

Knowing Better

We have a lot of parents here today (grandparents and great grandparents too).

What works with kids? Incentives? Rewards (bribes)? Threats? Punishment?



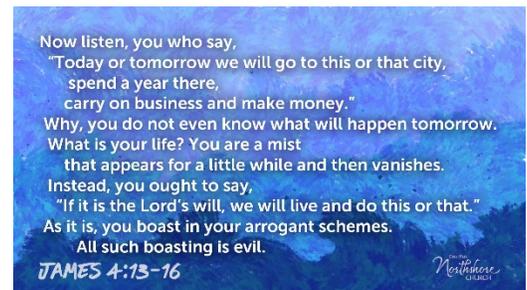
For me, a fairly effective rebuke would be along the lines of, “You know better.” It reminded me that I knew the difference between right and wrong... or at the very least I knew better enough to not get caught.

Knowing better: This is the rebuke we find in this week’s installment from our series from the Book of James that we are calling *Working Faith*. Here the text is reminding us, and all followers of Jesus throughout the ages, that we **know better**.

Here is how it begins:

¹³ Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.”

James is addressing those who are *going about their business*... **literally** going about their business.



The letter was originally addressed to those very early Christians, predominantly of Jewish ancestry, who were scattered around the areas surrounding Israel (Syria and such). Some were scattered because of persecution; others were scattered as immigrants often are... simply seeking a better life. Many were scattered due to commerce; they were merchants.

We can surmise that there were no particular merchants in mind since there are nonspecific terms used here... no specific cities, trade routes, or even businesses mentioned. While there is certainly a *rebuke* in today’s text, it is not a matter of being against business or capitalism or money. This is about attitudes, motives and values.

There is a **tone** here... the sort of tone a parent would have when disciplining a child who knows better. “Now listen,” says James. You go about making your plans... yet...

¹⁴ 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.¹

Tomorrow could be just another Monday... but who knows? We make our plans, but sometimes our plans get *turned upside down*. We make our plans, and they seem stable enough... but we often find that our plans are *fragile*. It turns out that our **lives** are fragile.

Our text describes our lives as a *mist*. Translators could have said *vapor* or *smoke*. What is more fragile than a puff of smoke? A puff of smoke (or vape) can't even *hold it together* against the slightest breeze; it vanishes.

We get it. Life is short. Every day may bring a new surprise. And our very lives are fragile. Illness or an accident could upend everything, or simply end our lives. This is the sort of thing common to everyone, from every perspective... faith or no faith.

It seems that we are fascinated with the question since it seems to come up from time to time: If you knew today was your last day on earth, what would you do? I suppose it is a revealing question... the sort of thing that could reveal priorities, aspirations, regrets, or even fears.

But the mere fragility, and perhaps futility, of life isn't the main point. We aren't to live under the specter of the Grim Reaper; but under the Lordship of Christ.

¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."²

With verse 15 the point is revealed: rather than living pridefully, making our plans from our own perspectives with our own strength and out of our own resources, Believers should always live humbly, rooted in the Lord's will.

Verse 15 starts with the word *instead*. Instead of making your plans on your own (going to this city or that, carrying on business and such)... instead, consider the Lord's will.

We have said before that the words and theology in James closely parallel the words of Jesus (more closely than any of the other books in the New Testament, apart from the Gospels, of course). Perhaps James (the half-brother of Jesus) had in mind the words of Jesus we find in Luke 12.

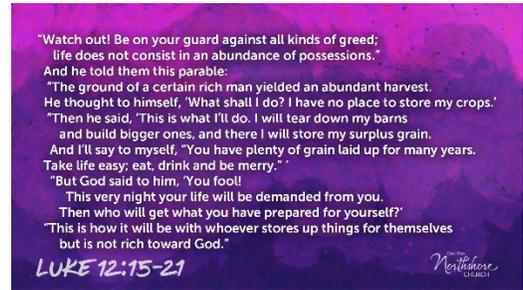
¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jas 4:14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jas 4:15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Jesus warned:

“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

¹⁶ And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’”



Notice how Jesus highlighted that the *ground* yielded an abundant harvest. There is no reason to minimize the work of the farmers, those who plant and care for the growth and harvest the yield, but we should also not minimize all that is out of the control of mere humans (weather, soil conditions, pests, and such). It wasn’t merely the ground that yielded the harvest; it was seed and soil and skill and labor and sun and rain. It was a combination of what a farmer can do, and all that is out of the control of the farmer. In this case, since it was a rich man, it could be that all he did was **own** the land; others likely did the work.

It isn’t just farming that is like this. While it does seem to be true that the harder I work the luckier I get, success is always some mix of what we control and what we don’t. Such was the success of this one of whom Jesus spoke.

Yet, regardless of the work of others and all that is under the Lord’s control, the man makes his plans with his newly found wealth.

¹⁸ “Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’”

His perspective was entirely self-centered. It was **his** wealth, regardless of precisely how he acquired it, and he was going to keep it for himself... no concern for God’s direction, no concern for those who helped, and no concern for the poor. He didn’t even have any apparent concern for his ancestors, or anyone else connected to his business. He planned to *cash out*, take it easy, and *party in style* for retirement.

²⁰ “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’”

²¹ “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.” ³

³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 12:15–21). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

This man did not apparently make his plans with God's Wisdom and direction. He did not consider God with the resulting blessing... and he did not consider God with his long-term plans.

