

Planning Properly, - Part 1

by Alistair Begg

Alistair Begg's sermon discusses the importance of planning with humility and reliance on God's will, as highlighted in James 4:13-17.

Duration: 38:27

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, James 4:13-17

Topics: "Planning"

Description

In this sermon, Alistair Begg focuses on James 4:13-17, which addresses the issue of making plans without considering God's will. James specifically speaks to those who rely on their own abilities and make plans without acknowledging their human frailty. He compares our lives to a mist or vapor that appears for a short time and then vanishes, emphasizing the transient nature of our existence. Begg highlights the importance of recognizing our dependence on God and seeking His guidance in all our plans and decisions.

Transcript

The following message by Alistair Begg is made available by Truth For Life. For more information, visit us online at truthforlife.org. James chapter 4, verses 13 to 17, which provide for us the focus of our study, both this morning and this evening. We read from verse 13, James chapter 4. Now listen, you who say, today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.

Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, if it is the Lord's will we will live and do this or that.

As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone then who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it sins.

Now, a prayer together before we look at this. We pray, O God, that you will now speak through your word the Bible, and in such a way that we lose sight of the human communicator and find that we're hearing from you, the living God. This is our humble, earnest expectation.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, our studies so far in James have, I think, proved beyond reasonable doubt that the letter of James is intensely practical.

Indeed, in many instances, in fact, right from the opening salvo in chapter 1, we have discovered again and again how under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, James is putting his finger on areas of our lives that are so clearly in need of God's attention and correction. And perhaps nowhere more so than in the little section that we have just read now from the end of chapter 4. Because here James is giving a particular word to the planners, to, if you like, the people in every generation who engage in the equivalent of the addiction to their daytimer, the individuals who clutch at their blackberries, taking it to the limit before they close the door of the plane and immediately reaching for it as if the universe depended on it as soon as the wheels touch the runway, thereby creating the impression to all around us that we really are phenomenally important and we couldn't have gone for an hour and a half without being in direct contact with all the people who are just so delighted to hear from us. In point of fact, they wish that we flew forever and a day so they might never hear from us again.

If we don't have the little mechanisms that are electronic in their wizardry, then we probably are the possessors of those large binders that have a clasp or a clip or a zip. And again, by the vastness of this compendium of pressing import, we convey to those around us just how concerned we are to be properly prepared for the day that lies ahead. And some are so driven by these things that they are able to tell us not only how their week is looking and their month or even their year, but they can go out beyond that as well.

And I have found that there are young men who particularly, some in the realm of sales and marketing and some in banking, who are able to tell me that they've got it pretty well mapped out all the way through to an early retirement. And I'm always fascinated and breathless listening to them explain their journey through life. And James has a word to say for such individuals.

Now, I want you to know, lest you feel that I'm just taking point shots at people who plan and that I don't plan, this is my 2007. And behind 2007, this is my 2008. And because Filofax doesn't go beyond 2008, this is my 2009 that is already printed out, taking me up until the 29th to the 1st of October in Asheville, North Carolina, God willing, in 2009.

I also am becoming a slave to my mechanism here, which of course sends me my emails at all points on the compass all the time every day and is actually producing great conflict in my home because my wife thinks I'm married to someone else. And when I sit next to her, I spend more time with this than I do holding her hand. So maybe what I'll do is I'll put it in her hand and then kill two birds with one stone, as it were.

So I don't want anybody to think, because I know some people, they say, he was up there this morning rambling on about planning or something. He's a pastor, he's got nothing to do, he works one day a week and he wouldn't know a planner if it jumped up and bit him, you know. So I'm seeking to shore up my self-esteem in that regard, I suppose.

You know, what James is addressing is not the issue of planning. Planning in and of itself is, of course, in most instances, quite a good thing. And Wesley, the great evangelist, used to plan out his day in 20-minute segments so that he made sure that there wasn't a period of a third of an hour when he was not addressing himself to the matters of the kingdom.

No, James is not charging the wisdom of making plans as being silly or unhelpful in any way. But what he is doing is he is confronting the peril of presumption. He is confronting the tendency on the part of men and women to act in such a way as to suggest that we can safely make all of our plans without reference

to God and leaving him out of the equation.

We actually studied this verse, or these verses together, on the 31st of December last year, 2006. Some of you may remember that because we mentioned the Latin phrase Deo Valenti, DV, God willing, and so on. And we looked at the verses under that heading.

