

25. Acknowledging the Will of the Lord

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." 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. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

(James 4:13-17)

How Do We Make Plans?

The passage before us is quite well known, and often referred to as the "condition of James". We have introduced this expression into our own language as "the Lord willing". Some of us may even know the Latin version, "*Deo Volente*", shortened to the letters D.V. We often add these letters when we plan an important event in the future, and I know of people who became quite upset when this addition was inadvertently not included in a family announcement.

In itself, the use of such an expression is good. By it, we acknowledge an important matter: "no enterprise can have success, unless the Lord decides to bless" (Ps 127:1, *Book of Praise*). This can easily become a formal matter, however, as with other things in life. We automatically add D.V., without really thinking much about it. It is just something that we do.

James 4:13-17 deals especially with the making of plans. We all make plans, whether for an immediate event or for something that lies farther in the future. We have to make plans so that we can direct ourselves properly and take steps to realize our goals.

There are those who suggest that Christians cannot really plan anything. We are to live day by day. After all, the Lord Jesus himself said in the "Sermon on the Mount", "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matt 6:34). James has made

many references to the “Sermon on the Mount”, and is he now also referring to that sermon in particular, to the passage just quoted?

I do not think so, this time. The Lord Jesus was speaking about people who worry too much, who are anxious about the future. They worry about life, food, and clothes. They are afraid that they will not be able to make ends meet because of some kind of disaster. The Lord Jesus then tells them not to be anxious. James, on the other hand, is writing about people who do not worry at all, who are quite confident in the success of their plans. To them he says, “You had better trust in the Lord!”

Do we really reckon with God in all of our planning? That is what James is writing about. Do we consciously make all our plans *in the Lord*? Is everything we hope to do placed under the will of our God and held up for his scrutiny? In our planning, do we seek the blessing of the Lord or do we simply go our way, thinking that everything will go as planned, and, if not, too bad? The message of this text is that we must acknowledge the will of the Lord in our planning. We will look at two aspects: planning and bragging, and planning and blessing

The Planning of the Businessmen

James begins this passage with the words, “Now listen, you who say...” He is specifically addressing a certain group in the congregations, namely, the traveling businessmen. Yet this portion of the letter has something to say to all of us. Perhaps this is especially true today, because our world has become a global village and we do much more and much farther traveling than the people in James’ time did.

James is not forbidding traveling or doing business elsewhere than in one’s own region. Sometimes, the conclusion is made that we may not go anywhere, but must always stay at home. That is not the point, however. Rather, it is a matter of boasting and bragging. Note 4:16: “As it is, you boast and brag.”

I mentioned earlier that James’ first audience was made up of Christians from among the Jews. As one commentator mentions, many Jews were traders and merchants, comprising a very mobile community. When a new city was established somewhere, the Romans encouraged Jews to come and live there for a while, in order to establish a good business and commerce environment. One explainer tells us that there were sometimes subsidies, benefits, or bonuses for such an arrangement. This happens in today’s business world as well, when excelling employees are given special allowances and incentives to work

in another area. The point is not that James forbids this kind of upward mobility, but that he exhorts against the mentality that often results.

Some of the businessmen were saying, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” The way this statement is phrased already shows forth the arrogance of it. The decision had been made: “we will go.” They would start right away, leaving “today or tomorrow.” They had even set a time limit for themselves: “a year.” Perhaps then they would move on to bigger and better things, for after all, life is a matter of more acquisitions. They had their plans ready, and they would “carry on business” there. They were also sure of their success: “[we will] make money.” They would put all their energy and expertise to work, and the project simply could not fail. There was a ton of money to be made there, and they would surely earn it.

That was the kind of language being used in the church. In that way, they boasted and bragged about their achievements, even if these lay in the future and had not yet been achieved. Success was guaranteed, and nothing could go wrong. They were professionals who knew their business. They had seen an opportunity and would take advantage of it. They would make a lot of money.

Rivalry and a desire to move up in life may have been the motivation to act in this way, especially among the traders and merchants in the churches. Such competitiveness may also have caused them to brag and boast to one another about their achievements and prognoses. It was a matter of planning with bragging.

