

Lesson Ten
THE TEST OF DEPENDANCE UPON GOD
4:13-17

James has just finished dealing with how our faith is tested by the attitude of worldliness. Worldliness is self-centeredness. It views everything in life, even God, as existing for our plans and desires. In verses 1 through 12, this worldliness manifested itself in a spirit of competition which led to conflicts with others, conflicts within oneself, and conflicts with God. Now James is going to show another manifestation of worldliness, and it is seen in a self-sufficient attitude which ignores one's dependence upon God's providence in the daily affairs of life.

He addresses the wealthy merchants who were planning their business year as if God did not exist. It applies to anyone who lives and makes plans for life's daily activities, while disregarding God's plans for them that day. The foolishness of these people is not that they made plans, but that they made plans without God. They were in all respects "practical atheists." While they did not deny the existence of God, they just ignored His providential activities in their daily affairs.

While his tone changes, James seems to indicate in verse 17 that his readers know how to do that which is good, which implies that they belong to the Christian community. Nevertheless in this area of their lives, some of them were ignoring God, and I have chosen to label them in this area as practical atheists.

I. THE PLANNING OF THE PRACTICAL ATHEIST - v. 13

"Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain."

James begins this section by using an expression of speech designed to catch his readers attention. The Authorized KJV uses an obsolete English idiom "Go to now". This in modern English could be stated "Come now, listen up." It is an expression of disapproval over the conduct of the individuals being addressed.

The plans which are made are well thought out. They have sat down and counted out the cost. To this James has no rebuke. It is a model business plan. David Jeremiah describes the process in this manner:

The plan is constructed - **“today or tomorrow”** - this allows for flexibility.

The place is chosen - **“we will go into such a city”** - a location is chosen and travel plans are made.

The period is calculated - **“continue there a year”** - their business could be completed in a year's time.

The purpose is considered - **“buy and sell”** - buy low and sell high.

The profit is computed - **“and get gain”** - we will sell out the stock investment and bank our profit.

(Jeremiah, *Turning Toward Integrity Study Guide*, p. 89)

It is a great plan, but there is something missing: God's will and God's glory! Notice that James has no problem with the merchant's occupation, neither does he condemn the ethics of free enterprise and profit making. The problem James has is not with what the merchants did, it was with what they did not do. There is no evidence that they sought the will of God or prayed about their decisions. They planned as if God had no plans which would involve their plans. Jesus' discourse on the people in the days of Noah and Lot is a parallel to what James is speaking about. In Luke 17:26-30 we read, **“And as it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man. They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and the flood came, and destroyed them all. Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; But the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed.”** There was no fault to be found in what the people were doing in the days of Noah and Lot. There is nothing wrong with providing for the basic necessities of life. Eating, drinking, marrying, having children, buying, selling, planting, and building are all actions which are commendable to God. The fault with those people lay in what they were omitting in their lives. They did not recognize God in their lives. They lived as if He did not exist. This is what the merchants were doing in James' address.

II. THE PRESUMPTION OF THE PRACTICAL ATHEIST - v. 14

“Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.”

The problem which these merchants had was they were acting as though they had the ultimate control over their future. They were acting as if they had the God-like capabilities of omniscience and omnipotence. It is noteworthy that whenever a person ignores God, he begins to see himself as godlike. The sinful presumption of the merchants overlooked several clear factors about our human existence.

1. **The complexity of life** - v. 13 ***“go, continue, buy, sell, get gain.”***

Think of all that is involved in everyday life: today, tomorrow, travel, lodging, buying, selling, gaining, losing. Life is made up of people, places, activities, plans, days, years, and each of these is affected not only by our plans, but by the plans of others, the elements, and most of all, God! Many of these forces, events, people, are such that we have little or no control over, yet people foolishly imagine they are in charge of their lives.

2. **The uncertainty of life** - v. 14a - ***“You don’t know what shall be tomorrow.”***

They were ignoring the warning of Scripture. Proverbs 27:1 says, ***“Boast not thyself of to morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.”*** They were acting like the rich fool which Jesus described in Luke 12:16-21. ***“And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”*** The fool was a fool not because he planned for the future, but because he thought he was in control of the future! The very night he announced his plans, he died!

These merchants to whom James was referring had planned their lives a whole year in advance, and yet they could not even know what the next day held in store.

3. The brevity and shortness of life - v. 14b - ***“What is your life?”***

This is not a question about the origin or essence of life, but about the time of life between birth and death. In Job 14:1, 2, Job said, ***“Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not.”*** Life seems long to us as we measure it in years, but in comparison to eternity, it is brief like a vapor of steam or fog. Time takes on new meaning as we age. An unknown author describes how time passes in this life with these words:

When as a child, I laughed and wept - Time crept.

When as a youth, I dreamed and talked - Time walked.

When I became a full grown man - Time ran.

When older still I grew - Time flew.

Soon I shall find in passing on - Time gone.

