

Increasingly it is our experience, and the older you are the more clear this experience is, that our country is becoming a foreign land. Much about the way life is lived, many of the values that are advocated and furthered by our government, many of the laws that are passed increasingly make people like me [say], “I don’t understand why this has happened; I don’t understand why we are here. This is defining a way of life that is simply not what I ever thought it would be. How has this come to pass?” So our condition is increasingly as is actually described in the book of Hebrews regarding Christians, and that is that we are aliens and strangers on the earth, that literally is what we are.

But the consequence is not that we should withdraw from an engagement with the culture around us. Oftentimes Christians feel this is the right answer: it is the wrong answer. We are to fully engage with the culture around us. We are to fully engage and as Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon, we are to build houses, we are to grow families and we are to seek the prosperity of our community. Of course we are! We serve a God Who brings rain upon the just and the unjust. He blesses all across the face of the earth. In the last day all will be sorted out; in the meantime you and I are called to be those who seek not just our personal prosperity but the prosperity and well-being of the community in which we live. I hope that we gather that into our understanding.

But there are dangers are there not? There are dangers, and those dangers are the ones James is pointing to in James 4:13-17. Follow with me in your own scriptures.

*“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”*

For many, I think, these verses would not sit easy in the mind. As Americans in particular the guiding principles for our national life are the sacredness of all for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Those are our guiding [ideas], the motto that guides the life of our nation. Certainly the pursuit of happiness for most Americans is almost inseparable from the pursuit of prosperity. This is the very heart of the American Dream, as it has come to be [understood]. Every citizen of the land presumptively has the right to say what is on his or her mind, to worship God as this seems right, to join with others to pursue common causes and shared interests, and to make their way in the world with honest labor with the expectation of retaining the fruit or profit of that labor for their own benefit, to be used as they see fit within the parameters of those laws enacted with the consent of the governed by those representatives they have elected. That is a short summary of our form of government.

But reading James 4:13-17 can easily plant in the mind [the notion] that the [American] Dream is incompatible with the Christian’s calling in Christ. Oftentimes this question has been raised. In his commentary on James Leon Morris says that the judgmentalism of 4:11-12, which we looked at last week, and 13-14 are examples of worldly thinking. When we are judgmental, we separate ourselves from and lift ourselves above others, adopting the role of God in judging. What, however, is the particular worldliness that James wants us to consider in verses 13-17? Some would say that the worldliness here is the determination to make a profit. There are many who call themselves Christians who say that profit seeking is a sign of worldliness, is a falling away from grace, and needs to be repented of. That, however, is an error. James is not criticizing profits, perhaps based on Jesus’ teaching about worldly

treasures. James was Jesus’ brother and he would certainly have known Jesus’ own perspective on these matters and may have known these specific words that we find recorded in Matthew 6:19-21. This is what Jesus said, *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and dust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* That sounds like maybe profits are a bad idea. However, if you read the passage carefully, Jesus was not criticizing profit; the problem is not the pursuit of profit; the problem is what you expect profit to bring, what you expect is going to gain by the profits you make and retain. It is a matter of what we treasure; that is the issue: what we treasure. Often in the book of Proverbs the man who lays by a store of goods for winter is commended over the man who lives only for the day. The man who lives only for the day is called a fool.

What does it mean “to lay by”? “To lay by” means that you have produced more than is needed for present consumption. For the farmer or rancher that could mean produce for canning or freezing, for the rancher more specifically, meat for freezing or drying or canning. For those who buy and sell goods, whether manufacturers or shop keepers or those who provide services for others, it means you take in more income than you need for present business operations or consumption and that means you have gained a profit. Jesus told us a parable which clarifies this matter of profits and laying up and treasuring. You find it in Luke 12:16-21. *“And he told them a parable, saying, ‘The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’’ 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. And I will say to my soul, ‘‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’’’ But God said to him, ‘‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’’’* So how do we evaluate this, how do we understand it? The man’s error, the fault lies in treasuring worldly wealth, which in the context of scripture means to feed ones’ heart on it. It is operating on the assumption that worldly wealth is the key to happiness. Paul makes exactly the same point as is being made here by James when writing to Timothy. In I Timothy 6:6-10 this is what Paul says: *“But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.”* You might keep in your mind the parable of the four soils. One of those four soils was filled with thorns and thistles. So the Word of God that was planted there began to grow and then the thorns and thistles just crowded it out and there was no fruit at all. Here Paul specifies that it was not merely a lack of fruit but the suffering of many, many sorrows and troubles for the man who thought worldly wealth would bring him happiness and contentment. It is not money for this or that, but money as the answer for all things: that is the problem. The root of the problem is a love of money and the assumption that money is the answer. We gain a false sense of security, don’t we, if we simply have a positive bank balance. That is not to say that we shouldn’t be both happy and grateful to have a positive bank balance! Every month when I write out all of my checks to the various utility companies, the credit card company and everybody else my wife has spent money on – just keeping things real! – whenever I write out the checks I say, “Lord, thank You, I have got money to cover every obligation.” Praise the Lord. Amen? Amen!

