

How Not to Be a Functional Atheist James 4:13-5:9

I just saw where Essential Oils has a scent called *Humility*. Kimberly asked if she should order it for me?!

If only it were that easy!

- If only you could grow in humility by putting a bit in your beard, or on your wrist, or in your diffuser!

We actually need to something else: **to breathe in God's Word.**

- And if you think you don't need to grow in humility, then that's a good indication that you may be the person in greatest need of it.

Pastor James obviously considers it essential for growing in Christ-likeness.

- Last week we we considered God's grace to the humble, and how the humble practice repentance (4:6-10).
- Today, we read of James' warnings to **arrogant businessmen.**

Moo rightly says that the central theme of these two paragraphs is arrogance.

- One expression of arrogance is **presumptuous planning.** (13-17)
- The other expression of arrogance is **materialism and the oppression of others.** (18ff)
 - Pride is everywhere, and there's certainly a lot of pride in the business world.

This text reminds us of the problem of separating one's *faith* from one's *vocation*.

- Some find it easy to think and talk about God in worship places, but not in workplaces.
- While many wouldn't identify as an "atheist," the way they go about their work, they live as **functional atheists.**
- But all of life is to be lived humbly under the Lordship of Jesus — a Xian worldview.

Work is a gift, and can be done to God's glory and for the good of neighbor.

Contrary, to popular belief, we will even work in heaven! It won't be an eternal vacation.

- Witherington: "When Isaiah envisions the eschatological age, he doesn't envision a massive work stoppage. What he envisions is a massive war stoppage." (*Work*)
- We worked in paradise before the Fall.
 - The fall made work difficult and burdensome, and it made work selfish.
 - In the new creation we will still work – only apart from the effects of the fall.
- "Work reflects the character of God – He is pictured as a potter, metal worker, garment maker, dresser, winemaker, gardener, shepherd & tentmaker." (Banks, *God the Worker*)

So how do we work in a way that glorifies God and blesses the world?

Much could be said about this, but this particular text teaches this:

**The faithful Christian goes about his or her job
humbly, ethically, and eschatologically.**

There are **three groups of people** in these paragraphs:

- Meet the **cocky, hot-shot businessman**. He thinks he is in control! (4:13-17)
- Meet the **wicked, self-indulgent, landlord**. He thinks he can be tardy in paying wages, and be socially oppressive to laborers (5:1-6)
- Meet **the oppressed**, Christian laborer (5:7ff). (Notice the “**therefore**” linking the sections).

The **businessman** may be a Christian. James gives them Christian instruction in hopes of changing his behavior. He rebukes them like a parent does a child.

The **landlord** seems to be outside the church. James rebukes him like Amos rebuked the oppressors of his day.

The **oppressed** in verse 7ff is definitely a Christian. James addresses them as brother/sister.

Similarities in the businessman and landlord:

- Both are addressed with “**come now**” – almost sarcastically, then the warning.
- Both are failing to show a **living faith**, even though the businessman may be a Christian – **these guys are living as a functional atheists**.
 - They have no thought of **God’s sovereignty and coming judgment**.
- Both are “**arrogant**,” living as though God doesn’t exist, or as if they are God.
- Both fail to see the **transient nature of life and wealth**, and **the landlord is blinded to the fact that God is aware of the plight of the poor**.

So how can we avoid living like a functional atheist? How can we do our jobs without being spiritually blind? How can we live differently than full-blown secularists?

- We must live humbly before the Lord’s sovereignty.
- We must be mindful of the Lord’s judgment.

#1: Be Humble Before the Lord’s Sovereignty (4:13-17)

4:13 – Making plans...

- How many of you have a planner? Kimberly and I have calendar dates – I use my digital device and she’s old school planner.
 - I get frustrated sometimes because a hers doesn’t extend beyond the year! I have questions about October of 2022, you know?
- James is talking about business plans.
- You can find yourself in a conversation about business travel every week in our foyer. Raleigh has tons of people who travel for business, by car, plane, and train.
- It may come as a surprise, but business travel was quite common in the first century.

Now, we should be quick to point out that *the Bible never condemns working hard, making money, making plans, being industrious, and having an entrepreneurial spirit.*

It doesn’t **condemn** these things: it **commends** these things.

What it condemns is **sloth**.

- **Proverbs** values hard work, diligence, and investment.
- The “**sluggard**” is characterized by **indolence, inactivity, idleness, inactivity, apathy and procrastination**. None of these attitudes or actions glorify God!

- Paul told **Titus** that the Cretans were “evil beasts and lazy gluttons.” **Not a compliment!**

The Bible doesn't commend making *money* either.

