

## The Common Problem of Practical Atheism

James 4:13-17

January 12, 2025

James 4:13-17, we'll be finishing up James 4 today. So we come to this new section in the epistle of James. If you remember from last week, the previous section ended, and it was a very convicting command to God's people to not slander, and then the implications of why that is such a serious sin.

One of the things that brought the most conviction to many of us out of that passage is just how serious the sin of slander is in view of how lightly we tend to take it or even just maybe kind of make peace with it within our day-to-day conversation, our day-to-day living, not really thinking of it as that big of a deal.

And in our section today, we get another warning about a type of sinful pattern that is probably even more prevalent in

our lives and even more overlooked in our day-to-day living. This is a sinful pattern that I would venture to say that most of us are guilty of regularly. It's not so much a question of whether or not we do it; it is more about the degree to which we do it.

Our subject today is sometimes referred to as sinful presumption, but it might be more helpfully understood by us if we think of it as practical atheism. So when we essentially live like God isn't there, like he isn't in control, or like he isn't constantly at work in the world and in our lives, essentially when we live our day-to-day lives relying on the same things that those who don't know God rely on as they make decisions and they make plans for their lives, really, themselves, reliance on themselves.

I want to jump right into the text today because it is five verses, and I want to try and finish in a decent amount of time. But let's jump right into it so we can see what we're talking about, here. Let's look at James 4:13-17; read along with me.

"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.' You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You're a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.' But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. Therefore, to one who knows to do the right thing and does not do it, to him, it is sin."

So James begins this section with the command to "Come now." That's the imperative. That phrase translated as "Come now," is only used by James in the New Testament. We'll see it again in the next section. It's an imperative that really does signal, it's meant to signal the beginning of a new section.

He is almost calling his readers, "Okay, come out of that last section. I know you're still kind of convicted about that. Come out of that section. Now focus on this new subject," and bringing this new thing to their attention. Might be connected a

little way to the last section, but he wants their attention here.

So in the last section, if you remember, we saw the command "Do not slander" at the beginning, and that was the imperative. That was the command that governed the entirety of that passage. If you remember, the rest of those two verses just really served to strengthen the importance of the command, why the command not to slander is so serious, so important.

But here we see this command to "Come now," "Come now," which we almost don't even think of it as a command, but it's actually the main and only imperative verb that's in the entire text, and it's the one that stands over this text. So its main function is to just get listeners to pay attention, pay attention, to think, to really think about what is going to be said in this section. That's the command: "Think about, pay attention to what I'm about to say."

James is calling this original audience, and each of us by extension, to just really stop and ponder what he's about to

say, to think about what is truly at stake in what he is about to say, just what it is that may lie beneath a saying as common as that one that we read in verse 13. It's kind of a common saying, seemingly innocent.

What is the concern there? I think we can be pretty confident that James would want us to be attentive to this passage also, that this is something we need to hear, that we ought to heed the call to pay attention and think like this because I'm pretty sure most of us fall into the category that he gives, of those who say something like, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, engage in business, and make a profit."

So if you ever say anything like, "I'll be there, I'll be there this afternoon," or "I'm going to go over there tomorrow," or "I'm going on a business trip; I'll be back at the end of the month," or "I'm going to a conference; this is what I'm going to be doing there"; maybe even bigger: "Here's my five-year plan," or "Here's my two-year financial plan," "Thanks for the invite; I can't do that next Thursday because I'm already going to this

other thing," those types of things, those types of statements, if you ever say things like this, then you fall into the category of the type of person who needs to pay attention to what James is about to say.

And to be clear, before we go any further, I need to make sure that we understand that there is nothing inherently wrong with any of those kinds of sayings. Please, the elders do not want a congregation of people calling others to repentance whenever they speak to each other about plans and schedules. Please don't do that. I just want to make that clear from the outset so you can make sure that you're focusing on the wrong thing as we go into this.

We'll talk a bit more about that as we make our way through the text, actually the importance of making plans and schedules. But today after church, when you make plans to go to lunch with someone after church, and they say, "I'll see you there at 1:30," and don't add, "Lord willing," that's not the sign to initiate church discipline. Don't do it.

So what James actually is doing, here, is he's calling us to think about what may be going on beneath the surface of much of our confident-sounding speech. This is a call for each of us to examine ourselves to see if it might be true that in our day-to-day living we really don't live or maybe even believe any differently than those who don't claim to know and serve God.

