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James 4:13-17

Eleventh Message

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THE FOLLY OF THE SELF-MADE MAN

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

During my college days, I was part of the hippie generation. The theme of the day was the “search for truth.” Young people were tossing aside the traditions, values, and hypocrisy of their parents. The Vietnam War brought campus unrest, apathy, and a search for identity. Our favorite songs were “Freedom” and “Blowin’ in the Wind.” Lyrics like “Hello darkness, my old friend,” from the movie *The Graduate*, seemed to capture the spirit of the age.

In the 1980’s, the pendulum swung the other way. Transcendental meditation became transcendental acquisition. Money became the root of all good. Power and possessions were the twin themes of that decade when the yuppie generation came into their own. The American dream was said to be realized when you had your own business, preferably a start-up company. That generation was characterized by the hard charging, aggressive, dynamo who wanted to have it all, no matter what the cost.

The yuppie mentality may be somewhat out of fashion these days, but much of its philosophy still permeates society, especially here in Silicon Valley. We live in a high-powered, high-energy, ambitious, profit-seeking area, surrounded by people who are planning their future successes with all the confidence in the world. Their philosophy beckons us: “Take charge of your destiny.” “You can be the next CEO.” “Take our course in motivation and management skills and watch your star rise.”

Society exalts self-made men and women, holding them up as models to emulate. Christians face great temptation to follow this “spirit of the age” and strive for fame and recognition. Perhaps some of us are not happy about what God is doing with our investments. Everyone else seems to be getting ahead. Maybe it is time to change brokers and take back control of our lives.

How should Christians respond to this 1990’s philosophy of life? Is there hope for the not so rich and famous? The book of James is built around the theme of how to respond to the pressures of life in a godly and wise way, how Christians build spiritual character and maturity in the midst of suffering and hardship. The world confronts believers with many challenges. One of the most subtle of these is the notion that people who have power and money have a decided advantage in life. Thus we may be tempted to go along with the philosophy of the day that says if we have to suffer, we should do it in style.

James addresses this very issue in the text to which we come this morning from chapter 4 of his letter, beginning in verse 13 and continuing through chapter 5, verse 12. The literary structure of these verses is instructive. In 4:13 and in 5:1, James uses the formula, “Come now, you who say,” and “come now, you rich.” He is addressing two kinds of individuals, warning them of their wrong thinking and their impending doom. In verse 7 of chapter 5, he addresses the brethren, saying: “therefore, brethren, etc.” I rather think that the individuals addressed as “you who say” and “you rich” are not believers, since James makes a point to address “brethren” as such throughout his

letter. However, the truth set out here is for the benefit of believers too, to help them recognize the folly of the world and respond righteously to the fads of the day. The temptations that are exposed in this text are very real for all of us. These truths are given for our benefit, not for some friend or acquaintance we wish were here to learn from them.

We will look at this text in three lessons. This morning, we will talk about the folly of the self-made man, from verses 13-17 of chapter 4:

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that.” But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin. (James 4:13-17 NASB)

James is addressing the self-willed, independent, self-guided and proud, the driven, self-seeking men and women whose goal is to dignify and glorify themselves, the kind of people who say: “Here is what I am going to do. I will start a business, make a profit, and succeed in life.” This kind of person makes a plan and intends to implement it through self-effort, no matter what the cost. This attitude is characterized by a cartoon I saw once of an executive dictating a letter to his secretary. When he had finished, he told her: “Type that up, make ten thousand copies, and send them to all the important people in the world!”

Verse 16 has a phrase which describes this person: “you boast in your arrogance.” “Arrogance” here means “one who makes more of himself than reality justifies,” “one who promises more than he can perform.” This is the word that John uses to describe the boastful pride of life, in 1 John 2:16. “Boasting” here is self-glorification. In the Bible, this word describes the attitude of fools and the ungodly. To “boast” in something means to trust in it. The man in our text might well be labeled the “boastful man.” Because he boasts in his ability to plan and accomplish, he trusts in himself.

Once again we note the problem with pride, which James has been focusing on in this chapter. Pride seeks to exalt self. According to the apostle, pride is the root of anger. Now we learn that it is pride that makes us want to run our own lives, seek our own glory, and boast in our future plans. This is the philosophy that drives society here in the Bay Area. I sensed the same thing when I visited New York a couple of years ago. It is impossible not to feel the energy and drive of that city. I can see how they call New York “the city that never sleeps.”

Why are we tempted to be self-directed and self-made? One characteristic of pride is that it is always making comparisons with oth-

ers. It is pride that drives us to succeed, to climb to the top and become autonomous. On another level, we think we can handle life by trying to control everything that happens to us. We fear a lot of things—being hurt or poor or ordinary or lonely—and we try to counter these fears by seeking to control the direction our lives take. At times we don't even know we are doing this.

The Christian brethren who received this letter were poor and oppressed. They were tempted to seek control of their own destiny, to become like the world—and many Christians are no different today.

