

Proud Planning

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; 14 whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. 15 Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." 16 But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. 17 Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin. (Jam 4:13-17)

Napoleon Bonaparte's downfall came when he decided to attack Russia. In fact, a friend sought to dissuade him from doing so, but Napoleon would not change his mind. The friend then gave up trying, and quoted the old proverb, "Man proposes, but God disposes." To that statement, Napoleon angrily replied, "I dispose as well as propose." One Christian who heard that remark said, "I set that down as the turning point of Bonaparte's fortunes. God will not suffer a creature with impunity to usurp His prerogative." (from Harold Fickett, *Faith that Works* p. 134). When Napoleon's plans were dipped in deep pride, they became his undoing.

Of course, everyone plans. Only animals live in the present moment without any thought of past and future. Human beings, with the gift of language are able to not only think about the present moment, but past moments and future moments. So it is part of being made in God's image that we think about the future, and we plan what we will do in advance.

However, how we plan is one of the single most revealing things about our worldview. How you and I plan speaks volumes about what we believe about God's control of life, how dependent we are, how involved He is, how much His will matters, how we discover that will, and whether we care about it.

And here James turns his attention to the topic of planning. As James has reached the high point of his book, he is rounding it off with a few more practical areas. Remember he showed us that the same gospel that saved us is the gospel we live by. We came to faith in humble, submissive repentance and faith, and we must live by humble, submissive, repentant faith. That's how we overcome worldly wisdom, sinful conflict, partiality, an evil tongue, and what we saw last week proud judging. But James is not finished showing us the ways that worldly pride can manifest. One of the clearest ways that our pride is shown is in our planning.

So what we have before us is James rebuking proud planning. The same pride that leads to conflict and partiality and evil judging, leads to a particular kind of planning that dishonours God and is not fitting for Christians. He is going to rebuke proud planning, he will then ridicule proud planning, and then thirdly he will show us how to replace proud planning.

I. Proud Planning Rebuked

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit";

Come now – which means, look here, listen up. You people who strut around the world in proud independence, and you make these loud, self-confident boasts. You say, today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit.

What's wrong with this? James is continuing the theme of proud, worldly living. What James is condemning here is boastful, arrogant, God-denying planning. Look closely at this verse and you will see how atheistic this planning is.

This person left God out of five areas of his planning. He has firstly planned **when** he is going to do something "today or tomorrow". He has his own calendar, his own schedule, and God does not feature at all.

Second, he has planned **where** he is going to do something "we will go to such and such a city". He decides on where he will go and be, no sense of God's calling, no sense of God setting the bounds of our habitations, calling us to particular places at particular times.

Third, he has planned **what** he is going to do "go...buy and sell". He has determined his actions ahead of time, and God doesn't seem to have been consulted.

Fourth, he has planned the **duration** of his actions "spend a year". He believes he can decide independently where he will be and for exactly how long.

Fifth, he has even planned the **outcome** "make a profit". He believes the results are in his own hands, and he arrogantly tells the universe what will happen.

Now James has no problem with people making plans for tomorrow. He has no problem with people travelling. He has no problem with people planning journeys, trading, or even making a profit. The problem is the profound independence here – planning when, where, what, how long, and the outcome, all without reference to God.

This kind of planning assumes things that only the proud assume – life is promised to them, that they can control where they will end up, that they can plan the exact timing, and even predict the result.

The person at deepest risk for this kind of planning is the pragmatic person. The person who likes to make things happen, and is used to planning, and getting results. And the more good results he gets, the more assured he feels that pragmatic planning is the way to go. So he lives in a cycle of planning pragmatically, getting decent results, feeling vindicated for doing so, and doing it all over again.

But in the end, that's a worldly way of thinking. It takes us right back to the Tower of Babel.

Gen 11:3 Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. **Gen 11:4** And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."

This was the attitude of the hoarder we meet in Luke 12

15 And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness¹, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." 16 Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. 17 "And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' 18 "So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. 19 'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.'" 20 "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' (Luk 12:15-20)

Now if we have any doubt that this kind of planning is proud, look at verse 16.

But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

James has no problem with planning. He has problems with planning that pretends we are gods on the Earth. Boasting in arrogance is not humbly planning. This is conceited, evil, pride. You don't just plan, you glory in how independent you are, you enjoy your strutting self-confidence, you feel exalted in how you speak confidently about the future. You speak loudly and knowingly about what you are going to achieve and do. You enjoy your own conceitedness, your false posturing, your

swagger. You know you are putting it on, but you love it.

There was a zealous advocate of health foods named J.I. Rodale who claimed when he was 72 that he would live to be 100. A television program interviewed him about his boast, and moments after making the claim that he was as strong as ever, he died of a heart attack.

Sadly, there is even a false theology out there which teaches that we must speak out what is going to happen, and somehow this positive confession will conform reality to our desires. They even teach that if you speak in the subjunctive, that is, if you say, this may happen if God wills, this may take place if the Lord wills, then you are somehow lacking in faith. We must speak in the indicative – it will happen, we are going to do this, it shall be, and then they add, in Jesus name, to make their arrogant boasting sound like humility. But it is false. Whether you coat it with 'in Jesus name', or whether you just use the raw atheistic self-will of the world, it is boasting.

