

Planning Properly, - Part 2

by Alistair Begg

We need to recognize God's control over our lives and put ourselves entirely at God's disposal in order to live a life of obedience to God.

Duration: 34:05

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Luke 12:47, Romans 12:11, James 4:13-14, James 4:16-17

Topics: "Planning"

Description

In this sermon by Alistair Begg, he focuses on James chapter 4 and verse 13. He warns against boasting and bragging about our plans for the future, as we do not know what tomorrow holds. Begg emphasizes the importance of recognizing our daily duties and responsibilities, and not neglecting the good that we ought to do. He reminds listeners that our Christian experience is expressed in the everyday events of life, and failing to do the good we know we should do is considered sin.

Transcript

The following message by Alistair Begg is made available by Truth For Life. For more information visit us online at truthforlife.org. We're going to turn back to the portion in James chapter 4 where we found ourselves in our study this morning. It's James chapter 4 and verse 13.

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.

We pray together, eternal God and ever blessed Father, we thank you for the privilege of being in the company of your risen son Jesus here in the pleasurable surroundings of others who have chosen to enrich our lives by their presence this evening. And we bless and thank you for the fact that we have not gathered to revere your memory but to celebrate your presence. We thank you for the way that you have spoken so clearly in many ways in the past by your prophets and by your servants.

And how now in these last days you have spoken fully and finally and savingly in the person of your son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you that Jesus was gentle and lowly in heart, approachable, the kind of

man who was strong and forceful and clear and concise in his teaching and who bid all manner of people come to him. And when they did they found that he was the one who was able to forgive their sins and to bear their burdens and to transform their lives.

And we thank you that tonight his touch still has the same power and even as we've listened to those who have spoken prior to their baptisms, our hearts are stirred within us as we realize how you save people out of sin and how you save from sin and how you bring to completion the good work that you begin that often has origins far and beyond our ability to conceive. And we believe that tonight as we turn to the Bible that you will speak to us. Indeed, were that not the case, then this would be an exercise in futility.

So we humbly ask that we might hear your voice, that we might understand and that we might live in the light of your truth. And to this end we seek your help in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, we are picking up where we left off this morning and it may be helpful for those who weren't present for me just to summarize where we went or the point that we reached. First of all, we noted that James had a word to say concerning the futility of planning without reference to God. That's who he addresses in verse 13.

The planners who are very clear about where they're going and what they're doing and so on. They are convinced of their own ability. They are unaware of their own frailty.

That approach to life has an inherent problem as we see in verse 14a on account of the fact that the future is known to God but it is unknown to us. The fact of our unknown future should be a cause for humbleness and also at the same time it should be a help to us to realize that God doesn't allow us to intrude upon our futures so that we cannot be unduly worried by difficulties that are about to come our way or become conceited as a result of any anticipated successes. Thirdly, we paid attention to the fact that in verse 14b time is passing through our fingers and very quickly and that although our life seemed for a while to be very substantial in actual fact they very quickly vanish and are gone.

Just as quickly we said as the beautiful sunset that many of us identified upon our arrival here last time. We ended this morning by recognizing that a confrontation with the brevity and frailty of our lives that doesn't find an answer in the provision that God the creator has made for us in Jesus will often paralyze us and introduce us to such a sense of futility that we will be tempted to try and compensate for that sense of alienation by filling our lives with all kinds of things. The kinds of things that have been spoken about by some who have been baptized tonight who in recognizing their inability to unscramble the riddle of their lives immediately went about to try and find the missing pieces of the jigsaw and then to be able to tell us of how when they were not actually looking for God they discovered that God was looking for them because he is a God who seeks to save those who are lost.

Well, that's where we left it and it is from that point that we begin. Instead of approaching it in that way, verse 15 gives to us, if you like, the right perspective on dealing with the passing nature of our lives and in the making of plans for our lives. Instead of dealing with it in the way he has just outlined, you ought, he says, to say if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or do that.

In other words, if we view life as if it were our right, as if each new day dawned as a matter of necessity or if it came about by courtesy of nature, then we would be thinking absolutely in the wrong direction. We need God to teach us that every day that we have on earth is a gift from him. It is an evidence of his covenanted mercies to us and it is an indication of the fact that he still has plans and purposes.

Spurgeon, addressing this, says, let it be clearly understood and let it be conspicuous in all your arrangements that you recognize that God is over all and that you are under his control. Let it be conspicuous in all your arrangements, the way in which we speak, the way in which we make our plans, the way in which we reflect upon our lives and the way in which we tell others about our hopes and our dreams. We can't see all of God's purposes, and that is a mercy in itself, but we can see that which he has chosen to reveal.

