

Mist

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 August 2017

Preacher: Mark Ogden

[0 : 00] 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.

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

As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

Come now, you rich. Weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten.

Your gold and silver have corroded and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.

[1 : 12] Behold, the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you. And the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have murdered the righteous person.

He does not resist you. Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it until it receives the early and the late rains.

You also be patient. Establish your heart, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged.

Behold, the judge is standing at the door. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

[2 : 28] Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job. And you have seen the purpose of the Lord.

How the Lord is compassionate and merciful. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God who has spoken. We thank you that your word is the word of power with which you uphold the universe.

And it is also the word that breaks into our hard, proud hearts and softens them. And we pray that you would be doing that work now. We pray that your spirit would be amongst us now, taking these words and driving them deep into our hearts.

Father, would... So as we start, let's think about this question. Imagine you get to a point in your life where you've lived, you've done a number of things, you've got a lot to speak about, and you decide, I'm going to write a book summarizing my life.

I'm going to write an autobiography. Has anyone here actually done that? Has anyone written an autobiography? I asked that question at St. Nicholas Sevenoaks, and obviously three or four people put their hands up. There's the Admiral, there's the... Yeah, you write an autobiography, okay, a summary of your life.

[3 : 35] And here's the question, what title would you give it? What? What a tricky question, isn't it? What title? I saw McEnrose put one out, but seriously, that's his title. My father, my father, who became a Christian 10 years ago, dad's 70, he was 70 last year, became a Christian 10 years ago.

The title he would give his autobiography is Never Too Late. What title would you give to your autobiography? James gives us a suggestion.

It's there in verse 14. Have a look at verse 14. He says, what is your life? How do I summarize the whole of your life? Here's his suggestion. On page 1217, verse 14, title for your autobiography,

Mist.

Mist. That is not very flattering, is it? Mist, says James. That captures the whole of your life. In northern Italy, during the winter, they have freezing fog that makes it pretty hard to drive and navigate around.

And in the summer, they have this incredible heat haze that they call alpha. And that is what James says we are. We are haze, mist, fog, vapor.

[4 : 45] That is a biblical perspective on my, on your, on our individual lives. And when you stop and think about it, it makes sense, doesn't it?

How long have we human beings, someone will come and tell me afterwards, how long have we human beings approximately lived on this planet compared to the age of the earth? It's a fraction, isn't it? How long have I lived 43 years on this planet compared to the lifespan of the human race? It's a blink of an eye, isn't it? Psalm 103 puts it like this. As for man, his days are like grass. He flourishes like a flower of the field.

For the wind passes over it, and it is gone. And its place knows it no more. What is James wanting to teach us this morning?

Very simply, he's wanting to teach us humility. Humility. Humility for those of us that plan. Those are the first verses we read, verses 13 to 17. Humility for those of us who have money, verses 1 to 6.

[5 : 51] Humility for those of us who are suffering, verses 7 to 11. Three points. Humility for those of us that plan. Humility for those of us that have money. Humility for those of us that are suffering.

Simple lesson, very hard to put into practice. Well, let's look at those, those first verses. And obviously here in verses 13 and almost, James isn't saying it's wrong to plan.

It's not wrong to think about the future. It's not wrong to have projects. One of the challenges of working in a place like Naples is that no one owns a diary. No one owns a diary. How do you plan everything? James is not saying it's wrong to plan.

Nor is he saying it's wrong to make money. There in verse 13, trade and make a profit. It's not wrong to earn money. What is it that James is wanting to target here?

What is it that he's trying to criticize? It's there in verse 16. As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting, says James, is evil.

[6 : 53] James is wanting to think about the arrogance of the human heart. The arrogance of the human heart that says, hey, I'm in control.

You know, next week I'm going to move to this city. I'm going to move to this town. I'm going to work for that company. Do you know what? I'm going to make a fortune. I'm going to make these deals because I'm in the driving seat of my life.

