

## Do You Have A Good Plan?

### James 4:13-17

What a blessing it is to take a pause from our regular study in the book of Acts and consider for a moment some truths and challenges from God's Word as they relate to our celebration of Jayden and Elizabeth's graduating from High School. The challenges I bring to them are not for them exclusively, but indeed for anyone and everyone who would profess to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Now, I would imagine that over the past few weeks, many of you have attended any number of graduations as high schools and colleges commissioned yet another class of citizens, members of the work force, and contributors to the tax base. They have been called "world-changers;" and the hopes and aspirations for graduates are always high, as they should be. The many commencement addresses given to commemorate this occasion reflect this confidence.

We have a rather small number graduates here at Hope, a class of two. And since I was not asked to give any commencement addresses this year, I decided to give a commencement sermon. What I have to say today applies to you whether you are graduating or not. However, to our class of graduates, I offer these words of wisdom as you chart out your life course.

First, let me say congratulations to Jayden and Elizabeth. I know that you are full of promise and possibilities. One of the great things about life is that with each new day comes a new opportunity, a new chance to change and to grow, and new graces and mercies from God to meet every challenge. Traditionally, commencement addresses attempt to harness these emotions and aspirations of the graduates into some kind of charge or commission to make the world a better place. But I think the comedian Bill Cosby got it right when he said, "A word to the wise isn't all that necessary. It's the stupid ones who need the advice."

I think that Elizabeth and Jayden, along with most of us in here are educated enough to know that we do not know everything; there is much left to learn. To that end, let me ask you to crack the books yet another time. Only I would ask you to open a book of true knowledge and insight. Please open your Bible, or direct your smart phone and find the book of James. I have chosen this text because our youth group just recently finish a study through this book. The entire letter of James, who was the half brother of Jesus, is filled with profound and pithy sections like the one I am about to read. I would recommend you read the whole thing, just not right now, of course! Would you read along with me from James 4:13-17...

*[slide 02] 13 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." 14 Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. 15 Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." 16 But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. 17 Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.*

James had been addressing a number of subjects that were real life issues with his readers. Goals, life dreams, and personal pursuits were at the top of the list. Today we might call it career planning 101. What do I want to do after I graduate? What happens when I am out of school? For some today the questions might be, what plans do we make once the kids move out

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:3).

or what will I do when I retire? We all have dreams. We all have memories (along with a few nightmares) but for the most part, we still dream. We still have hopes. We still make plans. And whether we are aware of it or not, there is always something that motivates us; a guideline, principle, or value that shapes our choices, influences our decisions, and directs our wants.

Sadly, at most commencement addresses, some of the most popular bits of advice that graduates hear when considering their future are things like; “Follow your passion” and “Be true to yourself.” Well, may I say that passion is great, but let me also say that you not expect to be paid for it. Sure, it is wonderful to do what you love, but make sure you get a job. As for being true to yourself, you need to remember that what you know about yourself, apart from a relationship with Christ, is terribly limited. Yes, you may be “all grown up” and have turned into a responsible young person; but you have not arrived. Not one of us has. Others have gone before you and I charge you to seek input from others and most especially, seek constant input from God through His Word.

To than end, let us walk through our James text and consider some truths and challenges that are not only for our graduates, but for each of us who professes to know Christ. *[slide 03]*

## I. What is in your plan? (4:13)

*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.”*

Our text begins with the most emphatic of language. James is pleading with his readers, saying, “Pay attention, you who speak so confidently about the future.” It does not matter if have business savvy, a strategic planner, or someone who needs to have all his ducks in row, listen to what I have to say. You may have a plan and it may be good to plan. I will go to this college; get that job; marry this kind of person; be a millionaire by 30. There is nothing wrong with planning and you ought to make sure it is the best plan possible.