- The Bible condemns “the **love of money**” because it is “**a**” **root of all kinds of evil.**
- There are many **wealth saints** in the Bible: From Abraham Lydia.
- It's **not** that the poor are always godly and the rich are always ungodly!
- **We see these categories in Scripture:** (1) godly rich, (2) godly poor, (3) ungodly rich, and (4) ungodly poor.
- **Are you being godly in your current state?**

If you work hard, rest well, are “rich in good deeds,” and are a generous with your wealth – as the Bible instructs the wealthy (1 Tim 6) – you can have a significant impact in the kingdom of God and in the good of your neighborhood.

So what's the problem with this businessman in James 4?

- It's **not** that he's planning. It's **not** money. It's not work.
- **It's presumption!**
- He/she is **making plans without dependence on God.**
- This person is making money as if he/she is in **control.**

You should write across your planner, your calendar: “If the Lord wills.”
The humble plan in pencil!

You can be so consumed with the material realm that you become blind to spiritual realities.

James gives us a series of correctives and instructions:

A. You Don't Know the Future (13-14a)

- They are talking about today, and tomorrow and next year, as if they're in control.
- **14a:** “You don't know what tomorrow will bring.”
- You don't know the future!
- Now, we do know something about the future – **but we only know what God has chosen to reveal.**
 - Platt, “We'll tell your future for free”
- But about where we will be, what we will do, etc, that's in God's hands.
- This humbles us.

B. Your Life Is a Mist (14b)

- **“What is your life?”** – That's a big question!
- In many ways this is **the question of philosophy** – all questions revolve around it!
 - **Where did you come from? Where are you going? Why are you here?**
- These need to be answered because ... your life is **a mist.**

Consider the fact that your heart could stop beating at any moment.

- **This is humbling, isn't it?**
- **Every day is a gift of God... and he sustains us as we sleep.**
- **Every hot shot still gets in the fetal position at night!** A great illustration of how small we really are.
- **Here are a few of the biblical expressions about the brevity of life:**

“My days are swifter than a runner” (Job 9:25)

“My days are like an evening shadow;
I wither away like grass.” (Psalm 102:11)

“Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.
Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!” (Psalm 39:5)

“As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.” (Psalm 103:15-16)

“So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom.” (Psalm 90:12)

Life is a vapor.

- **Illness: Heart attack ... Cancer**
- **Accidental Death**

Jesus isn't a Vapor.

- He is the Alpha and Omega.
- He was crucified. Dead at 33. But he didn't stay dead! He was raised for our justification!
- In him, we live forever.

C. The Lord Is in Control (15)

We should say, “**if the Lord wills.**”

- James takes this expression that was used in a variety of circles, “If God wills,” or “if the gods will” **and “baptizes it” by using Kurios, the Lord.**
- The Lord Jesus gives this is a distinctly Christian perspective.

The Duration of our lives is in the Lord's hands. “If the Lord wills ... we will live”

“You saw my unformed substance; in your book was written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.” (Ps 139:16)

The Direction of our lives is in the Lord's hands. “If the Lord wills ... we will do this/that”

- Paul talked like this regarding missionary work: (Acts 18:20-21; 1 Cor. 4:19; 16:7)
- Like Jesus in the garden, we must always say, “not my will, but your will be done.”

Proverbs 16:9: “The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.”

Proverbs 16:33: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”

Proverbs 19:21: “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.”

Proverbs 3:6: “In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 – He makes everything beautiful in his time

Two Words of Clarification

1. **This is not a call to passive fatalism.** “Whatever will be will be.”

- **Fatalism** doesn't have a sovereign God. Fatalism isn't Christianity.
 - Far from being passive, **James has given us plenty of commands to act on!**
 - There are **48 commands in 108 verses!** The whole book is about action!
 - 4:17 – If you know what to do, what please God – do it!
 - **The problem of “let go and let God” is that it doesn't take God's clear commands seriously.**
 - Don't wait passively because God has given us a whole book of instruction!
- **This verse is simply reminding us of who is in charge, and how that puts all of our planning in perspective, and it should give us a great measure of comfort!**
 - **So make plans. Go to work. Work hard.**
 - **But remember, God has his own agenda that he is working out.**
 - And that agenda is good. It involves **conforming us to the image of His Son.**

2. **Don't feel like you must utter these exact words every single time you say something about the future.**

- We would have to use it for everything! **“Will you pass the potatoes?” “If the Lord wills, I will pass you the potatoes.” “You say that again I'm throwing my knife at you.”**
- **It's not for every sentence you utter. It's not a magical incantation. It's not a cliché.**
- **It's certainly fine to incorporate it (or “DV”), and it can be very helpful for reminding ourselves and others of who is in charge.**
- **But the bigger issue is your heart and mind.**
- **Instead of making it a cliché, it must be a conviction.**
- **As you make your plans, you need to acknowledge in your heart, that these plans are subject to change because God is in control.**
- **Have this mindset, “I need the grace of God and I am dependent on the will of God in every part of my life.”**

D. Arrogant Planning Is Evil (16)

Here is the root problem: “you boast and you brag.”

