

# Presumption or Practical Atheism

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[ 0 : 00 ] When I was young, I didn't know why older Christians would often end their sentences with the letters DV. I guessed it was the Christian equivalent of a superstitious phrase like touch wood or fingers crossed, or perhaps even the Christian equivalent of the Islamic phrase inshallah. It wasn't until I was older that I learned what DV really meant and why older Christians would often end their sentences with it. It's an abbreviation of the Latin Deo Valente, which means God willing. They were neither using DV in a superstitious nor a fatalistic way. Rather, they were sincerely acknowledging their dependence upon their loving heavenly father, a loving father whose sovereign will is always for their good and for his glory.

I realized that these old saints were using DV to express their heartfelt dependence upon God's guidance and God's grace, both for the ability and the opportunity to pursue their plans. Now, the question of DV is at the very heart of James's discussion of presumption in these verses, James 4, 13 through 17. Upon whom do we as Christian believers depend? At first glance, it may seem that this passage is unconnected to the passages which I've gone before, but what links them together is the theme of humility. Humility refuses to talk down to others or to talk about others in a slanderous way. We saw that last week. But likewise, humility refuses to depend upon oneself, but strenuously pursues the path of dependence upon God, of living life, Deo Valente. Dependence upon God is neither superstition nor fatalism. It is wholehearted faith in our loving heavenly father's sovereign will for our good and for his glory. It is true humility.

I want us to consider this passage tonight from two perspectives. First, dependence not on self, and secondly, dependence all on God. Perhaps tonight you think, well, this passage has nothing to say to me.

Think again. It's got a lot to say to all of us. It goes straight to the heart of a man who professes to be a Christian, but to all intents and purposes is living as a practical atheist.

[ 3 : 03 ] First of all then, dependence not on self. Not on self. Now, at first glance, we can all put ourselves in the place of the person who says, today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit. In fact, not only can we place ourselves in that person's shoes, but there's a strong sense in which we should all place ourselves in that person's place.

As we'll see later, this passage is not condemning prudence and planning, rather it's condemning presumption that I don't need to factor God into my equations.

That whereas on Sunday I can stand in church and sing loudly about faith in Christ, or hopefully soon we'll be able to sing loudly about faith in Christ, from Monday through Saturday, I don't have to live out that faith in heart decisions and practical attitudes.

James is setting up a person who is boasting about tomorrow. Someone who's unaware of their own limitations, the impact of their actions, or their own sinful hearts on their relationship to God. Let's look a little bit at what self-dependence looks like, and then why it is so futile and empty, and therefore sinful. First of all then, what does self-dependence look like? What does it look like?

[ 4 : 39 ] What is it about what this person says in verse 13 that makes it so presumptuous, so self-dependent, and so obnoxious to true Christian faith? Well, of course, for a start, there's no reference to God.

We will go. We will trade. We will make a profit. It all sounds so Ecclesiastes-like. A life lived under the sun with no reference to God at all. Surely, if faith in Christ was really so important to this person, they'd factor him into all their equations, whether these be equations in church, or at work, or at home. This person should be a Christian, whatever they are, whoever they're with, whatever they are doing, applying the Christian principles of humility, love, and righteousness, whatever they

are. Over the years, there have been simply too many church Christians who put on a great show of piety in church, but in the workplace are known as hard, unloving, dishonest, temperament, unmerciful, and spiteful. And in essence, that is practical atheism at work, the kind of presumption James is condemning in this passage. If DV, Dio Valenti, means anything, it means acting as a follower of Jesus in every area of our lives. One of the greatest compliments I've ever heard was that given by a non-Christian employee regarding their Christian employer, someone who is in this congregation, this Christian employer, that non-Christian employee spoke of his employer's honesty, understanding, and work ethic.

Now, there is a man I want to work for, a Christian in church, at home, and in the workplace, living his whole life with reference to God. This is how important faith in Christ is to him. And so the first area in which self-dependence may show itself is in this, that your life as a Christian is compartmentalized, that Jesus rules in the church, maybe at home, but not at work. Or he rules at home, but most definitely not at work. There's a lack of the consistent application of the gospel across every area of this person's life. But the second area in which self-dependence may show itself is in a lack of awareness of the situations in which other Christians find themselves. A lack of awareness of the situations in which other Christians find themselves. Remember the context of the book of James. He is writing largely to a church made up of Jews who had become refugees during the persecution of the church in Jerusalem. And many of these Christians were exceptionally poor, the kind of people that James describes in chapter 2 as being victims of the favoritism of the rich. You know, it really is only the rich people in that church who have the ability to determine where they shall go, what they shall do, and when they shall do it. The poorer members, by contrast, are victims of persecution. They have no self-determination whatsoever. And sometimes I wonder whether these rich people in this church were using their superior planning schedules as a way of asserting their importance. That they're saying, today or tomorrow we will go and to arrogantly assert their supremacy and superiority over the poor Christians in that church.

