

“A Better Tomorrow”, Rev. Doug Ashley  
James 4:13-17  
Worship Service April 26, 2020

Good morning, and welcome once again to worship with us virtually, I'm Pastor Doug and I am glad you are with us today. I miss so much seeing each of you here. The camera lens is just not the same as seeing all of your faces. I miss getting to be together and I miss you.

Today we are going to be looking at a passage from James 4, that I think is appropriate for us as we begin to make decisions and transition into what's next. What we want is a better tomorrow, and James shows us to how we can get there. However, its more subtle and yet more dynamic than you may think! Look with me at James 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. Please pray with me.*

Lord God, please speak your Word to us. We need it. Thank you for being with us wherever we are today. We need your nourishment in our hearts and lives right now. Please open our minds to your truth and deepen our faith to receive it. In Jesus name we pray, amen.

Back in 1995, an American scientist by the name of Clifford Stoll predicated that the internet would just be a passing fad. He went so far as to write an article for *Newsweek* entitled "The Internet? Bah!" Clifford Stoll was WOEFULLY mistaken about the impact of the internet on our lives—just look at what you are doing right now! But he was not just wrong but presumptuous about it. He had overstepped his bounds and was commenting on something outside of his field. He was an astronomer not a sociologist. We could learn from Clifford.

In this passage, James puts some words to his readers' thoughts right at the start: "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit." Doesn't this sound like a solid business plan? Doesn't this sound like strategic next steps? And yet, James says that with these words these followers of Jesus "boast in their arrogance". He calls these words "evil". What is going on here? **You see, when you and I make plans without God, that's arrogance. It's presumptuous.** That is the issue James is highlighting here. This is the problem.

He is not saying we shouldn't make any plans. He is not saying we should not aim for excellence. Instead, he is saying all such planning WITHOUT GOD is presumptuous.

James was the brother of Jesus and a key leader in the early church. He was writing to Christians scattered in different communities in order to show them what it meant to follow Christ in their daily lives. James is a practical book. And here we have one of the most immediately applicable texts to business people, but James uses the real life example of the business person to underscore what it means to do life with God. It is a new mindset. He wants them to know that **since God is in control we can surrender everything to him.**

How do we surrender? What does this look like for us? Well, we have got to have BOTH a realistic view of ourselves and a realistic view of God. That is what James is helping to foster in us. Let's begin by looking at ourselves, because that is where James starts.

To surrender to God's will we need self-awareness. In James 4:14-15, James holds up a mirror so that we can see ourselves from every single vantage point. It is like one of those mirrors in a tailor shop or a clothing store that is fully enclosed. Those mirrors expose everything. They let us see exactly who we are from every angle. Here is what it says:

*...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."*

Commentator Alec Motyer describes this multifaceted and realistic view of ourselves that James exposes with three words: ignorance, frailty, and dependence. The way to surrender has to go through this revealing look at ourselves. Why? Because when we make decisions without considering God in the equation we show how blind we are to each of these areas. We are blind to our ignorance. We are blind to our frailty. We are blind to our need for God.

We are ignorant because very logically James points out that we do not know what tomorrow will bring for us. That's it. It is that simple. We have been living in that reality for about 6 weeks now. If our ignorance is not clearly visible right now, I don't know how else to illustrate it! We didn't and we still don't really know what tomorrow is going to bring, do we?

We are frail. Did you ever imagine that a grocery store counter, a gas station pump, an ATM, a restaurant table, could be so dangerous for us? James tells us that we are just a mist, a vapor. We appear for a little while and then disappear. Again, not very flattering. But you have to see what he is talking about here. He is not commenting on the value of a human life but on the fragility of it. We are weaker than we think. We are not as strong as we would hope.

We are also dependent. Without doctors, nurses, medical techs, grocers, bakers, butchers, truck drivers, IT people, utility workers, factory workers...in other words the "essential workers" we would be in much bigger trouble than we are right now. But you say, fine then, I'll go off the grid. I'll take care of myself. Can you make fire appear? Can you purify water by yourself? Can you grow your

own food without soil? Can you build your own structure without materials? No. You are dependent. And all of those things that you need come from God.

