



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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

The Sermons of Dan Duncan

James 4:11-17

Fall 2021

"Just A Vapor"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Geoff, and good morning. It's great to be with all of you. We are in the Book of James if you're visiting, and we are really, seems to me, going through it rather rapidly. We're in Chapter 4, in fact, we're going to finish Chapter 4 this morning. We're going to begin with Verse 11 through Verse 17,

¹¹Do 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*. ¹²There is *only* one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?

¹³Come 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." ¹⁴Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are *just* a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. ¹⁵Instead, *you ought* to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." ¹⁶But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. ¹⁷Therefore, to one who knows *the* right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

James 4:11-17

May the LORD bless the reading of His Word and bless our time studying it together.

(Message) *Invictus* is Latin for “unconquerable”, and the title of William Ernest Henley’s poem that boasts of his unconquerable soul. It ends with the lines,

I am the master of my fate:

I am the captain of my soul.

Poetry inspires. And those famous lines have inspired many people; and all kinds of people. But they fiercely state the very error that James rebukes in our passage of James 4, Versus 11 through 17. They are what John described in 1 John 2, Verse 16, “...the boastful pride of life...” James said much the same when he dismissed the boast of human sovereignty with, “You’re just a vapor.” (vs14). There are so many unknowns and invisibles in life that no one can reasonably claim to be in control of destiny or a master of his or her time or plans and successes. Only God is sovereign.

Mankind has always challenged that. Now, that’s human nature. At least, that’s fallen human nature. And James writes about it because it was the attitude of the world. It is the attitude of the world that so easily can creep into the church and influence us to conform to **it** rather than conform to God’s will—which is always perfect and always best.

In the previous passage, James dealt with worldliness in the church with people living independently of God, not praying to Him, not seeking His will but living for themselves. In the remaining verses of the chapter, James gives further examples of human pride and life lived without a thought for the Lord God. It’s all selfish ambition—and it’s doomed to failure.

The first example in Verse 11 has to do with back-biting and judging others. If we live life for self, if we live a selfish life, then we will fight and we will judge others. And that 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 speaking behind a person's back. It can be slander, making false charges, or it can even be disclosing a truth—but a private matter that is revealed for the purpose of doing this individual harm.

It was evidently a habitual problem in these churches. James indicates that by putting this in the present tense to describe this as an ongoing thing. But we also know it is that, just from human nature. We know, this is a very common thing, because as James said earlier in Chapter 3, Verse 8, 'The tongue is a restless evil.' This is what people do for various reasons. Maybe due to jealousy or due to pride. Something is said, a person takes offense, and he or she reacts with a personal attack. And then, it's just the fact that people enjoy gossip. They do—and they like to hear it.

And James's readers had fallen into this pattern for doing this. For whatever reason, this was a pattern that had taken hold in these churches, and so James responded to it. And he responds to it, very simply, by saying, 'Stop. Don't do it.' He gives two reasons. The first is, it's "...against the law..." (vs11). It makes the person who smears and vilifies another – a brother or a sister, really anyone – it makes him or her 'a judge of the law.'

Now, within the law there is a place for doing that. There is a place for judging. God has established courts of law. But this that James is talking about here, has nothing to do with that. This is personal criticism. This is gossip, it's slander intended to harm.

It's not clear that James was referring to the Law of Moses here. He speaks of "the law", but it's not clear that he's speaking of the Law of Moses. Because in the Greek text the definite article is not used—so it's "law"; not "the Law".

And so, maybe what he's referring to here is 'the law' or 'the principle' that governs the Christian life and what he described earlier – back in Chapter 2, in Verse 8 – as "the royal law"; the royal law which is the law of Christian love. That's what governs our lives and our relationships. But it should go without saying, that in breaking that law, a person does break the Law of Moses: The command of Leviticus Chapter 19, Verse 18, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

And so, when we do that, (that is when we break that law), when we sin against a brother or a sister, we've placed ourselves above God's law. We become a judge of it and judged it to be bad. Well, that's the first reason this is wrong. We are judging the law.

The second reason is, we're trying to take the place of the lawgiver by playing God—it's usurping His position. That's what James explains in Verse 12, "There is *only* one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you to judge your neighbor?" Who are you, in other words, to take the position of God in a matter of judging people? He is the only "Lawgiver and Judge". He has authority to save and to destroy.

Again now, this isn't referring to law courts which are authorized by God—it is a correction of critical comments intended to harm another person for improper motives, jealousy, or pride.

