



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of Dan Duncan

James 4: 11-17

James 4

“Pride and Perspective”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] A text this evening is James 4:11-17. Before we read, let’s pray. Father we do thank you for the opportunity that we have to gather again this evening on this Wednesday night and continue studying the book of James, this book of great wisdom. It’s a book that puts its finger on many of the problems that we have, that are universal to the world and to mankind and whatever age we live in. And we pray, father, that you teach us and convict us where we need convicting.

We pray that, as a church, you would deliver us from worldliness. Deliver us from pride. We know that we’ll never be fully delivered of that in this life, but we do pray that you would continue to sanctify us and give us greater victory over such things. Bless us that we would submit to you as James councils us to do, and to live for you and be men and women who seek your will above all things. We pray you bless us to that end this evening as we study. Bless the other classes that meet.

Bless the young people this evening. Give them good fellowship but good instruction. And bless us as we conclude our evening together with prayer, a time of worship. We pray that as we come to the throne of grace, you would bless us. Prepare our hearts for that. Prepare our hearts now for study together. We pray in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] Our text, again, is James chapter 4, and we’ll begin with verse 11. “Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it. There’s only one lawgiver and judge. The one who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you who judges your

neighbor? Come now, you who say today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.

Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You're just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. Therefore to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.” William Ernest Henley wrote the well-known poem *Invictus*, which means “unconquered.” Some of you may have learned it back in junior high and high school.

But it expresses his self-sufficiency, his independence from God, or what he thought was the case and what he boasted in. It begins, “Out of the night that covers me, black is the pit from pole to pole. I thank whatever gods may be for my unconquerable soul.” And concludes, “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.” That is a well written expression of the natural man's heart. It is what John describes in 1 John 2:16 when he writes of the boastful pride of life.

It is an empty boast. Isaiah put man's boasting in perspective in Isaiah chapter 4, when he compares the glory of the nations and all that the nations boasted in, with God. And there he describes all of that – all the pomp, all the glory of the nation – as a drop from a bucket, a speck of dust on the scales. It doesn't even weigh anything. James puts it differently. He puts it just as clearly, though. He writes, “You are just a vapor.” That should give us some perspective on life. And it should silence our boasting and our sense of self-sufficiency and self-determination. That's the reason James wrote this passage. Because Christians were boasting.

They were talking about themselves and thinking about themselves and their plans for the future, just like the world would speak about such things. They were full of pride. They were not including God in their thoughts or in their plans. The problem fits with the previous section that we studied last week, where James dealt with worldliness. And worldliness, very basically, can be describe as selfishness. It takes no account of God. It lives independently of him. It lives for self. That's what was happening in this congregation to which James writes this letter.

They weren't praying to God. They were not seeking his will for their lives. As a result, they were fighting with one another. They were experiencing lots of

disappointments and frustrations. And so James exhorted them to put away pride and submit to God. In the remaining verses of the chapter, he gives further examples of pride and indifference toward God. And again, he advises them to do essentially the same thing. To submit – though he doesn’t put it quite that way – but they are to seek God’s will first. It’s how they’re to live their lives.

Now the first example that he gives of this attitude of pride, this worldliness, is given in verse 11. And it has to do with backbiting – with judging others. If we live for self and if we seek our own rights and privileges – however we want to put it – first – that’s what we live for – then we will fight with others and we will judge others. That’s what was happening. And so James writes in verse 11, “Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks against the law and judges the law.

But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it.” Speaking against others is slandering them. We describe it as speaking behind another person’s back. It was evidently an habitual problem with these people and, I suppose, it’s pretty much an habitual problem most places. Because we all have a tongue, and the tongue has the nature of doing that. That’s basically the way he has described it. He says it is a restless evil. That’s what he said back in chapter 3, verse 8. And that being the case, they have a problem with the tongue. So in a sense, he comes back to that earlier instruction.

Now there are various reasons for this, various occasions for this kind of activity, this backbiting, this speaking against one another, slandering other people. Basically it’s pride. And pride is seen in various ways. And its occasion are stirred up for various reasons. People become jealous of one another for one reason or another. And so they seek to exalt themselves by attacking the other person, trying to detract from their reputation. Or someone might give offense, and because of pride and the wounded that’s been caused, a person reacts to that and they speak out and they speak against the other person.

And it’s also a fact that people simply enjoy doing that. They simply enjoy gossip. I don’t read the tabloids, but if I go to the grocery store I see a bunch of them and they’re all there. And people obviously like to read that kind of material. And I think the fact of the matter is – it’s a sad fact, but it’s a reality – I don’t think I’m being too harsh or critical of us – but don’t we just like to talk about other people and

hear what’s going on and hear that kind of thing? That tends to be the nature of the heart. And really, that’s the problem with the tongue. The tongue is not a problem. It’s the heart that governs the tongue.

