

What is Your Life?

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Date: 30 March 2014

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you love us and we thank you that you love us enough to speak the hard word to us.

And so we do pray that you send your spirit to open our hearts to receive what it is you want to say tonight. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, everybody clapped when they heard that I was getting ordained and I'm glad it was announced before this sermon.

Because James is going to continue doing what he's been doing for a long time now. He's going to expose the pride that lies really deep in our hearts, in our lives.

And he's been doing this relentlessly. And in the very center, the very crux of the passage that Aaron Roberts preached on last week is the reason why he does this.

It's in verse 6 of chapter 4. He says, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

[1 : 18] And so James, throughout his letter, is putting this in action. He's showing us the pride in our lives that God opposes. He's revealing to us the sins against humility so that we may turn to the Lord and receive his grace.

And in particular, right after the passage that Aaron preached, there are three paragraphs in a row where he exposes these different sins of pride, sins against humility.

In verses 11 and 12 of chapter 4 in particular, he exposes the pride of a judgmental life. Those that speak evil against their brothers and sisters and act as if they are judges over them.

And then next, you get verses 13 to 17 in chapter 4. James exposes the pride of those who live a self-directed life. Those who want to be their own kings and those who want to be their own lords and be the masters of their destiny.

And then in verse, verses 1 to 6 in chapter 5, James exposes the pride of the self-indulgent life. The life that is all about acquisition and consumption to satisfy ourselves.

[2 : 32] So we're not going to go through all these. We're going to skip the first one. And we're going to focus on the last two because that will give us plenty to talk about. James exposes the pride of the self-directed life and the self-indulgent life.

Now notice how he connects these two passages together by a common rhetorical introduction. Come now. This is chapter 4 verse 13, chapter 5 verse 1.

Come now, you who say. Come now, you rich. This is James' way of trying to wake us up. He's saying, listen up, pay attention, come now.

What I'm about to say is really important. James calls our attention as he's about to humble us so that we would turn to the Lord.

So let's begin with the first come now. Verse 13 of chapter 4. It's the pride of the self-directed life that James points us to. He shows us the arrogance of those who try to live autonomous, self-directed lives.

[3 : 39] 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 profit.

In verse 13, James is describing a person who feels like they have control over their lives and they have control over their future. And notice the detail that he goes through to show how detailed this control is for this person.

Look at verse 13. Today or tomorrow, it's the timing of life. We will go into such and such a town. It's the location. And spend a year there.

It's the duration. And trade and make profit. It's the work that we will do and the outcome of that work. And I can only imagine that in a community like ours, in this place, the planning that's talked about here in verse 13 can take a whole bunch of different forms.

Maybe for some of us, it's the plan that next year, I'm going to go to university. I'm going to graduate with this degree in four years. And then I'm going to get this particular job. I'm going to climb my way up the corporate ladder so that I'll be making this amount of money.

[4 : 54] Or maybe it's different for others of you. Maybe it's more like this. I'm planning on getting married by the time I'm 25. And then buying a house, either here in Vancouver or somewhere else, by the time I'm 30.

And then having three children by the time I'm 35. And then living the American dream. Or maybe it goes like this. I'm planning on having kids that sleep through the night starting at two months old. Then they're going to go through this really advanced school program. And they're going to go to this particular university. They're going to get this particular profession. They're going to behave this way, have these friends, have these hobbies, and they're going to make it.

Or maybe it's more like this. I'm going to take this really high paying job for the next five years and it's going to cost my family a whole lot relationally.

But I'll make enough money so that I can retire early, play golf, and enjoy life. Many of us could add to this list and it could go on and on and on.

[6 : 02] Because we have plans. We have dreams. We have hopes for our lives. We want to be in control. Now at this point, I need to be clear. I need to be very clear.

I'm not saying that James is against making plans. James is not saying don't make plans. Planning is bad. It's evil. That's not what he's saying.

The problem is not planning in and of itself. Rather, James is pointing to the problem of the way in which we plan and that which motivates our plans. The problem is is that we plan without any reference to the living God.

The problem is that we plan as if we're practical atheists. As if God doesn't exist. And even if he did exist, he's distant and he's uninvolved and he doesn't care and it doesn't matter.

