

*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." <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." <sup>16</sup> As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. <sup>17</sup> Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins. (James 4:13-17)*

### **What Will You Do in the New Year?**

The old year is almost over. Once again we're on the precipice of a new year. It's natural for us to look back and evaluate the year that's gone by. But it's also natural for us to look forward in anticipation or even in dread of the year to come. What are you planning for the new year? A new job? A new house? Or will it be more of the same? What will you do if the economy gets worse? What if it gets better? What are you anticipating from the election? New Year's Eve is the kind of holiday that generates questions like those. Most of us probably have some kind of a plan even if it's as simple as sleeping in one last time tomorrow before Tuesday comes and we have to start living that new year. Whatever your approach is, **what will you do in the new year?**

#### **I.**

Does it matter how you answer this question? If you had asked me one year ago today what I would be doing tonight, I'm quite certain that preaching in Livonia would not have been a part of my answer. The future always holds surprises for us. James, the brother of Jesus, wants us to understand what this means for us as we plan our lives on this earth. **What will you do in the new year? Only God knows.**

James says, **"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.'"** I read an article last week about interviewing for jobs. It said that you will be asked, "Where do you see yourself in two years? What about in five years?" If you can't answer that question, the person interviewing you is likely to draw the conclusion that you don't have goals and so either you aren't very motivated or you don't have much foresight. But James seems to be addressing that tendency in our culture to have a two or three or five year plan. He addresses people who say, "This is what we're going to do for the next year and this is how it's going to go."

To those people, James says, **"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."** You could get hit by a bus tomorrow and even if you don't die from it, how many of us are planning to spend a week in intensive care and then six months doing physical rehabilitation in 2008? We don't assume that we're going to get sick. We don't assume that our job is going to get downsized or that our health insurance will get canceled or that people we love will die. But sometimes those things happen. We can't know what the future holds.

So does that mean it's a sin to plan? Not at all. It's a sin to think that our plans can't fail. You see, planning is perhaps the greatest example of our sinful pride. We think that we're in control of what's going to happen to us. If we consider it carefully enough, if we work at and put enough effort into it, if we get our priorities straight and dedicate ourselves to the plan, we will succeed. We make that assumption whether we're talking about our jobs or businesses or our health or our families. If I watch what I eat and exercise, I can plan on losing weight or moving down in my clothing size. If we go to marriage counseling and put in the time and effort, we can fix our marriage. If we do this or that, we can reasonably expect this outcome. Do you know what's wrong with all of that? It isn't the plan. The plan may make sense. What's wrong is the subject – the "we." Those plans are all about what I am going to do, as if I had any knowledge at all of what the future holds.

You and I are not God. From God's perspective, our lives are like fog that rolls in overnight. When the sun shines on it for a little while, it disappears. We simply don't know what is going to happen tomorrow, let alone next month or next year. Only God can know those things. So why do we keep thinking we can? Because that is the devil's most effective temptation. In the Garden of Eden, the devil told Eve, "You can be like God." He tempted her to believe that she was in control of her life and she could make decisions for herself and they would be every bit as good as God's decisions. You and I are still vulnerable to that temptation because we were born with sinful hearts. Sinful hearts are the natural habitat of sinful pride.

We Americans think that pride is a good thing. Over and over again, we're told to develop our self-esteem which means our pride. Coaches tell players to conduct themselves with pride. Minorities hold marches to generate gay pride or Hispanic pride or whatever kind of pride. I was told the other day that teachers in some schools aren't allowed to mark things wrong with red ink because it would hurt the feelings – hurt the pride – of the kids. But my friends, pride is sinful. It is making myself god. It assumes that my effort and my desires are right and anything that disagrees with me is offensive. That's the attitude that James condemns tonight.

Sinful pride deserves hell. It's just that simple. Can any of us deny that we are guilty of sinful pride? Can any of us deny that it's our natural instinct to plan our lives and to imagine that if we work at it, we'll be successful, we'll be in control, we will be like God? Can any of us deny that we deserve God's judgment in hell for making ourselves into our own idols?