We may confess things to be true that are a lot different than atheists and those in every other religion. But when it comes down to it, do the glorious truths that we profess about who God is affect the way that we live our day-to-day lives? When it comes to our decisions about our personal and financial goals, the activities we're involved in, the schedule we keep, the plans we make, when it comes to those things, what, if anything, is the difference between you and your unbelieving coworker or neighbor or fellow student?

So in order to examine ourselves in this regard, to examine whether we are living like we actually believe, that everything is true about God that we claim to be true of God in our confession, in order to help us, I've divided this section into

just two points to consider. Two points to consider: number one, arrogant in our presumption, we are arrogant in our presumption; number two, we're ignorant in our provision. Arrogant in our presumption, ignorant in our provision.

So point one, we're arrogant in our presumption. Look again at verses 13-14: "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.' Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You're a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away."

So notice that James addresses this little section to "you who say," to "you who say." He's essentially introducing a saying by a certain group of people that does not necessarily need to be taken as a direct quote. It's a summary statement that's intended to represent the types of things that are being said.

This is evident by how he leaves out the reference to a specific city and uses the more general "such and such a city."



"These are the types of things you're saying, so fill in that city yourself and your own conversation."

James doesn't have a specific person in mind or a specific situation or two that he has seen. He is talking about a general way that people are talking, that people are speaking, there. He's casting a broad net with this statement so that we can all see ourselves in it.

So the idea isn't that real people in the congregation are saying this exact thing, but that there are real people in that congregation who are saying things like this. There's a good chance that those most likely to fall into the category that James is concerned about might indeed be some of the more wealthy businessmen who are doing traveling, and that would begin to pave the way for the next section at the beginning of Chapter 5. That could be the case.

But James, here, what we see in this sentence, this quote that he gives, is James carefully and wisely using this question as an example because it does such a great job of weaving in

four areas of our lives where we tend to be arrogant in our presumption, areas in our life where we are prone to act like we are the ones who are in control, that it is our own ability, that it is our own knowledge that are ultimately responsible for how things go for us.

So just look at the question again, and note these four categories. "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." So the four areas we tend to be arrogant in our presumptions could be summed up as this: "We'll go to such and such a city," so location, location. Number two, duration, "spend a year there," the time we spend. Number three, action, "engage in business." Number four, retribution, or what we expect, to "make a profit."

So location, where you will be, where you are; duration, how much time you will use on any given thing; action, what you will do, what you are doing; retribution, what you will receive, what you expect to be the result of things that you do.

And so let's look at each of these just with a little more detail, just draw out some examples of what that looks like. So first, location, your location. Where are, you know, where are you going to go? Where are you going to be, even where you are right now?

When you just look at your life at the most basic level and ask why are you where you're at, why are you here today, well, it is because you, in your mind it's because you made the decision to get up this morning, to drive here, and to sit where you are. So maybe someone was in the place where you wanted to sit, so you graciously sat somewhere else, or ungraciously sat somewhere else.

But in general, it was your decision to be in that seat. That's how we think. You're in the state of Colorado, this state, because of other decisions you have made or have not made. But you can generally look at your own life and see, "based on how I've lived and choices I've made, why I'm in the location that I'm in."

After the church service, you will most likely eat lunch somewhere, home or out, based on what you feel like eating or what your spouse feels like eating, or more likely what you feel like spending. You'll be wherever you end up because of your own preferences, your own decisions. That's how we think when it comes to location. That's how we see it.

Second, duration, how much time we will take doing whatever we do. So they say, "We'll spend a year there." You can say, "So I'll meet you for lunch in two hours. Then we'll get home by 4:00 so we can rest and go to home group tonight at 6:00." You will surely utter to someone today something like, "See you tomorrow" or "See you tonight." Or you look on your GPS, maybe, and see that the drive somewhere is going to take about an hour, and maybe you'll, you know, leave five minutes early to ensure that you get there on time.

Or bigger picture, you might say things like, "I'm going to this school for four years. I'm going to graduate and be in my profession within two years. I'm going to get married at this age, and I'm going to retire at this age." Like, big picture

plans. We see that as, "Here's what I'm doing; here's how things are going." So, duration.

Third, action, what you will do, the actual things you will do. So these in James' example say that they're going to be engaging in business. So similarly, we might say, "I'm going to work in this job. I'm going to have this career. I'm going to," maybe on a daily basis, "I'm just going to sit back and relax tonight." "I'm going to start, you know, it's the beginning of the year, I'm going to start exercising and eating better." Whether they be long-term or short-term plans, we make plans about what actions we will be doing.

