

Sermon 17: James 4:13-17: Practical Atheism

OUTLINE

Living as if you are God
Living as if God is God

INTRODUCTION

Living like God is not real is the basic default of our sinful hearts. We call this practical atheism. As sinners we live as if we are God and not God. We live by our rules, we serve our will, our desires are best, our thoughts and ideas are truth, what we think is right or wrong defines morality. It appears that the punishment of sin against God takes the form of sin which is being our own god, we as sinners have natures that go through life like we are god. This new 'natural' set of instincts have replaced the original righteousness that we had in Adam, and is the disposition of all sinful human beings. Becoming a Christian changes all of this, there is a radical reorientation in our lives. When you heard the gospel you were awakened to the truthfulness of the truth as the Spirit drove it into your hearts and understandings, that ideas and words that were once like water off a ducks back suddenly felt alive and addressed to you directly. There is a God who made all things; He is holy; He created us and is worthy of all of our obedience; He made us to dwell in the goodness of His laws; but we chose rebellion. Sin is not a minor matter like a crime against a human being but a denial and reordering of reality. To deny God is worse than a child murdering its parents; or a dog killing and eating its master; it is more absurd than a rock pretending it can fly. The magnitude of God's glory surpasses any creaturely comparison, He is not a creature. We always underestimate the nature of sin because we always try to equate what sin is like to something we have experienced. The Spirit opens your eyes and helps you understand some of this difference, and the seriousness of your sin. The Spirit teaches you the sinfulness of sin. Then the Spirit points you to Christ and shows you that you don't need a small work done to pay for your sins and overhaul you so that you stop sinning, you come to see that your only hope is in Jesus Christ. You believe in Him, you put all your confidence in Him, in fact you run to Him because there is no other possible way for your sins to be paid for. And along with this faith is repentance, you repent of trying to be God, your repent of sitting on the throne that ruled your life; you repent of your arrogance and pride and folly and are crushed and broken in humble contrition. This is how the Christian life begins. But we still have the flesh with us warring against the Spirit; we still have all the learnt ways and tendencies that can easily fall back into the practical atheism of the sinful heart. This is the problem James is addressing in 4:13-17.

The book of James as it addresses the matter of true religion orbits around certain ideas: rich and poor; faith and works; true and false religion; trials and patience; and the tongue. The flow from one section to the next is not always apparent where there appear to be radical gear shifts in topic, but it is always James circling back again to these ideas. We are entering now into a new section that deals with the rich. 4:13-5:6 have two clear sections dealing with the well to do. Both sections start with the words 'come now', but are quite different in flavour. 4:13-17 seems addressed to the Christian rich who are backslidden; 5:1-6 is much stronger as it speaks in more prophetic terms of the hypocritical rich. 4:13-17 deals with the sins of omission of the rich and is likely linked to the neglecting of the poor mentioned in 2:14-26; 5:1-6 deals with the sins of

commission of the rich. We are looking at 4:13-17 under two headings, Living as if you are God; Living as if God is God.

Living as if you are God

V13-14, 'Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"— ¹⁴yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.' It is clear from James's words that he is addressing a particular group of mobile merchants. Many Jews in the past have had this entrepreneurial spirit and it seems there was no shortage of these types in the believers James is addressing. Now let us be clear that James is not forbidding industry or planning, he is addressing the practical atheism of his hearers. Now I say practical atheism because at the time of James there were very few explicit atheists, everyone was religious. James is addressing those who claim to believe in God and obey His law. These words that James is putting into their mouths are betraying a godless attitude that is unworthy of Christians.

