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God's Will And Ours

As we head into this new year, I want to bring you a short message from this section in James that I have entitled, "God's Will and Ours." One reason why I think this is the perfect text for us to consider is that naturally, this is a time of the year when we all, to varying degrees, are beginning to set course to accomplish our New Year's resolutions or goals or aspirations for the coming year. For many, it's not even something that we want to see happen specifically this year, but there's simply a new direction that we want to head into in some capacity, some sort of new endeavour that we believe the Lord might have for us this year.

I read that Jonathan Swift, the famed author of "Gulliver's Travels," kept a record of some resolutions that he once made with himself when he was 30 years old concerning his future self. He was looking down the tunnels of time and saying, "When I get to this age, here are some resolutions that I want to have for myself." Some of these are quite humorous, to say the least. One of them was not to tell the same story over and over to the same people. Does that ring any bells with any of you? Another one was not to scorn present ways or wits or fashions or men or war. In other words, he was obviously surrounded by a lot of old people who were constantly complaining about the way that young people are these days, and he said, "When I get to that age, I don't want to be like that."

Another resolution that he made, and perhaps this one was a little bit arrogant, was not to boast of his former beauty or strength or favour with the ladies. You can take that for what it's worth. But you see, people have all sorts of different resolutions that they will make. We all set goals, however small or however big. Making plans is as natural to us as breathing itself.

At the turn of the new year, when we are most prone to set and make plans, we need to see what sort of framework Scripture gives the Christian to see their lives unfold through. What James does is remind us of God's sovereignty. God does not want us to think that because we plan, somehow it is within our power, apart from Him, to see them through. God does not

want us to overinflate our sense of ability simply because, as His image bearers, we have the capacity to take action in the world. Rather, He wants us to be grounded in the truth of His sovereignty and His ordering of the world and our daily lives.

We have this sinful tendency, you see, to think that we can control the flow of time, money, skills, and success. But God's Word tells us that first we must remember these words of James: "If the Lord wills." And so I say this directing you to our key learning outcome. If it is as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ that you desire to enter this new year with a Biblical lens to see your life unfold through, then these words of James will serve you well.

The key point is this: Christian, God forbids you to disassociate your will from His, despite the temptation that we have to do so. We are forbidden to live in a way that does not ground ourselves in God's providential ordering of this world. As John Calvin put it, we must live with this fixed principle ever before us that without God's permission, we may do or accomplish nothing at all.

So it is not making plans that's the issue as you head into this new year. Plans are good. Plans are, in themselves, fine and natural things to do. The problem is man's willing himself without God. It is man's mind and thinking devoid of the reality that we belong to God and have life, our will, our being all in Him and for Him.

Return your minds back with me to the original creation, the creation that God called good. In this good creation, God placed man in His special, what others have called tabernacle or temple, the sacred sanctuary of the Garden of Eden, wherein man, God's special and crowning creation, was to enjoy the blessed nearness and communion with their Maker. However, the serpent, the fallen angel Satan, also had access to this sanctuary, and in fact, it was part of Adam's testing or probation that he would keep at bay Satan to crush the serpent's head.

The human pair listened to Satan's lies, and he successfully deceived them to commit sin. I ask you, what was Satan's lie? Well, Satan's lie was that there is a richer and fuller human life and experience to be enjoyed outside of the bounds of the Creator's will. Satan's lie is that God cannot be trusted and that as image bearers, it is our preferential destiny to be God's unto ourselves. It is Satan's lie that we may for ourselves define what is as we see it, not as God sees it.

It was Satan's lie to tell man not to concern ourselves with right and wrong, with law as God gives it, but to define it as we want to. His lie was not to fear the threat of death through sin but instead to fear as living subjects to a Creator God. We find all these lies contained in the simple text of Genesis, and he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said?" You see, he asked the woman to question God. God can't be trusted, so you must question Him.

We know that Eve took of the forbidden fruit, and we know that Adam failed in his duty to God as a husband to Eve, and he himself ate of the fruit. In the words of Ecclesiastes, God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices. We fell at that moment into this delusion that self-determination and self-sovereignty is the better way for us.

So now look again at the text of James. Is that not exactly what we are being warned against here? The lie, the delusion of self-determination and self-sovereignty. Dear friends, the original sin was the sin of self-government. But as those in Christ who are being renewed by the Spirit of God through Jesus Christ, James is assisting us in our daily fight against this pervasive lie that continues to rob us of joy in God.

Before us all is the choice this new year of going our own way as opposed to orienting ourselves to God's will. The serpent would still have it that you would determine your own destiny, but this is nothing but a deceptive delusion. Yet we do battle with it as men, as women, as fathers, as mothers, as children, as employees, as employers. We do battle with this delusion every day.

Let's consider this text a little bit more, and we see in this passage two main ways we commit the sin of exercising self-sovereignty. The first is that we become presumptuous in the way we plan out and execute whatever we desire. Now look at the way that James presents this in verse 13. He says, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city.'" You see, what James is saying here is that he is addressing everyone who makes plans everywhere at all times. People who make plans for holidays, people who make plans for weekends, for evenings—anyone who makes a decision.