[ 8 : 42 ] And so in this instance, the DV principle, the God-willing theme of humility, is being broken not just by taking God out of the equation, but it's by attributing our affluence, our wealth, our position to our own abilities without reference to God in any way.

And I perhaps, this is even more powerful than the one we mentioned before. The man or woman who thinks they are self-made, who boast in their pride rather than attribute everything they are, everything they have, and everything they've done to their Father's gracious provision for them. It's the man or woman who is unaware of the situations other Christians, perhaps even in that same church, find themselves in. In our Tuesday morning staff meetings, Phil Stogner has been leading us through the book *Respectable Sins* by Jerry Bridges, which I know the Bears Den City Group have been through.

And it makes very uncomfortable reading because it cuts deep and shows us that many of the things that we accept as being culturally fine in our church settings are actually deeply sinful. I wonder whether this sin of presumption, of not living out this DV principles, cuts you deep. That God has no place in your diary.

[ 10 : 18 ] God's got no place in your planning. And you can't help thinking that you're successful in life because of you and you alone. Well, in the second instance here, let's ask the question, why is self-dependence so empty, so futile?

Well, you see, there's a brutal honesty about James. We might say about him, he calls a spade a spade. He doesn't flatter. He tells it as it is. Self-dependence, or acting like a practical atheist, proud and self-sufficient, is pointless and empty for at least two reasons, according to our text.

In the first instance, it doesn't take account of the fact that time isn't something we can control. Time isn't something we can control. It is entirely in the hands of God.

James brings us back, and he says, you don't know what tomorrow's going to bring. If there's anything this coronavirus pandemic should have taught us, it should be this.

We don't have a clue what tomorrow may bring us. The graveyard is filled with self-dependent people who, while out planning their futures, had a heart attack and died.

[ 11 : 35 ] That brings us to the second reason why self-dependence is so futile. It doesn't take account of how frail we are. How frail we are. James asks the question, what is your life?

You are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. My dad used to say to me, the graveyard is full of people who thought they were indispensable, that the world would stop spinning if they weren't on it.

Why is self-dependence so futile? Because it assumes that we are lords of our own destinies when in fact there is no such thing as destiny and God's will as God's will, not ours.

Alexander the Great has acknowledged to be the greatest military general in human history. By the age of 30, he had conquered an area, a vast area of the east.

His empire stretched all the way from Macedonia in the west to the north of India in the east. If ever a man thought he was lord of his own destiny, it was Alexander.

[12:48] That is until he contracted fever and died in Babylon at the young age of 32.

Unfortunately, self-dependence is very much alive and well in the church of today from individual Christians and from churches as a whole.

But it's so futile, it's so empty, it is so pathetic. This passage is not condemning planning nor prudence but presumption.

A life lived outside of God, a proud life with no Christ-like humility inbuilt into every area. And the DV principle hits this way of thinking head on, not from a superstitious nor fatalistic perspective but purely from its clear futility.

Dependence not on self. But secondly, as we read this passage together, we're asking about dependence all on God. Dependence all on God.

It's all very well to critique a position but surely the gospel must change everything about us to the extent that we want to embrace the DV principle and practice. We want to repent of our presumption and pride and to replace it with humility before God and before others and wholehearted dependence upon him.

[14:16] How can we embody the godliness of that Christian who says, if the Lord wills, verse 15, we will live and do this or that? How can we embody that living faith of the person who's living by the DV principle?

Let's consider three aspects of God dependence. First of all, what does it mean? And then, why does it matter? And then lastly, why is God dependence such a comfort?

First of all then, what does God dependence mean? What does it look like in practical terms for me and for you to move away from a model of self-dependence to a model of God dependence to live out the principles of the humility of the gospel in our day-to-day lives as Christians?

Well, out of a thousand different applications and ways we can approach this, let me suggest to you three things about what God dependence will mean for you this week. First of all, it will mean that you plan prayerfully.

You plan prayerfully. As I said before, I'll say it again, this passage is not condemning prudence and planning. You cannot use this passage as an argument against taking out life insurance or making solid plans for your business or your family.