Now at first glance, this plan that James alludes to seems to have everything necessary for success. It is thought out, and perhaps even written out. Notice that there are specifics; a destination or location has been selected, **such and such a city**. There is a specific length of time determined, in this case **a year**. There is a plainly stated objective; we will **engage in some business**; and then there is a pursued outcome, to **make a profit**. This is what we will do. This is what we will accomplish. This is how it is going to work out. Our graduates may have a similar plan; “I am going to go to this school, and pursue this degree, and finish in this timeframe and then live in this city.” Beloved, positive thinking at this level sounds good, but James, as we will see, considers it presumption; and presumption, the art of assuming you can always expect certain things, equates to poor planning in James’ thinking.

So what is wrong with the plan of verse 13? It seems “good”, but we have to ask, what makes a plan truly good? For James, a good plan is to have all the pieces mentioned in verse 13. But there is one more ingredient; one more thing necessary to make this plan good. What is that addition? I entitled this first point, “what is in the plan?” but it really ought to be, “who is in the plan?” For the addition that makes every plan good is God. God and His will are to be the very center; the focal point; and that which drives every ambition and every decision. In verse 13, and too often, in many of our own plans, there was no God in the equation. There is no looking to the providence of God; no showing deference to what God may want; no awareness or submission to God’s greater purpose and His sovereign right to change anything in our plans whenever and

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"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

however He likes. Do not misunderstand me, we need to be thinking about what we want to do and to plan for it. This is not what makes a plan bad. Additionally, we sometimes begin our plans with God, which is good; but then, somewhere in the working out of the plan, we put God on the backburner and His will becomes "I will."; I will do it; I will accomplish it. Sometimes our plans start with God, but do they also depend upon God and end with God? What makes a plan bad is when God is excluded from the plan anywhere along the way.

In verse 13, each of the verbs should literally begin with "we will": **"we will go"; "[we will] spend"; "[we will] engage in business"; "[we will] make a profit."** James is making us listen as the repetition makes the point. He says that you are saying repeatedly, "This is my will..."  
*[slide 03]* This is why James will offer the correction 5-16, **15 Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." 16 But as it is, you boast in your arrogance [pretentions- pre assuming] all such boasting [bragging that you know such things]; is evil.**

*[slide 03]* Proverbs 16:9 reminds us of this, **"The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps."** What does this mean? It means that we may start in a certain direction and follow a certain path, but as most of us in here can testify, we rarely see the twists and turns that come. And when they do, we tend to complain about them rather than see them as the Lord's guidance and direction. Anything difficult or course changing we tend to see as a setback, a roadblock that keeps us from "my will." When God puts someone in our way, we that person as a hindrance or as an enemy that needs to be defeated rather than as someone put on my path by the good providence of God to teach me something.

It is interesting to me to think of all the times I started down one path only to have my course changed by another person or persons, which was really by the providence of God. Back in 1995, I received two requests from churches to come and be a pastor. I was currently serving in Bella Vista and it was obvious that God was leading me out of that ministry. One of the churches courting me was Hope and the other was a church in Arlington, Texas, very close to where my mentor was pasturing. Laura and I prayed and agonized over where to go. God had apparently opened two doors as both churches offered me a position. After praying, Laura and I concluded that it might be too hard on the people in Bella Vista if we took a ministry so close to our previous church. So after many interviews and expectations of needing to make a move to Texas we decided to accept the call to Texas. On the day I was to give my decision to the Texas church, the pastor of that church called me, very somber and disappointed. He said that after much consideration, that the board decided it would be too much to take on another staff member and after months of planning and interviews, they shut down the whole pursuit of adding staff. I could have been angry or upset with those men for making Laura and I go through all that process. On the other hand, I could see it as the hand of God directing me to Hope, where I have now ministered for nearly 17 years.

Beloved, we can plan and plan, but in the end we must never forget that God is in control, and His agenda is both bigger and better than our own. Our plans need to begin with God, continue with God and end with God. If you believe He loves you, then there is nothing that comes across the path that is intended for anything but your benefit, not matter how hard it might seem. It may be nothing else but to keep your eyes and heart fixed on Jesus. *[slide 04]*

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

## II. Why do we need God in our plans? (4:14-17)

*14 Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. 15 Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." 16 But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. 17 Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.*

