

FACING TOMORROW¹ By Lorin Cranford

Introduction

“Facing Tomorrow” -- That’s our theme today.

Most of my 59 years I’ve spent more time “facing yesterday,” that is, having to answer for past actions. As a college student during the anti-Vietnam war era I’ve often enjoyed bucking the system way more than I should have. My background in West Texas ranch life instilled in me a rugged individualism that doesn’t tolerate taking commands from anyone very easily.

But “facing tomorrow” has a certain fascination about it. Especially in the climate we’re living in today. It creates a particular curiosity. With my personal struggle over the past few months with major health issues, it takes on a much more serious tone for me.

James touches on this in 4:13-17. Listen to his words: <4:13> ἄγε νῦν οἱ λέγοντες, Σήμερον ἢ αὔριον πορευσόμεθα εἰς τήνδε τὴν πόλιν καὶ ποιήσομεν ἐκεῖ ἐνιαυτὸν καὶ ἐμπορευσόμεθα καὶ κερδήσομεν· <4:14> οἵτινες οὐκ ἐπίστασθε τὸ τῆς αὔριον ποία ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν· ἀτιμὴς γάρ ἐστε ἢ πρὸς ὀλίγον φαινομένη, ἔπειτα καὶ ἀφανιζομένη. <4:15> ἀντὶ τοῦ λέγειν ὑμᾶς, Ἐὰν ὁ κύριος θελήσῃ καὶ ζήσομεν καὶ ποιήσομεν τοῦτο ἢ ἐκεῖνο. <4:16> νῦν δὲ καυχᾶσθε ἐν ταῖς ἀλαζονείαις ὑμῶν· πᾶσα καύχησις τοιαύτη πονηρὰ ἐστίν. <4:17> εἰδότι οὖν καλὸν ποιεῖν καὶ μὴ ποιοῦντι, ἁμαρτία αὐτῷ ἐστίν.²

In this part of his “sermon” he evidently does what many preachers today often do. He targets individuals beyond his readers in order to give preventative ‘medicine’ to his readers. James picks up on a frequent Old Testament condemnation of the Jewish merchant who often represented the worst of ancient Jewish society. They frequently symbolized the most irreligious group among the Jewish people. This passage has echoes in Amos, Ezekiel and several other OT prophets.

Out of this warning comes a challenge about “facing tomorrow.” James suggests two stances: leaving God out of tomorrow, or else, building tomorrow on God’s will. These two emphases have importance to each of us today. I want to dwell on them for the time we have together.

¹ Text: James 4:13-17

CIT: James cautioned his readers about forgetting God through condemning those who do.

Thesis: Christians today need reminders about genuinely including God in their living.

Objectives:

Total Objective: Abundant Life

Major Objective: Devotional

Specific Objective: That my listeners would deliberately include God in their daily lives and plans.

Title: Facing Tomorrow

²4:13 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." 4:14 Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. 4:15 Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that." 4:16 As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. 4:17 Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.

Body

I. Are you a Christian atheist?

Notice James' accusation in verse 13: "Ἄγε νῦν οἱ λέγοντες, Σήμερον ἢ αὔριον πορευσόμεθα εἰς τήνδε τὴν πόλιν καὶ ποιήσομεν ἐκεῖ ἐνιαυτὸν καὶ ἐμπορευσόμεθα καὶ κερδησομεν."³

Nothing is wrong here with making plans for tomorrow. Taken by itself, out of the immediate context, what these merchants are planning has nothing wrong with it. Making plans, mapping out strategies for the future -- all these actions are both correct and important to do.

One of the best courses I had in 1960 as a beginning college student was Freshman Orientation 101 and 102. We met at 7:00 every Thursday morning for the entire academic year. Among the many topics covered in the course was planning a daily schedule. Our professor required us to set up a chart with 15 minute segments from the time we typically woke up until the time we usually went to bed. Over a seven day period we had to fill in planned activities, and then make an honest effort to follow it for a week. At the end of the week we had to write an evaluation and indicated changes that we found were needed. Although most of the students just went through the motions and immediately forgot about it after the completion of the assignment, I tried to take it seriously. Out of that assignment came a life altering pattern that I have followed to some degree or another now some 41 years. To be sure one has to be flexible in planning. Circumstances change, unexpected things happened. But to have a basic plan for each day with things in mind that you want to accomplish gives each day much more meaning and a clear sense of direction.

