



The Final Six Messages in the Book of James Series

Dr. Strauss preached his last message on August 15, 2013. He went home to the Lord on September 11, 1993, after an ordeal with multiple myeloma (bone cancer). Because he usually worked six weeks ahead, he had completed the remaining messages in the James series. A booklet of these sermons was produced; the chapters are available at SpiritualGold.org, in separate PDF files for easy downloading.

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|---|------------------------|---------------|
| 1 | Little Tin Gods | James 4:11-12 |
| 2 | Planning without God | James 4:13-17 |
| 3 | Rotten Riches | James 5:1-6 |
| 4 | Lord, Give Me Patience | James 5:7-12 |
| 5 | Let Us Pray | James 5:13-18 |
| 6 | Rescue the Perishing | James 5:19-20 |

Except where otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New King James Bible.

2

Planning Without God

James 4:13-17

Purpose:

To encourage believers to consult the Lord about all their plans for the future.

If you have ever attended a management seminar or read a book on leadership, you learned something about the importance of planning. It's one of the effective leader's major responsibilities. One Christian publication put it like this: "It is not a question of whether we will make plans or not. Not to plan is a plan in itself, for planning is basically nothing more than attempting to decide in advance what we will or will not do in the next minutes, hours, days, months or years. For the Christian leader, planning asks the question as to whether we will affect the future at random or with purpose. Because affect it, we will."¹

And we've heard all the clever little sayings that encourage us to plan. "Plan your work; work your plan." "To fail to plan is to plan to fail." "If you aim at nothing, you'll hit it every time." "If you don't care where you're going, any road will take you there." In other words, if we ever hope to accomplish anything worthwhile in life, we better decide where we're going and then map out a strategy for getting there.

Planning happens to be the next subject James addresses in his Spirit-inspired letter to the Christian Jews who had been forced to flee from Jerusalem because of persecution. "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit'" (James 4:13, NKJV). These people were making elaborate plans. They planned: 1) The time of their departure—"today or tomorrow." 2) Their intended destination—"go to such and such a city." 3) The length of their stay—"spend a year there." 4) The activities in which they would engage—"buy and sell." And 5) Their ultimate goal—"make a profit."

So what's wrong with that? "Buy and sell," or "carry on business" (NIV) is a perfectly legitimate thing to do. Incidentally, that's one Greek word, emporeuomai, from which we get our English word emporium—a place of commerce, a trading center, a marketplace. There's nothing wrong with doing business. And furthermore, there's nothing wrong with making a profit. Nothing I can find in the Bible outlaws free enterprise or forbids making a profit. These people to whom James wrote lived in a time when new cities were springing up in many parts of the world, and new cities meant new business opportunities. It was perfectly normal for them to travel for business purposes. And they were merely making intelligent plans to make the best use of their time and energies. That's exactly what the management experts tell us we're supposed to do.

But there was something wrong with it. Those opening words, "Come now," were intended to prepare them for a rebuke. So what was wrong? The problem is that God is nowhere mentioned in the verse! They left God out of their planning. They were acting in total self-will and self-sufficiency as if they had complete control of their future and God had no part in it. Their motive for making money was not to glorify God, not so they could give to God's work, not so they could help others in need, but merely for their own pleasure and security. Apparently they thought that multiplying their net worth was going to buy them happiness. The

presence of God was never acknowledged and the will of God was never considered. They were doing their own thing. They were planning apart from God.

Now there's nothing wrong with planning. It is an essential part of life. We all plan. We plan where we will go to school, what we will study, what career we will follow, where we will live, where we're going to go on our vacation, how we will provide for ourselves in retirement. Maybe you're planning to put an addition on your house, or buy a new car, or do some traveling. That's fine. If you are in business, you need to plan things like how you're going to promote your product, how much inventory you're going to stock, how many employees you will need to hire, and so much more. If you fail to plan, you'll probably be out of business very shortly. Planning isn't wrong; it's necessary.

But if we have put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, then He wants to be a part of the planning process. He made us to function in fellowship with Himself, in partnership with Him, and partners share with one another. It's presumptuous and self-willed to plan as we please without ever talking to Him about it. But that's what these people were doing. James has been talking about worldliness in this chapter, and planning without God is the essence of worldliness. That's the way the people of the world operate—with total disregard for God, His standards, His goals, His methods, His desires, His will. It's called secularism, and it's the very opposite of true Christianity.

