

## Marks of a Faith That Works

### *A Faith that Works...* ***Plans Wisely, Not Presumptuously*** James 4:13-17

We've been in this series on the book of James now for nine weeks. And I'm sure that you have been impressed, as I have been, with just how down-to-earth this book is. By the way, here's a little quiz to see just how practical this book has been for you. Are you ready? All eyes on me, without looking at your bulletin: What is the theme of this book? (*Marks of a Faith that Works...* they've always told me that within 24 hours of the service, people have forgotten 95% of what the speaker says! That's pretty depressing!)

We've seen so far that a Faith that Works:

- Grows through Difficulty
- Turns from Temptation
- Obeys God's Word
- Shows no Favoritism
- Behaves like it Believes
- Manages the Mouth
- Draws Close to God
- Leaves Judgment with God

And today, a Faith that Works *Plans Wisely, Not Presumptuously*. Let's look at what James says:

Look here, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit." How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog — it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, "If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that." Otherwise you are boasting about your own plans, and all such boasting is evil. Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.

James 4:13-17 NLT

We all have different ways of planning, but there's not a person in this room who doesn't *plan*. My wife and I joke about our differences in this area. She'll walk into the bedroom at night and see me sitting on the bed with my PDA in hand, looking at upcoming events. She'll remark, "There you are again, with that little machine!" The next morning I'll get up and go to the kitchen. As I reach for the coffee maker, my eye catches several "sticky notes" reminding Mary Alice of what her priorities are for the day. We all plan, even if we have different ways of going about it. You *planned* to be here this morning...though some of you didn't *plan* to get here an hour early!

Planning is not a bad thing. God gave detailed plans to Moses, instructing him how to build the tabernacle (Exodus 26:30).<sup>1</sup> In the revival under Hezekiah, God's people devised a plan encouraging the people to come to Jerusalem to worship (2 Chronicles 30). And Paul says in Romans 15 that he planned to go to Spain. Jesus once said: "No man goes out and builds a

house without first considering how much it's going to cost" (Luke 14:28). And the book of Proverbs says over and over again that if I don't plan I'm a fool.

So the problem is not our planning, but *how* we plan. And I'm not talking about whether you use sticky notes or Microsoft Outlook. James could care less if you have *Microsoft* Outlook. He's asking if you have God's outlook.

So how do I plan with God's outlook? How do I plan wisely, not presumptuously?

## **I. AN EXAMPLE OF PRESUMPTUOUS PLANNING (13)**

James begins with an example of presumptuous planning. Notice what he says in verse 13:

Look here, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit."

James has been eavesdropping. He's listening in on a conversation between some of the more entrepreneurial business men in the church. Maybe this conversation took place after the Sunday morning service. They've listened to the message but now their minds are already on the business of the week. "Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit."

James knew little about "baby-boomers," but he seems to describe them to a tea. These guys don't drive BMW's or carry Blackberrys, but they were just as aggressive, goal and profit-oriented as any business executive today. They not only worked hard, they probably partied hard. Maybe they had a bumper sticker on their deluxe camel that read, "It's party time in Jerusalem!"

But in all their long range planning and pursuits, these people made three fatal mistakes that we all at times are guilty of.

### **Mistake #1: We presume about the future.**

Here's the most obvious problem this group of people had: They *presumed about the future*. "Today or tomorrow," they say. And again, "We will stay there a year!"

These optimistic planners assumed they had a 100 year lease on their bodies with options to renew! But none of us have that. The 1<sup>st</sup> Century philosopher and playwright Seneca once said that we are always complaining that our days are few and acting as though there would be no end of them.<sup>ii</sup> In our planning, we often presume about the future.

