

RUF Large Group Bible Study  
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James 4:13-17<sup>2</sup>

13 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"- 14 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. 15 Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." 16 As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. 17 So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

Where will you be next year? Five years from now? Ten years?

That's always a good question to ask someone. You can learn quite a bit about a person based on his or her plans. You can see ambitions, desires, hopes and dreams. But James shows us that you can also see if a person is a Christian or not.

However, before we dive into that point, let's start at the end of the passage.

### ***We All Sin***

James writes this: *So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.* This is what we refer to as the sin of omission. We sin when we do wrong things (commission) and when we don't do the right things we should do (omission). That is a convicting statement, for it opens the door to no end of confession. Most of the time when we confess our sins, we focus on what we've done wrong and rightly ask for forgiveness for those things. But the Bible points us to realizing that sin also is in *not* doing right.

Think of it this way – if you were to be really serious about not sinning, you might consider locking yourself in a room without a television or computer or any vices and only read your Bible. Would that keep you from sinning? No way. We are to make disciples of all nations, something impossible without spending time with people. You can't be patient, kind and loving without anyone around. You're committing a multitude of sins of omission by being alone like that. "We may be able," says C.L. Mitton, "to avoid committing forbidden evil; but who can ever seize positively every opportunity of doing good?"<sup>3</sup>

A few nights ago I spent three hours talking to an apartment of women who were having roommate troubles. Two roommates in particular were in major disagreement but the third was there. I asked her what she thought, and she said, "I'm just trying to stay out of it. I didn't even know there was a problem until last night. If they want to talk to me they can, but it's their problem. I figure that I can't say anything or do anything wrong if I keep my mouth shut." I pointed out that Galatians 6:1 says we are to carry each other's burdens and enter into each others' worlds is a requirement of doing that, even if it gets our hands dirty. She shrugged her shoulders, unmoved. That is a sin of omission.

That really ups the ante for the things we've done wrong this week and in our lives, doesn't it?

Think about this: the first commandment says that we are not to have any other gods. I'm going to guess that you don't have a shrine to Buddah in your apartment and that you might even be willing to get rid of your Sooners mecca if you absolutely have to (okay, I'm not so sure about that). And if you hang around us long enough, you'll hear us talk about idols of the heart – love, marriage, career, money, sex, power. Any of these can replace God as our ultimate affections.

But when a group of very wise men got together to reflect on the Scriptures, here is what they wrote when thinking about the first commandment. Let's look at the negative first.

*Question 105: What are the sins forbidden in the first commandment?*

Answer: The sins forbidden in the first commandment are, atheism, in denying or not having a God; idolatry, in having or worshiping more gods than one, or any with or instead of the true God; the not having and avouching him for God, and our God; the omission or neglect of anything due to him, required in this commandment; ignorance, forgetfulness, misapprehensions, false opinions, unworthy and wicked thoughts of him; bold and curious searching into his secrets; all profaneness, hatred of God; self-love, self-seeking, and all other inordinate and immoderate setting of our mind, will, or affections upon other things, and taking them off from him in whole or in part; vain credulity, unbelief, heresy, misbelief, distrust, despair, incorrigibility, and insensibility under

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<sup>2</sup> Resources used: Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982; Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000; John MacArthur, *James*, Moody Press: Chicago, 1998; Dr. Tim Keller's sermons on James found at [www.redeemer.com](http://www.redeemer.com); Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Doubleday: New York, 1995; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (New Interpreter's Bible), Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1998; J.A. Motyer, *The Message of James*, Intervarsity Press: Downer's Grove, Illinois, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Motyer, p. 163

judgments, hardness of heart, pride, presumption, carnal security, tempting of God; using unlawful means, and trusting in lawful means; carnal delights and joys; corrupt, blind, and indiscreet zeal; lukewarmness, and deadness in the things of God; estranging ourselves, and apostatizing from God; praying, or giving any religious worship, to saints, angels, or any other creatures; all compacts and consulting with the devil, and hearkening to his suggestions; making men the lords of our faith and conscience; slighting and despising God and his commands; resisting and grieving of his Spirit, discontent and impatience at his dispensations, charging him foolishly for the evils he inflicts on us; and ascribing the praise of any good we either are, have, or can do, to fortune, idols, ourselves, or any other creature.

*Question 104: What are the duties required in the first commandment?*

Answer: The duties required in the first commandment are, the knowing and acknowledging of God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly, by thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honoring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing of him; believing him; trusting, hoping, delighting, rejoicing in him; being zealous for him; calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks, and yielding all obedience and submission to him with the whole man; being careful in all things to please him, and sorrowful when in anything he is offended; and walking humbly with him.

Whoa, Nelly. Just think about that. Do you confess and repent of your false opinions? Your despair? Your incorrigibility? Your carnal security? Your indiscreet zeal? Your lukewarmness and deadness to the things of God?

How about confessing that I'm *not* thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honoring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing of him; believing him? That I'm not careful in all things to please him? That I'm not sorrowful for offending him?