I was sorely tempted to re-preach the same sermon because I know that most of you never remember it from Sunday to Sunday. But there's just something in me, it must be the planner in me that couldn't do that. So, here we go.

First of all, let us notice in verse 13 how he references these individuals and the plans they make. You who say today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business, and make money. Now, the inference from James is that these individuals are establishing their plans on the basis of their own ability.

The emphasis upon the we, we will do this, we will go there, we will achieve that, and so on, is an emphasis that he highlights because he is setting it in the context of an absence of dependence upon God. So that it is presumptuous. It is based on their ability to achieve and the plans are made with no reference to the frailty of the one who is making the plans.

I just wrote in my notes ability and frailty. Plans that are made on the strength of our own perceived ability and plans that are made without reference to the fact of our human frailty. So that the notion, the emphasis from James is that of the individual who is self-motivated, self-contained, if you like, the self-made individual.

And what James does is he says, now I want you to think about this for just a moment. Hence the way in which he begins. Now listen, you who say, or in the King James Version, come now.

Or if you like, wait a minute, or hang on, or give me a break. Or in Yorkshire, go on with you. That's what they say in Yorkshire.

If you are presumptuous or you're a little bit beyond yourself, the lady behind the counter where you're making your purchase will say, oh, go on with you. And that's what he's saying here, go on with you. You who are making all your big plans and explaining to everybody where you're going and what you're doing.

Or if, in Shakespearean terms, it's go to now. And there's almost a sense of sarcasm, isn't there, in the way in which he frames this. That's why he sets it up in that way.

Now listen, you who say, James has already given a hint of the preposterous nature of establishing a plan for earthly profit that extends no further than time. And if you turn back just one page in your Bibles, you'll be able to see James Chapter 1, I think. And in James Chapter 1, in verse 9, he has this little paradoxical section where he says the brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.

But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position. You say, isn't this the wrong way around, James? Isn't the person who doesn't have very much in the low position and the person who has a lot in the high position? No, he says, not as soon as you include God in the equation. Not as soon as you include eternity in the equation.

If you're completely earthbound in your perspective, then you will make certain deductions. The one who's rich, verse 10, should take pride in his low position because he will pass away like a wildflower. He doesn't mean that the one who's in a lowly position won't pass away like a wildflower.

He will, but the contrast is greater. And the person who lives lower to the ground, the person who lives as a farmer, the person who lives as an artisan, the person who digs, the person who plants, the person who has dirt under his fingernails on a daily basis, the person who goes out onto the oceans up in New England and brings back fish for our table, that individual has far more of a sense, an innate sense of mortality and reality. It is the person who has managed to distance themselves from all that stuff, who has a gardener to dig, who has someone to build, who has a person to achieve the food, who has someone to deliver it to the home, who has managed to inure themselves against all of those fundamental and basic issues of life, that person needs to be reminded that he's going to pass away like a wildflower.

For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant, its blossom falls, its beauty is destroyed, and in the same way the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. The idea of human transience, of the dissipation of the strength of the individual, of the inroads of gravity, of the diminishing of our capacities physically and psychologically too in many cases. You see, the emphasis in verse 13 is on the fact that there is no statement here made that would reference God seeking his help, relying on his strength, or conducting the affairs of business for his glory.

This is not a diatribe against financial success or the profit motive. Some have tried to take James and press that from it. We're going to come to it quite dramatically at the beginning of chapter 5 in not so long.

But no, he's not doing that. What he's saying is, I want you folks who are tempted to say, I've got tomorrow in my grasp, I have my tomorrows under my control. He says, I want you to just think about what you're saying for a moment.

Think about the way you have framed your plans. Secondly, you should do so in light of the problem that is inherent to our humanity. Verse 14, why you do not even know what will happen tomorrow.

You've got big plans for tomorrow, but you don't know what will happen tomorrow. We can say two things about all of our tomorrows or about the future. One is that God knows the future, and secondly, we don't know the future.

Those two things we can say with certainty. We do not know, but God does. I think it was Augustine who said, a God who did not know the future would not be God.

Just in case any of you are tempted to buy into the open theism stuff, just to let you know I know. So now you know that I know. God knows the future, and we don't know the future.

And the fact that the future is unknown cannot be denied. Will it be sunny tomorrow? Rainy. Will thunder clouds come in? Will your flight be on time? Will there be sufficient milk in the refrigerator so you can put it on your cereal? Or will your kids have taken it all before you managed to get to it? Now the fact that we do not know the future, which is what he's pointing out here.