It's obvious, isn't it? I'm the captain of my destiny. What I say goes. My plans, they're written in stone. My tomorrow, just as my today. Well, it belongs to me.

I'm the one who's calling the shots. And James says, wrong answer. You are mist. Vapor.

Haze. Here today, gone tomorrow. If that is my worldview, if that is the way I'm thinking about life, that is a completely non-Christian way of thinking, isn't it?

[7 : 50] That's a worldview that says, God, there's no place for you in my life. I can get on with my life without you. James says, we are vapor. And we struggle to accept that, don't we?

We struggle to accept that as individuals. Perhaps the older we get, the more we accept it. But we certainly struggle to accept that as a culture, don't we? There's no way, in Italy, for example, there's no way we're wanting to think about how here today, gone tomorrow we are.

In the words of one of the kind of Italian modern day prophets, he describes himself as the grandfather of Italian rap. That's quite a title, isn't it? A guy called Giovanotti. He wrote a song two years ago.

The title was, We Are Immortal. Siamo Immortal. Made number one. And James says, that is rubbish. We're mist. We're mist. We've no real idea what tomorrow holds in store for us.

We can try to live our lives. We can try to plan our lives. Project forward into the future. We can try to do that without reference to God. With no thought to his purposes and plans.

[8 : 59] But as we do that, what we'll be doing? We'll be creating an unstable project. A plan filled with uncertainties and insecurities. Because the reality is, we don't have a clue what is round the next corner.

What's going to happen the next time we cross through Dulwich Village. We don't have a clue what the future holds in store for us. I was struck by a guy called Francesco Totti.

Famous football player. Played for Roma. Yeah, there's a couple of people nodding. He played for Roma for 28 years of his life. He retired in May. A great football player.

Captained the team. And he spoke, not a Christian, he spoke at his final match in the Olimpico Stadio. A stadium with enormous crowds. And he spoke of the future. And he said, as I think about the future, will you permit me to feel scared?

That's brutally honest, isn't it? That's brutally honest. That is the project, the planning of a man who doesn't have God in his life.

[10:03] What is the motto of the Christian life? We'll find it there in verse 15. If the Lord wills, we will live and do this and that.

If the Lord wills. My heartbeat. The fact that my brain is communicating with my mouth and words are coming out.

It doesn't always happen. The fact that I woke up this morning, that I was able to drive from Colchester to here this morning. If the Lord wills. If it is part of his plan.

We will do this and we will do that. I don't tell my heart to beat. Now. Ba-boom. And again.

Ba-boom. I don't do that, do I? I don't tell my lungs to inflate. And breathe out.

If we're honest, we don't really know what's going on in here. And we're not really in control. If the Lord wills. My present. My future.

[11:01] He determines. He directs my steps. He knows the end from the beginning. He knows my date of birth. Just as he knows my date of death. All of my days are written in his book.

If the Lord wills. I wonder how many of us saw that series. I think it was three episodes. Secret Cities of Italy. Anyone see the Secret Cities of Italy? A few people here. It was fascinating, wasn't it?

A couple of guys went, traveled through Italy. And they went to Venice. And they went to Florence, I think. And they went to Naples. And they were looking at kind of what's going on underneath, as it were. And in Naples, they were looking at a kind of super volcano that is Vesuvius and the Bay of Naples.

And they were looking. And one of them made an interesting comment. And he said, I think what struck me is that the membrane, the membrane between life and death in Naples is particularly thin. Very thin membrane, he said, between life and death. And that may be so. But I wonder whether actually that membrane is the same width, as it were, wherever we live.

[12:04] It's just here we feel as if it's thicker. If the Lord wills. Humility as we plan and think about the future.

It's so easy, isn't it? For us as Christians to become functional atheists when we start planning the future. Isn't it? We start making plans.

We start thinking about, I don't know, which university we want to go to. Which job we want to do. Where we want to live. We start making plans about who to marry and children and et cetera, et cetera.