And when we say, if it is the Lord's will, we're not moving immediately into a realm that is unknown, because God has, in his revelation of himself, identified for us certain things that ought to regulate our actions and our attitudes. And so when we say that we're going to do something, we need to be saying, I will do this, as long as it does not violate what God has said or what he has revealed of himself. So, for example, instead we ought to say, if it is the Lord's will, I'm going to do this.

In other words, if it isn't the Lord's will, I'm not going to do this. If God's will for me is that I am to be holy, then it is not his will for me to be unholy. If it is God's will for me to be contented, then I refuse to live my life in discontent.

If it is God's will for me to tell others about Jesus, then I cannot arrogate to myself the freedom to please myself and never tell others about Jesus. We need to say, if it is the Lord's will. Now, not all of God's revealed will answers all of our questions about his providential will.

And we face decisions in our lives, all of us, routinely. That will be sometimes major decisions, minor decisions nevertheless, where we have ostensibly equal choices, both of them equally moral, neither of them a clear violation of God's revealed will. And it is in that circumstance that most of us find difficulty in discovering what God's will is.

And my advice to you when you find difficulty in that, and I do too, is to recognize how many times the Bible calls upon us to wait, to wait, to wait upon the Lord. Especially if we are the decision-oriented kind of people. Especially if we think that it is a mark of usefulness to be able to decide very, very quickly about things.

When we are confronted by apparently equal choices, the best approach is to stand still, to kneel down, to look up, and to wait. To remind ourselves that God will not lead us in violation to his revelation of himself in his will. To recognize that there is wisdom in multiple counselors.

To recognize that, as Luther says, we may detect the mind of God and the word of God from the insinuations of the evil one in light of the fact that God speaks with sweet reasonableness. But at the end of the day, if our perspective on the living of our lives is to be biblical, we must, with Jesus, be about the Father's business. We must, with the psalmist, be prepared to say, I delight to do your will, O Lord.

In other words, we are prepared to put ourselves entirely at God's disposal. Entirely at God's disposal. And when we grasp that, when we realize the perspective, if it is the Lord's will, we will live, and we will do this, and we will do that, it suddenly transforms all the things that we are called upon to do.

One of the great dangers when we think in terms of being placed entirely at God's disposal is that if we're not careful, especially people who are in the position in which I find myself, along with my colleagues, set apart to the gospel ministry. If one is not careful in this position, we may inadvertently, or worse still, purposefully, create the impression that if others are going to put themselves entirely at the disposal of

God, then it is going to demand of them a complete uprooting from where they are and what they do. And sometimes that leads to all kinds of silly decisions on the part of people.

When we place ourselves entirely and utterly at the disposal of God, then the daily round of our duties and the common tasks of our days become the place of service. We don't need to go anywhere else unless he calls us to. We don't need to do anything else than that which he has asked us to do.

And we need to do it where we're placed. We may serve God just as much by delivering mail, by doing conveyancing in legal work, by selling real estate, by bagging groceries, by loading cargo, as by preaching the gospel. If those areas are the areas in which God has set us.

And you will do well to take from the hymn book, the lines from the hymn, for you're embarking on every day of your life, these words. Fourth are on my way forth in your name. Oh, Lord, I go my daily labor to pursue you.

Only you resolve to know in all I think or speak or do. And you may sing that going into the bank. You may sing that going into the grocery store.

You may sing that going into the airport. You may sing that going into the laundry room. You may sing it dealing with your children.

You may sing it dealing with your elderly relatives. It is an expression of recognizing that my perspective on my place in life and God's purpose for me is to delight in doing his will. If the Lord wills ought to be written then across all of our plans, all of our dreams and all of our lives.

Deo Volente. Fifthly, proud planning is evil. Proud planning is evil.

That's verse 16. As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.

J.B. Phillips paraphrases verse 16. As it is, you get a certain pride in yourself in planning your future with such confidence. That sort of pride is all wrong.

And what James is addressing here is just the kind of arrogance that allows us to make speeches about ourselves as if somehow or another we were omniscient. As if we were in control of our own destiny. And the real problem here in verse 16 is that such an individual not only leaves God out of the equation, but that individual then goes on to boast about the fact.

This boasting and bragging is an interesting verb, but it is the same context that we find in 1 John chapter 2 where John talks about the lust of life and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. It's the same root as is used here. As it is, this is your boasting and bragging.

This glamour of all that you think is splendid. You like to boast about it all. Someday someone will determine how many times I quoted which particular song in the course of pastoral ministry, and they may even be keeping a book on it already.

