

# Living for Today – James 4:13-5:20

## The Key Question: What is your life? (4:14)

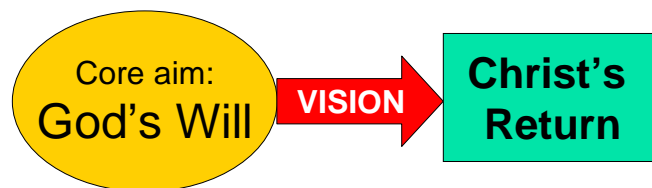
James challenges us with this question. If you were asked the same question today, what would your answer be? What is the purpose for living in your opinion? There are several common answers in our modern society, for example:

- Stay out of trouble – don't cause any one else any harm
- Work hard and enjoy the results of it – get rich to protect you and your family
- Make a mark on the world – be known for something (have you got the X factor?)
- Have good relationships with others – find a partner to face life with you
- Learn to be independent – look after yourself and find your own way through life

But James has a stark warning for us – life is like a vanishing mist. Your life is brief, and will soon pass away. The problem with all of the above goals in life is that they only last as long as you have breath in your body. Once you die these things have no value any more. We all receive reminders of this undeniable fact when we are faced with the finality of death. If we don't find something greater to live for then all of our efforts in life are in vain. If there is nothing else that lasts beyond death then our lives are just a flicker in the darkness, a mist that appears in the morning but is soon burnt off as the sun rises. In this study we will discover what James reveals to be the true purpose of life, and we will find that it is something that really lasts!

## The hope that changes everything (5:7-11)

The problem with the goals for living that we listed above is that they are focused on our own ambitions for what we hope to achieve. James challenges us in 4:15 that we should be living for a different purpose: **that God's will would be done in our lives**. This is a completely different way to live life. But how can we transform our reason for living from our own ambitions to focusing on God's will? The answer lies in vision. The real issue is what your vision is. Vision is vital in the Christian life (and especially in Christian ministry). If you don't have a clear idea of where your life is leading to or what your work is supposed to achieve you will end up going round in circles. The problem is simple – many people face problems in life with the attitude "I'll just keep ploughing on". In other words, keep going and you'll get through it eventually. The problem with this is that if you are ploughing in a field you must keep one eye on the furrow you are ploughing, but the other eye must be fixed on the goal you are ploughing towards. Otherwise you'll look back after a few hours of hard work to discover you have been going round in circles! Life without vision is like treading water. It takes energy to stay afloat, but you get nowhere at all. We need to have a clear idea of vision.



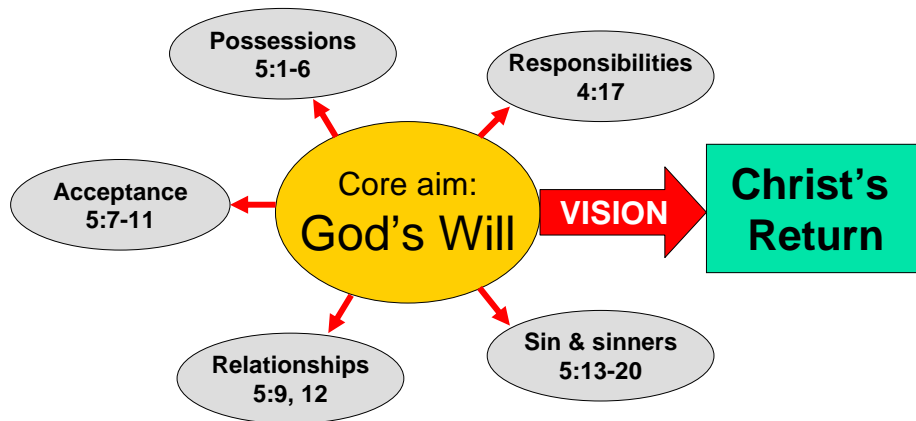
In 5:7-11 James tells us what our vision should be focused on. He presents to us the ultimate goal of our lives – the realisation that changes everything: **Christ is coming back!** The idea of Christ returning brings fear to many people because they associate it with judgement. James makes this connection too – the Judge is at the door (v9). This is indeed a sobering thought. We must realise that we will give an account to the Lord for how we have lived our lives, and this should change our attitude to our brothers and sisters (v9). But James presents another amazing truth to us in verse 11 – the Lord is compassionate and merciful! The wonderful truth for the Christian is that we have discovered that our Judge is also full of mercy and love. As singer-songwriter Michael Card put it, we have looked into our Judge's face and found a Saviour there!