And we leave God out of the equation. We think, well, hold on a second. This is my life. Obviously, I'm making these decisions. I don't need to think about God. And then what happens when things go to plan? We panic or we blame God.

If it is the Lord's will. Humility. If that's what he wants. If he wants me to go to university. If he wants me to do that job.

[13:02] If it's part of his plan that I would have a job. That I would have economic stability. It struck us, living these four years in Naples, that many, many people don't have stable jobs. Many people don't have financial and economic stability.

If it's the Lord's will, I will have a job. If it's his will, I will get married. If that's part of his plan for me. It's not my right to be married. If it's his will, I will have children that grow healthy and become Christians.

If that is God's will and purpose for me. Humility as we plan. It's not easy, is it? It's not easy.

I find it so hard putting this into practice. I don't know about you. I find it so hard being dependent on someone else as I project forward into the future. I think, wouldn't it be wonderful if I and I alone could build this church in the center of Naples?

If I could do this ministry. If I could do this job. If I could run these summer camps. If I and I alone could do this. I find myself thinking that. There's a verse that's kind of followed me through this first year of the church's life.

[14:08] Psalm 127, verse 1. It's a famous verse. Unless the Lord builds the house, the laborers labor in vain. And there's part of me that hates that verse. I want to build a church on my own.

I don't want to have to be dependent on someone else. I want with my own initiative, with my own energy, with my own enthusiasm. I want to build the church in the center of Naples. And that is madness. If that is how we are thinking.

Hands up who loves building Lego. Anyone love building Lego? It's great, isn't it? One of the joys of being a parent is that you get to do what you enjoy doing as a kid. Through your own children. My wife has recently said, Mark, we need to stop buying Lego for the kids. We've got a massive box of Lego and we don't know what to do with it. Even my parents have said, we're not giving any more Lego to the grandchildren. But I've still got my son.

Archie's only six. And I'm sure I can get a lot of mileage out of Archie. Louisa, my nine-year-old, and I spent a glorious hour and a half building a Lego camper van together three weeks ago.

[15:08] It was great. She and I, the dining room table, the manual open in front of us. An hour and a half. We didn't pray once. Glorious independence on our own. Using our own Lego building.

And I want my life to be like that, if I'm honest. We do, don't we? I want my life. I want my relationships. I want my ministry. I want my job. Dependent on me.

The arrogance of the human heart. If I were God and encountered someone like that, I'd think, well, off you go.

See how far you get on your own foolish, proud man. But thankfully, God's not like that. Thankfully, he's gracious.

He's patient. He's loving. And he speaks to us. And he rebukes us. And he challenges us through his word. Perhaps he's doing that to some of us this morning. He's certainly done that to me as I've wrestled with these truths.

[16:09] And he meets us. And he teaches us of his goodness, of his kindness, of his wisdom. He shows us our weakness and the folly of this kind of arrogant, proud heart.

And even as we encounter his will, even if it's not necessarily what we thought we wanted for our lives, it becomes something sweet and delightful to follow.

Father, your will be done. Humility. Verse 17. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

Humility as we plan. Humility for those of us that have money. Once upon a time, once upon a time, there was a young Neapolitan man called Gennaro.

They're all called Gennaro in Naples. It's the patron saint of Naples. And so there are hundreds, hundreds of thousands of young men called Gennaro. But Gennaro was a special. He was unique. He was a pizza maker.

[17:15] And Gennaro had some kind of supernatural gift to make the most amazing pizzas in the world. Not only was the pastry light and delicious, but the ingredients that he combined were incredible.

And quickly, Gennaro's reputation was established and spread throughout the city of Naples. Birthplace of pizza. It's hard to find a bad pizza in Naples, but Gennaro was special.

And people flocked to Gennaro's pizzeria. And the business flourished. And the money came in. Cha-ching. And what did Gennaro do? Well, obviously, he started spending it, didn't he?

