

James 4:13-17 || “Let It Go”

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INTRO

Mercy Church, what is up! If I haven't had the chance to meet you yet, my name is John Hellams and I am one of the pastors here. Our Lead Pastor, Spence Shelton, is one of 5 on our team currently in Eastern Europe that we just prayed about. Been keeping up with Spence and the team while they've been gone and they have had a fantastic week! They just wrapped up leading a marriage and family conference, Spence has been preaching almost every day, actually preached earlier this morning, and they've had the opportunity to share the gospel with over 100 people. More update to come when they return, but, in the meantime, we ask that you continue praying for the team and the people they are engaging with the gospel. That God would bring a gospel awakening to the people of Eastern Europe. That they would hear the gospel and respond in faith.

Alright, on to today. In Spence's absence, he asked me to continue along in our series through the book of James. If you haven't been with us, we've been walking through the book of James over the last several months. Seeing how the gospel transforms both our hearts and our actions. In God's grace and *incredible* humor, I am preaching a sermon on control and planning today. If you've talked with me for

more than a couple minutes, you've probably noticed that I'm *just a little bit* of a planner.

Back in January, Spence and I went with some people to the ACC Championship football game. And it was *cold* that night. Think it got down into the 30s. So, of course, as soon as we decide to go, I'm making plans. When we need to leave the house, what route we need to take, where we need to stop to get food on the way, and what kind of clothes I need to wear. Got all my bases covered. Spence, on the other hand, shows up to my house rocking a long-sleeve t, light jacket, jeans, tennis shoes, and hat. Smile on his face. Free and easy. Ready to see UNC lose. I'm sorry. I had to. UNC gets so much love from the stage each week. Had to talk a little smack.

Alright, back to the story. Spence dressed for a nice, spring day. I, on the other hand, look like I'm bout to roll up into Antarctica. I've got long johns, Under Armor cold gear, a long sleeve t shirt, a short sleeve t shirt, toboggan, ear warmers, 2 baseball hats, a hoody, light jacket, and pea coat. Now, some of you are thinking, "Why the heck did you bring all that stuff?" Because *I'm crazy*. Yes. But also because I wanted to be prepared. I wanted to have a plan. Really, I just wanted to feel like I was in control no matter what.

Whether you're here today and you're type A planner like me, you're a "free and easy down the road I go" kind of person, or you're somewhere in between, I believe James

has something for each of us today in the passage we're going to be looking at. James chapter 4, verses 13 through 17. I believe this because all of us have some plans, some desires, some goals that our hearts are longing after. And, if we're really honest with ourselves, we live our lives like we've got the means to accomplish everything we desire on our own. Even if we don't say it out loud, for the most part, we live this life like we're self-sufficient. James is going to show us the problem with this perspective today, and that the only solution is to just let our perceived go and to surrender control of our lives to God's will. That's our big idea for the day:

Surrender the control of your life to God's will.

The way we're going to get there is simply to talk through our passage verse by verse. As we talk through the passage, I believe James answers three simple questions for us. First, what is the problem with our planning? Second, what is God's solution to our problem? And finally, how do I plan my life in line with God's will?

THREE QUESTIONS:

Alright, let's jump in and look at our first question:

What is the problem with our planning?

Like I said, we'll be walking through James chapter 4, verses 13 through 17. If you brought your Bibles or your phone, go ahead and flip over there. If you didn't, the words

will be on both of our screens. Follow along with me. Let's get at it. Verse 13:

Come now

Alright, hold up. First two words: "come now." Modern vernacular: "*come on, man!*" James is rebuking, he's reprimanding, the people he's writing about. I'm sure many of you have had your fair share of "come on, man" moments in your life. One of my favorites happened during grad school. I had a new roommate. Let's call him Charles. We'd hit it off. Immediate bromance. We're having lunch one day in our apartment. I sit down, start eating my lunch at the table. Charles is finishing up fixing his. He gets something out of the fridge, throws it in the microwave, and then heads back to his room to get something. I don't think anything about it. Continue eating my sandwich. Then, all of a sudden, I start smelling something and it smells *weird*. I start hearing this popping noise. So, I turn around to see what's going on and, to my surprise, smoke is *bellowing* out of the microwave. I run over, dodging sparks as I try to shut off the microwave. Finally get it turned off and open it up. My roommate had put *a can* of green beans in the microwave. Not poured out a can and put it in a bowl. He had literally put an aluminum can of green beans straight in the microwave. Word to any college students/single dudes in the house, that don't make your microwave happy.