Bragging of Ourselves

The Lord did not factor into the plans of the businessmen. They were too self-assured of their own ability. James does not write that they denied the Lord *outrightly*. In their way, they were still quite religious. If prompted, they would probably say, “Unless the LORD decides to bless, no enterprise can have success.” But that would likely be an after-thought. They would build first and foremost on their own ability. Their true philosophy would be: “We can do it. We will take care of ourselves. We can handle the challenge that is placed on our path.”

We all know the expression, “a self-made man”. What exactly does that mean? Generally speaking, as Reformed people, can we say that we admire “self-made” people? These people put their heart, soul, and strength into a project, making it work by sheer determination and sacrifice. In itself, this is

commendable, but no one is *self*-made. It is God who made us, and he also gives us our drive and determination, our gifts and our talents. This does not mean that we do not have to develop these gifts and increase these talents, but it is the Lord who makes us into what we become, often in spite of ourselves.

Bragging of ourselves therefore has no place among God's children. No one may boast of his achievements. No one may suggest that the success of life lies in one's own effort. Indeed, there are those who have wasted their time and talents, who have been lazy and slothful. The Bible does not have good things to say about people who will not work. When I was a child in elementary school, I had to memorize Proverbs 6:6: "Go to the ant, you sluggard." At the time, I did not even know what a sluggard was, but I did know that it was bad. The Lord warns against laziness, and when we consider James 4:13-17, we may be reminded of this warning. We are called to work, to do our best and utmost. That is not Calvinistic, but Biblical.

The point is that success may never lead us to brag of ourselves, just as lack of success may never lead us to blame the Lord. Bragging is always out of place among God's people. It takes away from the glory of God and leads to self-praise, and that is something the Lord will not tolerate in his church. Neither may we find fault with God when we do not realize the success we want. It is better to examine oneself than to accuse the Lord of any wrong.

What is Our Life?

For who are we, really? James writes in 4:14, "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."

We brag about what we will do in one year, but we cannot see past today. We plan for tomorrow, but our plans can be easily and instantly frustrated. Often, we have to say, "Change of plans!" We are confronted with events that we never expected and that were far beyond our vision.

Let me give a personal example, for even though some people may not like personal examples, they are legitimate and real. In 1975, my family and I returned to Canada from The Netherlands, where I was to be installed as minister in Burlington-West. This was an important day for my family and me, and my parents and relatives were all going to come from British Columbia for the occasion. They were supposed to arrive on Friday evening, and their presence would be very encouraging for us. On Thursday evening, however, my father suffered a serious stroke and went into the hospital. As a result, nobody came to the installation service except those living in Ontario. The installation took

place as planned, but the very start of that ministry was a constant reminder: what is my life?

James writes, “You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” We have all seen this type of mist, a slight fog that hangs over the fields in the early morning and disappears when the sun rises. We cannot touch it, and we drive or walk right through it as if nothing is there. We do not know where it goes; it simply disappears. That is our life.

In Psalm 39:5, our life is compared to a breath. Inhale and exhale. That is all there is. Our life is like a shadow, here one moment and gone the next, or like a passing guest who comes and goes and whose name we cannot even recall a few days later.

Psalm 102:11 uses a similar term: “an evening shadow”. The sun drops amazingly fast when we watch it go down, and darkness descends. Look also at Psalm 103 (*Book of Praise*): “The life of man is fleeting like the grasses, and like a flower when the storm wind passes.” As a child, growing up in lush, green British Columbia, I did not understand that grass was fleeting. We had more grass than we knew what to do with, and all we did was mow the lawn. But in southern Ontario, where I now reside, I have seen how sometimes everything turns brown during the hot, dry summers. Also, during a past visit to Western Australia, I saw dry, scorched paddocks, acres where not one cow could feed because of the relentless sun. And if we add a dry wind to the picture, everything withers.

The Lord’s Will

Our life is like that. Psalm 103 also speaks of the beauty of a flower. Indeed, life is beautiful but, like the flower, fragile. It is here one day, gone the next. And we brag about the things we will do or achieve? No, James says, “Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that’” (4:15).