He started spending the money that he was receiving night after night after night. And the first thing he did, he bought himself a sharp suit. If you're in Naples, you've got to have a sharp suit, sharp suit, haven't you? And he bought himself a nice watch.

And he gave his girlfriend loads of amazing gifts. And then he bought himself a motorbike and a car and a flat. And he accumulated and he amassed and he consumed as he grew in his wealth.

[18:12] But not only that, the interesting thing was that as Gennaro got richer, he got nastier to work for. He was a nightmare to work for.

He would employ people. Everyone wanted to work for him to learn his secret. He would employ people. Rarely would he pay them on time. He'd make them work ridiculous hours in front of the heat of the pizza oven.

He would abuse and exploit his workforce. It was a nightmare to work for. But not only that, as he grew richer, he grew more extravagant. The parties that Gennaro threw on his rooftop terrace overlooking the Bay of Naples were legendary.

There was wine and there was alcohol and there were drugs and there were women. And the extravagance of Gennaro's wealth. Let's have a look at these verses.

Verses 1 to 6. Because in the midst of all of that partying, in the midst of all of that extravagance, one night after Gennaro had gone to bed, God came to Gennaro and said to him, Gennaro, you fool.

[19 : 23] This night your soul is required of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God.

Wealth finances. Obviously, again, James is not saying here it's wrong to be wealthy. He's not saying it's wrong to have money. Again, the issue here is what you do or what you don't do with your wealth.

There are three issues I think that James is wanting to target. Verses 2 to 3. This hoarding or accumulating of wealth. End of verse 3.

You have laid up treasure in the last days. It's the first issue. The second issue is the injustice of the rich. Verse 4. Behold, the wages of laborers who have mowed your field, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you.

The injustice. And then finally, verse 5. The extravagance of the rich. You have lived on the earth in luxury and self-indulgence. So let's think about hoarding and accumulating.

[20 : 29] It is the air that we breathe, isn't it? I grew up in southeast England. I worked in London for a church. And it's the air that we breathe. We are what we own.

We accumulate. We're taught from a young age to amass and consume, living in a materialistic culture, filling our homes, our lives, our houses with stuff.

Accumulating. Verses 2 and 3. Verse 4. The injustice of the rich and the powerful who use their positions to exploit and abuse their work. I can think of so many examples of people that we've encountered over these last four years in Naples who have been treated appallingly in their workplaces.

Very few people are given contracts. And if they're given a contract, they're given a part-time contract when the reality is they work full-time and more. Very few people receive regular incomes. They're promised. Very rarely does it arrive. The injustice of the wealthy. There's hoarding. There's injustice. And then there's the extravagance, isn't there? In verse 5.

[21 : 36] You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You've fattened your hearts. There is a way of living that has no holds barred. There's no moderation. There's no self-control.

Extravagance of the wealthy. In May, a super yacht sailed into the Bay of Naples.

It's a yacht that's owned. I know nothing about boats and yachts, but this was an incredible structure. It's owned by a Russian oligarch. It is 119 meters long. It has eight decks, 54 people employed to work on the yacht.

And it cost 460 million euro to build. That is insane, isn't it? The extravagance of the wealthy. Now, I appreciate that this is a fairly high-risk passage to be preaching on, isn't it? I'm a mission partner. We're mission partners very generously supported by Grace Church Dulwich. And I appreciate that these verses are hard verses for us to wrestle with, you living in Dulwich.

[22 : 41] But they are such crucial verses, aren't they, for us to get our heads around? How much does Jesus have to say on money and wealth? Loads. What does it look like for us to be distinctive Christians with our wallets and with our wealth?

First question, what are we filling our homes with? What am I filling my life with? I may want it, but is it really necessary?

Jesus' challenge is clear. We are to travel through this life lightly. We're pilgrims on the way to a heavenly city. Don't burden yourselves. Always travel lightly as you move through this life.