And pride shows itself in other ways: Like confidence in the future and an attitude of self-sufficiency in planning daily activities with complete disregard for God. It's more like 'worldly wisdom'; people presume that they are the masters of their fate, the captains of their soul. —No one is.

But that's the problem that James addresses in the rest of the chapter in Verses 13 through 17. He focuses narrowly on businessmen, but the problem is broader than that—it includes everyone. But that may be illustrated most easily with businessmen. They have to plan their futures. They have to schedule meetings. They have to be confident in what they do and somewhat aggressive in their work. And if they're not confident in what they're selling or what they're representing, they're not going to have a very successful career with that. And all of that makes it much easier for them, say than other people, to succumb to an independent spirit. They've got to plan out things.

And so, James uses them as his example. But as I said, this is applicable to all, regardless of job, gender, or age. For all of us, without exception, the lesson here – the first lesson – is, 'Counting on the future is folly.'

The seriousness of this is indicated in the first words. "Come now." It is intended to get their attention; to get the attention of Christians, (not to get the attention of the world), but to get the attention of Christians who are thinking like the world, "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.' "

A lot of business was going on in James's day; it was the age of the *Pax Romana*, 'The Roman Peace.' The Roman legions were everywhere to keep order. Roads were built throughout the empire so that all roads literally led to Rome and to many cities. The sea had been cleared of pirates. Travel was safe. Access to cities was open to business. And coastal cities like Corinth, Ephesus, Smyrna, and many others, prospered and became great.

A lot of Jewish men living in the Diaspora, (and were in the foreign land among the Gentiles), were doing business. And some of these Jewish Christians were businessmen; and there were women, of course, like Lydia in Acts Chapter 16. So it was an age of very great activity in terms of business.

So here, James gives an example of these Christian businessmen making careful plans for a business trip; and we should be careful, again, not to conclude that 'making plans' is bad. That's not what James is saying. It's wise to plan ahead, the Proverbs teach that. They tell the sluggard in Chapter 6, verse 6, to, 'Go to the ant, study his ways and learn from him and be industrious.' Proverbs 24, Verse 27, counsel is, 'Preparing the work before building a house.'

But Proverbs 16, Verse 9, also says, "The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps." That's really the lesson of James 4; and understanding that is what is missing here with these businessmen. Where is God in all of these well thought-out plans? He doesn't figure into this. It's probably not due to willful disregard; not at least if these are Christian men, just a failure to take account of Him. Their minds were occupied with other things that they had allowed to become more important.

And isn't that the way it generally is? Isn't that the way it generally happens in our lives? We get distracted by other things; good things, important things. And they

become pressing matters and they take preference. It's gradual; and due to spiritual inattention, (I think it was Dr. Hendricks at the seminary who compared spiritual failure to a flat tire. It usually isn't from a blowout but a slow leak.) Whatever the reason, these businessmen had their hearts set on profit rather than Jesus. So their priorities were all wrong. They were following the world's wisdom and were, therefore, set up for failure.

They were confident about when they would leave, where they would arrive, how long they would stay, and what they would accomplish,(which was a nice profit), as though they can determine these things. That's what the Greeks called *hubris*; 'excessive pride in self-confidence'—and for the Greeks, it always ended badly.

Mr. Spurgeon got it right when he said, "There are two great certainties about things that shall come to pass: One is that, God knows; and the other is that, we do not know." And that's what James explains in the next verses; Verse 14., "Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are *just* a vapor that appears for a little while and vanishes away."

How many people have said, "I'll get to that tomorrow", and then, for them, tomorrow never comes? We can't see into tomorrow. We can't see into the next second of our lives. That's the nature of time. It's closed to us.

That's also due to our nature. We are, as James said, "just a vapor". Like a person's breath on a cold day, it appears for a moment, and then it's gone without a trace. And so it is with man. We are transient. We're here for a very brief moment of time and then we are gone without a trace—remembered by no one.

And you think, 'Well, I hope I'll be remembered by my children or my friends.' Well yeah, but then they're gone before they know it...and then the next generation. Pretty soon, you're just completely forgotten.

Some people think about eternal life. I've had a person tell me this, (we had a discussion, and this was not a believing man), and he was saying that he and his friends had a discussion about eternal life—and is there such a thing? And he paused as he was sipping on his wine and I thought, "Well, what did you conclude?" "Yes! Well, we believed in it!" But I said, "What is it?" "Well, it's being remembered by your children."

Well, that's hardly eternal. And that's what James is dismissing here, gone without a trace—not remembered. That's true of multitudes; it's true of everyone.