The problem is is that we plan as if we are the sovereign rulers of our lives, the self-sufficient and supreme masters of our destiny. And the problem is is that this planning is rooted so often for us in selfish pride and selfish ambition.

[7 : 11] Now let me be clear once again. God does not, I mean James is not encouraging passivity here. He doesn't want us to do nothing. Rather, what he's encouraging is God-centered activity.

And in verse 13, it's the God-centeredness that is what's missing. And so James says in verse 16, as it is, you boast in your arrogance and all such boasting is evil.

Now James responds to this arrogant attitude that he's described in verses 14 and 15. It's James' response. And he does two things here.

First, in verse 14, he tells us why this arrogant attitude is foolish. And then in verse 15, he tells us what our attitude and posture ought to be.

So first, he tells us why this prideful attitude is foolish. Verse 14. He says, you say all this and you plan this way, yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.

[8 : 16] What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. And so your arrogance is foolish, first of all, because you do not know the future.

You do not know what tomorrow will bring. And oh, how we love to think that we know what tomorrow will bring. We love to think that we can determine it. But the reality is is that none of us know what tomorrow is going to bring.

I remember when I was 17 years old, I got an opportunity to go to university and I had just signed the papers that determined what university I would go to.

I was going to go to this private school that was about an hour away from where my family lived. I was really excited because I was like, I actually got into university, I've signed these papers, I'm going to do a four-year degree, pre-med, then I'm going to go to med school, then I'm going to become a doctor, and this is going to be a glorious thing.

So this is just the beginning of a sweet unfolding of my future, my glorious future. And what happened about a week later, actually, is that about a week later, unsuspected, my father was asked to step down from his job.

[9 : 28] So he lost his job. And then a week after that, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. I had no idea what tomorrow would bring. No idea.

Now, my father has a job, my mother is alive and healthy, it's good, but I had no idea what tomorrow would bring. And James says, you just don't know.

So to be arrogant about it is foolish. But then he goes on and says, your arrogance is foolish because your life is fragile and momentary. Look at the rest of that verse.

What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. One moment you're here, the next you're not.

One moment you're alive and well, the next you're in the grave. We tend to think we're immortal, but God's word says it very clearly. All flesh is like grass and its glory like the flower of grass.

[10:28] The grass withers and the flower falls. And so, brothers and sisters, your life isn't as stable as you think it is. It could go at any moment. What is your life?

You are like a mist. So that's why James tells us it's absolutely foolish. We don't know what the future holds and our life is like a mist. But then James tells us in verse 15 what our attitude ought to be.

Instead, says James, you ought to say if the Lord wills, then we will live and do this or that. If the Lord wills. If I were to paraphrase what James is saying, I think he's saying you ought to have a posture a posture of humility and open-handedness before the Lord and as you walk into the future. A posture of open-handedness. If the Lord wills, we will live. It's worth pausing there for just a moment. God actually determines the number of our days.

Human life is a gift. We tend to think that our lives are self-sufficient. That we're autonomous. That we exist in and of ourselves. But what James is telling us is that it's by the will of the Lord that we actually live.

[11:50] So that our existence, our lives, are being created and sustained and held into very existence by God every second of every day.

The fact that we woke up this morning, grace. The fact that we came here tonight, grace. The fact that we may wake up tomorrow morning, well that depends on grace.

So the existence of tomorrow is never a guarantee. It's never a right. It's always a gift. And when we see life primarily as a gift from God, then that gives us a completely new perspective on life.

Because no longer is life this possession or this right that we have that we can control for our own purposes. Rather, life has become this gift gift that we receive and steward for God's purposes.

We are not our own. We belong to God. If the Lord wills, we will live. But James says more. If the Lord wills, we will live and we will do this or that.

[12:56] Not only does God determine the number of our days, but he directs the course of our life. whether or not any of our plans ever come to fruition is ultimately radically dependent on the will of God.

If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. So you may ask, what is James really getting on about? What is James really getting on about?

And I think it's this. Your life is a gift. You receive it with open hands. You don't control it like this. You receive it with open hands when you make your plans.

