

Finding and Doing God's Will—James 4:13-17

Trying to fill God's shoes will always be a bad fit. Wearing our own shoes and walking in His steps is always a better way to live. Many people live with no thought of God's steps in mind. The culture is filled with statements that declare people's rights to do this and that, as if they were the final authority for their lives. "We have a right to decide our own destiny and choose what is best for us..." so the line goes.

If any of us were to challenge this way of thinking, we would immediately be asked, "What's wrong with choosing our own destiny? It's my right to choose what I think is best—nobody can live my life better than I can!" Oh, really?

In the Christian community of believers, our actions and attitudes are not always much different. Take the business person as an example. How should a Christian business person's life differ from that of his or her non-Christian counterpart? In James 4:13-14, we find some words addressed to the wealthy merchants of the first century, who traveled all over the ancient world buying and selling in the major trade centers of that day. Surely they would be representatives of Christ wherever they went!

Apparently not. Look at James 4:13-17.

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 and brag. All such boasting is evil. 17 Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

The primary context: a businessman or woman.

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Written by Bob Stone

This person is preparing to move to a particular city; predetermining how much time they will need; prioritizing what they will do; and projecting the result: making money. James writes to them, "Listen." In other words, "Listen up; I have something to say to you." Before we get to what he wants to say, how does this command to listen apply to us today? We all need to listen because we do this type of planning every day! We all make decisions about

- the location,
- the timing,
- the activities, and
- the results we desire to achieve!

The problem being pointed out here is subtle.

Look closely again at v. 13. It isn't the *planning* that James is calling sin. (The sin he wants us to avoid is presumptuous or arrogant planning.) There are several things, in fact, that he was *not* calling sin.

- It isn't wrong that a person is in business and working hard (see 2 Thess. 3:6-15).
- It isn't improper that a person is going to make a profit. If a businessman's goal is to glorify God and serve people, there is nothing wrong with a profit.
- It is not a sin to plan. In fact, in a moment we'll see from Scripture the encouragement to each one of us to plan. It is essential in order to move ahead in life.

The problem James is correcting—in his day and ours—is when we don't acknowledge God's right to direct our lives.

James is saying that it's a sin when our underlying attitude is, "I'm in control of my destiny" (see v. 13). It appears the statements in verse 13 are portraying an attitude of arrogance that says, "I know all I need to know." (This attitude is so common.) In fact, in the important everyday decisions of our lives, it doesn't even occur to us that God should be asked His will! Why do we act this way?

We often separate the spiritual and secular issues from each other. Often we bother to pray and communicate with God only when it is overtly a spiritual issue, e.g., asking God's help when we are in a crisis. We should be asking about God's will in the everyday decisions of our life.

- **Housewife**, "do you hear this?"
- You who are **working** in the marketplace, "do you hear this?"
- **Students**, "do you hear this?"
- **Parents/couples**, "do you hear this?"
- **Singles** do you hear this?"
- **Unemployed**, "do you hear this?"?

Whatever our occupation or station in life, **do we hear James' words?** If we are trying to fill God's shoes and run our own lives, it's a bad fit!

James points out two things in verse 14 which we must keep in mind in all planning.

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1. We have inadequate knowledge of the future.

v. 14a—*"Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow."* (See Prov. 27:1.) We can't predict the future. We can do some pretty impressive things (split atoms, transplant organs, program computers, and explore outer space), but when it comes to tomorrow, our level of knowledge plunges to zero. We have no absolute knowledge of tomorrow.

1. Second, we have insufficient time. v. 14b—*"What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."*
The Bible likens life to

- a declining shadow—Psalm 102:11; Job 14:2
- a whiff of breath—Job 7:7
- a vanishing cloud—Job. 7:9
- a wildflower—Psalm 103:15. (Life is portrayed as short !)

