

“If the Lord Wills”

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Scriptural Foundation: James 4:13-17, ESV

Boasting About Tomorrow

¹³ 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”—¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.¹⁷ So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

A golfer approached the first tee, a hazardous hole with a green surrounded by water. He debated if he should use his new golf ball. Deciding the hole was too treacherous he pulled out an old ball and placed it on the tee. Just then he heard a voice from above loudly say: “*Use the new ball!*” Rather startled by that, he replaced the old ball with the new one and approached the tee. Then he heard the same voice from above say, “*Take a practice swing!*” With this, the golfer stepped back and he took a practice swing. As he approached the ball, ready to hit his brand new ball, he heard that same voice say, “*Use the old ball!*” Evidently his practice swing was not very impressive.

We make hundreds of decisions every day which impact our life in big and small ways from selecting a golf ball to hit off the first tee to choosing a spouse to making plans for the week ahead of us. Whether our decisions are large or little, the believer in Jesus longs to live under the leading of God. For the Christian, our aim is to live our life by the will of God. As Christians, we do not desire to do anything God does not want us to do and we do desire to do everything God does want us to do. This does not always mean that we are one-hundred percent successful in following God’s will, but it does mean we desire to do His will and when we fall short, we confess our failures to God and recommit ourselves to walking in His path. That is how Christians live.

James has been describing the difference between real faith and false faith, between living faith and dead faith, and in James 4 he asks the question: what do you do with God’s will? Living faith produces within us a passion to know God’s will and to do it. Real faith is not ambivalent or apathetic regarding God’s will but it is zealous, it is fervent, and it is enthusiastic about it. Nothing characterizes the authentic Christian more than a healthy yearning to do the Father’s will.

James has been describing this difference for us and he tells us one way we can discern living faith from dead faith is living faith is driven and energized by the will of God. Psalm 25 says,

⁴ Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.⁵ Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation...

Psalm 27 tells us,

¹¹ Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path.

Psalm 143 tells us,

¹⁰ Teach me to do your will, for you are my God! Let your good Spirit lead me on level ground!

The person who loves God desires to be lead by God. As children of God we know the will of God comes from the heart of God and that is always so very good! We have a good God. Friends, we need never fear pursuing God’s will for our lives. Central to a real relationship with God is an active pursuit of the will of God.

You may remember Jesus words in Mark 3 where Jesus was teaching a crowd of people inside a house. Jesus’ mother, Mary and his half-brothers came to visit Jesus, but they could not get inside the house and get near Jesus because the

crowd was so great. Remember that James, the author of the epistle we are studying, is the oldest half-brother of Jesus. He was likely there, in Mark 3. The family cannot get near to Him and they send a messenger to push his way through to get Jesus' attention and tell Him they are there. The messenger arrives at Jesus' presence and says, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you."¹ Jesus answers, in Mark 3,

³³ "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ³⁴ And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" ³⁵ For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

Did you catch Jesus' words: "Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother. That person is related to me." This lesson was not lost on James, Jesus' half-brother. He was there that day and he heard the report of those works. Perhaps, initially, it angered him, "What do you mean? Are you saying we are not special?" James comes to understand the evidence of a true relationship with the living Lord is witnessed by a zeal for the will of God!

When the true Christian wakes up in the morning, he or she actively considers what God's will is for them and how they might accomplish it. The driving energy for the believer is the pursuit of God's will. We know in the will of God we find life and joy and peace and goodness, and all of the blessing of God is wrapped up right there. We know outside of the will of God we find sadness and brokenness and heartache and conflict and death and every evil thing.

Therefore, if there is no conscious desire in you to do the will of God, then you are rightly to be concerned as to whether there is any real, living faith in you! This is James point in Verses 13-17. James asks us to consider two foolish responses to the will of God and two wise responses to the will of God.

The two foolish responses are disregard and disobedience. The two wise responses are enthusiasm and obedience. We will consider this first foolish response for the majority of this study, that of disregard.

