

James 4:11-17, No. 12
“Lord Willing” and “Know Yourself”!
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Text Comment

- v.11 In earlier English translations “speak evil against” was rendered with the more acerbic “backbite.” You’ll notice that “you adulterous people” in v. 4 has given way to James’ more characteristic address: “brothers.” That is important in this case because how we speak about others has everything to do with how we think about them or view them. If we regard them as our *brothers* we are much less likely to run them down. So notice the three-fold repetition of “brothers” in v. 11. [Motyer, 158]

There is an “*and*” between “speaks against” and “judges,” but the idea is not that those are two different sins. Rather to slander another is, in the nature of the case, to pass judgment on him or her. What is more, to do so is a clear violation of the Law of God, so to speak evil against another Christian amounts to speaking evil of the Law. The law forbids tale-bearing (Lev. 19:16: “Do not go about spreading slander among your people.”) and requires that we love our neighbor as ourselves, a command that James has already described (in 2:8) as “the royal law according to the Scripture.” If we don’t keep the law, whatever we may claim as Christians, we are not giving it the reverence it deserves and we certainly appear to be dismissing its authority.

Now, this hardly means that Christians are not to exercise discernment about people or render judgment regarding them. They are not to slander people, but, as you know, there is a great deal in the Bible about speaking the truth in love, even when the truth is that someone is doing something very wrong. The Lord Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount, famously said, “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” But he went right on to counsel his disciples not to throw their pearls before swine, which certainly requires a judgment to be made about another person. Johann Albrecht Bengel’s famous four word commentary on the Lord’s command in Matt. 7:1, “Judge not lest ye be judged,” has always seemed to me perfectly to capture the Lord’s meaning. He said the Lord meant that we should never judge another person *sine scientia, necessitate, amore*, that is, we should not pass judgment without knowledge, necessity, and love. Don’t judge unless you have the facts – we very often (if not usually) don’t –, unless it is necessary to do so – it usually isn’t –, and unless you are doing so in love – which is so rarely true! In other words, cut out the judging when you don’t have firsthand and reliable information, when you are under no obligation to pass judgment (if nothing worthwhile will be lost if you keep your mouth shut), and when you can’t do it in a spirit of true affection for the person in question. I fear that would eliminate almost all of my judgmental thoughts and words!

- v.12 In other words, to pass judgment on others is to assume a place and a prerogative unique to God alone. Here “brother” has become “neighbor.” It could be that James means that the prohibition against slander must be observed no matter whom we are speaking about – which certainly is true – but I suspect here that James is still talking about relationships

between Christians and my brother, of course, is my neighbor *par excellence*. [Motyer, 158]

- v.14 We've moved on to another subject, though it can certainly be related to the issue of true humility before God and man, the subject of previous verses. In this case James personifies some businessmen or traders who imagine that their hopes and plans for commerce are of interest to no one but themselves and who forget how much in life lies entirely beyond their control. This short section trades on the same teaching we find in the Lord's parable of the rich fool who made plans for bigger barns without reckoning with the fact that the Lord could and, in fact, would cut his life short. [Luke 12:16-21] Far from being in charge of our lives, entire lives are a vapor that can vanish in a puff of wind. Remember, we've said that James, of all NT writers, seems to have the Lord's teaching in permanent solution in his mind. And that's why it continues to appear and reappear in his writing.
- v.16 Boasting about your plans and your achievements is proof that you don't really understand your situation. As Paul would put it in 1 Corinthians, "What do you have that you did not receive?" You foolish pipsqueak; who are you to take credit for what God has given you?
- v.17 Why this statement here and now? Commentators have debated that question long and hard. But the simplest explanation is to say that James has told us what we ought to do in v. 15. Since we now know what we ought to do, if we don't do it, we are all the more responsible for our sin. It is interesting that here the sins considered are sins of omission. We tend – I think men in particular – tend to think first and primarily of sins of commission, the doing of what is forbidden. But the Bible lays tremendous stress on sins of omission and the failure to keep the Ten Commandments is, in the summary of them provided by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 22, first and foremost a sin of omission. When we break any one of the Ten Commandments we have not loved the Lord our God with all our heart and we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves. In the Lord's parables as well the accent is on sins of omission. Think, for example, of the parable of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levites are condemned not because of what they *did*, but because of what they *did not* do. The rich man, also, did not care for Lazarus when he could have; another sin of omission. And so in the Lord's account of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25 people are judged and rejected not because of the wrong things they did, but because of the good things they failed to do for others. We tend to imagine that the last judgment will expose our wicked deeds – no doubt it will – but Jesus lays stress on the exposure of our lack of good deeds. Remember his words there: "Truly I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." [Matt. 25:45; cf. Tasker, 106-108] I fear that it will be sins of omission for which we will be held most responsible on the Great Day!