As I'm beginning to think about how *stupid* my roommate is, he runs into the room saying, "What happened?" I, being

the empathetic person I am, glance over at the microwave, glance back at him, and the first words out of my mouth are, “Bro....are you serious?! Come on, man!” Then, my man got rebuked. And, let’s be honest, he deserved it.

But what is James rebuking the people about? Let’s keep reading verse 13:

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”

Alright, James is talking to a group of people making plans for a business trip. Something all of us can relate to. It’s a very natural part of life to make plans. We decide we’re going to go somewhere and do something for a certain period of time. We figure out how we’re going to get there and who’s going to go with us. These people James is talking to are doing the same thing. Their plan has 5 parts: a date (today or tomorrow), a place (such and such a town), a length of time (a year), a task (trade), and a purpose/goal (profit).

So what’s the problem? Is it wrong to plan? Is it wrong to have goals? Not at all. Think about Deuteronomy where God gave the Israelites all the detailed plans for building the tabernacle. Or 2 Chronicles where Solomon lays out plans for the temple. The parable of the talents in Luke 19 where Jesus rebukes the ones who didn’t have a plan. So,

the problem is not planning in and of the itself. It’s not evil to plan. It can actually be God honoring. Problem #1 is that:

We plan in a way that forgets God.

Like the business people in our passage, more often than not our plans are conjured up in our heads and spoken with our mouths without ever taking a true view of life and God into account. Simply stated, we just forget God when we make most decisions.

I don’t know about you, but I really don’t like when I feel like I’ve been forgotten. As humans, we long to be valued and remembered. A friend has a party. Even if we can’t make it, we at least want an invite. A random family member is getting married. *Definitely* don’t want to be there, but you know we want to get an invitation. Why do we crave to be remembered? Why do we hate when we are forgotten? Because we have a longing to be loved and desired. And that longing comes from our Father. Our Creator, God. Throughout the Old Testament, over and over again, one of the greatest sins that God denounces Israel for is forgetting him.

And yet now, in both big and small plans, we continue to forget him just like the Israelites did. Just like the business people in our passage. Because we think we can handle things on our own. Think about how often we do this in our lives.

Jessica and I are leasing a house right now and a few months ago, we both began feeling a little uneasy about living there. We didn't know why, but we both felt it. My first response when I felt this wasn't to pray. It wasn't to think of the decision in light of God's mission. No. It was to go into logical, efficient decision-making mode. Make a list of positives and negatives. You guys ever do this? Positive, it would be awesome to live in a house in the city *but* we like our house. We love our friends who live close by. We're comfortable here. We're hoping to buy a house next year, so not worth it to move to another rental. Alright, doesn't make practical sense. Decision made. You see what I did there? I had totally taken God out of the decision making process. Though I didn't say it out loud, I was practically saying, "Where we live doesn't matter to you, God. We got this."

Think about some plans you've made recently. Maybe it was where you going to work. Where you were applying for college. If you were going to date that guy who just asked you out. If you were going to go to lunch by yourself of invite your coworker to go with you. Now think about your decision-making process. Did you take God and his calling on your life into account? For some of you you did, and that's awesome. If your anything like me, though, you probably didn't even think about him. Our first problem in planning: we plan in a way that forgets God.

Alright, let's keep moving. There's more to this problem. Verse 15:

Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

Classic James. Shooting it to us straight. Problem #2:

Our perceived control is a false reality.

James says, "You think you're going to do this in the next year? And this is exactly how you're going to get it done? And this is exactly how you're going to make money? Nah. Your life is uncertain and momentary."

He says our lives are uncertain because none of us know what tomorrow will hold. Actually, I think James is pretty lenient here. If we're real with ourselves, we don't even know what today will hold. What the next minute or second will even hold.

Think about it with me. Everyone of our lives could be changed in an instant before we even leave this room today. How? With a simple phone call. You lost your job. There was an accident. Your house burned down. Your father died. Y'all, life is uncertain. And we have no knowledge, no guarantee of what will happen before we fall asleep tonight. Before we even leave this room today.

But life is also momentary. James describes it as a mist. We aren't a dense fog that hangs around for a morning. We are

a mist. A vapor. Just a puff of smoke. Here for a little while and then we'll disappear. James is saying, "Not only do you lack knowledge, but you lack power to do anything about the little that you do know."¹

Anyone else feeling a little small? Maybe even a little gloomy? Me too. But this is the picture James is creating for us. None of us knows if we'll make it to the end of the day or take another breathe. We aren't in control over our lives. And living, making plans like we are, is just a false reality that we place far too much hope in.