[15:42] Think about it. Jesus had plans to which he worked, where he would go, what he would do, who he would be with. Paul had mission plans listed for us in Romans 15, including that he would travel to Spain to preach the gospel there, God willing.

This passage is not condemning prudence and planning, but presumption. But for both Jesus and Paul, the key phrase was, not my will, but yours be done.

And so at the very least, this means that as Christians, we will commit all our plans to the Lord in prayer. We're going to live our lives with reference to God by committing everything to him.

Whether we pray before we plan or as we plan or after we plan, we will do so dependent upon God, recognizing that without him, the things outside our control, time and frailty, will thwart us.

Now, this is faith at work, which is, after all, the major theme of the book of James, but every day is peppered through not just with planning and performance, but also with prayer.

[17:02] This means that prayer belongs just as much in the office as it does in the church. That you plan out your work and you pray through your work.

That you be dependent upon Christ for every area of your life. That seems to me to be the first of the pillars of God dependence. Concentrated prayer.

For those of you who are into management techniques, it might mean praying your way through a Gantt chart, spreading it out on your computer entirely before the Lord and praying through each stage of the project.

Plan prayerfully, not necessarily with the intention of making profit, but of growing in your faith. The second way in which God dependence will work out in your life this week is that you will work dependently.

You will work dependently. Now let's go back to this primary feature of what a self-dependent life looks like. A life lived without God. I'll do this.

[ 18 : 11 ] I'll do that. I'll do the next thing. Let's think of the futility of that position. Our lack of ability to either control time or to master our own frailty.

I remember going to an assertiveness training seminar where the basic mantra was, stand in front of your mirror in the morning and say to yourself, you can do it.

A DV, God dependent position teaches us otherwise. It trains us to kneel before God in the morning and say to him, I cannot do it.

But you can. If grace is our teacher, then God dependence means reliance upon him for the ability to do the work we do, for the physical, mental, and emotional strength to work out that plan which we are prayerfully committed to the Lord.

It might mean praying directly for God's help to deal with conflict resolution in the workplace, to deal with frustrating colleagues who are letting you down, or a frustrating work process.

[ 19 : 25 ] when I was working as a research and development engineer in London, I would often preach on a Sunday and I would spend ages praying through my sermons as I was preparing them.

So why should I not have prayed in the same way for all the projects I was conducting in my research and development? Praying not so much for their success but for my own ability to adorn the gospel by the way I worked and my diligence and my enthusiasm.

Work dependently and sending up these arrow prayers to God all the time. This is how to live the DV principle. In the third instance for you this week, it's going to mean that you're going to profit thankfully.

Profit thankfully. I love the realism of James in this passage. We will go there. We will trade. We will make a profit. God might as well not exist. Profit depends upon our performance and that's it.

And when that profit's been made, we feel self-justified. Give the man a pat on the back. He's a success. He's self-made. Give him a book. Tell him to write it on how to be a success.

[ 20 : 46 ] Doesn't this man realize it was God who gave him his abilities and his opportunities? Doesn't he realize it was God who gave him his profit and his success?

Why then is he acting as though it all depended upon him? To live dependently means to profit thankfully. In former times, it was the Christian habit not just to say grace before a meal, but also to return thanks after a meal.

Every meal was covered both before and after with prayer. And if you're Annette McKay's for dinner, it was also accompanied by prayer during the dinner as well.

But I always loved that phrase. Sorry, Annette. Returning thanks. She's pointing at me as if to say I'm going to get you back for that. Returning thanks.

To live God dependently means to profit thankfully. To return thanks recognizing the sovereignty of the DV principle.

[ 21 : 52 ] It was grace that brought you to this place of success. So you commit your plans to God prayerfully. You work dependently upon his grace. You profit thankfully.

This is how the Christian man or woman lives in a God-dependent way. A manner worthy of the gospel recognizing the DV principle. The older folk by using the language of DV were sincerely acknowledging their dependence upon their loving heavenly father.

A father whose sovereign will was always for their good and for his glory. I realized when I was old enough to be mature that they were using DV to express their heartfelt dependence upon God's guidance and grace.

Both for the ability and the opportunity to pursue their plans. Well secondly here and more briefly why does God-dependence matter?

What's the big deal? So what? Does it really matter? Listen again to James in verses 16 and 17 as he opens up the horror the ugliness and the repugnance of a life lived without God.

