



Study Series

James: Week Ten

Bible

James 4:13-17 (NIV)

Boasting About Tomorrow

13 Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." **14** Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What

is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. **15** Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." **16** As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. **17** If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.

Sermon Summary

In James 4:13-17 the focus shifts from one small group of people in the congregation who were negatively impacting the community of faith (teachers) to another; the wealthy. Most of those James was writing to would have been subsistence farmers working their own land or that of another. Very few people would have been in a position to go to another

city, establish a business there for a year, and make some money. This hypothetical scenario leads to James' response which, on the surface, appears to confront the presumption of their planning. In other words, they are making plans without reference to God. They don't even know what tomorrow will hold. Instead, James advises, they ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." He then calls their plans arrogant schemes and accuses them of sinning by not doing the good they know they ought to do.

While it is true that we ought to make plans in light of God's sovereignty and our own mortality, it struck me as more than a little odd that James would advise "saying" something as a solution! He hasn't been a big advocate of just saying throughout the letter. Those who claimed to be wise, those who claimed to have faith, and those who claimed to listen to the word are all challenged by James to demonstrate these things in actions. Furthermore, James has just finished a section where he has argued that our words come from our hearts and that too often our hearts are divided, leading to mixed words and mixed actions. If James wants us to say "If it is the Lord's will" he must want these words to reflect a heart that is singularly focused on what our words profess. Put simply, we ought to be those who desire what God desires, for this is the will of God. And this raises the prospect that the plans of the merchants are not in line with the will of God. This is born out when you consider the parallels with Jesus' teaching in Luke 12:16-20 in which Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool. At first glance this also seems to be about presumption; the man presumes that he was going to live a long time, but his life was demanded of him that very night. The context, however, makes very clear that the underlying problem was greed and an independent arrogance (he gives no thanks to God, nor any consideration to those he could assist, nor any thought to the fact that it was the land, not his brilliance that produced the harvest). This suggests that James is actually saying something about the desire to make money that is evident in the community of faith. This makes some sense of the arrogant scheming since planning in and of itself is wisdom, but the desire to make money with the temptation to consider ourselves independent and secure because of it, is folly. It also makes sense of the accusation of verse 17. The good that James has already advocated is to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. The merchants he is addressing are not thinking of others and have allowed themselves to do exactly what the world finds normal.

This is where this text strikes our context. How easy it is to be swept along with our society's views of money, wealth and all that it brings! While we acknowledge that all good things come from God and that we have been created to enjoy and appreciate good

things, we must also acknowledge how easy it is to stop delighting in God, but in the things that come from his hand. Very quickly we can be desiring the delights, rather than God, and our hearts have become divided. We want the kingdom, but we also want what we can get out of life. This is what James is addressing here – and it's a remarkable challenge. Are we people who desire God's will in every aspect of our lives and can say the words, "If it's the Lord's will" with integrity? This is the essence of what James is engaging with.

Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: What are the claims our society makes about money, wealth, and experiences? How do these affect us? Take some time to share your reflections with the group.
2. Read James chapter 4:13-17. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that 'jump out at you'. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain *why* it jumped out – this is about creating space for often familiar passages to say something new to us, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to that word or phrase. Share what you've been lead to.
3. We have been created by God to enjoy goodness and beauty, the existence of around 10,000 tastebuds on every human tongue is an example of this. But all good and beautiful things come from God. What are the indicators that we have stopped focusing on the one who gives us good gifts and the ability to enjoy them, and begun to focus on the gifts themselves? (Gifts = God's good things, not spiritual gifts in this instance.)
4. One of the questions we have to grapple with is where is the line on gluttony, or "How much is too much?" How do we answer that in our own lives?
5. What forms the big picture of the will of God, or what are the central themes of His purposes as revealed in Jesus, that helps to inform our understanding of His will for us as followers?

6. In our previous study, during the time for prayer, we took time to listen to the Holy Spirit and His revelation on what may have been at work in our hearts causing division. Jesus invites us to follow Him and have our hearts re-made as we seek to walk in His will for our lives. What practical first step might we take this week, following Jesus towards receiving God's work of 'heart-restoration?'

Prayer

Take some time now to reflect on your answers to questions 6. Pray for each other, that the Holy Spirit would empower you to walk towards a life of wholeheartedness, dependent upon God alone for our security.