He's saying, "Don't fall into the trap of thinking that you're in final control of your life and you can do whatever you want at any given time." So it's all of us that are being addressed here. Then we see a second way we exercise self-sovereignty. This man says to himself, continuing in verse 13, "and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit."

Not only does this man, who we can address to ourselves, presumptuously think that their lives are their own to make grand plans, but they have presumptions even about making gains from their plans. They intend to make a profit, to beat the market, to maximize returns, to receive a large return on the investment. So they've mapped out this plan: "I'm going to go to this city, I'm going to engage in business, I'm going to make myself rich."

What James is describing here is the inner dialogue of those who make plans without any thought for the fact that this is not our world, nor are we the center of that world. We have only a perceived ability to carry out what we want when we want, but our sin is that we so easily forget that only God is sovereign and all-knowing. Only He knows what there is for us five minutes from now, five hours from now, five days from now, five weeks from now, five months from now. Only He knows.

But this is how the world lives. This is the way people are. We self-determine without first aligning our wills to God. So James has two corrections for this delusion. The first is in the beginning of verse 14. He says, "You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow." You don't know. You see, all those plans we made were entirely contingent upon that variable we have absolutely no control over—that is time. Or even better yet, your life within time is not yours to ultimately control. You don't know what tomorrow is going to be like. God is saying, "Be weary how you plan, then, for tomorrow may not come for you."

Just recently, a close friend of my sister, in fact, she even dated my brother for a couple of months a year or two back, died in the hospital just recently after being in a serious car accident north of Auckland, driving home from a wedding. She was just in her mid-20s, a Christian girl. She was struck by another driver speeding through an 80k zone, supposedly having an argument with her husband while she was speeding, and she lost control and crashed into this girl. I remember saying when I found out, "Who can possibly know what a day will bring?"

That such a life might end so young in such a tragic way. And so we must remember that only the Lord holds and knows tomorrow. James' second correction is in the latter half of verse 14. He says, "You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away." You see, what you plan may never come to pass, and that what you work for may not benefit you because your life is like a mist—it's like a vapor. It's here, it rises up, and then it's gone.

I'm reminded of the psalmist in Psalm 39:5: "Behold, you have made my days as hand breaths, and my lifetime as nothing in your sight. Surely every man at his best is a mere breath." How about that?

Now, if you're hearing this and coming to the conclusion that somehow it's unwise to make plans at all, given these realities, then you're misunderstanding the point that James is making, and he brings clarity to this in verse 15. Now he tells how to really make resolutions and plans. He says, "Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.'"

You see, we're still living, we're still planning, we're still going about our business, doing things with the kids, with family, booking flights, planning things. I know this myself—half of my year is planned out already. But this must be every Christian's one controlling variable, and it's these words: "If the Lord wills, we will do this or that."

It's like a prefix that needs to be on every word and every sentence and every plan we make. It's prefixed with "If the Lord wills." Then we are placing ourselves into His providence. Only if the Lord wills it will I have it. Only if the Lord wills it may I enjoy it. Only if the Lord wills it will I succeed in it. Only if the Lord wills it shall it be so.

Now we see how we are to frame our entire lives within His providence. The implications of this must touch every part of your lives. Sunday through Saturday, we are to be entirely animated by this reality that it is God who is sovereign. We live in His world, and not one thing shall come to pass that He doesn't sovereignly permit in His decree.

And so we surrender that autonomy we desire for ourselves, and we entrust ourselves to Him instead. So when it comes to walking in this life by God's law and His ways, we submit to His will. When it comes to structuring our marriages, our families, going about our work, the way that we talk about our fellow believers, all manner of things, we must force, cram under this umbrella of God's sovereignty and give it to Him, and we always say, "If the Lord wills."

As we come to a close, it's not like as Christians we are without an example of one who lived his whole life completely surrendered to the will of God. You see, there was one who never lost sight of God's will and His own. There was a man who never for a moment saw his life apart from that which is wholly dependent on the Father. It was our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to accomplish His work." He desired the Father's will and entrusted Himself to it with every breath. Jesus said, "If the Lord wills." Jesus was the only man to ever live who never gave in to the serpent's lie of exercising self-government. He was never guilty of the kind of attitude that James is addressing that is found in us so often.

Jesus perfectly rendered His will to God in a way that we cannot even begin to understand. He desired only that which God had for Him, and this took Him even through suffering to a cross where He died for our sins. Such was His commitment to yield Himself to God and to the Father's will in order to save His people.

As disciples of His, might we say, therefore, as we begin to make plans for this new year, "If the Lord wills, then shall it be." This is what grounds us; this is what will help us fight the sin of self-autonomy. We must believe that living within the bounds of and the boundaries of God's revealed will is the perfect place for us. We don't want to step outside of His providence. We don't want to try and test the limits. We want to find joy in what He has for us, and this means we can know that He always has us right where He planned, even when we can't understand what's going on—and that's often, isn't it?

So this new year, friends, follow Christ fully. Plan, but do not presume, for our lives are in His hands, and we must live to the end that all things we do will glorify and honor Him. Set goals, but do not glory in them. Have grand aspirations, but do not make them your great enduring aim. Point yourselves toward God and aim for Him, and see where He, who knows you better than yourself, might land you, might use you.

And as you pray, pray in this way: "Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Let's pray.