To disregard God's will means we live our lives with a neglect of any conscious consideration as to what God wants and what God desires for us and for our lives. It is a denial of God's sovereignty and His authority over us. Disregard is not defiance. It is not a closed fist shaking at Heaven saying, "God, I will not do your will." It is simply a neglect. It is the ignoring of the truth that God is sovereign, that God has a right to rule and to reign, and it is a pursuit of self-sovereignty; that we rule our own lives. Disregard is not so much open defiance as it is neglect and apathy.

James communicates the danger of this kind of disregard by using an illustration. James writes about an illustrative businessman who disregards God as he makes his strategic business plan for the next week. He wants success so he plans out his business and what his week is going to be like. We read about him in Verse 13,

¹³ 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."

James begins by saying, "Come now..." Those words express a righteous frustration from the pen of James. He wants to get our attention by saying, "Listen closely."

My son Daniel told us in a letter that the scariest part of his day at basic training at the Air Force Academy is always the morning. At 4:30 am the reveille blows and then the cadre come running through the halls screaming at the top of their lungs and banging with all their might on every door. He said, "They get you up in the morning!" He has five minutes to shower, shave, get dressed, make his bed, and be standing at attention outside the building.

James says, "Come now." The idea is one of very strong forcefulness, running through the halls, shouting and banging on the door; "Let me get your attention. Come now, I am about to tell you something really important." He begins with this description which, at first glance, seems really innocent and it does not alarm us: "Today or tomorrow we

¹ Mark 3:32

will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.” That sounds like something I might say on any given day. How about you?

Have you ever said anything like that? You do not have to be a businessman or businesswoman to say something like that. “Next week we are going to take a trip. We are going to go to the east coast and we are going to spend a week at the beach. We are going to enjoy ourselves and relax.” “Tomorrow I am going to clean my house and then I am going to go out and attend to the garden, then I will play with my children and then I will spend a relaxing evening with my husband.” Do you ever say anything like that? What is wrong here? Here is the problem: this man leaves God out of his plans. This man does not pray. He does not ask God for direction. He does not submit himself underneath the mastering hand of His Lord.

He speaks and acts as an independent agent rather than a one who has been bought with a price; one who is no longer his own. He does not call out to God and say, “Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be Thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, give us this day our daily bread.” This man does not pray that way because he does not think that way. It is not as though he is defiance against God, he is just disregarding Him. He forgets to pray. He believes himself to be the master of his own plans. He says, “Here is what I will do. It is my kingdom I hope to come. My will is going to be done. And I will obtain for myself my daily bread. I will make the profit I need to live.”

God is not at the front and center of this man’s life, and because of that James says, “Come now and listen! This is a huge problem.” Do not think this is something little and small and of all the sins this is relegated to the back corner of sins. No, this is a huge, huge problem to live this way. It is the essence of a heart of pride.

Earlier, in James 4, God says He opposes the proud, the independent, the self-sufficient, and those who make their own plans and do their own will, those who leave Him out of the picture, and those who do not consciously submit themselves under His hand. God opposes the proud and He gives grace to the humble.²

This man made at least four mistakes in his plan. First, he ignored God in the timing of his plans. Notice he says, “Today or tomorrow.” God had nothing to do with the timing of that. Second, he ignored God in the location of his plans. He says, “I am going to go to such and such a town.” Third, he ignored God in the duration of his plans when he says, “we will spend a year there.” Finally, he ignored God in the outcome of his plans. He says, “We will trade and we will make a profit.” In all four areas, this man is presuming upon the prerogatives of God. He is presuming upon the authority of God and those areas in which God says, “This is my right and I do not yield them and I do not vest them in another. This is mine and you have to seek me if you want any part of these things: the timing, the location, the duration, and the outcome.”

Friends, God does not wish for us to ignore Him in the details of our lives. God designs our life so He will be at the center of everything. Let us be honest with ourselves, are we like this man in James’ illustration? Do we give conscious thought to God’s pleasure for our daily, ordinary, mundane schedule? Do we include Him in our planning or are we living quite independently of Him?

