

The Vanishing Life

Satisfied-Part V

James 4:13-17

This past week I picked up a copy of the News and Observer because the front page article arrested my attention.

It introduced a new campaign by an atheist organization called, “Freedom from Religion Foundation”. The term “free thinking” has become more popular than atheism or agnosticism because it obviously sounds positive and somewhat sophisticated.

Free thinking basically means freedom from the idea of a creator God to whom one will give an account.

The word atheist is actually a Greek compound transliterated word—*theo* (for God) with the prefix *alpha* or *a*—meaning no.

An “a/theo”—atheist simply refers to someone who believes there is no God.

The Raleigh news article announced the billboard campaign which began last month and will continue through April not surprisingly during the same time the church acknowledges the crucifixion and resurrection of God the Son.

I went online and found all the billboards and what makes them unique is that the picture of the person being quoted is actually on the billboard – including their name and the town where they live here in Wake County.

It is their desire to be known for their unbelief. The campaign includes 12 billboards in all. Let me quote a few of them to give you the idea.

One man from Cary declared, “Science is my co-pilot.” This is an obvious pun to the “God is my co-pilot” bumper stickers, which are just as bad theologically by the way. God is the pilot and we’re just glad to be on the airplane, right?

Another billboard has a couple of teenage sisters saying, “We put all our faith in science.” Which is a contradiction in terms, but you get the idea.

One showed a woman who identified herself as a stay-at-home mom. She has her picture next to her quote on the billboard that reads, “I don’t need a higher power to have a higher purpose.”

The next billboard featured the smiling face of a man next to his quote, “I write fiction; I don’t believe it.”

This billboard carried the picture of a truck driver who said, “I’m saved *from* religion.” I’d love to have the opportunity to tell him that you cannot be saved *by* religion.

I found this particular billboard humorously ironic. A man was quoted as saying, “Reason over dogma. Always!”

Reason over dogma, always! Isn’t that rather dogmatic?

I’ll mention one more from a retired man who said, “We’ve got the whole world in our hands.”

That really sums it up, doesn’t it? It’s *my* world, not God’s; the world is in *my* hands, not some Creator’s hands; which means, it’s *my* life, *my* will, not God’s.

Free thinking is really nothing more than defiant thinking, described in Romans chapter 1 which reveals the underpinnings of mankind's aversion to God.

They suppress the truth about God and refuse to acknowledge Him or thank Him for creation; instead they resort to speculation and proclaim themselves to be wise or, as in this campaign, they proclaim themselves to be free thinking. But in reality, Paul writes, their *foolish hearts are only darkened in their unbelief. (Romans 1:21)*

Like the famous lines of William Henley's poem, *Invictus*, which reads, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul."

I could go on and on and just about everyone in my audience would say, "You're right, Stephen . . . you tell those atheists!"

Frankly, I don't have nearly as much trouble with *practicing* atheists *outside* the church as I do with *practical* atheists *inside* the church.

We could all pitch a fit and host a rally because of all those people out there who say they don't believe in the existence of God and all the while ignore the growing number inside the church who say they've confessed Christ as Savior but have practically nothing to do with Him.

They are *practical* atheists. They attend a church they decide they like, get married to someone they choose to love; select a vocation that seems interesting; grow a family; buy and sell homes, cars and stuff; expand their portfolios and investments, slip into retirement and all the while ride the current of culture without ever including God.¹

You might not spot them right away. But they become a little more obvious when you overhear the advice they give to their children, "You need to choose a profession that pays well; you need to meet a nice boy or girl and get a good college education so you can land a good job and live in a good neighborhood near the family as you live out your nice life."

"Surely" they argue, "that's what God would want you to do . . . you don't need to bother asking because I'm pretty sure God will tag along."

Ladies and Gentlemen, practical atheism is living and thinking and deciding without ever giving any serious thought to the word of God, much less the will of God.

Practical atheists fill the churches of our land on Sundays; they watch their p's and q's and try to stay

out of serious trouble; and you can never expect them to agonize in prayer with questions like:

- Lord, am I really pleasing You?
- Is this decision I'm about to make acceptable to You?
- Would you please direct my steps today?
- Lord, would you give me wisdom at school today. I want to live out my relationship with your Word;
- Lord, help me at this very moment to resist the temptation I know is waiting for me at work today: the temptation to lie; to gossip; to overeat; to flirt; to steal; to procrastinate; to goof off; to cheat—Lord, I want to represent You well today!

