

“The Self-Sufficient Christian”

September 16, 2012

Text: James 4:13-17

The popular song *Both Sides Now* compares clouds w/ man’s inevitable difficulty/disappointment in trying to control—or even to understand—this life.

Rows and flows of angel hair,
And ice cream castles in the air,
And feather canyons ev'rywhere.
I've looked at clouds that way.

But now they only block the sun,
They rain and snow on everyone.
So many things I would have done,
But clouds got in my way.

I've looked at life from both sides now,
From win and lose and still somehow
It's life's illusions I recall.
I really don't know life at all.

A person who depends on worldly wisdom to explain life is always apt to end up confused/insecure/frustrated by illusions/uncertainties.

Without considering God at all, he sets his goals, makes his plans, develops his strategy for accomplishing those plans, & goes to work, expecting to achieve success.

Suddenly out of nowhere, some unforeseen event takes place that upsets his whole plan, like unexpected clouds that block out the sun.

In the words of 18th century Scottish poet Robert Burns=>
The best laid schemes of mice and men

Go often awry,
And leave us nothing but grief and pain,
For promised joy!

By contrast, a believer who seeks God's will as he makes his plans, need never suffer that sort of disappointment.

When the unexpected happens (as it will), he simply accepts it as God's correction or redirection of his efforts.

- * He leans on God's omniscience, not his own limited understanding.

He assumes the change of course is due to God's being able to see into the future—as he cannot.

- * He also relies on God's eternal power, not his own abilities.

- * His goal is to bring eternal glory to God—not to himself.

So the unforeseen hindrance/contingency that changes his direction presents no crisis to his confidence, nor of to his ego.

This whole outlook is an enormous advantage to the Xn.

Strangely, however, many Xns, disregard it, & make their plans exactly the same way the world does.

They completely leave God out at the planning stage, make all the same faulty assumptions the world makes, and rely exclusively on their own abilities, ignoring God.

Charles Spurgeon challenged such foolish thinking among Xns in terms that were ironically similar to those of the song *Both Side Now*.

“How is it that, instead of living in the eternal future, where we might deal with certainties, we continue to live in the more immediate future, where there can be nothing but uncertainties? Why do we choose to build upon clouds and pile our palaces on vapor to see them melt away, as before they have melted, instead of, by faith, getting where there is no failure, where God is All in All, and His sure promises make the foundations of eternal mansions?”

In today’s text, James will describe 3 approaches to making plans for the future=>

- * The Worldly Foolishness Approach,
- * The Godly Wisdom Approach,
- * The Xn Wickedness Approach.

*** The First Approach—Worldly Foolishness**

James describes the foolishness of the world’s approach to plan-making, w/ an illustration, in which some itinerant merchants are making their business plans.

Although James addresses businessmen & stirs up our imaginations w/ the specifics of a plan like theirs, his words are intended for all Xns, in general.

It may be that Xn businessmen in the churches to which he wrote, were simply the worst offenders of this principle, not seeking God’s will, in making plans.

[James 4:13]=> *“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.’”*

I’d call that good planning—as far as it goes.

* It establishes a starting date=> *“Today or tomorrow.”*

* It establishes an itinerary=> *“We shall go to a certain city.”*

* It sets out a time-table=> *“We shall spend a year there.”*

* It indicates anticipated activities=> *“Engage in business.”*

They won’t be going there for sight-seeing, for relaxation, or for making new relationships, other than those useful to the business.

If you were paying for these guys’ salary and travel expenses, you’d want to know that, & you’d hold them accountable to it.

* Finally, this plan clearly delineates the goal=>

“To make a profit.”

But this is good planning, only as far as it goes, because it completely leaves God out of the picture.

James is continuing to warn us about worldliness, and this is a form of worldliness to which most Xns are susceptible=>

A self-sufficient attitude by which we plan our daily lives/activities w/o any reference to God at all.

If we want His involvement, it’s only to help us do what we want to do—not His telling us what we should do.

Paul wrote=> *“I have been crucified w/ Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me”* (Gal 2:20).

For many Xns, that would have to read=> *“I live for myself and let X give me a hand in doing so, once in awhile.”*

There is no virtue in failing to make plans for the future, or simply planning to play it by ear, or “wing it” as you go.

In fact, not making plans is irresponsible, and in some situations, illegal.

As 1 old adage goes: If you fail to plan, then plan to fail.

