



The Future

JAMES 4:13-17

**Baxter T. Exum (#1538)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
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*****COVID-19 LIVESTREAM*****

It is so good to be able to be with you (in a sense) this morning! As we get started, I want to encourage you to check out the announcement on the website this morning. We have some resources there for worshiping on our own. We've posted and sent out two communion bread recipes – one from my grandmother and one from Ruth Conrad. We've also posted a link to PTP365, a powerful online resource that is being offered free for a limited time. And to study on our own, there are obviously many tools out there, including the Bible correspondence courses on our own website. All of those can be printed and done at home, and the course on James is also available as an online quiz. These are all located under the "Contact Us" tab on our website.

Our purpose today is not to have an entire worship service, but our purpose is to have a lesson together. As for the rest, I do not plan on taking the Lord's Supper on camera. I don't plan on singing to you this morning. You can include that in what you are thankful for when we come together for our online class this coming Wednesday. But we do plan on studying together this morning.

If you'd like to learn more about God's plan for our salvation, we would encourage you to go to the "I'm New" tab on our website and going down to "God's Plan." We need to understand the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, and then we need to obey it by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. If you have any questions, get in touch. If we can assist you in being baptized immediately, please let us know, and we would be glad to help.

We absolutely hate not being together this morning, but we also realize how important it is stay well and to protect our community. If you are joining us online this morning, we would love to hear about it. Say "hi" on the livestream, either on Facebook or YouTube, send me a text or an email, and give me a call later today if you are joining in on the phone number. We are interested in hearing how all of this has worked out for us. We've learned quite a bit over the past few days, and we are interested in improving, but we need your help to do that, so we would appreciate your feedback and your input.

The one thing that most of us have in common right now is that pretty much all of our plans have changed. In some way or another, it is probably very safe to say that all of us have changed our plans this week. As an

eldership, we met together a few weeks ago, we prayed together, we talked about some spiritual concerns, and then we talked just briefly about some things we saw coming on the horizon. And I'll tell you: We did not in any way anticipate that we would be doing THIS right now. Canceling all of our public worship assemblies and Bible classes did not come up even as a remote possibility just a few weeks ago.

The same goes for most of us in our daily work routine. For most of us, everything is different – travel plans, work plans, school plans. Some have been laid off, many of you are working from home, some of you have extra work, for some of you work got a lot harder and more complicated, some of you are now sorting through how to teach and how to learn online. We have a new resident at our house this week. She took a test in Tennessee this past Tuesday afternoon and then drove through the night to get here. The rest of the semester is all online.

Other plans are changing. I worked at the Dane County Clerk's office on Wednesday and Thursday of this week, doing some security testing for the upcoming election. As we were there, the clerk was dealing with a shortage of absentee ballot envelopes. Thankfully, those envelopes arrived as we were there, but the plans for this upcoming election are changing minute by minute. As you have possibly seen, the City of Madison is now offering curbside voting at the clerk's office. I was talking with one of my coworkers about how our lives have changed this week, and I told him I've had one out of state speaking engagement canceled for mid-April, and another one isn't looking too good at this point. My co-worker is a musician, and he has already lost \$17,000 in canceled concerts over the next few weeks. Yesterday, a preaching buddy from Texas called and asked what I was doing the second week of July. He's anticipating youth camps being canceled this summer, and he was wondering whether I could speak one night at a virtual Bible camp this year. We never could have imagined this, even as a possibility.

In terms of planning, then, pretty much everything is different. Most of our plans have been either scrapped altogether or drastically altered. So, over the past week or so, there's one scripture that keeps coming to mind, and it's found in James 4. I would tell you what page number it's found on, but that doesn't matter anymore, does it? We don't have any pew Bibles in front of us. Feel free to look this up on your own, but since we have this capability on the livestream, I will try to put it on the screen so we can all see it together in just a moment.

The book of James was most likely written by James, the Lord's brother, and it was perhaps one of the first books of the New Testament to be written. So, if we could arrange the books of the New Testament in the order they were written, James would probably be near the beginning. And this is interesting, because the early Christians probably had the book of James before they had Matthew, Mark, Luke, and definitely before John. And this means that James is incredibly practical. As the early church grew and started spreading out all over the Mediterranean world, it became really obvious that these brand new Christians meeting in homes desperately needed some very practical guidance. We are Christians, but what do we do now? What is Christian living all about? James basically answers that question. And it is especially relevant as persecution starts ramping up? In a time of chaos, what do we do?