In May was the 100th Giro d'Italia. You know, like the Tour de France, the Italian equivalent of the Tour de France, the race, cycling race that goes all the way around Italy. There was a famous cyclist in the 90s called Marco Pantani.

I wonder whether anyone's heard of him. He was this incredible animal of a cyclist who was able to go up these climbs in an incredible speed. And there was one particular race where he was racing a Russian cyclist, head-to-head, up one of these kind of ascents in the Italian Alps.

[23 : 52] And one of the things that he did, he was a bit of a theatre man, Marco. One of the things that he did as he cycled up was he would try and lighten his bike and his load. Obviously, the more you're carrying, the slower you're going to go. So the first thing he did, he took his water bottles off

and he threw them into the bushes.

And up he would go against this Russian. Then he'd take the bandana off and throw that away. And then the sunglasses, off they went. And one last kind of gesture of theatrical grace. He takes his diamond nose stud out and throws that in the bushes.

How do you do that? I've not seen footage of this, but I'd love to watch it. How do you do that? We are to travel lightly through this life.

Get rid. And don't amass, don't accumulate, don't pour, don't lay up treasures in the last days. Let's get rid of these things. And we are to be just in our workplaces.

The teams that we work in. The people that look to us for their wages. The laborers, the workers that we employ.

[25 : 00] We've got to treat them fairly, haven't we? I've no idea what that looks like for you in particular, in your office, in your school, in your workplace. I've no idea. But I guess we've got to be doing everything we can, not to find ourselves in verses 4 and 5, haven't we?

We'll be treating people with justice and kindness. And we're not to be extravagant in our choices. Again, what does that look like? What does that look like for us in our holidays, in our homes, in our cars, in our clothes, in the kit that we buy? You tell me. That's something perhaps we can discuss over lunch.

I need your help on this. I'm obviously preaching to myself here as well as to you. What does it look like for us not to be extravagant? James has two things that he wants to say to the people that find themselves in these verses.

And the first thing he says is, guys, you're making a massive mistake. You're making a massive mistake in investing your time and energy and resources here. You're making a huge mistake because these things do not last. Verse 2, your riches have rotted and your garments have moth-eaten.

[26 : 01] Your gold and silver have corroded. These things will not last into eternity, guys. You're making a huge mistake investing in these things. If you don't believe me, go and visit Pompeii. Has anyone been to Pompeii? Pompeii.

A hugely luxurious, wealthy community until AD 79. It's rubble. These things, silver, gold, clothes, treasures, do not last. You're making a huge mistake, says James.

And secondly, he's got three words. He's got three words that he wants to highlight to the people that find themselves in these verses. The first word is there in verse 1, miseries.

The second word is at the end of verse 3, fire. And the third word is at the end of verse 5, slaughter. And those are not warm and cuddly words, are they?

Miseries, fire, and slaughter. Because the God of the Bible is not warm and cuddly towards anyone who finds himself or herself in these verses.

[27 : 03] And we can look at the super rich, can't we? And we can look at the Silvio Belloscones of this world. We can look at the Donald Trumps of this world and think, you know, those guys can get away with anything, can't they? Basically, they can do what they like.

They can do what they like. Why? Because they've got an army of lawyers behind them and they've probably got a politician or a judge or two in their pockets, haven't they? They can get away.

They're the untouchables. And James says, no, that's not true.

That's wrong. He says there is someone more powerful. There's someone more wealthy. There is someone more influential. He's there at the end of verse 4. We meet him.

The Lord of hosts. The Lord of the heavenly armies. The Lord of hosts.

The Lord of hosts. The Lord of hosts. The Lord of hosts. For him, it is sin. Humility for those of us who have wealth.

[28 : 24] And finally, humility for those of us who are suffering. Looking at these last verses, 7 to 11, it's quite hard to work out who James is speaking to here. Perhaps he's speaking to the workers, to the laborers who have been pushed down and exploited by their wealthy owners.