And this was a problem with these people. And so James’s response is not to analyze all the motives and the reasons and all of that. It doesn’t matter to him. He says, don’t do it. That’s the bottom line in all of this. It doesn't matter why a person does it. He says, don’t. Not to do that. And he gives two reasons. The first is it’s against the law. It makes a person a judge of the law. Now within the law – within the legal boundaries that God has set up – there is a place for judging others. There is a place for making these kinds of decisions.

Setting up courts of law. We do that. We personally have to make certain judgments about people. What they say and what they do and about their character. We must make those kinds of judgments. But he’s not speaking of that. He’s not speaking about a legal system. He’s not speaking about courts of law and judges and lawyers and juries and all of that. He’s not speaking about evaluating another person’s character and coming to a determination about the truth or value of some statement that has been made. It has nothing to do with that.

This has to do with personal criticism, gossip, slander. And it is described as judging the law. Not the Mosaic law. The word that’s used here does not have the article, it doesn’t have the word “the” in the original text. It has to do with the law or the principle that governs Christian conduct. And James has already spoken about that law. Back in chapter 1 of verse 25, he spoke of the perfect law, the law of liberty. And then in chapter 2 in verse 8, the royal law, which is the law of Christian love.

And in breaking that law, a person does break the law of Moses because, as our Lord explained, the law is fulfilled in two ways. It’s fulfilled in loving God with all of our heart, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. And so if a person is backbiting, the person is judging, slandering another, gossiping about another, then he or she is certainly breaking that law. So to do so is, first of all, to break the law. And then secondly, James says, the reason that one is not to do that, to speak this way – he explains in verse 12 – is because that puts a person in a position that is not their position.

It assumes a position that is not our own. Verse 12. “There’s only one lawgiver and judge. The one who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you

who judges your neighbor?” Who are you, in other words, who takes the place of God in the matter of judging people? He’s the only lawgiver and judge. Only he can judge perfectly. Only he can search the hearts of people and make a perfect, pure judgments on things. And understand who is really right in terms of God’s standard. And only he is the one who will judge in the future.

He is the one that ultimately will settle all of the issues. And James may be looking to the future day of judgment. So we’re not usurp his authority. Pride leads to presumption, meaning overstepping one’s bounds or being insolent or audacious, overconfident. That’s what a person who judges others is. Presumptuous. Pride leads to presumptuousness. In the matter of personal relationships and judging other people, and also in other areas as well, it produces confidence about the future. An attitude of self-sufficiently and planning daily activities with a sense of independence with disregard for God.

People presume that they are the masters of their fate. That they are the captains of their soul. No one is that. But that is the problem that James addresses next in verses 13 through 17. He focuses here narrowly on businessman. The problem may be more obvious to them. Perhaps that’s the reason he chose this. Perhaps he had certain businessmen in this congregation in mind. But they have to plan their futures. They do have to be aggressive about their work. It is probably easier for them, or people in that kind of situation, to succumb to an independent spirit. And so James uses them as his example, but what he says here is applicable to all. Verse 13.

“Come now, you who say today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” There was, in James’s day, a lot of business going on. It was the age of the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. There was general tranquility throughout the empire. There were roads throughout the empire. The sea has been cleared of pirates. Travel was safe. Access to cities and regions was open. And men were doing business. A lot of Jewish men, living in the diaspora – living in the nations, the lands outside of Palestine – were engaged in a lot of business.

And some of these Jewish Christians were businessmen. Just as in any church, there were businessmen. And these Jewish men were doing business. And here James gives an example of some of these Christian businessmen making careful plans

about a business trip. And they show a lot of confidence about when they will leave and where they will arrive at how long they will stay and what they will accomplish, the goals they will achieve, which is make a profit. They seem very confident about all of that. As though they can really determine the time of their departure, or the certainty of their arrival, or the success of their enterprise. They say that they will spend a year there, wherever they're going to go. And so they know that they have a certain amount of time that they can control.

There'll be a year. Well, they'll control the time at their disposal for that year. These were industrious men. They were ready, evidently, to go wherever the profit was, wherever profit could be made. Which isn't bad. To an extent, businessmen have to be that way. They have to do that. They have to plan. They have to be confident about what they are doing. And James isn't condemning any of that. He isn't condemning business. He is condemning making plans or making a profit. There's nothing wrong with what these men were seeking to do and the plans that they were laying. It wasn't what they said, it's what they didn't say.