And above all, it's absolutely foolish to think that multiplying money is going to bring us happiness. Several years ago I was watching an interview on Sixty-Minutes with a professional hockey player who had been making 2.6 million dollars a year, but had gotten involved in cocaine and alcohol and just about destroyed his life. He made this statement: "If I just didn't have any money, maybe I would be happy."²

Most of us know in our hearts that money can't buy happiness, but all we ask is a chance to prove it for ourselves. Right? So we

keep on planning how we can acquire more of it and, unfortunately, we may never even give God a fleeting thought as we do. James is saying, "Come on, now. How can you claim to know God, and yet plan your life without taking Him into account. That doesn't make any sense." If we truly know Him and claim Him as our Lord, then we need to consult Him about every plan we make. To do otherwise amounts to denying Him by our manner of life. And James is about to explain why. He suggests four problems in planning without God:

1. TOMORROW IS UNCERTAIN, v.14a

"Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow" (NIV). When we lay our plans without God we are implying that we are more than mere mortals, that we know the future, and that we control our own destiny. That's ridiculous. We can hope things turn out as we have planned, but there's no guarantee that they will. We can't even be sure there will be a tomorrow for us. That's why Solomon wrote, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth" (Prov.27:1).

Who knows what would happen to those ancient business people before their tomorrow came. Their camels might be taken sick and die, and the trip have to be cancelled. Or their goods might be stolen by bandits on the treacherous roads. Or the city they intended to visit might be destroyed by fire. Or any one of hundreds of things could keep them from carrying out their intended plans. If we put all of our focus on tomorrow we may never accomplish what God wants us to do today.

Psychologist William Moulton Marston asked 3000 people: "What have you to live for?" He was surprised to find that 94% were simply enduring the present while they waited for the future; waited for something to happen; waited for the children to grow up and leave home; waited for next year; waited for the opportunity to take a long-dreamed-about trip; waited for tomorrow. They failed to realize that all anyone ever has is today, because yesterday is gone and tomorrow never comes.³

Planning is an attempt to write future history, and we simply cannot know the future. Our best estimates, based on all our past experience and most careful calculations, are going to come up short. And Murphy's law is sure to prevail: "If anything can go wrong, it probably will." God is the only one who knows the future. We learn from the Prophet Isaiah that He knows the end from the beginning (Isa.46:10). So it might be a good idea to ask Him for His direction when we plan for the future.

Problem No. 1—Tomorrow is uncertain

2. LIFE IS A VAPOR, v.14b

It doesn't make sense to make our plans apart from God, since He is the only one who knows for sure whether we'll even be around to carry out the plans. "For what is your life?" asks James (4:14b). Lit. "Of what sort is your life?" Or "What is the nature of your life?" Answer: It's brief, fleeting, temporary, transitory. Or as James puts it, "It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away" (4:14c). A vapor! A mist! Like the steam whistling from a boiling kettle, or the breath coming out of your mouth on a cold day! Now you see it, now you don't. It appears for a moment, then it is gone forever. The only sure thing about life is that it will end in death. We're all terminal! Unless Jesus returns in our lifetime, sooner or later, we're all going to die. And for some of us, it may be more sooner than later.

Maybe you've heard the old legend, told by Peter Marshall years ago, about a merchant in Bagdad who one day sent his servant to the market. Before very long the servant came back, white and trembling, and in great agitation said to his master: "Down in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd, and when I turned around I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture. Master, please lend me your horse, for I must hasten away to avoid her. I will ride to Samarra and there I will hide, and death will not find me." The merchant lent him his horse and the servant galloped away in

great haste. Later the merchant went to the marketplace himself and saw Death standing in the crowd. He went over to her and asked, "Why did you frighten my servant this morning? Why did you make a threatening gesture?" "That was not a threatening gesture," Death answered. "It was only a reaction of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra."⁴

As the writer to the Hebrews put it, "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Heb.9:27). Only God knows the day and the hour and the appointed place for each of us. But it is certain that some in this room will not live another year. I preached on this paragraph to introduce the new year in 1987. Since that time, many of our number have gone home to be with the Lord. I didn't know at that time that I had terminal cancer. But God knew. And He knows how long I will live beyond today. With that in mind, it would be foolish for me to make any plans without consulting Him.

Jesus told the story of a man who had great plans for the future (Lk.12:16-21). For him, it was retirement. He had been looking forward to it for so long—no more work, just eating, drinking, partying, traveling, fishing, golfing. What a wonderful life it was going to be! And he had saved up enough to allow him to live in style for many years. But he was a fool, because he had laid his plans without consulting the Lord. And the very night of his retirement dinner, God took him. And all those savings were wasted. He might have made a little better use of them had he let God be a part of his planning.

I read of a businessman who dreamed that an angel came to him and promised to grant him one request. He was delighted, and requested a copy of a newspaper one year hence. He wanted to see the stock market page. It was his chance to get rich! He could hardly contain his enthusiasm as he looked down the page and planned what he was going to buy—until he glanced across the page where he saw his name in the obituary column. All of a

sudden, money was no longer important. Maybe we all ought to be living our lives today as though our names were going to appear in tomorrow's obituary. I doubt whether we would do any more planning without God.

