

Living in Light of Eternity

James 4:13-17

Rev. Brian Bill

March 23-24, 2019

I read a compelling book several years ago called, *“The Christian Atheist: Believing in God but Living as if He Doesn’t Exist.”* Here’s how it begins:

“Hi, my name is Craig Groeschel, and I’m a Christian Atheist. For as long as I can remember, I’ve believed in God, but I haven’t always lived like he exists...you might think it’s odd for a pastor to struggle with living like there is no God. However, in my corner of the world, Christian Atheism is a fast-spreading spiritual pandemic, which can poison, sicken, and even kill eternally. Yet Christian Atheism is extremely difficult to recognize, especially by those who are infected.”

We’re going to see from today’s text how common it is for Christians to be infected with this self-centered sickness. As we read James 4:13-17, let’s ask this question: *Am I living my life as if there is no God?*

“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.”

Last week we learned this truth: *God gives grace to the humble, not the haughty.* Here’s where we’re headed today: *Live as if this is the last day of your life.*

Verse 13 provides the symptoms of our disease: ***“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.’”*** This person makes plans without any regard for God’s purposes.

The phrase, ***“come now,”*** occurs only here and in James 5:1. It’s a terse and blunt way of saying, *“Listen up and pay attention!”* This is addressed to business people. In James’ day, merchants would gather goods and products from one city and travel to a distant city and remain until they sold those goods at a profit. Then,

using their profits, they'd buy up products from that city and head to another city to sell them.

It would be like a vendor from Green Bay moving to the QCA for a year and trying to sell Johnsonville Brats, Cheese Curds and Packer memorabilia at the Freight House Farmer's Market. When it was all sold (I'm sure it wouldn't take very long) he or she would use the profits to load up a semi filled with Boetje's Mustard, Whitey's Ice Cream, Lagomarcino's chocolate, pizza from the QC Pizza Company and move to Michigan until everything was sold.

These business people had a solid business plan – they had a place, a program and a purpose. It seemed like they had everything figured out – or almost everything. The phrase, “*you who say*” is in the present tense, meaning they said these kinds of things all the time.

- When: “*today or tomorrow*”
- Where: “*such and such a town*”
- How long: “*spend a year*”
- What: “*and trade*”
- Why: “*make a profit*”

In all their planning, they left out the most important – the “*who.*” God was nowhere in their plans. They were self-absorbed, self-assured, self-confident, self-sufficient, self-indulgent and self-centered. Notice they said, “*we will go...*” as if nothing can slow them down.

I'm reminded of the five “*I wills*” spoken by Lucifer which led to his banishment from heaven in [Isaiah 14:13-14](#):

- *I will* ascend to heaven; above the stars of God
- *I will* set my throne on high
- *I will* sit on the mount of assembly
- *I will* ascend above the heights of the clouds
- *I will* make myself like the Most High

Making plans is a good thing, but planning without acknowledgement of the Almighty is presumptuous and puts you in a precarious position.

James then gives us five directives to heal our self-centeredness.

1. Admit ignorance of the future. Listen to the first part of verse 14: “*Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.*” We don’t know what will happen tonight, much less next week or next year. Proverbs 27:1: “*Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.*” The only time you have is this time, right now.

Yesterday is called the past because it has already passed, and tomorrow is not here yet. I don’t recall where I first heard this but it’s very helpful: “*Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, and today is a gift—that is why it is called the present.*” It’s good we don’t know the future. If you knew tomorrow would bring prosperity, you’d likely become proud. If you knew disaster was coming, you’d likely fall into despair.

The rich fool made plans he thought would give him security for the rest of his life. He planned for whatever could possibly occur, but according to Luke 12:20, he did not plan for what was certainly going to happen: “*But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’*”

Have you admitted ignorance about the future? *Live as if this is the last day of your life.*

2. Acknowledge the brevity of life. Life is not only uncertain; it’s also short. We see this in the second half of verse 14: “*What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.*” J. B. Phillips paraphrases it this way: “*You are like a puff of smoke visible for a little while and dissolving into thin air.*” I wonder if James borrowed this idea from Job 7:9: “*As the cloud fades and vanishes...*”

The Greek for “*mist*” is *atmos*, from which we get the word “atmosphere.” James is thinking of the morning mist which appears for a “*little time*” on the Mediterranean and goes away when the sun comes up. The word “*vanishes*” has the idea of utterly disappearing.

