

James 4:13-17

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Preacher: Zac Skilling

[0:00] James chapter 4, verse 13. We're picking right up where we left off last week. As I prepared for the sermon this week, a song came to mind, a song that I listened to a lot in high school.

In 1978, Billy Joel, the piano man, published one of his famous songs called My Life. So you can already hear the teenage angst. This song came to mind because it's a song in which the narrator is obsessed with himself.

It's his life, and he will live it however he wants. Just a few lyrics from this song. He says, you can speak your mind, but not on my time.

He says, they will tell you you can't sleep alone in a strange place, and they'll tell you you can't sleep with somebody else. Oh, but sooner or later, you'll sleep in your own space. Either way, it's okay.

You wake up with yourself. And the chorus of the song is this. I don't need you to worry for me because I'm all right. I don't want you to tell me it's time to come home.

[1:11] I don't care what you say anymore. This is my life. Go ahead with your own life. Leave me alone. So this song relates to our text in that here we have a singer who is describing his hatred for any kind of authority whatsoever.

He never mentions God, parents, government, elders, or anything like that, but it's clear he wants to be free of any and all authority, to just do what he wants to do to live his life.

And I doubt this song is super widely known today, but the spirit of this song, right, the message, the teaching of this song is all pervasive.

It's everywhere. In fact, Billy Joel didn't come up with this idea, right? It's just him describing any other sinner's heart. Frank Sinatra had a song as well called My Life or My Way in which he basically said more or less the same thing.

He says, I don't care how any of you feel, I did it my way. A more current song that embodies these values, these values of self-love, self-autonomy, self-sufficiency, which you should really not listen to, is DNA by Kendrick Lamar.

[2:28] And I only know about that from when I was younger and caught up in things of the world. But let's just say it's so bad I wouldn't even dare quote it here. But the point is there is a whole host of songs from generation to generation that teach this lesson.

More songs than we could possibly cover today if we wanted to. And they all teach this. You are the God of your life. Now go out and take what you want, when you want it, and how you want it, and give no regard to everybody else because they're just in your way.

So this is what we will see in our text today. James is addressing believers in this text who are caught up in this worldly thinking. Believers who forget that they serve a sovereign Lord who demands their total devotion in singular worship.

And we're going to see James' prescription for this problem, which on the surface seems simple, but I think he's making a much more pervasive comment on what the Christian life ought to look like.

So let's read our text together, picking up in verse 13, chapter 4 of James. James writes, Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.

[3:49] And he just stops and he says, Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for little time and then vanishes.

Instead, you ought to say, If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. So I want to start by just noting five assumptions of these men that James addresses in verse 13.

Five assumptions of these men. So again, they say, Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.

So the first assumption is that these men assume when they will go. They assume today or tomorrow we will go. So try to think with me of all the reasons why that might not work out.

[4 : 53] Maybe the horses escape. Maybe the roads are bandit infested. Maybe the weather would not permit them. If you played the computer game Oregon Trail, maybe dysentery strikes and wins again.

Then the very fact that they say today or tomorrow suggests they don't even really know when they will try to leave. So this is James' way of mocking them.

You don't even know. And you know that you don't know. The second assumption is that these men assume where they will go. They assume they will go into such and such a town.

They have a plan. They have a charted course. They desire to go from point A to point B. What's to stop them? And again, think of the possibilities with me. Maybe they get lost on the road.

Maybe they get kidnapped on the road. I think of Joseph who never intended to go to Egypt, and yet that's where he ended up. Or Jonah who gets dragged by a great fish to the very last place he wanted to go, Nineveh.

[5 : 55] Maybe they turn back due to weariness or their desires change. Okay, so the third assumption is that these men assume how long they will remain in that city, right?

They assume they will spend a year there. And you might think, well, surely they're in control of where they'll stay, right, for how long. Once they're there, surely they can guarantee that.

What's to move them? But again, let's put on our thinking caps. Maybe a natural disaster forces them to move on. Maybe they hate it in that city, right? They thought they'd love it, but they get there.