Augustine's classic statement *Love God and do as you please* meant to pursue God's glory and to follow Him with abandon and passionately desire His pleasure to *love God and do as you please* which meant to give Him the right to change your definition of what pleases you.

Augustine's classic statement has been changed from, "Love God and do as you please" to "Do as you please and don't worry about God."

That's practical atheism, and it's practiced today by millions of people who are filling churches today who say they believe in God but have very little to do with Him.

Many are no doubt self-deceived and unregenerate, having never come to genuine faith and repentance. To them, the Apostle Paul would issue the challenge, "***Examine yourselves to see if you are in the faith.***" (2 Corinthians 13:5)

At the same time, many could be genuine believers who are presently living self-absorbed, self-centered, disobedient lives.

Think about it? Is it possible for a genuine Christian to be self-centered? Is it possible for a Christian to think more of his own pleasure than the pleasure of God? Is it possible for a Christian to make a decision without asking God's counsel?

When's the last time you looked in the mirror with some measure of honesty?

Well, let's do that today. And the particular mirror I have in mind is the one delivered to a group of Jewish believers, inspired by God through the half-brother of our Lord, which came wrapped in the form of a letter.

I'm looking at *James chapter 4* as James describes, challenges and calls to repentance believer's who are nothing less than practical atheists.

James writes in *verse 13*. ***In fact, let's read through the entire paragraph. Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit. 14. Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. 15. Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." 16. But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. 17. Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.***

Now in that text we just read, the practical atheist makes at least 5 choices all on their own without any acknowledgment of God's will or any desire to discern the wisdom or purpose of God for their lives.

First, he chooses his own timetable

James writes in *verse 13*, ***Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go***

The word translated "you who say" refers to consistent, active talking and reasoning and planning. This is not haphazard or spontaneous.ⁱⁱ

These people are carefully planning an enterprise based only on their reasoning and their planning of when the best time would be to launch the enterprise.

Today or at the latest tomorrow, now's the perfect time! Have you prayed about it?

Why bother . . . God wants me to be happy doesn't He? I'm sure He wouldn't want me to wait until next week . . . today or tomorrow that's the perfect time.

If you've been a Christian for very long, you've discovered the critical issue of timing, haven't you.

There are a lot of good things you can do, but the timing of them matters doesn't it?

And so you're learning to pray, not only about saying the right thing, but saying it at the right time; not only doing the right thing, but doing it at the right time.

When do I move?

When do I change jobs?

When do I have that conversation?

When do I buy that or sell that?

When I was in seminary I convinced my wife that the timing was right to replace our old automobile. It was a bucket of bolts. It was time to get a newer car something with maybe 50,000 miles on it or less. She had a great job working for an attorney, and I was working part time as a courier while going to seminary.

The timing for this automobile upgrade was perfect, and I even had a friend who was ready to sell me his little hatchback with low mileage.

Did I pray about it? I was in seminary. I'm praying all the time; I get graded on my prayers, but I hadn't prayed about that car.

We bought that little car and wrestled the payments into our budget, and then two weeks later I found out about a job couriating for a commercial real-estate company. The president of the company and several of his associates were believers. They had decided years earlier to hire only Dallas seminary students for the job, not only because they trusted them, but because they wanted to help whatever student happened to land the job. The help they offered was giving the courier . . . 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, all expenses paid including gas, oil and even detailing a beautiful, new Buick LeSabre. It was ours as long as I had the job which I had until graduating.

But now I've got a little hatchback with plastic seats sitting in the parking lot of our apartment complex that I'm making absolutely frustrating payments on every month while it gathers dust. Plus I hadn't even looked the car over that carefully because only after buying it, I realized it didn't have air conditioning—this is Texas.

After nearly a year, I finally sold that car at a loss.

I've often thought about that decision, if I had only prayed about the timing of that decision for two weeks . . . That act of practical atheism cost me dearly . . . and gave me a lesson I still haven't forgotten.

Do you ever jump ahead of God? Have you ever made a decision only to realize you never gave God the deciding vote?

James is holding the mirror of the word up to the believer; practical atheism chooses its own timetable.

Secondly, he chooses his own destination.

James writes, *“Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city.”*

In other words, “I’ve decided where I’m going to move and live!”

Have you prayed about where you’re going to live? Why bother, says the practical atheist. This is a great neighborhood and the price is right . . . what more could you ask for? Why would God *not* want that for me? It’s perfect.

Thirdly, he chooses his own tenure

James describes them saying in *verse 13*, *“[We’re going to] spend a year there.*

Literally, “we’re going to do a year there.” It implies more than casual living. They are literally planning to use the year actively. They are presuming that the whole year is at their disposal to use as they decide.