Why don't we understand the shortness of life? There are a number of reasons:

- We don't have an eternal perspective—we are thinking only of this life and things that won't last. It's like eating cotton candy.
- Since we don't store up our treasures for eternity, our minds are on earthly things and not eternal treasure—Matt. 6:19-21.
- We also don't understand the frailty of life, e.g., a debilitating illness, accidental death, the loss of a job, the return of Christ.
- In summary, we are frail and transient, and few of us plan to die!

Contrast that attitude with those in poverty areas, or who are experiencing wars or terminal sickness. They think like vv. 13-14. They have seen death, so they live one day at a time.

The Positive Solution is conditional planning.

The precondition is v. 15—*"Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'"* This is where our title comes in: "Planning

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with a Big IF in Mind." We must plan with conditions; we should have a contingency in mind. Before we get to the planning, let me point out that when we properly say, "If it is the Lord's will," we must also understand what God's will is not:

It's not passive surrender.

Some pray the Lord's prayer, "Thy will be done," basically lying down in a passive resignation to God's will. They are really praying, "Whatever You want to do in me is okay, because I can't do anything else anyway. If I were stronger, maybe I'd assert my will, but You are too strong for me." There is a need for surrender, but not because we feel we have no other choice. There is no victory for the kingdom of God when we say, "Thy will be done," in a joyless, tired, weary, defeated, passive, "unthrilled" and fatalistic manner. The prayer Jesus prayed in the garden was not passive surrender to God.

It's not bitter surrender/just being plain mad.

Many accept God's will, but do so with bitterness and anger. These are people who are just plain mad; they can't escape the inevitable. Why would they be this way? They don't understand who God is. John MacArthur says, "Some people don't understand God is a loving Father, that God cares, that God's heart breaks over the pain of man, that God loves so much that He died in the midst of His love. Some think God is an oppressive, dictatorial, overbearing, selfish and cruel individual"—John MacArthur, *The Disciples' Prayer*, Word of Grace Pub., 1981, pp. 38-39.

William Barclay echoes this:

"Man may submit to God's will because he has accepted the fact that God is too strong for him and that it is useless to batter his head against the walls of the universe"—William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Westminster Press, 1975, p. 212.

"I read that Beethoven died all alone; and it is said that when they found his body, his lips were drawn back in a snarl and his fists were clenched as if he were shaking his fists in the very face of God"—Barclay, *Ibid*, p. 213.

We need to examine ourselves:

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- Where are we coming from?
- Do we have clenched teeth and some bitterness about what is obviously God's will?
- Do we think God is cruel, bitter, angry, and uncaring? Then we don't know the true God! His will is good, acceptable and perfect.
- Is it possible we have not complied with the conditions of God's will as outlined in Rom. 12:1-2?

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship. 2] Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

God's will is not passive surrender, nor is it bitter surrender. There are also those who believe God's will is something they design for themselves and demand from God. That's not it, either.

It's not self-centered surrender.

This sounds like a contradiction in terms, and it is; but this is where some people find themselves today. Look again at the Lord's prayer where we are instructed to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The little word "as" has been misrepresented by some. They say, "There is no sickness in heaven, therefore, if we are really praying God's will, there will be no sickness in our lives on earth."

What's wrong with that logic? Sounds like it should be right? Not really! Using that kind of logic (on earth "as" it is in heaven), we would begin to pray for 24 hours of daylight with no darkness, since heaven has only light. Jesus didn't follow this line of thinking; there are no crucifixions in heaven, yet Jesus prayed in Gethsemane that He would have strength to face the cross.

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The little word "as," then, does not carry the idea of God's will being expressed now, in the same manner as in heaven. It is referring to the same kind of obedience to God's will on earth, as it is in heaven. It is sad that we have to defend the Lord's words, "Your will be done..." but necessary, because people have twisted Scripture to deny the believer the right to trust that God's will be accomplished in answer to believing prayer.

It is common in some circles to simply announce to God what His will is and claim it. The problem is, we make God our servant, and He must bow to our preconceived ideas of what His will is! Our prayers become self-centered and are not fully submitted to Him.

It is active and joyful surrender.

(See teaching: ["Finding God's Will."](#))

The planning mandate

With the big "IF" in mind, we need to see that Scripture encourages us to plan ahead. (*"If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."*)

) Here are some helpful questions to ask and answer as we prepare to plan.

1. **Is planning important?** Proverbs 14:15—"*...a prudent man gives thought to his steps.*" (See also 16:9; 16:1; 24:3-4.)

2. **Why is it important to look ahead?** To avoid danger—Prov. 22:3; 27:12; make

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the most of every opportunity—Eph. 5:15-17; and make sure our resources are allocated according to our priorities—1 Cor. 16:1-2.

3. Can't we just trust God for the future? Proverbs 19:2 says, *"Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise."*
Prov. 14:8 says, *"The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways."*

4. Should we keep working on our plan if it isn't succeeding? Proverbs 20:18 says, *"Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance."*
Proverbs 16:9 says, *"In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps."*

For further study: James 4:13-16; 1 Cor. 4:19; Rom. 15:22-33; 1 Cor. 16:7; Acts 16:6-10; 20:22-23; Psalm 37; Prov. 19:21. Pay attention to Paul's way of determining God's will—Acts 16.

1. What should we do once we have determined a plan? Psalm 37:5 says, *"Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this."*
Proverbs 16:3-4a says, *"Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed. The Lord works out everything according to His ends..."*
(See again Prov. 16:9.)

2. What attitude should we have as we plan? Isn't it presumptuous to plan? Shouldn't we just sit back and wait for the Spirit to direct? Listen how the men of Scripture chose to plan and participate in the process:

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- 1 Thess. 3:1-2—"*...we thought it best...*"
- Phil. 2:25-26—"*...I thought it necessary...*"
- 1 Cor. 16:3-4—"*If it is fitting...*"
- Acts 6:2—"*It would not be right...*"
- Acts 15:28-29—"*It seemed good...*"
- 1 Cor. 4:19—"*But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing...*"
- 1 Cor. 16:7—"*...I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.*" (See also Acts 16:6-10; 20:22-23; Rom. 15:22-33.)

1. **What should we be prepared for as we begin to follow the plan?** If we plan with the big "IF" in mind, we should expect God to speak to us in many ways, to affirm us or to adjust us.

In other words, we should be prepared for the possibility of God breaking into our lives and sovereignly, even radically changing us and our plan. If we fail to take God into account when making our plans, however, we will enter into a temptation and evil described in 4:16.

The Potential Temptation

v. 16—"*As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.*"

A paraphrase of boasting and bragging is captured by the Phillips translation: "...you get a certain pride in yourself in planning your future with such confidence." This is the "pride of life," an arrogant sense of self-sufficiency and self-importance that John says is characteristic of the world—1 John 2:16. (See also Rom. 1:29c-30; 2 Tim. 3:2.)

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People are not only leaving God out of their planning, but the essence of the sin is that they brag about it as well—"I take center place, in the place of God." This kind of boasting is evil.

Conclusion

This section closes with a sweeping statement with general application to the Christian life, but also applies especially to vv. 13-16. v. 17—*"Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."*

James wants each one of us to know that our futures are in the hands of God, and if we refuse to acknowledge this instruction, we sin—v. 17. Or in the words of v. 16, if we plan without making room for God in our lives, it is boasting and bragging; it is an act of evil arrogance.

In other words, if we don't acknowledge God in the planning process—consulting, praying, asking, etc.—we sin. So what is being called for?

To know good

v. 17—*"Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do..."* Sin is not only what I do, but what I don't do... the sins of omission and commission. How can we be sure we don't commit these sins? We must learn to be adept at knowing God's heart and His plan by being students of the Word, and by being consistent and sincere in praying the Lord's prayer. Knowing, however, is not all that is needed.

To do good

v. 17—*"Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."* This is not the time to get the last drop of pleasure out of life while there is still time; for inactivity and waiting for God to do something. This is the time to do good, i.e., the will of God.