Back in 2001, about the time of 9/11, there was a column in *Time* magazine called "Winners and Losers." In the "Loser" category in the August issue was Rudy Giuliani, lame duck New York City mayor, suffering from crumbling health, a crumbling marriage, and a crumbling political career. What a loser, *Time* suggested. Who would want to be this guy? In the "Winner" category a month earlier was Ted Olson, rising star as Solicitor General of the United States. What a winner, *Time* proclaimed. Who wouldn't envy this guy? How things change. Within a matter of weeks of these two issues, *Time* would refer to Giuliani as the "Mayor of the World" and a "tower of strength" for his leadership in the aftermath of September 11, and a few months later

the magazine would name him “2001 Person of the Year.” By contrast, many ached with Ted Olson as he buried his wife, Barbara, a passenger on American Airlines Flight 77, which crashed into the Pentagon. No one envied him at that moment.<sup>iii</sup>

You and I must never presume about the future. And the main reason anyone does is because we plan apart from God. That’s mistake number two.

### **Mistake #2: We plan without God.**

“Today or tomorrow *we* are going to a certain town...*we* will do business there.” Essentially, these guys leave God out of their planning. Of course, unbelievers do this all the time. That’s sad. But what is particularly sad is that many *believers* leave God out of their planning. Some claim to be believers, but are living as practical atheists.

But why do we presume about the future and make plans apart from God’s counsel? Bottom line, we’re preoccupied with self.

### **Mistake #3: We pursue selfish concerns.**

This crowd presumes about the *duration* of their lives, “Today or tomorrow we will.” They presume about the *location* of their work, “We will go to such and such a town.” They presume about their *vocation*, “We will do business.” But what really makes the whole scenario unfortunate is their motivation: “*We will* make a profit.”

A recent survey asked “What will make you happier?” 48% said “If I were rich.” On the other hand, a University of Illinois psychologist interviewed 49 of the wealthiest Americans, each with a net worth of over \$100 million. Many said that they were basically unhappy and one said that he could never remember being happy.<sup>iv</sup>

In and of themselves, none of these things are wrong. It’s not wrong to look ahead. It’s not wrong to plan on going to certain places or doing certain things. It’s not even wrong to make a profit from our work. The problem is that it is all based on presumptions, leaving God out of the picture.

And what is worse, making plans without God and presuming about life kept these people from doing good in the present. These fellows had “in-grown eyeballs” and could think of nothing but themselves. They were self-centered “navel gazers.” And they were probably the very ones that James accuses of favoring the wealthy rather than caring for the poor.

That’s the picture of presumptuous planning. It makes three critical mistakes: presuming on the future, planning without God and a preoccupation with self. What’s the solution? James hits hard on each of these mistakes in verses 13-17.

## **II. THE EXHORTATION TO WISE PLANNING (13-17)**

Notice how he begins in verse 12: “Look here, you who say...” In James’ Greek language, the expression is an attention grabber. He says it again in 5:1 where he begins his scathing remarks about the dangers of wealth. Remember, James is listening in on the arrogant boasting of these

First Century baby-boomers. It's like saying today, "Hey, shut up and listen up." More than that, James shifts here to the second person singular. He's speaking to *each one of us*, without exception!

If we are to live and plan according to God's will we must take into account three things which correspond to each of the mistakes of presumptuous planning in verse 12. Here they are:

#### **A. THE BREVITY OF LIFE (14)**

How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? For your life is like the morning fog--it's here a little while, then it's gone.

Mistake #1 made by so many is to presume about the future. And here's the solution: *recognize the brevity of life*. "Right in the middle of the word LIFE is IF. And life is pretty if-fy, isn't it. And the fact of the matter is, you and I cannot "read" tomorrow, or the next day. That's the idea behind James' question: "How do you *know* what will happen...?" The expression he uses speaks of those who are illiterate. As to the future, you and I *are* illiterate. We can't "read" tomorrow. We don't have a clue as to what tomorrow holds in store.

He goes on to describe our earthly lives as a "morning fog," here for a little while and then gone. He uses the word *atmis*, from which we get our word "atmosphere." According to the Bible, our days are like a shadow (1 Chronicles 29:15), a breath (Job 7:7), smoke (Psalm 102), a flower that fades (James 1:10-11) and they go by swifter than a runner (Job 9:25).

