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James #15  
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## Sermon Summary #15

### If The Lord Wills James 4:13-17

*Is it possible for a Christian to live like an atheist?* I don't mean "live like an atheist" in the sense that one actually denies the existence of God or commits sin repeatedly and feels no conviction or experiences no repentance. That person would have no basis for claiming to be a Christian in the first place. What I have in mind is a person who is born again going about his or her business and daily affairs without the slightest regard for God's intimate personal involvement in what happens. I have in mind the person who gets up each day and pursues whatever responsibilities they have all the while presumptuously taking for granted that they are alive. I have in mind the person, born-again mind you, who rarely if ever pauses to consider that whether or not they live another 10 seconds or another 10 years is dependent on the sovereign will of God.

This is the sort of person who professes faith in Jesus but lives as if God either doesn't care about the minor details of our daily existence or does care but is helpless to do anything about it. Where this person falls short is in their failure to believe and behave consistently with what we read, for example, in Proverbs 16:9 and 33. There we read:

"The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps" (Prov. 16:9).

"The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Prov. 16:33).

What I'm getting at with this is that some Christians live either in total disregard for or indifference toward the truth of God's *providence*. Is it really all that important that we know and believe in the truth of God's providence, that we actually live and make our decisions each day conscious of the fact that he is working all things according to the counsel of his will (Eph. 1:11)? Yes, it is important. It is critically and crucially important, as James 4:13-17 makes unmistakably clear.

Perhaps it would help if I briefly defined the word *providence*. The word itself does not appear in the Bible. But neither do the words *trinity* and *atonement*, among others, and yet we all agree that the concept or idea or doctrine of each is found repeatedly in Scripture. Providence is a theological term that points to God's sovereign oversight or governance of all things in creation. J. I. Packer refers to providence as "purposive personal management with total 'hands-on' control: God is completely in charge of his world. His hand may be hidden, but his rule is absolute" (*Concise Theology*, 54).

How God can accomplish his perfect will when Satan and human sin are involved is a profound mystery. But we should be encouraged and find comfort in knowing that our all-wise, all-loving, omnipotent, infinitely just and holy God will prevail and bring his purposes to their proper consummation. Again, I love the way Packer puts it:

"The doctrine of providence teaches Christians that they are never in the grip of blind forces (fortune, chance, luck, fate); all that happens to them is divinely planned, and each event comes as a new summons to trust, obey, and rejoice, knowing that all is for one's spiritual and eternal good (Rom. 8:28)" (56).

Let's do this. Before we jump headlong into what James says, look with me at how the apostle Paul understood the providence of God and the way it affected his perspective on life and its many daily decisions.

"But on taking leave of them [Christians in the church at Ephesus] he said, 'I will return to you if God wills,' and he set sail from Ephesus" (Acts 18:21).

“For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you” (Romans 1:9-10).

“I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company” (Rom. 15:30-32).

“But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills” (1 Cor. 4:19a).

“For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits” (1 Cor. 16:7).

“And I trust in the Lord that shortly I will come also” (Phil. 2:24).

These statements by Paul are not religious clichés designed to make him sound pious and humble. They are expressions of his deepest and most cherished belief, namely, that ***God’s will ultimately determines where he goes, when he goes, and what he accomplishes if he goes.***

And this is precisely the perspective on life that was absent in many of those to whom James was writing. Sadly, it is probably absent in the lives of some of you here today. And do you know what James calls this absence, this failure or perhaps even this refusal to acknowledge the sovereignty of God’s providential will? He calls it arrogance, evil boasting, and sin (James 4:16-17). So that ought to answer any concerns you might have that I’m exaggerating the importance of living our lives each moment conscious of the providential sovereignty of God.

#### *Setting the Scene (v. 13)*

Try to envision in your mind the scene that James describes for us in v. 13.

He wants us to picture a group of businessmen hovering over a map or perhaps a chart of some sort as they identify the most lucrative trade centers and cities where the greatest profits can be earned. They are discussing time limits and the duration of their stay in a particular city, or perhaps how much profit they will obtain and by what means. They are portrayed as setting goals and projecting potential losses and determining what are the best and most effective means of achieving their desired ends. Put in contemporary terms it might have sounded something like this:

“Mr. Jones, our best projections are that sales will increase by as much as 15% over the next 18 months. But this is dependent on the effective implementation of new techniques of production that will reduce our costs by no less than 20%. We also believe that we should increase our sales force by 10% and expand our market outreach to include the west coast states of California, Oregon, and Washington. To achieve this goal we need to relocate a significant percentage of our field representatives.”