[ 23 : 09 ] As it is you boast in your arrogance all such boasting is evil whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it for him it is sin. Listen to that sequence. Boasting arrogance evil sin the diametric opposite of that Christ-like humility which is the fruit of God's wisdom at work in our lives.

so you say to me well big deal I don't take God into the workplace and I attribute my success to my skills and to my effort and to my planning.

It really is a big deal brother because you have a proud heart which has not yet been humbled by a knowledge of its own frailties and sins and you lack a knowledge of the grace of God in the gospel.

It is Dante's descent into madness boasting arrogance evil sin and a warning here for us all this is not merely a sin individual Christians can fall into but entire denominations and especially mission movements.

Depending primarily upon management techniques mission strategies are developed which would fit entirely as easily into a Starbucks franchise as into the church of Christ and whenever success comes whatever the measure of that success may be it's usually money or numbers it's attributed to the strategies which were employed not to the sovereign blessing of almighty God our loving heavenly father.

[ 24 : 51 ] So you see it really is a very big deal when individual Christians and churches go down the self-dependence route boasting arrogance evil sin it is the diametric opposite of the humility which pleases our father and brings glory to his name.

And then lastly thirdly why is God dependence such a comfort? Why is it such a comfort? Because I want to close today not with warnings but with comforts with encouragements to take the DV principle of a previous generation to heart and live it out in our daily Christian lives whether at home at work in the church or exercising at the gym when they open again.

As I say the DV principle is neither a superstitious tech like touch wood nor a fatalism of inshallah. It is the expression of our heartfelt dependence upon God's guidance both for the ability and the opportunity to pursue our plans whatever these plans may be.

Now although there are many more comforts to be gleaned from this teaching I want us to focus our hearts on just two as we're closing. The God who wills and the will of God.

The God who wills and the will of God. In the first instance comfort yourself in the knowledge of the God who wills the Deo of whom it is said Deo Valente.

[ 26 : 27 ] Who is this God? Is he indifferent to you? Is he playing with you as a man plays chess with his pawns?

Is he capricious toward you? Willing only what hurts? Or has he just too many things on his plate to take any notice of you at the moment like the spinning of the planets around the corresponding stars, the other eight billion people on this planet or the ecological system of the Amazon rainforest?

Or is this God strictly governed by the principles of retribution? That if I should take the wrong turn, somehow he may punish me for it? All of these correspond to the fatalism of inshallah, the God of fatalism, divine chess, capricious uncertainty.

The DV principle is such a comfort to you as a Christian because of the God who wills, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, whose humble mind is cross-shaped and whose heart bears your name.

Your loving heavenly Father, Father into whose powerful and loving hands you place your heart when you say to him, Deo Valenti. This really is such a comfort, isn't it?

[ 27 : 55 ] Because the God upon whom we depend in faith is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our loving Father.

Capricious? No. Caring? Rather. Indifferent? No. Infinitely loving? Rather. Too busy? No.

Bountifully generous. Retributive? No. Restorative rather. Your Father.

But in the second instance, comfort yourself, not only in the God who wills, but in the will of God.

And what is that will for you? Is it to harm you?

Is it to bring you down? Can he be trusted to do you good and to grant you every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places? He has a sovereign plan for your life which includes your growth in grace, your Christ likeness, and your holistic peace, your shalom.

[ 29 : 04 ] will. This is his will for your life. Always his will that you be conformed to the likeness of his son for your good and for his glory.

And so even if all we have planned turns upside down, even if it all goes pear-shaped, as they say, even if your will be done leads to suffering and a cross, we can be comforted.

Our father knows best. He is working all things out for my good, for his glory. Catherine will tell you, I tell it often enough, that I often wish that things had worked out different for me in life, as I'm sure many of you have in your own life situations.

The comfort is this, our loving heavenly father is working out his plan for us with compassionate attention to detail that we may grow in grace and be conformed to the image of his son.

In other words, where I am now and where you are now, I hope you're all listening to this, from the youngest to the oldest, where I am now and where you are now is for our good and for his glory. [ 30 : 31 ] Surely that brings you comfort, that even if the now is hard for you, it's the now your loving heavenly father has for you and his plans are for your good and his glory.

The DV principle, humility, God dependence, call it what you may, this really does matter. Let me be so bold as to set each one of you a challenge this week.

Morning by morning, before you go to school, before you go to classes, before you go to work, before you start your duties for the day, whatever they are, determine that you're going to turn away from self dependence and embrace God dependence.

So everything you are and everything you do in dependent prayer. Live out the humility of the gospel and foster a thankful mindset and heart attitude.

hope about nothing.