Two problems in planning without God—Tomorrow is uncertain; life is a vapor. There's a third...

3. GOD IS SOVEREIGN, v.15

He controls everything. In that very same verse in Isaiah, telling us He knows the end from the beginning, He goes on to declare, "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure" (Isa.46:10). God is the one who runs this world, not you or me. Nothing happens outside of His sovereign will—either His directive will or His permissive will. And that's the truth behind James 4:15, "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.'" Does that mean we have to say the words, "Lord willing" every time we talk about our future plans? I don't think that's what James meant at all. Repeating the words can become so trite and hypocritical that they mean nothing to the person who says them or the people who hear them.

But we certainly shouldn't avoid saying the words just because somebody may think they sound phony. What we need to do is to cultivate such an attitude of dependence on God and submission to His will that it will be obvious to people who observe our lives. We need to have a deep settled conviction that the very life we possess is a gift from God, that every breath we take is another evidence of His grace, that every blessing we enjoy comes from His gracious hand, and that our future is securely held in His strong hands. That way, our whole manner of life will say, "If the Lord is willing." And if we say the words, people will know they are real. If He allows our plans to materialize, we give Him the praise for it. If we have to change them, we still praise Him, because we know that He does all things well.

As you know, the Lord has allowed me the wonderful privilege through the years of multiplying my ministry by providing opportunities to preach in other places around the world. And the leadership of our church has been gracious enough to let me do that for a number of weeks each year. I had all those weeks booked for this year well in advance—some of them three years in advance. But I made those plans “if the Lord was willing.” He wasn’t. My physical situation made it necessary for me to cancel nearly all of those engagements. But that’s okay. The people who invited me wanted God’s will just as much as I did, and in each case they found God’s person for that ministry.

I’ve told the story before of how the British empire in the early years of this century had to relearn its dependence on God. Queen Victoria had died, and the coronation of her son, Edward, was set for April 1902. In all the announcements which were sent out, two little letters were purposely omitted which had always been included before—D.V., short for Deo Volente “God Willing.” Kings and emperors all over the world received invitations to the coronation, and the prince was fully expecting to be crowned King Edward the Seventh at Westminster Abbey on the appointed day. But God intervened. The prince got appendicitis and his coronation had to be postponed for several months. God was NOT willing, and He let him know it. It might have been better for him to have acknowledged his dependence on God in the first place.

And it might be good for us to do that as well, by word and by our manner of life. To refuse, James assures us, is SIN. And that’s the last problem in planning without God...

4. SELF-SUFFICIENCY IS SIN, vs.16-17

There’s something in our human nature that makes us want to talk about ourselves—what we’ve done, what we’re going to do, how important we are. We try to project an air of self-confidence and self-sufficiency—like we don’t need anybody; we’ve got

everything under control. That’s one reason we exclude God from our planning—to exalt ourselves. Do you want to know how God views that? “But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil” (Jas.4:16). That word arrogance (alazoneia) originally referred to the wandering quack who offered cures that didn’t work. It came to refer to anybody who boasts of that which he cannot perform.

The word is only used one other time in the New Testament, 1 John 2:16, where it is translated the pride of life—one of the three major characteristics of worldliness. Arrogance says, “I run my life; I control my destiny; and I’m out to make myself look as good as I can.” Now we understand why James called it “evil.” Planning without God robs Him of His rightful place as ruler in our lives and enthrones self in His place.

And just to be sure we understand how serious that is, James adds, “Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin” (Jas.4:17). We know what God wants of us. He’s told us in this chapter—submit to His will and resist Satan’s attempts to distract us (7), draw near to Him (8a), confess our sin to Him, repent of it and turn from it (8b-9), walk in humble dependence on Him (10). To know that, yet to go on making our plans to suit ourselves without considering what He wants, is SIN! Somehow many of us have gotten the idea that sins of commission are much worse than sins of omission, like this one. But sin is sin, and any sin deprives us of the abundant joy God wants us to have.

So let’s decide now. We’re going to include the Lord in all our planning. Whatever plans we consider, we’re going to acknowledge His presence, ask for His direction, then carry out those plans in dependence on His strength and submission to His will. That’s the pathway to spiritual power and blessing.

Have you made your plans for eternity? God invites you to do that. He has provided the way to heaven. Jesus said, “I am

the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). The problem that separates you from God is your sinful nature, but the Son takes care of that problem. He paid for it and bore our punishment. In His own body, He bore our sins on the cross at Calvary. It was a gift to us. Trust in Jesus Christ as your eternal Savior and receive His gift of eternal life.

¹Christian Leadership Letter, May 1973.

²Interview of Derick Sanderson on "Sixty-Minutes," Feb. 5, 1984.

³Pulpit Resource, Oct-Dec. 1978, p.18.

⁴Biblical Preaching, "The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages," Haddon Robinson, Baker Book House, p.168.