And it was the spirit in which they said what they said and did what they did. Which was making plans with presumption. That is, they would do all of this and they took no regard for God. In fact, he has no part in the plans that they were making. And James will point that out. He will point out in verse 15 what they should say, but before that he gives perspective to this whole issue of living in that way. Whether it's a businessman, or whether it's a teacher, or whether it's a housewife, or a student, or whoever maybe, there is a perspective that a person should have when he or she is making any kinds of plans at all. Verse 14.

“Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You're just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.” How many people have said, “I'll get to it tomorrow?” And tomorrow never comes. We're just a vapor. Like a person's breath on a cold day, that may be what James is thinking about. Because Jerusalem gets cold. In fact, it snows over there in the winter sometimes. About like Dallas. But in February, you go out and breathe and you see your breath and then disappears. He says that's the way man is. That's human life. It is here for a moment and then it's gone without a trace. We are transient. We're but for a moment of time, and then we're gone.

The Bible speaks about this a lot with different figures. The Old Testament describes human life in Psalms and in the book of Job in various ways. As a shadow. Man's a shadow. A breath. A cloud that vanishes and is seen no more. A human life is like grass. It's like the flower. All of these are ephemeral things. They appear, they have life for a moment, but they're gone, just like that breath on a cold day. It appears, you see it, and then it vanishes. I've heard it said that the best soldiers are 18-year-old boys because they think they're invincible. And they will charge into a heavy fire because they don't realize that they're mortal.

They don't think like that. Young people are like that. It's how they drive a lot of the times. But really, you say that about young people. It's more obvious about them. I suppose people grow more cautious about things as they grow older and drive more carefully or more slowly. But basically, I think most people are like that. They don't give lots of thought to their mortality. They don't want to think about those things. They don't want to think about death.

They put it out of their minds. Instead, they live as though there's no tomorrow. The reality is, we are just a breath. We are mortal. We can't hold on to the present. We can't know the future. And it is presumptuous to think that we can chart out the course of our lives. It's not to say it's unwise to make plans. It's not what James is saying. But to make plans independently of God and to think that we have control of what we're doing and where we're going. I suppose most of us have watched the Olympics some. It is a display of youth and skill and strength.

Young men and women – well, in the gymnastics, children – who are full of health and hope. But young people in the prime of life are what James says we all are. They are a vapor. 1972, I was in seminary. It was my first year. And the Olympics were being held in Munich, Germany. So I watched them when I could. And then became very interested, fascinated, riveted with what was going on when the whole thing was interrupted by the Palestinian terrorist group Black September, when they seized the Israeli athletes.

I, as I said, followed it with great interest. And one night, I think it was around 11 o'clock in the evening, I was working on my studies and watching the television at the same time when some breaking news occurred. The terrorists and the athletes had been moved to the Munich airport. And the announcer – I think it was Jim McKay. There were about three of them sitting there in that panel discussing the events and

discussing the developments. And he was haggard looking. He had a bit of a beard on. He hadn't shaved all day. And suddenly he interrupted the discussion that they were having and he said, "I'm getting a report." And there was a moment of silence as he was listening and then he said, "They're gone. They're all gone."

And what had happened is – as many of you may remember – is the anti-terrorists, German antiterrorist team had tried to rescue the athletes before the helicopter, which they'd been placed, took off. And one of the terrorists had a bomb and he blew everyone up and all were killed. And I didn't expect that. I was young myself. Probably about the same age as those athletes. And I thought, that's not what I anticipated. These are the Olympics. These are a festive time. It's not a time for that kind of thing.

And I fully expected that this thing would be resolved and everything would turn out fine. And the Israeli athletes would be saved. But we can't know those things. We don't know what tomorrow will be like. Life is brief, even for the most healthy individual. It is, from our perspective, completely uncertain. We cannot chart our course. And as I sat there watching these things and listening to that report, when that came through, I remember picking up my Bible and turning to James 4:14 and wrote beside it, September 5, 1972. You are just a vapor.

That statement should give a person clear perspective on life. A kind of perspective that Jesus taught. In this parable in Luke chapter 12, he taught that very thing. That's the parable about the rich man. He was a very good businessman, very successful. He was a farmer. He accumulated much. In fact, so much that he had to build extra barns. And he filled as extra barns with all of his stuff. And then he made plans to enjoy it all. But God said, "You fool, this very night your soul is required of you." He planned for everything but death.