Someone said, **“None are so empty as those who are full of themselves.”**

- It is arrogant to *not* believe and confess that your life is in the hands of God.
- Again James doesn't have an issue with industry or planning, but of arrogant independence.
- **Sometimes that anger is expressed when plans are changed!!! I see it in airports around the world! They can't control the weather, pal.**
- **“We're going to be grounded for 15 minutes” – and everyone goes bananas!**

- God lifts a finger and all your big plans are changed!
- He's God.
- **Volcano in Iceland... who plans for that?!**

**A Christian worldview is a humble worldview.
It acknowledges the sovereignty and self-sufficiency of God.**

E. Live Out Your Faith Everyday (17)

This kind of comes out of know where. Most believe this was a common maxim that people knew. James decides this is a good place to drop it.

He may have had the Proverbs in mind

²⁷ Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
when it is in your power to do it.

This would certainly apply to the next section especially. (Landlord using power/wealth generously & justly)

And it's interesting how the next verse sounds like this paragraph in James:

²⁸ Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come again,
tomorrow I will give it"—when you have it with you.

Whatever the case, James says you have no excuse when you know what to do, but fail to live out your faith.

James gives us a needed perspective on sin.

- Sins of of **Commission**: *Doing what God says **not to do!*** "Do not commit adultery." This is how we usually think of sin.
- Sins of **Omission**: *Not doing what God **said to do!***

This would involve what James has just said!

James says admit your dependence on God when you make your business plans—if you fail to do it – it is sin.

Previously, James told us to care for the needy.

- It would be sin of omission for us not to care for the needy.
- In fact, this is how Jesus approached lack of care for the needy in Matthew 25.

Summary: Be humble before the Lord's Sovereignty...

#2: Be Mindful of the Lord's Judgment (5:1-9)

James's emphasis on the poor leads to the harshest language in the entire book!

Here James thunders away like Amos in the OT, who denounced **materialism**.

"You lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on posh couches, gorge on meat all day, play idle songs, and fail to mourn over the sins of Israel — this revelry will end in judgment." (Paraphrase, Amos 6:1-7)

- This is like “Yo MTV Cribs,” or “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous”

James emphasizes the fact that the **judgment is coming soon.**

V.1: “miseries that are coming,”

V.3: “laid up treasure in the last days,”

V. 5: “a day of slaughter.”

7-9: This emphasis on end-time judgment continues:

- **V.7:** “be patient until the Lord’s coming” (v. 7);
- **V.8:** “The Lord’s coming is near”;
- **V.9:** “The judge stands at the door!”

Jesus is coming back, and we should live in view of that coming, not as a functional atheists!

James says and Jesus is going to do at least two things.

A. He Is Coming to Judge the Wicked (5:1-6)

These are most likely unbelievers.

- They are not called “**brothers.**”
- They are only told to **weep** and **wail**, and the language is similar to **what the prophets would pronounce on pagan nations** (Moo).

Why would James spend time using such harsh language toward unbelievers?

- To **comfort suffering** Christians, those suffering at the hands of the wicked.
- To indirectly instruct the believers — some of whom were favoring the rich!

5:1-6 is a a direct rebuke to rich non-believers who are oppressing the poor, but it’s also a subtle, indirect warning to rich Christians who are ignoring the poor.

You may not be oppressing the poor, but are you ignoring the poor?

- Remember to know the right thing to do, and fail to do it, is sin!

4 Specific Sins of the Unbelieving Rich:

i. Hoarding Wealth (5:2-3)

- The rich were storing away their wealth in barns (to use Jesus’s words in Lk 12:13-21).
- James says that all your stuff you buy that you don’t need is **rotting**.
- **Moths** are eating your clothes, **as they just sit in storage.**
- Your our gold is **corroding** — **it’s transient.**

Instead of hoarding we should be stewarding God’s gifts.

- “**We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.**” (Churchill)
- **Wesley, “Make as much as you can, give as much as you can.”**

3b: Your hoarded resources will testify against you when you meet the judge.

Jesus said that we should not “treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.” But rather, lay up treasures in heaven. (Matt 6:19-20).

Let's be reminded of **Luke 12:15-21**:

¹⁵ And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” ¹⁶ And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷ and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’” ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

This is a person living without reference to God – without any fear of coming judgment. Jesus calls this person a *fool*.