Have you ever thought of yourself as fragile as the mist? You’re here one moment and then gone the next. Even if you live to be 100, time goes by quickly and like vanishing steam from a hot cup of coffee, you will eventually evaporate from the earth.

John Blanchard offers this insight: “*The moment a man is born he begins to die, and death could come at any time – by design, disease, disaster or decay. Man is not here to stay, he is here to go.*”

Let’s ponder the brevity of life from the Book of Psalms.

- Psalm 39:5: “*Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!*”
- Psalm 78:39: “*He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and comes not again.*”
- Psalm 89:47: “*Remember how short my time is!*”
- Psalm 90:10: “*The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.*”
- Psalm 102:3: “*For my days pass away like smoke...*”
- Psalm 144:4: “*Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow.*”

We often think this is the land of the living, and when we die we go to the land of the dead. The opposite is really true – this is the land of the dying. When our life here is over, we are transferred to the land of the living – either to a place of eternal joy called Heaven or to a place of terrible torment called Hell.

*Life is short;
Death is sure;
Sin the cause;
Christ the cure.*

Brothers and sisters, life is too uncertain and too short to live it without God at the center. We count our lives in years but God tells us in Psalm 90:12 to number our days. Every one in this room is just one heartbeat away from eternity. In 1 Samuel 20:3, David said, “*But truly, as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death.*” To not be 100 percent ready for something that is 100 percent certain is 100 percent foolish.

Because life is brief, *live as if this is the last day of your life.* Have you admitted ignorance about the future? Have you acknowledged the brevity of life?

3. Align with God’s will. The third directive is found in verse 15: ***“Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’”*** We’re called to move from arrogant independence to intentional dependence upon God. God is actively and personally involved with His people. Because He has plans and purposes for us, we must seek Him and His will. The little word ***“if”*** makes all the difference. ***“If”*** the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

When Warren Wiersbe was speaking at a youth conference a teenager remarked, *“I would give my life to the Lord, but I’m afraid.”* When he asked about her fears, she answered, *“I’m afraid He’ll ask me to do something dangerous.”* Wiersbe wisely responded, *“The dangerous life is not in the will of God, but out of the will of God. The safest place in the world is right where God wants you.”*

No amount of money, influence, power, or planning can guarantee tomorrow. Only God can grant us another sunrise or another breath. Let’s declare with David in Psalm 31:15: ***“My times are in your hand.”***

We need to be like the Puritans, who were known to conclude their written correspondence with two letters: *“D.V.,”* which stands for *“Deo Volente,”* meaning “as God wills.” It would be helpful for us to say, *“Lord willing”* whenever we make plans.

The Apostle Paul often expressed this attitude.

- Acts 18:21: ***“I will return to you if God wills.”***
- 1 Corinthians 4:19: ***“But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills.”***
- 1 Corinthians 16:7: ***“I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.”***

Does that mean we must always declare, *“if the Lord wills”* when we’re making plans? Not necessarily. Paul didn’t do it all the time.

- Romans 15:28: ***“When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.”***
- 1 Corinthians 16:5: ***“I will visit you after passing through Macedonia...”***

Whether Paul explicitly stated it or not, his plans were always conditioned on the purposes of God. The key is not to make this phrase a trite formula but to really mean, *“If the Lord wills.”*

One commentator offers this helpful insight:

- We should *refer* to God's will.
- We should *defer* to God's will.
- We should *prefer* God's will.

It's not wrong to make plans, but we must make sure they align with God's purposes. Proverbs 19:21: "***Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.***"

Let's summarize. Make sure you are *living as if this is the last day of your life*.

- Admit ignorance about the future.
- Acknowledge the brevity of life.
- Align with God's will

Our next directive is to avoid arrogance.

4. Avoid arrogance. According to verse 16, God does what He chooses in my life. Therefore, I must accept what He chooses to do: "***As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.***" The word "***boast***" means to exult one self higher than God. The word "***arrogance***" was originally used of wandering hucksters who were full of empty and boastful claims about their cures.