Someone may say, “Well, what is wrong with not including God in our planning of mundane, everyday life?” James offers two theological arguments to motivate us, as believers, to include God in our daily plan so that everyday we rise with a consciousness of God, of His sovereignty over our life and over all of life, and we would have Him involved in even the mundane planning of our schedules.

The first argument James presents is: only God controls tomorrow’s events. He is saying, “One reason why you ought to include God and bring God in is God is sovereign over the affairs, the times, the circumstances, and the happenings of you today, tomorrow, and everyday after. Only God controls tomorrow’s events.” James makes this argument in Verse 14,

⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.

² James 4:6

James is telling us, “You do not know what tomorrow will bring because you are not in control of tomorrow. God knows what tomorrow will bring because God controls tomorrow.”

James is not condemning sound planning or a strategic business plan. He is not saying we should not make plans. Planning for future needs is a wise and good course of action in business, in ministry, in personal life, in family life, and every other area of living. God commends planning in Proverbs 6,

⁶ Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise . . . ⁸ she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.

The ant plans for the contingency of future needs, but our planning must account for the reality only God knows what is going to happen tomorrow. The Lord acts according to his own good pleasure.

Proverbs 135 says,

⁶ Whatever the LORD pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.

⁷ He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouses.

Isn't that great? That is not said of you and I, “Whatever we please we do...” because we please many things we cannot do.

We can plan an outdoor wedding in July, but we must consider that God might have other plans for us, this has to be okay if He does. It is His prerogative. We cannot be angry when God ordains something different from what we ordained. We are not in control. God is and it is ours to submit ourselves to Him.

Recently, a grandma took her grand-daughter to visit some missionaries in Africa. This grand-daughters mom was very concerned about the whole trip and the grandma gave her assurances everything would be fine and they would be home by such-and-such a date. As they arrived at the airport to return home they found every flight through Europe had been cancelled. What was going on? They found out there was a volcano in Iceland and flights were not going to go through Europe for five days. Have you ever had your plans changed like that? How did you feel about it? Here is the Christian response, “God, your will be done. I am comfortable and I am at peace.” Here is the response of the independent person, “Why is this happening to me?” they are frustrated and angry and who are they angry at?

God is in sovereign control and that is why James begins his book with, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds because you know God is in control of those trials. He is using those trials to produce a joyful result in your life.”³ He controls where we go, how long we can stay, what we can do, and what outcome results from our efforts.

Consider some practical questions to evaluate whether or not we are submitting to God's control over the affairs of our life.

- How do I respond when I am in a hurry and I get stuck in a traffic jam?
- How do I respond when the line I am in at the grocery store turns out to be the longest line?
- How do I respond when our team loses the game?
- How do I respond when I lose the sales contract?

I am sure you can think of hundreds more. Proverbs 27 says,

¹ Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.

We must not plan or even speak about our future plans as though we are in control of future events.

The second argument James makes is: only God controls the amount of time we have to live, as we read in Verse 14,

³ James 1:2

¹⁴ What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

The word “mist” means vapor, a puff of smoke, a frosty breath on a cold day. You see it and it is gone. That is all we are. We are here for one moment and we are gone the next. This life is very temporary. The time between our birth and our death is very brief. Ask an eighty-year old man or woman if they think life they have lived a long time or a short time. They will say, “I do not know where the time went.”

Shakespeare, in Macbeth, wrote of the brevity of life: “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.” What a dismal view of life that is, but there is truth in it. There is truth in the brevity of this temporal life. Our life is not only brief, but it is also very fragile.

I remember in late April, walking my dad and mom from my house after spending an evening with them. I walked them to the car and said, “Goodbye.” I did not realize it would be the last time my dad would visit me in my home. Psalm 139 says,

¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

God has established the day we are born and the He has established the day we die. Someone has said that each one of us is stamped with an invisible expiration date. It is there. It could be today for anyone of us. We may meet next week and some of you who are here today might not be here next week because God has taken you home. James is saying we ought to consider that, because that is not just true of other people, but it is true of me.