And you receive it with open hands when you walk into the future. And it's this posture of humility that we think is going to be the loss of our freedom which we think comes with control.

But actually, it's this posture of humility that is going to be our utmost freedom. And it's going to be the life of true grace. So if you're here tonight and you're trying to discern the posture of your heart right now, I have a few questions for you.

[14:08] Do you pray when you plan or make decisions? Do you pray when you plan or make decisions? Do you experience feelings of anxiety about the future?

Anxiety can be rooted in a whole lot of things but oftentimes it could be in a control that we actually don't have. Do you experience feelings of anxiety about your future?

If life does not go as planned, if things do not work out the way you want them to, do you feel bitter or resentful against God and people? Do you feel bitter and resentful against God and people if things don't work out the way you had planned?

All right. That's the first half of our passage. Take a deep breath. James now is going to take us in chapter 5 verse 1 to the rich.

Come now you rich says James. He's going to show us the pride of a self-indulgent life. Come now you rich who weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.

[15:25] I mean if we thought James was intense thus far I mean it's about to get even more intense. This is as intense as it gets. Come now you rich.

And we have to pause there for just a moment because there's a great temptation for us to hear that word you rich and automatically go oh that's not me. I'm good to go.

It's this person that's just above me. because wherever we draw the line we always want to draw it right above ourselves because it's really convenient for us because then we don't have to be addressed by the living God.

We don't have to be challenged. And the thing is is that if we live in Burnaby or Surrey we can point to those that live in let's say Richmond.

If we live in Richmond we can point to those who live in Carersdale or Kitts. And if we live in Carersdale or Kitts we can point to those who live downtown or at UBC or at Shaughnessy. And if people live there then it's kind of hard to point anywhere but you can point to downtown Manhattan downtown Manhattan or something like that right?

[16:39] But we must realize eventually that all this finger pointing is not the point. We got to hear God speak to us. And the reality is that most of us here tonight are rich.

So God wants to say come now you rich weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. James speaks here in the language of Old Testament prophetic judgment oracles.

Let me say that again. Old Testament prophetic judgment oracles. oracles and those oracles had two purposes in the Old Testament. When you read the prophets you'll see them all over the place. The first was to warn those that were comfortable. Those that were sitting in their sin and their self-indulgence. In this case the rich and it was to say to them you better repent you better change your ways or judgment is coming and it's going to be bad news.

So it was to warn. And the second thing was to comfort those who were suffering or afflicted at the hands of those who were sinning. So those that were oppressing others.

[17:48] It was to comfort those and say look God will have justice hang in there. God's going to take care of the rich who are oppressing you. So James has this keen sense that the judgment of the Lord is on the way.

The coming of the Lord is at hand. The judge is standing at the door says James. And so he wants to warn the rich because misery is coming their way if they continue down this path.

Come now you rich. Weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. And then in verses 2-6 James explains why the rich deserve the misery that's coming.

Why they deserve it. Look at verses 2-3 with me. First the rich are hoarding wealth. Your riches have rotted said James 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.

[18:57] James paints this picture of the sinful accumulation of wealth that is put to no good use. That's why the imagery of decay and rust and corrosion is there. If you have a Bible with you, can you flip to Matthew chapter 6?

Because James is actually drawing from the imagery and language of Jesus himself. These aren't James' own thoughts here completely. He's drawing from Jesus. Matthew chapter 6 verses 19 to 21.

Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says this, Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Skip down to verse 24. No one can serve two masters for either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and money. It's pretty straightforward. according to James, if you accumulate these earthly treasures that Jesus is talking about and you put them to no good use so they rot and they decay and they corrode, then harsh judgment is coming your way.

[20:31] In fact, the very treasures that you hold on to will actually be evidence against you in the last day and lead to your destruction. Your treasures will end up being your doom, says James.

And so I have to ask you brothers and sisters, are you hoarding your wealth? Are you? Is it money? Is it clothes? Is it food?

Is it apple products of various kinds? What is it? Are you hoarding? And as Christians, especially rich Christians, we love to hold on to this 10-90 rule.

