

SERMON TITLE: How to (Not) Boast

SCRIPTURE: James 4:13-17

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SERIES SUMMARY

In Scripture, we find the life of faith is often a difficult journey. But true faith in Jesus will show itself in tough times and display the reality of Jesus to a watching world. In the same way, we're called to give voice to our words and action to what we believe. This is how our faith can make a transformative difference in our lives and the lives of others. On this side of eternity, a faith not applied is worthless and will make no difference. The book of James regularly asks us to put our faith into action so others can witness the reality of Jesus in our lives. As we turn towards Christ, our faith journey will be purposeful, fruitful, and sustain us through any difficulty we face.

SERMON SUMMARY

Is pride a good thing or a bad thing? If I say, "You are so prideful, that's negative. But if I say, "I'm so proud of you," that's positive. So, is it ok to be full of pride? Well, it depends. What about confidence? Is it good or bad to be confident? You want your quarterback to be confident. You want him to know the playbook. He needs to have some level of self-assurance. But not too much. You don't want him to be so confident that he blames it all on other people. You don't want him so confident that he's smug and arrogant in interviews. But still, you don't want him second-guessing his ability. There has to be good confidence, but not bad confidence. Much like "pride" and "confidence," there's an important word in the Bible that functions similarly: "boasting."

In Romans, Paul tells his Jewish friends to stop boasting in their Jewishness. But then later, he tells them that they should boast in the hope we have in Jesus. In 2 Corinthians, he says that you really shouldn't even boast in your spiritual experiences, but instead, you should boast in your weaknesses. And in Ephesians, he says that we're saved by grace through faith so that we won't boast. So is boasting a good thing or a bad thing? Well, it depends. But what's the point of this boasting language?

In the New Testament, this language is all about how we respond to the hope and security God offers us in Jesus. In him, we have unshakeable hope. Nothing can undo or threaten or destroy God's perfect love for us in Jesus. And yet, so many people get our functional hope and security from our bank accounts. Or, we have no reason for fear because Jesus has conquered death. He has overcome the thing that fuels every other fear we will ever face. He offers us new mercy every morning, forgiveness of sins, and life in his family forever. And yet, so many of us, if our hearts were really seen, people would realize that our confidence is actually in what other people think of us, earthly securities, partisan politics, having nicer stuff, or projecting the lie that we have it all together. We spend countless amounts of time and energy boasting in stuff that we know won't last. But we do it anyway. We cram our calendars and closets full of stuff that we know won't fill God's New Creation one day. And we far too frequently look to it to give us a definitive sense of hope and security and purpose and surety. This is exactly the kind of boasting that the New Testament says is wrong. So what do we do? What's the right way to diagnose the boasting problem so that we have the good kind of pride, confidence, and certainty? Simply,

How do we learn to boast in God and not ourselves?

Here, James 4:13-17 helps us out by cautioning his friends about the wrong kind of boasting. In this passage, James begins by talking about a merchant class of people who travel and make money. Basically, they had long business trips down to a science. They knew how to go into a city, who to connect with, and how to make money. And they had gotten really, really good at it. But these people had figured it out so much that they no longer acknowledged or trusted God in

all of their business dealings. They had begun to boast in themselves. And James frames this in such an intense way that it almost sounds like he's against profit and planning. But certainly, he's not against those things, right?

Is money wrong? Is planning wrong? Isn't that just responsibility? Are we that ruled by the almighty dollar? Are we that ruled by our phones and our schedules, and our ability to travel? Are we that governed by the monster of Chronology? What if Time is really managing us instead? Is investing wrong? Is prepping wrong? Is vision casting wrong? Is a five-year plan wrong? Is a ten-year plan wrong? The answer to all of these is as simple as it is bothersome: it depends. They can be. This is why James talks about wisdom in chapter 3 before he gets here in chapter 4. But James' logic as to why they can be wrong is surprising and heavy. Why can those things be a part of bad boasting? Why can they be wrong? Well, because we're all going to die.

In 4:14, when James says that life is a vapor, he's saying that the transient nature of life should make us hold all those things so loosely that we're not frustrated if we don't have them. Think about it, if you know that you're going to die and stand before God one day, isn't it a little ridiculous to make things like possessions and profits and plans the things that consume your heart? James is forcing his readers to a new perspective where we don't boast in ourselves, our stuff, our plans, and our profits.