Ah, I don't like this. Let's go. Maybe their wives want them home early. Sorry, boys. Right? And the fourth assumption is that these men assume what they will do.

They assume they will trade. So this is maybe a little easier for us all to imagine the innumerable possibilities to why they might not be able to trade. Right?

[6 : 52] Maybe someone else is already trading the same goods for a far better price. So the competition's too great. They're just not going to cut it. Maybe the political climate is not tolerant towards their business or their ethnicity or whatever.

Right? Maybe there's some sort of prejudice that's keeping them from trading in that particular city. And the fifth assumption is that they will assume what the outcome will be.

They assume we will profit. So one final time, let's consider some possibilities. Maybe the economy crashes. Maybe wars break out.

Maybe something crazy and unimaginable happens like taxes getting hiked excessively to stop cow farting. Right? And those taxes bury whatever profit they had.

And now perhaps me saying maybe so much is getting annoying and old, but it is by design. I want you all to feel the depth and the width and the breadth of the absurd presumptions on the part of these men.

[7 : 56] I want you all to hear and feel that. And I'm confident we could spend the rest of today thinking of the innumerable variables that could change their plans. So many unknowns, so much fickleness, and so much frailty.

So these men lack any sense of reality. They speak as though they are all-knowing, as if they are all-powerful and can make what happened, happen. Whatever they want to happen.

In other words, they talk as if they are sovereign. It's my life. I'll do it my way. It's in my DNA. So now you know what inspired those three songs.

But there are two realities which James gives us that should humble these men. Two realities that should humble these men. And they're found in verse 14.

James writes that, You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. So the first reality that should humble these men is that humans are not all-knowing.

[9 : 09] This idea was at the heart of our text last week, so I'll be brief here. But as shown in verse 13, James is now explicitly stating with the authority of God that we do not know what tomorrow will

bring.

We are not God that we should know or could know these things. We are not prophets or apostles with a divine insight of any kind so as to speak with authority on what tomorrow will bring.

And even the smartest people among us in fields like meteorology, economics, or politics have a lifetime record of being wrong.

They predict things and they're wrong. And again, if you want a fuller biblical teaching on this idea, go ahead and check out last week's.

But in one sentence, we are not all-knowing and that should humble us. Okay? The second reality that should humble these men is that life is fleeting.

[10:08] So the first reality, we are not all-knowing. The second reality is that life is fleeting. I'm fairly confident that this text of scripture inspired one of William Shakespeare's famous lines from Macbeth, although it has a nihilistic twist to his character.

But Macbeth says, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time. All our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. So he's reflecting that everybody will die. And then he says, out, out, brief candle. Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.

So you can see he's reflecting on the ignorance of man and their foolish pursuits in the light of the fact that they all die. At some point, in some way, in every case, everyone dies.

So whereas Shakespeare thinks of life as a fleeting candle that's snuffed in a moment, James compares it to a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

[11:19] Dr. John MacArthur draws this picture out for us well in his commentary. He says, life is as transitory as a puff of smoke from a fire, the steam that rises from a cup of coffee or one's breath, briefly visible to plan and live it out without consideration of God's will.

Or better, consider the words of the psalmist in Psalm 78, verse 39. He writes, thus he remembered that they were but flesh, that they were but human. A wind that passes and does not return.

And so think of that, a wind that's passed you by. How long does that last? Not very long. In fact, the Bible never talks about life being long, but it always expresses how quick it is, how fleeting it is, how it's over in a moment.

And every moment we live is a moment closer to this sudden conclusion. And sadly, we're all too familiar with this reality, so I won't belabor on this point longer, but I do want to ask, why would James cite this specifically?

Why would knowing we're going to die change the way we use our time and make our plans and live our lives? What is James implying here? And I think it's easy to assume that James has judgment in mind.

[12:43] He's reminding his Jewish Christian audience that when they die, they will be judged by God for the way they live their life. Luke 12, 16 through 20 records Jesus' parable that he gave in response to someone asking about splitting his brother's inheritance.