And this brings us to some of his inspired advice as he writes and gives advice concerning what our attitude needs to be toward the future. What do we do now? Let's look together at James 4:13-17,

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 usually do, I want us to move through this passage as we apply it to what we are going through today.

I. And I want us to start with the thought in verses 13-14 (and also verse 16), as James warns us about THE EVIL ARROGANCE OF MAKING PLANS WITHOUT GOD.

Notice (in verse 13), how James refers to those who make plans for doing business. And notice how everything is so carefully planned out: The day of departure, the destination, the length of the trip, the day by day plans, and then the overall purpose of the trip, ***“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.”*** Everything is so carefully planned. We can almost picture these people gathered around a table in some kind of board room, looking at maps and charts, today we might imagine PowerPoint being involved. Excel spreadsheets get opened, the accountants are there, the various engineers are there. They’re all discussing goals, and projections, and markets, and production, and on and on. And James seems to condemn this.

So, is James saying it’s a sin to plan? Is it wrong to plan for the future? Well, when we look down at verse 16, it seems that the real problem is not planning, but arrogance. The real problem is leaving God out of our plans. We’ll get back to that in just a moment. But the issue here is that these men making all of these plans have arrogantly failed to consider God in all of this, when the reality is: They have no idea what might happen in the future. They cannot anticipate every possibility. And obviously, the profit is not guaranteed. They might lose everything in this little adventure. And the reason is: Life is uncertain! Unlike God, we cannot see the future. And so, to leave God out of our plans is foolish.

And what is true of these people is also true of us. Do we know what will happen tomorrow? Do we know what will happen in Madison, Wisconsin, on Monday morning, March 23, 2020? We have no idea! We might think we know, we might be able to make some predictions, we might assume a few things here and there based on trends from the past (or whatever), but ultimately, we as finite human beings are completely clueless concerning the future. And the events of the past two weeks have proven this to be true.

In fact, as James points out here: Life itself is uncertain. As he says at the end of verse 14, ***“You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.”*** We might think we live a long time, we might think we will all be here tomorrow, but James reminds us that our lives are like fog. Our lives are like the breath that we exhale on a cold winter morning. And this is the consistent message of scripture. Life itself is temporary. Life is like a vapor, James says.

Many of us might be thinking about the parable of the Rich Fool, the man in Luke 12 who was having a bumper crop of grain. He makes plans to tear down his barns to build bigger barns so he would have a place to put it, but we remember the words of Jesus so well (from Luke 12:20), where God says to the man, ***“You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?”*** And Jesus’ conclusion is this, ***“So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”*** Haven’t we seen people this week, storing up treasures for themselves, with no thought of God or others? Like the people here in James, the rich farmer is foolish for leaving God out of his plans completely. So, this is the first message from James this morning – we have a warning about the evil arrogance of making plans without God.

II. **The second message from James basically, then, comes in the form of this ENCOURAGEMENT TO INCLUDE GOD IN OUR PLANS (verse 15).**

So, the solution is not to avoid planning; again, there's nothing inherently sinful about planning for the future, but since the problem is arrogantly leaving God out of our plans, the solution is to include God in our plans. And this is where James says (in verse 15), instead of arrogantly forging ahead with no concern for God, we should say, ***"If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that."*** And I hadn't really thought about this before, but in getting ready for today's lesson, I noticed there are actually two things here that are conditional on the Lord's will. First of all, if the Lord wills, ***"we will live."*** So, we have the reminder that even life itself is not guaranteed. Every breath we take is a gift from God. In Daniel's message to King Belshazzar in Daniel 5:23, Daniel describes our life-breath as being in God's hand. We think about Paul's sermon on the Areopagus in Acts 17, where he says that God Himself ***"gives to all people life and breath and all things."*** Life itself, then, is conditional on the Lord's will. But then there is also the second part, ***"If the Lord wills, we will...do this or that."*** And so, in everything, as we make plans for the future, we need to make those plans conditional on the Lord's will. This isn't some kind of magic phrase we say before we do anything, but it's an attitude of including God in our plans.

And Jesus is our example here, isn't he? In the model prayer in Matthew 6, didn't Jesus teach us to pray, ***"Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"***? And then again, on the night before he died, didn't Jesus pray over and over again that his Father's will would be done?