Thankfully, though, James doesn't stop in verse 14. He doesn't just tell us that we've got problem: that we forget God and live in this false reality of self-sufficiency. He shows us God's solution. So let's unpack question #2:

What is God's solution?

Look at verse 15 with me:

Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

Before we get into God's solution, I want to let you know that this verse assumes the sovereignty of God. Sovereignty is just a word people use to explain that God is the ultimate power and authority in our lives. That *he* is the ultimate one

in control. Now, if you're here today and you're a believer, I don't expect you to just believe that. I believe it's the best way to explain the world, but that would be a whole bigger conversation that I'd love to have with you sometime later. If you're here today and you are a Christian, though, you should *absolutely* believe this. God has control over everything in your life. I could give you texts *for days* on this.

But, I digress. Let's get back to God's solution to our problem in planning. First part of his solution is that:

God does not forget us.

Remember how I said earlier that one of our problems with planning is that we plan in a way that forgets God? One of the beauties of the gospel is that God doesn't respond to our forgetfulness by forgetting us. In the gospel, we see that God forget his Son so that he could remember us.² You see, in the gospel, in the good news of Christ sent his son to this earth to live a perfect life that each of us should have lived and then, though we were actually the ones who deserved it, he died a death on a cross as a substitute for our sins. You took the burden, he received the punishment for our sins. Even though we continually forget him as we make plans and decisions, he continues, in his grace, to remember us.

¹ Idea from Matt Chandler sermon "Arrogance/Humility".

² Idea from Tim Keller sermon "Worry".

And he doesn't just casually remember. Our text tells us that he remains sovereign, he remains in control over lives, our deaths, and even our activities. You see what it said?:

Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live."

Y'all, it is only by the grace of the God that we even have the ability to breathe this morning. Yup, that breathe there you just took. Grace. And that one, too. Grace. But James goes further. Check out the end of verse 15.

"If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

God is not only sovereign over our life and our death. He is sovereign over *everything* we do. Guys, everything we accomplish, everything we attain in life, even every time we fail is totally under the sovereign will and control of God. Whether we do this or that on our business trip, in the classroom, on the basketball court, or in our home is in the hands of God.

Do you realize how HUGE that is for how we live our lives? If I began living that way my life would be absolutely transformed! There is no need for fear. God is sovereign. There is no need for worry. God is sovereign. There is no need for anxiety. God is sovereign. There is no need to make myself look better than I am. God is sovereign. Guys, the sovereignty of God isn't something to push against. It's not something to doubt. It is something we gain incredible peace and joy in.

Romans 8:28, one of the most hope-filled verses in the Bible says:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

God is not only in control of our lives. He is working together for our good at all times.

Guys, this might be a surprise to some of you, but I love me some country music. Not the new stuff. That's weak. But the classics. George Strait. Alan Jackson. Garth Brooks. And one of my favorite country songs is...wait for it...."Unanswered Prayers" by Garth Brooks. I know, I know. It's cheesy. And the theology is pretty bad. God always answers prayers. Sometimes it's yes. Sometimes it's no. Sometimes it's wait. But the idea that ole Garth is getting at is true. Some of God's greatest gifts are the prayers that he doesn't answer how we think or even hope he would.

Think with me for a second about how different your life would be if God had answered all your prayers with a yes throughout your life. If my 5 year-old prayers had all been answered, I would be a *cowboy* today. 12 year-old prayers, a professional baseball, basketball, *and* football player. Yeah, that's right. All of em. Guys, in college I *begged* God and even my parents to allow me to transfer to another college for, I'm really embarrassed to say this, a girlfriend. I just knew we were going to get married and I had to be

closer to her. Did that happen? Nah. Broke up with her a few months later. And I am so stinkin thankful that God didn't answer that prayer with a yes. That my life isn't under my control. Because if it was, it would be pretty messed up.

You see, the God who created the universe, split the Red Sea, and raised Christ from the grave. The same God that is sovereign over everything, loves me enough in Christ that he is working all things together for *my* good and for your good, as well. Every plan that unfolds in your life. For your good. Every time that you accomplish something. For your good. Even every time you mess up. For your good. Why? Because all things are working together for his purposes. All things are working together so that his glory might be made known in your life and in the lives of people to the ends of the earth. Our God doesn't forget us, Church Even when we deserve it. He remains sovereign and works together for our good. And our lives are so much better because of it.