Further, the reality is, more stuff won't satisfy. Only Christ will. Be rich toward God. Charles Bridges, “I have found more in Christ than I ever expected to want.”

ii. Cheating Workers (4)

- In James' day, land was in the hands of a small number of wealthy landowners.
- The laborers were reliant on the landlords to pay them a just fee, and to pay them on time.
- **Dad comes home with nothing. The kids have no food. “Did you work, dad?” Yes, but they never paid me.”**
- **There's crying – so loud that God hears it!**
- **The wealthy are getting fat and indulging in their riches, while people were suffering and dying.**
- **James says, the Lord will have the last word on this.**
- The “Lord of Hosts,” or the “Master of Armies,” knows what's going on.
- **Xian employers must treat their workers as image bearers of God. That means paying them a decent wage, and treating them with respect and compassion. And remember that God knows what's going on.**

iii. Living in Self-indulgence (5)

- Look at this imagery.
- The wicked landlords are like cattle gorging on food on the day of their slaughter!
- They are **enjoying their stuff, unaware that they're about to be butchered.**
- They are **overstuffed and unconcerned about God.**
- **Question to Charlie Sheen: “Why did you spend so much money on prostitutes?” He said, “I had millions to blow. I ran out of things to buy.”**
- **Many like him have numbed themselves to their most urgent need, being right with God, knowing Him, being satisfied in Him.**

iv. Condemning the Righteous (6)

- **“Condemning”** — They may have been using the law-court to deprive them of wages.
- **“Murdering”** - One commentator says **“In the Jewish world, to deprive a person of their support was the same as murdering them”** (Blomberg and Kamell)
- They are crushing the poor.
- But God is opposed to them! And the Judge will have the last word.

App:

- **Repent.** James doesn't tell these unbelievers to repent, but their sin should wake them up and cause them to repent.
 - The good news is if you still have breath, you can find grace!
 - **John Newton was an abusive slave trader. A wicked practice. During a storm in the mid 1700's, his ship almost sank, and he cried out for deliverance. This eventually lead to his conversion. He eventually became a pastor, and supported Wilberforce's work against the slave trade.**
 - Grace transformed Newton. And God can transform the unethical businessman who thinks he's God.
 - It happened for **Zaccheus** – I will pay back what I owe four times the amount!
- **What is your life? While you have breath, repent.**
 - **Story of one of Graham's crusades in Madison Square Garden ... old man watching in NC... attended church but had never made a commitment to Jesus.... When Graham went off the air, the man began sobbing, and when his wife asked him what happened he said, “I have given my heart to Jesus.” The next morning, the wife was surprised to not find him in the bed. She looked around, and he was in the garden... lying face down, dead from a heart-attack. (Ryken)**
 - It's a story of grace. While there's breath, there's hope. And it's also sad for a person to wait that long! **Believe now, and start living for Jesus, not self-indulgence.**

While this is aimed at unbelievers, we need to apply it to ourselves.

- **God is serious about His people not hoarding wealth.**
 - **Think about this as you think about literally thousands around the world die every day because they do not have food or water, while the rich gorge themselves.**
- **God is serious about not cheating workers.**
- **God is serious about not living in luxury and self-indulgence while there are real physical and spiritual needs around the world.**
- **May we use our wealth to bless others, care for the poor, and advance the gospel.**

B. He Is Coming to Deliver the Faithful (7-9)

Verse 7 shifts focus.

Now consider the plight of the poor Christians.

- Put yourself in the seat of the struggling, impoverished, persecuted Christians who are hearing this letter read aloud.
- You are comforted that the Lord is aware of what these wicked landowners are doing, but that's not all of it.
- The Lord is coming not just to judge the wicked, but to deliver his people.
- James says the Lord of Hosts will vindicate you in due time.

So what's the call? It's this:

7-8: To "be patient until the Lord's coming."

- "Coming" is the Greek word *parousia*, meaning "presence" (1 Cor. 16:7; 2 Cor. 10:10).
- In secular Greek, it referred to the "arrival" of a king or dignitary.
- The early church applied to the "coming" of Jesus at the end of history to judge the wicked (See Matt. 24:37, 39; 2 Thess. 2:8) and deliver the saints (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23).
- **Moo: "James certainly intends, and his readers would certainly have understood, *the Lord's coming* to refer to Jesus' return as judge and savior."**

Be patient like a farmer (8).

- The farmer is waiting on the harvest.
- The farmer is dependent on the Lord's provision of rain.
- The farmer can't control the rain. He has to trust God.
- So James says that those who were suffering have to trust God with what they can't control.
- But one thing is sure: **the rain is coming. Jesus will return. Be patient.**

9: To "not grumble against one another"

- **When you suffer, this is one of the most tempting sins: grumbling and complaining – even to turn our frustrations against one another.**
- James says you too must remember that "the judge is at the door." So be faithful.

In the end, Jesus wins. And because we are in Him, we win.

- Sometimes, winning feels like losing, but remember we win.
- This gives us great hope!

So be faithful, be expectant, and be holy, as you do your job.

Do your job humbly, ethically, and eschatologically.