

Planning with God in Mind

James 4:13-17

On Tuesday I did a Google search on the phrase “business planning.” How many hits do you suppose that got? Over 4 billion hits! I then went over to Amazon to see how many books the same search would turn up. They list over 70,000 books on business planning! There is a lot of information out there about planning! If you are in business, clearly some level of planning is important, right? There is a reason so many books are being written about the subject.

Whether or not we are in business, planning is something all of us do at some level. Around here I do a lot of planning for ministries I lead. We are planning right now what it will look like to reopen Sunday in-person worship. Personally, we make plans for things like our careers, our vacations, our families, and many other things. Planning is simply part of life.

In our passage today, James is going to talk about planning. Specifically, he is addressing those involved in business. His desire is that when it comes to business that we would plan with God in mind. The principles that James talks about in the passage that we are looking at today has application to any kind of planning, but James is specially addressing the subset of his audience who were merchants involved in business and so I want to let this text speak first specifically to those of you in business and then secondarily to the rest of us.

James begins by confronting a wrong attitude in planning.

I. A Wrong Attitude Confronted (v. 13-14)

¹³ 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.” 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 then vanishes away.

When James says, *come now*,” it is a strong call to pay attention to what he is going to say. It’s like, “Listen up!”

The wrong attitude that James confronts here is planning without reference to God. The people he is speaking to had it all figured out apart from God. They know the when - *Today or tomorrow*. They know where they will do business – we will go *to such and such a city*. They know how long – we will *spend a year there*. And they know what they will do – we will *engage in business*. And they are confident of results – we will *make a profit*.

Now, for any business owners here at Faith, I’m guessing that most of you have had to develop a business plan. You’ve had to think through the very details that are reflected in what these merchants say, right? Let me be clear, James is not confronting planning or strategy. He is not even confronting the desire to make a profit. He is not saying these things are wrong. What he is confronting an attitude in which our plans are made without God in mind. James is

addressing people who might gather in worship with other believers on Sunday, but when it comes to how they approach their business the rest of the week, God has no part of it.

These people are so self-confident of what they are going to be able to accomplish in the next year, and yet, James says, *you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.*

This spring our son, Philip, graduated with a second degree from KU. I distinctly remember back in February thinking to myself, “What a great time for Philip to be graduating. Unemployment is at record lows. There just have to be good jobs out there for Philip.” Three months later over 36 million Americans have lost their jobs and the unemployment rate is at depression era levels. We do not know what our life will be like tomorrow! If there is one good thing that COVID-19 has done in my life it is to remind me that I am not in control.

These business people failed to understand that they were not in control. And they failed to understand how fleeting life can be. James says that *You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.* James is emphasizing the brevity of life. We are like a vapor. This is a biblical view of life. It’s short. Very short.

James is not making a statement of your value. The scriptures are clear that you are incredibly valuable. You are made in the image of God. You are an eternal being. But in this world, your life is like a vapor. And since this is true and since we do not know what tomorrow will bring, we need to bring some humility to our planning. We are not ultimately in control of life and our plans. And so therefore any approach to planning that leaves out the One Who is in control, is a wrong approach.

James goes on to explain a right attitude toward planning.

II. A Right Attitude Explained (v. 15)

¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.”

You can plan. James says you can say, *we will live and also do this or that*, that’s planning, but he is advocating an attitude of humility where we remember Who is ultimately in charge. We have the attitude of *if the Lord wills* I will do these things.

The Apostle Paul made plans for his ministry, but he didn’t do it arrogantly. Acts 18:21 is reflective of his approach:

But taking leave of them and saying, “I [Paul] will return to you again if God wills,” he set sail from Ephesus.

Paul planned, but he did so with a clear acknowledgement that God was in charge. This is what James is going for – a heart attitude that says, “I don’t know what tomorrow will bring and I’m

not in charge of the days of my life. And so, in light of these realities, here is what I plan to do IF the Lord wills it.” And James is not talking about just a rote recitation of this phrase; he is talking about a heart attitude in which we submit our plans to God knowing that He is in charge.

