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LIFE IS A VAPOR

James 4:13-17

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James Lesson 18

Life is a Vapor
James 4:13-17

When we lived in California, our clock radio was set to a Los Angeles news station that gave frequent traffic and weather updates. Sometimes I would lie in bed at 6 a.m. and listen as the announcer would say, "You want to avoid the 605 northbound. They are clearing a fatal accident at Slauson." And he would go on with the conditions on the other freeways. I would think, "Some guy left his house early this morning to head to work, probably didn't even say goodbye to his still sleeping family, and he didn't realize that he only had minutes left on this earth. They only mentioned him on the radio to say that his death created a traffic jam!"

As you know, four years ago on this date, thousands of New Yorkers headed for work on what seemed to be a normal day. But the evil plans of a few suicidal men ended the lives of thousands and forever changed the history of our nation. Marla and I will never forget standing in line at the Eiffel Tower that afternoon when another American in line told us what had just happened.

James is right: Life is a vapor! Like a morning mist that soon vanishes, so life is short and uncertain. There are no guarantees about tomorrow, let alone next year or ten years from now. You may be young and healthy this morning, but you easily could be a corpse by sundown tonight. You may be thinking, "That's morbid! I don't want to think about such things!" But if you ignore these things, you will not live your life properly in light of eternity. James wants us to know that...

Because life is a vapor we should humble ourselves before
God and obey His will.

James is beginning a new section, but the connecting theme through chapters 4 and 5 is humility. True faith judges pride by humbling oneself before God. In 4:1-12, James hit the need for humility to resolve conflicts and have harmonious relationships. Now he turns to the subject of humility with regard to the future. He is confronting an arrogant spirit that he had observed among

the churches. Although these people professed to know Christ, they were living with a worldly attitude that the apostle John calls "the boastful pride of life" (1 John 2:15). They were making plans without taking into account their own mortality and God's sovereignty. Like the prosperous man in Jesus' parable, they were saying, "I'll build bigger barns to store my goods," and "I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?'" (Luke 12:19-20).

James makes four points:

1. Life is a vapor.

This means three things:

A. Life is frail.

James writes (4:13-14a), "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.' Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow." Or, the text may read, "You do not know what will happen tomorrow." We don't even know what will happen ten minutes from now, let alone tomorrow or next year! These businessmen were arrogantly assuming that they would wake up tomorrow, that they would safely get to the city, that their business venture would be successful within a year, and that no one would rob them of their income. They were presuming all of these things about an unknown future that they had no control of and no guarantees about!

As I said, the most healthy young person among us could easily be dead by nightfall. There are so many easy and unexpected ways to die! I once did a funeral for an 11 year-old girl who complained to her mother about a headache. Her mother told her to go lie down. She lay down and died of a brain aneurysm. We knew of a young couple who was serving with Campus Crusade. They went on a weekend getaway. As he got out of the hot tub at their motel, he was dizzy and fell, hitting his head on the edge of the pool. He never came out of the coma. One Sunday afternoon a few years ago, a man in his early thirties who attended here was shoveling

snow. His wife looked out the window and saw him lying on the ground, dead from a heart attack.

Again, you may protest that to think about such things is morbid and depressing. I'm not suggesting that you obsess on these things. But if you don't ever think about them, you will not live in proper dependence upon God. You will proudly make plans and go on about life as if you will be forever young and healthy. James says (4:16) that "all such boasting is evil."

B. Life is short.

A vapor is short-lived. You see the mist at one moment and a few minutes later it's gone. You see the steam coming out of your coffee cup and in just a second, it disappears into the air. Life is like that.

In Psalm 90, Moses laments the brevity of life. He compares life to the grass of the field that sprouts in the morning and by evening, it has faded under the hot sun. He writes (90:10), "As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years, yet their pride is but labor and sorrow; for soon it is gone and we fly away." Even if you live to be a hundred, how quickly life flies by! A friend of mine wisecracks that life is like the roll of toilet paper—the closer you get to the end, the quicker it goes!" You may not care for the analogy, but it's true!

That's why Moses prays (90:12), "So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom." On October 1st, I'll be 58 and a half. I have about 4,220 days until I'm at my allotted seventy, if I even make that. That only adds up to about 603 weeks or 138 months! Yikes! Only God can give me the wisdom I need to spend those days profitably in light of eternity.

C. Death is certain.

George Bernard Shaw astutely observed, "The statistics on death are quite impressive. One out of one people die." You would think that because death is not just probable, but absolutely certain, and that it can happen at any minute, and that each person must stand before God for judgment, every person would be desperate to know how to get right with God. But, strangely, people put it out of mind and go on about life as if they will live forever. They can watch the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina on TV, shake their

heads in disbelief at the bodies floating in the water, and go out the door to their daily routines without getting on their faces before God and repenting of their sins! It's amazing!