This evening I plan to spend my time on the last five verses we just read rather than on the first two. The primary reason for that is that we already devoted attention to our speech about others when considering James' longer treatment of that subject in the first paragraph of chapter 3. In Proverbs, as you may remember, various proverbs concerning our speech are scattered

throughout the book and when a preacher preaches sermons on Proverbs he almost invariably gathers those proverbs together and preaches a sermon or two on the aggregate. No one I'm aware of ever preached through Proverbs verse by verse. He would have to be a very clever preacher to keep that interesting when he came to the seventeenth time that we had something in the proverbs about our speech. It is always subject by subject. Well, in a similar way, *we've already had* our sermon on unkind, cruel, and judgmental speech. Perhaps I should have read and dealt with verses 11-12 then.

It is not often that a biblical writer so perfectly encapsulates an important theme of biblical teaching that his words become part and parcel of Christian conversation, but James has done that here. How many times in your life have you heard a brother or sister say, "Lord willing, I will do this or that." I say those words a lot myself. I know many of you do as well, and so have Christians for two-thousand years. Indeed, the terminology is so fixed in Christian speech that it has a technical designation, the *condicio Jacobaea*, that is, the "Jacobean condition." Remember, Jacob is the Greek spelling of James. *Condicio Jacobaea*, in other words, is the condition James' imposes on a Christian's speech. When speaking about the future a believer should say, "Lord willing" or "if the Lord wills." That *condicio Jacobaea*, in large part because it applies to so much that we say, is then shortened to the Latin letters D.V. They stand for *Deo volente*, a Latin ablative absolute that means "If God is willing" or "God being willing."

There have been those, as you might expect if you know human nature at all, who have then turned this into a law. That is, a Christian is not allowed to speak of the future or of plans he or she may be making or express an intention without adding "Lord willing" or *Deo volente*. I have had people correct my speech by saying that I should have said "Lord willing" or *Deo volente*. But, of course, that isn't James' point. He is not talking about the words we must always use but about *the way we think* about the future, about our plans and intentions. The proof of that is that we have a great deal of speaking about the future in the Bible and almost never are such words actually spoken. Neither Jesus, nor Paul, nor the other apostles always stated this condition when explaining their plans or expressing their intentions. They had no doubt that God was overseeing their plans and that when those plans came to nothing that was God's will, but they didn't always say the words that expressed that conviction.

For example, Paul gives the Romans quite an elaborate description of the itinerary he intended to follow once he left Ephesus, where he was when he wrote his letter to the Romans. He was going to Jerusalem to deliver the monetary gift that had been collected from his Gentile congregations on his third missionary journey. Then he was intending to leave for Spain but pass through Rome *en route*, giving him a chance to meet the saints there in person. As it happened, as you know, when he reached Jerusalem he was arrested and then spent the next two years in jail in Caesarea. He appealed his case to Caesar and was duly sent to Rome under arrest. So he did make it to Rome and did meet the saints there, and, it appears, he did go on to Spain from Rome after he was released, but nothing happened as Paul had imagined it would when he first wrote of his plans to the Romans. [15:22-29] Still, though no one knew better than Paul that his life, with all of its twists and turns, was entirely in God's hands and that in all things God was working his own purpose out in Paul's life, - not necessarily Paul's purposes - he didn't always say that every time he talked about his intentions and the plans he was making.