In 4:15, James gives us a glimpse into what the good kind of boasting should look like. Rather than boasting about tomorrow on our own, we should say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." Meaning you shouldn't get possessions, earn a profit, and make plans and then ask God to sprinkle some blessing on it. No. Rather, you should get before God, take time with him, talk to other godly people, think about the needs of those around you, study your Bible, and then consider what God's will is when it comes to your plans. Consider: our possessions are not ours; our profits are not ours; our plans are not ours. They are God's. He's the Sovereign One. We are called to be stewards and not owners. With faith in our hearts, we need to learn to say, "If the Lord wills." This verse is an invitation to trust God's Sovereign Care for us.

Are you not more valuable than sparrows, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them? Are you not more beautiful than lilies, and yet your Heavenly Father clothes them? Did not our Lord teach us to pray for daily bread and not hoarded bread? And the psalmist reminds us, "I've been young, and I've been old, and I've never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging for bread." God gave Israel enough manna for the day, not for the stockpile. And Jesus told us, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow has enough trouble of its own." With these words, James is trying to get his friends to cherish something about God in verse 15. He is not only asking his friends to see that life is transitory but that God isn't. He's not only reminding them that life is fleeting but that God isn't. He is faithful and true. He is from everlasting to everlasting. His ways are above our ways. His thoughts are above our thoughts. He knows our needs more than we do. His purposes will outlive our own. His justice and peace will win out in the end. He has more provision than we have lack. So, why in the world would we not submit our entire lives to him? All the way down to your calendar app and bank account?

In summary, James is pushing us to a more resolved faith in God's Sovereign Wisdom and Care for his children. This faith includes an unraveling of the places where we put our confidence outside of God. This is why, in 4:16, James says, "All such boasting is evil." He knows that there's a negative kind of boasting that uses God as a good-luck charm when we don't get the results we want or when we pout when we don't get our way. And this bad boasting is dismissive of God and thinks it knows better than God. But the good kind is when you submit it all to God, and you have a hope in him that isn't contingent on results, money, or stuff. And these ideas help us answer our question:

If we resist presumption, surrender our plans, and realize the brevity of life, then we are set free to embrace, trust, and be confident in God's plans for our life.

If James can get his friends to kill presumption and deconstruct entitlement, if he can get them to see how often they go about life without considering God's will, if they could see how much time and money they waste on stuff that will not fill the life of heaven in the future... If they do that, then they can start to embrace the life of heaven that has come to earth in Jesus right now. And this is how we learn to boast in God and be confident in his love and promises, by letting go of

our agenda for things and clinging to his agenda revealed in Jesus. Possessions, profits, and plans aren't evil. But there is a kind of pride that often attaches itself to those things. And that pride that assumes it knows how the world works more than God does.

And the best example we have of all of this is Jesus himself. Paul says, "God forbid that I should boast in anything except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14). But why does Paul say this? Because Paul knows that Jesus constantly lived out the posture of "if the Lord wills" from James 4:15. Jesus said, "I only do and say what the Father tells me. Luke tells us that Jesus was completely yielded to the Holy Spirit's guidance. And the clearest picture of this is Jesus in the immediate shadow of the cross. There, speaking out of the intensity and fragility of the moment, he looked to the Sovereign Care of his Father and said, "If it's possible, let this cup of death pass from me, but not as I will, but your will be done." Jesus did James 4:15 – he embodied "if the Lord wills it." We fail at it, but Jesus did it perfectly – in our place, as our representative. This is why Paul's declaration is so powerful: "God forbid that I should boast in anything except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." He knows that only the crucified and risen Jesus is all the security and comfort, and purpose we need. If we trust him, life can be more than a vapor. And what he has done at the cross and in his resurrection is the starting point for resisting our own agenda. Imitating Jesus, relying on Jesus, pursuing Jesus, holding fast to Jesus – this is the supreme way we learn to boast not in ourselves but in God.

COMMUNITY GROUP QUESTIONS

- What was your favorite part of the passage and/or message?
- What is something that you put your confidence in? Something that you get your security from?
- Who is someone you know who lives like this? They live trusting in God's sovereign care and wisdom.
- What is hardest for you to let go of when it comes to the plans you have for your own life?
- How should the vapor-like brevity of life change the way we think about time and money?
- When is a time in your life when you have surrendered your plans to God, and he proved himself faithful?

The following resources have been a great help to us in preparing messages for this sermon series: *The Letter of James (NICNT)*, by Scot McKnight; *James (ZECNT)*, by Craig Blomberg; Mariam J. Kovalishyn; *The Epistle of James*, by Peter Lange & J.J. Van Oosterzee; *The Letter of James*, by Douglas Moo. Also, I (Charlie) have benefited from the teachings of Tim Keller, Andy Stanley, Tim Mackie and the Bible Project, and others whom I will credit during my messages. I have adapted and borrowed insights and illustrations from these men and incorporated them into the messages in this series.