

“Satisfying Dependence”

James 4:13-17

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(faith; humility)

In 1875 William Ernest Henley published what would become a rather infamous poem.

You might remember it because of Timothy McVeigh the Oklahoma City bomber.

McVeigh had no last words before his execution, but earlier he had asked that Henley’s poem be released to the press as his last statement.

The title of the poem is “Invictus” which is Latin for “Unconquered.”

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For **my unconquerable soul.**

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
**My head is bloody, but unbowed.**

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find, **me unafraid.**

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
**I am the master of my fate;  
I am the captain of my soul.**”

It is said that Henley wrote it after overcoming a near fatal disease and the amputation of one of his legs.

The courage and tenacity of the human spirit is often admired in severe circumstances.

And this poem would seem to be simply the expression of such an indomitable spirit were it not for the biblical metaphors he uses.

Such criticism could be made of the entire poem but especially the final verse:

“It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll...”

These are clearly references to Jesus’ words about the “strait” or “narrow” gate and road that leads to life and to the judgment scroll on which are recorded the deeds of each life.

To a Christian, such words are unconscionable.

They express arrogance and even anger.

We see the image of a man shaking his fist in the face of God.

As I said, to a Christian, such open defiance of God is unimaginable.

But open defiance is not the only way people treat God.

**Another is to ignore God.**

That seems to be the issue James is addressing in our text for today:

James 4:13-17 “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.”

**I believe, in verse 13, James is describing the day-to-day thinking of even many Christians:**

**“Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.”**

Clearly James is criticizing a certain kind of thinking and acting.

This person is making plans.

Nothing wrong with making plans; God’s Word tells us to.

**But here we have a person who is independently making plans with no thought of God’s will in the matter.**

I will go, I will spend time, I will carry on business, I will make money.

Too many Christians think they have an after-life-insurance-plan called being saved.

They know they have no control over what happens to them after they die, and so they accept God’s gift of eternal life.

Then they live with the confident, or not so confident, assumption that when they **die** all will be well.

But **here and now**, they make most of the decisions of life with hardly a thought of God’s will in the matter.

They purchase homes, they take jobs, they date and marry, they select a school to attend, they invest their money; they live life as if their choice alone is the deciding factor.

They act as if time is on their side and as if their ability and desire to get are the only issues to take into account.

(Moyer, James, 160)

Oh, they go to church and they try to be moral in their choices but, day-to-day, they live as if God has nothing to do with job, recreation or mutual funds.

And it is manifest in their prayerlessness about most of life.

Some may pray about really big decisions but they are prayer-less in much else – not remembering that God is here and active in the “now.”

One of the negative results of the Enlightenment was the eventual removal of God from everyday life.

Later, some, called Deists, believed in a God who originally set everything in motion but then withdrew to allow creation to take its own course.

They imagined a “closed” world where God doesn’t intervene. Miracles didn’t exist, Jesus didn’t come from God, and humans are on their own to interact with the forces of nature and each other.

Years ago one man wrote: “Not that I call in question the existence of a supreme being; on the contrary it seems to me that the greatest degree of probability is in favor of this belief... (but) it is a theoretic truth with little practical value.” (In James Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 60 – Frenchman Jullian de La Mettrie was actually an atheist but his expression is similar to Deism.)

How many, even in our churches, are **Christians by confession but Deists in practice.**

We tend to function as Deists – we think of the world, even our own day-to-day experience as “closed,” cut off from God’s direct influence.

We assume that all that happens is as a result of our hard work or our dumb luck or simply as a result of the way the world functions – gorgeous sunsets and tornados just happen.

We simply don’t think about God except in what we consider religious matters?

And why not?

Have we been infected with “affluenza?”

Though not a real word it is a real condition:

**Affluenza**, n. a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.” *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, John de Graaf, David Wann & Thomas H. Naylor

Arthur Simon, president of Bread for the World wrote, “An affluent culture turns our hearts towards fleeting satisfactions and away from God,” while “unprecedented prosperity has left our lives full but not necessarily fulfilled.”

Simon concludes that “the problem is not that we’ve tried faith and found it wanting, but that **we’ve tried mammon (money)**

**and found it addictive**, and as a result find following Christ inconvenient” and even thinking of Jesus as irrelevant. Church and Simon in Blomberg, 274

Others consider this the result of:

- seeing work as just a way to make the money we need to buy what we want,
- viewing material prosperity as a symbol of *our* independence,
- imagining God as aloof from mundane cares of money matters

(Barton, Veerman and Wilson, *James* (LABC), 112 in Blomberg, 275)

We have effectively shut God out of much of our lives.

But the remedy is not in simply choosing to give some money to God. Neither is it a matter of witnessing to ones employees.

It may include those, but it is deeper than that – it is actually making daily decisions and conducting ourselves with **an awareness and dependence on God.**

It is to live with an awareness of what James Sire called “A universe, (everything around us), charged with the grandeur of God.” (Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 20)

James 4:13-14 “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.”**

**James tells us why living as described in verse 13 is so foolish?**

**It is because of the truths of verse 14.**

“Why, you...” There is an incredulity in the address – “how could people like you, fragile human creatures, “even know what will happen tomorrow?”

