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**A0745 – November 11, 2007 – Jas 4:13-17 – The Arrogance Of
Autonomy**

James 4:13-17 Ἄγε νῦν οἱ λέγοντες, Σήμερον καὶ αὔριον πορευσώμεθα εἰς τήνδε τὴν πόλιν, καὶ ποιήσωμεν ἐκεῖ ἐνιαυτὸν ἓνα, καὶ ἐμπορευσώμεθα, καὶ κερδήσωμεν· ¹⁴οἵτινες οὐκ ἐπίστασθε τὸ τῆς αὔριον. Ποία γὰρ ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν; Ἄτις γὰρ ἔσται ἡ πρὸς ὀλίγον φαινομένη, ἔπειτα δὲ καὶ ἀφανιζομένη. ¹⁵Ἀντὶ τοῦ λέγειν ὑμᾶς, Ἐὰν ὁ κύριος θελήσῃ, καὶ ζήσωμεν, καὶ ποιήσωμεν τοῦτο ἢ ἐκεῖνο. ¹⁶Νῦν δὲ καυχᾶσθε ἐν ταῖς ἀλαζονείαις ὑμῶν· πᾶσα καύχησις τοιαύτη πονηρὰ ἐστίν. ¹⁷Εἰδότε ὅν καλὸν ποιεῖν καὶ μὴ ποιῶντι, ἁμαρτία αὐτῶ ἐστίν. **(BYZ)**

James 4:13-17 Come now, you who say, Today and tomorrow we will go into such and such a city, and we will stay a year there, and we will be in business, and we will make a profit”—¹⁴yet you are not acquainted with tomorrow. What kind is your life? For you are a vapor that for a little while appears and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we live and we do this or that.” ¹⁶But as it is you boast in your pretentiousness; all such boasting is malicious. ¹⁷Therefore, he who knows the good thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin. **(Author’s Translation)**

James 4:13-17 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.” ¹⁴Yet 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. ¹⁵Instead, *you ought* to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.” ¹⁶But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. ¹⁷Therefore, to one who knows *the* right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin. **(NASB95)**

Come now, an imperative command from *ago*, it’s an interjectory verb. In other words, he’s interjecting with an example of autonomy and how arrogant and sinful autonomy is. What do we mean by *autonomy*? What did we say

last week when we introduced autonomy? That *self is the law*. We make ourselves out to be the law, the standard, the measuring stick, whatever you want to call it, we decide.



Basically, an autonomous person thinks He is the center of the universe. Now, this comes quite naturally to our flesh. We look out from ourselves, we can't get out of ourselves, so we tend to think and act as if everything is revolving around us and with respect to us. Everything has to be about us. There's a key word here that relates to this aspect of autonomy. Selfishness. We are very selfish little creatures. It always amazes me when I think about why I'm doing what I'm doing." Why am I doing this and not that?" "Why am I playing on the computer rather than playing with my kids?" Why am I talking on the phone rather than talking with my wife?" And when I ask, "Why am I doing this and not that?" I always come up with the same answer. Selfishness. I'm selfish. And if we all run around as selfish and you want to do this and I want to do that and they want to do this then we have all this conflict don't we? So, autonomy is natural, it's fleshly, it's worldly, it's carnal. That's one aspect. A second aspect of autonomy is another word, authority. We will be the authorities. That's what James is concerned with in vv 11-12, that these believers have set themselves up as the final authority. They even stand above God. We all do this, every time we judge anybody according to any other standard besides the word of God we're saying, "I'm the authority and I'll be the judge." Anytime we question the word of God, not asking questions of it but questioning it's validity we are setting up a standard above God's word which makes us the final authority rather than God the final authority. He doesn't check with us. He doesn't say, "Alright, here's My word and I want to pass it by you to get your approval." No, His word is the final authority. Not us. A third word related to autonomy is standard. We make ourselves out to be the standard, this is related to authority because for authority to operate it has to have a base of operation, and that's a standard. We make ourselves out to be the standard rather than God's word. Fourth, another word related to autonomy and that's arrogance, this is the moral