We have all had experiences in our lives when our ignorance, frailty, and dependence were exposed. I certainly don't like it when that happens and I'm sure you don't either. However, what if God is giving us an opportunity in those moments to actually turn our hearts to him? What if we let our inadequacy and insecurity drive us to God? What a gift that we do not HAVE to be enough because HE is enough! Take the opportunity the next time you are feeling foolish, weak or in need to let God show you that he has got you. Let that self-awareness drive you to him rather than to pride or to self-pity.

**We are learning from James that since God is in control we can surrender everything to him.**

We have seen already that in order to surrender we need self-awareness, but we need something else.

To surrender to God's will we also need God-awareness. In James 4:15, we read this:

*"If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."*

Notice in this one sentence we see two parallel paths of a God awareness that must be on our minds when planning for the future. First, it says that our lives are in God's hands, not our own. We can exercise, we can eat right, we can get enough sleep, we can make every good decision possible with our bodies. And still, our lifespan is up to God alone. This certainly doesn't mean that we don't do all or at least some of those things I mentioned, but we must make sure to let James' words ring loud and clear for us. OUR LIFE IS UP TO GOD.

Second, it says that our accomplishments are also in God's hands, not our own. What James is telling us here is that the so-called "self-made man" or "self-made woman" is a myth. No one makes their own future, no one. And yet, so often we separate our lives out into compartments. We have our faith life that includes church and Bible study and our life group and our daily prayer and our giving and our serving and all the different God things we "do" that help us to grow in faith. And that is in its own container.

Then we have work life or school life that includes the projects and presentations and meetings and classes and papers and assignments and rehearsals and all the different me things we "do" in order to feel like we add value in the world. And that is in its own container. We have got other containers, too: Hobbies, sports, community involvement, causes, extended family. To name a few. But what often happens is our faith life never integrates with all those other areas. And we find ourselves making plans and preparing for a future without God. James says God is right there in the midst of all of it. Do we recognize him there? Are we aware of his presence? Do we see that our faith interacts with every aspect of our life?

A few years ago I was asked to do a service for a young man who had taken his own life. It was so very difficult for the family of this young man as well as all of his football teammates and the community around them. I knew that service would be packed and prayed and prayed that God would give me the words that all of them needed to hear that day. I talked to my dad about the service the night before. He was very encouraging to me that night. So the next morning I did everything to finish the preparations for the service and met the family and led them into the service. It was packed, every seat was taken in the sanctuary, I was nervous but also felt God's peace as I stepped forward to share the message and noticed there near the very back of the church was my dad. He lived about an hour away and the service was in the middle of the day. So he had taken off work and had driven down to be there. He did not know this young man. He did not know the family. But he knew me. And so he came. His presence there was powerful for me as I tried to share words of life at a devastating time.

We all have experienced times in our lives when just the presence of someone we care about and we know is "for" us means the world to us. How much more when we are aware that God himself is with us. That he holds our life. That he holds our accomplishments. That we are not alone in the world. What if we were to in every decision and every plan we pursue embrace the truth of God's presence and provision and purpose in our lives? What if we recognized that even though he is invisible to us that he is near?

You know the way God has demonstrated his presence to us, right? Jesus. He makes God's presence real to us because he is God. He does this through all that he has done and all he continues to do to make us right and maintain our connection to the Father. It is no wonder that on the night Jesus was betrayed, while he was in the Garden of Gethsemane, he did what we as humans do. He planned for the future. He did so in a conversation with God recorded for us in Luke 21. The most profound statement in that prayer is when Jesus says to his Father, "not my will but yours be done." He would go to the cross because it was God's will. With this last surrender we see Jesus for the first time EVER in human history freely choosing in EVERY instance and circumstance to do the Father's will rather than his own.

Friends, **since God is in control we must surrender to him in everything.** Jesus went first for us by surrendering his life so we could be right with God. Jesus did the Father's will. This one act made our ability to choose God's will not just possible but certain because of Jesus' surrender and sacrifice. What a gift! What a Savior!

Would you join me as we together surrender ourselves, by praying the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.