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FaithWorks
James 4:13-17²

Isn't it amazing how quickly things go? I had the awesome chance this week to attend a Patty Griffin concert, and I loved every second of it. But there weren't enough seconds. The concert ended too quickly. That's the trouble with something good – it never really lasts. I suppose that's good news for the bad things too though – they won't last forever.

Things can change really quickly, and they can change your life forever. I've had students who met someone for the first time, got married and had a baby in a year. Wow. That is a curveball.

The way the RUF internship works is that you never ever stay at the school you graduated from. You always get placed someone else in the country. So 5-10 men in a room pray and think and then ask you to move your life to work for a guy you don't know at a school unfamiliar for you. My last intern was Natalie Haynes from the University of Florida. She moved to Norman and gave her all at OU. And – she met Damon, they fell in love and are now married. How quickly life changes.

Just last Saturday, we were offered four tickets to the OU Kansas game, so that changed my evening. There are little things that change and big things that change. Sad tragedies happen in an instant.

Where will you be next week? Next year? Five years from now? Ten years?

That's always a good question to ask someone. You can learn quite a bit about a person based on his or her plans. You can see ambitions, desires, hopes and dreams. But James shows us that you can also see if a person is a Christian or not. James is telling us that faith works not only in the big huge issues of life, but in every day life. Faith works in how we love God, how we love people, how we love the city – and how we think of and plan our weekly schedule. We use to talk about Franklin dayplanners but now we talk about iCal. What's in yours?

I smell a rat, baby...

We all sin.

James writes this: *So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.* This is what we refer to as the sin of omission. We sin when we do wrong things (commission) and when we don't do the right things we should do (omission). That is a convicting statement, for it opens the door to no end of confession. Most of the time when we confess our sins, we focus on what we've done wrong and rightly ask for forgiveness for those things. But the Bible points us to realizing that sin also is in *not* doing right.

Think of it this way – if you were to be really serious about not sinning, you might consider locking yourself in a room without a television or computer or any vices and only read your Bible. Would that keep you from sinning? No way. We are to make disciples of all nations, something impossible without spending time with people. You can't be patient, kind and loving without anyone around. You're committing a multitude of sins of omission by being alone like that. "We may be able," says C.L. Mitton, "to avoid committing forbidden evil; but who can ever seize positively every opportunity of doing good?"³

A few years ago I spent three hours talking to an apartment of women who were having roommate troubles. Two roommates in particular were in major disagreement but the third was there. I asked her what she thought, and she said, "I'm just trying to stay out of it. I didn't even know there was a problem until last night. If they want to talk to me they can, but it's their problem. I figure that I can't say anything or do anything wrong if I keep my mouth shut." I pointed out that Galatians 6:1 says we are to carry each other's burdens and enter into each others' worlds is a requirement of doing that, even if it gets our hands dirty. She shrugged her shoulders, unmoved. That is a sin of omission.

That really ups the ante for the things we've done wrong this week and in our lives, doesn't it?

Think about this: I doubt very many of us feel like we have broken the sixth commandment, Do not murder. Good! I don't want us to be a people who have done that. James talked about his in the previous section, in 4:2ff and then again when he talked about judging others in evil and hatred.

So we're good to go in our schools and our homes. We're good to go in our hearts. I doubt very many of us are confessing breaking the sixth commandment when we lie down at night.

But when a group of very wise men got together to reflect on the Scriptures, here is what they wrote when thinking about the sixth commandment. Let's look at the negative first.

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² Resources used: Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982; Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000; John MacArthur, *James*, Moody Press: Chicago, 1998; Dr. Tim Keller's sermons on James found at www.redemptor.com; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Doubleday: New York, 1995; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (New Interpreter's Bible), Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1998; J.A. Motyer, *The Message of James*, Intervarsity Press: Downer's Grove, Illinois, 1985.

³ Motyer, p. 163

Q. 136. What are the sins forbidden in the sixth commandment? A. The sins forbidden in the sixth commandment are, all taking away the life of ourselves, or of others, except in case of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense; the neglecting or withdrawing the lawful and necessary means of preservation of life; sinful anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge; all excessive passions, distracting cares; immoderate use of meat, drink, labor, and recreations; provoking words, oppression, quarreling, striking, wounding, and whatsoever else tends to the destruction of the life of any.