And so, whether you are planning for your business or doing any other kind of planning, this is planning with God in mind. Now, as we come to verse 16, James circles back to the wrong attitude that these merchants were expressing. And he gets to the heart of the matter and that is that to plan without God in mind is arrogant.

III. The Arrogance of Planning without God in Mind (v. 16)

¹⁶ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.

The NIV translates this phrase, “you boast in your arrogant schemes.” Their plans were arrogant because they were made without keeping God in mind. It is arrogant to plan for the next year without keeping God in mind when we don’t even know what tomorrow will bring.

James is talking about an attitude of self-exaltation and self-absorption. It’s about me and trumpeting what I am going to do. When you make plans apart from God and then boast in those plans this is arrogant. And it is not just a little problem; James calls it *evil*.

Just a few verses earlier James had said that God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble (v. 6). The wrong approach that James is confronting here is an approach to which God would be opposed, because it is rooted in pride and arrogance. And so he is appealing to them to turn from this, to humble themselves and keep God in mind as they plan that they might experience God’s grace.

Finally, as we come to verse 17, James states a general principle.

IV. A Final General Principle

¹⁷ Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

Sin is not just the committing of a wrong, it is also the failure to do a right. This applies to all things, but in the context it most likely applies to all that he has said in chapter 4 and certainly to what he has just said about planning. For these merchants who now know the right approach to their planning, to fail to do it is sin.

And so for those of you who are in business, James is very clear that the right thing to do as you plan for your business is to humbly plan with God in mind. To make plans apart from God is arrogant. It is sin.

A few days ago I reached out to several men and women here at Faith who own their own businesses to ask them to share what it looks like for them to keep God in mind as they plan. I want to share some of their thoughts. For any who are in business, I think what they shared will be really helpful. And the reality is that what they shared will be helpful to all of us.

Before I share some of the specifics of how they plan with the Lord in mind, I found it interesting that most of them expressed that this is a real struggle. They talked about battles pride and desires to hold tightly to control. They talked about feeling the pressure that success and failure is all up to them. They talked about dealing with motives to grow their business. Is it about God's glory and to be generous or is it their own greed? I share this to simply to make the point that to plan with the Lord in mind is not easy. It is a constant battle due to our own brokenness and the world that we live in. But it is a battle that is worth it.

Okay, so here are some of the concepts they shared about how they plan with the Lord in mind. First, they wrote about the need to **surrender the business to God**. One person said this:

It took sleepless nights full of fear and anxiety to show me that I wasn't in control. I had to get to a place where I surrendered my business to God and allow[ed] Him to be in charge of it. That's something I have to do very regularly and it helps me keep that attitude "if the lord wills." I've had times in recent years where work has dried up and have been faced with the reality that I didn't have anything for my guys to do. Surrendering my business to God has given me freedom and peace that He gets to be in charge and will ultimately provide for me whatever that looks like. . . I think ultimately for me all of it has come down to the idea of surrendering my business to God daily and allowing Him access to everything that is involved with how I operate my business.

A couple of the people used the image of holding their business and their plans with an open hand as a picture of what surrender looks like. One woman said this:

I think of the analogy of . . . open hands quite a bit. I plan for and work hard toward the future like it's certain, but try to focus on the present and hold every plan with an open hand trusting that the Lord is good and will provide and guide me even if my plans fail.

A second concept that many of them shared was that they **see their business as a stewardship from God**. They understand that it is God's business not theirs. And they are called to steward well what God has given to them. One person said this:

I have an opportunity to serve God in the management of a business that we've been given . . . to tend for him. This is God's garden, I'm a steward. I'm reminded that this is my occupation, not my identity. This is my job, not my life. We are here for a season and then our time will cease. This takes a lot of the worry and burden from our shoulders.

Part of what this means for these people is that as a stewardship, they are concerned about what God is wanting to do through their business. They talked about how as stewards of their business that their desire is more than just being profitable. It is about being blessed to be a blessing. It is about loving and caring well for others through their business.

Another aspect that was shared over and over about how they involve God in their plans was **seeking God through prayer**. One said this:

Involving God looks like a lot of prayer. The two of us independently praying and then reconven[ing]. Praying over the clients when we know what life struggles or celebration they face.