When we make up a family budget, we are wisely creating a plan, for how we intend to spend our money wisely.

But the difference between plan-making by worldly-wisdom, and the plan-making of godly wisdom, is that godly believers wait on the Lord, & seek His will and guidance as they make their plans.

There is an awareness of God and a desire to please Him in all they do.

Worldly people (including worldly Xns) don't.

James starts out with the words “*Come now.*”

This is an interjection that means he has something more to say about worldliness, and he wants our attention as he says it.

It also implies disapproval, so once again he is taking a stance of confronting his readers w/ a problem in their lives pertaining to worldliness.

He addresses itinerant merchants among the Jewish Xns to whom he is writing this letter.

The peace that prevailed w/i the Roman Empire, and the excellent Roman roads made such commercial enterprises common/convenient/lucrative.

There was nothing wrong with Jewish Xns being productively engaged in such business enterprises.

The problem was their sense of self-sufficiency, which pervaded every aspect of their planning, and which kept them from giving any thought at all to God, or to His will.

Here were feeble men ordering their lives as if they were God, and as if God couldn't stop them even if He tried.

They had not learned that absolutely nothing happens apart from God's determination, & they thought that their own saying "We shall go and spend and engage and make profit" was the only real consideration.

They viewed themselves as self-made men, and considered their success to be dependent only upon their own intelligence and strength of will, giving no thought to entreating God's direction/help/approval.

Their self-confidence was such that one would think they somehow controlled even marketplace dynamics.

The businessmen of 1929 thought they controlled the market, until it crashed in the Great Depression.

Apparently, it never even entered their minds that death might interrupt/curtail their plans for year they intended to spend in trade.

May God teach each of us the wisdom that humbly remembers His will is supreme, because He is Lord—we are not.

* That our lives are in His hands, from 1 moment to the next.

* That=> *“The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps”* (Prov 16:9).

The men in our text were Xns, they gathered together w/ other Xns to worship the Lord, and yet they lived their lives as if their employment was none of God’s business.

They were what some have called “practical atheists.”

Not theological atheists, who would argue philosophically against the existence of God.

But practical atheists who acknowledge God’s existence with their words, but who simply lived as if He didn’t exist.

Or, as if He/His-will were irrelevant to the way they lived, & the things they did.

We see no indication of their praying, to seek God’s guidance.

The main goal of their lives was simply to make a profit, not to please/glorify Him, not to involve Him, or even acknowledge Him.

These were proud/worldly individuals who gave no thought to eternal matters, but lived only for themselves and the things of this world.

They were like the people of Noah’s day who were eating and drinking, marrying & giving in marriage, when God’s flood swept them away.

Those practices aren't wrong—until they crowd God out of our lives.

That's what had happened in these businessmen's hearts, disregarding God/sin/righteousness/heaven/hell, thinking only of their lives in this world.

I.e., they were just like a lot of Xns today, who can talk excitedly/endlessly about things that pertain only to this world, but rarely about biblical truth, and who have never once really sought to draw close to God, through Jesus X (who, they claim, is their Lord/Savior).

Genuine believers concern themselves w/ doing God's will.

They may be distracted by the world at times, but they can definitely say w/ David=> *"I delight to do Thy will, O my God; Thy Law is within my heart"* (Psa 40:8).

When they pray *"Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"* (Mt 6:10), they mean it, because they truly love the Lord, & they love His righteousness/holiness down deep in their hearts.

If they'd heard Jesus say, *"Whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother,"* they could have raised their hands and responded, "I'm Your brother/sister" (Mk 3:35).

Although they sometimes lose the battle w/ their flesh, they can always say w/ Paul=> *"I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man"* (Rom 7:22).

But none of that is true of the worldly-wise.

They have set their minds on the things of this earth, not on the things above (Col 3:2).

This world is passing away a/w/a its lusts (I Jn 2:17), but it has captured their hearts in the foolishness of its “wisdom.”

Therefore, they never give a thought to God, or to His will.

These men’s foolishness was based on their overlooking and ignoring 2 fundamental truths about human nature=>

Man’s ignorance of the future, and the vulnerability of his life.

1st James mentions man’s ignorance of the future=>

[Verse 14a]=> “Yet you ***do not know*** what your life will be like tomorrow” (not only a year from now, but even tomorrow!)

Life is an unpredictable complex of events, circumstances, & contingencies that we cannot control.