Jesus taught us how to think when we hear about such disasters. Some people reported to Him about some Galileans whom Pilate had slaughtered. Jesus responded (Luke 13:2-5), "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

When you hear about disasters, whether human-caused, such as 9/11, or due to natural causes, such as hurricanes, make sure that you have repented of your sins, because if you do not, you will die in your sins and you will perish. Not to be ready for something that is 100 percent certain would be really foolish! James' first point is, life is a vapor.

2. God is sovereign.

This means, *we are not sovereign!* The problem was not that these businessmen were making plans for the future. Nor was it a problem that they were capitalists engaging in business to make a profit. Planning is commended to us in Scripture (Luke 14:28-32; Rom. 15:20-28). Financial planning is good stewardship if it is done in dependence on God and with regard for biblical priorities. It is wise to have a will or living trust. It is wise to have some savings to cover possible future expenses or the potential loss of a job. The Bible commends hard work and being rewarded financially for it.

The problem that James hits was, they were planning as if they were sovereign and they were not bowing before the only Sovereign God. They were arrogantly making plans for their future financial security, but their plans did not include God. Their trust was not in God, but in their business ventures and in all of the money that they supposed they would make. They were assuming that they were in control of their future and that everything would go according to their plans. Instead, they needed to acknowledge (4:15), "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that."

James is not giving a trite formula that we need to tack onto every sentence. Sometimes Paul used the phrase, "if the Lord wills," when speaking about the future (Acts 18:21; 1 Cor. 4:19; see also, Rom. 1:10; 1 Cor. 16:7; Phil. 2:19, 24), but sometimes he did not (Acts 19:21; Rom. 15:28; 1 Cor. 16:5, 8). But he always depended on the Lord and bowed before His sovereignty with regard to the future. So, James is giving us a mindset that needs to permeate all of life. We need continually to be aware of our finiteness and dependence on God and His sovereign purpose in every aspect of life. Sometimes we should *say*, "if the Lord wills," but even if we don't say it, we should *think it*.

As I've often said, one of the most basic and helpful lessons in life to learn is, "*God is God; I am not God!*" He is sovereign; I am not sovereign. He controls the future; I do not in any way control the future. While I believe in carrying a modest life insurance policy to protect my wife if I should die (1 Tim. 5:8 supports this), no amount of life insurance will give her financial security. I believe in saving and investing as I'm able towards the day when I may be too feeble to work (Prov. 6:6-8), but there is simply no such thing in this world as financial security. It is impossible to cover all possible contingencies. Our economy may crash. Our country may be overrun by terrorists. My retirement investments may fail. Trusting in God is the only true source of security for the future.

Note also that James assumes that you should acknowledge God as the sovereign over your business life. The idea that church is one sphere, but business is an altogether different sphere is not biblical. Jesus is Lord of all of life, from the boardroom to the bedroom. Your business ethics should reflect that you are *not* in charge of your business; Christ is in charge. You must conduct your business dealings in a manner that pleases and glorifies Him.

So James states that life is a vapor and that God is sovereign over every aspect of life. His words imply a third truth:

3. Pride is a great sin that easily plagues us all.

Verse 13 reeks with arrogance: "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." There is a lot of mention of what *we* will do, but there isn't any mention of God! In 4:16, James directly

confronts the sinful attitude behind the comments of 4:13: "But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil." "Arrogance" (4:16) was originally used of wandering hucksters who were full of empty and boastful claims about their cures and other feats that they could accomplish (R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* [Eerdmans], p. 98). It came to apply to any braggart. It is used in 1 John 2:15, "the boastful pride of life." It refers to the arrogant self-sufficiency of the world apart from God.

You see this attitude in the powerful Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. While walking on the roof of his royal palace, he said (probably to himself, Dan. 4:30), "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?" Daniel 4:31-32 continues,

While the word was in the king's mouth, a voice came from heaven saying, "King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you, and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place will be with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes."

Napoleon Bonaparte was a military genius, but his pride led to his downfall. He was about to invade Russia, but a friend tried to dissuade him. When it became apparent that Napoleon would not be budged, the friend shared the familiar proverb, "Man proposes, God disposes." Napoleon angrily snapped back, "I dispose as well as propose." A Christian upon hearing this remark said, "I set that down as the turning point of Bonaparte's fortunes. God will not suffer a creature with impunity to usurp His prerogative." Sure enough, Napoleon's invasion of Russia was the beginning of his downfall (from Harold Fickett, *Faith that Works* [G/L Regal Books], p. 134).

Probably James' readers, who were professing Christians, were not as crass as Nebuchadnezzar or Napoleon in proclaiming their own greatness. But it is possible for a Christian to fall into practical atheism, where he proudly thinks, "I have decided to do this and nothing is going to stop me. I'm a man of strong will! I will succeed!" He chuckles at his own resolve and strength of character.