And here is what we are to do in order to keep the command:

Q. 135. What are the duties required in the sixth commandment? A. The duties required in the sixth commandment are, all careful studies, and lawful endeavors, to preserve the life of ourselves and others by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any; by just defense thereof against violence, patient bearing of the hand of God, quietness of mind, cheerfulness of spirit; a sober use of meat, drink, physic, sleep, labor, and recreations; by charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, kindness; peaceable, mild and courteous speeches and behavior; forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and requiting good for evil; comforting and succoring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent.

Whoa, Nelly. Just think about that. This list isn't inspired Scripture, but these men were thinking about how we might break and fulfill the sixth commandment both in omission and commission. Desire of revenge. All excessive passions and distracting cares. The immoderate use of recreations. Provoking words. And then I'm supposed to have patient bearing of the hand of God, quietness of mind, cheerfulness of spirit, mild and courteous speech and behavior, readiness to be reconciled, comforting and succoring the distressed.

We're to protect and defend the innocent – the widow and orphan among us. The needy children and outcasts in our midst. We're here to help the poor, the weak, the wounded.

This is a major thing. We are sinners. All of us. If we kept going through the commandments talking about what we should not do and what we should do, we would be utterly laid low before him to whom we must give an account.

Is this you? Can you see yourself here? Do you need to confess the sins you do and the sins of the things you should do but don't do? Can you name yourself in that number or are you still thinking you're a good person who doesn't need grace?

But that isn't all James talks about here. You see, his claim of our sins of omission is connected to the previous verses. That's stated by a "therefore." So, what is he thinking about or linking our sins of omission to?

I wish you well on your way to the wishing well...

We all forget God.

Back to verse 13. We make plans. James seems like he doesn't like for us to have goals and dreams, like he wants us to repent of our planning. Some people, he says, say that they'll go to such and such place, make money for a certain amount of time and come back.

What's so wrong about that? Husbands this is not an excuse to get out of your yearly planning session with your wives!

Well, let's go ahead and say that it's not the plans themselves. In fact, when James gives the solution to the problem, he doesn't say that we shouldn't make plans. You can still say, "we will do this and that." The problem, as shown by the correct attitude that says, "if the Lord wills" is that so often our plans leave God out of the picture.

When we make our plans we lock into our: Own time – today or tomorrow; Own location – such and such city; Own duration – spend a year there; Own enterprise – engage in business; Own goal – to make a profit.

When we do that we do two things: we assume the lordship over our own lives, and we forget God.

We act like we know what we're doing. We repeal our stated position that there is a greater being who is in control of the earth, and instead we are in control. When our plans go awry, we get upset, angry and depressed because we *knew* that our plans were the best they could be and for our good. We forget Proverbs 27:1: *Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.*

Augustine used to say that any day out of the pains of hell was a good day, and it was all of grace. You see, we don't actually deserve anything good. It shouldn't be so much a hard question to answer, "Why is there so much evil in the world?" as to answer the question "Why is there so much good in the world?" Everything we have that is good has been given to us by God. (James 1:17)

I love the ways the Invictus poem has inspired many people, especially Nelson Mandela (as depicted in the movie bearing the name of the poem). And it's true that you have to put on your big boy pants and grow up and take charge of your emotions and life. But you are not the master of your fate and captain of your soul.

You have a lot to do with your choices in life. You can change what you're going to do tomorrow. But you can't choose who you are, or where your born, or who your parents are, or what color your eyes are – someone else is in charge of that. We hope and trust that it's someone better and bigger than you.

It's better to have the attitude that Adelaide Pollard had:

*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.⁴*

We all too often, simply put, forget about him. He doesn't like that.

A few months ago, I was sitting at home. I usually don't answer phone calls from phone numbers I don't know. I wait and see what the message says and then will call back after I know who it is and what we're talking about (I have stories to tell!). I'm sitting there watching Duck Dynasty or SportsCenter or both – I'm doing important things here – and this number keeps calling me and calling me. But no message so I just ignore it for awhile. This goes on for maybe an hour. It gets a little annoying. Then I see that there is a message but I don't want to listen to it, because I don't want to be bothered by this message and the person called so many times that I'm worried to listen to it.

But my shows were ending and so I answered the call. Ohhhhhhhh! Oops! I was supposed to pick up Drew from football practice at 8pm. It's not 9pm. Yikes. So I pulled up at 9:15, only 75 minutes after practice was over.

This was not good. This is not good parenting. I admit it. I forgot Drew, my seventh grader. That didn't feel good.

What about you? Have you ever been left? Have you been left out of a party, not because you weren't invited, but just because the party-thrower forgot to invite you? That hurts. Let me tell you, there is something worse than negative reviews of a book you've written. It's far worse to get no reviews. None of us want to be irrelevant. None of us want to be forgotten. It hurts.