We make our plans on the assumption that nothing will ever change, just like the foolish men in II Pet 3, who said=>

“Ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning” (3:4).

Or that if there ever is any change, we can predict it and remake/revise our plans, so that they will accommodate that change.

Within limits, that is true, but reality has a nasty habit of throwing things at us, that go beyond those limits.

The only thing we can reliably expect, is the unexpected.

Life constantly surprises us, & at times it leaves us reeling.

Bobbi enjoys watching a TV program in which young couples are buying their first houses.

In some cases they have to take out mortgages for 5, 6, 7 hundred thousand dollars.

But what's going to happen if one of them loses his/her job, or if one of them gets sick, or if the house loses so much of its value, that they owe more than its worth?

What if something goes wrong (as it very well might).

I don't know how anyone could ever handle such staggering pressures, apart from the Lord.

We don't know what our lives will be like tomorrow, but, let alone at the end of a 30 year mortgage.

But He does, so hold onto His hand for dear life.

The 2nd fundamental truth man overlooks, is his vulnerability to death=>

[Verse 14b]=> *"You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away."*

There are 2 facts we can state w/ certainty about death=>

- * We don't know for sure when it will take us.

- * But we do know for sure, that it will take us, unless X return for us before it does).

We are here for only a little while, then we vanish.

Meanwhile, we hold onto our lives by the slimmest of threads.

Our bodies are an interwoven complex of systems, many of which are vital to our survival.

If any one of those critical systems were to fail, our lives would end.

Many people live as if nothing could ever go wrong, but in reality many things can, & it's inevitable that eventually something will.

The businessmen in our text were certainly operating as if nothing would ever go wrong either in their own bodies, or in the business environment in which they worked.

Actually, most people live that way, but it's foolhardy, because we are only 1 heartbeat away from death, at any given moment.

James compares our lives w/ the vapor that we breathe-out on a cold day, & which we see only momentarily before it disappears.

You may look in a mirror and think, "I'm relatively young, so I've got many years of life ahead of me."

But you too are just 1 heartbeat away from eternity.

Last month, new incoming students at The Master's College went to the beach, as the culminating activity of their first week as college freshmen.

A young man named Paul, decided to dig a pit in the sand on the beach.

He dug it deep enough so that, when he stood up in it, it
was deeper, than he was tall.

Suddenly one of the walls of the pit collapsed, Paul was
buried alive, and he was pronounced dead at the
hospital, shortly afterward.

Life is far more fragile than many of us might like to think.

It's as if God has but to move a finger, & souls fly off into
eternity.

Worldly foolishness trains people to ignore such truths, and to
procrastinate responding to them by faith.

It teaches them to think, "I'll believe in X, and get right
with God, someday; but I don't need to think about
that right now."

It encourages man to live in the fantasy of his own
invincibility.

*** The Second Approach—Godly Wisdom**

[Verse 15]=> *"Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we
shall live and also do this or that.'"*

**Godly wisdom constantly lives in light of the fact that God,
the believer's Heavenly Father, is absolutely sovereign.**

Nothing happens w/o His permitting it, or His ordaining it.

*"Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? Yet not one of them
will fall to the ground apart from your Father"* (Mt 10:29).

Each flake of chaff thrown into the air by a winnower is steered
as precisely by God's hand, as the stars are steered in their
courses.

All things have their ordained place in God's plan.

Understanding this truth, we should say “*If the Lord wills....*”

And if we don't actually say it, we should always be thinking it.

This is not natural to fallen man's pride.

It's not an attitude children are born with, but one which must be trained into them.

It comes about through the sanctification of the Spirit as we saturate our minds with God's Word and submit to God's will, which we find in His Word.

Ultimately, we embrace the Lord's will even w/ regard to our own death.

This takes the sting of sin out of death for us, because when a Xn has completely entrusted his life into God's hands, the guilt of his sin has been taken away, and he is destined for heaven.

He can say with Paul=> *“If I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. / But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better”* (Phil 1:22-23).

There are several principles we follow as we seek God's will.

1st, God doesn't ordinarily reveal His will by writing it on walls, or speaking to us in an audible voice, but as we draw near to Him, He will give us the desires of our hearts.

Jms 4:8 taught us that “*drawing near to God*” involves
cleansing our hands, & purifying our hearts of
double-mindedness, in order to commune w/ Him.
It is getting into God’s Word, and getting His Word
into our thoughts.