If we plan without aligning ourselves with God's purposes we become arrogant. 1 Corinthians 5:6: "***Your boasting is not good...***" We might call ourselves Christ-followers but by leaving God out of our lives, we are acting like atheists. Boasting is evil because we are defying the true state of our lives and living like we don't need God for anything.

Let's not be like Nebuchadnezzar who said in Daniel 4:30: "***Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?***" If we think we're "all that," we may end up eating grass like an ox.

I appreciate Charles Spurgeon's advice for conquering pride:

- Embrace your Nothingness – "***Be not proud of race, face, place, or grace.***"

- Embrace Christ – *“Pride cannot live beneath the cross.”*
- Embrace Suffering – *“The benefit of the furnace; it melts, tries, and purifies.”*

Have you noticed how popular self-centered spirituality is today? Someone has said many Christians are following *“therapeutic moralistic deism.”* An example of this is found in the best-selling “Christian” book called, *“Girl, Stop Apologizing: A Shame-Free Plan for Embracing and Achieving Your Goals.”* This book is #2 on Amazon Charts and #1 on the Publisher’s Weekly list.

Jen Oshman has written an insightful review entitled, *“Girl, Follow Jesus.”* Here are a few excerpts.

Rachel Hollis *“wants you to believe in yourself, to take great pride in your hard work and accomplishments, and to do so without shame and with gusto. She wants you to go hard and unapologetically after your dreams.”*

Here’s a quote from page 83: *“All that really matters is how bad you want those dreams and what you’re willing to do to make them happen.”* For Hollis, a professing Christian, salvation is found in ourselves: *“The real you is destined for something more...your version of more. This is who you were made to be, and the first step to making that vision a reality is to stop apologizing for having the dream in the first place...it’s time to become who you were made to be.”*

To get there, Hollis says: *“First learn to love yourself well and give yourself credit; then reach for more.”* She encourages readers to pick 10 goals, write them out every day, and meditate on the future vision we have of ourselves in order to get our subconscious involved. An example of one of her goals is, *“I only fly first class.”*

Oshman concludes: *“Becoming the women we were created to be means following Jesus, believing in Jesus, living for Jesus—not ourselves. We were made to be more than self-made. We are God-made. God-rescued. God-loved. Only as we orient our lives and dreams around Him will we experience true and lasting joy...Girl, let’s start with an apology. Let’s turn from a self-focused way of life to a Jesus-focused way of life—and therein find true life. For it’s in Him, not in ourselves, that we find the path of life, the fullness of joy, and pleasures forevermore.”*

You can read more on Sermon Extras if you're interested.

5. Act in obedience. We've been challenged from the Book of James to live out what we're learning. The final directive is found in verse 17: ***“So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”*** This literally reads, *“sin it is to him.”* This attitude says something like this, *“God, I know what you want me to do, but I'm not going to do it. I know better than you do.”*

Some of us think we haven't done anything really bad, so we're good to go. Perhaps we even point out others who've done awful things. But the truth is we can sin by doing nothing. It was Edmund Burke who said, *“All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.”*

James is addressing sins of *omission*, which result from failing to do something God's Word commands us to do. A sin of *commission* is a sin we actively commit. Paul struggled with both in Romans 7:14-20 when he describes not doing what He knows He should do (sins of omission) and doing what he doesn't want to do (sins of commission).

I'm reminded of the young boy who was asked in Sunday School if he knew the difference between a sin of commission and a sin of omission: *“‘Sins of commission,’ he said, ‘Are the sins we have already committed. And sins of omission are the sins we haven't gotten around to yet.’”*

The best way to deal with the future is to be faithful today. Now is always the right time to act because it is the only time you can be sure of. The only moment you can guarantee is this moment. When you procrastinate doing the right thing, you end up doing the wrong thing. Knowing what should be done obligates a person to do it. Jesus said it strongly in Luke 12:47: ***“And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating.”***

We could say it like this: *Delayed obedience is really disobedience.* Do you have any delayed obedience in your life? Do you know what God wants you to do or to stop doing, but you've been delaying?

Here's what we've learned. Actually, we can't say we learned it until we start living it, right?