But James says that everything is not as it might appear on the surface. He lists three things that are wrong with this approach to life. First, life is unpredictable and uncontrollable: “you do not know.” We do not know what life will be like tomorrow. Of one thing we can be certain, and that is that life is very uncertain. There are no guarantees for what tomorrow will bring, no matter how well we plan or how talented we are. We cannot control what will happen. We may wake up tomorrow and find that our circumstances are completely changed and things will never be the same again. We may well be struck with illness or injury. An earthquake may destroy everything we had counted on. Our job may force us to move out of state. Think about all the unfortunate people who have been made homeless by the recent floods. Think about all the people whose lives were forever changed on December 7th, 1941, Pearl Harbor Day.

Charles Swindoll has a good word for us here:

Man's knowledge seems impressive—awesome. We can split atoms, we can build skyscrapers, transplant kidneys, program computers, explore and explain outer space, and even unknot the problems of ecology. But when it comes to tomorrow, our knowledge plunges to zero... Tomorrow may bring sickness, sorrow, or tragedy. It may announce an answer to your waiting prayer. It may introduce you to prosperity, the beginning of a friendship, a choice opportunity for sharing your Lord...or just another twenty-four hours of waiting, trusting, and claiming His presence. It may not even come! God may choose this very day to intervene and take you Home—either by death or by Rapture. We can speculate, we can dread, we can dream—but we do not know.

You have probably heard the story of the stock broker who was granted one wish by a genie. The man had a brilliant idea: he asked for the stock market returns one year in the future. The genie granted him his wish. As the man was scanning the stocks, figuring out how he was going to make a killing, he glanced at the opposite page, and there he saw his own name among the obituaries!

The Bible has many warnings about this kind of thinking. James says: “We do not know.” The Proverb says: “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth” (27:1).

Secondly, James gives an appropriate metaphor: “you are like a vapor.” He compares man to a vapor, a gas that disappears into the air, invisible to the eye. Life is brief, temporary, and insubstantial. It lingers for just a short moment and then it disappears. One puff and it is gone.

The psalmist was well aware of this, as Psalm 39 demonstrates:

**Lord, make me to know my end,
And what is the extent of my days,
Let me know how transient I am.
Behold, Thou hast made my days as handbreadths,
And my lifetime as nothing in Thy sight,**

**Surely every man at his best is a mere breath.
Surely every man walks about as a phantom;
Surely they make an uproar for nothing;
He amasses riches, and does not know who will gather them.
(Ps 39:4-6)**

Listen to the words of Moses, from Psalm 90:

**For a thousand years in Thy sight
Are like yesterday when it passes by,
Or as a watch in the night...
As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years,
Or if due to strength, eighty years,
Yet their pride is but labor and sorrow;
For soon it is gone and we fly away. (Ps 90:4, 10)**

When I look at my children I can see how true this is. One is in college, and another will be leaving next year. I have just two more years with my youngest child. Twenty years seemed to disappear in a flash. Life is very short. My own body testifies to this. I have a bad knee, a bad back and a bad neck. I can't run anymore. I have retired three times from basketball. Every time I play, I think to myself, this could be my last game.

Life is fleeting. My father worked hard all his life to save up for retirement. His biggest fear was that when he retired, he would die. Shortly after he retired, he had triple-bypass surgery, and a few years later he died of cancer. What he feared most came to pass.

It is important to comprehend this truth and see ourselves from the right perspective. We think that life is going to go on forever, so we make plans, expending a lot of effort to try and make everything perfect. But then, like a puff of breath, life is over. The problem is, we take ourselves too seriously. But when we compare ourselves to God, history, and creation, when we compare our seventy or eighty years to eternity, we get a grip on reality. Surely every man, whether he be Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Caesar, Mickey Mantle or Joe Montana, every man even at his best is but a mere breath.

Thirdly, boasting is contrary to faith and trust. Life is unpredictable and uncontrollable. God intends it to be that way. He controls the universe. He orders the affairs of the world. He has designed life so that man will have a trusting relationship with him. We tend to boast in the things in which we trust. That is why, when we boast in ourselves, our plans and our abilities, we are declaring that we are trusting in ourselves. When we boast in God, however, that is a sign that we are trusting in him.

Self-glorification is wrong because it fails to acknowledge God as the giver of all good and instead tries to usurp his glory.

Boasting is contrary to faith and trust. According to Paul, when we acknowledge that our salvation comes by faith, all boasting is excluded. Abraham could not boast in his works before God. The Jew in the New Testament boasted falsely in the law, but Paul says that Christians are the “true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil 3:3). The boastful man says: “This is what I will do.” The man of faith says: “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” The man of faith is willing to acknowledge that God is in control, and he submits to God's will.

So that is the wrong thinking of the boastful man. Life is short, unpredictable and uncontrollable; thus, boasting is contrary to faith in God. Jesus told the story of the man who had an abundance of crops, so much so that he resolved to tear down all his storehouses

and build bigger ones. He thought his future was completely secure and certain, that he could eat, drink, and be merry. But he was so wrong, for God said to him: “You fool, you do not know that this very night your soul is required of you.”