Of course, it is a fact of human life that any wise man reckons with, that life is fragile and utterly unpredictable. That is one reason why the insurance industry, whether life or property, never fails to sell its products. We know that houses can burn down, that car accidents occur with regularity, and that sickness and death can change a person's or a family's fortunes in an instant. Wisdom being wisdom, what James says here can be found in the wisdom literature of the world, at least in a general way if not in a specifically religious form.

And human history and church history is furnished with literally unending examples of how very differently events unfold than a person supposed they would beforehand. Alexander the Great died at just 33 years of age, having conquered a large part of the then known world. But his exalted plans for empire came to nothing and the lands he had conquered were soon divided up among his lieutenants without his knowledge or his influence. One wonders, of course, if Alexander would have set out to conquer Persia and beyond if he had known that he would so soon contract an illness and die, that he would not live to see the fruit of his great accomplishments. But he didn't plan on dying and altered history as a result. Of course, had he remained in Macedonia, he might well have lived a long life. But how was he to know. The Oracle of Delphi didn't bother to tell him when he consulted her before leaving for the East. But we are less interested in unbelievers than believers.

Robert Murray McCheyne is one of the most celebrated names in Presbyterian Church history, the saintly Scottish pastor more famous for his personal holiness than his accomplishments, but his accomplishments were impressive enough. He led his congregation through a time of revival in the late 1830s and early 1840s. His writings including his letters, his poetry and, especially, his published sermons, have been read avidly ever since. He devised a Bible reading plan that has been widely used since his death. I use it every year myself. He was also a delegate of the Church of Scotland sent with a few others, including Andrew Bonar, to investigate the possibility of missionary work in the Holy Land, the written report of which deputation became one of the classics of English-speaking missionary history. He was also a part of that group of faithful ministers who prepared to lead their congregations out of the Church of Scotland in 1843, in what came to be called The Disruption, to create The Free Church, a faithful Presbyterian Church in Scotland unencumbered by connection to the State. Andrew Bonar, McCheyne's close friend and colleague on that trip to the middle east wrote a Memoir of McCheyne after his death which itself became a spiritual classic, remaining in print virtually without interruption since its first publication. But McCheyne was not yet thirty years of age when he died, the victim of typhoid, then rampant in the town. He had been a minister for only seven years. But he crammed many lifetimes into those seven years *in large part because he was so well aware of the fact that his life was, as James says here, a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.*

It is said that McCheyne, though still in his twenties, in order to enforce a consciousness of the fragility of life and the shortness of it, painted a setting sun on his pocket watch, so that whenever he checked the time he was reminded of the brevity of a human life and its tenuous character. Of course, he was a frail man, often sick, and lived in a time when a great many more people died young, so perhaps it was easier for him than it is for us. Yet, nevertheless, McCheyne's short life certainly teaches us that "*If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.*"

Or think of Blaise Pascal, the French polymath – mathematician, physicist, scientist, inventor, man of letters, and Christian philosopher – who died when he was only 39 years of age. For some years Pascal had been putting down various ideas on scraps of paper, thoughts that occurred to him in preparation for what he intended to be a major work of Christian apologetics. He died before he could work them into a coherent argument and they have since been published simply as the famous *Pensées*, that is, the “thoughts” of Blaise Pascal. We can’t help but wonder how much more that great mind and heart might have accomplished had he lived another twenty, or thirty, or forty years, but it was not to be.

And, of course, reminders of the fragility of life come thick and fast in more personal ways, in the experience of people we actually know and sometimes people we love. My brother-in-law died at 42 years of age and my sister at 49. I still vividly remember the first phone call. Something had been found in her physical exam and she was being sent to a hospital for a more comprehensive test and wanted me to pray with her and for her. It was ovarian cancer and she was dead two years later. Of course I knew that people often enough die sooner than it is expected, but no one in the family was reckoning with *this* possibility.