Repentance begins when we recognize the sinfulness of our hearts and the hell we deserve. But repentance doesn't end there. Repentance in its fullest and most glorious sense focuses on Jesus and all that he did for us. Above all else, repentance trusts that Jesus has won forgiveness and life for us, just when we most deserved death and hell. Jesus took our place in death and in hell. During this Christmas season, we focus on the child who was born in Bethlehem. We remember that God was hidden inside that baby. But why did God lower himself into the cesspool of our existence? To die and pay for our sin. To suffer hell itself on the cross because the whole world is full of sinful hearts that think that they can be like God.

Jesus suffered all that those sinners deserved. He paid the price we owe. His blood wipes out God's record of our pride. To God, it's like our hearts were always pure. Jesus died so that we don't have to experience the death of an unbeliever. Death may well come to us. But for us, death is no longer the beginning of endless torment in hell. We will only see hell from a distance and mark it as God's just punishment for sin. For us, death is the entrance to eternal life. Jesus has transformed death from a horrible punishment into a necessary evil that we have to pass through in order to reach heaven.

## II.

In spite of what I said before, up to this point, you might get the idea that James was telling us that planning is a sin. Maybe we should just drift through life accepting whatever God sends us today without thinking at all about the future. That's not what this passage means. This passage condemns pride in our planning. Certainly, because we're all sinners, we can never completely wipe out the pride that infects our sinful hearts. But through the gospel, God has made us new. The believer God put inside us is capable of faithfully following our Lord in this life. That's the point tonight. It's a point that we need to understand every day of the rest of our lives. **What will you do in the new year? Only faith can make God pleasing plans.**

James says, **"Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'"** Now, does that mean that any time we speak about the future, we have to include the phrase "God willing"? God willing we'll go to work tomorrow? God willing we'll visit grandparents for the holidays? God willing the kids will graduate from college? I know a man who likes to say, "God willing and the creek don't rise" whenever he talks about the future. But James does not command us to use those words like some kind of magic formula or incantation. Saying those words without thinking about them or without meaning them doesn't protect us from God's wrath. The important thing is the attitude of our hearts.

Certainly, it is a good practice to say those words. They remind us of the attitude God wants us to have. But the attitude is all important. God wants us to be humble before him. God wants us to make all our plans understanding that we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. Only he does. He is in control of the universe. He is in control of our lives and if our plans don't match his plans, then his plans will succeed while ours fail. And he wants us to rejoice in his plans even when they wipe our plans out.

Now, to be faithful stewards of all that God gives us, planning is necessary. How can I know how much to give to the Lord unless I plan? How can I fulfill my responsibilities as a husband and father if I don't plan? God wants us to carefully and faithfully plan so that we can be faithful to him. But at the same time, when God's plans don't match my plans, God calls me to gracefully accept his will and move forward.

God is looking for humility and trust from us. That's a challenge for us sinners. We don't like to be humble and we don't like to have to trust others. To be humble and to trust God means more than just not messing up. God is looking for a positive commitment to a life of trust, a life that takes God's will as a blessing even when I don't understand it. A life that actively seeks to be content in God even when my plans have nothing to do with what God actually does in my life. That's James point when he says, **"Anyone, then, who**

**knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."** In this passage, "the good" is this attitude of trust, this approach to our plans that always leaves room for God to change or even ignore my plans. If I am so rigid in what I want that I don't leave that room, then I sin.

Once again we find ourselves recognizing how far short we fall from the life God wants us to live. Once again, the only answer for us is Jesus. Jesus alone had a perfect faith in God. He alone trusted God no matter what happened, so he alone was able to plan perfectly – to balance being faithful in using God's gifts with the need to trust God when he does something different from what we were expecting. Now, we can't begin to understand how that worked in Jesus' life because he was God. The important thing is that he was perfect in our place. His trust, his humility, his faith count for us. God sees us as Jesus today. So he sees us as perfect.

So now, we have the power to plan because we have the key element: we have faith in Jesus as our Savior. That means that we trust God to do what is best for me today and tomorrow, in 2007 and in 2008. We have the faith that motivates us to make the most of the resources he gives us and to use them to his glory. And we have the faith to trust him and even rejoice in him when our plans fail and everything seems to have gone horribly wrong. We have the faith to realize that there is no such thing as luck in this world. God is in control of all things and even the things that seem like bad luck are really God's love working for us.

So, my friends, what will you do in 2008? Only God knows. And we will move forward trusting in him. Be faithful and make the best, most God pleasing plans you can. Then trust that whatever happens, God who sent Jesus to live and die and rise for you will still be with you in the new year. Amen.