James says that all such boasting is evil. Or, it's easy for us as Christians to think, "I have succeeded because of my own hard work and smart business sense." We disdain the poor, thinking, "If they would only work hard as I've done, they could succeed, too." But we're forgetting Paul's pointed question to the proud Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:7), "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" *Everything* we have comes from God by His grace. We fall into pride when we do not keep that in mind.

How then should we live in view of the fact that life is a vapor, that God is sovereign, and that we're so prone to pride?

4. Humble obedience to God's revealed will is our only sane course.

At first glance, verse 17 seems somewhat disjointed from the preceding context. It may refer to all that James has said up to this point. But, "therefore," seems to connect it to what James has just said: "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin." Douglas Moo (*The Letter of James* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 208) explains the connection: "He has urged us to take the Lord into consideration in all our planning. We therefore have no excuse in this matter; we know what we are to do. To fail now to do it, James wants to make clear, is sin."

Of course, this verse applies to all areas of the Christian life pertaining to what are called "sins of omission." We all tend to focus on sins where we have violated some direct command of God. Perhaps we stole something in violation of God's command not to steal. Or, we lied in violation of God's command to tell the truth. Or we got angry in violation of God's commands against anger.

But, we also sin when we fail to do something positive that God has commanded us to do. He commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves. We violate that command when we hate our neighbor, of course. But we also violate it when we ignore our neighbor and live selfishly. In the final judgment, Jesus condemns those who did not help the poor and the needy (Matt. 25:41-44). Their sin was not that they actively abused these people. Rather, they just ignored them while they pursued their own pleasure or personal goals (see also, Luke 10:25-37; 16:19-31).

Obviously, we can't all do everything or there simply wouldn't be enough hours in the day. But it does seem that in most local churches, about 20 percent of the people do about 80 percent of the work, while the 80 percent of the people sit around doing nothing. If you are a Christian, it is not enough just to avoid sinning. God has given you a spiritual gift and He calls you to serve Him in some capacity. To know this and to neglect to get involved in serving is sin.

Ministry is first a mindset and only secondarily an activity. If you come to church just to sit and take in whatever seems to grab you, or to meet with your friends, you do not have a ministry mindset. You are just using the church to meet your needs, with no regard of how God wants to use you. You're a religious consumer, but you're not doing what God calls every believer to do.

A ministry mindset means that every day you pray, "Lord, here I am, ready to do your will. Give me eyes to see people as Jesus sees them, like sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36-38). Give me a heart of compassion as Jesus has, to love those who are distressed or downcast. Use me today as a worker in Your harvest, for Your sovereign purposes." By the way, you begin to serve God in your home! Now you know that God wants you to serve Him (Matt. 6:33). Not to live that way is sin.

Conclusion

In view of the fact that life is a vapor, that God is sovereign, that pride is a constant battle, and that humble obedience to God's will is the only sane course, I would counsel you to do this: Think about what God wants your life to look like on your deathbed. What will you have accomplished that matters in light of eternity? In view of God's purpose for your life, write out a single-sentence *personal mission statement*. Here is mine: To glorify God by being a godly husband and father, and by using my gift of pastor-teacher for the building up of the body of Christ and the furtherance of the gospel. Yours will vary depending on how God has gifted you.

Then write out some *personal lifetime goals* that will help you fulfill your mission statement. These may include things like your daily walk with Christ; personal holiness in thought, word, and deed; your responsibilities as a godly spouse or parent, etc.

Think through some *short-term personal goals* in various areas where you need to grow. Perhaps spiritually, the goal would be to spend at least 20 minutes each morning in the Word and prayer, and to work on memorizing at least one verse each week. In your marriage, the goal may be to schedule a half-hour daily to sit down and talk as a couple, or two evenings each month to go out for a date. Financially, perhaps you need to set goals to get out of debt, to live within your budget, and to give faithfully to the Lord's work. Personally, maybe the goal is to eat nutritional food and to exercise vigorously for a half-hour at least five days per week. These are just examples; your personal goals will vary. But write them down. Then, review them periodically and adjust as the Lord leads.

The aim is to number your days so as to present to the Lord a heart of wisdom (Ps. 90:12). You know that you ought to do these things. James says that if you don't do them, to you it is sin.

Application Questions

1. When will you schedule a time prayerfully to think through and write down your mission statement and some goals? Do it!
2. Where is the right balance between thinking about life as a vapor versus not becoming morbid and depressed?
3. Since we're often blind to our own pride, how can we guard against it? What is true biblical humility?
4. Obviously, we cannot do everything in terms of Christian service. How can I know what God wants *me* to do?

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