4. The frailty of man - v. 14c - ***“a vapor that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.”***

Throughout the Scriptures figures of speech are used indicating the brevity of life. It is like a “handbreath” (Psalm 39:5), a “dream” (Psalm 73:20), a “shadow that declineth” (Psalm 102:11), “a flower” (Job 14:2), and like “grass” (1 Peter 1:24). James compares life to a “vapor”, something that is visible for just a brief period. A puff of smoke from a fire, the steam from a cup of coffee, one’s breath on a cold morning, all serve to remind us of the brevity of our earthly existence. David said in Psalm 39: 3, 4, ***“My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned: then spake I with my tongue, LORD, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am.”***

5. The Sovereignty of God - v. 15 - *“If the Lord wills.”*

The Scriptures teach there is a time to be born and a time to die, and that all our times are in His hands. Indeed it is true as Paul stated to the Athenians that God *“hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation . . . For in him we live, and move, and have our being.”* (Acts 17:26, 28).

III. THE PROPER CORRECTION OF THE PRACTICAL ATHEIST - v. 15

“For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this or that.”

Submission to the will of God is James’ proposed alternative to the presumptuous life style of these business men. He informs them that God, not man, is in control of the future. James teaches that God is sovereign in all the affairs of our lives. We shall live as long as God appoints, and in the circumstances which God appoints. Our plans here on earth do not alter God’s plans in heaven, but God’s plans in heaven certainly can and do alter our plans here on earth. The believer is to be willing to have his plans changed by God’s providential plans.

Some 100 years ago, it was the custom for Christians to sign their letters of correspondence with the words, “D.V.” These two letters stand for the Latin words *Deo Volente*, which means “if the Lord wills, or God willing.” Submitting our plans to God’s will is the example set before us in the New Testament, even plans to advance the kingdom work of Christ. Paul told the Jews at Ephesus that he would return to minister to them *“if God wills”* (Acts 18:21). He told the Corinthians that he planned to visit them *“if the Lord wills”* (1 Corinthians 4:19), and he would remain with them for a period of time *“if the Lord permits”* (1 Corinthians 16:7). Paul hoped to go *“in the Lord”* to visit the Philippians.

What James is telling his readers is this: The only way to face the future is with a trust in God’s plans for us and not in our well thought out plans.

IV. THE PRIDE OF THE PRACTICAL ATHEIST - v. 16

“But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil.”

Boasting comes from a heart of pride. Pride is the ruling sin of the devil, and his kingdom is built upon it. Instead of humble dependence upon God, these merchants were giving the impression they didn't need God. Such self-confidence comes from the evil one. God is set in opposition to such an attitude (cf. 4:6). Human boasting gives man and not God the glory.

A Christian businessman named Howard Butt wrote an article entitled, “*The Art of Being a Big Shot.*” It is almost as if he had read James 4:13-17.

It is my pride that makes me independent of God. Its appealing to me to feel that I am the master of my fate, that I run my own life, call my own shots, go it alone. But that feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can't go it alone. I have to get help from other people, and I can't ultimately rely on myself. I'm dependent on God for my next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I'm anything but a man — small, weak, and limited. So, living independent of God is self-delusion. It is not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait and humility being an attractive little virtue; its my inner psychological integrity that is at stake. When I am conceited, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God, and not man. My pride is the idolatrous worship of myself, and that is the national religion of Hell. (Green, *Illustrations For Biblical Preaching*, p. 288).

Pride is the original sin of Satan. His five self-centered “I wills” are found in Isaiah 14:13, 14. The merchants in our text were following his example. Notice their 5 “we wills”: (1) **“we will go into such a city”**, (2) **“we will continue there a year,”** (3) we will **“buy”**, (4) we will **“sell”**, (5) we will **“get gain.”** Boasting is evil at all times, but it is even worse when we do it arrogantly. We must all face up to the pride that exists in our lives.

V. THE PARTICULAR SIN OF THE PRACTICAL ATHEIST - v. 17

“Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”

In confessing our sins, Christians are given to focus on the acts of sins committed. In this text, we are introduced to a different category of sins, often called the “sins of omission.” Jesus denounced the Pharisees for the things they had left undone (Matthew 23:23). The priest and the Levite who disregarded the needs of the injured traveler were guilty not of a sin of commission, but of omission (Luke 10:30-37). The rich man sinned against Lazarus, not by mistreating him in some aggressive manner, but by neglecting him (Luke 16:19-31). A believer who knows that God's providence controls his present and future life, but lives as if

there is no such thing, falls into the sin of neglecting God. These merchants failed to walk in humility before God. This is as great a sin as any positive act of sin they might have committed. In fact it is a sin of the greatest magnitude, in that it is a sin against the greatest commandment. When Jesus was asked, ***“which is the greatest commandment in the law,”*** He replied in Matthew 22:37-40: ***“Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”***

To neglect or ignore the will of God is to commit the greatest sin, thus making one the greatest sinner.

VI. SUMMARY OF JAMES FOUR

In this chapter, James has set before five dangers which occur when people attempt to live without God. (1) It stifles their prayer life (4:1-3). (2) It makes them a friend of the world and an enemy of God (4:4). (3) They neglect God's will in their lives (4:5-10). (4) They insult and slander fellow believers (4:11,12). (5) They plan their lives without seeking God (4:13-17). Our knowledge of what is good and our failure to do it establishes our need of much prayer and confession to God.