Fourth, retribution, what we are going to receive. So they plan on spending a year at this place and making a profit. We do similar things. "I'm going to work this long for this person, and this is what I am to receive for it." Or "If I work hard for this company, I will be rewarded, I will be promoted, I will be taken care of." Or "If I do eat healthy and I exercise, then I will look better, and I will feel better, and I will live longer."

Or maybe, you know, for some of you, a lot of you in our church right now, "If I sneak out of the room quietly, the baby will stay asleep. Then I can still maybe get three hours, three hours of sleep." Or "If I save up enough, I'll buy a quality car, I'll buy a quality refrigerator, I'm going to get more years out of it. It's going to be a better investment." So we think along those lines.

So you can see by using this somewhat fictitious question that James uses, that James covers kind of the gambit of the areas in our lives where we tend to make confident presumptions based upon our own actions or our own ability. I'm just throwing out a lot of examples, there, but you should be able to fit pretty much every aspect of most everything you do in life somewhere into those categories.

Before we go any further, there's some socially liberal commentators, and maybe you've heard this verse quoted this way, who take this verse and use it to say that James' concern, his only concern, is going after those who are only concerned about

making a profit, that those are the people who are being rebuked and them and them alone. If you're not one of those people, you can just tune out, and that this is the main concern that James is addressing in this question. They try and tie it to the next section and say that James is condemning them for their greed.

But this is not James' concern. It's clearly not James' concern, and it's evident and it becomes more evident as we move through the rest of the passage because actually, there isn't even anything that's condemnable in that statement, in that fictitious statement that James makes, itself.

It is not wrong, it is not wrong for people to make plans. It is not wrong for people to talk like this. That's not the issue. In fact, the Bible's pretty clear, just to make sure you're clear, the Bible's pretty clear that it is good to be wise planners, and that this even leads to a good outcome, even being profitable. And those are good things. Not being someone who's in need is a good thing.

Proverbs 6:6-11: "Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways, be wise, which, having no chief officer or ruler, prepares her food in the summer, and gathers her provision in the harvest. How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest. Your poverty will come in like a vagabond, and your want like an armed man." So the example of the ant being pushed forward as someone who is, positively, being someone who prepares and plans for the future.

Proverbs 21:5: "The thoughts of the diligent lead surely to profit, but everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty."

Proverbs 15:22: "Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed."

So, far from condemning planning, the Scripture gives instruction on how to do it well, on how to plan well. The goal of our plans is for them to succeed. We should want this, and we should try and be diligent to make good and wise plans that will be successful and that will even lead to some sort of profit. That's a good thing.



Jesus even presents good planning in business practices and in war, and the results that you should expect from such planning as a model for how we should think when it comes to discipleship and whether or not you have really thought about what it will cost you and what you will receive.

In Luke 14:25-32, Jesus says, "Now many crowds were going along with him, and he turned and said to them, 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.'"

And then look what Jesus says. "'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, lest 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.'"

“Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with 10,000 men to encounter the one coming against him with 20,000, or else while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace.”

This is a reminder from the Lord himself to not just make important decisions on a whim, the most important one on following Christ, being a disciple. We're to be wise and measured and to plan and think, to not be ignorant when it comes to making plans and even to expect the logical results that should proceed from those plans.

So it's important that we are clear that James is not counteracting any of this clear teaching on wisdom from Scripture. He is not doing that. He's not condemning anything in these words, in this statement. No, his concern is for the thinking that may lie at the heart of all of their preparation, all of their planning. What's going to happen if it doesn't work the way you planned? He isn't criticizing diligence or wise business practice. He's criticizing the presumption that your

life, that your time, that your future, that your success is ultimately dependent on you. That's the critique.

And that's evident again in the statement in verse 14. Look there again. "You say all these things, yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You're a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away." James points to the simple truth that if we are honest, if we are honest, we have no real idea what's actually even in store for us tomorrow. James points to the simple truth that if that's what's happening, our future is actually uncertain, and those who are truly wise live and think and plan as if that is the case.

James is expressing the common, again, more common biblical truth that we see elsewhere in Scripture, probably most famously in Proverbs 27:1: "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth."

We can make plans. We can make the best plans that we can. We can take all of the variables into consideration. We can gain help, gain wise counsel, knowledge from others, as well as

learning from observations and studying. But we can never actually say with certainty whether or not we will even wake up tomorrow.

So there, again, there's nothing wrong with planning, nothing wrong with preparing. It is self-focused presumption that is the concern. There is a sense in which what happens to you in the future has to do with the plans and decisions that you make. There is a sense in which that is true, but it is not the ultimate sense. It's not the ultimate reason.