The point is that you **don’t** know, even though you act like you do.

To prove that you don’t know, don’t have control over life, James asks, “What is your life? You are a mist...”

Psalm 39:5 “Each man’s life is but a breath.

Outside in the cold winter air we see our breath; but we notice how quickly it becomes invisible.

The steam rises from the teakettle on the stove but disappears by the time it reaches the ceiling.

My friend, John, went to the doctor for a routine physical exam only to discover that he had advanced melanoma, which took his life in a few short weeks.

He was part of our church and only in his 40s. He finished work, ate a quick supper and went to play in his softball league. He had a great evening then came home and sat down to watch the news. His wife came into the room to say she was going to bed only to find him dead in his chair.

Steve was also part of our church. He awoke on a mid-week morning and went about his usual business. Later, he was driving alone eastbound on Hampden/285 when another car careened across the median into his car.

I went to see Steve in the hospital; he was surprisingly okay. We talked and even laughed together about the “close call.” 48 hours later Steve was dead.

To get an impression of the brevity of life, I want you to watch a 40 second video: “85 years in 40 seconds,” while I read 1 Peter 1:24 and Matthew 6:25-33

[http://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=85+years+in+40+seconds&search\\_type=&aq=0&oq=85+years+in+](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=85+years+in+40+seconds&search_type=&aq=0&oq=85+years+in+)

“All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall... “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ...Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? <sup>28</sup> “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. <sup>29</sup> Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these... So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ <sup>32</sup> For the pagans run after

all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.  
<sup>33</sup> But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Not only is each life brief, even fragile, but the truth is also we don't know what even tomorrow holds.

Proverbs 27:1 "Do not boast about (place your confidence in) tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.

Jesus told this story in Luke 12:16-20 "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. <sup>17</sup> He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' <sup>18</sup> "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. <sup>19</sup> And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." ' <sup>20</sup> "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you.

Charles Spurgeon said our ignorance of the future is a **fact** and our dependence on the future is **folly**. (from sermon on this text)

It is tempting however! We put our hope, our faith, in the hands of the uncertain future; we assume stock prices will climb, that our job will give us greater income, and that our health will hold, rather than putting our faith in God.

**James began this section by writing, "Now listen, you who say..." telling us where our confidence should not be placed.**

**Now in verse 15 he writes, "Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."**

Certainly James doesn't mean that we must repeat these very words, "if the Lord wills," like some magic mantra every time we talk about plans for the future.

The phrase, “If it is the Lord’s will,” is the verbal expression of a condition of the heart.

In a life over which we have so little control, where or in whom do we put our trust, our confidence?

James says don’t trust yourself, you may be gone tomorrow, and don’t trust the future, you don’t know what will happen.

But James’s point is not merely that life is relatively brief and uncontrollable by us but also that our lives **are** in God’s care.

It’s called providence: “God’s providence is his completely holy, wise and powerful governing and preserving every creature and every action.” (Westminster Shorter Catechism in Modern English)

Jesus said it this way in Matthew 7:7-11 “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup> For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>9</sup> “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup> Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? <sup>11</sup> If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

This life, this world is not a closed system – functioning only by what is seen.

We don’t live in just an obvious cause and effect world.

We live in a world where God is active every day.

“If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”

James calls us to live with that awareness of God’s presence and control, a cognizance that everything we do is by God’s permission.

One man called it a “fixed perspective from which to view all of life.” (Moo, 206)

Imagine if we lived every day with that awareness of God.

I’d like to share a rather long illustration of this with you.

This past week I spent some time with Andy Schwab of our church.



6 years ago Andy was a very successful salesman, earning six figures with the house, cars, and toys commensurate with his income and status. He also had investments that would care for him the rest of his life.

Andy was living the “American Dream.”

Then the “dream” turned to what many would call a “nightmare.”

The “dotcom,” NASDAQ bubble burst, the market crashed and Andy’s life seriously began to change.

Then three years ago doctors discovered a cancerous tumor in Andy’s brain.

The subsequent surgery left him weak, unable to work and generally less-abled.

But Andy doesn’t call it a nightmare – he calls it God’s blessing.

The disappearance of the house, cars and 401ks has been replaced by a day-to-day sweet dependence on God.

- He has seen God provide an apartment when he lost his house.
- He has seen God provide just enough money to meet his and his son’s needs.
- He has learned a confidence in the provision of God that is more secure than all the wealth that he lost.

**Still keeping Andy in mind, I want to tell you a little about me.**

By God’s grace and the generosity of his people, Barbara and I have, through the years, been able to save money for retirement.

We went from having no idea how we could make ends meet after we could no longer earn an income, to seeing that it is possible.

I have discovered over those years that I’m tempted to change my thinking – actually tempted to change my trusting.