Be assured of one thing: ***James is not denouncing good, effective, wise planning.*** He is not condemning trade or commerce or business ventures or the making of an honest profit. He is not condemning capitalism. He is not suggesting that it is wrong or sinful or that it reflects a failure to trust God for you to read the *Wall Street Journal* to determine the future prospects of the stock market. He is not in the least recommending that you ignore social and political trends and simply make your decisions based on the flip of a coin!

Neither is he arguing that it is sinful or wrong for you to think and plan about what you will do following high school graduation, or college graduation, or what awaits you following grad school. He is not condemning careful evaluation of your current job situation or the trajectory of your career, as if to say you should never think about the future at all.

***What he condemns is the attitude of mind that enters into such planning apart from a humble acknowledgement that the authority and power to determine what the future holds belongs to God, not human beings.***

Jesus himself addressed this sinful mindset in a parable found in Luke 12:16-21.

And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:16-21).

What was wrong with this man? Was it his success? No. Is he accused of dishonesty in his business dealings? No. His problem was his *self-centered, self-referential perspective* that failed to acknowledge the providential sovereignty of God over his life. Observe the repetitious “he” and “I” and “my” . . . He clearly refused to acknowledge that God was the source of his success and wealth. He consults only with *himself*; *he* determines *his* future plans solely on the basis of how it will affect *him*; *he* conceives of *his* possessions as if wholly *his own*. Not only *his* present success but *his* future security, so *he* thought, were all of *his* own doing and *his* life consisted of the treasures *he* had amassed.

#### *Five Principles (vv. 14-17)*

James highlights five things that I want you to consider as you reflect on life today and your plans for the next five minutes as well as the distant future.

**(1) *It matters greatly to God how you think about your future plans as much as it does the actual pursuit of your future plans.***

Let me explain. Imagine someone responding to James by saying: “Wait a minute; what practical difference does it make in my planning whether I *believe* my life is a mist? What practical difference does it make if I *believe* that my future is in God’s hands? Do I stop planning, because my life may be short or uncertain?”

I think James would say, “No, you don’t stop planning. You don’t drop out of society. You don’t become a hermit, waiting for your little vapor of life to disappear.”

So what is the point? The point, is that *it matters whether a true view of life informs and shapes the way you think and how you speak about your plans*. As John Piper has so forcefully said: “*Your mindset matters.*” What he means by that is that *your theology matters. How you talk about your present existence and your future plans matters*. Believing that your life is a mist may make no practical, bottom-line difference in whether you plan to do business in a place for one month or one year or ten years. But, in James’ mind it makes a difference how you think about it and talk about it.

Why does it matter? Again, I appeal to the words of Piper. It is “because God created us not just to do things and go places with our bodies, but to have certain attitudes and convictions and verbal descriptions that reflect the truth – a true view of life and God. *God means for the truth about himself and about his providential and sovereign control over all of life to be known and felt and spoken as part of our reason for being.*” You weren’t just created to go to Chicago or New York and do business; you were made to go there with thoughts and attitudes and words that reflect a right view of life and God.

So he says in verse 14, in all your planning, *keep in your mind and let it govern your actions* and give expression with your lips to this truth: “You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.” That is, *keep in mind* that you have no firm substance on this earth. You are as fragile as mist and vapor and a breath in the wind. *Keep in mind* that you have no durability on this earth, for you appear “for a little time” (v. 14). 70 or 80 or even 90 years may seem like a long time, but it isn’t. Your time is short. And *keep in mind* that you will disappear. You will be gone, and life will go on without you. It matters that you keep this view of life in mind.

Then verse 15 tells us the true view of God that we should have in our minds and in our mouths as we plan our future. Verse 13 began, “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.” Now he tells us what's wrong with that way of talking. He says in verse 15, “Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’”

In other words, it not only matters that you have a right view of life when you make your plans (you are like a mist), but *it also matters that you have a right view of God* as you make your plans. And it matters that you *give expression* to this true view of God: “You ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that’” (v. 15b). People need to hear you say it and watch you conduct yourself in conformity with your belief that God is sovereign over your life.

(2) ***We are ignorant of the future, and it is good that we are!*** “Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.” Some of you are saying: “Damn it! I wish I did.” No, you don’t. Why? Because if we knew that tomorrow would bring prosperity, we would probably become careless and presumptuous. If we knew that tomorrow would bring adversity, we would probably become frightened and fall into despair.

Tomorrow may bring earthquakes, car wrecks, heart attack, a promotion, healing, an unexpected pregnancy, an unexpected miscarriage, your elderly parent becomes a Christian, a wayward child comes home, and who knows what else.

So, in his wisdom, God has given you memory in order that you may learn from your past success and mistakes, and he has hidden the future in order that we would be compelled to trust in him wholly.