You do not know what will happen tomorrow. That ought to do two things at least for us. Number one, it should humble us.

It should humble us. And James's emphasis here on humility, which we're coming to see is a melodic line running through so much of this material. The melody keeps coming back again and again, doesn't it, to the issues of humility.

Verse 6, he's told us God opposes the proud. He gives grace to the humble. He comes back to it again in verse 10.

Humble yourselves before the Lord. He'll lift you up. And then, so as to press the point, he gives an illustration of the person who is arrogant rather than humble.

That's the person who sets about taking to himself the seat that only belongs to God alone. Seeks to make himself the judge of all the earth. Seeks to determine what he knows about everyone else.

That is pure arrogance, says James. And furthermore, it is another expression of arrogance to make plans without reference to God. It should humble us to recognize that we do not know.

Now, if you think about this, you listen to the rage of somebody in the airport when the flight is canceled or delayed. I don't want to suggest somehow or another I'm taking the high ground and I don't know what it is to be disappointed or upset by these things. But I must confess, for all of my impatience, I have never managed to understand what benefit there is from the kind of tirade that issues from some of these men.

I guess ladies do it as well, but it's mainly men I've seen. And they storm around with those big binders and they go to the desk and tell the lady that if she was worth anything at all, she would have had this fixed. Like she's in charge of thunderstorms in Atlanta, you know.

That somehow or another, she and her airline and everybody associated with the entire United States of America, everything that has to do. And you just listen to this. You say, what is up with this guy? I'll tell you what's up with him.

He's arrogant. He's proud. And he is so consumed with everything that he put in that book about who he is, where he's going, what he's going to do, how successful he's going to be, and when he's coming back, that the slightest interruption or interference with his plans reveals the nature of his heart.

And every time impatience and disappointment with things rears its ugly head, it speaks to the self same thing. One clap of thunder, one flight delayed, and all of our we will go, we will spend, we will carry on business, we will make money. It's all blown away in a moment.

God raises his little finger and all our best plans are in tatters. As Robbie Burns put it, the best laid plans oh mice and men, gang after glee. And they do so routinely, and if we would learn from them, it would humble us.

Because it would say to us, we're not in control of very much. That's right. Mr. Smartypants with the big book may actually get on the flight and look down and find he's got on one black sock and one navy blue sock.

Oh, Mr. Planner, you didn't plan so well last night, did you? Little things. Number one, the fact of our ignorance should be an occasion to humble us, and the fact of our ignorance may be an occasion to help us. You see, the future is hidden from us ultimately for our good, for our good.

We should be glad that we do not know yet of some success which awaits us further down the road. Why? Because we would be unbearable, breathing our feathers and walking around with a big smile on our faces, annoying everybody, but unable to tell them that we were about to become. I'm about to become.

Oh, yes. And we would face the potential that in the immediate, because our success is not yet enjoyed, we would become disgruntled with the fact that we don't have that success yet. And then we would become impatient in waiting for that success, a success which we knew was there and was guaranteed.

So it's to our good we don't know about our success. And it is to our good that we don't know about our disappointments, that we don't know about our stumblings and our bumbings and our fears and our failures and our bereavements and our heartaches and our illnesses. What advantage to know? God knows.

And it is a matter of pressing importance that we learn to rejoice in this ignorance. Despite an inherent desire to want to know, because we want to control, because we actually want to be God. Last week in Rockport, Massachusetts, where my wife and I were placed in order that I might speak at Gordon Conwell Seminary.

If you've been to Rockport, it is, as with so many of these pretty places now in the continental United States, a haven for artists and creative people. And at the same time, a haven for paganism, just unadulterated paganism. And in walking up and down Rockport, the main street there, beckoning from a number of shop fronts was an invitation to discover the future.

To buy tarot cards, to have someone read them for us, to discover our horoscope, to have someone read our palms. And in every instance, appealing to an innate sense in men and women to want to see around the corner and beyond the pale. The devil knows exactly how to make his play.

And I want to say to every one of you, just in passing, do not, for a nanosecond, go down that road. Do not engage with the slightest touch upon that issue. Stay away from all your horoscopes.

Stay away from all of that stuff in every instance. And if you doubt my word, read your Bible and consider what it has to say. So what do we learn? First, to presume upon the future is foolish.