James challenges us to "be patient and stand firm". When we realise the wonderful hope that we have at Christ's return we have a vision that extends beyond what we can achieve in our lifetime to something that has eternal consequences. Life's purpose is to know and do God's will because life's goal is to stand before Him at His coming and here He says "well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23). This

is no heavy-hearted obedience to an over-bearing master, but a joyful discovery of the freedom and blessing that comes from discovering His compassion and mercy.

## God's will meets our lives

The new vision that we have as Christians, based on the hope of Christ's return and our realisation of His amazing mercy towards us, transforms every part of our lives. We will examine five of the key aspects of life that James refers to in this passage.



### 1. Responsibilities (4:17)

We have a tendency to define sin as the wrong things that we do. The result is that we can justify living selfish lives on the basis that we're not causing anyone else any harm. However, James raises the standard much higher. The wrong things that we do are indeed sins, but they stem from the central problem of sin which is our rebellion against God. All sin stems from pride – the belief that we can rule our own lives and make our own decisions without God. In 4:17 James tells us that “anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins”. Sin is not just when we actively do what is wrong, but when we passively refuse to do what is right. As Christians we have God's word, which reveals to us the duty we have in terms of caring for the oppressed and reaching out in love to those who are lost and hurting. If we fail to do this we are sinning. We cannot hide behind the view of holiness that says “I'm holy because I don't smoke, gamble, get drunk, commit crimes or swear”. When we answer to the Judge, He will ask what we did to those who were in need (Matthew 25:40). Our responsibility in view of His coming is to seek actively to do God's will, not just to avoid doing what we know to be against it. We must be pro-active in asking God what His will for our lives is, and prayerfully considering the challenges we see in our world. Too many Christians go through life doing what seems right to them and never really surrendering themselves to God's purpose.

### 2. Possessions (5:1-6)

James has a stark warning for the rich in these verses. The New Testament consistently warns against being rich – it is a precarious position to be in! The Bible is never opposed to people being successful financially and having good incomes, but it is clearly opposed to people using that income to indulge themselves rather than to bring blessing to others. You can be successful, with a good income, but live modestly and give generously. James reminds us that all riches are only temporary (vv2&3). We know that we cannot take our possessions with us beyond the grave. We come into the world with nothing and we will leave it with nothing. But there is deeper problem with riches – not only do they corrode, but they corrode into the heart (v3)! They eat into the flesh. Riches are a dangerous snare, which can easily find a place in our affections. However, this self-indulgence does not go unnoticed (vv5&6). God sees all that is done by the rich as they fail to give to the poor and even murder the righteous man. These people are fattening themselves for the day of their own slaughter (v5). We must not think that we are innocent of these charges. We who live in the wealthy West must consider how our own economic policies in trade are oppressing the poor in other nations. We must think seriously about where the cheap products we buy come from. We should take the Fairtrade movement seriously and do what we can to change the policies of large multi-national companies that become rich at the expense of others. We should look behind the labels we wear to ask what the real cost of the clothing is in terms of the sweat, blood and tears of those who make them.

### 3. Acceptance (5:7-11)

There is a strong tendency for us to live our lives for acceptance from others and even for popularity. This desire has been made public in shows like the X Factor where people will do anything to be famous, even for a short time. However, in light of the hope of Christ's return, these goals lose their attraction. In fact, according to James, there will be suffering through opposition for those who live for God in this world. The world is at enmity with God's purpose (4:4), and Christians will not always find acceptance from a society that has rejected their Lord. In face of this opposition, we must endure like:

- a. *A farmer* (vv7&8) – waiting for the harvest. We know as Christians that what is done in God's will, for His Kingdom, is never forgotten. Like seed planted in the soil we may not see the growth of the Kingdom, but one day the harvest will come (see Mark 4:26-29). Just as the farmer waits patiently for the rains to come, we should endure hardship patiently as we await God's blessing, confident that it will come in due time, when Christ returns if not before. We must keep on sowing faithfully, trusting that the Lord will bring the increase.
- b. *The prophets* (v10) – speaking in the Lord's name despite opposition. While we await the Lord's coming we must be active in proclaiming God's word.
- c. *Job* (v11) – blessed for persevering. Just as Job remained steadfast, we too should stand firm because we know that the Lord honours those who honour Him.

