

A Study in James

The Tests of a Living Faith

James 4:13–17

March 20, 2013

Introduction

One of the questions that believers commonly ask is, “What is God’s will for my life?” Sometimes we plan out our lives because the answer seems abundantly clear. And yet other times we are so uncertain that we don’t even know what the next day will hold. How should we go about planning our lives? James’s readers were facing some of these same questions, but their plans were not made with God in mind. In fact, their elaborate godless plans were symptomatic of a serious underlying condition: pride.

Test #7: A Living Faith and Humility (4:13–17)

The seventh test of a living faith concerns humility, specifically, recognizing God’s sovereignty and our dependence on Him in all areas of life. As with the previous two tests, James first lays out the problem and then provides a solution for us to follow.

The Problem of Pride (vv. 13–14)

The problems of worldliness (4:1–5) and pride (4:13–14) go hand in hand. The clear implication here is that a number of people in James’s audience were failing this test as well.

Making Plans Apart from God (v. 13)

The individuals speaking in this verse were completely confident in their plans for business and a residence. However, the implication is that these plans were made independently of God. James is not condemning making plans per se. What he is condemning is making plans that don’t recognize the absolute sovereign authority of God. When we plan for the future, we need to yield all our plans to God’s sovereign will.

The Uncertainty of Tomorrow and the Brevity of Life (v. 14)

James gives us two reasons for yielding our plans to God’s will. The first is that the events of tomorrow are unknown. It is no secret that even the best laid plans will often encounter unexpected variables, and

sometimes those variables can drastically alter our plans. In reality, we don't even know with certainty what will happen five minutes from now, let alone tomorrow. Of course the ultimate example of something that can cut short any plans is death. Whether we live twenty years or ninety years is really irrelevant. Our earthly lives are truly momentary in the grander scheme of things, and we don't know how they will turn out. The reason we don't know is because God has sovereignly decreed all things and has not revealed what will take place.

The Solution for Pride (vv. 15–17)

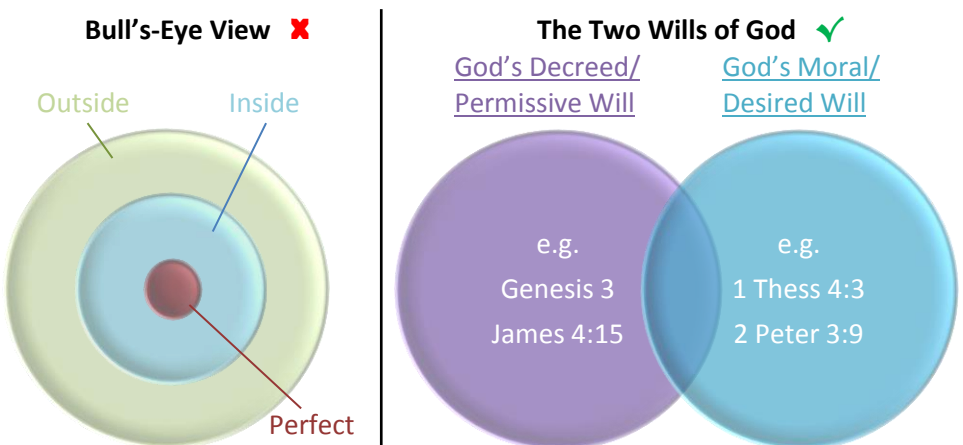
We have already encountered the solution for pride in verses 7–10. In this case, the answer lies in humbly submitting our plans to God's will.

Submitting to the Will of God (v. 15)

There is a potential problem we face when we look at this verse. On the one hand we are told to submit our plans to God's will. On the other hand we also know that God's sovereign plans are secretive. So how are we to submit our plans to a will which is unknown to us? We need to first make sure that we have a proper conception of God's will.

Sidenote: God's Will

There has been a lot of confusing teaching on discovering God's will in recent years. The most popular model for conceptualizing this is the bull's-eye diagram on the left. Every decision and plan is either viewed as inside or outside of God's will. The goal is to hit the bull's-eye: God's perfect will for your life (Rom 12:2). The problem here is that there is only *one* right way to hit the center target. Missing the elusive bull's-eye is often viewed as somehow coming short of God's best for you.



The better approach to understanding God's will is to see two overlapping circles. One circle represents God's decreed or permissive will. This circle includes everything that *has* and *will* happen. It is decreed because God has foreordained all things according to His own secret council. It is permissive because some events occur which God does not desire, and yet He allows them to happen (the left part of the circle). Sometimes God chooses to reveal this aspect of His will, e.g. the coming Messiah, or the future of Israel. However we often don't know this side of God's will until after events have actually unfolded.

The other circle represents God's moral or desired will. These are positive things God desires that accord with His moral goodness. While this circle represents what is morally ideal, we recognize that this ideal is not always met (the right part of the circle). Ideally, we want to find ourselves in the area where these circles overlap. This means we are actually doing what God desires for us.

The best way we can find out what God desires for us is by reading our bibles. The Scriptures are clear that no one can know the mind of God (Isa 40:13; Rom 11:34). But as believers, we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16). The more we understand the Scriptures, the more we can evaluate things spiritually and understand what God's moral will is (1 Cor 2:12–14). We should also recognize that as believers, we have a great deal of freedom. In many cases, there is not a single "bull's-eye" answer to the plans and decisions we make.

In verse 15, James is referring to God's decreed will. We need to humbly submit our plans to the sovereign, decreed will of God. There is a great example of this in Paul's life. He had laid out plans to come and minister in the city of Rome following a quick visit to Jerusalem. While the Lord eventually did allow him to reach Rome, it was not in the manner Paul expected — he arrived three years later in chains! In the same way we can also make plans, but we must humbly do so acknowledging the sovereign power of God to uphold, modify, or even completely alter them.

Boasting is Evil (v. 16)

James categorically condemns the self-confident proclamations of verse 13. Such boasting is evil! Any planning that does not submit to God's sovereignty and authority is sinful.

Not Doing What is Right is Sin (v. 17)

There are two basic categories into which we can group every sin. The first are sins of *commission* — doing things God has told us not to do. For example: theft, murder, lying, etc. The second category includes sins of *omission* — not doing things that God has told us to do. Some examples could be believers who don't get baptized, or who don't regularly go to church.

Many interpreters see verse 17 as only referring to sins of omission. However, according to verse 16, their sin involved *both* sins of omission and commission. The principle James is illustrating in this verse can easily be shown by an equation:

$$\text{Knowledge of What is Right} + \text{Opportunity or Ability} = \text{Obligation}$$

From this equation, we can answer a few questions:

Q: Are we still obligated to do something if we don't have the ability?

A: No!

e.g. If we see a brother who is naked and starving (2:15–16) and we open our cupboards and they are bare, are we sinning by not giving him anything? No!

Q: If we *don't* know the right thing to do, and we fail to do what is right, is that sin?

A: No! *

e.g. I invite a brother over for a ham dinner, who unbeknownst to me is a Jew. That would wound his weak conscience (1 Cor 8:12), but I'm not aware of it. Therefore it is *not* sin.

*This is only sinful if I continue after becoming aware of it.

Q: Do I have to be aware of the fact that I am sinning before it's sin?

A: No! — This is what the Scriptures mean by "hidden faults."
(Lev 4:13; Ps 19:12).

e.g. I was driving 10mph over the speed limit even though I was genuinely unaware of the speed limit and never got pulled over.

Conclusion

In the context here, we have been told the right thing to do. Those who arrogantly boast in their own self-confidence will fail this test. But those who have a living faith will humbly recognize the sovereign power and authority of God and rely on Him to achieve their goals! ~AWB