So you can do all your research and buy the best car that you can, and you can have it destroyed in a hailstorm that night. You can sneak out of the baby's room as quietly as possible, but if there is an ear infection that you don't know about, all that tip-toeing is in vain. You can say you'll be somewhere in an hour based on your GPS, but that means nothing if there is a train.

Or to bring a current example, to make this a little more current, you can save and plan, make all kinds of home

remodeling decisions for a home that might burn down in a massive wildfire next week. Just think about that. Think about what's going on in California right now. Don't know if you've seen some of the pictures, especially some of those before-and-after pictures, but they're incredible when you see the scope of the damage.

Not to minimize the hurt or the pain of those people, but to bring that into the point of our text, think of all of the many things that the people who lived in those neighborhoods might have had on their schedules for today, just a week ago.

You can be sure none of them had penciled in that they're planning on fleeing their home, watching the news to see updates on whether or not their home is still standing, and spending countless hours talking to friends and family members as they check in on each other. So you see, ultimately, ultimately, the decision about their location, their time, what they would be doing, and what they would be getting out of last week were not their own. Their plans didn't matter at all.

So not only does James remind his audience that they can't even know what their lives will be like the next day, but he also reminds them of what their life is. Again, verse 15: "You are a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away."

So the previous phrase puts our ability into its proper perspective, our ability to bring things to pass the way we want them to, according to our own wisdom and strength. It's at the mercy of so much that is totally outside of our control. And now this phrase puts into perspective the entirety of the life that we are trying so desperately to control with everything that we have in us.

Again, James is not saying anything extraordinary here. He's just placing more common biblical teaching into this context for them. Psalm 103:15-16, that we just looked at: "As for men, his days are like grass. As a flower of the field, so he flowers. When the wind has passed over it, it is no more, and its place acknowledges it no longer."

Psalm 144:4: "Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow." Psalm 39:4-6: "Yahweh, cause me to know my end and what is the extent of my days. Let me know how transient I am. Behold, you have made my days as handbreadths, and my lifetime has nothing before you. Surely, every man, even standing firm, is altogether vanity. Surely, every man walks about as a shadow. Surely, they make an uproar in vain. He piles up riches and does not know who will gather them."

Common biblical teaching. When we are making these grandiose plans for our lives, what we're going to be, what we're going to do, it can become very easy to lose sight of eternity. When we're thinking only of this life, if that's where our concern lies, then our entire range of concern is probably not much more than 100 years. And if that were truly everything that there is, then it would make sense to weigh with great concern that which has a great impact on what we perceive to be longer periods of time in this life.

But in light of eternity, billions of years from now, we'll be closer to our birth than we are to the end. Our life is a

vapor. Our life is a breath. It doesn't actually make sense to give any of our decisions or plans the type of life-or-death weight that we tend to.

Whether or not you get your college degree when you want to, or your financial plan works out for you, or all your plans for marriage and family work out the way that you were hoping and planning for, those things seem very important.

And it's not that they don't have any meaning. Don't get me wrong. This life, our decisions, really do matter because it is only here, only in these years of physical life, living under the curse of sin, that we can add to our heavenly reward with either wood, hay, and straw, or with precious stones. It's not that they have no meaning. It's not that they have no value.

But when we examine the lives of two faithful Christians, one whose plans worked out almost exactly as they hoped and exactly as they'd worked for, and one who is now 50-60 years in and looking back at their life, realizing there's less time in front of them than behind them, and wondering what went wrong.



"Why? Maybe I should have made a different choice back then. Why didn't this work out the way I thought it would? Why aren't my plans coming to fruition?"

When you consider both of these Christians and every other person who follows somewhere along that spectrum of perceived success and failure in life, a million years from now, it won't look any different. It'd be like trying to, and this morning was the most I've ever paid attention to the vapor coming out of my coffee, just because of this, but it'd be like trying to compare vapor particles if you're able to. Sure, there are probably some that are bigger than others and maybe last a little bit longer than others, but very little thought is given to that just a few minutes after. What does it matter, the difference? So it is with our lives in comparison to eternity.

But it is at this point I do want to pause, make sure that we don't start making the wrong application, here, because there is a way that a Christian ought to read and apply verse 14, and it is in stark contrast to what many people do when they begin to understand the truth of this verse.

Because it is the tendency, because unbelievers can come to these conclusions, too, and it's the tendency of the unbelieving, when they come to the realization that "tomorrow isn't promised to me, no matter what I do, and that life is short," unbelievers respond to that, as they come to realize it, with more sin. They see it now that an appropriate response, then, is to live recklessly, like there's no consequences. Like, "Now, I might as well just do everything in my power to get as much enjoyment out of life as I can with whatever time I have that I'm not guaranteed."

