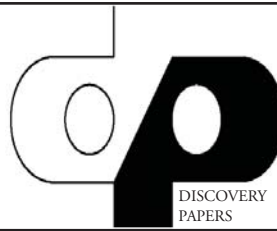


IF THE LORD WILLS

SERIES: WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN



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James 4:11-5:6
12th Message
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James 1:16 can be considered a theme verse for the entire letter: “Do not be deceived, my dear brothers.” In fact, this verse sounds a warning that is threaded throughout the whole Bible. The human tragedy began with a terrible lie, ‘you can be like God.’ The scriptures have been given to us in order to save us from the ruin caused by that lie. ‘Do not be deceived, dear ones.’ We cannot replace God with ourselves.

Now we continue with our study of James’ challenge to deception:

James 4:11-12:

¹¹Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. ¹²There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

The word that is translated slander here describes a deliberate, malicious statement about another person, spoken behind their back. These wounds can cut to the heart. Once a slanderous characterization has been made it is very difficult to undo. For most of us, gossip is remembered longer than praise. Malicious statements and humiliating pictures, posted on the internet, have been a factor in the growth of teen suicide in our community. “The tongue is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:8). Indeed, slander is a two edged sword. It cuts the one who is being slandered and it twists the heart of the slanderer. Malicious speech is a deliberate challenge to the royal law, ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ So, James calls the slanderer to account.

This lawbreaker has put himself in God’s place. Beyond the whisper of the tempter in Eden, a slanderer has gone from wanting to be like God to becoming God’s replacement. ‘There is only one lawgiver and judge—who do you think you are?’ How did you let yourself ascend

where you don’t belong? Who are you to judge your neighbor?

In addition to the experience of victim and victimizer, malicious speech destroys the believing community. Churches, sadly, are too often hot beds for gossip. We are called to awareness of one another’s needs, to the bearing of burdens, to open hearts. Yet, such vulnerability can easily become fuel for slander. A church in which openness about personal struggle leads to gossip will soon become a cold, dying social club.

If we must not replace God as lawgiver and judge, neither may we claim his status as Lord of history.

James 4:13-17:

¹³Now 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.” ¹⁴Why, 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. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” ¹⁶As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.

“What is your life?” (v. 14). This is similar to the question in v.12, ‘Who do you think you are?’. You who are making plans with reference to nothing but yourself—what is your life? We (who are a mist) make plans with no reference to the will of God, as if he has become irrelevant. We are lured in by a slick business plan and the promise of profits from foreign markets, trusting ourselves, not God. How do we end up in this place?

We know that the possibilities of financial gain are seductive, a strong temptation we should guard against. However, the Scriptures are not opposed to making plans per se, or to generating a profit. Farmers sow seed and rightly expect an increase. The adventure of travel abroad

is not, in itself, a cause for concern. James' point is that we must submit our plans to God ('if it is the Lord's will') rather than push him aside and attempt to order our world our way. The deeper problem is our love of control and refusal to submit.

What then, does it mean to seek God's will in our decision making? Let me suggest four questions that can help us.

1. **Has your awareness of God's presence expanded?**

The life of faith is not static. The embrace of God's will leads to our world becoming larger, our understanding deeper and God's presence more apparent in everything. So we ask, is our circle of friends more varied than it used to be? Do we have a new vision of God in art, music, and the natural world? Have we moved on from a focus on favorite passages to know the wholeness of scripture? The person who is passionate about the will of God will find that God's presence fills more of life.

2. **Are you learning to balance activity and rest?**

Those who live in the middle of God's will experience both Sabbath and service, learning and doing, silence and shouts of praise. Most of James' letter is a challenge to believers who fail to act when they should. But activity, especially religious activity, can spin out of control. Mary of Bethany was praised for sitting at Jesus' feet.

There was a time when 'compartmentalization' was the enemy of a balanced life: attention to God only on Sundays, work Monday through Friday, and recreation on Saturday. Today the greater concern is the absence of boundaries. Instead of God being given only one day per week, he may have none. Always connected—work, friendship, family, recreation, productivity, and entertainment all flow together. The urgent drives out the important. Those who heed God's choices for themselves will find a balance of activity and rest.

3. **Do you rejoice when others receive blessings in their lives?** Jealousy comes easily. We keep track of who gets what. The complaint, 'why him and not me?' comes easily to our lips. Yet choosing to follow the will of God requires acknowledgement that he loves all of his children. He is generous to all and knows what is best for us today as 'he conforms us to the image of his Son.' The experience of joy, without jealousy, when another is given a gift is a sign that we are following the lead of the Spirit.

4. **Is fear diminishing?** In this life we will never be anxiety-free, but as we mature in Christ what once seemed impossible can become routine. Knowing more of God's power and faithfulness, we become more confident that he will walk with us through the dark valley ahead. Greater peace is evidence that we are aligned with the will of God. "Don't be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6).

We will conclude this study by considering the first six verses of chapter five, a text that is difficult to fit into the flow of the book. It is clear, however, that James has taken up a megaphone, writing not with the deliberation of a teacher but the intensity of a prophet. He intends to jolt as much as inform. James' target is the false promise of wealth and its power to pervert justice.

James 5:1-6:

¹Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. ²Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. ³Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. ⁴Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. ⁵You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. ⁶You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.

Like his older brother, Jesus, James declares forcefully that wealth cannot last. It will deteriorate and corrode. It is no basis for security, offering nothing of persistent value. Indeed the one who loves money will surely suffer the agony of its decay.

Wealth fails as a source of security, but it can also lead to injustice and mistreatment of the poor ('you have failed to pay the workmen'). As these words were read in the community that first received this letter they may well have challenged greedy and dishonest members of the congregation. It may serve the same purpose among us.

It is more likely that James wrote to encourage poor and misused believers and to remind them that God has not forgotten them. Someday the Lord will put things right.

“Do not be deceived, my dear brothers.” Whether writing as a teacher or a prophet, James is committed to a message that exalts God. The Lord is lawgiver and judge and we have no business engaging in slander. He is sovereign over history and making plans on our own terms is foolish. He will judge the corrupt and unjust lovers of money.

The serpent lied. We cannot be like God and we can certainly not replace him. Choosing the will of God leads to life in abundance.

The disciple who says, “Thy will, not mine, be done,” will one day hear these words from the Lord: “Well done, good and faithful servant! . . . Come and share your master’s happiness” (Matthew 25:21).