

Responding to the Will of God
James 4:13-17

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Introduction

The Scriptures give many marks of a true Christian, but nothing more clearly summarizes the character of a genuine believer than a desire to do the will of God (Psalm 40:8; 143:10; Matthew 6:10; Mark 3:35; Eph 6:6).

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the best example of those who did the will of God. John 6:38 states, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me". Also see John 4:34, 5:30, Matthew 26:39, Mark 14:36, and Luke 22:42.

A constant disregard to God's will is a mark of the presence of pride in one's life. To disregard God's will is equivalent to saying, "I am the sovereign ruler of my own life." This is the opposite of saving faith!

In this passage James gives us insights into how people respond to the will of God. James will present three negative responses and one positive

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Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; ¹⁴ whereas you do not know what *will happen* tomorrow. For what *is* your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. ¹⁵ Instead you *ought* to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” ¹⁶ But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do *it*, to him it is sin.

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The Foolishness of Ignoring God’s Will

James 4:13-14

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The first negative response to God’s will is foolishly ignoring it, living as if God did not exist or was indifferent to our behavior.

James’ rebuke is to those who are saying, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”. The Greek text literally reads “the ones who are saying,” indicating people who habitually live without regard for God’s will. The Greek verb means “to say something based on reason or logic”. James rebuked those who habitually think through and articulate their plans as if God did not exist or care (cf. 4:11–12).

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The Illustration James chose was one that was familiar to his readers. Many Jews who were scattered throughout the ancient world were successful traveling merchants. They would seek out flourishing trade centers in which to do business for a time and then move on. James is not condemning wise planning and strategizing in business. There were no spiritual principles violated by anything the businessman said. The problem lies in what they did not do. They did extensive planning, but in the course of their planning, they totally ignored God. God was not part of their agenda.

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These businessmen were presumptuous in five areas. **First**, they chose their own time, "today or tomorrow". **Second**, they chose their own location for doing business, "we will go into such a city". **Third**, they chose their own duration, deciding to spend "a year there". **Fourth**, they chose their own enterprise, to engage in business "buy and sell" (literally, "to travel into an area for trade"). **Fifth**, they chose their own goal or objective, to "make a profit". James is not attacking their profit motive, but their exclusion of God. Allowing for no contingencies, they planned as if they were omniscient, omnipotent, and invulnerable.

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In verse 14, James gives two important reasons those who presumptuously leave God out of their planning are foolish. First, James says to such people, "you do not know what *will happen* tomorrow. For what *is* your life?" To phrase it another way, "You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow".

Life is a complex matrix of forces, events, people, and circumstances over which we have little or no control. It is impossible for anyone to know tomorrow.

Despite that, some people imagine that they are in charge of their lives. Such people ignore not only the existence of God's will, but also its benefit. Christians have the comfort of knowing that the sovereign, omniscient, omnipotent God of the universe controls every event and circumstance of their lives and weaves them all into His perfect plan for them (Rom. 8:28).

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The second reason that leaving God out of one's planning is foolish is the brevity of life. "It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away." Life is like one's breath on a cold day, it is briefly visible and then it is gone. How foolish, considering the brevity and frailty of earthly life, to plan and live it without consideration for God's will.

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The Arrogance of Denying God's Will

James 4:16

But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

There are also those who, acknowledge that God exists and has a will, but arrogantly reject it. This group refuses to submit the uncertainties of life to God. Rather they set themselves, their goals and wills above God. They boast in their arrogance. "Boast" here can mean "to be loud-mouthed," or "to speak loudly," either in legitimate rejoicing (e.g., Rom. 5:2–3, 11) or in flaunting one's own accomplishments (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:19). The context indicates James has the latter meaning in mind in this passage.

"Such boasting is evil". Scripture uses this word "evil" as a title for Satan (Matt. 13:38; John 17:15; Eph. 6:16; 2 Thess. 3:3; 1 John 2:13–14; 3:12; 5:18–19), the original boastful sinner (cf. Isa. 14:13–14). Those who arrogantly deny God's will emulate Satan's sin.

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The Sin of Disobeying God's Will

James 4:17

Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do *it*, to him it is sin.

Those guilty of this third negative approach to God's will affirm God's existence and acknowledge the supremacy of His will—then proceed to disobey it. James rebuked such people with the statement that "to him that knows to do good, and does not do it, to him it is sin". Those in this third group know God's will and affirm that it is good. "Good" here describes what is "qualitatively good, morally excellent, worthy of honor, and upright".

Those who know God's will are responsible to obey it, and if they fail to do so, they sin. Jonah is a good example of this sin.

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The Blessing of Acknowledging God's Will

James 4:15

Instead you *ought* to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."

In contrast to the negative, sinful responses to God's will, James gives the positive side. This positive response to God's will is acknowledging and obeying it and generally marks true believers. The tense of the verb translated "to say" reveals that submission to God's will must be habitual and continual. In every aspect of our lives, our response must be "If the Lord wills." The will of God must be central to all our plans (cf. Acts 18:21; Rom. 1:10; 15:32; 1 Cor. 4:19; 16:7; Phil. 2:19, 24; Heb. 6:3).

Acknowledging God's will affirm His sovereignty over all aspects of life. We live only because God so wills it, for He controls life and death (Deut. 32:39; Job 12:9–10; Ps. 39:4–5; 104:29; Heb. 9:27; Rev. 1:18). God also controls everything people do and all the circumstances of life.

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So What ...

For the Christian, doing God's will is an **act of worship** (Rom. 12:1–2). It is to be done from the heart (Eph. 6:6), as a way of life (Col. 1:9–10; 4:12), recognizing that He must empower us to do it (Heb. 13:20–21). In John 13:17 the Lord Jesus Christ pronounced the reward given those who do God's will: "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

Responding to God's will is yet another test of a living and true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. A strong desire to do the will of God is a sure mark of a transformed life.

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