The other day I happened to dip in again to Stephen Ambrose’s *Citizen Soldiers*, his account of the U.S. army in Europe during World War II. In that book he is severely critical of the U.S. Army’s method of feeding replacements into units in the field, what many now regard as having been a particularly cruel and very inefficient method of replacing killed and injured soldiers. Young men, boys really, were shipped to Europe a few months after graduating from high school, made to wait in replacement depots among large crowds of soldiers whom they did not know, and then were taken one by one and sent to units who were in the thick of the action, their numbers decimated by losses in combat. Young kids, poorly trained, who didn’t know what to do, who were intimidated by their situation, who knew no one, who were often shunned by their new comrades because rookies made mistakes that could get them killed too, afraid, often in tears, utterly lost and confused, shivering in a foxhole with artillery rounds and small arms fire whizzing overhead. Ambrose relates the sad case of one such young fellow, who was sent as a replacement to the front line, landed in his unit in the midst of a firefight and was killed in the first minute of his active service. The soldiers he was with were ordered forward and he was shot dead before they had traveled a few feet. Ten seconds. No one thinks of *that* happening even in wartime. Surely there will be some time, some camaraderie, some experience as a soldier. “If the Lord wills...”

James is certainly not against planning. Jesus was a planner, Paul was a planner. They had a strategy to complete their calling and suited their tactics to their strategy. They would have agreed with the famous adage: he who fails to plan, plans to fail. But James wants us to plan fully aware of our actual situation in life. These merchants knew what they intended to do, how long they were going to do it, and visualized the reward that would be theirs at the end of the day. In fact, they could have no idea if any of this would come to pass as they planned for it to. They might even do what they planned to do for as long as they planned to do it and still have nothing to show for it at the end of the day. Or they might actually never be able even to start out on their trading trip. They planned for a year’s work but couldn’t be sure there would be a tomorrow, much less a next year. They didn’t make their plans fully aware of the fact that human

life is fragile, unpredictable, because it is utterly dependent in every way on the providence of God.

The unbeliever, of course, rarely seriously considers either the fragility or the brevity of life. He or she is, the Bible says, in bondage to the fear of death all his or her life long. And ignoring reality is a typical human strategy for coping with fear. More than half of adult Americans ages 55 to 64 do not have a will! Sometimes they fill the void with bluster. W.E. Henley, the Victorian poet, wrote the famous poem “Invictus.”

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 the 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.

People have found these words inspiring, including Nelson Mandela, - as you know if you saw the movie made a few years ago that bore the title of the poem “Invictus” - but, of course, they are nonsense. Souls are conquered all the time by all manner of things, and are, of course, inevitably conquered by death. And no human being is master of his own fate, much as he may wish he were. Many of you saw the movie *Unbroken*, the account of Louis Zamperini’s youth and wartime experience. But the movie was, in fact, deeply dishonest, obviously dishonest for anyone who knew Zamperini’s story. I felt like standing up in the theater and shouting that the movie had the wrong title. It should have been *Broken*. Zamperini didn’t come home unbroken. He did not remain unbowed by the bludgeonings of chance. He came home very much a broken man, and soon proved that he was a ruined man, an alcoholic, in thrall to the nightmares that interrupted his sleep, vivid reenactments of his brutal treatment as a Japanese prisoner of war. His marriage was soon on the rocks, he was finding it difficult to make a living, he was angry at everyone all the time, and was sometimes suicidal. Unbroken? Phooey. Louis Zamperini was rescued from the devastation of his life, made happy and useful again, a faithful husband and father not because *he* was the master of his fate but by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

In fact, W.E. Henley makes an interesting case. “Invictus” is one of what are called Henley’s “hospital poems.” He had a number of early battles with tuberculosis. He had a leg amputated when he was 13. In fact, years later Robert Lewis Stevenson, modeled his character Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*, after his friend Henley. By the way, it was Henley’s daughter who gave J.M. Barrie, another friend of Henley, the name Wendy for a principal character in Barrie’s *Peter Pan*. But his daughter did not survive to read the book, dying at five years of age. How, we may ask, was Henley the master of his fate if he couldn’t prevent the death of his beloved daughter? And then Henley himself died young, just 53 years of age, from the tuberculosis that had bedeviled his life from an early age.