But this, beloved, ought not to be the case with true Christians. This cannot be the effect that these truths have on us, believing all that the Bible has to teach us on imitating Christ and how we ought to be living this life for him with whatever few years we have.

We live for the glory of God in thankful response for the salvation that he has given us that guarantees us that eternity and glory and salvation that is guaranteed; that no matter how

we perceive that this life is going for us, whether it has been good or disappointing, our time spent here is a vapor in light of eternity; knowing that no matter how good or bad it's been, this vapor-life, it is far and away the worst it's ever going to be for us in this life.

It's because this life is so short, actually, that we must make the most of every day, that we might live to the pleasure of the God who has saved us. When the Christian lives with the understanding that the future is uncertain and that tomorrow is not promised, it causes them to have a right perspective about the present.

"So I can't know for certain that I have years and decades ahead of me to get my life turned around, to mortify this sinful pattern in my life, to become a better prayer, to become a more diligent and responsible worker, to become a better husband or father or wife or mother or church member. I don't know how much time I have to do that."



The truth of an uncertain future for the Christian should have the exact opposite effect that it has for the unbeliever because our desire is to please God in this life and not ourselves, knowing that treasure in Paradise all comes later.

So often we Christians forget this truth, and what we do is slide into laziness when it comes to disciplining ourselves, making our bodies our slaves, as Paul says, for the sake of God and others, because we just see the place where we would like to get to. We see that: "This is where I want to be, I want to be like this Christian. This is what Christian maturity looks like." We see it, we picture it, and we think something like this: "Well, hopefully, by the time I'm whatever years old, that's where I'll be." Hopefully. We long to become the person whom we are continually putting off the next step to becoming. That's what we do.

The knowledge that life is short and uncertain moves the Christian, should move the Christian, to take present responsibilities with the seriousness and perspective that we should have. So my current job, my current day's work, what's

right in front of me, that is all I know I have. I might die tonight. What is the accounting I will give for today?

I can make plans for the future, for how I'm going to get out of debt. I can make plans for being a better steward. I can work towards those plans. I can buy books that help me with that. All this stuff is well and good, but all I know for sure is that I have today to please the Lord, that I have whatever's in front of me. I mean, I'm not even sure I have all of today.

As far as being a godly husband, a godly father, I might make plans to move further and further in that direction and find help in doing it, and that's good. Figure out a way to schedule more intentional time with my wife and my kids. I can order books to help me to grow, to help me to plan family devotions. But what I have for sure is right now. I have this afternoon, I have this dinner with them. I have this time in the Word, I have this time in prayer. That's what I know I have.

The fact that the future of a life that is compared to a vapor is uncertain, that should be a tool that keeps the



Christian faithfully on mission moment by moment. That's how it should affect us, beloved.

Before we move on to the next point, it would be a good idea for us to take a moment and ask a brief diagnostic question. If it's true that making plans and speaking this type of language that we see in here isn't the issue that James is going after, it isn't the sin issue, but the issue is actually whether or not we are making presumptions about the control that we have and trusting in ourselves to bring about what we want to see, if that's the case, how do we know whether or not our planning is righteous, wise stewardship or if it's sinful, arrogant presumption?

Well, here is a good way to figure it out. Here's the key. Here's how you know if you should keep paying attention. How do you respond or feel when things aren't going the way that you had planned? Do you ever get frustrated? Do you ever yell at others, yell at your spouse? Do you get short with your kids? Do you become anxious, downcast, depressed, get angry at others or even angry at inanimate objects?

Our level of frustration when our plans don't work out is the indication of just how much we have been arrogantly presuming that things needed to go the way that we planned. So when an obstacle or the will of our neighbor or our spouse or our child or some other random driver on the road, the will of ultimately God when it forces an adjustment into my life, forces an adjustment to where I planned on being, my location, to what I planned on doing, my reaction to the time I was planning on spending on something there in my duration, or what I had planned on receiving, how I respond in attitude and action is the indication of my arrogant presumption.

So the other day I was trying to get a license plate off the back of our van. I had forgotten that the screw that was used in it did not fit, and I could see why the previous owner had just filed the whole thing off. I allotted two minutes to this task to change the license plate, and I remained godly-ish into the five-minute range.

But as more of my time that I had planned for something else was taken from me, and I was still in my garage and not in my office, and I was not working on my sermon about this topic like I wanted to be, frustration started to take root, ended up taking a lot of time. I had to get Bret involved, had to take his time.

