

"The Future"

James 4:13-17

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Introduction:

Over the past one hundred years, there have been many huge accomplishments in the fields of science, and medicine, and technology. Even today, we continue to be impressed with organ transplants. We are still amazed at various forms of space travel. Several weeks ago, our family enjoyed watching the space station and the space shuttle travel overhead, and it was amazing to realize that there were people traveling at more than 17,000 miles per hour in both of those vehicles. We continue to be impressed with technology in other areas. We think back to some of our first computers, and we realize how far things have come. In my pocket right now, I have ten times more memory than the first computer that was purchased by the church down in Janesville. As I remember it, that computer had a pretty big hard drive at the time, and the whole thing cost roughly \$3,000. But in my pocket, I keep a pretty small thumb drive that is about a year old and was purchased for about \$10. And so we continue to be impressed with the amazing advances in modern technology.

And yet even though we can do so much, there is still at least one thing that we have never been able to do. In spite of the best minds and the latest in technology and millions of dollars in research: No one has yet been able to figure out what will happen tomorrow. In fact, our knowledge of tomorrow is absolutely zero. We do not know what will happen on Monday, July 9, in Madison, Wisconsin—we do not know.

We can make predictions. We can project where certain trends will lead. We can make appointments. We can plan. But when it comes right down to it, no one really knows what will actually take place tomorrow.

This morning, I'd like to invite you to turn with me to the fourth chapter of the New Testament book of James. We know that James was written by the half-brother of Jesus. It is a very practical book, and this morning we'll be looking at a paragraph about a Christian's attitude concerning the future. ****PPT**** The paragraph starts in **James 4:13** and continues through the end of the chapter. If you will, please look with me at **James 4:13-17**. James says...

¹³ Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." ¹⁴ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. ¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." ¹⁶ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such

boasting is evil. ¹⁷ Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

As we look at these verses, I'd like for us make two observations and then close with the practical application of what the Lord's brother has written.

I. First of all, James reminds us that LIFE IS EXTREMELY UNPREDICTABLE. **PPT******

We notice in **verse 13** that James starts with a story about some people who were talking to one another about an upcoming business trip. These men were to leave either today or tomorrow. They had plans to go to a particular city. And once they got there, they knew that their purpose was to spend a year there and to make a profit.

Some people have looked at this passage and have assumed that James was criticizing these men for making plans to go on the business trip. And yet is this the problem? No, it is not. In fact, there are many places in the Bible where we are told that we are to work for a living. Not only are we told to earn money for our own families, but we are also told to share. In other words, we are to make more than we consume, and we are to use the surplus to care for those in need. And so it is not wrong to go into business.

Perhaps some would suggest that it was wrong for them to plan on making a profit. I know that opinions are divided concerning whether Madison is business-friendly, and yet I know that there are people in this city who would object to even the concept of making a profit. And yet we remember that Jesus gave us the parable of the talents. Sometimes we wrongly assume that Jesus was talking about a talent as a natural ability. But we need to remember that a talent was a measure of weight—it was an amount of gold or silver. And so when Jesus told the parable of the "talents," He was actually talking about amounts of gold or money. You might remember that the master of the house was headed out of town for an extended period and gave three of his most trusted servants three different amounts. The five-talent man doubled his talents, for a profit of 100%. Our Lord praised the man. In other words, Jesus wants to see us make a profit. The two-talent man also earned two more and was praised for doing so. But the one-talent man buried it in the dirt for safekeeping, and you might remember that the Lord had some harsh words for this man. In fact, he was condemned for not making a profit. And so it is not the making of a profit that is condemned in **James 4.**

But rather, James is simply reminding his readers that life is incredibly unpredictable. We remember the parable of the Rich Fool in **Luke 12.** The man was having a bumper crop of grain, and so he foolishly made plans to tear down his barns to build bigger barns, so that he could store all of the grain. But we remember so well the words of Jesus in **Luke 12:20**, ***"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich***

toward God.” The Rich Fool forgot that life is incredibly unpredictable! He was called a fool—not for making plans, not for making a profit, but for arrogantly thinking that he was in complete control of his future. And that is what James is warning us about back in **James 4**.

Whether we are righteous or evil, none of us here this morning have any guarantee concerning what will happen tomorrow. As the wisest man who ever lived wrote in **Proverbs 27:1**, ***“Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.”***

Again, we need to remind ourselves that planning for the future is not the problem here. Especially in our society, we are told from a very early age that planning for the future is essential for a successful life. We plan what college to attend. We plan on getting married. We plan where we will live. We plan when we will retire. Jesus Himself taught His disciples to count the cost of becoming a follower, and He compared the situation to a man building a tower. As Jesus said in **Luke 14:27-30**, ***“Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’”*** Jesus, then, wants us to plan for the future, but in the end, we need to always remember (as James said in **verse 14**), that we do not know what our lives will be like tomorrow.

And so first of all, we are reminded that life is extremely unpredictable.