The Bible has a lot of images that express that; human life is a *shadow*; it's a *breath*; it's a *cloud*; it's like *grass*; it's like a *flower*—all ephemeral things. And that's what we are. We can't hold onto the present. You think about that for a moment—the present, as soon as it's here, it's gone. We're always in the present but it's gone. You can't hold onto the present. We can't know the future. And so, it is presumptuous to think that we are self-sufficient and we can chart out our course in life and all of our accomplishments and things that we, in our own strength and according to our own wisdom and cleverness, can bring these things to pass. —We can't!

This image of all of us being “just a vapor” was vividly impressed on my mind many years ago during the 1972 Olympic games held in Munich, Germany. The Olympics are a display of the flower of youth in its strength and splendor. It presents the best athletes in their field; young men and women full of health and hope; if anything is the opposite of a vapor—it's Olympic athletes.

But that notion, ‘went up in a vapor’ when the terrorist group, Black September, invaded the Olympic village and took nine Israeli athletes hostage. It was my first year in seminary and I was very, very busy that semester, (in fact, every semester.) But this was a busy semester for me, yet I took every opportunity I could to watch the games. Then they were interrupted and the whole world was watching. I followed it with great interest. And one night around 11:00 o'clock, I was working on my studies and watching the television when some breaking news occurred.

The terrorists and athletes had been transported to the airport. Sports commentators were discussing the events when one of them, Jim McKay, interrupted the others with breaking news. He said, “I'm getting a report.” He paused and said, “They're gone. They're all gone.” The German SWAT team had tried to rescue the athletes before the helicopter they were on took off—and a terrorist had detonated a bomb—and all were killed. And just like that, they were gone.

I didn't expect that. It was the Olympics—the 'happy times.' The victims were my age. They were young, they were innocent people with their health and with their lives ahead of them. And I was sure, in that phase in my life, I was sure that everything would turn out well.

We can't know those things. We don't know what tomorrow will be like. We don't know what will interrupt our day at any moment. Life is brief. It is uncertain. And as I sat there watching these things, stunned, I turned in my Bible to James Chapter 4, Verse 14, "You are just a vapor," and wrote in the margin next to it, "September 5th, 1972."

Isaiah wrote in Isaiah 40, "All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows upon it..." (vs 6-7). Our lives are in His hands. He gives us every breath of life we have. How foolish it is not to take account of Him when planning our lives—which are fragile. He just blows and we're gone in a moment.

That's the lesson Jesus taught in the parable of the rich fool in Luke Chapter 12. He was a farmer, very industrious, "very productive"—something that we could admire. He had so much grain in crops that he built extra barns to store it all and then he made plans for the future to enjoy it. But God said, "You fool! This very night your soul is required of you." (vs20).

The parable, again, (like James's instruction here), is not against planning carefully; it's not against working hard, but it's about planning unwisely—which is planning without the Lord and without eternity in mind. The farmer had planned for everything but his death. And the reason is, he took no thought of God; no thought of God in his life. He thought he was self-sufficient and was in control of time and could chart out his future. The men of whom James was writing were doing the same thing. It is foolish to make plans and ignore God when our lives are so fleeting. Like a mist that disappears.

Now Verse 14 is really a parenthesis in the advice that James is giving. And what he's doing here in Verse 14 is showing the short-sightedness of plans confidently made

in Verse 13. Verse 14 gives perspective on that, and then in Verse 15, based on that, he answers the persons of Verse 13 who said, 'Today or tomorrow we will go. We will spend, we will engage, we will make a profit.' He answers them with the right words. When making their plans, the proper attitude, what people ought to always be saying in their hearts, in their minds, is, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." I think that word "live" is important. It seems to suggest, 'Remember, you frail things, you're just a mist. You're just a vapor.'

Well, this is what Paul did when making his plans. For example, when he planned to return to Ephesus, in Acts Chapter 18, Verse 21, he said, "I will return to you again if God wills." He knew who was in control of his schedule. He knew that because he had good theology, but he also knew that from experience on his second missionary journey.

He got a good life lesson on that when he was not able to go to the places that he had planned to go. First he was going to go into Asia, the great province of Asia, where Ephesus was on the Western Coast of Asia Minor. And the Spirit prevented that, so they went North, they followed plan B; 'Let's go into Bethania.' So they went to the North and into the East. But they couldn't enter into Bethania, so they ended up in Troas on the Northwest Coast of Asia Minor – no doubt puzzled about why we're here, 'This wasn't our plan.'

It wasn't their plan but it was the plan of the Holy Spirit. And then, Paul had this vision of the man of Macedonia asking him to come over and help us. And so, that was the plan that the Lord had; and Paul passes over to Philippi and down through Europe: Thessalonica, Berea, onto Athens and then to Corinth—and then was able to go to Asia. He realized that God has plans that countermand our plans.

