

Decision Making and the Will of God

Lesson 12: Putting It All Together: Wisdom for Life's Big Decisions -- James 4:13-17

Picture a successful merchant laying out his plans over dinner, full of confidence. "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit." Notice everything that is missing from his speech. There is no "if." There is no "Lord willing." There is no awareness that he does not actually command tomorrow, that his very next breath is a gift, that the whole enterprise rests in hands other than his own. He plans as though the future were his to dispose of, and James gently, soberingly, pulls the rug out from under him: "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."

We have come a long way together. Over these lessons we have learned to bring our decisions to God by asking a series of plain, wise questions. Is it biblical? What are my motives? What will be the impact? Do I actually want to do it? Am I capable? Has God provided an opportunity? What do godly counselors say? We have learned to pray for wisdom rather than chase signs, to make the decision rather than wait forever for certainty, and to trust the providence of the God who establishes our steps. This final lesson gathers all of it into one place and crowns it with a single, governing posture of the heart.

That posture is captured in James's correction of the boasting merchant: "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'" Here is the spirit that should run underneath every decision we make, from the largest to the smallest. We plan, and we plan in earnest. We decide, and we act with conviction. And through all of it we hold our plans before God with open hands, saying, in our hearts if not always on our lips, "If the Lord wills." This is not a magic phrase to sprinkle on our sentences. It is the humble confidence of a person who has learned, at last, that he is not God, and that the God who is can be wholly trusted.

James warns us away from two dangers at once, and both have shadowed this entire study. On one side is the presumptuous self-confidence of the merchant, who plans as though God were not in the picture, a prayerless, arrogant grasping at a future we do not control. On the other side, James closes with a word that cuts against the opposite error: "whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." After all our careful weighing, the point was never to become paralyzed admirers of wisdom who never actually obey. Confident, humble, decisive action under the lordship of Christ, that is where this study has been heading all along. So we hold it all together now: plan wisely, submit humbly, act boldly, and trust deeply. If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

Group Discussion: Looking back over this whole study, which of the questions we have learned to ask has been most helpful or most convicting for you, and why? As a group, talk about

James's two warnings: the presumption of planning as though we control the future, and the sin of knowing the right thing and failing to do it. Which of those two dangers are you more prone to?

Personal Reflection: As this study closes, consider how you have made decisions in the past and how you sense God calling you to make them now. Where do you most need to grow, in humble submission to God's will, or in courageous obedience to what you already know is right? What is one decision you will carry forward differently because of what God has taught you in these weeks?

Read James 4:13–17

Study Questions

1. James confronts those 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" (v. 13). What is wrong with the way these merchants are planning? Is the problem that they make plans at all, or something deeper about the spirit in which they make them?
2. Where in your own life do you tend to plan as though the future were under your control, leaving God out of the picture? What would it look like to invite Him back into that area of your planning?
3. James asks, "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (v. 14). How should the brevity and uncertainty of life shape the way we make decisions? Why is remembering our own mortality a source of wisdom rather than mere gloom?
4. If you truly took to heart that your life is a mist, what would you do differently? What decision or priority would change in light of how short and uncertain life really is?
5. James gives the better way: "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that'" (v. 15). What does it mean to make plans under "if the Lord wills"? How is this a genuine posture of the heart and not just a phrase we tack onto our sentences?
6. Think of a specific plan you are holding right now. What would it look like to genuinely submit that plan to God's will, holding it with open hands while still pursuing it wisely?
7. James says, "As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil" (v. 16). Why does Scripture treat presumptuous, self-sufficient planning as a form of arrogance, even sin? How does leaving God out of our decisions reveal something about the posture of our hearts?
8. Where does a quiet self-sufficiency show up in your own decision making, a confidence that you can manage your life on your own? What would humble dependence on God look like there instead?
9. This study has taught us to weigh decisions carefully and then to act, and James holds together humble submission ("if the Lord wills," v. 15) and decisive obedience ("whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin," v. 17). How do we keep confident, decisive action and humble submission to God together, avoiding both the presumption of leaving God out and the paralysis of never obeying what we already know?

10. Look back across this entire study on decision making and the will of God. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through it. What is the single most important truth you will carry into the decisions of your life from here on?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Proverbs 27:1, do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring; Luke 12:16–21, the rich fool who planned for many years and met God that night; Psalm 90:12, the prayer to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom; James 4:7–8, submitting to God and drawing near to Him; Philippians 1:6, confidence that He who began a good work in us will bring it to completion

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