It says, And he told them a parable, saying, The land of a rich man produced plentifully. And he thought to himself, What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?

And he said, I will do this. I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grains and my goods. And I will say to my soul, So, you have ample goods laid up for many years.

Relax, eat, drink, be merry. But God said to him, Fool, this night your soul is required of you and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?

So while Jesus is making a point about the extremely low value of earthly success and possessions, James is making a point about not living as practical atheists, as if we aren't called to live for God and his will.

[13:54] But for both, the undergirding argument is that you will be judged by God with condemnation if this is the way of your life. Okay, so our first application is another implicit call to humility.

And on the one hand, I hate using this application again, because, you know, I want my sermons to be fly and on the top 100 billboard if such a thing exists. But this is the, on the much larger hand, though, I want to be faithful to the text, faithful to what James is saying.

And he's hitting this point again and again to be humble. And I think it speaks so much to how arrogant we really can be. And if you're sitting there thinking, well, this isn't really me, like, I've got that one down.

This is probably for you. Okay? And that's why James says it over and over and over again or implies it over and over and over again. So why should we be humble?

Well, there are plenty of reasons. The two reasons in this text, as I've already said, because we are not all-knowing and we will die. We will face judgment.

[15:03] So we have to be vigilant. We have to be on guard with our hearts so as to not give way to sin. And in a moment, I will share more on what this humility specifically looks like in this text.

We'll see it in verse 15. But I want to skip that verse for now and save it until the end because I think in that verse we're going to find the main thrust of this whole thing.

That is where we will find the all-pervasive but subtle comment of James which I alluded to earlier. So before we get there, I want to jump to verse 16 where we will see the heart of these sinners and the heart of these men.

So James 4, 16, he says, As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So James makes it clear what is going on in their hearts.

They are arrogant and they are committing evil or sin. They make their plans without any acknowledgement of God because they think they don't need God.

[16:10] You might call their sin the sin of self-sufficiency. I think a large part of our culture would tend to view self-sufficiency as a virtue. This idea that I danced around with earlier with the secular music, being able, competent, powerful, knowledgeable to do any and all things for your own self, for your own substance, for your own will.

And I struggle with this sin all the time, personally, when it's at its worst, I tend not to pray. And why would I? In those moments, I'm acting as though I don't need God, so why would I ask him for anything?

Which is, of course, evil. And it's the opposite of humility. Another consequence of this slippery slope of sin is that it leads to this false boasting.

It sounds something like this for all of us. Hey, everyone, look at this thing I built. Look at this money I made. Look at the sermon I preached. Look at the homeless man that I was so kind to.

It's this attitude of sounding the trumpet before ourselves to whether the work is innately evil or made evil by our prideful motive. It's an invitation to worship, but not an invitation to worship God, an invitation to worship me, myself, and I.

[17:39] But to be clear, there's nothing wrong with boasting. Boasting in our arrogance, boasting in the world, boasting in things like that is evil, of course, but we are called to boast.

So this is our second application. Boast only in the Lord. Jeremiah 9, 23-24 says, Thus says the Lord, Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.

For in these things I delight, declares the Lord. So like James, God told Jeremiah that man should put off this self-sufficient attitude and put on this humble adoration of God, that if we were to ever boast, we should boast only in the Lord, as Paul summarily says in 2 Corinthians 10, 17.

And praise God that he delights in love, justice, and righteousness. This is why we have the gospel, because God loved us even while we were yet sinners and sent his son to die for us in Romans 5, 8.

Because God justifies the ungodly which results in Christ's righteousness imputed to us. Paul says in Romans 4, 5, and to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.

[19:22] So anytime the Bible gives us a verb or an action related to salvation, God is the subject. In other words, he does everything on our behalf and despite ourselves.

Romans 8, 29-30 outlines this entire process of salvation. And notice, God is the subject, the church is the recipient, the church does nothing, God does everything.