- Admit ignorance of the future

- Acknowledge the brevity of life
- Align with God's will
- Avoid arrogance
- Act in obedience

Putting it into Practice

Are you living this day as if it's your last day? Ray Pritchard just released a booklet called, "Coming Down the Homestretch: My 25-Year Plan." A free PDF is available on Sermon Extras. Here's how he concludes: *"My job is to keep running hard until I cross the finish line. If that happens today, I'll be surprised but not disappointed. If it happens 25 years from now, I'll be surprised in a different way. My friend Jack Graham said it this way: 'If you're not dead, you're not done. God still has work for you to do.' That thought cheers me up. At the moment, I'm not dead; therefore I'm not done...I figure if I live each day as if it might be my last, one day I'm bound to be right."*

In light of eternity, you and I must live differently today. Here are some ways we can do that.

1. Repent of being a "Christian Atheist" today. If you've been living like God doesn't exist, admit it right now and repent of your rebellion.

2. Get right with others today. Treat your spouse as if he or she was going to die tonight. Treat your brother or sister as if he or she won't be here tomorrow. Treat your child as if he or she were going to be called home this afternoon. Is there anyone you need to forgive? Anyone you need to ask forgiveness from?

3. Go with the gospel today. As we look ahead to our six Easter services in a month, let's consider four actions.

- Come for one (Gather)
- Pray for one (Grow)
- Serve at one (Give)
- Invite one (Go)

4. Get saved today. 2 Corinthians 6:2 says, ***"Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."*** Don't delay – you could die today or Jesus could return tonight.

If you don't know Jesus as your Savior, you have an appointment with judgment. There is no escape unless you put your faith in Jesus Christ this very moment. Do you want to go to heaven or to hell? Do you want deliverance or destruction? Put your faith in Jesus Christ now before it's too late.

Time is short. Hell is hot. Eternity is a long time.

While I was working on the message this week, I received a call from a friend named Randy. I met him about 10 years ago. I'll never forget what he did when he came into the sanctuary for the first time. He put his arms over his head, looked up to the ceiling and said he was waiting for the roof to cave in because of how he had been living. Randy was rough around the edges but he and I became good friends. After he got saved I had the privilege of baptizing him. He liked to joke that the water boiled for 35 minutes after he was dunked.

He reached out to me on Wednesday because he was scheduled for a triple bypass surgery on Friday and he was afraid. Surgery has a way of sobering us up, doesn't it? He told me he knew he was not in control but was finding peace knowing God is in control.

He asked me if I would do his funeral if he didn't make it. I asked him if he was ready to die. He said he was 95% sure he would go to heaven. I asked why he wasn't 100% sure. He told me he's still in process and he's no Mother Theresa. I reminded him even Mother Theresa couldn't get into heaven by her works but only by trusting in the finished work of Christ. I rehearsed the gospel with him and he confessed he is trusting Christ alone for salvation. He told me the Lord has been bringing Romans 8:1 to his mind. This is the verse he quoted when he was baptized: ***"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."***

I encouraged Randy to forgive anyone who had wronged him and to ask forgiveness from anyone he had wronged. He was quiet for a few seconds before agreeing to do this. Thursday night he told me he had done it. He said: *"I've forgiven all those who've done me wrong. This was really hard to do, but I've let it go. In the end, God is judge."*

As Randy reflected on his life, he said he doesn't have much money but he is thankful for his wife, who has made him the richest man on earth. He gave thanks to Jehovah Jireh for the provision of Jonna.

Then he told me he regrets all the time he wasted seeking satisfaction in things that didn't bring any lasting satisfaction. I asked him what he was going to do about it. He said if he made it through surgery, he would get back to living for Christ and His kingdom.

Brothers and sisters, we can choose to live our lives in one of three ways:

- Spend our lives
- Waste our lives
- Invest our lives

Life is short, 'twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last.

Invitation Prayer

If you're ready to be saved so you don't come into judgment, please pray this prayer with me right now.

Lord, I admit I am a sinner and deserve your just judgment. I repent from how I've been living and turn to you. I believe Jesus died in my place on the cross and rose again on the third day and now I receive Him into my life. Please save me from my sins and from your righteous wrath. I want to be born again so I place all my trust in you and you alone. If there's anything in my life you don't like, please get rid of it. I pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Closing Song: "I'll Fly Away"

*Some glad morning when this life is o'er I'll fly away
To a home on God's celestial shore I'll fly away
Just a few more weary days and then I'll fly away
To a land where joys shall never end I'll fly away*