(3) ***Never lose sight of the brevity of life!*** “What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.” The Bible doesn't liken our existence to the Rock of Gibraltar or to the everlasting hills or to the immovable stars above. James says, "you are a mist"! A mere puff of smoke, like breath that appears momentarily in the cold air and then vanishes; like steam rising from a hot pan of water only to dissipate in the swirling air.

James isn't the only biblical author to describe life in such terms.

“Remember that my life is a breath” (Job 7:7a).

“My days are swifter than a runner” (Job 9:25a).

“Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble. He comes out like a flower and withers; he flees like a shadow and continues not” (Job 14:1-2).

“O Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Surely a man goes about as a shadow” (Ps. 39:4-6a).

“My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass” (Ps. 102:11; cf. Ps. 103:15).

Don't misunderstand these texts or the one in James. They are describing the *quantity of life, not its quality*. These biblical authors are not saying that life isn't important, but that it is brief. The word "mist" or "vapor" isn't designed to minimize the value or meaning of life, but rather points to its brevity. In fact, it is precisely because life is so important and valuable that we need to diligently redeem every moment of our short sojourn on this earth.

(4) ***Consciously and consistently submit to the sovereignty of divine providence in all things.*** “Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that’” (v. 15b). Everything we do is subject to God's will. It isn't simply life that is subject to his will, but *all we do in life*. It's not just whether you are alive tomorrow or next year or in ten years, but *what you do* (“this or that”) tomorrow or next year or in ten years!

“If the Lord wills” isn't just some insincere, cheesy, religious cliché. It's a worldview, a theology of life, an attitude that submits humbly to the sovereign, providential purposes of God. If the Lord wills, I will finish this sermon. If the Lord wills, I will eat lunch later today. If the Lord wills, I will be back here next week, preaching once again from James. ***But God may not so will***, and if he does not, don't think for a second that he has treated me unfairly or my wife unfairly or you unfairly. Life is a gift. Each breath is the fruit of divine mercy.

The bottom line is, we are rather presumptuous when it comes to life. We've lost sight of the fact that life is a gift, subject to God's will. That we live as long as we do and accomplish as much as we do is the mercy of God. G. K. Chesterton perhaps put it best when he said:

***"Here dies another day, during which I have had eyes, ears, hands, and the great world round me; and with tomorrow begins another. Why am I allowed two?"***

If the Lord wills that we live means that there are times when the Lord does *not* will that someone continues to live. I'm certain that my emphasis on God's providential sovereignty over life and death is unsettling to some. So let's be sure we have biblical grounds for asserting it.

"See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand" (Deut. 32:39).

"The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up" (1 Sam. 2:6).

"And he said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (Job 1:21-22).

"Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them" (Ps. 139:16).

***(5) To disregard or remain indifferent to God's sovereign providential oversight of both life and death, together with all our decisions and their outcome, is arrogant, evil, sinful boasting.***

This may sound harsh and inflexible, but I'm only restating for you what James clearly and unequivocally says in vv. 16-17. It is "boasting" because it seeks to take credit for things ultimately due to divine grace and his merciful provision. If God is ultimately responsible for life, not to acknowledge it is to boast over some alleged self-sustaining and self-preserving power that you and I think we have.

To think that anything we do or say is out of God's control and that we are the masters of our own fate is "arrogance" (v. 16b). It is, says James, "evil" (v. 16b). That is a fairly harsh and pointed indictment of any attempt on our part to claim ultimate credit for anything of good that we achieve.

Let me give you just a few among countless examples of how this is confirmed elsewhere in Scripture. The first comes from the lips of David as he praised God for what God had done in making possible the building of the Temple:

"Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all" (1 Chron. 29:11-12).

Second, don't ever think that this only applies to God's dealings with his people, with believers. When Nebuchadnezzar was king over Babylon and still in rank unbelief and idolatry, God held him accountable and severely judged him for failing to acknowledge that God alone makes rulers great and brings rulers down. Nebuchadnezzar was condemned to live as an ox in the field for failing to recognize

"that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will" (Dan. 4:32).

Daniel spoke the same thing to Nebuchadnezzar's successor, Belshazzar:

“And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored” (Dan. 5:23).

Note well that this latter statement, as well as the words to Nebuchadnezzar, were spoken to *unbelievers*. Their lives, their very breath, together with all their “ways” are no less in God’s providential hand than are the lives of those who are in saving relationship with him.

Finally, some have wondered how v. 17 is connected with vv. 13-16. We know that it is because of the word “therefore” (translated in the ESV by the word “so”). Clearly, the sin of omission in the mind of James is the failure to take into consideration the reality of God’s providence when making and pursuing our plans in life.

Thus, the “right thing” to do that James mentions in v. 17, the not doing of which he calls “sin” is the conscious, happy, consistent, unequivocal acknowledgment that whether we live or die, wherever we go and whatever we do, is subject to the sovereign, providential, majestic will of our heavenly Father!