Paul had plans to go to Corinth and they were interrupted by God's providence. And he had to explain that to the Corinthians in Chapter 1 of 2 Corinthians and he had to make the point to them because they did not quite understand why he wasn't showing up as had been planned. He said he wasn't vacillating in his purpose—God had a purpose that overruled his purpose.

And so, James instructs us not to be confident in ourselves and in our plans and in the schedules that we draw for ourselves. God is in control. We are to say, "If the Lord wills."

My mother-in-law was Dutch and she once told me that in Europe it was customary to end their letters with the initials 'DV', (which were abbreviations), which is an abbreviation for the Latin *deo volente*, "God willing." I've learned it was not only European but it was also a custom in England as well; and probably in America. I don't know if it still is fashionable to do that, but I think it showed some biblical influence generations ago. It's a good statement to make. It's biblical, but such things can become mere formality.

Muslims often say, "God willing." That can become a kind of rote or a ritual piety; even superstitious. James here wasn't counseling so much of a way of writing or speaking, rather, he was as a way of thinking. His point was that the conviction of God's sovereignty over the affairs of life should guard our minds and govern all of our plans. It is a recognition that God is sovereign, a recognition of Ephesians Chapter 1, Verse 11, that God "...works all things according to the counsel of His will;" —all things. Which should instill humility in us and the good sense to look to God for our direction.

His will determines the future and the success of our plans and all of our enterprises. And everything is to be done in recognition of that and in honor of Him. That's the wise way to live, that's the worshipful way to live. And if that's our thinking, it will affect our working; we'll work to the glory of God. And so that if a person, a businessman, sees an agreement or a deal that may be very lucrative, but it's not honest, he or she knows they can't do that.

Now, that really goes without saying; honesty in business is required. We know that; and I don't think this is James's concern here. It's something else. He is concerned about planning without a thought for God as though God does not matter or that God does not figure into our lives.

That has been called practical atheism. It's not denying the Lord's existence, just living as though He doesn't exist. Maybe it's due to carelessness. But it's letting the world set our priorities.

But believing "If the Lord wills," shows a willingness to accept His will knowing that only He can make us prosper—just as the proverb says, (Proverb 16, Verse 9.)

Now that's not only proper, it's also practical. The conviction that God is in control of our success is the remedy to feelings of fear that we might have in this world and the uncertainties that we see around us—it is the remedy to that. It also leads to confidence in the midst of the uncertainties of life and doing what is right in spite of what we may think is the most pragmatic and choosing the wrong way. I think that the understanding that God is in complete control is what gives us confidence in this life and in this world.

So we go forward honestly and carefully, sometimes waiting on the Lord when we're not certain about what to do; when we don't seem to have some confidence about ; and we wait on the Lord. We pray to the Lord. We look to Him. We can trust Him and be confident that if we seek His will in glory, He will guide us in our steps and establish them.

And when things don't work out as we might have hoped, we need to trust God in our disappointment and know He is sovereign. He has a good purpose in whatever has happened, and we need to rest in that and work; He's with us! What James said in Verse 15 is what should be the attitude and the actions of God's people.

But it wasn't with those to whom James wrote. At least, it wasn't with some of them. They were bragging about their practice of making plans and gaining a profit as though it were all their doing and they were in complete control. In Verse 16, James tells them, 'That's arrogance'. Arrogance is the same word that's used by John in 1 John 2, Verse 16 where he spoke of "the boastful pride of life." It's an attitude of independence, an attitude of autonomy, of being self-directed, self-sufficient—the captain of one's

soul.' It is boastful pride. It is empty. It's not true. In fact the word "arrogance" was applied to the wandering 'quacks' of the 1st Century; charlatans, fake doctors, who boasted of cures that didn't cure. And James was saying that, 'That's true of the person who boasts that he or she controls their future, their engagements, and their goals.'

We're used to hearing football players make comments like, "We control our destiny." That's a phrase that's become kind of popular in the past few years, "We control our destiny." They say that as they're approaching the playoffs, and they mean 'they'll win or they'll lose depending on how hard and smart they play.'

Now, I think there's truth in that. That's not, I don't think, the arrogance that James is speaking of here, though there are unpredictables, there are events in games that you can't foresee. Officials make bad calls, players get hurt.

Again, it's good to plan and prepare to put one's best effort in sports or business or whatever area of life we are in and what we're engaging in; our studies— whatever, apply ourselves fully and completely; that's only wise. But ultimately, our destiny is not in our hands. That's what James is saying.