That is not the error. [Further] the error is this: the rich farmer’s error was to think only of meeting his own needs, with considerable comfort you might notice. The problem was not that he built bigger barns. The problem was that everything in those barns was *his* and he had no intention of releasing it for anybody else at all. Referring back to last week’s [message], he did not plan and plant with charity in mind. He had no charity in mind at all. His response indicates he was a man wholly occupied with himself, his own security and his own happiness. That was it. Loving money implies a person who values what money can buy over every other option.

Loving money also implies a person whose life is largely if not wholly occupied with what it can control and with being in control. It is wise for us to see money as a form of power. It can be used coercively. It can be used to control people, even whole communities and societies can be controlled by money. Even our souls can be controlled by money. Some people think worldly wealth can even protect them from God. “Plutocracy” names a society which is under the control of those who are rich. More than a few people fear that the United States has become a plutocracy. That, however, is not the error that James is dealing with in James 4:13-17.

Some might read James at this point as if he was criticizing planning ahead. After all, [think of] planning ahead for a whole year: think again of Jesus’ words. In this case we would look at Matthew 6:34. This is what Jesus said: *“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”* Again it is easy to mistake Jesus. Jesus is not criticizing planning ahead. Instead He is criticizing those whose approach to life is without practical faith allowing them to trust that God will supply what is needed and take care of those who trust Him. These are people who think it is their plans and preparations which determine the future. But these are people who have forgotten one of the most basic truths in scripture. If you turn to Proverbs 16:9 we read that the heart of man plans his way but the Lord establishes his steps. What has been lost sight of by these people is the fact of the sovereignty of God over the affairs of men and the providence of God which orders all things. So they make their plans, but they do not make their plans in submission to the God who controls all things. He says, “You have spoken in your arrogance.” What is their arrogance? Their arrogance is that they think their wonderful plans have accomplished all these good things when it is only the grace of God which has allowed them to accomplish anything at all. So instead of being those who live gratefully before God, they are those who live arrogantly before God as if they were self-sufficient, along with the failure to keep soberly in mind that as redeemed sinners neither our time nor our abilities are simply our own: we have been bought with a price and we are now under the authority of Jesus Christ.

These are the kind of thoughts that are underpinning the understanding of James [and] which are the foundation and the explanation for what he says in 4:14, *“You don’t know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? You are a mist, a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”* Beloved I think all of us are familiar with the truism that those who are young think of themselves as invulnerable. That is why they do some of the most amazing things. On the longer view, they think that they will never die. But of course in reality it is not merely the mind-set of the youth; none of us actually, soberly thinks that we are going to die. It is incomprehensible to us that we are going to die. Oh, we know we are going to die, but what does it mean to be dead? What is that? We cast it off. There is a tacit recognition I think in our denial of death that death is alien to us. You can’t make rational calculations based on death. Death is, in fact, irrational. I say that because death as the cessation of existence empties existence of any meaning. What is the point of buying a new car if tomorrow you are going to die and then your teenaged son will have it!

Traditionally humanity has answered the difficulty of the meaninglessness of life because of death by being persuaded regarding the multiplicity of generations: my sons, my sons, my sons. Someone earlier spoke of the legacy we will receive. Who cares about the legacy? My sons care about the legacy. It will be handed on from generation to generation, and indeed most of the Old Testament is focused in precisely that manner.

There are places in fact where people worship their ancestors: Japan. Somehow they are understood to still be on the scene. Hindus believe in reincarnation, a nearly endless recycling of life until one achieves ultimate liberation [“nirvana”] which is understood to be absorption into the infinite. Christianity along with Islam, which by the way is a Christian heresy, Judaism, these three believe in eternal life.

