

Prayers

To God

Ask the Lord to bless you and help you repent of what is wrong within your life, so you may grow in faith. Keep it simple.

For myself

Give thanks for your parents, because God has given you life through them. You may have many different feelings towards them and about them, but this fact remains ...

For others

Weekly theme: Travel

Dear Lord Jesus; You spent a large part of your ministry away from home, travelling and going from place to place, and you know what it is like to be on the move. Bless those who do not have a home because they must move about because of their jobs, or because they are refugees, or because they choose to be without a home. May we who live very different lives not fail to appreciate their place in society and the fact that You love them as much as anyone else. Give us a heart of love for all, we pray. AMEN

Meditation

Do you feel uneasy? Has peace slipped from your grasp?

Listen and be ready

The Lord could be speaking. He may have something to say to you ...

Is He suggesting you should stop and think?

Is He calling you to face what you dislike?

Is He reminding you to seek His help?

Is He challenging you to grasp the unknown?

Is He telling you to offer unconditional forgiveness?

Is He wanting to do a work in you as yet unknown?

Is He offering you help that you have not yet accepted?

Is He saying, 'I am here; please don't turn away'?

It may be difficult to hear what the Lord is saying,

But remember,

He never turns away from us; it is only we who turn from Him.

Bible Passage

James 4:13-17

¹³ Now listen here, you who say, "One day soon we will go a town somewhere and spend a year there, doing business and making money." ¹⁴ You don't even know what will happen in your life tomorrow! You are like a mist that appears for a little while and then disappears. ¹⁵ Instead, what you should say is this; "If it is what the Lord wants, we will live and do what we need to do." ¹⁶ As it is, you take pride in your arrogance, and all such boasting is evil.

¹⁷ So then, anyone who knows what is right to do but fails to do it, commits sin.

Review

This is yet another memorable passage from James' letter, and it delivers a blunt message about the Christian life. Clearly, the but of James' comments here are the rich; but although we will shortly study this further, our eyes should be fixed on his general teaching, which is found memorably in verse 15. James says that to show faith, the Christian should approach life in general with this attitude, "*if it is what the Lord wants, we will live and do what we need to do.*" This passage of Scripture lies behind the often repeated comment of Christians when facing the future, '*if the Lord wills ...*', a phrase intended to express faith in God. Some say this so often it unfortunately becomes an unthought recital of mere words. But James' advice is that the Christian should always be conscious of the Lord's presence and leading in every aspect of life, whether rich or poor, male or female, Jew or Gentile.

In all this, James applies to the rich a moral principle from the heart of the Gospel, which is that the Christian should submit all things to God. People of faith who are also rich do their business by trading for a profit; just like everyone else who is rich, their money may come from investment or from trade or commerce. But as we begin to look carefully at this passage and what it means, we should be careful. The general practice of commerce is not under attack here. Rather, James attacks the manner in which Christian people who happen to be rich are tempted to do what they want for themselves without reference to God. That, of course is a denial of faith and the Gospel.

So why does James pick on the rich? As we saw in his earlier comments (2:1-7), James could see that the rich were often treated differently in church, and sometimes, afforded a greater status. He clearly disliked such attitudes, but reminded rich Christians of the high standard to which they were called. They had dealings with the world, for sure, but they could not presume to go about this as if their faith did not exist. Here, he calls on them to listen (4:13), explains what they are doing wrong and why (4:13,14), then appeals to them to approach their trade differently (4:15), and concludes by criticising their arrogance (4:16). His final remark (4:17) then reminds every Christian of what God expects of them, which is to put faith into action. Those who '*know what is right*' must get on and '*do it*' (4:17).

In studying this passage, we find that it is not just a complaint but a careful analysis of Scripture and of Jesus' teachings, which suggests a more spiritual way of approaching working life. Verse 14 reminds us of Jesus' teaching, '*So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today*' (Matt 6:34). So when James continues, '*you don't even know what will happen in your life tomorrow*' (4:14), he is challenging the rich of the church to consider their priorities; he asks, what is more important, your plans for making money or trusting in God?