But when you look at this, as it is, you boast and brag, and all such boasting is evil. Do you know what the number one song is at secular funerals? Do you know what they ask to have sung or the melody that they have to have played? The number one for people who are going out. What is it? I did it my way.

You're right. That is the number one requested song. As the coffin sits there, all such boasting is evil.

Can you imagine? I've lived. I've laughed and cried. I've had my fill, my share of losing.

And now as tears subside. I find it all so amusing to think I did all that. And may I say not in a shy way.

Oh, no. Oh, no, not me. I did it my way.

And people go, Oh, it's so lovely. It's not lovely. It's horrible.

It's dreadful. All such boasting and bragging is evil. It is empty.

It is futile. Finally, verse 17 introduces us to what we might refer to as a clear and present duty. Anyone then, he says, therefore, in light of what I've just been telling you, anyone who knows the good he ought to do or she ought to do and doesn't do it sins.

This, the commentators estimate, was probably a maxim. A routine statement that went around. And James picks it up and says, this is a good time to include this in my letter.

Everybody knows this one. Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it sins. Well, he says, I've just told you all the things you ought to do.

Now, you need to know that if you don't go ahead and do them, you will be guilty of sinning. I've warned you against being boastful and braggadocious of being self-reliant in the living of your life. I've called you to the duty to walk humbly with God.

And now that you know this, if you don't do it, you sin. Spurgeon, in referencing this, says that this is a call to immediate obedience. A call to immediate obedience.

The call to obey God is always an immediate call. It's not a call that we're allowed to take up tomorrow. When he says, let's go, we go.

You know, I was reading the Clapton biography and I was intrigued to find out how it was that he wrote the song Wonderful Tonight. It's late in the evening. She wonders what clothes to wear.

Well, the fact of the matter was he was doing what husbands do, waiting for his wife. And she took so long up the stairs trying on so many different outfits that he had time to write and complete an entire song before she got down the stairs. He called up.

Are you coming? Yes. Are you coming? Yes, I'm coming. Are you coming? Yes, I'm coming.

And finally, quit coming and come. And the call that is issued here is a call to obey Jesus. And it is always a call to obey him now.

So, for example, we dare not delay or defer the call of the gospel. A call to repentance and to faith. A call which comes clearly from the Bible.

Arresting us in the journey of our life, seeking to turn us around from our own selfish orientation to rely entirely on the work of Jesus and to go in a completely different way. When that voice calls to you, deal with it immediately. Now is the accepted time and today is the day of salvation.

We dare not delay in responding to the call of the gospel. Nor dare we delay in obeying the commands of Jesus. We dare not delay in obeying the commands of Jesus.

If we know that it is good to obey the commands of Jesus and we don't obey them, then it is sin. So, for example, we're here at a baptismal service. Let's just let the cat right out of the bag.

If we understand the Bible correctly, an unbaptized Christian is like a soldier who refuses to wear a uniform. Like a husband or wife that refuses to wear a wedding ring. Well, I'm happy to have a relationship, but I don't want anyone to know that I'm married.

Or I'm thinking about doing it sometime in the future. I say, I don't want you to do it in the future, I want you to do it from day one. I want to put the ring on your finger on the first day and I want it to stay there until the last day.

In fact, you can leave it on when I go. Have you been baptized? Are you committed to doing what is good? Or have you determined that delay is actually an option? And if so, on what basis? Now, we don't delay in obeying the commands of Jesus. And we don't delay in filling the demands or the requirements of Christian living.

Just the duties of the day. Just the routines of the hour. Let me quote Spurgeon to you again.

I'm glad it was Spurgeon who used this as an illustration. I'm not sure I would be brave enough to do it on my own. This is him making application of the notion of doing that which is good and doing it immediately and properly.

And he says this to his congregation. There is a mother at home and her children are neglected while she evangelizes her neighbors. When the children are off her hands, then she says that she's going to be a mother in Israel and look after the souls of others.

Such conduct is sin. Mind your children. Darn the stockings.

And attend to the home duties. And when you have done that, talk about doing something in other places. But if present duties are neglected, you cannot make up for the omission by some future piece of dramatic endeavor to do what you were never called to do.

We dare not delay in the fulfillment of present requirements. Billy Graham's wife died this year, didn't she? A lovely lady by all standards of reckoning. Sue and I had the privilege of spending the day in their home with them on our honeymoon.

And as we sat around the big table with the lazy boy or the lazy Susan or whatever it was that spins around, and as the meal ended at lunchtime and things proceeded, we realized that it is actually true that Ruth Graham had a sign at her kitchen sink which read, Divine service conducted here three times daily. Divine service conducted here three times daily. And the fact that she conducted that divine service there made it distinctly possible for her husband to conduct his divine service.