rebellion underlying it all, we are in rebellion against Him so we elevate ourselves above Him and submit Him to our standards. Fifth, autonomy is always tied in with human reason or experience as ultimate, as replacing revelation as the basis of knowing truth. And, if you trace this out you come right to a Kantian or Kierkegaardian philosophy where we become ultimate. If you go the way of Kant you make reason the basis of truth. Kant made the human mind the thing that structures reality, the human mind, not God, but the human mind constructs and imposes order on reality. If you go the way of Kierkegaard then you make experience supreme and the basis for truth. Either way, Kant or Kierkegaard you are making yourself out to be ultimate and either way you end up relativizing truth because it's individually centered. So, you can have your truth and I can have mine, it's all just relative. So, autonomy is the basic orientation of the sinful heart toward God. We don't want God. We want to be God. We make ourselves the Creator and Him the creature. As you'll see, in our text today, when we are autonomous we don't get rid of the attributes of God, we just attach them to ourselves. There's always this reversal that happens in the carnal mind because we're sinners and that translates into moral rebellion against Him. So, autonomy is this selfish, arrogant exaltation of self to be the standard by which we, on the insufficient basis of reason or experience, rebel against and take the place of God.

So, James interjects, **come now** you autonomous rebels **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."** Here's our long-term plan. We got it all worked out. We're going to go on a two-day trip to this city and once we get there we're going to engage in business for one year and we're going to make some money. What's the presupposition behind the statement? That we are Architects of history; that we plan the future; that we are in control. What attribute of God have we stolen if we say this? We haven't gotten rid of His attributes we've just moved them over to us. What attribute of God do we normally associate with planning the future, controlling the future? When we say "God is in control, God has a plan" what attribute are we referring to? Sovereignty. So, to say "Today or tomorrow we will go do this and that" is to say that we are sovereign, that we write history. Yet, we do nothing of the sort. As Prov 19:21, "Many plans are in a man's heart, But the counsel of the LORD will stand." God has a plan. God has a pre-determined blueprint for history and you can plan all you want but your

into the yellow areas through tools such as a telescope, microscope or high speed camera where you can see smaller increments of time. Through high speed cameras you can approach the vertical axis. That axis is what we want to look at because that is the knife edge of time. So, to the left side of that line is the future. And what James is saying is “You’re making plans way off in the future but you can’t know even what’s just on the other side of that line,” “You can’t go into the future one second.” We can imagine how we might be able to go into the future, we’d need a tool like a time machine but we don’t have one. Can you know what will happen 30 minutes from now? 30 seconds, 3 seconds? No, you can’t know. Every human being is stuck in the present. If we could just glimpse 12 hours in advance we could become billionaires on the stock market. Lots of us would like to know what will happen. But we can’t. We’re limited. What James is getting at is this: Tomorrow is dependent on God’s plan, not your plan. If you plan tomorrow all out, you’ve got your t’s crossed and your i’s dotted and tomorrow rolls around before you know it what happens? Your schedule is blown; your plan gets aced by a bigger plan. We’ve all experienced that. Nothing happened right, I didn’t get anything done. We get frustrated, we get angry. Why do we get angry? What is our anger betraying? It’s betraying our autonomy. Anger is the betrayer of autonomy because we’d never get angry if things went according to our schedule. But things don’t go according to our schedule. “But I want them to.” “But they don’t.” Things are going according to someone else’s schedule. “But I don’t like that.” “But that’s reality.” Our anger is simply an evidence that our flesh is at enmity with God, that our desire is to be autonomous and it’s frustrating because God didn’t design us to be autonomous, He made us to be dependent on Him.

Not only are you limited in our experience but “Who are you?” **You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.** He’s portraying our physical life. This is a humbling portrayal, a radical depletion of man’s self-projection. If you need a verse that cuts man down to size here’s a great one. We tend to think of ourselves as these permanent and necessary structures of society. Look at all we’ve done. Look at how great we are. We’ve almost reached the end of aging. I’ve got a book called *The End of Aging* and it always makes me laugh because, here we are, we don’t even know why man dies, we can take man’s cells, take some tissue, put it on a Petri dish with the right nutrients and the cells just go on and on dividing and dividing, never die, but when the cells are in a human body all of a sudden there’s a

limiting factor. And we don't know why. Why do we die? Well, because of sin we're all under the death sentence, that's why, so that slowly everyday we're dying. And that's what this verse is saying. Our lives are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then it's gone. There's no permanency to this life. If you walk all over the world what do you find more of than anything. Graves. As J Vernon McGee once said, the earth is one big graveyard. What do we see when we dig up the earth? Fossils, hundreds of millions of fossils, death, death, death. We're going to die. These bodies are under a death sentence. You ever walk out on a cold morning and you exhale and the warm breath from your lungs comes out your mouth and you see this little cloud of mist appear and 2 seconds later it's gone. That's your life. It's warm breath on a cold morning. It's a stunning portrayal. Your life is a vapor. Now, this isn't saying man is a nothing. This isn't a value judgment. God didn't send His Son to save a nothing. It's a temporal judgment. It's saying man is ephemeral. Our lives in these bodies, on this earth are very short. They don't last. Now, if we are limited to the point that we don't know tomorrow and even if we'll be alive tomorrow then who do we think we are to be making plans without consulting God? James is proving a point. We just don't have what it takes to control history. You've got limited life, you've got limited knowledge, you've got limited experience.