In fact, the construction James uses here implies that after one year, these practical atheists have already begun planning what they’re going to do the following year.ⁱⁱⁱ

And don’t overlook, fourthly, that they are choosing their own occupation.

James adds near the end of *verse 13*, *they were going to engage in business*

The word business is the word *emporeusometha* (εμπορευσομεθα) which gives us our word *emporium*.^{iv}

An *emporium* is a center of trade. It’s a place that provides opportunities for buying and selling and conducting business.

We consider New York City one of the world’s great *emporiums*. It’s a city of business.

These Jewish believers had chosen a trade center and figured out all the details on building their business.

They were also presuming one more thing by the way; notice the last phrase in *verse 13*-*we will engage in business and make a profit.*

Lastly, they were choosing their own outcome.

This outcome was the ultimate goal, the final outcome of their enterprise. We are going to succeed.

And why would God be against any of that?

These are the five decisions of atheism, in general, who doesn’t believe there’s a God to petition and practice atheism because they assume life can be lived without enlisting the wisdom of God for any of their plans.

To summarize James says . . . described here in *James 4:13*;

- I know *when* I’m going to start my business;
- I know *where* I’m going to live;
- I know *how long* I’m going to live there;
- I know *what* I’ll be doing while I’m living there;
- And I know what’s going to *happen* to me while I’m living there!

The world out there lives and plans and decides and moves and works like that, and we would expect them to because they deny the existence of God, but James isn’t just describing the world out there. We can live and plan and act, in practical terms, just like they do too.

Now, you need to understand that God isn’t against planning!

Paul wrote to the Ephesians to *be careful how you walk . . . making the most of your time.* (*Ephesians 5:15*)

He wrote to the Thessalonians that work and industry was honorable and refusing to work when work was available was dishonorable (2 *Thessalonians 3*).

Solomon writes, *Go to the ant you sluggard and observe her ways and her industry and be wise . . . watch her prepare in the summer and gather in the harvest.* (*Proverbs 6*)

James is not rebuking these merchants for their plans; in fact, he’s not condemning their desire to make a profit, which happens to be a good thing when you’re in business.

He is rebuking them, not for their occupation, [or their anticipation,] but for the secularization of their hearts and minds.^v

God did not factor in. Just like the world, these believers were planning as if God didn’t exist.

That’s practical atheism.

Now, having described how the practical atheist thinks, James now goes on to describe what he overlooks.

James is about to reveal:

Two Realities Overlooked by Practical Atheists

The first reality is this: life is entirely unpredictable.

Notice *verse 14*. *Yet, you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow.*

You could translate it, “you don’t know what will happen to you tomorrow.”

I love the way Eugene Petersen paraphrases it to read, “You don’t know the first thing about tomorrow!” Have you forgotten that?

The March 11th earthquake that created the Tsunami waves which literally wiped towns and villages away. Four trains including one passenger train literally disappeared. Japan has one of the world’s most sophisticated warning systems and it worked perfectly . . . the residents of Sendai, the largest city hit by the Tsunami, had everyone heard the warning, many people didn’t, they still only had no more than 15 minutes to run.

I watched live footage as the wall of water swept inland over farmland carrying boats, buildings, and houses as if they were plastic toys and you could see just ahead of the water, cars slowly moving down village streets, and a man on a motorcycle all unaware that a massive wall of water and debris was heading their way.^{vi}

15 minutes! Have you forgotten that life is unpredictable?

All it takes is an accident, a doctor’s report, a financial reversal, a downturn on Wall Street, a tornado, or an earthquake and life can change in a moment.

No wonder Solomon wrote, “***Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.***” (*Proverbs 27:1*)

Ladies and Gentlemen, the emergency rooms today are filled with people who had different plans. Who among them woke up and said, “I think I break my leg today and go sit in the emergency room all afternoon being ignored.”

The emergency rooms are filled with people who had plans. So is the cemetery.^{vii}

People aren’t in the cemetery because they ran out of plans . . . they had plans too!

That leads me to the next thing practical atheism overlooks.

Not only is life entirely unpredictable;

Secondly, life is physically unsustainable.

James puts it this way in verse 14b-***You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.***

You can’t capture the vapor of life and suspend its progress. You can’t keep the mist of life from evaporating into thin air.

The truth is, we are all living, here in these bodies, a vanishing life.

You can’t bottle life and keep it from moving on and eventually running out.

