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Looking to the Future
James 4:13 – 5:11

It's a part of human nature to look toward the future. God has put us human beings together in such a way that we naturally look to see what's ahead.

Sometimes we do that with eager anticipation. Our future is bright, and we expect good things to come our way, like children who can hardly wait for Christmas.

Sometimes we look to the future with *anxiety*. Not knowing what's coming can be frightening.

Do you remember 1999, when people around the world were worried about the "Y2K bug" and what kinds of catastrophes it might cause? Untold millions of dollars were spent to correct the problem, but some were still making all kinds of doomsday predictions. Some government officials feared that terrorists would take advantage of the confusion to mount attacks in our country. As we approached January 1, 2000, most people were feeling less anxious about it, but some people still made extensive preparations and stockpiled huge amounts of food, bottled water, cash, and other necessities. As it turned out, those anxieties were unfounded. But a lot of people had spent a lot of time worrying about it, right up until the clock and calendar rolled over into 2000. One major city on the west coast even canceled its plans for a large celebration on New Year's Eve because of the fear of a terrorist strike. The fears never came to fruition, but they dominated our nation's attention for nearly a year.

Most of the time our anxieties about the future are much more personal. There's always the possibility of illness or injury or tragedy or a financial setback looming around the corner. And many people worry about those things. To those of us who do, Jesus said in Matthew 6:

"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."¹

That's a pretty clear word about looking to the future with anxiety, isn't it?

But for some, it's even worse. They look to the future with *despair*. Their lives seem to move from one crisis to another. Trials and hardships come one on top of another, mounting up into seemingly insurmountable obstacles in their lives. For them, the future is bleak, and they become despondent when they look toward it.

However we do it, almost all of us look to the future.

This text we're looking at today is about "Looking to the Future." In it, *James gave his*

readers some important instructions about how they should look to the future. What he says here in our text can help us learn to look to the future from a kingdom perspective.

James' instructions

On the surface, the broader passage seems to be a hodgepodge collection of ethical instructions and appeals, much like the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (the book of Proverbs in particular) and much like Jesus' ethical instruction. In fact, James seems to have been very familiar with Jesus' teachings that have come to us as the Sermon on the Mount. This is actually a particular style of teaching that was common at that time.

In this style the writer or speaker would move quickly from one matter to another. Often the exhortations were connected like the links of a chain by linking words or ideas, rather than logical progression. When we learn to look for these links in James, we can see the connections.

You'll notice that James gives two words of warning that begin, "Now listen . . ." He addresses the first one to presumptuous merchants who make their business plans with no thought of God's will (4:13-17). He directs the other toward the wicked rich who trust in treasures and oppress the laborers who work for them (5:1-6). These are followed by several exhortations to patience and endurance in anticipation of the Lord's coming (5:7-11). In the midst of these exhortations (5:9) is a warning not to grumble against one another, so that they wouldn't be judged, and a reminder that the Judge is standing at the doors, ready to return at any time.

It's worth noting that the passage immediately preceding our text (4:11-12) warns against speaking evil against one another, equating it with judging the law and usurping God's prerogative to judge His people.

Likewise, the passage that immediately follows our text (5:12) warns against using oaths to establish what we say in ordinary conversation. Instead, we should speak with consistency and integrity so that people know our "Yes" means yes and our "No" means no. This way we won't fall under condemnation or judgment. These warnings about how we speak bracket our text and link up with the same kind of warning in its midst in 5:9.

Now the common theme that runs through all this is the future—specifically, how to approach the future in light of the uncertainties and trials of this life and the certainty of the Lord's return and the judgment.

But let's focus this morning on James' first warning in 4:13-17. It's a friendly challenge to industrious business people who are planning their future operations: "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." The problem is not their desire to do business and make a decent profit. It's not that they're making future plans. The problem is that they're making their plans without any reference to God's will!² They were leaving Him out of their plans completely. After all, this was an *economic* matter, *not* a religious one. At least that's what *they* thought! How many times have I heard that one!

James' friendly challenge then becomes very pointed.

Maybe he had Proverbs 27:1 in mind: "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth." Pointing to the reality of human mortality, he says to the merchants, "Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." Then he says, "Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil."