This is a major thing. We are sinners. If we kept going through the commandments talking about what we should not do and what we should do, we would be utterly laid low before him to whom we must give an account.

But that isn't all James talks about here. You see, his claim of our sins of omission is connected to the previous verses. That's stated by a "therefore." So, what is he thinking about or linking our sins of omission to?

### ***We All Forget God***

Back to verse 13. We make plans. James seems like he doesn't like for us to have goals and dreams, like he wants us to repent of our planning. Some people, he says, say that they'll to such and such place, make money for a certain amount of time and come back.

What's so wrong about that? Well, let's go ahead and say that it's not the plans themselves. In fact, when James gives the solution to the problem, he doesn't say that we shouldn't make plans. You can still say, "we will do this and that." The problem, as shown by the correct attitude that says, "if the Lord wills" is that so often our plans leave God out of the picture.

When we make our plans we lock into our: Own time – today or tomorrow; Own location – such and such city; Own duration – spend a year there; Own enterprise – engage in business; Own goal – to make a profit.

When we do that we do two things: we assume the lordship over our own lives and we forget God.

We act like we know what we're doing. We repeal our stated position that there is a greater being who is in control of the earth, and instead we are in control. When our plans go awry, we get upset, angry and depressed because we *knew* that our plans were the best they could be and for our good. We forget Proverbs 27:1: *Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.*

Augustine used to say that any day out of the pains of hell was a good day and it was all of grace. You see, we don't actually deserve anything good. It shouldn't be so much a hard question to answer, "Why is there so much evil in the world?" as to answer the question "Why is there so much good in the world?" Everything we have that is good has been given to us by God. (James 1:17)

How about the contrast between the attitudes of William Henley and Adelaide A. Pollard?

INVICTUS

by: William Ernest Henley

*Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud:  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds and shall find me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.*

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*Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!  
Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.  
Mold me and make me after Thy will,  
While I am waiting, yielded and still.*<sup>4</sup>  
- Adelaide A. Pollard, 1907

When we lock and load in our plans without giving God the option of changing them and directing them, then we basically and functionally act like we're the captains of our own souls, the masters of our own fates. That is a nonChristian position. What a difference than being able to say, "Have Your way God." We all too often, simply put, forget about him. He doesn't like that.

Have you ever been forgotten? My dad and I left my sister at a Cub Scouts meeting about 25 years ago. I must have been seven or eight and she was five or so. After the meeting, we were talking, got in the car and took off. We still hear about that today – it made an impact on my sister.

Have you been left out of a party, not because you weren't invited, but just because the party-thrower forgot to invite you? That hurts. Let me tell you, there is something worse than negative reviews of a book you've written. It's far worse to get no reviews. None of us want to be irrelevant. None of us want to be forgotten. It hurts.

It hurts God too. He can't believe it happens, and yet we do it all the time.

Here are some verses about forgetting God:

*Isaiah 65:11-12 But you who forsake the LORD, who forget my holy mountain, who set a table for Fortune and fill cups of mixed wine for Destiny, 12 I will destine you to the sword, and all of you shall bow down to the slaughter, because, when I called, you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not listen, but you did what was evil in my eyes and chose what I did not delight in."*

*Isaiah 49:15 Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.*

*Job 8:12-13 While yet in flower and not cut down, they wither before any other plant. 13 Such are the paths of all who forget God; the hope of the godless shall perish.*

*Hosea 4:6 My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.*

The idea is that you don't forget things that are important. A bride never forgets to put on her make up for her wedding. It's important. We set alarms for things we need to attend. We get reminders. We make it a priority to be there.

And when we forget there are consequences. Things don't go as well. People have to forgive us. We don't earn respect. We lose the job. We fail the test. Your sister gets mad.

God says the same in Psalm 9:17-18 *The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God. 18 For the needy shall not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever.*

Who are the wicked who shall return to Sheol? The people who forget God. Whose children will God forget? Hosea 4:6 says: *And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.* Who will God cut down? Job 8:12-13 says: *While yet in flower and not cut down, they wither before any other plant. 13 Such are the paths of all who forget God; the hope of the godless shall perish.*

Friends, that is chilling to me. What hope do we have then if we forget God? We'll come back to hope in a minute, but I don't want to get to hope too quickly.

### ***We're All a Mist***

As we reflect on how we all sin, and we all forget God, James also reminds us of the transitory nature of life. He writes, *For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.*

I'm sure you've already had it happen. You get a phone call and a friend from high school has died. Kevin Carter died when he was 22. I still remember that his birthday was on Groundhog Day, and his incredible sense of humor. I used to go over to his house to play. Another buddy of mine from high school, Rob Smith, died two weeks ago in a car wreck. It was raining and he swerved into the oncoming lane and was crushed by a semi. His wife was in the same car and survived without a scratch. He was 32.