Our frustration level, the way we respond when things don't go our way, that's a sign of how well we are doing in this. J.A. Motyer sums up these verses very well. I'll close this point with this. "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." That's the thinking. That's what it means to be arrogant in our presumption. And that's point one.

And that leads us right into point two, which is connected: ignorant of our provision. We're ignorant of our provision. So point one is essentially telling us how we are wrongly thinking



about ourselves and point two is about how in a related way we are wrongly thinking about God.

And that is how it always is, beloved. The two things go together. Whenever you elevate yourself and elevate your importance, you cannot help but demote and devalue God. That is what you do.

So we see this point in verses 15-17: "Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.' But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. Therefore, to one who knows to do the right thing and does not do it, to him it is sin."

So the fact that James needs to tell us what we ought to say is the indication that we have become ignorant of the provision of God. This is the realization that we are dependent creatures. Even with all of our planning and hard work, we are never ultimately providing for ourselves. It's always from God.

So the places that we plan to go, those are places that belong to him. And he is absolutely sovereign over who is where in this world that he has created. The time that we try to designate for certain purposes is the time that he has given us. The actions that we plan to do are done in a body that he has given us and that he is currently sustaining and keeping from dying. The things that we hope to receive in this life, whether they're resources or recognition, they are his and his alone to give and do with what he wants.

So the remedy for our ignorance is that instead of saying the statement from verse 13, we ought to say the one from verse 15: "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." The reference to the will of the Lord, here, I want to make sure we're clear about it, refers to his will of decree, not his will of command.

When we say it is the Lord's will that you live obediently to him, we are referring to his will of, what we would say, his will of command, that which he has commanded you to do, but which you might not do.

James is speaking here in our passage of God's will of decree, or his efficacious will. This is what we are referring to when we say something like, "All that comes to pass is the will of God." He ordains all things. God ordains all things for his own good, sovereign design. Nothing happens outside of his will. That's what we mean by God's will of decree. That's what is meant by the will of God, here.

So James is pointing out that in light of our creaturely position before a sovereign God, the right response to our now-exposed arrogance, our now-exposed arrogant, presumptuous living, is the humble acknowledgement of our absolute dependence on God.

So it is not just acknowledging the fact that God has the power to just ruin my plans whenever he wants to. That's not quite what he means, here. We could acknowledge this with a bad attitude and actually begin to develop bitterness and disdain for God. This is what leads a lot of people who thought that they were Christians at one time out of the church. Some bad

thing happens in their life. They can't reconcile it, and they see that it's God's power, that God's ruined their plans, and so they leave.

So James is pointing out, in light of our creaturely position before a sovereign God, that our right response to our arrogance, our presumptuous living, is the humble acknowledgement of our absolute dependence on God.

So it's not just acknowledging the fact, again, that God has the power to ruin our lives if he wants. Rather, it is the belief that not only does God have the power, but he has the right to do all that is according to his will; and not only that, but it is my desire that my best plans would always be subject to his good and perfect will.

We need to be careful that we understand that, just like what we said above, the concern isn't actually for the words that are said, but what lies behind the words that are said. James says, "We ought to say." The reason he says that is

because he is contrasting it with the types of things that were represented in the spoken statements from the above verses.

So listen, this is not the command to just tack on "Lord willing" to everything that we say that might sound like we might be presuming a certainty in an uncertain future, so I'm just going to say, "Lord willing" at the end of it. It is a good thing to say, and it's probably best that most of us get in the habit of saying, "if the Lord wills," or "Lord willing" more.

But we don't want it to become just another Christianese phrase that we just use like some sort of magic incantation to bless our statements and cover all our bases. What we are concerned with, here, is whether or not we actually believe this to be the case when it comes to our planning.

If you say, "I'll see you in Florida tomorrow if the Lord wills," and then our flight gets cancelled when we're at the airport, and we get all angry or depressed, and we start treating the airline employees badly, well, then, we really weren't okay with the will of the Lord superseding our own, like

we just said we were. In fact, we're actually taking the Lord's name in vain because we've attributed something to him that we are actually refusing to give him, namely, our trust.

So notice, again, at the end of verse 15, that we are not to see, again, we're not to see planning and scheduling as a bad thing, because even in the phrase that we are told we ought to say, we see the presence of planning. It's just planning now that is done in fear and reverence of the God whom we are totally dependent on.

He says, "You ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.'" We're still planning. And notice that it takes into account everything that was said before. "If the Lord wills"; what's the next thing? "We will live." So let's get that out of the way first. "If the Lord lives, we will live."

