

Vapor Trails: Planning Without God

James 4:13-17

We have all had plans that have gone horribly wrong. There are times when our best intentions, our best plans, and our best efforts combine to create complete and total disaster. And that doesn't even include our worst intentions, our worst plans, and our worst efforts. If you know what Pinterest is you know that it's a place you can find all sorts of creative and wonderful ideas. But even the best ideas don't always work out.

(Show Pictures of Pinterest project flopping completely.)

- Cookie Monster cupcakes
- Super model whipping her wet hair
- Door wreath gone bad
- Melted crayon art
- Pumpkin child

If only such disasters were limited to Pinterest. Unfortunately, we all have our share of good ideas gone bad, horrible mistakes we would love to take back. For me, personally, it was my first and only pair of parachute pants.

But in James 4:13-17, our Lord's brother says the worst is when we make plans without first seeking God's will. Last week, in the first half of chapter 4, we saw how when we focus only on what we want it causes fights and quarrels among us. James is still building on this theme of putting our own desires first. When what we want is most important, we're not just putting ourselves in front of others, we're putting ourselves in front of God. And when we put what we want in front of what God wants, we are putting our faith back inside the box. We're not living out what we believe.

The problem with this James says, is that our plans, our will, our wants, rarely work out the way we think they will. Our best laid plans, James says, are merely vapor trails, if we aren't putting God first in our lives.

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 in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.

Our culture praises the self-sufficient, the self-determined. We are told to chase our dreams, follow our heart and do what we want, to answer to no one but ourselves. We have bought into the

philosophy which was so eloquently stated by William Ernest Henley in his poem *Invictus*. His verse ends with this triumphant line, “It matters not how strait the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.”

That is the attitude of our culture. I make my own plans. I chart my own course. It’s my life and I can do what I want. Even as Christians we often think in this way. We plan our lives and we chart our course as though our will is the only thing that matters. We choose our college and build our careers based on what we want. We date and marry based on what we want. We make career decisions and choose homes based on what we want. We make our plans without ever considering what God wants.

It’s not surprising when people in the world make plans without ever considering what God wants, but it’s tragic when Christians act as though God does not exist. This is what Pastor Craig Groeschel of Life Church calls Christian atheism. We believe and know God is real, but live and act as though He isn’t. We drive through life as if we know exactly where we’re going and what’s around the next bend, when our GPS is flashing “Turn Around” “Turn Around!” James tells us in our text that this is extremely foolish, and that God should always be at the center of our plans.

I. The Foolishness of Planning Without God

Let’s look first at the foolishness of planning without God. James doesn’t use the word foolishness in our text, but he takes on the tone of a parent correcting a child for doing something boneheadedly stupid. His first words, “Now listen,” carry a rather sharp edge in the original Greek. It is the brusque, insistent tone of mom telling her child, “Now, you listen to me, mister.”

Why is James so concerned? Some in the church were making big plans without ever considering what God wanted. *“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.’”*

James isn’t against doing business. He’s not against making money. He’s not against building a successful career. However, James is saying that these things cannot become the all-consuming, self-assured directive of our lives. James is against charting the course of our lives without God being the GPS. God needs to be the very first consideration in all of our plans at home, work and church, not the overlooked final consideration. Where I live? Where I work? What I say yes to? What I say no to? Is God at the top of my list?

As we continue in our text, verse 14 lays out several reasons why planning without God is so foolish. *“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”.*

A. Because Life is Uncertain

The first reason planning without God is foolish is because life is uncertain. *"You do not even know what will happen tomorrow."* How many of you had weeks this week that went exactly as planned. Things happen almost every day that are unexpected and unplanned. We have no idea what's going to happen tomorrow. Sometimes, these are major, life changing events.

There is not guarantee we will even have a tomorrow. In reality our plans, are our best guess. Something could happen today that will totally rearrange everything you had planned for tomorrow, or this week, or this month, or this year, or the rest of your life. Now should our plans be based on our best guess, where we have no knowledge of tomorrow, or based on God who knows all things?

B. Because Life is Frail (Use a spray bottle of water)

Life isn't just uncertain. It is frail. Our lives are so fragile, so delicate, this is one of the reasons why life is so uncertain. *"What is your life?"* James asks, *"You are a mist."* The word James uses here was used to refer to all sorts of things. Mist, a vapor, smoke, a cloud that appears for a little while, and then disappears. It is there for only moment. You blow your breath into the morning cold, and for a moment you see your breath, but as quickly as it appears, it fades from view. You pour a fresh cup of hot coffee. The steam rises from the cup, but quickly dissipates. Our lives are just a mist. It glistens for a moment, but then it is gone. We may think if we just glisten bright enough, but in the end all of life is frail.

We have all had that moment of looking at someone in a casket in a funeral home and thinking, "I just talked to him on Tuesday. He seemed fine." "I sat next to her at church on Sunday. I never imagined, I'd never see her again."

When we're young we think we're indestructible, but life has a way of stripping away that façade. We think we're in good health, when all the sudden the doctor says something like, "It's malignant," or "It's inoperable," "You will have to live with this pain the rest of your life," "You will never walk again," or "you only have 6 months to live." We think we have a good job and our career path is on a good trajectory, and then your company loses its biggest contract, downsizing happens, the government passes crippling regulations, or your business partner pulls out. You think you have plenty in savings and in retirement investments, but then the market tanks and you lose half of everything, or you discover your financial advisor was funneling your money into a crooked Ponzi scheme, and you got in too late on the deal.