I went from having no idea how to make ends meet but trusting that God would somehow provide, to having some investments and trusting that they will be sufficient.

Do you hear the difference?

It is a subtle but significant shift in thinking and trusting.

The great temptation is to start trusting more in the investments than in God.

I can say and believe that God has provided, but my dependence could shift from God to the investments.

### **Now let's bring Andy and me back together.**

While Andy was losing everything, I was gaining.

Andy no longer has the option of trusting in health and investments.

I still do. So where will my trust be placed?

I said to Andy that I know of a way to put myself back into the place where I can only trust in God.

I could give my retirement investments to Andy.

I would then have no option but to trust God.

Then I would pray what we call the Lord's Prayer with a new intention: "Father...give us today our daily bread."

### **How long has it been since we have seriously prayed that prayer or anything like it?**

Who here, honestly, **does not know** whether you will have food for breakfast in the morning?

Except intentionally or accidentally, most of us in this room have never missed a meal.

And some of us **haven't** missed more meals than others!

In an age of affluence and refrigeration is this prayer for **daily** bread irrelevant?

**Not** if we truly understand the prayer and have a realistic understanding of our actual situation.

In few words Jesus teaches a mouthful (pun intended):

**"Father... give us today our daily bread," teaches us dependence and contentment.**

We imagine that we provide for ourselves.

The truth is we are dependent on God.

In 1 Corinthians 4:7 the apostle Paul rightly asked,  
“What do you have that you did not receive?”

James himself pointed out in James 1:17

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down  
from the Father...”

The Psalmist wrote, Psalm 145:15-16 “The eyes of  
all look to you (God), and you give them their food  
at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy  
the desires of every living thing.”

Do we forget that the money we have, was earned by using time,  
health and intelligence that were given to us?

If God doesn't “give” to us we would have nothing.

If my ability to earn an income or my investments for the future all  
evaporated, would I then learn even better what Andy has learned:  
dependence and contentment.

So I asked Andy, jokingly of course, if he would take my money.

In all sincerity, Andy said “no,” he wouldn't want it.

So positive is his experience with God's daily provision  
that he has no desire for the things on which most of us  
depend.

No, James is not saying we must get rid of all material possessions  
and pray to get sick.

He is saying look deeply and ask, “Has something other than  
God stolen your trust.”

Maybe for you it is not a matter of trusting in investments or your own  
ability to earn money or whatever else.

**Maybe for you, rather than truly trusting God, your trust is  
in some other person – a spouse or parent or some other  
benefactor.**

Maybe a way to apply this issue is to ask, “When you make plans in  
life, who do you involve in those decisions?”

Does God care which school you go to, which job you take, who you marry, what vacations you take, where you invest your money...?

I'm convinced it isn't so much that God has only one right answer to every question we might ask in life as in whether we should buy Colgate or Crest toothpaste.

But the point is that **what God thinks matters** and he is part of every aspect of our lives, even every decision we make – **after all, this is a relationship!**

I sometimes wonder, if God chooses to give us guidance in even the mundane matters of life, **would we be available to hear him** or have we grown accustomed to simply moving ahead without him?

James 4:13-17 “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.”

I often use “The Lord’s Prayer” to remind myself of my true dependence on God for everything including life itself.

Matthew 6:9-13 “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, <sup>10</sup> your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us today our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.  
Amen

## Other Notes on James 4:13-17

These verses are likely a whole new section of the book, breaking from what he has been talking about to go back to a theme he only introduced early in the book.

James 1:9-11 “The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. <sup>10</sup> But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. <sup>11</sup> For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

Verse 15 would suggest this instruction is directed to Christians for it doesn't seem likely James would say this to non-believers.

4:13-17 “really is not about wealth or poverty but about the temptations of autonomous planning more generally, and thus a failure to take God's will into account.” (Blomberg, unpublished commentary, 262)

Main point: “Christians should not plan for the future as if they were in complete control of their own lives but should consistently make a healthy allowance for God's sovereignty.” Blomberg, 263

Augustine wrote, “Love God and do as you please. We changed it to “Do as you please and **say** you love God.” (Hughes, 203)

**<sup>16</sup> As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.**

Again the problem is not with money-making and planning but with the assumptions underlying our actions.

It is the arrogant self-sufficiency, the disregard of God's prerogatives, that is the evil.

NASB “You boast in your arrogance.”

“boast” is “to put confidence in” which is not necessarily negative until we add the word “brag.” “Brag” is negative – arrogances.

Phillips translation: “You get a certain pride in yourself in planning your future with such confidence.”

Amplified Bible “But as it is, you boast [falsely] in your presumption *and* your self-conceit.

We begin to think we control the direction and duration of our lives.

<sup>17</sup> Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

Is this James' conclusion? You now know what is the right thing relative to how you view your life and your daily actions – now do it. To know it and not do it is sin.

Luke 12:47 “And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act as he would wish him to act shall be beaten with many [lashes].”