We make our plans, we go about our lives with the total understanding that not only is it ultimately up to the Lord

about what I do today, it is he who decides whether or not I even have a today.

Now, knowing that it is good and wise to plan and prepare, to think about the great help it will be to us if all of our planning, the way that we order our lives, go about our day-to-day business, is done through this grid; if this is what we're asking as we fill out the day planners of our lives or as we think about those big decisions before us; if as we are living and making plans and decisions, we are constantly saying to ourselves, "If the Lord wills I will live and then do this or that thing"; when it treats every day that we have as a blessing, that'll fight against frustration.

This type of attitude is far less likely to have sinful motivations embedded in the planning, much harder to do things with a selfish ambition when at the foundation is "if the Lord wills, I will live and do." This keeps us from being frustrated when our plans fail because the will of God is actually what we are most concerned about.

And if we plan something that God keeps from happening, we are confident that what God ordains is always good, and we can take comfort in the fact that we actually wouldn't want any of our plans that stand in contradiction to God's will to succeed. No matter how much you love them, you don't actually want that if you're a believer.

It's like if you're working your first day with a master carpenter, and you're just learning, and on your first day, he comes up to the table that you've been working on all day, and he breaks a piece off that you had been working on for a while, he takes it and puts it in a different place, you don't just look at him and then put it back where it was and then redouble your efforts. You adjust your work to what the master has now revealed to be his will.

Also, in addition to these benefits, you're more likely to make your plans prioritizing the things that are from above and not from below, that which is righteous, those things that are his will of command. It is hard to say in your planning, "If the



Lord wills, I will live and also make this sinful, selfish decision."

And if you're thinking like this, there is an incredible freedom to it. You can be obedient in your responsibility in making godly, efficient plans, prioritizing righteousness, and then actually move forward with comfort and confidence even as those plans may fall apart because your plans were always under the canopy of "if the Lord wills."

It's one of the things that constantly, even this week again, amazes me about Travis. He is one of the most diligent preparers, planners that I've ever seen. He prepares and plans for different things, and sometimes things happen and it works out, and then other times things happen that totally undercut everything that he'd planned.

But he just has no problem pivoting and moving in whatever direction is now available. And he's even grateful and thankful for it because the Lord's will is taking us this way, has been revealed in this situation; so that there is a real freedom in

being able to do that because we understand, we should understand, that we serve a better Master than ourselves, one who is omnipotent and omniscient, completely good, not tainted with sin at all.

When we are servants of our own plans, we get frustrated easily because we are not good masters like he is. The reason others ultimately get frustrated when their plans fail, the reason unbelievers ultimately get frustrated when their plans fail, and why we shouldn't, is because they don't believe in God. They don't believe in a divine will that is better than their own, that's working all things together toward God's good and glorious and ultimate plan.

That can't be the case for us. We're Christians. We can't live like practical atheists. We don't want to pretend for one second that we see ourselves as the true Lord of our own lives. This lack of recognition of God's supreme place over our lives isn't just "no big deal." It actually makes us into those who proudly try to push God off of his throne in our lives and then sit on it ourselves.

Look at verse 16. This is why verse 16 says what it does: "But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil." When we don't live as we know we ought to, when we aren't recognizing our dependence on God, when we're not trusting that he will provide what we need, we boast in our arrogance. We place ourselves in the place of God when it comes to the management of our lives, and we place our plans above his plans.

We might not say it out loud, but we are demonstrating that we believe our plans are better than his. We would never say that out loud, but that's what's happening when we get all frustrated and depressed and angry when things aren't going our way.

This is actually the little thing that is communicated to God every time we get frustrated and sinfully angry when things aren't going the way we want them to. We may see it as other people or even animals or inanimate objects and circumstances getting in the way of "the really good plans that I had."

But there is a true sense in which our sinful attitudes and words, they're kind of like yelling at the good and sovereign God who brings everything to its good end according to the counsel of his perfect will. It's like we're yelling up to him, "My plan was better."

Easy to see, then, why James would say in verse 16, "All such boasting is evil." When we understand that this is what we are doing, it makes sense that James describes us with the same word, the same adjective that's used to describe who? Satan. The Devil. The evil one. Just as the Devil's great sin was rebellion against God, so, too, do we rebel against God when we demonstrate through our actions and our attitude just how much we prefer our plans over his.

So what is the diagnostic for how we are doing when it comes to living in ignorance of the One who is our provider? How can we measure how we're doing? Well, I think the best way is to look at your prayer life. First of all, are you even praying regularly? That's the best sign of acknowledgement of a dependence on him.