So the question is: How do we know God's will? We know his will through scripture. So, we need to be reading. We need to be studying. We need to be familiar with it. And when we hear it or read it, we need to obey it. I think back to some of those evil kings in the Old Testament, and their issue was that they were ignoring God. They were leaving God out of their plans entirely. I'm thinking of Isaiah 30, where God speaks through the prophet and says,

***"Woe to the rebellious children," declares the Lord,
"Who execute a plan, but not Mine,
And make an alliance, but not of My Spirit,
In order to add sin to sin;
Who proceed down to Egypt
Without consulting Me,
To take refuge in the safety of Pharaoh
And to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt!"***

Those kings were pressing forward without ever consulting God. And if they had asked, God would have answered through the prophets. Sometimes, though, we make plans that might not involve a clear command from God; for example, where and when to travel on business. So, in a practical way, as I make plans, I try to have the attitude, "Lord, this is what I have in mind, but please feel free to interrupt; this is what I would prefer, but please feel free to close the door." I don't know if that's the best way to do it, but that's at least what I try to remember. And this seems to be what Paul does in other passages. In Romans 1:10, for example, he says that he's praying, ***"always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you."*** In other words, I would like to come see you, but only if perhaps it is the Lord's will. We have something similar in Acts 18:21. As he passes through Ephesus, the people want him to stay longer, and he says, ***"I will return to you again if God wills."*** And I think that is what James is telling us here. It's good to plan, but we need to remember that our plans are always somewhat tentative. Our plans are conditional on whatever it

is that God has in mind. So, in a sense, this is the opposite of arrogance. This is the opposite of boasting. This is planning with humility.

III. **As we come to the end, we have this statement tacked on in verse 17, and at first, it almost doesn't seem to fit, but it has to fit, because James uses the word *"therefore."* Here at the end, then, we have his conclusion, and the conclusion is, DO GOOD.**

And I want us to notice how words this in a positive way. Many times, we think of sin as something we do wrong. God has said, "Do not do this," and we do it. In verse 17, though, we have the opposite, ***"Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin."*** So, as we make plans for the future, we remember: Not only are we to avoid doing evil, but we must also DO GOOD. So, not only must I not violently attack my neighbor, but I must love my neighbor. It's not just a matter of me not stealing his food, but I might need to give him some of mine. There are two ways we might blow it here. We can do what is wrong, but we might also not do what is right.

In his commentary on James, an old-time preacher by the name of Guy N. Woods makes an interesting observation, ***"Every judgment parable in the New Testament reveals that the punishment meted out was not for something bad the individual involved did, but something good he did not do."*** I've never thought of that before. But in Matthew 25:41, for example, when the King says, ***"Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels,"*** he's condemning them not for murder, robbery, or assault, or anything like that, but Jesus himself explains that they're being punished because they failed to provide food, water, and clothing to those who needed it; they failed to take care of the sick and those in prison.

The same thing is true of the parable of the talents. The wicked servant didn't steal anything, he didn't blow it all on drugs and alcohol, but he failed to invest it. He didn't do evil, but he failed to do good. And that is what James is warning about here: As Christians, we don't just avoid doing terrible things, but we have to be doing good things. We think of the parable of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite don't do the robbing, they don't kick the man by the side of the road, they don't spit on him, they don't insult him, but they pass by on the other side. They don't do evil, but they fail to do good. If we quarantine ourselves at home this week and somehow manage to not kill anybody, that's awesome. But if we fail to do good, James says that we have actually sinned.

So, this is James' conclusion: We sin when we know the right thing to do and do not do it. He's applying this warning about arrogantly leaving God out of our plans. So the lesson is: As we plan for the future, as live our lives, ***"if the Lord wills"*** isn't just something we say, but it is how we live. His will is for us to do good. This is our mission this week, to do good.

Again, if there is some way we can help, please get in touch, but as we close today, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in heaven,

We praise you as our loving Father, Lord of heaven and earth, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the one and only Almighty God who brought your people out of Egypt. You are the Great Physician, and we come to you this morning in a time of great need, begging for your mercy and grace. We pray for this terrible situation to come to an end. We pray for a cure. And until that

time comes, we ask that you bless all of those who are working so hard – we pray for first responders, we pray for all of those who work in our hospitals, we pray for those who in any way work to provide, produce, prepare, and deliver our food. We pray for our children whose lives have been disrupted. We pray for our teachers. We pray for those who have lost jobs and are perhaps in great financial need. Above all, we pray for wisdom and strength personally.

As we look for ways to help our friends and neighbors, we pray that we would include you in our plans, that we would include you in everything we do. We pray for opportunities to do good this week. We pray for peace and courage as we face the future.

In the name of your Son Jesus our Savior we pray. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com