It is praying and pouring our hearts out to God.

It is repenting of our sins, and confessing them to X,
placing them under the cover of God’s grace.

When we have drawn near to the Lord, Psa 37 assures us=>

*“Delight yourself in the LORD; And He will **give you
the desires of your heart**”* (Psa 37:4).

God will give us the desires He wants us to have in the first
place, & then He will fulfill those desires, for us.

So in formulating our plans for the future, we can start w/
our own desires, as long as we have drawn near to
God and are walking in the Spirit.

2nd, in seeking God’s specific will for our lives, we know that
His desires will never contradict His revealed will, in His
Word.

While there is a subjective element involved in the desires
of our hearts, His revealed will is completely
objective, & we can be very certain of it.

If our desires contradict His Word, our desires are wrong
and should play no role in our planning for the future.

3rd, every believer knows what it is to wait on the Lord to make His direction clear to us through some act of His providence in our lives, as we discern which doors He seems to be opening, & which ones He seems to have closed.

This, in conjunction w/ God's Word, & the desires of our own Spirit-filled hearts, gives us a direction to follow.

Yet even then, we hold to the goals we set very tentatively, knowing we may still not perceive God's will aright.

4th, as we pursue what we perceive to be God's direction, we remain open to His redirecting us, at any time.

Paul did that, on his 2nd missionary journey, in Acts 16, when he was headed west, & the H.S. forbade him to turn south to Asia, or north to Bithynia.

He just kept going west until the Aegean Sea stopped him, at a seacoast town called Troas.

There God gave him the Macedonian vision, instructing him to cross over the Aegean and bring the gospel into Europe for the first time.

Ultimately, the question of discerning God's will is secondary to that of our willingness to follow His will.

Do we put ourselves totally at God's disposal, knowing we are not our own, but have been bought w/ a price (I Cor 6:19f)?

This is an extremely important principle for us as Xns to
learn and get a grip on.

Or has the world persuaded us to keep back some part of our
selves/lives from total surrender to X?

May the Lord bring us all to wholehearted consecration to Him.

*** The Third Approach—Christian Wickedness**

[Verse 16]=> “*But as it is, you [Xn readers, esp. the businessmen
whom he has been addressing] boast in your arrogance; all
such boasting is evil.*”

**Notice that James is no longer calling proud self-sufficiency
merely foolish—now he calls it evil, or wicked.**

The public schools seek to help children develop self-esteem, &
to feel self-sufficient, but God calls that goal, evil.

Not that children should be made to feel incompetent.

But neither should their pride be systemically enhanced,
making humility impossible for them.

If we are to boast, it must be in our Lord, because there’s
only a hair’s-breadth of difference between our
boasting in ourselves, and our despising the Lord.

Psa 10=> “*For the wicked boasts of his heart's desire, And
the greedy man curses and spurns the LORD*” (10:3)

If you are of a worldly mindset, this will sound very foreign to
you—in fact, it will sound like nonsense.

But if you love/seek godly wisdom, and the humble spirit
that is inherent to godly wisdom, you’ll love it
because it will sound obvious/right to you.

You'll say w/ David=> *"My soul shall make its **boast** in the LORD; The **humble** shall hear it and **rejoice**"*
(Psa 34:2).

You'll also say w/ Paul=> *"If I have to **boast**, I will **boast** of what pertains to my weakness"* (II Cor 11:30).

Why would he boast in his weakness?

It provides God's power a backdrop against which to shine brightly, & glorify Him--which godly wisdom fervently desires to do.

God hates the arrogance that assumes it can control its own life.

Nebuchadnezzar boasted of building Babylon *"by the might of **my power**, & for the glory of **my majesty**?"*

Then God said=> *"King Nebuchadnezzar...: sovereignty has been removed from you, / & you will be driven away from mankind, & your dwelling place will be with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, & 7 periods of time will pass over you until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, & bestows it on whomever He Wishes"* (Dan 4:31-32).

Boasters may place their confidence in the strength of their own will, or rejoice in their personal superiority, disdaining the weak.

But God says, that all such boasting is evil.

Like smoke in His nostrils, it offends Him, and He promises to repay it into their bosom (Isa 65:5-6).