Modernity, the culture in which you and I live, however, is the first major civilization on the face of the earth which has attempted to sustain civil life with the simple acceptance of death as a blank end point. There are consequences, beloved, there are consequences. To live this way necessitates that the whole meaning of our lives and the entirety of its satisfactions as well as any moral precepts for guiding decisions and restraining the impulses and passions of individuals have to be found in day to day existence. The consequence was already known in the ancient world and was stated as clearly as can be by the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 15:32. There he wrote what every pagan in that day also knew: *“If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”* Is that attitude prevalent in our society? Oh my yes it is. Have you seen the bumper stickers? “I am spending my children’s inheritance.” We may laugh at that, but that is a statement of despair. That is a statement that says life is empty and has no meaning beyond my present satisfactions.

Beloved, there are far worse consequences than that. At the root, therefore, of modern life, there is a seed, if you will, of the most radical possible irresponsibility, one that is rooted in despair. The secular humanists of our age necessarily believe that humanity has come from morally devoid matter through a process of amoral evolution and is destined both on the individual and the universal level to simply die without remainder. Every moral practice and every ethical principle ultimately has only one justification, and that is whether or not it furthers the practical goals of ensuring whatever is thought to be a good life for those who espouse them. All moral practices and ethical principles must be adjusted to meet the felt needs of the presently living. James says, *“You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”* That sounds like the very perspective of the secular humanist. But James’ actual meaning is far removed [from that]. Almost always when thinking of the future we think of the unforeseen challenge which may disrupt our plans. It is rare that we think of death, that which brings all our plans to an abrupt end. But in the ancient world death was a constant companion of the living, a shadow over all their plans.

The Christian knows two things: 1) First, the Christian knows that the Lord and the Lord alone is master of death. He knows the hour; He has appointed it. In Psalm 139:15 David writes, *“My frame was not hidden from You when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth –There is the argument against abortion: every single doctor on the face of the earth with any self-respect knows that human life begins at conception; it is a lie to say anything else. Intricately woven: every child is a gift from God— Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.”* 2) Every Christian knows as well that death is not a blank end of life altogether. Equally

though not acknowledged we know that what comes after death, which is a transition into a radically altered state of life, is an inconceivable increase or maximization of life. That is what we live for. We live for the eternal life that is ours in Christ following death. That is what we live for. Does your checkbook say that? Does your calendar say that? Do your prayers say that? Do your daily conversations with family, neighbors, friends say that: “I am living for the life beyond death!” or does it say, “I’m living for today and all the satisfactions that can be mine now”?

Earlier James has said the faithful receive a crown of life. The modern world is both obsessed with and trapped with physical and material realities. Consequently being trapped in material reality they see the end of material life as the end of life altogether. But equally though not acknowledged, this is the end of moral truth, and we are seeing this. We are seeing the end of moral truth and the progressive disintegration of the moral order of life and the deepening confusion in our culture and the growing cynicism regarding moral standards or ethical behavior wherever secular humanism is dominant.

It is not that James’ last statement – *“Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin”* – This is not incomprehensible to the secular humanist. The people who are around us who do not believe in God are not thereby immoral. They have moral principles. They have ethical standards. You know that. So do I. No, the problem is not that they are void of ethical principles and standards. The problem is that when push comes to shove, and survival is on the line, “sin” is irrelevant if there is nothing beyond you and this moment. One of the Biblical prophets said it better: “To live as a dog [is better] than to be dead as a lion.” That is true if death is the end of all things. Wouldn’t you rather be a live dog than a dead lion? No! However, you must believe that death is not the end of all things.

Hebrews 9:27 says it is appointed for man to die once and after that comes the judgment. This truth lies at the heart of the Lord’s Supper which we have just taken together. Jesus died and is buried and on the third day He rose again from the dead. He became the first fruits of all those who believe. Colossians 3:1-4 calls powerfully to us. *“If then you have died with Christ Jesus, seek the thing that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died with Christ and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”* So, when we set out tomorrow morning to live the life to which God has called us, what do we seek? We should seek to bless our community. We should seek to see our community prosper. Beyond that we should seek the face of God and be willing to spend whatever we have both for the glory of His name and the good of our neighbors so that in the end we are with Him forever.