And second, that our ignorance of the future is a matter of fact. It's a matter of fact. Thirdly, and this is in the second half of verse 14, he tells us, he reminds his readers of the passing of time.

The passing of time. You don't know what will happen tomorrow. In fact, he says, if you think about your life, you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

A vapor. A vapor, frail and insubstantial. A vapor that is around just for a little while.

Last Sunday evening, people came to me and said, did you see the wonderful sunset? And it was apparently beautiful. I didn't see it, as it turns out. I was inside the building and at the back of the building and no access to see it.

But when I got out at about quarter past eight, it was gone. It was gone. It was apparently very, very beautiful.

Brilliant. Breathtaking. A mixture of clouds, vapor, sunshine.

Glorious. But gone. And what James is saying here is, our lives may, for a while, be bright and glorious.

They may have great appeal and may be attractive to folks. But the fact of the matter is, they are as transient as a painted cloud. And as sure as the clouds dissipate and the winds blow and the flowers fall, so too, our lives will be over.

Even if we were to live to what we refer to as a ripe old age. What is a ripe old age in light of a thousand years? It's nothing. And it is dishonest on our part not to face up to the question that is asked.

What is your life? What is your life? You may be here and that's the very reason you've come along to Parkside. You've said to yourself, I have no answer to the question, what is my life? I don't know what I am and I don't know who I am. I've got no conviction about where I came from.

And I certainly have no clue about where I'm going. You may think that at the end of the day, you're just a collection of molecules held in suspension. If we try to summarize our lives and our worth, our value in dollar terms concerning the chemical content of our bodies, I'd be surprised if any of us are worth more than about three dollars and fifty cents in terms of parts, bits and pieces.

I don't know if there is enough iron in me to make one decent nail that wouldn't bend. I don't know if there's enough magnesium in me to strike a couple of matches and light a fire. What is your life? You see, it is such a vital question, isn't it? And that's why we tend to fight against life's brevity and fight against life's frailty.

Think about it. Think about all of the mechanisms that are offered to us at this point in the 21st century for staving off old age. For preventing us looking like mature people should look.

For fixing us so that we can look in the mirror and say, I'm going to live forever, idiot. But it's everywhere. It's just it comes in volumes.

Why is that? Because of the inherent nature within us that recognizes that the facts of the matter are as represented and as discovered. And unless we find the answer to the fundamental questions, who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? And does it matter? Then we are forlorn. So if you take life's brevity plus life's frailty without finding an answer to those two issues, then it is no surprise when life is marked by futility.

Futility. The poets have it. Shakespeare has it.

What does he say? Life is but a walking shadow. Out, out, brief candle. Life's but a walking shadow.

A poor player who comes out on the stage, comes out and says his lines, does his best, dances around a little bit, and finally goes off stage left. A poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is, he says, a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing.

Life then is like a soccer game with no lines, no goal posts. It's like a basketball game with no hoop and no nets. Like a baseball game.

Oh no, sorry. It's epitomized in the Earl of Rochester's life. You remember the Earl of Rochester, the second Earl of Rochester in the 17th century, when I tell you what he said, because you'll remember this.

He's the man who said, before I got married I had six theories about raising children, and now I have six children and no theories. He was, as a young man, prolific. Inherited his title from his father at the age of ten.

Went to Oxford University at twelve. Graduated at fourteen. Was imprisoned for abducting a wealthy heiress when he was eighteen.

Renowned for his wit and for his outrageous behavior, for his debauchery. And he was dead at the age of thirty-three. All of his powerful potential was dissipated as he blazed out.

Because he died without ever finding out why it was he lived. Until we find out how to die, we never really find out how we should live. And until we know how we should live, we will never be ready to die.

Now, this is not a call to morbidity. James is not suggesting here for a moment that this is so that we might all be morose and unhelpful to one another. Some of you may be here this morning and you're saying, I can't even believe that I got myself into this, and I wish you would stop so that I can go and get pancakes and maple syrup and just drown out all this morose and terrible information that I've been receiving.

Some of you actually may have tried the pancakes one time too many. They don't really taste that good anymore. The same way that your intellectual achievement no longer gives you the buzz it once gave you.

You thought if you did a master's, you would be there. But there's so many people with a master's degree. And then, of course, a PhD that establishes you in a rarefied group, and you did that too.