Like that poem that goes:

When I was a child, I laughed and wept,
Time crept;
When as a youth, I dreamed and talked,
Time walked;
When I became a full grown man,
Time ran;
When older still I daily grew;
Time flew;
Soon I shall be traveling on,
Time gone.
Life is short!

This is great opportunity for me to tell you, “**Today is the day of salvation?**” (*2 Corinthians 6:2*)

Why is today the day? Because you don’t own tomorrow. And if you haven’t settled eternity, you’re on dangerous ground.

You say, but I’m young . . . I’ve got plenty of time!

I read just recently of the author whose book swept the publishing world *100 Things to Do Before You Die*. At the age of 47, this author fell inside his house, struck his head, and died.

The subtitle to the newspaper article recorded that he was halfway through the 100 things to do before you die . . . he only made it halfway through the list.

He was 47; young people would think he lived a full life.

So I’ve clipped from a USA Today newspaper last week an article which told the story of an undefeated high school basketball team that was playing its last regular-season game. Its star player was 6’2” at 215 pounds. He also starred as the High School quarterback.

The game was tied in overtime and time was running out. This star player, in front of several thousand fans, put up a shot and made the basket just as the buzzer sounded, giving them a victory and sealing their perfect season. This young athlete was lifted off the floor on the shoulders of his teammates, grinning from ear to ear. Seconds later, he fell to the court, stunning the crowd, and died

from cardiac arrest. He was a teenager in High School.

The truth is, life is physically unsustainable at any age.

Not one of us knows for certain whether or not we are going to live to see the light of another day in this body.

Practical atheism says, “I’ve got all my tomorrows all planned out and I’m going to live to see every one of them happen, and I’m sure the Lord would approve.”

James reminds us of what we overlook; life is a vapor. The word for vapor can be translated, “mist; it can refer to breath appearing in the cold air as you exhale or steam coming up from a boiling pot of water.^{viii}

Now you need to understand, James is not saying that we cease to exist. Annihilationists use this as a proof text.

James is actually using the same root verb twice which means “to appear”. What James is saying is that we *appear* for a moment and then we *disappear* . . . we are *visible* and then we are *invisible*.^{ix}

We don’t cease to exist; we just change form like vapor that still exists, only in a form we can no longer see. So, if you’re going to plan anything, James implies, plan on a short life.

Don’t overlook the unpredictable nature of life and don’t overlook the brevity of life.

Businessmen in the days of James and on into the 2nd and 3rd century would often write the words *memento mori* in large letters on the first page of their accounting books.

That Latin phrase meant, “*Remember your mortality*.” In other words, don’t ever get so busy you forget you’re not going to have this job forever.

The scriptures repeatedly remind us of this fact. Our lives are like flowers in the field (**Isaiah 40**); like a leaf before the wind (**Job 13**); like a shadow (**Job 14**).

A prayer of Moses is included in the Psalms which encourages the faithful to develop a wise heart by *numbering our days*. (**Psalm 90:12**).

Literally, count the number of days you have lived and have yet to live.

If that kind of exercise didn’t lead to godly wisdom, James wouldn’t remind us of how short

our lives are and Moses wouldn’t suggest we live in light of it.

How wise are you can be answered with, how recently have you considered that you’re not going to live for very long?

So let’s do this exercise together. Let’s assume the best of health and vitality for all of us.

Let’s calculate that you and I will live the average lifespan in this country, which is now right at 77 years of age. How many days do you have left?

- If you’re 15 years old, you have 22,630 days left. That sounds like a long time, so let’s figure it according to months, okay? You 15 year-olds have 744 months left – if you live to the age of 77.
- If you’re 25 years old, you have 624 months left.
- If you’re 35 years old, you have right at 504 months left;
- If you’re 45, you have 384 months left;
- If you’re 55, you have 264 months left;
- If you’re 65 years old, you have 144 months left;
- If you’re 75 years old, you have 24 months left;
- If you’re 80 years old, you can sit there and just smile! You beat the average!

You can live like Charles Ryrie, retired seminary professor who taught several courses here at Shepherds seminary, he is fond of saying that he’s so old he won’t even buy green bananas anymore.

Not bad advice for us all.

Today I’ve brought this glass vase with me to church. The bottom of this beautiful vase is filled with little green marbles. Since I don’t have room in the vase to hold the number of days I have left, if I lived to the age of 77, I decided to count out the remainder of my days in months. Each marble in here represents one month that I have left.

Every month, if I remember, I take a marble out and throw it away an action that reminds me that it’s gone. Did I invest it well or waste it?