Paul writes, for those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

And those whom God predestined, he also called. And those who he called, he also justified. And those who he justified, he also glorified.

So this is our God who does all these things. So naturally, and of course, we should boast in him. What else is there to boast about?

[20 : 25] Every other kind of boasting is evil. So we boast in the Lord and the Lord alone. Now James gives us a warning in verse 17 and I have to confess it seems somewhat broad and unrelated at first glance but I think it connects in two ways.

So just to discuss the first one for now, we have a warning and I think it's an implied call to repentance. Right? Verse 17, he says, so whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

So James is saying, hey, you know this thing is wrong so change the way you live your life. Repent. Turn around. Go the other way. He's recognizing that everyone deep down knows they are violating God's law and some of you have heard this called natural law or the law of the conscience. Whatever you want to call it, James is saying, I know that even though you live as if you were autonomous and self-sufficient, that you do in fact know there is a God whom you are trying to run from.

That deep down you are suppressing this truth. So stop pretending. Right? So we have another application from last week again. Our third application is to repent.

[21 : 44] If you've been living lately the way these assuming men have from the beginning of our text, it's time to wake up. Right? To recognize, I have been living as though God were not real.

I have been living as though I will not answer to him. I've been living as though it's my world for me to inhabit the way I want. Right? If that's been you, if that's been your plans lately, if that's been your dreams lately, that's sin and you need to repent.

I love the hymn entitled When I Survey the Wondrous Cross. It ends with this line, Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, and my all.

So that's hitting that wholeness idea that we've talked about in the weeks prior with James, that we're no longer here to live for ourselves as Christ followers, but we are here to live for him and him alone.

And so this leads us to the all-pervasive comment that our text is built around in verse 15. And this is the second way that verse 17 is tied to James' thoughts here.

[22 : 50] So this is the big sentence of today, right? The heart of this text is that James wants us to live life in such a way that we are constantly reminded of our servitude to God.

So I'll restate that. The heart of this text is that James wants us to live life in such a way that we are constantly reminded of our servitude to God.

So this is the final section for today, what the Christian life ought to look like, what it should look like.

So verse 15, James says, instead you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

So James says instead, so he's contrasting this statement with the assuming statements of the arrogant men in verse 13. He's reminding them that because God is sovereign and worthy of all worship and praise, his will alone will and should be accomplished.

God deserves this and not only does he deserve it, but he will make it happen. Paul says in Philippians 2, 9 through 11, therefore God has highly exalted Christ and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

[24 : 20] God's will not only ought to be done, but it will be done. And to clarify, James is not saying we cannot make plans. It's biblical to plan, to save, to invest, to work, to provide for your family, to make wise decisions.

He's merely speaking against this gainful, arrogant, boastful planning that neglects consideration of God and his will and his character. I just want to leave that as a clarification.

So how is this an all-pervasive comment then? What do I mean by that? I've been circling it for a while now. Well, I don't think James' main intent here is to say God is sovereign.

I think he says that here. I think he's said it elsewhere. He's made it clear. It's important and directly related to what James is saying. I also don't think he is merely saying include this statement in your life, right?

This idea that we should just throw around if the Lord wills to sound Christian, pious, or holy. Although I also think he does want us to say that more regularly.

[25 : 25] But I think James is talking more specifically about a healthy church culture, right? And this is just one specific thing he's tapping on to hit that larger picture, right?

He's writing to the church. He's telling everyone in that church to speak this way. So there are other ways to communicate if the Lord wills. It's not so much about the exact words, although that's a wonderful way to say it.

But he wants them all to speak to one another with such language. And I think it's significant that in verse 15 he says, you ought to say rather than you ought to think, believe, or know.

And don't get me wrong, we do need to know, believe, and think in this way if the Lord wills, right? We should think in those terms. That God's will should be done. That God is sovereign.

That God should have his way. But James has made clear throughout his epistle already this idea. So I think he's saying something more pervasive and it is church culture.