Why do we need God in our plans? That sounds like a silly question to ask, does it not? Why do we need God in our plans? But how do you answer the question? Why do you need God in your plans? What difference can He and does He make in the equation of your plans? In the remaining verses of our text, I would have you note three reasons given as to why we need God in our plans. Maybe you are already keenly aware of this; maybe you have rarely considered such things before, but remember that James is actually rebuking his hearers for not considering these three things in their planning. I will offer these reasons to include God in the form of three questions: *[slide 04]*

### 1. Who knows tomorrow? (4:14a)

*Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.*

While we may each have an idea, and sometimes even a pretty good idea of what might happen tomorrow, we are also painfully aware that days are often interrupted. Many times they are interrupted with benign or unimportant things like; realizing you are out of pop-tarts this morning so you will have to eat cereal; or getting into your car to find that the first thing you must do is go to the gas station. Sometimes the interruptions are good; the boss calls you in to give you a raise; a friend calls to invite you for dinner. And sometimes the interruptions are devastating; the car breaks down; the doctor calls with the test results; there is a death. The truth of the matter is that not one of us knows with certainty what tomorrow holds.

Our text could read, "*you do not have it in your mind capacity to truly know what tomorrow will hold.*" We have no certainty as to what kind of life is to be ours. I became a Christian at 17 and was accepted that same year to the University of California at San Diego into their Biochemical Engineering program. I was convinced that God had saved me and called me into medical research to make lots of money, which of course I would then give to the church generously. But I did not know what my life would be like? Math and sciences that had come to me so easily were now my nemeses. God was closing doors and at the time, it was devastating. I knew what I was going to do! According to James, that is presumption, and it is evil and utterly ridiculous to speak with such false confidence about what "I will" to do; especially when I do not even know what tomorrow will be like.

Why do I need God in my plans? Listen to what the LORD Himself says to His people Israel about plans. In Isaiah 46:8-10, the LORD declares: *[slide 05]*

***8 Remember this, and be assured; Recall it to mind, you transgressors. 9 "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, 10 Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure';***

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"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

God works all things out according to His good pleasure. In other words, while tomorrow may be uncertain to me, it is not uncertain to God. He knows the end from the beginning. This is why I need God in my plans, because He knows tomorrow. May I ask you, is your life different today than it was this time last year? Did you even imagine all the changes that came to pass this past year? God did not imagine them; He brought them to pass. He holds our lives, our todays and our tomorrows. I may be uncertain about my tomorrow, but I need not be uncertain about my God and His plans for me if I belong to Christ. As Katharina A. Von Schlegel so poetically penned it: <sup>[slide 06]</sup>

*Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side.  
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.  
Leave to thy God to order and provide;  
In every change, He faithful will remain.  
Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend  
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

Some of you have commented to me about the imprecision of weather forecasters in predicting the weather. Yet how often are we nothing more than weather forecasters with our lives. We are even more limited at forecasting our future, let alone dictating tomorrow, than the meteorologist is forecasting the weather. Let us include God because we know that He holds the future. Let us compare our plans and hopes with His revealed will. And even then to remember that whatever comes to pass is for our good and His glory. <sup>[slide 07]</sup>

## **2. What is the length of life? (4:14b)**

*You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.*

Sometimes we might lay in our beds at night, unable to sleep and we think that the night is never going to end. We find ourselves at work, looking at the clock and think that our shift will never be over. We wade through homework or some project and cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel, wondering if we will ever get it finished. At such times, we might be tempted to think that life drags along.

Yet the truth of the matter is declared here at the end of verse 14, that life is short, it is like that vapor you see rise out of the tea kettle, so mysteriously rising and twisting, doing its dance and then....gone! The Bible is full of pictures and metaphors depicting the shortness of life. Just a few examples: <sup>[slide 08]</sup>

### **Job 14:1**

***Man, who is born of woman, is short-lived and full of turmoil.***

### **Psalms 39:5**

***Behold, You have made my days as handbreadths, And my lifetime as nothing in Your sight; Surely every man at his best is a mere breath.***

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

**1 Peter 1:24**

**For, "ALL FLESH IS LIKE GRASS, AND ALL ITS GLORY LIKE THE FLOWER OF GRASS. THE GRASS WITHERS, AND THE FLOWER FALLS OFF**

In our James text, we learn that life is like a morning mist, a fog that burns off by the coming of the noon sun. We are reminded that life is fleeting and momentary. Everyone, take a deep breath! Now exhale! That is it, that is your life in comparison to the eternity of God. But we still do not get it, particularly if we are young. Remember when Summer vacation seemed so wonderfully long? Remember when a week was longer than you could wait? But James wants us to know the truth. For if we allow ourselves to think about it from our perspective in this moment, we might believe we have forever. God tells us differently. Who are you going to believe?