Or think about these words of Moses in Psalm 90:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.  
Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.  
You turn men back to dust, saying,  
"Return to dust, O sons of men."  
For a thousand years in your sight are like a day  
that has just gone by. Psalm 90:1-4a

If 1000 years is like one day in God's sight, each year of our lives are like 86.4 seconds. Given that measurement, the average person in America will live about 28 days. No wonder Moses goes on to say: "so teach us to number our days, that we may present to you a heart of wisdom."

Remember this: *You have to be ready to die before you are ready to live*. Steve Jobs, cofounder of Apple and Pixar, at the Stanford University Commencement Address in June, 2005, said this:

Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.<sup>v</sup>

We are so concerned about the *duration* of life. God is far more concerned about the *donation* of our life—what we are doing with it. I'm reminded of this each Friday when Mary Alice and I

visit the grave of two of our young people, our own son, Jonathan (who died at the age of 22) and only about 20 yards away, the grave of Eva Khallaf (taken at the age of 20). Mary Alice and I were there again this last Friday. I walked over to Eva's grave and there on the back of the tombstone are written these words, the last letter Eva wrote to some of her dear friends:

My prayer for you girls in that you would reach the end of your life with no regrets. Who knows when the end of life may be. As quoted in the martyr's prayer "a long life is not necessarily a full life." I pray that your lives would be full and free of regret. Having no regrets does not require a perfect life. In other words, may you live your lives in such a way that you would learn from your mistakes and bless God in your trials. He can use anything and everything for His glory and He will. Not even our suffering and downfalls are experienced in vain. He has a purpose for everything. May He always be your purpose for life on this earth. If I never have the privilege of seeing you again, I will see you in Heaven where He is preparing a place for us beyond our wildest dreams!

God told his people through the mouth of the prophet Amos: "Prepare to meet your God" (Amos 4:12). Are you prepared? You see, the real problem of presuming on tomorrow is that we are counting on a day that may never come and forgetting the day that will certainly come. Their planning is not long-range enough. We need to plan, not so much in view of tomorrow or the next day, but in view of a million days from now – in view of eternity. The Bible says, "For it is appointed unto man once to die, after which comes the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). God doesn't guarantee tomorrow or the next day, but he does guarantee ONE DAY – the day each person will give an account to him.

## **B. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD (15-16)**

We presume about the future when we plan without God. Did you notice how many times in verse 2 the word *God* is mentioned? Zip! Zero times. It's all about I, me and my: "we are going to a certain town...we will stay there...we will make a profit." That's mistake #2, planning without God.

And here's the solution: *recognize the sovereignty of God*. James says to this crowd of self-sufficient entrepreneurs (15-16):

What you ought to say is, "If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that."  
Otherwise you are boasting about your own plans, and all such boasting is evil.

Proverbs 16:1 says, "We may make our plans, but God has the last word." As we approach the two year anniversary of Jonathan's death, I was reading again through some of the comments written by his classmates there in South Korea. One girl named Susie wrote this:

It was only last month when Jonathan himself was giving me encouragement on a situation that I now find myself in again. His message was ... (this): "Even though death hurts, there will be a reason shown to us later for why that life was taken."

*We may make our plans, but God has the last word*. Jonathan had plans. He told us no more than 12 hours before his death that felt God was calling him to make Korea his third home. He

planned to settle down there and support God's work towards North Korea. But God had other plans. *We may make our plans, but God has the last word.*

To what degree do you, as a believer, bring God into your plans? As you work through the priorities of your week, does it revolve around what is most on God's heart for your life? Or do your plans revolve around your own personal pursuits? Parents, what do you model before your children? Making plans *with* God or *without* God?

James says that we ought to say, "If the Lord wills we will do this or that." We see this modeled particularly in Paul's life. In Acts 18:21 he says to the Ephesians, "I will come back if it is God's will." And to the Corinthian believers he writes: "I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing" (1 Corinthians 4:19). And then to the Roman believers he says: "I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you" (Romans 1:10). You see, the planning is not the sin. But the planning without taking God into consideration is the sin. Just like the entrepreneurial traders in James' day, we also can rely on the perceived stability of our jobs, income, wealth, or other things that we so often take for granted.