Thus James delivers the bottom line, based on the evidence that he has set out. Boasting is not just foolish and futile, it is an anti-God way of living. James doesn't pull any punches. Boasting is evil and sinful. If you know the good thing to do and you don't do it, that is sin. If you know that God is in control and yet you do not live in submission to him and do not trust him, then you are sinning. If you know that you should not be seeking to exalt yourself but should be caring for the widow and orphan, that is sin. It isn't enough merely to know the truth; James challenges us to be “doers of the word.”

Boasting does another thing: it leads to emptiness. When we boast in what we will do, when we trust in ourselves, and even when we succeed in accomplishing our goals, we are left unsatisfied and unfulfilled. The prophet Habakkuk put it this way:

**Furthermore, wine betrays the haughty man,
So that he does not stay at home.
He enlarges his appetite like Sheol,
And he is like death, never satisfied. (Hab 2:5)**

We call this “destination sickness.” We boast, plan, control and achieve, and then we reach our goal. We are satisfied for a moment, but we find that this too leads to a feeling of emptiness; it is never enough. And so we make another boast and drive ourselves towards a higher goal. If we stop, we die.

Some Christians, too, are driven people. They can hardly think of anything except trying to accomplish the next goal. I remember one day complaining to my daughter about my feeling that I was not accomplishing much. “I can't relax,” I told her, “I feel I am wasting time.” Sara said: “You are not wasting God's time.”

A self-guided life is a misdirected existence because it depends on self, not on God. This philosophy of life denies some very basic principles. It is evil, it is sin, and it results in emptiness.

How then should we live? Let us reflect on two points. First, we are called to trust in God, not merely acknowledge him but trust him for our brief span of existence, even when we encounter various kinds of trials. The text does not say that we should never plan or attempt to accomplish things. We are free to make our plans, but then we must say, “If God wills, this is what I will do.” We make plans, but God guides our steps. We submit our plans to him, but he reserves the right to overrule and change the direction of our lives. The boastful man does not do any of these things of course, but we are called to a much wiser course of action.

We must be careful here, however, because we can err on both sides of this truth. Like the boastful man, we can take control, build our kingdom, and try to protect ourselves from hardship—at least, we can try to do these things. But we can err on the other extreme, too. We can refuse to do anything until we sense that circumstances are perfect. So we become paralyzed. We try to figure out everything and order life according to our liking. But by the time we get it all figured out, life is over. I see this tendency in myself, and I see it in the younger generation, too. This isn't trusting God, either. Pride is

at the root of this, too. James says it isn't just a matter of not doing the bad; if we know the good thing to do and don't do it, that is sin.

Many of us take life too seriously. We dwell so much on the temporary that we miss the eternal. Life will never be perfect. Every day brings its own risks. We are not called to be boastful, but neither are we called to play everything safe. We are called to live life fully, trusting in God as we go.

Secondly, we are called to boast, but not in ourselves. The Bible says there are things in which we can legitimately boast. Philippians 3:3 says we are to boast in Christ Jesus. Romans 5:11 says we are to boast in God. Romans 5:2 tells us to boast in the hope of the glory of God. Galatians 6:14 says: “But may it never be that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

But we are inclined to boast in our efforts to build permanency, to glorify ourselves. When we do this in the world, with the world's means, we are being foolish, because life is unpredictable, uncontrollable, and brief. Remember that God opposes the proud and the arrogant. If we are going to boast then, we should boast in that which is permanent and eternal. Let us boast in God, in Christ, and in the cross, in our hope of salvation and in the future hope of glory. These are the things that are predictable and everlasting.

But there is something else in which Christians can boast. James says that we are to boast in our low position, because God will exalt us. Paul says we are to boast in tribulations (Romans 5:3), because suffering and humility are the very things that produce an “eternal weight of glory.” We boast in our suffering because it is by means of suffering that God is transforming our souls and preparing us for our permanent place of glory.

James opens this letter with the words, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials.” It seems absurd, but when you think about it, it makes all the sense in the world. The world boasts in its temporary accomplishments, but the Christian boasts in the eternal accomplishments of God. And part of the eternal working of God is the deep work that he does in us, if we so allow him, through disappointments, difficulties, and suffering. It is through these things that God transforms us into heavenly creatures.

The glory that we seek is a God-given desire.

Tennyson wrote:

Thou madest man, he knows not why.
He thinks he was not made to die.

God is preparing us for a glory that surpasses our wildest dreams. In life we work, build and achieve, but we should not boast in these things. Let us boast instead in that which is truly glorious: our God, our Lord, our salvation, our humiliation, and our tribulations. Should we boast in vapors that disappear in a breath, or in the God of all creation who is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory? The choice is obvious. God grant that we may, by faith, choose eternal life. Life is short, but God is forever.

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