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# OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

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## Who's in Charge Here?

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In 2005, Oxford University Press published the book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, by sociologist Christian Smith, with Melinda Lundquist Denton. The authors identified the dominant understanding of God among American teens as “moralistic, therapeutic deism.” In 2009, Timothy Keller explained the meaning of those terms as follows:

- Moralistic – “God blesses and takes to heaven those who try to live good and decent lives.”
- Therapeutic – “The central goal of life is not to sacrifice, or deny oneself, but to be happy and feel good about yourself.”
- Deism – “Though God exists and created the world, he does not need to be particularly involved in our lives except when there is a problem” (Keller 2009, 115).

The worldview (Barna 2021, [here](#)) summarized by these three terms is a distortion of New Testament faith; in essence, it allows us to give a nod to God while retaining control of our lives (see the [summary](#) by Smith 2005). But we should also note that, as Smith and Denton emphasize, it is not a worldview unique to teens. Teens held the view because their religious parents and caregivers were moralistic, therapeutic deists. The teens were imitating a faith that is really worldly with a veneer of devotion (see the Amazon summary, [here](#)). As James 4.13–17 shows, that's not a

new problem. We'll examine the circumstances he addressed, how he exposed its failure, and his call to Christ's different way.

## The Challenge

“Come now, the ones who are saying, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into this town and we will do a year there and we will do business and we will gain’” (Jas 4.13, literal translation). Using four future tense verbs that accentuate his point, James chastises some merchants for relying on themselves instead of God. They were the ones determining the *time*: “today or tomorrow.” They were declaring the *purpose*: “we will go.” They were deciding the *place*: “into such and such a town.” They were setting the *goals*: “and spend a year there and trade.” And they were determining the *reward*: “and make a profit” (see Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 211).

The remainder of the passage, particularly verses 15–16, shows that James's main concern was not with their occupation, or even their profits, but with their secular focus (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 207). It is important to see that, while legitimate questions can be raised about the compatibility of Christian faith with practices in all economic systems, including capitalism, “it would be wrong to find any critique [of capitalism] here” (Moo 2000, 202). But that caveat should not lead us to miss the fact that “James was chastising the merchants because their lifestyle and their thinking had become secular. To approach the Christian vocation in this way was to walk in friendship with the world, an association already reprobated (4:4)” (Martin 1988, 165).

As we reflect on James's words, we should not minimize the truth “that wealth allows people an independence from God that can be dangerous for their spiritual state” (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 206–207). In this regard, Blomberg and Kamell cite Arthur Simon as follows:

“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. The problem is not that we've tried faith and found it wanting, but that we've tried mammon and found it addictive, and as a result find following Christ inconvenient” (Simon 2003, as cited in Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 211–212).

## The Failure

James's admonition reveals two reasons the merchants failed to demonstrate authentic faith. First, in practical terms, they were suppressing the reality that life is uncertain (Jas 4.14). The first part of verse 14 is translated better in the NASB: “Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.” In fact, each of us is a “mist” (ἄτμις, *atmis*), a word that recalls “the dry Palestinian climate, in which water droplets in the air formed from condensation near the sea but then quickly disappeared” (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 208). Underscoring that figure with a Greek wordplay, James emphasizes that each of our lives “appears [φανομένη, *phainomenē*] for a little while and then disappears [ἀφανιζομένη, *aphanizomenē*]” (NJB).

Logically, then, it makes no sense to live as if we are in control of life's events. Verse 16 identifies this for what it is: “you boast in your arrogance.” “Boast” (καυχάομαι, *kauchaomai*; cf. the cognate term in 3.14) is generally used negatively for “presumptuous bragging” (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 209), and in the New Testament, “boast in” (καυχᾶσθε ἐν, *kauchasthe en*) always “indicates the object in which one boasts” (Moo 2000, 206–207) (Rom 2.17; 5.11; 1 Cor 1.31; 3.21; 2 Cor 11.17; Gal 6.13; Jas 1.9; et. al.). The Greek plural “arrogances” (ἀλαζονεΐαις, *alazomeneiais*), or “matters of arrogance,” underscores the idea that they were boasting about their self-decided, arrogant presumptions, including the plans elaborated in verse 13. Few things more completely miss the mark of devotion to God (cf. 4.4), and so “all such boasting [πάσα καύχησις τοιαύτη, *pasa kauchēsis toiautē*] is evil.”

Verse 15 shows the second reason they had failed to demonstrate authentic faith: they were presuming the role (and knowledge, v. 14) that could only be assumed by God; this is the opposite of humility (cf. 4.6, 10). As people who should have known better—and this verse makes it apparent that those whom James is addressing here are probably believers—they should have been seeking the Lord's will in “this or that,” that is, in every part of their lives. But the point is not just to say, “if the Lord wills” as we make decisions, but to commit to do what he wills (cf. Matt 7.21; 26.42; John 4.34; Acts 18.21; 1 Cor 1.1). As Martin writes, this is no call to repeat “a vain, thoughtless repetition ... [but] a conviction (worked out in a congruent lifestyle) that leads one to acknowledge that indeed God is in control of life's decisions” (Martin 1988, 167). In truth, the point is larger still: we should live in acknowledgment of the fact that our very lives depend on God's grace.

But, if it is not “a pious addendum to be repeated mindlessly,” neither is it “an expression of fatalism that excuses us from taking responsibility for our actions.” Rather the point is to really allow God to rule “in every area of our lives as we seek to please him by following his will as best we can discern it” (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 209).

## The Solution

The proverb in 4.17 sums up James's point: “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” The word “so” (οὕν, *oun*) shows that James intends to connect verse 17 with what he just said, not insert a free-standing saying about the sin of omission. In the context, the emphasis of verse 17 is not on doing good generally, but on doing the specific good of not being boastful in self-reliance; instead, we should do all things in view of God's kingship (cf. Matt 6.33). When we do that, other good things, including those mentioned throughout James, will more consistently characterize us, even when we are blessed with prosperity (cf. Eph 4.28).

## Reflection

Timothy Keller reported that “some have pointed out that ‘moralistic, therapeutic deism’ could only develop in a comfortable, prosperous society among privileged people. People ‘at the top’

are eager to attribute their position to their own intellect, savvy, and hard work” (Keller 2009, 116).

James’s world was enough like ours that his teaching about similar conditions should serve as fair warning to us to check our priorities and evaluate where we place our ultimate trust. His teaching also should remind us that authentic and complete surrender to the Lord’s will is the only way to have a confident hope for lasting life.

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### Additional Thoughts on James

“So what’s wrong with planning, either for business or for the church? Surely God wants us to be efficient and to have a vision for the future. James says the problem is that it is easy to get caught up in our plans and strategies and forget that God is in control. Business, even church business, easily takes on a life of its own with committees, bureaucracy, charts and graphs. ‘If you do these things,’ we are told, ‘your business or church will grow.’ But growth and prosperity in business and at church are in the hands of the Lord. ‘If the Lord wills,’ must be more than a pious phrase to us. It must become the focal point of our existence.”

~ Gary Holloway. 1996. *The College Press NIV Commentary: James & Jude*. College Press Publishing Company, 110

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