I have three grandparents still alive. They're all in their eighties. That's a long life. They lived through the Great Depression, World War II, Vietnam, the Cold War and the end of the Cold War and now to 9/11. They lived in a time where everyone had dirt floors and no one they knew paid taxes. They have the development of widespread use of cars,

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<sup>4</sup> Pollard believed the Lord wanted her in Africa as a missionary, but she was unable to raise funds to go. In an uncertain state of mind, she attended a prayer meeting, where she heard an elderly woman pray, "It's all right, Lord. It doesn't matter what You bring into our lives, just have Your own way with us." At home that night, much encouraged, she wrote this hymn.

phones, televisions and computers. That's craziness. Yet, it's really just a flash when you think of it. Civilization has been rolling along for thousands of years, so what's eighty of it? It's a mist.

There's nothing really unique about James' position here. There would have been very few atheists or agnostics in James' day. Most people believed in something, some sort of afterlife.

The question is, how long do you think you'll live? "We may take tomorrow for granted, thinking of it as a mark on the rim of time's wheel, coming on inevitably as the circling years proceed. But in the Bible the years do not circle. They go in a straight line from eternity to eternity, and on that line we receive another day neither by natural necessity, nor by mechanical law, nor by right, nor by courtesy of nature, but only by the covenanted mercies of God. The very existence of tomorrow is as much part of our dependence on him as is our life itself and our ability."<sup>5</sup>

How long do you expect life to go on for you? Will you be ready when you die? Do you think of this? Do you think this life if yours is all heading somewhere? That there is something eternal out there that you're longing for? That there is a Heaven and a Hell?

Let me ask you these questions:

***Have you come to a place in your spiritual journey where if you died tonight you know you'd go to heaven or are you still working on that?***

***If you were actually to die tonight, and God were to ask you why he should let you into heaven, what would you say?***

As we consider our lives as mist, we need to think about the deeper things of life, and after life too.

### ***Solutions***

So what are we to do? Here are a few thoughts.

You must acknowledge that your future is in his hands. We are full of ignorance – "you do not know"; frailty – "you are a mist"; and we are dependant – "*you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills...'*" So we should acknowledge that in our lives and in our speech. *Deo volente*. Saying "If the Lord wills" is not the magic solution. In fact, that can be incredibly annoying, and not only to non-Christians. It's not a tack-on statement that makes everything better no matter what you say. I knew a gal who was incredibly difficult to talk to because every other word out of her mouth was some sort of charismatic word or phrase, almost like an expletive. If you insert "If the Lord wills" constantly, all it will be is pious jargon, similar to saying, "God told me" before you say what you're going to do.

Don't just say "If the Lord wills," but believe it. Give him your plans. It's okay to want to be married, to want to have children, to want to go to law school or med school or grad school, to get a great job, to go overseas next summer, to get that internship, to be this or that. But you don't *know* it will happen. Only God does. He may change your heart. You may be infertile. You may remain single. You may bomb the entrance exam. You may get passed over for the promotion. You may die tomorrow. It's great to make your plans. But as far as the cosmic age of the world and your place in it, you're an infant, you don't know, you're but a mist. Really.

So we hold our hands open and ask God to work *his* work in our lives. We need to ask if what we're doing is God's will and be open to being wrong. We should consider "if this kind of plan is in accordance with the Lord's will expressed in Scripture for his people."<sup>6</sup> We get counsel. We seek the Scriptures. We confess our weaknesses. We ask God to give us the desires of our hearts and to change those desires to match his own. We make our plans, sure. But we hold them loosely and aren't undone if they don't happen.

And we look to eternity future with him. If the Lord wills implies that there is a Lord, not just a general entity out there, but the Lord. James says that God bring his children forth like first fruits. He says that Word of God is implanted in his children, so we can look it and direct our ways with it. He says there is mercy for his people who come to him. He says that we can be called friends of God. He says there is a wisdom that is from above that we can understand and know. He says that God gives grace to the humble. That he is the lawgiver and judge, but that he is able to save his people from destruction. He is able.

Two more things:

The first is that you see that Jesus talked and acted in a way that showed, "Thy will be done." In his whole life, he did what we should do by submitting himself to God in everything he did.

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<sup>5</sup> Motyer, p. 162

<sup>6</sup> Moo

The second ties up something we said before. Remember how I said that God will forget us if we forget him? There are consequences to forgetting God and they are not good. If that is true, then what chance do we have? You have forgotten God, right? You have forsaken him, have you not? You should be forgotten and forsaken, right?

But... Jesus suffered for us. This is the gospel applied to this concept. It's a rich gospel if you see it. You see, we read this in Matthew 27:46 as Jesus was on the cross: *And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

My God, why have you forsaken me? Why have you forgotten me? Why have you left me? Turned your back on me? This is the most terrible thing Jesus experienced on the cross. Suddenly, for the first time in eternity, Jesus was alone and without the Father. He'd been forgotten and forsaken.

Because he was forgotten and forsaken, you can be and are remembered and brought near.