I didn't mean to use so many sports illustrations. But, I don't know, five years ago was it?, (I really have lost time of it), but I was watching the Masters Tournament. And Phil Mickelson was making a putt. All was quiet. The ball was rolling on the green right toward the cup when the camera caught this leaf. It just fluttered out of the sky and landed right on the green and his ball hit it and ricocheted off. It deflected and he lost a stroke or two. Now, you can't plan for that. You can be playing better than anyone on the course, you can be at the top of your game, and that happens. It's providence. It's foolish to think that we are the masters of our fate.

But more than foolish; James adds, "It's evil." That's a strong statement. Such self-confidence not only lacks sense, it is, (as one commentator put it), "Aggressively and viciously wicked." It's really a form of idolatry. Because what it says, (or what claim is being made, whether the person thinks this or not), really, what's being said is, "I rule over life. I'm sovereign."

The reality is, only God Almighty rules over time, rules over history, rules over our lives. And when I say, "Rules over our lives," I mean rules over our lives personally in every detail. And that includes every individual that is alive or has ever lived or ever will live. He's in complete control.

William Henley's poem was really more than an expression of courage in facing and overcoming the odds. (It wasn't that at all, really), it was a poetic statement of defiance against God. That's what James calls *evil*.

Now he ends the chapter and his condemnation of pride, selfish ambition, and spiritual insubordination with a final warning. Verse 17, "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin." Commentators have pointed out that James's statement here was probably a maxim, or proverb, and a way of saying, 'Now that I pointed all this out to you, you've been fully warned.'

So if they respond to it with humility and repentance, they will be wise people and they will be blessed. But if they don't, they will be without excuse for the trouble that will come. And it will come. Trouble always comes when we take a path contrary to God's will—because it's always the wrong path.

The wisest policy we can pursue in life is to make it our ambition to glorify God in everything we do; to seek His Will—first and foremost, seek His will.

One of the commentators, Guy King, wrote, "Too long and too often we have thought of God's will as something to be suffered, to be endured, instead of embraced." I think that's true. I think that's probably true of me. I think it is true of me.

His will is perfect. His will is always best. He knows the immediate future; He knows what lies around the corner. So trust Him when deprived of a trip and profit we so anticipate and look forward to. Who knows what harm He is protecting us from? Trust His will. Trust providence. And remember the industrious farmer of the Lord's parable of Luke 12, who never gave a thought to God even though it was the Lord who sent the rain annually, (that farmer didn't conjure up rain), and gave him a harvest that he enjoyed, gave him all of His riches. He amassed a fortune and thought life would go on and on

and he would be able to enjoy his ease for many years to come – eat, drink and be merry! ...When that very day of his retirement God spoke, "You fool," He said, "This very night, your soul is required of you, and now who will own what you have prepared?" Not him.

It is foolish to live without a thought of eternity. Someday we will all leave this world. In Psalm 90, Moses said of life, "...soon it is gone and we fly away." (vs10). Calvin said, "Sixty years go by in the blink of an eye."

We're "just a vapor"; so where will you be when God speaks and your end comes? Will the angels carry you off to heaven as they carried poor Lazarus or will you be like that rich man, at whose gate Lazarus sat looking for crumbs?, he was in Hades forever with nothing; not even a drop of water for his parched tongue.

If anyone is here without the Savior, if anyone is here who's not trusted in Christ, then consider the brevity of life and flee to the cross. Trust in Him. Trust in His death for sinners; be forgiven and receive eternal life.

And what of William Henley, the poet? And the many tragedies of his life?, (and he had many: From the loss of his health, to the loss of his reputation, to the loss of his foot, to the loss of his daughter, to the loss of his life proved the hollowness of his claim to be "captain".)

Christ is the captain. —The captain of our salvation. Come to Him. Follow Him. May God be merciful and gracious to you to lead you to do that and encourage all of us to follow the Lord.

Father, what a great blessing it is to know that someone is all-sufficient and came into this world to pay our ransom. And, in paying that ransom, freed us into Your life so that we are Your possession. We have a glorious future with your Son, we have eternal life and glory to come. We give You all the praise. We thank You for that.

We are "just a vapor", LORD, and that's the result of sin. But You've turned the curse into a blessing because, shortly, we will be with You if we're believers in Jesus Christ. We give You the praise and thanks for that. We thank You for Him, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Now, the LORD bless you and keep you, the LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you, the LORD lift up His countenance on you and give you peace. In Christ's name, Amen.

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