



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Who's In Charge Here?

James 4:13-17

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Introduction

1. In 2005, Oxford University Press published sociologist Christian Smith's *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*¹ where he summed up the dominant understanding of God among American teens as "moralistic, therapeutic deism".
 - a. Moralistic: "God blesses and takes to heaven those who try to live good and decent lives."
 - b. Therapeutic: "The central goal of life is not to sacrifice, or to deny oneself, but to be happy and and feel good about yourself."
 - c. 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."
2. This set of beliefs and the life that grows from it distorts (at the least) the ideal depicted in the New Testament, giving a nod to God while retaining control of one's life.
3. Smith's conclusion should lead us to ask why religious teens are moralistic, therapeutic deists. The most obvious answer is that their religious parents and caregivers² are moralistic, therapeutic deists. At the least, we should see the possibility that what declares itself to be faith is really worldliness.
4. James responds, showing the challenge, exposing its failure, and calling us to a better way.

Body

- I. Understanding the Challenge.
 - A. In v. 13, James expresses dismay at the merchants' *self*-confidence (note the four future tense verbs) that betrayed hearts not focused on God.
 1. They determined the *time* - "today or tomorrow."
 2. They declared the *purpose* - "we will go."
 3. They decided the *place* - "into such and such a town."
 4. They set the *goals* - "and spend a year there and trade."

¹ See Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*, 115, for the summary used here. Quotations in this point are from his book.

² A summary of the book (amazon.com, accessed November 11, 2011) notes their influence on the teens.

5. They established the *reward* - "and make a profit."³
 - B. The rest of the text, especially vv. 15-16, shows that James's main concern is not their occupation, or profit, but their secular attitude (cf. Blomberg & Kamell, 207).
 1. There are legitimate questions that can be raised about the compatibility of Christian faith with practices in all economic systems, including capitalism, but "it would be wrong to find any critique [of capitalism] here."⁴
 2. "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)."⁵
 - C. That said, do not dismiss the truth "that wealth allows people an independence from God that can be dangerous for their spiritual state" (Blomberg & Kamell, 206-207).
 1. As Arthur Simon has said, "An affluent culture" pulls us "towards fleeting satisfactions and away from God," giving us "prosperity [that leaves] our lives full but not necessarily fulfilled. . . . [T]he 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."⁶
- II. A Failure to Demonstrate Real Faith.
- A. Because they had forgotten reality – and God (14, 16).
 1. Verse 14 reminds us of life's uncertainty.
 - a) The first part is better in the NASB : "Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow." (Cf. HCSB - "You don't even know what tomorrow will bring – what your life will be!").
 - b) "Mist" (ἀτμίς, *atmis*) recalled "the dry Palestinian climate, in which water droplets in the air formed from condensation near the sea but then quickly disappeared" (Blomberg & Kamell, 208).
 - c) Most translations obscure the wordplay in the last part: "... a mist that *appears* (φαινομένη, *phainomenē*) for a little while and then *disappears* (ἀφανιζομένη, *aphanizomenē*)" (NJB).
 - d) Logically, it makes no sense to live like we control life's events.
 2. Verse 16 identifies their approach to life for what it is.
 - a) "Boast" (καυχάομαι, *kauchaomai*; cf. the cognate in 3:14) "is generally a negative term for presumptuous bragging" (Blomberg & Kamell, 209).
 - b) In the New Testament, "boast in" (καυχᾶσθε ἐν, *kauchasthe en*) always "indicates the object in which one boasts" (Moo, 206-207).
 - c) The plural "arrogances" (literally, from ἀλαζονείαις, *alazoneiais*), or "matters of arrogance," supports the idea that they were boasting about their self-decided, arrogant presumptions (including the plans enumerated in v. 13).

³ For this observation and breakdown of what they decided for themselves, see Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 207, 211.

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, 202.

⁵ Ralph Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary 48: 165.

⁶ Cited in Blomberg & Kamell, 211-212. Simon, president of Bread for the World, wrote *How Much Is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture*.

- d) Nothing more completely “misses the mark” of devotion to God (see 4:4), and so “all such boasting (καύχησις, *kauchēsis*) is evil.”
- B. Because they were not submitting to God (15).
1. It was evil because it presumed the role (and knowledge - v. 14) that belonged only to God, the opposite of humility (cf. 4:6, 10).
 2. As people who should have known better,⁷ they should have been seeking the Lord's will in *every* part of life (“this or that,” i.e., every circumstance).
 3. The point is not just to mouth the words, “if the Lord wills,” but to commit to do what the Lord wills (cf. Matt. 7:21; 26:42; John 4:34; Acts 18:21; 1 Cor. 1:1).
 - a) 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, 167).
 - b) Indeed, the point is bigger still: our very lives depend on God's grace.
 4. 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” (Blomberg & Kamell, 209).
 5. The point is to really let God rule “every area of our lives as we seek to please him by following his will as best we can discern it” (Blomberg & Kamell, 209).

III. Letting God Take Charge.

- A. The proverb in v. 17 sums up James's point.
1. “So” (NASB - “therefore” [οὖν, *oun*]) shows that James intends to connect verse 17 with what went before, not just insert a free-standing saying about omission.
 2. In context, the primary emphasis of v. 17 is not on doing good generally, but doing the good of not being boastful in self-reliance; instead, do things with God as our priority (see Matt. 6:33).
- B. Do that and other good things, including those in James as a whole, will more consistently characterize us, even when we are blessed with prosperity (cf. Eph. 4:28).

Conclusion

1. “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, 116).
2. 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 that in which we place our confidence and/or to guard against the temptation that prosperity can present.
3. Once again, James challenges us to evaluate what and who we ultimately trust, reminding us that only in obedient surrender to the Lord's will is there hope for lasting life.

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⁷ “This is the verse that makes it most readily apparent that these addressees are probably Christians” (Blomberg & Kamell, 208).