In other words, they should express their dependence on God's will, rather than displaying an

arrogant presumption that amounts to evil boasting. After all, in ancient times, even the pagans often used this expression. Shouldn't believers display this attitude of humble dependence much more? Shouldn't their faith in God permeate every area of their lives? James sums up his challenge by saying, "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." They know now that the expression of their dependence on God is what they ought to do; if they don't do it, they will be sinning.

With humble dependence on God

So what does all this say to us about how we should approach the future as followers of Jesus? James' instructions to his readers tell us that *we must look to the future with humble dependence on God*. Think about it.

It's so easy for us to take the future for granted, and to make our plans without taking God's plans into consideration. This is particularly true for us when we become so involved in our work, whatever it may be. If we're not careful, we'll compartmentalize our lives into sacred and secular, trying to be religious while leaving God out of our everyday affairs, particularly our work or business. If we allow ourselves to fall into that trap, we may be in for some hard lessons.

Some years ago, I heard the late Dr. W. A. Jones, long-time pastor of the Bethany Baptist Church of Brooklyn in New York City, tell a story about a man who was going to sell his horse. As he traveled along, he passed by the house of a preacher, who was out by the road painting his fence. The preacher spoke to him and said, "That sure is a fine horse you have there. Where are you going with him?"

The man replied, "I'm going to town; I have an appointment with a man who wants to buy a horse, and I'm going to sell my horse to him."

The preacher said, "Well, that's fine, but don't you think you ought to say, 'If it's the Lord's will, I'm going to sell my horse?'"

The man very arrogantly refused, saying, "No, sir! This is my horse! I've raised him, fed him, and trained him, and I'm going to sell my horse!"

The preacher asked him again, "Yes, but don't you think you ought to say, 'If it's the Lord's will?'"

The man responded adamantly, "The Lord doesn't have a thing to do with it; this is my horse, and I'm going to my appointment to sell my horse!"

Then he went on his way.

A couple of hours later, the man returned without his horse, and without his boots, with his clothes in shreds, and all scratched up from head to toe. Again the preacher spoke, "Say, aren't you the fellow who came by earlier on his way to sell his horse? I see you must have sold him. But what in the world happened to you?"

The man answered, "Well, you know that you stopped me to talk with me this morning. You detained me and slowed me down. I realized I was going to be late for my appointment, so I decided to take a shortcut across a man's field. He came out with his gun and started shooting at me, and hit my horse and killed him. When my horse fell, my leg was caught up underneath him, and I had to pull off my boots to get out from under him. The man kept shooting, so I ran, and had to climb through a barbed-wire fence to get away from him. So here I am, horseless, bootless, and scratched from head to toe!"

The preacher said, "That sure is a sad story; I'm so sorry. But tell me, what are you going to do now?"

The man said, “I’m going home—if it’s the Lord’s will!”

We must *never* look to the future with presumption, making our plans without reference to God’s will. We must yield *all* of life to His will, with no division into sacred and secular compartments. Our faith must impact *every* area of our lives, so that we express and live in an attitude of humble dependence on God and His grace in Jesus Christ. That’s true for us as individuals, and it’s true for us as a church as well.

This week the new church year will start for our church. New committees, teachers, officers, and deacons all assume their duties, and our new budget takes effect.

As we launch *Mission Jonesboro*, as we carry on the other areas of worship and ministry and service, as we search for a new Associate Pastor for Family Ministry, how will we look to the future? Will we do it all with humble dependence on God? Really and truly?

How many times do we make our plans about what we’re going to do for God and then ask Him to bless them, rather than seeking Him to see *what He wants to do through us*? How many times do we start a meeting or a service with a perfunctory prayer rather than really seeking God and submitting our wills to His will? What kind of difference would it make if we really did humbly depend on God and seek His face and His will?

We all look to the future, just as surely as children look for Christmas or for the first snow of winter. The question is, how do we look to it?

Do we look with anticipation, anxiety, despair?

James’ instructions speak a clear word to us. *We must look to the future with humble dependence on God*. To do otherwise is to live in arrogant presumption. It’s to give no thought to the fact that our lives are ultimately in God’s hands. So how about us? Are we making our plans—all of them—in the light of God’s will? By God’s grace, let us look to the future humbly depending on God, trusting in His gracious will, doing what He calls us to do.

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¹ Matthew 6:31, 33-34. Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

² Harold S. Songer, “James,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 12 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972), 130-132.