But the fact of the matter is, now you've discovered what you should have known before, that PhDs are ten a penny, and the key is that you get it from the right university. And now you can't go back and get another one because time has passed you by, and it doesn't taste the way it once tasted. That material success that allowed you to park that car in the garage and made you feel when you closed the door and looked at it and said, Man, that door closes so nicely.

You don't really care about that anymore either. And your grandchildren have grown. And your frailty is apparent.

And your finitude is before you. And you're not ready to die. You better take care of business, Mr. Businessman, before it's too late.

In fact, let me finish in this vein, now that I'm here. Let me speak to somebody who says, Okay, I recognize what James is saying here. I have been a big planner.

And I've got everything organized. I've even prepared my funeral service. I'm aware of all these things.

But I've still never unscrambled the riddle of life. Let me give it to you in two words. Word number one is alienation.

Alienation. What the Bible says is that the human predicament is directly tied to alienation. People understand alienation.

Being alienated from those with whom we once spent time. Being alienated from other cultures or communities. Being alienated as a result of our material prosperity or absence of that prosperity.

Being alienated by race, by intellect. Being alienated not only from others but also from ourselves. Being psychologically alienated so that we cannot even make sense of our own existence.

It's fascinating, isn't it, that Nietzsche ended his life the final 11 years of his life for all of his brilliance. He blazed out as a madman for the final 11 years. Why? Because he was so clever.

And so proud. And so unwilling to acknowledge what the Bible said. He took it on at every turn.

Lambasted it, caricatured it, made fun of it. And you may have done that. But what the Bible says is that God the Creator established you, made you, gave you all your abilities, all your looks, all of your opportunities.

Asked whether you understand it or not. Ordered your life right up until today. But that God who made you, you are alienated from.

And you are alienated with no prospect from your end of re-establishing a relationship. There is no way to do it by good works. There is no way to do it by religious fervency.

There is no way to do it by looking in on ourselves and trying to find our spirituality in a quest within. But the good news is that although we ourselves cannot do it, the same God from whom we are alienated has come to do it for us. That's the second word.

Reconciliation. Reconciliation. My alienation from God is dealt with by his willingness to provide reconciliation to himself through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And as strange as it may seem to your ears, when we come to acknowledge that we are in a position of enmity with God, to recognize that we are unable to rectify our condition, and then to realize that completely against the run of play and while we do not deserve it, God has chosen not to count our sins and rebellions and disinterest against us, but instead to count them against his Son, so that all who come to trust in his Son may be reconciled. And when that reconciliation takes place with God, not only does it deal with our ultimate alienation, but it provides for us, in the person of the Holy Spirit, the capacity to deal with all these other alienations, which we may have been spending all of our time trying to tackle. And the call of the Bible is to tackle the main one first, and then with God's help to tackle the rest.

I wonder if there isn't somebody here this morning for whom the very notion that Christ took our place and bore our punishment, all the stuff that we deserve he took and all that we don't deserve he provides, whether that very issue is enough to tackle a confrontation with our finitude. You're a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Why would you be so presumptuous as to say you're going to do all these things? Why? We don't even know what will happen tomorrow.

That's why the Bible always speaks in now terms, always speaks in terms of today. We'd love to talk with anyone and give you literature concerning these things. And we'll come back to the balance of this, God willing, this evening, where he drives home what we ought to do and points out that when we fail to do that, it's not just a bad idea, it's actually evil.

Well, Father, we thank you that the Bible speaks. And in many ways, it's important for me and for us to step aside, as it were, and allow you to bring this home to our hearts. And I pray particularly for those of us who are presumptuous, for whom getting it right and doing it properly and fixing everything has been the hallmark of our lives.

And yet, as things have gone awry, as plans have failed, as disappointments have come, instead of us humbling ourselves before you and saying, I need you, we've sought to bolster up our self-esteem, to deny things, to make it look as though life is different from what it really is. And we thank you that the work of the Holy Spirit is to give us a real clear understanding of how we stand before you, the living God, and then for us to be given an insight into the wonder of your love towards us, so that your love for us, despite our rebellion and disinterest, may woo us and win us and convert us, fulfill your purposes today, we pray, in each of our lives. And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God our Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest upon and remain with all who believe, now and forevermore.

Amen. You've been listening to Alistair Begg. You're welcome to pass this message along to others, but please do not charge for this message or alter it without written permission from Alistair Begg or Truth For Life.

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