And so, what is the point? Jayden and Elizabeth; and beloved, if you desire your days to count for something; then you must start counting your days. I have been a pastor here for almost 17 years, and if God would allow me, I will be here another 17 or more, but I know my days are numbered and I desire much more for the glory of God than what I have accomplished, so I have to count my days and make each one count for the glory of God. At the end of each of our lives, we do not want it to be said, "She had so much potential but never got started!" Rather, may we want it said of us, "He was taken for us too soon, but He lived each day to the glory of God. Let us be resolved not to waste another day. May we resolve with Jonathan Edwards, the great 18<sup>th</sup> century preacher, "**Resolved, that I will live so as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.**"

Again, the point is not that it is wrong to plan. In fact, we need to plan, but our plans must include God who holds our tomorrows and holds the span of our lives in His hands, which brings us to the third reason why we need God in our plans. <sup>[slide 09]</sup>

**3. "Today" is a gift from God? (4:17)**

*Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.*

As we come to the end of our text, I would have you notice that James offers us information on something that is truly in our control. We might not know what tomorrow brings; nor do we know the length of our days, but we do have control over the choices we make and the things we do today! James ends this section with these words, "*Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.*" If you would allow me to say this another way, "Do not allow what you can't know (tomorrow) and what you can't control (the length of your life) keep you from doing what God has said is good and right today!

To put it in very stark terms; if you know you need to pray today, then do not say, I will pray tomorrow. If you know you need to be a witness of Christ today, then do not say, I will do it tomorrow. Some of you know that we visit a man over at Ashley Health and Rehab by the name of Steve. Steve loves to say that he want to make a bunch of circular disks out of wood and write the words on it, "To It". Then people would have a coin that was a "Round To It". We like to say or think we will get around to it, but we rarely do. We must remember that sin is not limited to the things we do against God's will, we call those sins of commission, the sins we commit; but according to James, sin is equally found doing nothing when we should have done something for God. At such times, we have wasted our today, which is the only thing we really have, the now.

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"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

We must choose to give all we have to God and for His kingdom now; to put everything on the line for God today. Do you choose to obey Him?

Maybe you have heard this before, but I came across this and thought it illustrated the point of verse 17 well, putting our days in financial terms: *[slide 10]*

- Yesterday is a canceled check
- Tomorrow is a promissory note
- Today is the only cash you have to spend

There is nothing we can change about our yesterday. And our tomorrow is uncertain in our vision. But today we determine; today we decide if we will follow God and seek His will before our own. Do you see that this is truly the only thing that is in your control? Everything else is in the hands of God.

And so, my charge to you, Jayden and Elizabeth; my charge to each of us here this morning is as simple as this:

- Cast yourself into the constant care of your Heavenly Father.
- Make every effort to know and obey the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is your today and if you focus on these things, whatever God may bring to pass in your future, whether it appears at the time as good or bad, will be understood as for your good to the glory of God.

A noted young concert violinist was asked the secret of her success. "Planned neglect," she replied. Then she explained, "Years ago I discovered that there were many things demanding my time. After washing breakfast dishes, I made my bed, straightened my room, dusted the furniture, and did a host of other chores. I then turned my attention to violin practice. That system, however, failed to accomplish the desired results. So I realized I had to reverse things. I deliberately set aside everything else until my practice period ended. That program of planned neglect accounts for my success!"

May God be first, middle and end of your plans. Sometime that will mean planned neglect of other things until you have accomplished what you know God called you to first. *[slide 11]* As Jesus said in Matthew 6:33,

*But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*

## *Soli Deo Gloria*

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