He was wise about everything in this world and he was a fool about eternity. He took no thought of God. He thought that he was self-sufficient and that he could chart out his future. And God said, "You're a fool. Today's the end of it all." Men whom James was writing to are Christian men. And yet they're doing the very same thing. They're living just like the world. They're living just like that foolish farmer. It is foolish to make plans and ignore God when our lives are so fleeting. Like a mist that disappears in a moment. So this is what he says in verse 14.

It’s something of a parenthesis in the advice, the Council, that he’s giving. He’s told us what they shouldn’t say, and he’s going to say in verse 15 what they should say. But in between, he’s given this justification for his criticism of them in verse 13. And he’s given the perspective that they should have, which will lead to the right statement, the right response that is given in verse 15. So to the person in verse 13 who said, today or tomorrow we will go and we will spend and will engage – we will do all these things and we will accomplish our goal.

The right words are given in verse 15. “Instead, you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.” Make our plans. And we should make our plans. This is someone making his or her plans in verse 15. There’s nothing wrong with that. But do it in the right attitude with the right frame of mind, the right thought. If God wills. If the Lord wills, we will live and we will do this, or we will do that. This is what Paul did, you’ll remember, not too long ago in our studies in Acts. In chapter 18, he goes from Corinth over to Ephesus.

He has a brief, but successful, ministry. The men of the synagogue are very interested in the things that he said. They want him to stay, but he has to leave. He’s on his way to Jerusalem. He says that he will return, but then he adds, “If God wills.” He had learned on his previous trip – and he knew this anyway. I don’t he just learned it at the beginning of his second missionary journey, but he certainly had a good lesson in making plans and changing them, as God directs.

But he tried to go to Asia and the door was shut. He ended up going north. He ended up going into Europe, rather than west into Asia and to Ephesus. He learned that God has his plans and he has his timing for what we are to do. And we ought to make plans, but we’re also to be prepared to accept his change in our plans. And so, he said, I will return to you again if God wills. Some years ago my mother in law was telling me that in Europe, at least in Holland, when they would get a letter or respond to an invitation – respond to a wedding invitation or some kind of reception – they would say that they will be there.

And then they would always, at the end of it, put DV for the Latin *deo volente*. God willing. Now I don’t know if that was typical of all Europeans, or that was just something that came out of the Dutch piety of a generation ago, but that’s a good custom. It’s one that’s consistent with James’s counsel. Although James is not giving this council in order to get us to merely say these words or to write these words

or put the initials DV. The rote use of words is of no more value than the Moslem custom of routinely saying *inshallah*. If Allah wills.

That’s just an empty formula. And it’s almost superstitious. I suppose it is somewhat with them, but it can be with Christians as well. We can say that kind of thing – if God wills, or Lord willing, whatever – almost with the hope that if we say that, it will validate our plans. Otherwise God may frown on our plans. We don’t make that statement, as though it’s some kind of formula that adds to it. The point that James is making is that the principle should govern our thinking and guide our plans. So the point is not so much to say, “If the Lord wills,” as to think it. Although I think it is good to say it.

In fact, sometimes it should be said. But it should be said with full conviction and understanding. God is in control of all of life’s activities. He’s determined the future, and he’s determined the success of our plans and our enterprises. And everything is to be done in recognition of that. Everything is to be done in recognition of his sovereignty and in honor of him. Well, the believer desires to do that. The believer desires, fundamentally, to do the will of God, to do the Lord’s will. In this statement that James gives, “If the Lord wills,” is an expression of that desire. But it also acknowledges that God’s will is not always clear to us.

We have principles of conduct laid forth very clearly in the Scripture, and there’s some things that there’s no doubt about what those principles are and what God’s will for us is. But we’re not always certain whether God wants us to go to such and such a city. He may, he may not. We make our plans, but it’s not certain. And that’s indicated by the conditional word “if”. If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that. Often times God leads us by Providence. He’s always leading us by Providence, but often times the decisions that we make, the course of our life, is determined by the providence of God.

He shuts doors, as he did with Paul. And this statement is the recognition of that and the expression of the willingness to accept that. To bow to the will of God and even to rejoice in it. Whatever God wills is best. And the godly person, the wise person, will willingly accept whatever God wills. And as one commentator pointed out, that conviction is the true antidote against all feelings of fear and dread concerning the future. We try to control the future. We try to determine the outcome.

Sometimes out of fear. We do all kinds of things and we can become preoccupied with that. But we realize, God's in control.

God is sovereign and we're to be obedient, to trust him, and when things don't go the way we want them to go, well maybe it's because we don't have a good picture of the future and what's best for us. He does. He knows perfectly. And so fortunately our lives are in his hands. And he does guide us providentially. And shut doors and open doors and direct us. Put us through hard times for our good. What James said in verse 15 is what should be the attitude and the actions of God's people. But in contrast to that, James states the way things really are in verse 16.