If planning for tomorrow is good, what is wrong with the planning expressed in verse thirteen? When James begins to elaborate on the implications behind the planning in verses fourteen through sixteen, the wrongness in these plans comes clearly to the surface.

Note the first elaboration in verse fourteen: οἵτινες οὐκ ἐπίστασθε τὸ τῆς αὔριον ποία ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν· ἀτιμὶς γὰρ ἐστε ἢ πρὸς ὀλίγον φαινομένη, ἔπειτα καὶ ἀφανιζομένη.⁴ James accuses these individuals of ignorance about the nature of life, especially its fragility. "You don't understand tomorrow, that is, what your life is like."

What a temptation that is for all of us! Life is fragile and uncertain. Don't believe it? Pick up the morning newspaper and read just the front page. Story after story illustrates just how fragile life is. You and I have Sept. 11th burned into our very being as Americans. Almost 6,000 people began a normal day at the office or at the airport, but never lived to see the sunset that evening. Wow! What a vivid reminder of just how uncertain life can be. Indeed, in James' words, life is but a vapor that appears for a moment and then vanishes.

For many of you this morning, this may be a difficult personal lesson. Yea, life in general is uncertain, but not for me. Most of you are just leaving the so-called invincible years of teenage life, when most teenagers both consciously and unconsciously feel they're invincible. "Nothing is going to happen to me. I've got my whole life ahead of me." Yet, I dare say that most of you have high school friends or acquaintances who didn't live to see graduation.

³4:13 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money."

⁴4:14 Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

Old age is an eternity away. I remember thinking in 1960 as a college freshman that there was no way I could imagine ever being 60 years of age, which I will be in two weeks. It seemed like such a long time away. The duration of a lifetime seems unmeasurable to many of you now. You're young; you live in the present, not in the future. Why bother with planning out a life anyway. And then there's that decision the university forces me to make; I have to declare a major. Some sort of life time planning needs to go into that decision. So I'm forced to make plans. But isn't it a matter of what I want to do with my life? Anyway, who has any right to tell me what I have to do? But I don't really know what I want to do -- apart from a career that earns big bucks and enables me to realize the American dream of material success.

Ah! So a part of the wrongness of the planning expressed in verse thirteen is based on ignorance of life itself. Plans are made with no consideration of life's uncertainty. Sensitivity to life's uncertainty should impact what we decide to do. What does that mean? For one thing, this kind of planning doesn't include "Oh, eventually I'll get around to it." Procrastination is excluded in the awareness of the nature of life. Now, I've quite preaching and gone to meddlin', haven't I?

For the moment, let me skip over the second elaboration in verse 15 and go to the third one in verse 16: *νῦν δὲ καυχᾶσθε ἐν ταῖς ἀλαζονείαις ὑμῶν· πᾶσα καύχησις τοιαύτη πονηρὰ ἐστίν.*⁵ Here James accuses his merchants of arrogant boastfulness. The plural form of the word for arrogance emphasizes concrete expressions of arrogance, not just the attitude itself. The old Frank Sinatra song popular in my early college years, "I'll do it my way," captures the spirit behind this planning. These plans reflect a spirit of pride and arrogance that insists on having one's own way and planning out exactly what I -- and I alone -- want to accomplish. Now the wrongness of these plans becomes even more clear.

But how does that apply to us as Christians? We're committed to God's leadership over our lives. Self-centeredness is obviously not right. Arrogance certainly has no place in the Christian's life. Yet, over the years I've struggled constantly with doing ministry "my way." I couldn't count the number of seminary students whom I heard say, "I want to serve in a church close to where I grew up." Or, "My wife is insistent that we will move back home when I finish seminary. I have to find a church near her parent's home." We can easily put boundaries on our service to God -- geographical, vocational etc. We can limit God on our educational plans as well. I've often wondered how much poorer the Kingdom of God because of our refusal to follow God where ever He leads. We sing the hymn "Wherever He Leads I'll Go" but I'm not sure we always mean it.

Here is a real warning to each of us. Our pride can quickly turn our planning into sinful activity, rather than God-inspired activity. When one boils the concepts in this text down to the bottom line issue, it's a matter of leaving God out. In reality, we in the name of Christ and while claiming to be followers of Christ become practicing atheists. We're no better than the Madylene O'Hare's of this world. In some ways, we more despicable. At least she was open about her stance; we're more subtle about ours.