First, we need to live in order to do anything. And then we need health and ability, strength and sustenance. This does not depend on our will. Our will and willpower are helpless in this respect. Only the Lord can give and sustain life and health. “The Lord’s will” in this context means God’s hidden will, the secret things that are not revealed to us. His will is his plan for our life that we discover only as it is uncovered, and with which we deal only as it unfolds. We never stand before God’s hidden will, to fathom it, but we are always taken up in God’s hidden will, to acknowledge it. If we were to stand *before* God’s will, we would ask, “Why?” If we stand *in* it, we ask instead, “How?” We do not

have to know why God causes or allows things to happen, but we need to know how to deal with them.

“If it is the Lord’s will.” This is not a statement of resignation. We do not say that we must sit back and wait and see how God will guide us. No, for we are supposed to make plans. We have to take initiatives. We do this even in trust upon the Lord. Proverbs 16:1 says, “To man belong the plans of the heart.” The writer of this proverb does not condemn the reality of our planning, for it is in our nature to do so. This “belongs” to us, that is, it is in our province to plan. The point is that “from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue,” that is, the LORD makes known what will *really* happen.

We plan, but the LORD determines and guides. This is a good thing, because if our will was decisive, we would make a disaster of our life and never be able to fix it. Look at Proverbs 16:2: “All a man’s ways seem innocent to him.” We like our plans. We may even think that every plan is beyond reproach. We say, “I have no hidden agenda.” But we must watch out, for our “motives are weighed by the LORD.” He knows why and how we came up with a certain plan. And he “works out everything for his own ends” (Prov 16:4). His purpose shall stand, also in our lives. He achieves what he wants.

“If it is the Lord’s will.” This means that we actively do our task, in whatever place the Lord has set us, and then trust in him to guide us. We know how things can change. We are not the captain of our ship, nor the master of our fate. We trust in the Lord and submit to him. We continue to do what he has revealed, even if others do not. We expect results not from our efforts, but from the Lord’s blessing. Oh yes, we do our best, but we realize our goals only when the Lord decides to bless. We never boast when it goes well, or complain when it goes sour. We go to the Lord who will hide and comfort us, and also guide and admonish us.

Planning and Blessing

In this respect, many Christians are on a wrong track. James writes, “As it is, you boast and brag” (4:16). Such people create envy amongst one another. The one strives to surpass the other. They have quarrels and fights. Mostly, however, they boast. But, “[all] such boasting is evil.” James again uses strong language. Whoever boasts, sins.

The last verse of the text (4:17) is a puzzle to many explainers. It seems as if it does not belong to the rest of the passage. “Anyone, then, who knows the

good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." That is obvious and general, but what does it have to do with making plans?

James is referring to what he has just written. If we know the manner in which we are to make plans and how we are to deal with each other in this respect, then we sin if we do not do so. Boasting and bragging, creating envy, and causing quarrels are sins, especially in the church of the Lord. They are a matter of arrogance and self-seeking egoism.

How can the Lord bless us if we boast and brag? We read in Proverbs 16:7, "When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him." That is amazing! Even our enemies are at peace with us. Much more so, our brothers and sisters in the congregation are at peace with us. This is the result of planning in such a way that our plans meet with God's blessing and the approval of the brotherhood.

No matter what the current circumstances of our life may be, we must always remember these words: "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." We cannot look into the future. We can work only with the light of today. We must be responsible and reasonable, but ultimately we must leave it all in the hands of the Lord. He alone can bless, and we believe he *will* bless. He has always done so, why would he not do so again? Let us not be anxious. Everything in life is Deo Volente, the Lord willing.

We need to plan, and plan wisely. That is part of our stewardship. And as we do so, we leave everything in the hands of God. Our Lord Jesus lived in this manner. He worked with the Word of God. He made his plans. He knew when the time was not ready. He could say that his hour had not yet come. And when it did come, when God willed it, he was prepared to do what he had to do. He submitted his life to God's eternal counsel. He did not say, "Why me?" Instead, he said, "Is it time, my Father? Is it now? Is this your will for me? That I go to the cross? Then come, let us arise, for I have work to do." And he got up from the table where he had instituted the Lord's Supper and went forward to the cross. Yes, he knew more. He knew with perfect certainty what would happen and why. Still, he had to go through it, personally and deeply. We remember this every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Deo Volente: what God wants, will happen. Deo Volente: what God wants, we will do. Deo Volente: what God puts upon us, we will bear. And we will move onward, to the glory of Zion.