Now, let us not think that James is against being industrious and making plans. The OT is filled with encouragements to be diligent and resourceful and God would bless you with wealth. Prov. 10:4, 'A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.' the bible does not condemn a man for being rich, this very letter acknowledges that there were rich Christians, but the bible does lay responsibilities upon those who are gifted with wealth by God. 1 Tim. 6:17-19, 'As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.' Wise planning is encouraged as well, Prov. 24:27, 'Prepare your work outside; get everything ready for yourself in the field, and after that build your house.' The attitude here is more akin to the Jesus parable of the Rich Fool, Luke 12:16-20, 'And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' ¹⁸And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." ' ²⁰But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

James has much to say about laying up treasures as he highlights here the life bent on the pursuit of profits. Someone so consumed with the here and now that it pushes out everything else. 5:1-6 is full of addressing the pursuit of this priority and the sinful fall out of being controlled by greed. This section picks up on the godlessness of their attitudes, what they have forgotten, how their practical atheism has blinded them. He reminds us that we are not God but creatures in several ways. Firstly, you don't know what tomorrow will bring. We are ignorant. We are at the mercy of the unknown. We are not all knowing and able to confidently plan and make our plans come to pass. We are mere creatures. In chap. 1:9-11 James spoke about the rich remembering their humiliation, this is part of our humiliation. We live in God's world, we are creatures. Many say that they don't need God because they don't need a crutch.

Lies, you do! We are walking around in an illusion of our own making. We pretend that we have no history, where a Creator has put us here; no obligations and purpose that we must obey; no future that will bring all our self-made plans to an end, this is the grand delusion we are all living in. We think there is 'no hell below us and above us only sky,' John Lennon's imaginary united people all living in peace can only exist if all agree with his godless universe, and even then our sinful human nature will not allow peace, there will be war, and murder, and grasping for more. The Lord's Prayer teaches us to daily submit our wills to God, asking the one who controls the future to make His will present on earth as angels are executing it on heaven. In it we plead our dependence upon Him and look to Him to provide; we plead our weakness and sin and the reality of other sinners harming us; in it we recognize that there is a real devil and a spiritual war that we need God to help us in. This imaginary existence where the future is what you make it, is a godless self-deception.

James reminds us that we are a mist that is here for a little while and then gone. We are not strong and permanent and lasting, the human spirit is not the conqueror of all obstacles. Even the great empires of the world, if you walk around London or Rome, you see monuments to a bunch of dead people in nations that are no longer at the top of the food chain. James impresses our creaturely sinful condition upon us. Life is short, and we are soon for eternity. Thinking that forgets that we must die, that this life is not all that there is, is all part of the practical atheism where we pretend the realities about God and ourselves are not constraining realities. Right now we are all about waking up to reality, many now agree that no matter how much reassignment surgery you undergo and man cannot be turned into a woman and vice versa. Reassignment surgery is surgical level drag, this meat lego that human beings are playing at, where they assume divine powers of identity creation in defiance of biology is ludicrous. Well, this same insanity marks all those who deny God their creator; who deny that they are created by Him and for Him and like Him; who deny our sinful condition, that is as self-evident and engrained as our sex; that real human person—Jesus Christ was born, died and was resurrected, who was seen by eye witnesses whose testimony has been recorded for us to read. To deny these matters is as insane as denying the biology you pretend is at the mercy of your whims. This ignorant, arrogant, invincible spirit is the opposite of what we see in Psalm 90, the psalm of Moses. In this psalm only God is eternal but we are like a flash flood; a dream; or the overnight dessert grass of the middle east that died in the blaze of the sun. It is a psalm that places our death because of our sin front and center, speaking of the demarcated life span of sinners. It speaks about how we need wisdom to number our days, and a daily reminder of God's love to satisfy us because of the affliction that riddles our lives. It is a psalm that recognizes that we little human beings do not properly think about God's wrath against sin, and how all human death is an outworking of God's justice upon sin, 'Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?' it is this obliviousness that James is condemning.