So, God's control is awesome. Pretty clear so far. But I bet some of you are saying, "Alright. I get it. God is in control, so I'll just sit back, say Lord willing before everything, and see what happens." No, no, no. God isn't looking for our spiritual jargon. He's looking for our submitted hearts. He's looking for a mindset that is continually and completely submitted to him and his purposes.

Which gets us into the second part of God's solution to our problem in planning:

Submit completely to God.

Now for some of you, the idea of submitting to God doesn't sound like a solution. Let me show you how it is, though. Read with me the last 2 verses, verses 16 and 17:

As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

We need to stop here for a second. Because in these two short sentences, James gets right at the root problem of our perceived control. Of our false reality of self-sufficiency. It's not the absence of spiritual words. It's not that we don't say "if the Lord wills" before everything we say. The root problem is arrogance, and it expresses itself in boasting. You see, we don't just leave God out of consideration when we're making plans. We brag about it as well! After Jess and I decided to move from our current, we bragged to other people about how logical of a decision was and how it made sense. When we forget God in our lives and in our plans, what we really do is take his place. We proclaim our autonomy and independence from him. We step in and say, "I've got control. I don't need you. I've got this one, God." And James calls that what it is. It's arrogance.

Church, when we make plans and forget God, it's not just a false reality or stupid. It's sin. And verse 17 explains that sin more. Check it out:

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

In this last verse, God just obliterates how we view sin. Because most of the time when we think of sin, we think about it terms of sins of commission.³ Meaning doing what God has said not to do. God said don't steal, so to steal is sin. God said don't lie, so to lie is sin. When God says don't do something and we do it anyway, it's sin. Pretty straight forward. Right?

But here, that's not the only picture James gives us. He also tells us that sins of omission are sin. Meaning we hear the Word and will of God and choose not to do it.

Think about it like this. When you tell a child, "Stop smacking your sister" and they continue smacking their sister, they are being disobedient. Right? They are sinning. What about when you tell a child to clean up their room and they don't do it? Is that still disobedience? Absolutely! James is showing us here that when we are told to do something by God and we chose to not do it, it's sin. Makes sense? You guys tracking?

³ I am indebted to David Platt's sermon "Faith Lasts" for his thoughts on the sins of commission and omission.

Good. Plain and simple to see the sin of omission there. But how about in Matthew 25 when God talks about caring for the needy? Check this out. To those who don't care for the needy, Jesus says:

Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Don't miss this, Church. The people in Matthew 25 are sentenced to hell. Not because of what they *did*, but because of what they *didn't* do. So often when we think about sin we think in terms of, "Let me not do what's wrong." James here says, "Not enough. You've gotta do the good you know you're called to do, too."

Pretty staggering, right? But you know what my problem is? You know what your problem is? We can't do it on our own! Ever since the fall, ever since sin was brought into the world, each of us has been marred and broken by the effects of sin. Though we can try and try and try to keep God's will in mind when we make every plan, though we can try and try and try to do everything God says to do and not do anything he says not to do, it's just impossible. None of us are perfect.

And that crushes me. Maybe it does you, too. Because I want God to give me a checklist of right and wrongs to do to earn his approval so that I know I deserved, so that I know I earned, his love. Because even in God's love, I want to be in control of whether I receive it or not. God didn't give me or

any of us a checklist, though. He gave us a person. And the only solution to our problem of self-sufficiency, to our problem of control, is to submit our lives completely to someone else. It's to submit our lives to God.

Not just in the words we say and don't say, but in every single area of our life. Y'all, I understand that might be a hard pill for some of you to swallow. Our self-sufficient, I hate authority, I hate the word submit hearts are yelling at us to say no to this idea.

But I can promise you, when you completely submit your life to God, you will find so much joy and peace. Because you'll find that your success isn't based on how much you can control a situation to meet your desired result. Your success is found in the finished, perfectly successful work of Christ. That he lived the perfect life you and I should have lived, then died a death on the cross that you and I should've died. Not because we did or could do anything to deserve it. But simply because he loved us. In a life submitted to that kind of person, it's not a weight or a burden to submit completely. Because he brings us more peace, more joy, more life than any misplaced desire of control ever could. Question 2: What is God's solution to our problem in planning? He didn't forget us! Even when we forgot and continue to forget him. He gave us his very Son and all we have to do is submit completely to Him.