I counted the marbles yesterday to make sure I had an accurate count. I’m supposed to have 289 marbles in this vase, but I only counted 251. I’m

missing 38 of them. Someone wants me to go early!

You know what this vase does for me? It reminds me that I'm losing my marbles . . . faster than I thought!

Well, actually, it reminds me of something I might want to overlook. It reminds me of the brevity of my own life.

I want to number my days, because Moses said it would develop within me a heart of wisdom; I want to remember the brevity of my life because James said it would keep me from living the life of a practical atheist.

By the way, this vase and these marbles also remind me of something else, that life as I know it now is *nothing* compared to eternity! This is nothing!

The unpredictability of life is intended by God to remind us that we are shortsighted. We need God's direction; the brevity of life reminds us that we are short lived; we need God's wisdom.

And so James goes on to give us two activities. We'll call them:

Practical Atheism Resisting Activities for Practicing Believers

Number 1: Verbalize your submission to the will of God

James writes in *verse 15*. ***Instead, you ought to say, If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.***

In other words, you no longer talk like you're sovereign. Verse 13—we're going to do this, and we're going to live there, and we're going to get involved for a year, and at the end of it we're going to succeed.

James says, You need to stop talking like you're sovereign and start talking like you're surrendered to the Sovereign.

If the Lord wills!

Which is another way of saying;

- Whatever the Lord wants!
- Let me ask the Lord about it!
- Let me check in with my Lord!
- Let me talk to my Sovereign Lord first because His will is what truly matters.

We're not the Sovereign; we're the slave of the Sovereign and our will is to do His will.

Anything less is, according the next verse from James (v. 16), nothing less than evil and arrogant boasting. So verbalize your submission to your Lord. Learn to say, "If the Lord wills."

This is how the Apostle Paul thought and talked. He wrote;

- I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills (1 Corinthians 4:19);
- I hope to remain with you for some time, if the Lord permits (1 Corinthians 16:7);
- Perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you (Romans 1:10).

Like Paul, verbalize your submission to the Sovereign plan of God in everything;

- I'll go to that college, Lord willing;
- I'll get married to that mate, Lord willing;
- I'll have children, Lord willing;
- I'll spend my time today doing this or that, Lord willing;
- I'll make plans to accomplish something I've planned for tomorrow, Lord willing;
- I'll take up that ministry, Lord willing;
- I'll get that job, Lord willing;
- I'll move into that apartment or home, Lord willing.

The Puritans loved this biblical command and they used it often in its Latin form *Deo Volente-God willing*.

Deo Volente filled their speeches and their letters. They would often sign their letters at the bottom with the initials, "DV" for *Deo Volente-God willing*.^x

Everything was cast in light of the will of God. Nothing was ever attempted or desired apart from the will of God. His will was sought above everything and for everything. It was more than a cliché. It was their passion. James says, make it your passion too.

Verbalize your submission to the will of God.

Secondly, mobilize your agreement to the will of God.

James writes, in *verse 17*, ***Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.***

This text is often used to define what we call sins of omission. In other words, sin is not only

doing what we shouldn't, it's not doing what we should.

While that is certainly an accurate definition of sin, the context of this verse points back to the previous command to offer everything up to the will of God.

Therefore means, now that you've been reminded to surrender your will to the will of God, *therefore*, do it!

Don't just *say*, "Lord willing." *Do* what you know the Lord wants you to do. You say, "But I don't know everything about the will of God for my life."

James would say, "Who does? The thing that concerns James at the moment in *verse 17 is the person who knows the right thing to do and does not do it.*"

What is it that you *know* is God's will? Then do it! That's what James is after.

A practicing, growing, progressing disciple of Jesus Christ will not say or live in a way that continually says to the Lord, "Lord, this is none of your business." He develops the habit of effectively saying, "Lord, everything about my life is your business."

It must be! Why? Because we are living vanishing lives! In fact, I've only got 289 months left . . . maybe.

No wonder James would say to those who desire to live satisfied lives—verbalize and mobilize to surrendering to the will of God. Desire a deepening in that longing for His good pleasure as He reveals His will one day at a time—sometimes one moment at a time. One author put it this way, "Life is a gift from God. What we do with it is our gift back to Him."^{xi}

So let's agree with the hymn writer:

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.
Have Thine own way, Lord!
Have Thine own way!
Hold o'er my being absolute sway!
Fill with Thy Spirit,
Till all shall see,
Christ only, always,
Living in me.

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