[26 : 33] And to be clear, I'm not talking about a church brand or a marketing strategy or anything like that. So what kind of culture am I talking about? I'm talking about the kind of culture where we are constantly reminding each other of who God is.

What he has done and what he is doing. The kind of culture that loves God and loves neighbor. And the kind of culture that daily reinforces the truth that we are God's servants.

Because we need reminders. Because we forget our place. Because we can easily lose sight of God in our life apart from our participation in the body of Christ.

And this is especially important when we are surrounded by a secular culture singing songs that teach the complete opposite. Songs like the ones I shared at the beginning.

How easy it is for us to get swept up in that line of thinking. And it's not just in songs. It's in movies, books, politics, advertisement, education, video games, you name it, it's there.

[27 : 41] And so how do you combat that worldly pervasive culture, that pervasive worldly thinking that idolizes self? I know this, you don't appeal to it like so many so-called churches are doing.

Rather you create your own pervasive culture, a resilient church culture if you will. And there are two wonderful things about this pervasive resilient church culture that I'm describing.

And I think James is touching on. One, the church is the will of our sovereign God and Christ will build his church. He says in Matthew 16, 18, Jesus says, And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.

It's emphatic. It will happen. There's no question about it. And he adds, And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Or in Philippians 1, 6, Paul says, And I am sure of this, that God who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

The salvation, the sanctification, it's all being realized. It will happen. It's emphatic. The church body will be built and the body will be sanctified.

[28 : 56] So when I'm talking about church culture, I'm talking about that sanctification being lived out by the members of the church. And the second thing is that the work is already done.

We just need to live it out and realize it. It is done because of the cross of Christ. John 19, 30, just before Christ dies on the cross, after bearing the wrath of God on behalf of the church, Christ said, It is finished.

Not fully realized, but finished nonetheless. It is only a matter of time. So what then does it look like to live out this church culture, to live among one another as brothers and sisters in Christ?

And a lot could be said here, but I'll close with this final application as a good starting point. To blow up James' words to the larger picture that I think he intended, our final application, is to use our interactions in such a way to remind each other of God and his word.

Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5, 11, Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up just as you are doing. He also says in Ephesians 5, 19, Address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart.

[30 : 26] Again, there's that totality language. So whether we are singing, talking, playing a game, or whatever, let's do so in a spirit of love with a motive to build one another up for the glory of God.

And I have to confess, I'm not the greatest at encouraging people. It's not my strength. Some of you are like me. I feel weird giving and receiving encouragements or compliments, things of that nature.

In fact, I remember calling Nathan in Louisville, letting him know that I was moving back down. And I made a great talk, caught up, you know. And at the end, he said, All right, man, that sounds great.

I love you, brother. And it felt like a ten-second pause. It was probably only three, but I just was taken off guard by that because I just don't really say that to people other than like my wife, my

parents, you know.

It's just kind of weird to me. And then I finally said, Okay, man, we'll see ya. And I took a shower. But it shouldn't be that weird for me to say.

[31 : 40] It shouldn't be weird. It shouldn't be uncomfortable. It shouldn't be unnatural. I thank God that I don't have to greet anyone with a holy kiss, as Paul said. But it shouldn't be that weird.

It should be normal. It should feel as natural as praising God or praying, eating food, drinking water. It should feel normal. And don't get me wrong, I do love all of you.

I know I've neglected the importance of saying these kind of things regularly. for all manner of foolish and petty reasons.

And I'll tell you, I think sometimes my personal excuse is, well, you just don't know that. It's easy for me to think, I play in the band, I preach, I've helped you all over the years with different things.

I've done all this stuff. So surely they know that I love them. And it's true, nothing says, I love you more than action, but it is false to think as I have.

[32 : 55] And not verbalizing these kind of things is insignificant because I'm so prone to think. And so don't fall into that snare as I have.

And so let's talk to one another in such a way that sets us apart from the world, in such a way that is loving, in such a way that sets our minds on our sovereign creator God and his word.

To that end, let's pray.