What should we be saying? If we shouldn't be saying, "Hey, look at my plans here, I got it all worked out," what should we say? Verse 15, **Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that."** This is submitting the plan to the Planner. Hey God, you want me to do this? Is this what you want for my life? So, this brings us into the age old question, "How do I know God's will for my life?" Do I move based on my feelings? Is there some kind of mystical guidance? Does God guide me through dreams? Do I go to a palm reader? Do the stars tell us our future? Do I empty my mind and meditate? No, none of that is biblical. It's all radically anti-biblical. Well, how do I know God's will for my life? You go to the Lord not the palm reader, you go to the Lord, not your feelings, you go to the Lord not the stars, you go to the Lord not your dreams. Now, it's very easy to teach how to discover God's will for your life. I like to teach it under two headings. First, the general or preceptive will of God. Some call it general because it is God's will for all believers during the Church dispensation, children, teens, adults, all of us. Now, some of them are directed at children and others at men and others at women but they are for the Church as a whole. The Church dispensation

began on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 and ends with the pre-trib Rapture when the living Church is removed from planet earth and taken to heaven. Others call this the preceptive will of God because His will for all of us is expressed in His precepts. A precept is simply a command to follow. Mainly these are found in the NT epistles and small portions of the Gospels where we find commands written directly to Church age believers. There are over 1,000 of these commands. There are also principles throughout the whole of Scripture. A principle is different than a precept. A precept is a command but a principle is a fundamental law or doctrine. We learn a principle by studying all the Bible states on a doctrine and that gives us a set of axioms from which we can deduce proper thought or action. So, *the general or preceptive will of God is God's will for all Church age believers expressed in precepts found in the NT epistles and small portions of the Gospels as well as principles contained throughout all Scripture.* The general will of God covers 99% of our thoughts and actions. So, where do I find 99% of God's will for my life? In God's word. We need the precepts from the NT epistles and small portions of the gospel as well as the principles generally taught throughout the whole Bible. So, anytime you hear me say, "This is an imperative, a command" for us then I'm alerting you to a precept. I'm saying, "Here's God's will for your life." Anytime I teach a doctrine from Scripture, God, man, nature, evil and suffering, whatever, I'm alerting you to a principle or principles, axiomatic truths from which we can deduce how we ought to think and/or live. This is why it is so important to be searching the Scriptures daily, so you can find the precepts and learn the principles. Now, that covers about 99% of your life.

What James is concerned about is the other 1%. What I call the special or unique will of God. By special or unique we mean it is not for all believers but specifically for you. What do you want here Lord? Who do you want me to marry? Which job do you want me to take? What do you want me to do next year Lord? So, in our story, here comes a few Jewish businessmen and they've got this hot plan to make a profit. They've got it all worked out. They've studied the market, they've got the product, they've found this hot city, the place where everyone wants this item and they're off. Here's the problem. They haven't taken it to God, they haven't consulted Him? God is left out of the equation. That's the sin here. Making plans is not the sin, but making plans without God. If we go out without submitting our plans to the Planner then we're setting ourselves up for frustration. We have to be sensitive to change in our plans if God so wills. Everyday we wake up and we

have a general idea of what we want to accomplish but if you don't go into that day with the mindset that the Lord can throw a curveball in there then we're going to get frustrated. So, here's the proper attitude, "Lord, this is your day, I'm here for you, I want to accomplish these things, if that's your will" but if not I'm willing to go wherever and do whatever you have for me. I'm flexible Lord. Take me, mold me make me. This is the reverse of autonomy. It's saying "You're the boss, not me, You make the plans, not me, You're in control, not me." So, we make our plans but we ought to say, "**If the Lord wills,**" and that's a 3rd class condition, maybe it is His will and maybe it isn't, but Lord, if it is then **we will live and also do this or that.**" But it's up to you Lord, I'm flexible, I want to work inside your plan for my life. We've got to be flexible so that when our plan isn't working we don't get angry but we say to ourselves, "Alright Lord, I see you have something else in mind, let me adapt to that, give me patience, show me the way." Don't fight it. He's constantly seeing if we're going to go along with Him or fight Him. He doesn't call us to fight Him, He calls us to submit to Him. Turn over to Prov 3. We have a good verse that sums this up because people always want to know about that 1%. What does God want me to do here, in this specific detail. Here's what I tell people, one of my favorite verses, it hangs on my office wall, Prov 3:5-6,

Trust in the LORD with all your heart
And do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will make your paths straight.