His boasting was evil, just as James describes:

¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil.⁴

Again, the problem wasn't with the plan (or scheme). It wasn't a problem with business, or money, or capitalism. The problem is

arrogance. It is the **pride** at the root of the plans that is evil.

Last week's passage contained a few of my all-time favorite verses of Scripture. One of Steve Sankey's favorite verses comes to mind today (isn't it good to know someone so well that you know something about their favorite passages of Scripture?). I've heard him quote Proverbs 16:9 many, many times.

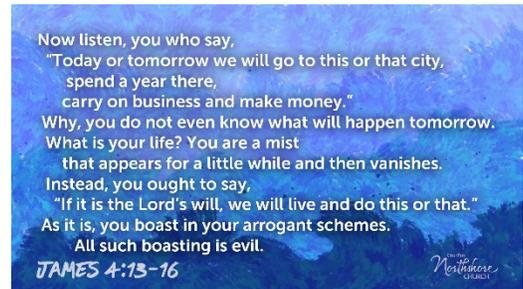
⁹ In their hearts humans plan their course,
but the LORD establishes their steps.⁵

We make our plans... nothing wrong with that; plans are good. But we know that the Lord establishes each step.

Galatians 5:25 urges us to "keep in step with the Spirit."

²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.⁶

If we know that the Lord is establishing each step, we are at our best when we hear the Lord's song, when we march to His beat, and our steps are in harmony with His will.



⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jas 4:16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Pr 16:9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ga 5:25). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

There are times when I am out of step, when each step is a struggle and frustrating, when it seems that I am out of sync... and I finally realize that I've done it again, that I'm more concerned with my plans than His, my will over His will.

That is when it is time to recalibrate. To listen to His song and get the beat... to slow down or catch up or even change directions so that I am saying again "If it is the Lord's will" I will live and do this or that.

Our short passage concludes with verse 17:

¹⁷ If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them. ⁷

When we know the Lord's will, whether that is from Scripture, or our experience with Him, or the leading of His Spirit, and we don't do it, that is sin.

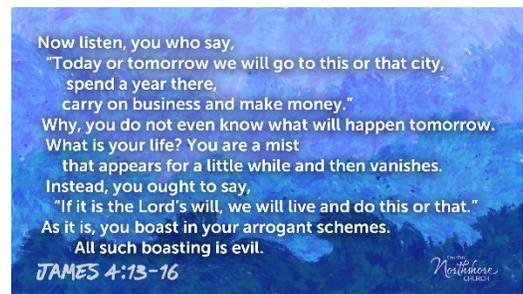
Sometimes we think in terms of sins of commission and sins of omission. There is the evil we do, and there is the good we leave undone... both are sin.

Contrary to popular belief, the Christian life is far more about what do than what we don't.

It seems that folk think that being a Christian is mostly about what we don't do (although that list of don'ts appears to be shrinking fast... I know some of you grew up with don'ts that included dancing and bowling and playing cards). Perhaps we can blame the Ten Commandments, the thou shalt nots. The Ten Commandments are important... but it is just the Ten Commandments. And while there are other don'ts in the Bible, the dos far outweigh the don'ts.

It seems to me that the Christians who are all about the don'ts are the miserable ones... and since misery loves company, they spread their misery around, inflicting it on others.

Now don't misunderstand; I'm not discrediting the don'ts in Scripture... but it seems to me that the whole point of the don'ts in God's Word are to make us best at the dos.



⁷ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jas 4:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

If you're more concerned about the don'ts than the dos, let me encourage you to change your mind.

Perhaps you don't yet believe, and the don'ts are somehow standing in your way. Could I encourage you to consider the dos?

Consider the dos in James so far:

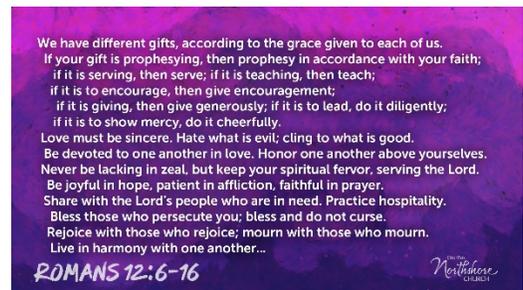
- Do joy
- Do wisdom
- Do humility
- Do God's Word
- Do faith
- Do charity
- Do love
- Do mercy
- Do peace
- Do impartiality
- Do worship

Looking for more dos? Consider Romans 12; here is part of it:

⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. **If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith;** ⁷**if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach;** ⁸**if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.**

⁹Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; **cling to what is good.** ¹⁰**Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.** ¹¹Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹²**Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.** ¹³**Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.**

¹⁴**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.** ¹⁵**Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.** ¹⁶**Live in harmony with one another**⁸



⁸ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ro 12:6–16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Let's allow this to sink in, and ask ourselves,
"What can I do? What can we do together?"

What do we know to do, from God's Word, that
we are leaving undone?

What do we know to do, from our experience
and what we see in others, that we are leaving
undone?

What do we know to do, from the Spirit's leading (we always trust God to speak to
us, especially in moments like these), that we are leaving undone?

Can we do it? Can we make a commitment today to do what we ought to do?

Today is a day to believe.

Perhaps that which we ought to do is take a step
of belief. Draw near to God today and see that
His promise is true; see that He will come near
to us.