We love the 10-90 rule. I give 10%. I keep 90%. Give 10%, keep 90%. 10% belongs to God and then I can do whatever I want with the other 90%.

And it's really convenient as long as we make more and more and more because then we give God his 10% while we could have piles of riches amassing around us with the other 90%.

[21 : 37] And we think that it doesn't really matter if our closets grow bigger and our bank accounts get deeper and dust collects on all the stuff that fills our garages and our basements.

But don't let your hearts be deceived says James. Your rotted riches will be evidence against you. famous missionary Jim Elliott once said he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.

He is no fool who gives his earthly treasures which he cannot keep so that he may gain the heavenly treasures which he cannot lose. Number two verse four the rich are cheating their workers.

Behold the wages of the laborers 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.

This verse makes it clear to us that what the rich are doing is not just hoarding wealth but they're doing it by sinful means. They're actually withholding wages from their workers.

[23 : 00] They're actually stealing from their workers. James calls it fraud. And what James wants us to see in the imagery that he lays out for us in very Old Testament terms is that this cheating does not go unnoticed by God.

The workers stolen wages notice how James says this actually cry out against the rich and the cries of the harvesters themselves reach the ears of the Lord of hosts and throughout the Bible especially in the book of Exodus when God hears God acts so what James is saying is God is heard and he's going to act so when the Lord of hosts looks at the money in our bank accounts when the Lord of hosts looks at the possessions in our house he sees not only what belongs to us but he sees what's there that belongs to others that we've refused to give to them that which we've held back and he hears the cries of those that we have cheated I was listening to an interview yesterday by a famous pastor in New York City some of you may guessed his name you probably don't know him though and he was somebody was interviewing him saying why don't you speak out on political issues or social issues or economic issues or sexual issues or whatever it be and he said well

Christianity is a private affair it's about the heart it's not public it's not about behavior it's not about actions it's not about our relationships with other it's private it's about the heart James says no to that James says no to that he's saying here God cares about how we do business God cares about Monday through Saturday just as he does Sunday and the rich who accumulate wealth at the expense of others will have to deal with the Lord of hosts they will have to third the rich in verse five are living in luxury and self indulgence you have lived on earth says James in luxury and self indulgence you fattened your hearts in the day of slaughter so we see here that the wealthy have gained all this riches and they've done it through immoral means but ultimately they do it so they can satisfy their own desires so they can create a comfortable pleasurable life and satisfy all their deepest cravings so he points us to the sinful use of wealth

I think this one's particularly challenging for us because we live in a culture that tells us that we are what we consume right you are what you buy so the clothes that you you are the clothes that you wear you are the food that you eat you are the technology that you have in your pocket and at your desk at home you are the possessions that you buy and the more you indulge we're told the fuller your life will be the more that you indulge the more human you will become shame shame shame shame shame shame shame shame the more you fatten your hearts for the day of slaughter you are ripening yourself for judgment says James and I say this with great sobriety because I've grown up rich my whole life and James' warning is really serious here and it's challenging challenges our priorities number four this is the final one

I'm closing up here verse six the rich are oppressing the righteous you have condemned and murdered the righteous person says James and he does not resist you I don't really know what this verse is saying but I think it's saying at least this in their self-indulgent accumulation and use of wealth the rich often leave many casualties behind them people have suffered so that the rich could live in luxury and friends we cannot leave here tonight and forget what James has said we can't leave here tonight and act as if these words have nothing to do with us that's why James gives us verse 17 look at verse 17 of chapter 4 whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it for him it is sin and this is the hinge between the two passages whoever knows the right thing to do and fails

to do it for him or her it is sin this is the sin of omission sin is not just what we do in rebellion against the Lord sin is what we know we should do before the Lord and we don't do it so if you've heard the voice of God speaking to you tonight through this passage if you've heard the spirit of the living God convicting you tonight through this passage if God is prodding your heart pricking your heart trying to show you the right thing to do regarding your planning and your wealth and you fail to do it you don't want to listen you don't want to obey then for you it is sin may God give us the grace to heed his warning tonight may God give us the grace to obey his voice tonight may God give us the grace to humble ourselves before him tonight that he may exalt us in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit

[29 : 24] Amen