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James then instructs them how they ought to think. V15-17, 'Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.' James is not being the language police trying to get us to word right words, but rather by our speech address matters of the heart. James sums up the right way to live in one terse idea, 'If the Lord wills

we will do this or that.' He could have said much more but this is the heart of the matter when it comes to living as if God is God. He is God and we are creatures; He is boss and we are servants; His will is what has the right to shape even our lives and we are those who are to submit. In the west science has pushed God out of our thinking. We have wrongly assumed that because we can explain the scientific mechanisms behind rain as we can label all the various parts of the water cycle, we assume that because we can explain it in terms of cause and effect that God is not also in it and upholding it at all times. Weather, medicine, earthquakes, the planets, gravity, light, science has made a lot of progress in understanding the nature of material creation. Because of this we think that we have disproven the bible which tells us that God is in each of these things. The bible teaches is what we call the doctrine of concurrence, it is not a case of either God or nature, but rather God by nature. God upholds secondary causes and free agency as He employs the mechanisms He creates to bring His will to pass. My unbelieving father who thanks himself and not God for all that he has done by the strength of his own hands is missing the fact that God is upholding all things, including the life and vitality and opportunities, and abilities of the unbeliever. We have nothing except that which is given from above. James is not only recognizing that God is involved but that God is king and His will is the guiding will that will determine all things. James is simply referring to what we believe when we talk about God's providence.

God not only created all things but continues to be involved and oversee all things according to His power and will. We believe in a universal providence, that there is no renegade atom in the universe denying and subverting God's will. We believe in an irresistible providence, that God is strong enough to cause His good will to come to pass without resistance or change. We believe in a mysterious providence, that as creatures we never get to see the whole picture of God's secret will, nor do we get to have God explain Himself to us to our satisfaction. Our lot is to walk by faith with gaps in our knowledge. And we believe in a good providence, that though we don't get to know all of what God has planned and why, we do know that God is good and does good; we do see His love for sinners and His good plans for His creation demonstrated in the death and resurrection of His Son. We can clearly see His holiness, His grace, goodness, mercy and His miraculous way of bringing good from evil in His work of Christ dying and being raised for us. Our faith is informed and not in the dark. We get to know the who but not always the why or how.

This of course breeds a certain humility and peace before God and His rule over our lives. Like Christ we say, not my will but yours be done. Like Paul we accept that God can change our plans no matter how well intentioned. We are able to roll with the punches like Paul who was imprisoned while trying to do something good like deliver funds to the needy saints in Judea. We are able to accept difficulty as discipline and know that in the larger scheme of things God has ruled best in what we have and suffer. Knowing that God has compassion on what He has made and that He provides for the birds helps us not be anxious about tomorrow.

The great test to see if you are a practical atheist is by your praying. If you are not praying for the salvation of the lost then you are not living remembering that we are totally depraved and that God alone can save souls. If you are not praying for your daily needs then you are falling into the modern materialistic mindset that pretends that we provide for ourselves. If you are not praying about your sin then you have forgotten who sanctifies, and we could go on and

go. Praying for our plans, laying our future plans at God's feet, trusting Him to choose what is best better than your own wisdom, being willing to have your plans subverted as God works out His plans. All of this is accomplished when we pray.

Let us look at the last verse of our section v17, 'So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.' This is the classic proof-text to prove the category of sins of omission. This is a most important text that reminds us that sin is not only a positive breaking of God's law, but a deliberate inactivity in fulfilling God's positive commands. But the question we have to answer is, in what way does this principle of the sin of omission relate to what James is discussing? We can see that it is sandwiched in between the rich who live and make plans as if God is not real; and the wicked rich who abuse their neighbour as they serve riches. Some have suggested that James is applying this principle to the whole letter up until now applying it to matters of enduring temptation, being generous to the poor, how we use our tongue. That may be, but I think it is at least to be applied to what James has said about rich and poor until now, in particular 2:15-16, 'If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?' Add this to what Paul says about commanding the rich to be generous and we have a good idea of what James is trying to say. He is asking the rich to think about how their faith translates into doing the good they should be doing towards the poor. Instead of being self-absorbed and bent on their own plans but to think about how God would have them be faithful.

In other words, practical atheism lives its life not deliberately aiming at the known will of God but just going about its own business and desires. You can apply this to the rich as James has done but it applies to all believers. Are we defaulting to a way of thinking where God is not God, this is not walking in the Spirit but in the flesh, not by faith but by sight. Are we redeeming the time, numbering our days, seeking the Lord's will, doing the good that we know that we should?