“But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.” They boasted in their sense of self-sufficiency, their sense of independence. That was their arrogance, this sense of autonomy. Arrogance is the same word that's used in 1 John 2:16, where John speaks of the boastful pride of life. These are the only two places in the New Testament where the words are used. This attitude of independence, of autonomy, of being the captain of one's soul, is boastful pride and it's empty. It's not true. William Barclay states that the word arrogance or boasting was the characteristic of the wandering quack.

He offered cures which were no cures, and boasted of things that he was not able to do. Well, that's true of the person who boasts that he or she controls his or her future. Football players like to do that. We hear this later on in the season as things begin to sort of shake out and the teams that are going to be in the playoffs begin to emerge and they'll start saying things like, “Our destiny is in our own hands.” And I suppose there's some truth to that, if it means, if we play hard and smart, we'll win the championship.

But if we don't play hard and we don't play smart, we won't. And that's true. So in a sense, one can say that. But the fact of the matter is, we don't control our destinies. The future is not in our hands. Football players can't foresee injuries that take place. They can't foresee the weather and how it's going to affect the game. They can't predict that a flu bug is going to come through the team and wipe out the quarterback or someone like that. Boasting in this way is making claim to being sovereign over life. I don't know that football players are making that kind of claim, that they're thinking along those lines.

But people who do, people who think like these Christians did to whom James is writing, are making that kind of claim. They’re living as practical atheists. And they’re living as sovereigns over life. And only God is sovereign. This is the attitude of the world and has no place in the mind or the speech of the Christian. It’s a form of idolatry. And it’s sin. And James calls it just that in verse 17, which concludes the chapter with a principle that summarizes things. “Therefore to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.”

Knowledge of what is right carries with it the obligation to do it. That is a principle that really goes beyond the subject of boasting. But James applies it to this immediate problem. These believers knew that their attitude, that their thinking, was wrong. They knew it. They were Christians. They were people who had been instructed in the word of God. Particularly if these were Jewish Christians – as is probably the case – they had lots of instruction in the word of God. They knew that this was wrong. It for some reason they didn’t – if they really thought that they were sovereign over their lives – well that’s now been corrected because James has corrected that.

James has made it very clear to them that they are not that, that they are not sovereigns. They are to submit to God. In fact, that was his counsel earlier in verse 7. He said just that. He said, “Submit therefore to God.” He gives a whole line, a whole list of these kinds of commands. Draw near to God. Be miserable and mourn and weep. But they are to submit to God. They know that now. So if they didn’t know it before, well they’re certainly without any excuse not to be thinking their own ends and chartering their own course without any thought of God. They’re not to be willfully disregarding the truth because that is sin, he says.

Our attitude, our thoughts, our plans are to be punctuated with the DV. God willing. And we ought to do that, not because we must do that. Not because that’s our duty. It is our duty, and if it comes down to it, if we can’t do it for any other reason, then we better do it for that reason. But that’s not the best reason. Not to do it because we have to do it. We are to do it because we want to do it. We want to honor God and submit to him.

Guy King in his little commentary on James writes, “Too long and too often we have thought of God’s will as something to be suffered, to be endured instead of embraced.” Well that’s true. Our attitude is not to be that. Our attitude is to be that

and express by Paul in Romans 12, 1 and 2, where he urges us to present our bodies, a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God. We are, as he goes on to say, to prove what the will of God is. That which is good and acceptable and perfect. Meaning good and acceptable and perfect to us. It's what we approve of ourselves, what we desire to do. And we desire to do it because we love the Lord and we want to please him. And we know that everything that his will for us, is best for us and good for us. But we can't know what the future holds.

We can't know what our lives will be like tomorrow. We can't know what circumstances will control our lives. But if we recognize that God is sovereign and rest in that, we can accept his will for our lives as being best. We can submit to him joyfully. That's how a child of God is to approach life. May God help us to do that. May God give us that attitude and that approach to life, which is honoring to him and is best for each of us. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father we do thank you for your goodness and we do praise you for your sovereignty. And we rejoice to know that we are in your hand and your Providence is in our favor because we your children. Not by any merit of our own, but because of your sovereign grace. Because of the work of your son on the cross for us.

Because the spirit, at a moment in time, quickened us, gave us eyes to see and ears to hear. And we drew near to you. We submitted to the gospel. We believed. Thank you for that. And may our lives be lived in a way that honors you. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.