In case anyone were to hear/read this text & respond to it by saying, “Maybe I’ll heed it, maybe I won’t,” James heads them off at the pass in=>

[Verse 17]=> *“Therefore, to one who **knows** the right thing to do, and **does not do** it, to him it is **sin**.”*

The knowledge of what is right, creates an obligation to do it.

Therefore, if we know it’s wrong to leave God out of our lives, to trust in ourselves instead of Him, & to boast of ourselves, our doing these things is an esp. offensive sin to Him.

This is a wickedness in which the spiritually ignorant cannot engage, a sin that only the well-taught Xn can commit.

It was of people like this, that X said, *“That slave who **knew***

*his master's will & **did not** get ready or act in accord with his will, shall receive **many lashes**”* (Lk 12:47).

This is the height of Xn wickedness/sin, in which we actually take a condescending attitude toward God Himself (and that is unbelievable arrogance).

It’s almost schizophrenic, in that it acknowledges God’s supremacy, then chooses to ignore/defy His will.

But this principle in vs 17 also applies to our whole lives, as Xns.

To know we should love God wholeheartedly, or study His Word, or spend time in worship/prayer-to Him, or serving Him through ministry to others...

But not to do these things—is sin.

By contrast, there is the beauty of a life well spent in devotion to God, who can expect to hear, “Well done, good/faithful servant.”

Charles Spurgeon described such a man in his church a week after that man suffered a massive stroke, but on the week before the man died:

“Mr. Wm Olney... was here, he was there, he was everywhere serving his Lord and Master! And now that he is suddenly stricken down, his life cannot be said to be in any sense unfinished! There is nothing to be done in his business. There is nothing to be done in his relation to this Church. There is nothing left undone w/ regard to anybody! It is all as finished, as if he had known that he was going to be struck down.”

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1. A person who depends on worldly wisdom is always apt to end up confused, insecure, and frustrated by illusions and [28 uncertainties].
2. By contrast, a believer who seeks God’s will as he makes his plans, need [12 never] suffer that sort of disappointment.

In today’s text James will describe three approaches to making plans for the future...

*** The First Approach—Worldly Foolishness**

[James 4:13]

3. This is a form of worldliness to which most Christians are susceptible: a self-sufficient attitude by which we plan our daily lives [16 without] any reference to God at all.

Gal 2:20

4. There was nothing wrong with Jewish Christians being productively engaged in such business enterprises; the problem was their sense of [10 self] sufficiency, which kept them from giving any thought at all to God or His will.

Prov 16:9

5. These were proud, worldly individuals who gave no thought to eternal matters but lived only for the things of this [12 world].

Psa 40:8; Mt 6:10; Mk 3:35; Rom 7:22; Col 3:2; I Jn 2:17

6. These men’s foolishness was based on their ignoring two fundamental truths about human nature: man’s ignorance of the future, and the vulnerability of his [10 life].

[Verse 14a]

[Verse 14b]

7. The businessmen in our text were operating as if nothing would ever go [12 wrong] either in their own bodies, or in the business environment in which they worked.

*** The Second Approach—Godly Wisdom**

[Verse 15]

8. Godly wisdom constantly lives in light of the fact that God, the believer's Heavenly Father, is absolutely [20 sovereign].

Mt 10:29

9. Understanding this truth, we should say "If the Lord wills..."; and if we don't say it, we should always be [18 thinking] it.

Phil 1:22-23

There are several principles we follow as we seek God's will...

- *10. God, as we draw near to Him, will give us the [16 desires] of our hearts.

Jms 4:8; Psa 37:4

- *11. God's specific will for our lives will never contradict His [18 revealed] will in His Word.

- *12. Wait on the Lord to make His direction clear though some act of His [24 providence] in our lives.

- *13. Remain open to His [24 redirecting] us at any time.

I Cor 6:19-20

*** The Third Approach—Christian Wickedness**

[Verse 16]

14. James no longer calls proud self-sufficiency merely foolish; now he calls it [10 evil].

Psa 10:3; 34:2; II Cor 11:30

15. God hates the arrogance that assumes it can [16 control] its own life.

Dan 4:30-32; Isa 65:5

[Verse 17]

16. If we know it's wrong to leave God out of our lives, to trust in ourselves instead of Him, and to boast of ourselves, our doing these things is an especially offensive [8 sin] to Him.

Lk 12:47

17. By contrast, there is the beauty of a life spent in devotion to God who can [14 expect] to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant."