

**13–14 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. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.**

It seems clear that James’ focus is now particularly upon those among the believing community who are more wealthy than the average person. They seem to be the well-to-do merchants who have professed faith in Yeshua and who are part of the believing community.

Though continuing a similar theme in 5:1–6 by directing his words to the wealthy, in this later context it seems quite certain that he has unbelievers in view, for he pronounces a verdict of condemnation upon “the rich.” It may well be that he addresses in this latter context those who have employed members of the believing community but have not dealt faithfully with them. They are gaining their wealth by defrauding their workers.

In our current verses, however, he urges those who are merchants and thus generally more wealthy than others, to acknowledge the Lord’s sovereignty in their lives, recognizing that it is by God’s providence that their plans would come to fruition. Further, in the following verses of our context James makes it clear that those merchants he is here addressing know what is right and pleasing to God and how they therefore are to submit to the will of God in all of life, including how they conduct their business.

The opening “Come now” (*Ἄγε νῦν*, *age nun*) is bold and confrontational, similar to our modern phrase “come on now!” He is requiring his readers to ask deep, heartfelt questions about how they view life and how they live it in light of the fact that a person who has professed belief in Yeshua as the promised Messiah and Savior ought always to view their life and work as entirely dependent upon God. It is God Who supplies the means to engage in one’s daily work, for He is the very source of one’s whole physical being and life. This He has made known in His word, clearly revealing His utter sovereignty and providence over all the affairs of mankind.

... *“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.”* – James begins with “tomorrow” and extends the immediate to the distant future of “a year.” In this he emphasizes that even the immediate as well as the extended future must be viewed by the believer as fully controlled and given by God. James is not in any way discouraging or speaking against making

plans, something every person engaged in any enterprise must do if he or she is to be successful in their given business. But what is the point James is emphasizing? It is what he has already taught us in the opening chapter of this epistle:

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. (James 1:17)

And this includes those “common” things we might take for granted, like our ability to breath, to see, to hear, and to maintain our lives. What James is teaching us here is quite clear: to live our lives as though our every breath is not a gift from God is to live in the realm of arrogance and pride rather than in humble humility, acknowledging that all the good that is in our lives is given to us by God’s grace and love.

Paul stated this as he confronted the philosophers on the Areopagus and pointed them to recognize the God of Israel as the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of mankind:

...and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist.... (Acts 17:26–28)

And Yeshua affirms the same truth about Himself as He taught His disciples:

I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. (Jn 15:5)

The point James is making is quite clear: as we make plans for the future, whether for the near or distant future, we must always have in our perspective that we are not ultimately in control of our future but God is. We cannot and must not presume upon the future, but we must consistently submit our lives to our loving God and Savior, Who has the whole world and all who live in it in His hand.

...*Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.* – God alone can see the future. Surely we can consider the common “cause and effect” in our world, but even in this we must admit that only God sees

and knows the future, for He is ordering all things together in His divine plan to bring about His ultimate purposes.

...*You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.* – Some may consider the words of James here to be “morbid” or “pessimistic.” But they are neither, for James, being carried along by the Spirit as he wrote these inspired words, intends to “wake us up” from the anesthesia of our sinful flesh and recognize that our lives, the very breath we breathe, is a gift from God and that when we consider our lives against the scope of eternity, we are, as he says, “just a vapor” that vanishes.<sup>1</sup>

The biblical worldview is that “we receive another day neither by natural necessity, nor by mechanical law, nor by right, nor by courtesy of nature, but only by the covenanted mercies of God.”<sup>2</sup>

**15 – Instead, *you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.”***

In v. 13, if one were to read the Greek literally, the verbs would be: “we will go,” “we will stay a year,” “we will engage in business,” and “we will make a profit.” Everything is “we will, we will, we will, we will.” This graphically emphasizes the arrogance of the fleshly mind that considers oneself to be in control of one’s future. James makes it clear that this ought not to be the mindset of the child of God, for the one whose life has been redeemed by God’s grace and who is in the process of becoming more and more like Yeshua, must constantly have the perspective of the truth that God is both the giver and sustainer of life, and that only by His grace and His sovereign will are we enabled to be living witnesses of His love and greatness. Indeed, the growing desire of the maturing child of God is to know and live out the truth that all of life is a gift from God to be lived out for His glory. An old hymn says this well:

- 
- 1 Cp. Ps 39:6, 11; 102:3; Hos. 13:3. Note also the word “vapor” (*ἀτμίς, atmis*) can have the sense of “smoke,” blown quickly away by the wind. It is found only one other time in the Apostolic Scriptures, Acts 2:19 (quoting Joel 2:30 [3:3 in the Hebrew and Lxx]).
  - 2 Stulac, *James in the IVP Commentary*, p. 160, quoting Motyer, *The Bible Speaks Today*, (IVP, 1985), p. 162.

My times are in thy hand; my God, I wish them there;  
My life, my friends, my soul, I leave entirely to thy care.

My times are in thy hand, whatever they may be;  
Pleasing or painful, dark or bright, as best may seem to thee.  
My times are in thy hand; why should I doubt or fear?  
My Father's hand will never cause his child a needless tear.

My times are in thy hand, Jesus the Crucified;  
Those hands my cruel sins had pierced are now my guard  
and guide.<sup>1</sup>

Only as the believer grows in faith is he or she more and more able to commit every aspect of life into the hands of the Lord, that is, to constantly know and be settled in the all-encompassing and glorious truth that God “causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” (Rom 8:28)

**16–17 But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.**

Here James reminds us of the stern warning he gave in v. 6 of our chapter when he quoted Prov 3:34, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” In our current text he addresses the wealthy merchants who, though apparently confessing faith in Yeshua, were still acting with pride over their business accomplishments. They apparently saw their wealth as that which they rightfully earned through their own strength and business intellect.

James has already taught us that there is a place for “boasting” in the life of the believer, but this is to boast about the goodness of God and to give Him the glory for the unspeakable gift of salvation, for as we submit our lives to the Lord, even when in humble circumstances, we affirm that we are seated with Yeshua in the heavenlies.

But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; (James 1:9)

Here, in 1:9, the Greek word *καυχάομαι* (*kauchaomai*), translated “to glory,” is the same word found in our current verse, translated by the English

1 Hymn by W. F. Lloyd. Source: *Trinity Hymnal*, #684.

“boast.” Thus, to “glory in his high position” (1:9) is to “boast about the goodness of God.”

However, once again James makes it very clear that to boast in one’s own achievements is to be arrogant and that such self-centeredness is evil, for it accredits to oneself what rightfully belongs to God.

... *Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.* – Here James is not warning us about the sin of commission, i.e., when we willfully do that which is sin, but he warns us about the sin of omission, that is, when we fail to do what is right and particularly when we fail to give God the glory in all aspects of our lives. It is in the “not doing it” that constitutes sin, and what is it that, in this context, is the sin of omission? It is failing to give God the glory for all things, and to live in such a way that even when we encounter difficulties, we are able to trust and rely upon God knowing that whatever comes into our lives is meant for our good and His glory, and thus glorifying Him by trusting Him and His promises.

In summarizing James 4:13–16, Kistemaker writes:

The proverbial saying conveys a stern warning against the sin of neglect. Not the sin of commission but the sin of omission is mentioned. That particular sin raises its ugly head when man ignores God, makes plans, is successful, and brags about his achievements.<sup>1</sup>

---

1 Simon Kistemaker, *James & I–III John* (Baker, 1986), p. 150.