Our plans should reflect the Bible’s teaching of our life being like a vapor. We ought to consider this in our thinking forward, but often our plans reflect the presumption we will live on and on without interruption in life, in health, and in strength.

Do you remember the rich man in Jesus' parable in Luke 12?

¹⁶ And he told them a parable, saying, “*The land of a rich man produced plentifully,* ¹⁷ *and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’*”

¹⁸ *And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.’* ¹⁹ *And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’* ²⁰ *But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’* ²¹ *So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”*

The man was not a fool because he made a business plan. It is appropriate to make plans to tear down insufficient barns and build sufficient ones, but he was a fool because he did not consider the frailty and temporary nature of his own life. God intends for us to benefit from our understanding of God being God. He is in control of our tomorrows. He is in control of the duration of our lives and when plan differently we remember this life is not the end game.

David would write in Psalms 39,

⁴ “O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! ⁵ Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you.”

David is saying, “God, make me know that because it will change the way I live and it will cause me to include you in everything.”

In Proverbs 3, there are these great verses,

⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths.

That is the point. The man was not acknowledging God.

The second failing response is disobedience, as we read Verses 16 and 17,.

¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

The idea of boasting is loud bragging about our plans, our successes, and our future. Some people foolishly disregard God's will by not thinking about it at all. They live as though God is not in control and that they are. They plan as though they are the masters of their future and the captain of their own soul. This is almost an unconscious decision. They simply ignore the truth of God's sovereignty in their daily lives, but other people take their defiance of God's will a step further. They recognize God has a will for them, but they choose to reject it. They set themselves in opposition to God through hardened disobedience.

This week LeBron James decided to leave the Cleveland Cavaliers and join the Miami Heat. The owner of the Cleveland Cavaliers, Dan Gilbert, was livid. He wrote an open letter to the fans, excoriating LeBron James for being narcissistic and calling the move a "cowardly betrayal". In this letter to the Cleveland fans, he wrote, in all capital letters, "I PERSONALLY GUARANTEE THAT THE CLEVELAND CAVALIERS WILL WIN AN NBA CHAMPIONSHIP BEFORE THE SELF-TITLED FORMER 'KING' WINS ONE. You can take it to the bank."

I wish LeBron would have stayed in Cleveland. I do not like the way he handled things. I do not know Mr. Gilbert's spiritual state, but I do know that his guarantee is the kind of expression James 4 is talking about when James says, "As it is, you boast in your arrogance as though you have some control over the future and all such boasting is evil."

Friends, our successes, and the effects of the work of our hands, is in God's hands. Then we read in Verse 17,

¹⁷ So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

How do we know the right thing to do? Our culture is very confused about this because our culture has abandoned God. They are confused about issues such as abortion, homosexuality, sexual purity prior to marriage, and a host of other issues. They are confused and they do not know what the right thing to do is.

Here, James is talking to someone who knows the Bible. For those who know the right thing to do, do they know what God has said because God is the author of life, morality, and ethics. He has not made Himself silent on these matters, and yet they do not do it. That is sin.

There are those who know what God has said in His Word, but they choose to do something else, a different course, and a different life. James is saying that is sin. You can almost hear this pastor's heart mourn as he writes, "This is sin."

There are two wise responses to the will of God. First, there is enthusiasm, as we read Verse 15,

¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

Instead of ignoring God's will in our plans and in our scheduling, we ought to say, "If the Lord wills." James is not asking for a disappointed resignation of our lives over the will of God; "I guess whatever God wants that is what God is going to accomplish. Que Sera Sera! Whatever will be will be." No, James is saying we, as believers, know we have a good God, an all-powerful God, a sovereign God, a wise God, a loving God and He has a will for us. We, of all people, ought to be absolutely enthusiastic that is the kind of God we have. Instead of making our own plans, what kind of foolish response is that? If you know God is all wise, all knowing, He has already been in the future before we get there, and He is controlling all of the events of circumstances, does it not make sense we would go to Him and say, "God, let me acknowledge you. Everyday I want to set my life before you and place the course of my life in your hands and not in my own."