Making the story still more interesting, Henley was the editor of a magazine entitled *The National Observer*. In the pages of that magazine in 1894 is found a review of Alexander Whyte’s book of sermons *Samuel Rutherford and Some of his Correspondents*. There is a great deal in that splendid book about sin and death and about the dependence of men upon the grace of God, themes that were foremost in the preaching of Alexander Whyte. In one sermon Whyte speaks at length about the importance of reckoning with the fact that you are going to die – and die sooner than you probably think - and about the importance of fore-fancying one’s death, seeing yourself dying, seeing yourself being buried. Under the heading “The bravest Leader of Old-Fashioned People” the writer of the review poured scorn upon Whyte’s book and what was called its morbid “coquetting with death.” We can’t know if it were Henley himself who authored the review, but there is no doubt he agreed with its sentiment. The reviewer concluded:

“No healthy man believes that he is going to die; when the inevitable sword falls upon him he bows his head with the best grace he can muster and says nothing about it.” [In Barbour, *Alexander Whyte*, 393]

Well, alright. But then let’s have no more of this nonsense about you being the master of your fate and the captain of your soul. The fact is no one would recite “Invictus” if it ended with the words, “No healthy man believes that he is going to die...” That doesn’t sound like an unconquered soul; that sounds like a man who is unwilling to face facts; it sounds less heroic than it sounds idiotic.

James’ point, a point often made in the Bible, is that to live our lives rightly, we must understand our place. We are not in control of anything; not really. We’re creatures. God gave us our lives, and we are small creatures over whose lives God exercises an absolute control. If we imagine that we are somehow masters of our fate, we have been duped because so much of what determines the course of our lives is invisible to us and unknown to us, and supremely because *the one* who ultimately decides everything is invisible to us and we have no idea what his plans and purposes for us may be.

That would be an unsettling, if not horrifying thought – which is why people so rarely admit it, even to themselves, no matter how obvious it is – if it were not for the fact that a Christian *knows* the sovereign God who has ordered his days – all of them – before there was a one of them. He knows of his great love, his wonderful goodness, his faithfulness to his promises, and his devotion to his people – a devotion demonstrated beyond question in the ministry of Jesus Christ – and so he knows that God will do what is best, for him, for his loved ones, and for the world.

We can see so little while God sees everything, past, present, and future. We control so little, while God controls everything, including and especially the very things we are tempted to imagine that we control.

It is this state of mind that James is after. Plan as you will and as you must. But never forget that all your plans must be tentative, must be in the nature of the case, because you neither know nor control the future. It lies in God's hands, not your own. If we remember this, it will keep us humble, it will keep us faithful in prayer, and it will enable us to relax and enjoy the ride. Think about your life. Stop and think. How little could you who are adults have imagined that you would be what and where you are today? How little did you anticipate either the sorrows or the joys? And, as a Christian, how certain are you now that God had all of this in mind before you were born. "All things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose." I am, at this point in my life, as certain of that fact as I am of any other fact in the world. So trust the Lord and then do what your hand finds to do and do it with all your might. Matters will turn out differently than you imagined, but, as Samuel Rutherford famously put it: "duties are ours, events are the Lord's."

Many years ago, when our Wednesday night prayer meeting was still held in the old Youth Room, in the basement of the old office wing of the church, we had several older women who were faithful at prayer; there every Wednesday night. In those days as today we always concluded our prayer meeting with a hymn. She was there, an older woman but healthy enough. We certainly expected that she would be there the following Wednesday evening. That night the closing hymn was the 19th century Anglican bishop Edward Bickersteth's *Peace Perfect Peace*.

Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown?
Jesus we know, and he is on the throne.

Peace, perfect peace, death shad'wing us and ours?
Jesus has vanquished death and all its pow'rs.

Helen Payne was at the breakfast table two days later and fell over dead. We do not know, we cannot know. But we know this: "we are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Only if the Lord wills will we live and do this or that." No boasting for us then. No acting as if we actually controlled the future. Always in mind and heart and at least sometimes in our speech, "Lord willing" or "*Deo volente*." And in that way we keep ourselves busy doing the things we ought to be doing for we do not know how much longer we'll be able to do them. And in that way let us keep *Him* always in our view as we make plans for tomorrow, for next month, and for next year.