Or perhaps he's speaking to people that are a bit more specific. Perhaps he's talking to people who have spoken. Have a look at verse 11. One of the examples he uses is the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Perhaps James is talking about people who are being persecuted and suffering here for having spoken in the name of the Lord Jesus. But whichever of these two groups James is speaking to, his message is very clear.

One word, one concept is repeated over and over again. Verse 7, be patient. Verse 8, you also be patient. Three examples. The farmer, the farmer who is patient about the crop that he sows. The prophets, verse 10, who are an example of suffering and patience. Job, verse 11, who is steadfast in the midst of suffering.

[29 : 38] Patience. Patience and steadfastness in the midst of suffering. How do we do that? How do I do that? Humility is the key, isn't it? I humble myself before the mighty hand of God as I pass through this time of suffering.

But that is so hard, isn't it? That is so hard, especially when there's injustice involved, when you're being treated badly in your workplace, when perhaps you're being persecuted for having spoken of the Lord Jesus.

And now you're feeling that. I don't know, perhaps at school, perhaps at university, you're ostracized from your friends because you spoke of the Lord Jesus. How do I keep going in the midst of that?

How do I remain steadfast? How am I patient? How do I stay humble? James' answer is, look to the future. Verse 7, the coming of the Lord.

Verse 8, the coming of the Lord is at hand. Look to the future. What is it that keeps the farmer going out day after day after day under the rain and under the sun? It is the fact that he is patiently waiting for the precious fruit of the earth.

[30 : 46] There in verse 7. What is it that keeps the prophet continuing to speak in the name of the Lord? How do you do that at school? What is it that keeps it? Answer, that they are patiently waiting for the day when they will be welcomed into the new creation.

For these words, well done, good and faithful servant. What keeps Job going steadfast through his suffering? Answer, the knowledge that he will one day meet the Lord who is compassionate and merciful.

What is it that James wants us to understand in the midst of our suffering? And perhaps there are people here today who are going through hard times, who have suffered or are suffering right now. There's so much to say on that subject.

And the Bible has so much to say. But from James this morning, I wonder if he's saying to us, look, don't let your gazes drop. Don't be consumed by your pain.

You can't see anything beyond it. Lift your gazes and look forward. Look forward to the Lord Jesus and think on him.

[31 : 57] Think on his humility as he planned and projected his life, as he thought about his will. Think about the Lord Jesus' humility to submit himself to his father's purposes.

He says, take the cup away from me. I don't want to drink it, the cup of your wrath. But then he says, not my will, but your will be done. Think of the Lord Jesus' humility as he submits his will to his father's.

Think of the Lord Jesus' humility with his wealth. Who is richer than him? Every super yacht, every bank, every law firm, every house on the planet belongs to the Lord Jesus.

And yet he makes himself poor, doesn't he? The son of man doesn't even have a pillow to lay his head on. He makes himself poor that we who are poor might become rich.

Look to him. Look to him who carried his cruel cross. Patient, steadfast in the midst of suffering.

[33 : 02] Look to him who is willing to embrace the agony of alienation for you and for me. Look. Look to the Lord Jesus.

He looked forward to the future, the future prize, and we can do the same. We can choose to go through life. We can choose to go through life arrogantly planning our futures, arrogantly using our wealth.

We can choose to go through life ignoring God in the midst of our suffering and in our pain. But James says, why would you do that? Embrace humility. Embrace Christ as you plan, as you deal with your wealth, and as you suffer.

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have opened our eyes to see very clearly what the right thing to do is. Heavenly Father, on our own, we cannot do that. We cannot live humble lives on our own. And so we need your help, Father. We need your help.

[34 : 06] We need your grace, Father, to live humbly, to plan humbly, to spend humbly, and to suffer humbly. Father, please would your spirit enable us to live as you would have us live, Father.

And as we do that in this community and in Naples, would we be distinctive? Would we shine like stars in this generation? And we ask that in Jesus' name. Amen.