II. Build your life around God

The other elaboration on the wrongness of the planning at the beginning of the passage is also a corrective and is found in verse fifteen: *ἀντὶ τοῦ λέγειν ὑμᾶς, Ἐὰν ὁ κύριος θελήσῃ καὶ ζήσομεν καὶ ποιήσομεν τοῦτο ἢ ἐκεῖνο.*⁶ Here is the famous *conditio Iacobae* statement, "if

⁵4:16 As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.

⁶4:15 Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that."

God wills.” This expression has no parallel in the Old Testament, but seemingly is taken over by James -- and also by [Paul](#)⁷ and the writer of [Hebrews](#)⁸ -- from Greek philosophy reaching all the way back to Plato who first coined the expression in ancient literature.⁹

Central to “facing tomorrow” is grounding our stance and plans in God’s will. Anything less amounts to atheism. One important note here: the biblical text doesn’t present God’s will as some divine road map in which our entire pilgrimage is charted out from beginning to end, and God will reveal this road map to us if we ask him. No such static concept is found here. The expression is in the form of a verb, not a noun: if God wills. God’s will is an ongoing expression of his leadership over our lives day to day, not some grand scheme for our entire life. It’s not a matter of asking, “God, what do you want me to be?” Rather, it’s a question of “God, what do you want me to do today?”

My experience has certainly been this way over these past 59 years. My Pentecostal grandmother prayed for a preacher son and God answered her prayer with a preacher grandson. I struggled with the direction God was leading me at several junctures of the journey. As a teenager I wanted to build and fly airplanes. Plans were made and initial steps of implementation were taken leading to an appointment to the Air Force Academy. God’s plan was for a cousin to follow that path, rather than me. I argued with God that I would make a good Air Force Chaplain then -- at least I could be around flyers and airplanes. Nothing doing. At the end of college and the beginning of seminary, I wanted to become a missionary to Brazil. Still, it was “my way” rather than God’s way. Toward the end of my master’s degree at seminary I agreed with God to work on a doctorate, thinking that theological education on the mission field was the way to go. All the while through seminary, I loved being a pastor and had ten fulfilling years as a senior pastor in two churches. Then, God’s leadership yanked me out of the pastorate and plopped me down as a seminary prof at Southwestern in 1974 -- and at a considerable reduction of salary from a student pastorate no less. I gradually assumed that this would be where I would serve the rest of my life. Then in the 1990s came the persistent call from two very significant congregations in Germany to become a pastor again. I wanted to go bad, but it was a “my way” situation, rather than God’s way. Quite out of the blue came the invitation in 1997 to come to Gardner-Webb as an undergrad professor. This after a missed opportunity to go to the North American Baptist Seminary in Sioux Falls, South Dakota because of sickness and missing a SBL meeting. Another “my way” situation, -- this time I’m really grateful. North Carolina winters are much more tolerable than South Dakota winters. Never in my wildest imagination as a teenager committing my life to vocational Christian service could I have conjured up such a varied and exciting adventure in serving God and trying to follow God’s leadership, step by step. It has been an adventure going to point A to point B to point C etc. None of it was mapped out for me at the beginning. God’s leadership has just unfolded in front of me, piece by piece, as I have tried to live sensitive to His leading day to day. And that’s how I suspect it will work for you also, my young friends.

⁷Rom. 1:10; 1 Cor. 4:19, 16:7 (Acts 18:21).

⁸Heb. 6:3

⁹Plato, *Alcibiades*, 1.135D: ὅτι ἐὰν ὁ θεὸς ἐθέλη.

Conclusion

The capstone of the James passage is verse 17: εἰδóτι οὖν καλὸν ποιεῖν καὶ μὴ ποιοῦντι, ἁμαρτία αὐτῷ ἐστίν.¹⁰ James puts it on us in the last verse with the use of a piece of early Christian tradition -- the sin of omission statement. In the context, the sin here is knowing how to make proper plans and not doing it. Knowing how we should face tomorrow -- with God's leadership as foundational -- and refusing to do it.

The final issue that you must individually deal with is: how are you “facing tomorrow”? With pride and arrogance? With a “I’ll do it my way” stance? Or, with God leading you step by step? Boy, is that latter option an exciting adventure that will take you into places and experiences you can’t possibly imagine!

¹⁰4:17 Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.