural tendency to adopt a worldly mindset in the way that we think about tomorrow. He 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’” (v. 13).

a. Their error is not in their planning (Proverbs 15:22; 16:3, 9; 21:5).

Proverbs has much to say about the wisdom of planning for the future.

b. Their error is in their presumption (vv. 13-14a).

James’ rebuke centers on their presumption. He chides, “You do not know what tomorrow will bring” (v. 14a). Jesus similarly warned, “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (Matthew 6:34). These people were assuming that certain things would happen tomorrow (and even “today”) and were banking on those things, in order for their agenda to be fulfilled. (Illustration: a “guarantee” in sports)

In particular, they were in practice, at least, making predictions along four lines. They unwaveringly declared “we will” about four things.

- *Location* — “go into such and such a town”
- *Duration* — “spend a year there”
- *Task* — “trade”
- *Success* — “make a profit”

Their error is not in their planning, but in their presumption. They had worked through their mathematical formulas, marketplace predictions, economic studies, and profit margin calculations, and on that basis they presumed a pre-determined outcome, as if those factors alone were the only issues to take into account.

As usual, Motyer helps us see the parallel to our own situation:

it is all so ordinary, indeed so natural. That is exactly the point. When James exposes the blemish of presumptuousness, he exposes something which is the unrecognized claim of our hearts. We speak to ourselves as if life were our right, as if our choice were the only deciding factor, as if we had in ourselves all that was needed to make a success of things, as if getting on, making money, doing well were life's sole objective.¹

c. Their error is in their pride (v. 16).

Fundamentally, then, the error that James is rebuking here is pride. Returning to the theme of verses 6-10, James admonishes in verse 16, "As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." Rather than putting themselves in a position of humility to receive God's guiding grace, they are manifesting an evil heart of pride that God resists.

Application: Like an insolent child that declares to his parents that he knows best, our independent and self-informed planning is an offense to God. Do you view it that way?

2. The reality of enigmas in life (v. 14b)

Beginning with his question in verse 14, James begins to offer the antidote to such presumptuous, proud planning. In a question from the Creator designed to put us creatures in our place, God asks, "What is your life?" Everyone has an answer to this. The teenager answers "acceptance," and alone in the hallway, his life seems empty. The young corporate executive says "money," and when enough isn't enough, his life seems like a hamster wheel. The athlete replies "football" (e.g., Tom Brady) or "basketball" (e.g., Michael Jordan), and when his body gives out on him, his life seems hollow. The relativist declares "freedom," but then loosed from every mooring, his life feels directionless and purposeless. The secularist declares "sex," but a long series of discarded romantic carcasses creates a life of disillusionment and chasing ghosts.

Such vanity in life is due to the fact that no matter how one might arrogantly answer the question, "What is your life?" there is really only one answer—"you are a mist that appears for a little time and

then vanishes" (v. 14b). One picturesque illustration silences our boasting and crashes our presumption. This illustration describes at least four facets of life's enigmas.

- a. Life is short. You don't know if there will be a tomorrow.
- b. Life is unpredictable. You don't know what will happen tomorrow.
- c. Life is confusing. You don't know how to handle tomorrow.
- d. Life is transcendent. You don't know what God wants tomorrow.

Friend, "you are a mist."

Fortunately, this is not the final or ultimate answer to the question, "What is your life?" If you have believed the gospel—that Jesus died for your sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and was raised again the third day according to the Scriptures—and if you are following Him as Lord, then Paul announces in Colossians 3:4 that "Christ...is your life"! And, since He was raised from the dead and is seated above, our life has eternal significance and meaning. In fact, it is when we die to our own agenda and embrace the will of God, that we find our lives (Matthew 16:24-25). In Christ, our future is secure: "Strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow"!

3. The response for us to choose (vv. 15, 17)

Pastor James leaves us with only two choices concerning how we will handle God's will and our future.

a. Submit to God's will (v. 15).

This is the response that honors God, demonstrates friendship with God, and is blessed with His grace. James exhorts, "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'" God's Word encourages us to submit to God's will on a daily basis in at least four ways.

- **Acknowledge God's will.**

We must admit, "God is infinite; I am not. He's in control; I am not. He knows and determines the future; I do not."

- **Adjust to God's will.**

Paul provides a case study in this in Acts 16:6-10. In obedience to Proverbs 3:5-6, the planning of "his way" was always in deference to and dependence upon God's will.

- **Appreciate God's will.**

We must preach to ourselves that "God's way is best," asking for faith to believe it so that we celebrate it. While God's Word is full of statements and stories that would enflame such appreciation, we really need look no further than the cross, where God's pre-determination intersected with man's wicked agenda, and God won! The result? Grace upon grace in the substitutionary sacrifice of our Savior Jesus Christ. God's will was best!

- **Ask for discernment of God's will.**

James 1:5 invited us, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." Our kind heavenly Father doesn't play games with His will, nor does He reveal it all at once. But He does promise to "direct our steps" (Proverbs 3:5-6) and grant us wisdom to make the corresponding decisions.

b. Sin against God's will (v. 17).

James warns against the alternative response, "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." This is a sin of omission, and is therefore a grave sin—we have simply left God out of the picture. That "ungodliness" is the root of all other sins. Therefore, worldly planning is indeed egregious.

ENDNOTES

¹ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James: The Tests of Faith*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 160.