II. Secondly, we also find that LIFE IS EXTREMELY SHORT. **PPT******

Not only have the people in **verse 13** assumed that they will travel and make a profit, but they have also assumed that they will be alive tomorrow! Sometimes people refer to the ***“seventy years”*** from **Psalms 90**, and they wrongly assume that some kind of average lifespan is basically guaranteed. But when we look at what Moses actually wrote in **Psalms 90:10**, we see the point he was making. Moses said, ***“As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years, yet their pride is but labor and sorrow; for soon it is gone and we fly away.”***

Several years ago, I got a sermon request from someone, and the person quoted this verse and asked whether those over 70 years old are living on “borrowed time.” I am not exactly sure what was meant by that request, but I would suggest that all of us are living on borrowed time. Seventy years is not a guarantee. Here in the United States, our average lifespan is currently right around 77 years. Worldwide, the average is 67. Sometimes people beat that average. Perhaps you are familiar with the life of Jeanne Calment, who now has the honor of having been the modern world’s oldest person. She was born on February 21, 1875, and died on August 4, 1997, having lived for more than 122 years. She was 14 years old when the Eiffel

Tower was completed in 1889. I have not been able to confirm this, but I have heard that she gave up smoking at the age of 117. She is most famous for having signed a deal to sell her condo to a young French lawyer. The attorney agreed to pay a monthly fee until she died (apparently common in France), at which time he could have her apartment—basically a reverse mortgage. When he signed the deal, however, he did not know that she would end up being the world's oldest person. The lawyer died at age 77, having paid nearly \$200,000 for an apartment he never got to live in.

But regardless of average life spans and world records, all of us need to understand that even for the world's oldest person, life is extremely short. In **verse 14**, James describes life as a "**vapor**." The word describes a puff of smoke that appears for just a little while and then quietly disappears. The word describes the steam from a teakettle that dissipates almost as soon as it comes out of the spout. The word describes our breath on a cold day.

From our own experience, we know that James was speaking the truth—that life is like a "**vapor**," and all through the Bible, the inspired writers use similar terms. In **Psalm 144:4**, for example, King David said, "**Man is like a mere breath; his days are like a passing shadow.**" In **2 Samuel 14:14**, we find that life is compared to water that is spilled out on the ground. In **Job 7:6**, life is said to be faster than a weaver's shuttle. In **Job 9:25**, he says that his brief life has gone by faster than a runner. In the next verse, Job compares his life to a reed boat slipping by or to an eagle swooping down on its prey. In **Psalm 103:15-16**, King David compares life to the flowers or the grass of the field. In **Isaiah 38:12**, Hezekiah compares his life to a shepherd's tent that is rolled up.

And so we find a reminder from James, first of all, that life is extremely unpredictable, and secondly, that even if we do live a fairly long life, that life itself is rather short. Our lives are like a vapor that is only here for just a moment.

III. Before we close, we need to consider the main point—now that we have made the observations, what is James really trying to get us to understand? I believe the main point is that WE ARE TO INCLUDE GOD IN OUR PLANS. **PPT******

As we look back at the plans discussed in **verse 13**, those plans do not appear to be evil. There is nothing inherently wrong with what those people were about to do. But when we come down to **verse 16**, we see that the problem is arrogance. These people were self-reliant and refused to look to God for approval. They were not really committing some evil deed. They were not stealing, or cheating, or lying. But they had left God out of their plans entirely. They had simply forgotten to include God in their plans.

In order to fix this problem, James says in **verse 15** that we ought to say, "**If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.**" In other words, in our planning

and in our decision making we need to consider the will of God. Our heart's desire is that God's will is done.

Certainly we remember the model prayer in **Matthew 6** where Jesus said, "**Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**" And certainly we remember our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before His crucifixion as He lived out that prayer from several years earlier. In the Garden He prayed three times, "**My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done.**" Asking for God's will to be done is not just a secret phrase or a code for getting things done, but it is a mindset—it is the process of being concerned about the will of God in our lives.

With this in mind, we come to **verse 17**, and James reminds us that not all sin is an act that we commit. Sin is not just doing something wrong, but rather, we can sin simply by not doing what is right. When we forget to include God in our plans, we tend to forget to do those things that we really need to do.

- When we know someone who needs a word of encouragement, but we don't do it because we have left God out of our plans, we have sinned.
- When we know that we are wrong about something, but we don't apologize for it because we have left God out of our plans, we have sinned.
- When we know someone who needs our forgiveness, but we don't do it because we have left God out of our plans, we have sinned.
- When we know someone who needs to hear the truth, but we don't do it because we have left God out of our plans, we have sinned.

James says that when we know the right thing to do and do not do it, it is a sin! "**If the Lord will,**" therefore, is not just something we say from time to time as an afterthought, but it is an attitude of being constantly in tune with the will of God in our lives.

As we go through our lives over the next few days, all of us will be making decisions and plans for the future. And so the question is: What standard will we use as we make those plans? James tells us that we are to learn the right thing to do, and then we are to follow through with it, because if we do not...it is a sin.

CONCLUSION & INVITATION:

I am so thankful for the request and the question that ultimately led to this morning's lesson. If there is anything that could get us in trouble for eternity, it is leaving God out of our plans. As Christians, then, we need to make a special effort, in all humility, to keep the Lord first in our lives.

The key this morning is found in **verse 17**, where James says, "**Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.**" The ultimate application of this verse comes when someone has heard the gospel message for some time but refuses to obey the word of God. If you have any

questions about the Lord's church or about the Scriptures, we would love to speak with you right away after this morning's service. But on the other hand, if you are ready to submit to God in baptism, we can also help you with that. The Bible teaches that we must hear and understand the gospel, we must turn away from our sins, and we must then allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you are ready to make that decision, you can let us know as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org

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