But then beyond that, look at how you are praying. Look closely. Think of how you pray, the things that you say. Are you praying for God to bless your plans and to convince others to fall in line with your desires, to see things the way you see them? Or are you praying for his will to be done? Are you asking him to bring an end to any of your best plans and desires if they don't conform to his will? Are you praying that? Are you willing to say that?

Are you praying for him to provide for your daily bread, the daily needs that you take for granted? Are you praying for those things, or do you act like you've got those things under control? "I already have a car, so I don't need to pray for a car. I already have a house, don't need to pray for a house. I already have food, don't need to pray for food. I got those things under control, God," and you pray and you only go to him with the big things that you really need his help with, as if there are certain things that are beyond you and others that are not.

"I'll go to God with the things that confuse me, the things that are easy for me to recognize as out of my control. But the daily things that I take for granted, my food, my next breath, my health, the provision of needed resources, I can take care of those myself. No need to pray for those" even though we ultimately have no real control over any of those things, either. What does your prayer life say about your understanding of your dependence on God and your desire to conform to His will?

Finally, James closes out this section with probably one of the more well-known verses in his letter. James 4:17:

"Therefore, the one who knows to do the right thing and does not do it, to him it is sin." So here's a verse that I'm sure most of you have no doubt heard before, maybe even have memorized. But maybe there's a chance you've never thought about it in its original context.

James, here, suddenly switches from the second person to the third person, and in doing so appears to be using this verse as a summary to his teaching from this passage. Those two things

have led most commentators to the conclusion that this verse is probably an independent maxim that James is incorporating into his teaching as a summary statement, here.

So that means it's probably a fairly common teaching among Christians, a common saying among Christians in early Christianity that these people were probably already familiar with, but it's now being inscripturated here in this context.

We see the word "therefore," there, that's in the text, meaning that James definitely intends for us to see this as the concluding thought to this teaching. We often quote this verse without the "therefore," and it's not necessarily bad. That's because the principle does stand on its own, right? It is always applicable. Anytime you know the right thing to do, and you fail to do it, you are in sin. You should feel free to continue to use it this way.

But we should take special note of the fact that it is in this context where we find this verse, because we need to be reminded that this isn't just something that we are neglecting,

that isn't a big deal that we need to add to our lives. This is arrogant boasting before a sovereign God. This is evil. This is sin.

We therefore need to take it with the seriousness that we take all sin. If we have seen the evidence for this in our own lives, we repent of it. We repent of this sin of arrogance, and we turn from it, and we put on in its place trust and confidence in a good and sovereign God even when "things aren't going the way I planned."

James essentially says, "Now that you know this, this is what you must do." You have no excuses now. You might not have taken this very seriously before. Now you know it. Now we know it. We can't claim ignorance. We have no excuse whenever we get angry, frustrated, lash out when things don't go our way.

You can no longer go about your day-to-day living and planning for the future as if God does not exist, like you are not dependent on him, as if all his ways are not perfect. That's how an atheist lives. God has revealed to us what rebellion



against him looks like, and conversely, what trust in him looks like in this area. "And to the one who knows to do the right thing and does not do it, to him, it is sin."

So, beloved, let's identify and repent of this sin of arrogantly presuming upon ourselves while ignorantly dismissing our Provider, the sin of failing to live like we are truly dependent on a good and wise God. Let's put on Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your path straight."

So we are to make good and wise plans based on biblical principles and priorities, try to live according to his revealed will, according to his commands, live those things out day-to-day, moment-by-moment, trusting that even what many times looks to us like a God foiling our plans, making things harder for us, is actually just the staff of a loving Shepherd keeping his sheep on the straight path that he's marked out for us. Let's pray.

# GRACE CHURCH



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Father, we are so thankful that we serve and have been reconciled to a good, omnipotent God, who brings all things to pass according to his good and perfect will.

God, I pray that you would help us to be faithful in the things that we looked at today; that you would kill any arrogance and boasting that's maybe manifest in our lives, in our bad attitudes when things don't go our way, areas where we have placed ourself or tried to place ourself on the throne of our own lives; that we would jump off and fall on our face in humble submission to the much better will of God; that we would be faithful in our planning and in our preparation; that we would be diligent in the things that we do, prioritizing righteousness and godliness; that we would make long-term plans that way, and because of the fact that tomorrow is not promised to us, that we would live that out in the moments right in front of us also.

Lord God, we, we ask that you would help us to live as those who are constantly understanding our desperate need for you in every situation. We pray all of this in the name of our



precious Savior, who has saved us into a relationship with you.  
It's in his name we pray. Amen.