I have an older sister who always used to sign her letters with the Latin abbreviation "D.V." What does that mean? It means *Deo Valente* – "Lord willing." That's what we all need to have written over our entire lives: D.V. *Deo Valente*. That's a freeing thought! Because some of us are crucified between two thieves: the regret of yesterday and the fear of tomorrow.<sup>vi</sup> But James tells us that this shouldn't happen. As we recognize the brevity of life and the sovereignty of God, we are free to *obey in the present*.

### **C. THE PRIORITY OF OBEDIENCE IN THE PRESENT (17)**

Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.

James is telling you and me this: Quite worrying about what we don't know (the specific plans of tomorrow and next year), and do what God has called us to do today! Many Christians get all hung up on this question of the will of God for their life. But James gives us this piece of advice: The will of God for your life begins with doing the good you already know you ought to do. Some people are too caught up in wondering what God's will is in terms of location and vocation. Where does He want me to go? What does he want me to do? But God has already revealed to us so much of his will. God is far more concerned with our obedience to what he has already shown us in the present than in our worry over what he has not yet revealed to us about the future.

James is probably thinking here of a well know verse in the book of Proverbs:

Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, "Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow"-- when you now have it with you. Proverbs 3:27-28 (NIV)

Both James and Solomon are talking about sins of omission. We often focus on sins of commission, doing things that we shouldn't do. But as believers one of our biggest problems is

sins of omission, not doing things that we should do.<sup>vii</sup> And at the heart any sin of omission is *procrastination*:

Procrastination is my sin,  
It only caused me sorrow;  
I know I ought to change my ways,  
In fact I will -- tomorrow.<sup>viii</sup>

What “good” is God calling you to do *right now*? What is holding you back? Are you presuming about tomorrow? Are you planning apart from God? Are you prioritizing selfish concerns?

What about the area of giving? It’s funny how a \$10 bill can look so BIG when the offering goes by in church and that same bill can look so SMALL when you’re in your favorite store! Are you like the Corinthians, who had great intentions of giving generously but never really followed through? Some of you have said, “Yes, I see the need. More than that, I see the opportunity and the reward in investing in eternity...but I just haven’t gotten around to it.” Remember, “Do your giving while you’re living, then you’re knowin’ where it’s goin’.” We’ll be talking more about this in the next few weeks.

Or what about the area of connecting? James is not content to let any of us simply “audit” the Christian life. But to avoid this, we need to connect with other believers. Have you been putting off joining a Life Group, a Sunday School class, or making the weekly gathering of the church of top priority in your life? Don’t put it off any longer. Make connecting with other believers a serious part of your weekly planning.

Or what about the area of serving? If you are part of Christ’s body, then you have something to offer to others. We *each* have a contribution to make. We *each* need others and are needed by others. What is your gift? What is your *SHAPE* for ministry? Can you identify your role of ministry within and through the local church? And if not, why not? Again, James urges you and me not to procrastinate. When it is in our power to do good, and we do not do it, then we sin. What is God calling you to do with the gifts He has given you?

The Psalmist says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts ...” (Psalm 5:7-8).

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<sup>i</sup> There are even numerous verses in the Bible that talk about God’s plans: 1 Chronicles 28:19; Job 42:2; Isaiah 5:19; Amos 3:7; etc.

<sup>ii</sup> Seneca, *Leadership*, Vol. 5, no. 1

<sup>iii</sup> J. Richard Love, Ruston, Louisiana; articles appeared in *Time*, August 6, 2001, and July 2001 as cited by [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).

<sup>iv</sup> David P. Nystrom, *James* in The NIV Application Commentary Series, 262-64.

<sup>v</sup> Steve Jobs, cofounder of Apple and Pixar, at the Stanford University Commencement Address, June 2005.

<sup>vi</sup> Adapted from Fulton Oursler, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 32, no. 3 as cited by [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).

<sup>vii</sup> In fact, the Bible says that many will miss heaven because of the sin of omission. Not because they have done something, but because they have not believed something. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. John 3:18-19.

<sup>viii</sup> Cited by Rich Warren.