So to help us repent of this pride, James is going to show us our true condition. He is going to show us the ridiculousness of this proud planning, considering who we really are.

II. Proud Planning Ridiculed

14 whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.

James says, how arrogant, how ridiculous, to speak confidently and boastfully about what you will do in the next year, and what you will achieve, when you cannot even guarantee the events of the next 24 hours. Which man can control precisely even one day ahead? You could decide that you will make sure nothing happens to you by staying in bed for 24 hours, and be struck with a heart attack where you lie. You could surround yourself with every possible security, and have the one closest to you betray you. You could plan things down to the nth degree, and have what you never imagined happen – the car engine explodes, a sinkhole opens under your house, a freak car malfunction puts you in hospital. Our life is swarming with contingency – what might happen. We know only a fraction of what could or may or might happen.

In this kind of world, where you can barely predict the certainty of the next hour in your life, it is a kind of insanity to act with cock-sure certainty.

James takes it further. What is your life, he asks? Your whole existence, from beginning to end, what is it like? Now think of the images James could have used to compare the human life to. Perhaps a mountain, which seems to have been there all the time, and remains there? Perhaps a tree, something that appears, grows, and after a long age, dies and must be cut down. No, he chooses that physical phenomenon we have each seen in the kitchen. That wisp of steam appearing above the kettle, that little gathering of steam above the pot of boiling water, that rising and wafting steam above the hot water of the bath. We see it, and just as we have glimpsed it, it disappears. It's there, and then it vanishes, before our very eyes.

That's the human condition. We begin, and just when our life might be considered visible and prominent, it disappears, another wisp here and gone. George Bernard Shaw said, "The statistics on death are quite impressive. One out of one people die."

Psa 39:5 *Indeed, You have made my days as handbreadths, And my age is as nothing before You; Certainly every man at his best state is but vapor. Selah*

This is hard to get our minds around, but according to those who count, around 157 000 people die every day, which is 6390 per hour and 107 per minute. That is, while I am speaking, every second about two people go into eternity.

We are dependent beings, living on a planet hurtling through space at 108 000 km per hour, sitting the precise distance from our star that allows the temperature to be a median of 15 degrees Celsius, shielded from deathly solar radiation, shielded from meteors and asteroids, filled with liquid water, a breathable atmosphere of just around 5 km, a perfect mixture of nitrogen and oxygen. Everything about our existence says that we should already be dead, but God is very deliberately giving us life and letting us live. The whole Earth is a life-support system for our existence, and a fractional change would kill us.

God wants us to meditate on that. God wants us to think about our lives not as if we are mountains, or oak trees, or granite rocks. He wants us to think of ourselves as wisps of steam that disappear in the blink of an eye. We are very frail creatures, about 70% water, ready to evaporate at any moment.

Why? Not because He wants us morbid or depressed about our mortality. Instead He wants the reaction of Psalm 90 :” 12 *So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom (Psa 90:12)*

We have to wake up out of the dream-world of pretend immortality. We have to snap out of the pride that says, “Death will one day come to me, but not anytime soon.” We have to repent of the pride that says, “Accidents, diseases, calamities happen to other people. I plan too well for it to happen to me. I am in control of what happens to me.”

I have no idea how much more time on Earth God will give me. Decades, years, months, weeks, days, maybe hours. However I may wisely take care of my body, however much security I may get, however much insurance I may have, however many precautions I take to be safe, and provided for, and healthy, God has literally thousands of ways to take me out of the world. I am as temporary and as transient as a puff of steam.

So what should we then do with this humbling knowledge?

III. Proud Planning Replaced

Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."

Instead of this boastful, arrogant attitude toward the future, we are to replace it with the humble one. James says, we should look at the future, and say, if the Lord wills, if God desires that we shall, then we shall live in such a place, or do such a thing.

Now I don't think James meant that we should add this verbal caveat to all our statements about the future. Certainly it is a good think to add the words “Lord-willing” to our discussion of the future. We see that in Scripture a few times:

Act 18:21 *but took leave of them, saying, "I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing." And he sailed from Ephesus.*

Rom 15:32 *that I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you.*

1Co 4:19 *But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power.*

But we must be careful. We have not exhausted the meaning of this verse simply because we add a

few words to sentences that refer to the future. Nor are we disobedient if we speak of the future without adding these words every time. James is not seeking to teach us to use the words “Lord-willing” like some kind of spell, or worse, some kind of good-luck charm, which if used will ward off the evil spirits of calamity. I think we should say these words, but not robotically, or superstitiously. Instead, James means to say, make your plans humbly. Make your plans with truth about God, and truth about yourself, so that that kind of thinking shows up even in your speech. Plan and think in a way that it will be natural for you at certain times to say “Lord-willing”.

In other words, plan with a God-centred and a God-submitted attitude.

So what would that be? The book of Proverbs gives us a full and clear theology of humble planning. Let's walk through several Scriptures in Proverbs that teach us what humble planning looks like.