One spouse wrote this about her husband:

Over the years, he has been able to embrace how God has wired him as a strategic thinker who sets goals and priorities for our business . . . however, he does so prayerfully and asks God to open and shut doors (even to protect him from himself and his ambitions if need be). He goes ahead and puts in the proposals . . . but prays God would shut the door or make it clear if he's not to submit it. He's negotiated larger equipment purchases, while asking God to guide him to know whether or not to make these purchases. Often if [he] has a particularly puzzling problem to solve, he will ask God for creative problem-solving. He's had times where God will give him a "crazy idea" shortly after a prayer like that, that actually worked! It's been really cool to see. Recently we had an opportunity to put in a proposal for work that [my husband] is really super excited about . . . it seems like he continues to put those longings before God with an open hand. . . "Yes, I really want this, but you know, God, if this is right for us to be doing this work . . . your will be done."

Another thing that was shared was to **seek biblical wisdom** for their business and their plans. One business owner shared with me a document full of scriptures that he uses to guide his decisions. If we are going to keep God in mind as we plan we would be wise to be in the Scriptures allowing that to form and shape our thinking.

Another shared how important it has been for him to **seek wise counsel**. He wrote this:

I've utilized a business coach for the past 3 years who has been more of a counselor/mentor than anything. He's always asking me questions about my business that help turn my heart towards God and what He wants for my life. That for sure has been helpful in my business planning.

One of the verses that was on that document of all those scriptures that the one man sent me is Proverbs 11:14, which says:

*Where there is no guidance the people fall,
But in abundance of counselors there is victory.*

Do you have any godly business mentors who are asking you great questions about your plans? This can help plan with God in mind.

Now certainly there were other things that these people shared, but these five things – surrender, stewardship, prayer, biblical wisdom, and wise counsel would be very helpful to any of us whether we are talking about planning for our business or for any other endeavor. These things help us plan with God in mind.

Now, I didn't ask for this, but most of the men and women I contacted shared what they have experienced as they have surrendered their businesses to God and have sought to keep Him in mind as they have planned. They have experienced peace and freedom. They wrote about how they experienced the reality that the pressure is off and they've have found freedom from worry, and burdens lifted as they have sought God in their planning.

One thing they didn't say, however, is that planning with God in mind always means success. In fact, one made the point that God's view of success is often different than his. Another man said that literally as he was getting ready to send his reply to me he heard from one of his employees that a major source of income that his company was planning on was not going to happen. It was a major hit as his company is seeking to weather the impact of COVID-19. This is a man who is doing the very things that I've just shared. He has planned with the Lord in mind and yet he is not sure if his business will survive.

He was gracious enough to share a note that he had sent to his kids a couple of months ago when this all started. In that note he wrote about how much he loves his company and how it has been able to help people. He wrote about the blessings and the joy he has received through the people his business has allowed him to meet. He wrote about actions he has been forced to take to try to survive this economic downturn. At the end of his note to his family he wrote this:

Three truths that I hope we all can remember:

- 1. Compared to eternity, this world is a match-head. Our short lives here on earth are just a flash when compared to our eternal, lavish and glorious time in heaven.*
- 2. I can't earn grace because my identity is already in Christ my brother, the royal son of God. With Christ, we have full fellowship with the King of Kings. He was judged for our sin. He did that for each of us. Our financial success doesn't reflect God's grace or, necessarily, our performance.*
- 3. The opportunity is available for us to bring Christ's love into others' lives. God's paths aren't usually about us, they are about the beautiful orchestra of*

His sovereignty and how others can know these three truths. Just because our business might fail, doesn't mean that God wasn't in it, though it is easy to feel that way.

I love you all and I can't tell you how much I hope these three truths are a part of your life and the lives of those you love. Dad

I love that. This is a man who understands who is in control. He sees the big picture that our lives here on earth are so fleeting and that there is an eternal, glorious heaven that awaits us. He understands that whether his business succeeds or not, he has an opportunity to bring Christ's love to others. This is a person who gets it. This is a person who is planning with God in mind.