

James' Letter

9: The Arrogance of Wealth

We now move into the seventh main teaching of James' letter where he addresses our perspective on wealth. Everything that God has given us or allowed us to accumulate comes with a responsibility. Many of us focus on making financial decisions that will set us up for the future. But James points out that in doing so we assume more control over our lives than we actually have, and we might be overlooking what God wants us to do with our wealth.

Do not focus on accumulating wealth for a future that is completely uncertain and out of our control; focus first on doing whatever God wants you to do with your wealth.

James writes:

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. (4:13-17)

God Controls Our Lives

James mentions how easily we forget our own weakness and dependency on God for life itself. Many of us fall into the trap of assuming that we have got life under control, and we have time at our disposal.

The plans that are described in this particular passage are normal business plans. Travel to a certain city where you think you can make a good profit and then spend time working there in that city. There is no mention of deception or immoral business practices.

So why is James so critical of this mindset and why does he call it arrogant?

This is in fact the way that business is done in this world, but according to James the follower of Christ ought to view business, income and wealth with a different mindset. We ought to be well aware of who controls our lives and therefore make all of our business decisions focused on what God might want us to do.

It's easy to overlook the arrogance in a mindset that makes plans focused on our future instead of on what God wants right now. We fail to realize that declaring "We will do this" or "I will do that" is arrogant and the essence of sin. To make assumptions about what we're going to do in the future subtly gives off a sense of self-reliance that disregards God's control over our lives.

James is reminding us that God is the One in complete control, and so we ought to make all of our decisions and plans with that in mind.

If God is the One in complete control then we shouldn't make assumptions about our future or that God wants us to go where we can make more money. Life is uncertain, and wealth is worthless when your life is over. We need to stop thinking so much about ourselves. This world isn't about us. We ought not to be so arrogant and assume more control over our lives than we actually possess.

Do What God Wants

If God is the One in complete control then we should actively submit to His authority. We should live our lives exercising our complete dependance on God. It's okay to make plans for the future and set financial goals. It is good to have direction, but we must remain open to detours because ultimately we are not the ones steering the ship. We ought to take on a mindset that continually declares, "If the Lord wills then I will do this or that."¹

In this passage, James describes people who are making plans that God did not make and assuming a level of control over life that they do not have. This is the equivalent of living life like everyone else lives and following the way of the world. Instead, James wants us to first seek the kinds of things that God wants us to do and then follow God's plans and desires in how we view and use our money.

¹ see Acts 18:21, Romans 1:10, 1 Corinthians 4:19

We might recall what Jesus taught his first disciples in his sermon on the mount:

For the rest of the world seeks after all these things that you need, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.²

James and Jesus are declaring that we need to change our perspective on wealth.

Do not focus on accumulating wealth for a future that is completely uncertain and out of our control; focus first on doing whatever God wants you to do with your wealth.

James concludes this section with a one-line proverb that drives his point home. He writes:

“So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”

We as followers of Christ ought to know the kinds of things that God wants us to do. Are we consulting God and asking him what financial decisions he wants us to make?

Failing to do the things that we know we should do is the same as doing things that we know we shouldn't.

² Matthew 6:32-33

To speak as if you are the one in control of your own life is to speak with arrogance. Let's acknowledge God's control over our lives through an absolute surrender to where he might want us to go and what he wants us to do with the wealth and time that we've been given.