### 4. Relationships (5:4, 6 9, 12)

Realising our new vision of the return of Christ transforms how we see our relationships with others. The problem is that if we focus only on our own ambitions then other people become either rivals, potentially obstructing our ambition, or resources to be exploited for our own gain, and our own word to others will mean very little. James challenges us that other people are:

- a) **NOT our rivals**  
We are not to grumble against one another (v9).
- b) **NOT to be used or exploited**  
We must not get wealthy at the expense of others (vv4&6).
- c) **NOT to be deceived**  
We must be people of our word, saying what we mean and meaning what we say (v12).

### 5. Sin and sinners (5:13-20)

The realisation of God's mercy towards us will also transform how we view those who have sinned against us. Instead of judging them we will see them as people in need of God's mercy, and we will be prepared to go out of our own comfort zone to rescue others. In verses 13-20 James teaches us how to deal with sin in our own lives and with those in the fellowship who sin. In verse 13 he shows us that our attitude in life should always be God-focused. Too many Christians go through life miserable because they focus on problems and on the faults of others, or complacent because they focus on the blessings God has given them. James challenges us that when we suffer we should pray, and when we are cheerful we should give praise to God. In the ups and downs of life, He should be our constant focus.

Then, in verses 14-18 James presents us with an example of a person who is sick because of sin. It is important to realise that physical illness can have a spiritual cause. This is not to say that it always has, but that our spirit and body are intimately related, and problems with one can be the root cause of symptoms in the other. When we are sick, we should call the elders of the church and they will come and pray for us ("spiritual medicine") and anoint us with oil ("physical medicine" – the actual word is to "massage" with oil, which was a form of medical treatment). The key point here is that sometimes we are too weak to stand alone – we need to depend on others. The prayer is powerful because:

- (i) *It is made in the Lord's name* – this means that it is surrendered to God's will (v14)
- (ii) *It is made in faith* – believing that God is powerful to answer according to His will (v15)
- (iii) *It is made by a righteous person* – in this case it is the prayer of the elders that is effective, not the prayer of the ill person whose sickness has been caused by sin (v16). It is only in cases of illness caused by sin that there is a guarantee of healing (v15).

It is a very dangerous thing when we think that we can survive in the Christian life without depending on others. Too often when Christians face challenges or struggles they do the worst possible thing by withdrawing themselves from fellowship with God's people and from any kind of accountability. The best way to deal with these problems is to come to other mature Christians ("righteous" people) and to confess our sins to them and receive the ministry of prayer from them.

Lastly, in verses 19 and 20 James challenges us about how we should treat Christians amongst us who wander from the truth. We must do whatever we can to bring them back. We have a responsibility before God to be our brothers keeper – to make an effort as far as is possible to bring back to the truth those who have wandered or to restore those who have fallen into sin. We cannot just pray for them and hope they come back! We must stretch beyond our own comfort zone to walk with them in their struggle, and to expend our energy to lift them up. Too often we fail to do anything either because we blame the person for their own fault and don't realise the responsibility we have to see their problem as our problem too, or because we fear that they will not accept our help. It is true that often they will not accept our help (this is one harmful result of our individualistic society), but you will at least have fulfilled your responsibility before God, and you may find that they will come back to you when they come to their senses. Let us search for those who are wandering and walk with them in their difficulties.

## **Conclusion - what are you living for?**

Are you surrendered wholly and only to God's purpose? Are you seeking His will alone? Or are you living for your own ambitions. Take time to ask God's Holy Spirit to search you and reveal those things in every part of your life that need to be more fully surrendered to His will. Above all, focus on that coming day when He will return and we will answer to Him.