1) Pray about your plans

Commit your works to the LORD, And your thoughts will be established. (Pro 16:3)

Humble Christians take their problems, their possible solutions, their ideas to the Lord in prayer. They ask God for wisdom. They speak of His promises to lead and to shepherd us. They wrestle themselves into full submission with God's revealed will – what He has made known in Scripture through commands or through principles. Praying is the first way that we show that we desire the sovereign God to direct and lead in our plans.

2) Diligently gather information.

5 The plans of the diligent lead surely to plenty, But those of everyone who is hasty, surely to poverty. (Pro 21:5)

It is a form of laziness to expect God to give you some kind of direct prophecy, some kind of mystical leading through your emotions, or through circumstances, or through some other means, when you live in a world where you can readily gain the knowledge you need to make a good decision. God want us to study two things – the Word, and the world. If we do so, we show that we are saying – Lord-willing. We want to know God's revealed will.

What you are looking for in the Word is if the Bible speaks directly, or indirectly to your plans. Is there an explicit command to do this, or prohibition to avoid this? If so, your plans are clear. Most often, you will find principles, general truths that affect what you are considering. Whether you are considering buying a house, or pursuing marriage, or changing jobs, or emigrating, or beginning a business, you want to evaluate your plans using the principles of Scripture. Scripture won't give you explicit advice about an investment, or buying a certain car, or choosing a school for your child, or moving to a different area. But it will give you principles to answer these kinds of questions:

Is this action one that is blameless for a Christian to do? Will this action have wrong associations? Will this action yoke me in some kind of ungodly and unequal fellowship? Could this action lead me into some kind of bondage or slavery? Will this action be a good use of the stewardship God has entrusted me with?

What will the consequences of this action be? What will the effect be on my testimony, on my walk with God, on my spiritual development? What will I lose or have to give up to get this?

Are my motives pleasing to God? What do I want and why do I want it? Why is this important to me? Is this a need or a want? Is this a biblical priority?

There is no wisdom or understanding Or counsel against the LORD. (Pro 21:30) There is no such thing as a good decision that violates a biblical command or principle.

We must search out the Word. Secondly, we study the situation in the world, the circumstances, the possibilities, the risks, the opportunities, the threats, the resources, and the meaning of it all. Ask what this thing you are going to do means, what it entails. Then we try our best to link what Scripture says about the action, and its consequences and our motives, with truth from the world about what this plan will mean. When we do this, we are saying, Lord-willing.

3) Gather good counsel

Without counsel, plans go awry, But in the multitude of counselors they are established. (Pro 15:22)

We have seen in James the huge danger of self-deception. We are sheep and follow our noses right off a cliff. So what humility will do is not assert itself as brilliant and able to figure things out independently, but it will go looking for counsel with people of proven good judgement. You seek out counsel to find out if you have properly read the Word, and properly read the world. You seek out counsel to see if you have rightly evaluated the principles of Scripture, and rightly applied them to the situation.

So you look for counsel. Not just in your favourite friend, who always seems to tell you exactly what you want to hear. But you look for it in your spiritual leaders, in other Christians, in excellent Christian books, in the sermons of godly teachers of the church past and present. Look for what wise people keep saying, look for repeated counsel in those with a track record of seeking God's will first.

Let this counsel confirm, or modify, or even altogether replace your plans. When we do not walk not in the counsel of the ungodly, or stand in the path of sinners, or sits in the seat of the scornful, but we make the counsel of the godly our delight, then we are planning humbly.

4) If more than one option seems right and best, then do what you want, in the Lord.

5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; 6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct¹ your paths. (Pro 3:5-6)

When you are confronted with several options, and each of them seem good, wise, with about an equal amount of advantages and disadvantages, then follow your consecrated desires. In other words, a Christian is submitting his will to God, but once submitted, that will is still a will. It desires. So then, as Augustine said, love God, and do what you want.

5) Understand that God oversees and overrules our plans.

A man's heart plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps. (Pro 16:9)

There are many plans in a man's heart, Nevertheless the LORD'S counsel-- that will stand. (Pro 19:21)

A man's steps are of the LORD; How then can a man understand his own way? (Pro 20:24)

Even the humblest plans can be completely replaced by what God wills. This doesn't make us passive or cynical about planning. It leads us to say that since we do not know what God will choose, we must plan as best we can before Him, but accept that He may change our plans.

Accepting this reality is another way we show we are planning humbly. We make plans, in pencil, and we give God the eraser, and the pencil. We plan the destination, but we accept that God sits in the driver's seat.

These five ways display that we are planning humbly, not arrogantly.

And with this truth under our belts, James wants us to know that we are accountable to do it.

17 Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.

That is, once you know the right way, once you have been exposed to truth, and you do not do it, you no longer fall under the category of sinning in ignorance. You cannot use the excuse that you are a baby Christian, or that you are still outgrowing some things, or that you forgot, or that you didn't understand. Once there is light, there is a responsibility.

Joh 9:41 *Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see. Therefore your sin remains.*

Once we know the truth about humble planning, we can no longer be satisfied to plan without prayer, without a diligent search of the Word and the world, without gathering good counsel. We now have light and we must follow it.