"Trust", this isn't blind trust, your trusting in an object, your trusting "in the Lord," your trusting in His character and it's not half-hearted trust, it's total trust in Him, "with all your heart". "And do not lean on your own understanding," you've got your finite knowledge, you don't understand what's going on, you don't know your future, but He knows, He's omniscient, so when your day is straying from your plan you lean on Him that He knows where things are going, that He's got a better plan. And here, in v 6 we get into the general and special will of God. First the general, "In all your ways acknowledge Him," in other words, your plan is falling apart but you just keep following His precepts anyway. And if you do this what does the verse say will happen? What will happen in the special will of God, that 1%, the details, the unique will of God for your life? He will make that stuff work out.

You just do the general will of God and He will work in the circumstances to “make your paths straight.” Believer’s always get hung up on this 1%, the details of life and I just say, “Look, focus on the general will of God. Focus on what Scripture tells you to be doing. Get out there and acknowledge Him in all your ways, just follow His precepts and stop worrying about the details. He’s going to take care of that if you acknowledge Him in all your ways.”

Now, let’s go back to James 4:16 and see what these fellas are doing. **But as it is**, that is, they are not submitting their plan to the Planner. And that’s arrogant. That is the height of arrogance. This is arrogance deep down in the heart. It means they’re “pretentious”. Their hearts make wild claims about what they will do in the future! It’s a claim to be in control of the universe. Extremely pretentious. And what did God say about the arrogant in verse 6? He’s opposed to them. He sets Himself against them in battle array. They go under the rod of divine discipline. They vocalize this arrogance through “boasting”, **you boast in your arrogance**. The **boast** is simply blurting out the plan. Hey, we got this plan, we got all the logistics worked out, it’s a bragimony session because they didn’t submit it to God. They didn’t admit that He’s in control of everything. The Scriptures tell us that if we boast let us boast in the Lord, let us glory in Him and not in ourselves. So James says, **all such boasting is evil**. In other words, this kind of **boasting is evil**, boasting in yourself. **Evil**, *poneros*, here means “malicious”. It’s malicious because it treads on God’s rights. It’s an attempt to play God, to do what only God can do. Plan the future and make it happen. So when we plan our future independent of Him it’s malicious. Thus James says, **all such boasting is malicious**.

Verse 17, **Therefore, to one who knows *the* right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin**. **Therefore** signals a logical conclusion, **to the one who knows the right thing to do**, and the participle **knows** is a perfect tense. They do know. They already learned this. **To the one who knows the right thing to do** but the Greek says, “the good thing to do”. This is a fantastic word, it’s the word *kalon* and it means this “to be in accordance at a high level with the purpose of someone”, “to be useful to someone”. It’s looking back to the Lord’s will in verse 15. When are we useful to God? When are we in accordance with His purpose? When we are doing His will. So, the good thing, the right thing, the useful thing is to submit our plans to Him. The implication is that they do know the right thing to do but

they're not doing it. You know why we do this? You know why we like to make plans without submitting them to the Lord? Because we're afraid that if we submit it to Him He'll say "No" and then we won't get what we want. So, we try to get it independent of Him. And do you know what that's a claim to? When we try to get something we're afraid God doesn't want for our lives we're claiming to know what is better for our lives than He does. We're claiming omniscience. "I know better than God what I need." That's violence, that's treachery, that's autonomy, stealing the attributes of God; of course the end of the verse says **it is sin**. You've missed the mark by a mile. You've made yourself out to be the Creator and Author of history and that is the very height of malice and sin. The word for sin here, *hamartia*, we see it used in archery and we say it usually means "to miss the mark", "to miss the bulls-eye" some say but it really means you've got your target out there all set up and your facing the opposite direction. You're not even looking at the target because you don't want to. It's not just missing the bulls-eye, it's shooting 180 away from the target.

I think, another fine lesson here by James on the treachery of autonomy applied to a situation where we make plans without submitting them to God. But every time we do this we don't get rid of God we just move His attributes over on to us. In this text His sovereignty, that He controls the future and His omniscience, that He knows what is best. So, remember, today, tomorrow, every day to submit your plans to him and know that when you are getting angry because things aren't going your way, that your anger is an evidence, it's a betrayer of an autonomous heart and this is the very height of arrogance and malice and sin.

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