But without her commitment to hers, his commitment was sadly disfigured and diminished. Then Spurgeon goes on. You do not obey your parents, young man, and yet you're going to be a minister, are you? A pretty minister you will make.

As a trainee banker, you're dilatory and neglectful, and your boss would be glad to see the back of you, and yet you have an idea that you're going to be a missionary? A pretty missionary you would be. You see what he's saying? He's saying that if we understand this perspective, if we're going to step back from the

boasting and the bragging and the self-aggrandizement that is attached to it, and if we understand the nature of God's good plan for us, then we must do what we are called to do in the daily round and in the common task. Do not fall foul of the idea that we can create a natural dichotomy between spiritual activity and natural function in life.

It is in the everyday events of life that our Christian experience is expressed. And at issue in verse 17, you will notice, it's not the bad things we're doing, but the good things that we fail to do. Let me finish in this way.

If anyone then knows the good he or she ought to do and doesn't do, it's sins. It sounds a lot like Jesus, doesn't it? If you think about this, and you can do this for extra credit when you get home, if you think about the parables of Jesus, and I haven't checked this entirely, but I have a sneaking suspicion that the parables of Jesus drive home the issue of what we fail to do rather than confront us and convict us about the things that we have done. So, for example, in the parable of the talents, remember, the individual with the one talent was condemned by the master, not because he used the one talent for an evil purpose, but because he squandered the chance to use the one talent to do something good with it.

If you consider the parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite are pointed out not for what they did, but for what they failed to do. They were so tied up in their ecclesiastical underwear that they were unwilling to get down and deal with real need when it presented itself to them. They failed, on account of their own preoccupations, to recognize what a genuine expression of neighborliness would mean, and it was left up to the Good Samaritan.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, remember, the rich man dies and goes to hell, and he is tormented in hell, and the source of his torment in hell is when he realizes not what he did, but what he failed to do, that he allowed his wealth to become a screen which prevented him from having to deal with the need of people who were around him. Indeed, he was able to separate himself from contact with folks like the beggar, and he didn't recognize the opportunity that literally lay at his doorstep. Verse 17, then, is a call to face up to what we failed to do.

It's probably true to say that the Christian more often leaves undone the things that ought to be done than does the things that ought not to be done. There's something very practical, isn't there, again, and we can just finish in this intensely practical way. For those of us who have had a good upbringing and have had parents who bashed into us certain foundational principles of life, made a point of explaining why you don't leave Rice Krispies floating in the bowl, why we would have to have the potential Third World War over Rice Krispies floating in a bowl.

Some of you are looking at me and saying, I can't believe that you had such a fierce and severe upbringing. But what my parents were trying to teach at that point was, don't start anything that you don't mean to finish. Finish what you begin.

Finish what you begin. And we could, I think, extrapolate from cereal floating in the bottom of the average teenager's bowl through unfinished homework and unfinished and unmade beds and untidy bedrooms and unfinished relationships and the present circumstances of individuals in their thirties who now live no longer in adolescence nor have they reached maturity, but sociologists tell us they now live in the realm of odyssey, in odyssey, where there are no lasting relationships, only hookups, only transient and passing equations with nothing completed. And in a very striking way, the Christian should always be the person who completes the task, completes the task.

Spurgeon again describes how George Whitefield said, and this is so quaint. I love this. And with this, we finish.

He tells of how Whitefield said that he would not go to bed unless he had put even his gloves in their right place. Just think about this for a moment. I refuse to go to bed unless I have put my gloves in the right place.

Why? Because, said Whitefield, if I should die in the night, I do not want anyone coming into the house asking, where did he leave his gloves? But you can make your own application of it. That is the way for a Christian man or a Christian woman always to live, to have things in order, yes, even to a pair of gloves. I've told you of my own father.

He used to make me smile with his shoe trees. And when he took his shoe trees out of his shoes, he put them in his slippers so that when he came home, he would be able to take them out of his slippers and immediately put them in his shoes. He even put shoe trees in his sneakers.

And I used to infuriate him horribly. But you know, I put my shoe trees in my slippers now as well. Whoever knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

Finish up your work every day. Finish up your work every night. Finish up your work.

Father, thank you for the intense practicality of the Bible. Forgive us our unfinished business. Forgive us for thinking that we'll get serious about serving God tomorrow or about obeying Jesus tomorrow or next year or once we've finished school or graduated or got the children off or whatever it might be.

We pray, gracious Father, that you will look upon us in your grace and in your kindness and woo us and win us and stir us and change us and keep us. For we pray in your precious name. Amen.

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