C. Because Life is Brief

Life is uncertain. Life is Frail, and thirdly, James says, planning without God is foolish because life is brief. *"You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."* You are there one moment and gone the next. A couple of years ago I read about the death of Jiroemon Kimura. He was the last

living person born in the 1800s. Mr. Kimura was born April 19, 1897. The former postman died in 2014 in a hospital bed at the ripe old age of 116. 116 years. Wow that seems really old. Although it seems less and less so all the time. One thing I've realized as I've gotten older, is that life moves faster and faster. I'm more than half-way to 80 and the 2nd half of the journey seems to be a whole lot faster than the first.

It's not a long time at all. Psalm 90:10 says, *"Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away."* Maybe James had read this passage in his morning devotions, because he's making the same point here. Life is uncertain, but death is not. George Bernard Shaw once observed, "The statistics on death are quite impressive. One out of one people die." You would think the fact that not only is death certain, but that it could happen at any moment, would cause people to examine their lives with sober judgment, but they don't. They go on as though they will never have to give account. As our Lord and Savior warned us in Matt. 25, *"Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour."*

Even the longest, richest, fullest life is over in a flash. Often times, it's over, even more quickly than that. I met Gary and Betty at about One O'clock in the morning. I got a call from a family who had visited our church only twice. They called me because their neighbors just found out their son had died. I climbed out of bed and changed out of my PJs and headed to a home of a family I had never met before on the worst night of their lives.

Their 21 year old son had stepped in front of an 8,000 ton freight train. This family had it all. He was a successful executive at a large corporation. They lived in their dream house in a fantastic neighborhood. Their children had all excelled in school and sports. But their son suddenly found life worth not living. All at once Gary and Betty had to face just how uncertain, frail, and brief life is.

Every hope, every dream, every plan they had, came crashing down that night. It was also the first time in years that they turned on their GPS. No, not their Global Positioning System, but their God Positioning System. Over the next few months, Gary and Betty began to put the pieces back together, but with God at the heart of their plans.

Going through life without your GPS is boastful arrogance, James says in verse 16. "As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil." When we plan without God, we are setting ourselves up above God. The word James uses for arrogant here originally applied to the ancient equivalent of a snake-oil salesman. These were travelling hucksters who made boastful but empty claims about their miracle cures and other feats of wonder that they would sell you for the right price. It came to apply to braggarts of all sorts.

I can do what I want. I can accomplish anything I set my mind to. I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul. How arrogant of us. On June 11, 2001 Timothy McVeigh was executed for his role in the Oklahoma City bombing. McVeigh chose Henley's *Invictus* as his final statement prior to execution. His last words were, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." How arrogant. How foolish.

II. Keeping God at the Center of All Our Plans

James isn't against making plans. He isn't against preparing for the future. He isn't even against making plans to make money. Joseph was praised in the Old Testament for using Egypt's seven years of plenty to prepare for seven years of famine. There is great wisdom there. Proverbs 6:6-8 urges us to observe the ways of the ant, and how it prepares for the winter. Proverbs 13:16 says, "*A wise man thinks ahead; a fool doesn't, and even brags about it!*" Other proverbs call to make plans with wisdom and counsel. Even Jesus praised our ability to count the cost of a project and making sure we had enough money to complete it.

James isn't telling us to fly through life by the seat of our pants, to make it up as we go along. He's not telling us to make no plans or preparations, and God will just provide everything. One of the primary ways God provides is through our wise plans and wise preparations. James is telling us not to map out our lives without our GPS, without our God Positioning System.

God needs to be the first and primary consideration in all of our plans. Look at verse 15, "*Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'*" You see we still make plans, but we always subject them first to the will of God. What He wants comes first. Every plan and purpose we have, needs to be first subjected to His will. It's contingent on His plan.

It's not enough to ask, does this make financial sense, does this make family sense, does this make career sense. We need to ask first, "does this make spiritual sense?" Does this decision keep God first in our lives? Does following this path keep in line with following Jesus? There are many good opportunities, and decisions that might be good in their own right, but they are not where Jesus is leading you. It's not where God wants you to be.

Let me give you some practical areas where we need to look at our GPS.

- Home: Where I live- Is there a Bible believing, Bible teaching, NT church where I can grow and use my gifts.
- Will buying this house/car/etc. keep us from honoring God first in our finances?
- Work: Can I honor my commitments as a husband and father, wife and mother, if I take this job?
- Will taking this job force me to compromise my biblical values, to put my faith back in the box?

- Parenting: If I enroll my kids in these activities will it cost them spiritually?
- Will sending our child to this university undermine the spiritual foundation we've spent 18 years building?
- Dating and Marriage: If I date/marry this person, how does this further God's purpose in my life?
- Ministry: How does this ministry/event fit with the overall vision of the church?

CONCLUSION

A. CLOSING QUESTIONS:

1. What is God revealing to you about the way you have been living your life? Have you been living by leaving God out of the picture? Living as if God were dead? Or are you living from the posture of "Lord Willing" or is it all about what you will?

2. What is God revealing to you about how much time you have left, and what God might want you to do with it?

3. What is God calling you specifically to do? And what specifically do you intend to do about it?

B. A GOOD PLACE TO BEGIN

1. Begin where young boy named Samuel began long time ago when he answered God's call upon his life by saying "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." It all begins with an openness, a willingness to listen, a willingness to follow.

2. Begin by asking God to burn "eternity into your heart" for we are but a midst that appears for such a short time – and then we are gone. Only one life and soon will be past. Only what is done for Christ will last. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has set eternity in the human heart. In a culture that sees only the here and now, we need to see the there and then and forever.

3. Make every plan conditional on these two words, "Lord willing." Every dream, every hope, every preparation is contingent on, if the Lord wills it.

4. Ask yourself, what is my primary motivation in wanting to do this? Does this conflict in any way with what God wants for my life?