Next, James says to the rich *'You are like a mist that appears for a little while and then disappears'* (4:14), but this is not just a poetic turn of phrase; it comes from the work of Hosea, who in calling God's people to turn from godlessness, said, *'What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early.'* (Hosea 6:4). Hosea was complaining that even though God's people were worshipping Him according to right practice, they did what they pleased and their hearts were not committed to their God (see all of Hosea 6). They continued the life of commerce and wealth creation without appreciating that God's judgement was upon them. James used Hosea's words to warn the rich of the dangers of their ways, and his warning applies to us now as well. If we will not have the Lord alongside us in our work, our faith will be like *'mist that disappears'* (4:14).

Verse 15 contains the famous phrase; *'If it is what the Lord wants, we will live and do what we need to do'*, which is James' advice to the rich to consider what the Lord wants when making their plans. These words have become well used throughout the church, but they are only sometimes used for their intended purpose, which is to remind the believer of God's hand in all things. For some, it is a phrase to add to everything, to cover the eventuality that God might have alternative ideas! But James did not write these words to give us religious magic or a form of spiritual insurance policy. He wrote them to give us wise spiritual counsel that God's ways are higher than ours, and we depend on Him. We cannot presume to grasp the connections between everyday life and God's eternal plan by ourselves; we need Him.

So we must indeed get on with life as it is before us, but at the same time place our complete trust in Him and be ready for whatever might happen. When read properly, James's words redirect us to God's will instead of our own, and they ask us to consider that what we plan for any day may not be the Lord's will for us.

As with much of James, putting this into practice can be a problem for people today who live in a world in which work and faith do not mix. Rich Christians who work in the world of business need to take note of this passage, however, as it is a cautionary note about right attitudes, and about the place of God in life. The passage is more than this, for as well as addressing the rich, it challenges every Christian to make sure that when going about their daily work, they are consciously aware of God's presence with them in Jesus. While we all go about keeping up the financial merry-go-round on which the economics of our families depend, we must always remember that the Lord is indeed at hand, and we should not be tempted to leave our faith at home when we go to work! More than this, He sometimes has greater plans for us if we will allow Him to walk with us and lead us on.

Discipleship

Application

Trusting God in all things

It can be undeniably hard to remember God and seek His will in the midst of daily work, if you are an engineer, a trader, an analyst, a shop worker or more; but it is not impossible. As in so many areas of life, if we are willing to take small steps along the way, then we can discover that our Lord is with us even in the most intense environment that otherwise occupies our full capacities. Our Lord is the God of the impossible, and He is perfectly capable of standing with us in the doing of exams, doing hard physical work, driving and concentrating on all manner of tasks. I urge you to try.

Surely, we should only expect our God to speak to us in the course of everyday life if we are doing our utmost to be ready to hear Him at any time! Another way forward is to pray to God throughout the day, perhaps in regular time slots, perhaps every 15 minutes or so. We do not need to say many prayers, just be willing to put before our Lord what is happening, and seek His blessing and His will for the moment. Such simple things can be revolutionary! Do you want your life to change for the better?

Rich? Who are the rich?

It is hard to read the letter of James because it feels as if he is trying to strike at the heart of the rich, and the rich may be those Christians who live in the more wealthy countries of the world. You and I may in relative terms be the rich of the world even if we are not rich according to the Forbes list of wealth! I know what it is like to try and earn enough money to keep a family going in a Western society, and it is not easy; but James makes me feel guilty!

It may be hard to try and work out who the rich are but when all is said and done the advice of James is for all Christians, and as he says at the end of this passage, our lives are a matter of doing what is right rather than just believing in something. As Jesus Himself says, He is pleased with those who may say, 'No', but nevertheless do the will of the Father, rather than those who say 'yes', but fail to do anything!

Ideas for what to do

- Take an opportunity to put time aside with your spouse (if you are married) or other family members with whom you are close, and discuss how you meet your financial needs and whether it is done in a godly way.
- How does James' advice affect you, and your church? What can you do about this? These are not easy questions, but they aim to help us remain conscious of the Lord's presence with us all the time.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage tell us about riches, and how does this affect people today?
2. Do you think that rich people would listen to the advice found in this passage of scripture? And if not, why not?
3. What does James' advice in verse 15 mean to people today? Have you the saying found in verse 15 used today? Should it be used?

Final Prayer

Jesus, stand amongst Your people with power and authority. Dispel the powers of darkness that attempt to disrupt the light You would shed on the lives of your people, and save us from every work of the enemy. We ask this through our Saviour Jesus Christ, who overcame death and hell by His death and Resurrection. Alleluia! AMEN