Jesus said, in John 4,

³⁴ Jesus said to them, “*My food is to do the will of him who sent me...*”

Does Jesus sound like a person who would begrudgingly say, “Father, if you want me to go to this earth and live as a human and die on a cross, I will do it.” No, He said, “My food is to the will of him who sent me.”

I am kind of enthusiastic about food. I really like it. When I go to a buffet, or to one of the church dinners, I look down at the table filled with food and I say to myself, “Oh, boy, I am so excited!” I am enthusiastic because I know there is something really good for me.

Jesus said, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me.” Do you think of the will of God that way, like a hungry person sitting before a banquet table? David said, in Psalm 40,

⁸ I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.

James encourages us to talk about God’s involvement in our life, “Instead you ought to say...” Incorporate the language of submission into your conversation, “If the Lord wills...”

The Puritans, and the old Methodists, used to say, “*Deo Volente*”, a Latin phrase which means, “If the Lord wills...” The Methodists used to sign their letters “*D.V.*”. They wanted to be conscious and communicate because they realized their communications would help them to become more conscious of God’s involvement.

Paul used this kind of language as well, in his letter to the church at Corinth, in 1 Corinthians 4,

¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills...

In Acts 18, Paul is leaving the Ephesian elders and when they ask him to stay a little longer, Paul replies,

²¹ “I will return to you if God wills...”

Finally, we look at obedience and we read in Verse 15,

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

The mark of the genuine believer is obedience to the will of God; “If you love me you will obey my commandments,” Jesus said.⁴ Friends, this truth about God’s will is a huge comfort to us. God secures us by His exercise of His control over our lives. Isn’t it great to know chance does not govern our lives? Isn’t it great to know other people do not govern our lives; what they do, what they say, and what they decide? Isn’t it great to know our enemies do not govern our lives? Isn’t it great to know disease, illness, and death do not govern our lives? Isn’t it great to know the Devil does not govern our lives? Isn’t it great to know government does not govern our lives?

It is God who governs our lives. When we submit to Him our life is in the hands of an all-knowing, all-loving, all-doing Father and we can pray with peace, “Not my will but yours be done.”

How can we know God’s will? Let me give you several practical ideas. First, we must desire to know God’s will and desire to follow it. God is not interested in satisfying our curiosity. He is interested in leading us. God will lead everyone who submits their life to Him. We need not fear missing God’s will if we submit our lives to God.

⁴ John 14:15

Second, we must seek His will in His Word. God has not left us in the dark regarding His will. He has given us a Book. Study God's Word to know God's will. His Word is a lamp to our feet, a light to our path, and it is a flashlight in the darkness of this world's woods.⁵

Third, acknowledge God in everything. Acknowledge God by praying and asking for God's guidance. I believe God to be a personal God and we rightly lay everything personal before Him.

Finally, talk about your plans with God included in your communication. Tell others you are under the hand of God and you are living your life that way. Paul wrote to Timothy and said this in 1 Timothy 2,

³ This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

At the very foundation, do you want to know what God's will is for your life? It is salvation that you would come to know Him, that you would believe in His Son Jesus, and that you would submit your life to Him as Savior and as Lord. That is God's will for you. That is what God has told us through the Scriptures.

If you do not follow God's will at the foundation, you cannot follow God's will any place else. Begin there. If you have never trusted in Jesus as your Savior and as your Lord, then grab hold of God's will for you, a will which says, "I want to bring to your life forgiveness, wholeness, spiritual life and spiritual mindedness, spiritual change, righteousness, and wisdom. That is my will for you and I am willing to offer all of that to you in Jesus. Embrace Him as your own."

⁵ Psalm 119:105