Alright. So, we've seen the problem with planning. That we plan in a way that forgets God and find control in the false reality of our perceived self-sufficiency. We've seen the

solution. That God doesn't forget us and that the only way we can find true peace and joy in life is to submit completely to him. Now, what are we supposed to do with all that? In our remaining time together this morning, I want us to think really practically about our third question:

How do I plan my life in light of God's will?

I hope you can tell that living life in light of God's will isn't about checking off a list of items. It's not about walking through the exact right door at the exact right time. He is not after our ability to earn our way to him. What God is after is our hearts. He's after us following him in our character. And the way we learn more about the way God desires our character to look is to look deeper into his. As we look at the character of God, I believe we see two clear lessons about life and how we should plan it.

Lesson #1:

It's about his glory.

James is clearly not telling us here we've got everything we need in ourselves to accomplish anything we want. Hearing that our lives are momentary and fragile and uncertain doesn't create within us swagger. It brings us humility. Because we see so clearly that this life, even our plans, isn't about us. It's about God. And you know what? That is exactly how we were created to live. Not for ourselves, but for the glory of our creator and sustainer, God.

So, how does this change the way we make plans? If our purpose in life is to bring God glory, then that means every plan we make should be about revealing God's glory.

Students, how does your schedule show that revealing God's glory is your priority? Do you miss Sunday morning worship gatherings or community group because you've got to study? How do you plan your weekly schedule so you don't have to prep for a presentation at lunch or in between classes, but so you can have the space to engage your classmates with the gospel?

Parent, how are you communicating that life is about God's glory to your children? Have sports and band practices and other extracurricular activities dominated your children's schedules so much that there's no time for discipling them?

Single person, are you content with your singleness? Or are you so focused on your plan, your hope, your desire to be married that you fail to see how God can use you, in a special way in this stage of life?

My list could go on and on and on. No matter what role you are in, no matter what you are doing, you have one purpose in life: revealing the glory of God. Live life like you believe it. Make plans like you believe it. Life's about his glory. Not your own.

Lesson #2:

It's about his mission.

One of the ways God uses to reveal his glory is by using sinful people like us to accomplish his mission. And that is to make disciples in every tribe, tongue, and nation. Our lives are about his mission. Not our own.

What if today when we got home, each of us wrote down everything we think about ourselves (I'm a husband. A mother. A student. A banker. A housewife. A planner. A musician.) and ask, "How can this accomplish God's mission"? That mindset would create more security and satisfaction in your lives than any of your own plans, hopes, and desires could ever dream of?

What if you looked at the person you dated not as how hot they are or how much money they make, but how they could be your partner in accomplishing God's mission?

What if Jessica and I looked at our house decision not based on how comfortable we would be, but on how we could use our house to engage the people God has called us to in the city?

What if you viewed your job not as a platform to engage people with how awesome you and what you're doing is, but as a platform to engage your lost coworkers with the gospel?

Once again, the list could go on and on. But I hope you see that the plans we make matter. Because they show who's glory and mission we are after. Church, are you about your own glory and mission or about God's? I encourage you, take some time this week to evaluate your plans. Trust me. I did it and they'll show where your heart is.

CONCLUSION

As I conclude today, I want to call each of us to do something really simple and that's to rest. Our passage in James has showed us that there's no need to worry or freak out or try to control everything. We aren't in control, but God is! No matter what you've got going on in your life, God hasn't forgotten you. He is control and working together for your good. Surrender the control of your life to God's will.

For some of you, as I'm talking about surrendering the control of your life to God's will and how it brings joy and peace and comfort, you've never really felt those things before. For you, your response today might be to surrender your life to God! In Romans 10, Paul says that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. There's two confessions here. First, that Christ is Lord. That's doing exactly what we talked about today. Surrendering every area of our lives to God and his purposes and his plans. Saying, "God I trust you with my life." Then we confess that Jesus is Savior. That he did what he said he would do. That he lived the perfect life we

should've lived, died a death we deserved, then rose from the grave to bring us new life. If you've never confessed those things, if you don't see the fruit of these confessions in your life, the peace, joy, and hope that comes from the gospel, I'd love to chat with you about that after the service. That would be an incredible response for you today!

For all of us, whether you're a Christ follower or not, God says, "Let it go!" You don't have control over your life and it's for your good. Rest in God, trust God, and you will find more peace, more joy than any plans you ever dreamed of. Let's pray.