It hurts God too. He can't believe it happens, and yet we do it all the time.

But you don't forget things that are important. A bride never forgets to put on her make up for her wedding. It's important. We set alarms for things we need to attend. We tie ribbons to our fingers. We tattoo ourselves. We get reminders on our phones. We make it a priority to be there.

And when we forget there are consequences. Things don't go as well. People have to forgive us. We don't earn respect. We lose the job. We fail the test.

God says the same in Psalm 9:17-18 *The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God. 18 For the needy shall not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever.*

Who are the wicked who shall return to Sheol? The people who forget God. Whose children will God forget? Hosea 4:6 says: *And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.* Who will God cut down? Job 8:12-13 says: *While yet in flower and not cut down, they wither before any other plant. 13 Such are the paths of all who forget God; the hope of the godless shall perish.*

Friends, that is chilling to me. What hope do we have then if we forget God? We'll come back to hope in a minute, but I don't want to get to hope too quickly.

Well I guess it takes awhile for someone to really disappear...

We all are mist.

As we reflect on how we all sin, and we all forget God, James also reminds us of the transitory nature of life. He writes, *For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.*

Our lives are but a mist. We feel so confident, so strong, so vital – but we're really going to be gone sooner than later. This is depressing I know. I know. I hate to tell you but I must.

Maybe you've already had it happen. You get a phone call, and a friend from high school has died. Kevin Carter died when he was 22. I still remember that his birthday was on Groundhog Day, and his incredible sense of humor. I used to go over to his house to play. Another buddy of mine from high school, Rob Smith, died a few years ago in a car wreck. It was raining and he swerved into the oncoming lane and was crushed by a semi. His wife was in the same car and survived without a scratch. He was 32.

My friend's 15 year old daughter died in a car wreck last year. We've had family members in our church pass away in the last few months. Some were in their 70, but some were in their twenties.

I have three grandparents still alive. They're all in their eighties. That's a long life. They lived through the Great Depression, World War II, Vietnam, the Cold War and the end of the Cold War and now to 9/11. They lived in a time where everyone had dirt floors, and no one they knew paid taxes. They have the development of widespread use of cars, phones, televisions and computers. That's craziness. Yet, it's really just a flash when you think of it. Civilization has been rolling along for thousands of years, so what's eighty of it? It's a mist.

There's nothing really unique about James' position here. There would have been very few atheists or agnostics in James' day. Most people believed in something, some sort of afterlife.

The question is, how long do you think you'll live? "We may take tomorrow for granted, thinking of it as a mark on the rim of time's wheel, coming on inevitably as the circling years proceed. But in the Bible the years do not circle. They go in a straight line from eternity to eternity, and on that line we receive another day neither by natural necessity, nor by mechanical

⁴ Pollard believed the Lord wanted her in Africa as a missionary, but she was unable to raise funds to go. In an uncertain state of mind, she attended a prayer meeting, where she heard an elderly woman pray, "It's all right, Lord. It doesn't matter what You bring into our lives, just have Your own way with us." At home that night, much encouraged, she wrote this hymn.

law, nor by right, nor by courtesy of nature, but only by the covenanted mercies of God. The very existence of tomorrow is as much part of our dependence on him as is our life itself and our ability.”⁵

How long do you expect life to go on for you? Will you be ready when you die? Do you think of this? Do you think this life if yours is all heading somewhere? That there is something eternal out there that you’re longing for? That there is a Heaven and a Hell?

These are important questions to ask. They may seem trite, but I promise you they aren’t. We often think of them when we’re sitting at funerals. We think about life and death and eternity. Then we try as hard as we can to banish those thoughts as far from our lives as possible. But we shouldn’t. Those are real thoughts, and they are very important and very close to us.

These are two good questions you may have heard before but I want to ask you again.

Have you come to a place in your spiritual journey where if you died tonight you know you’d go to heaven or are you still working on that?

If you were actually to die tonight, and God were to ask you why he should let you into heaven, what would you say?

Do you know what would happen? Do you know where you’ll go when you die. We pray that that will be a long, long time from now. But it is coming someday. It usually comes much faster than people want it to.

Oh heavenly day...

We all can have hope in Jesus.

So what are we to do? Here are a few thoughts.

You must acknowledge that your future is in God’s hands. We are full of ignorance – “you do not know”; frailty – “you are a mist”; and dependence – “*you ought to say, If the Lord wills...*” So we should acknowledge that in our lives and in our speech.

Saying “If the Lord wills” after every sentence is not the magic solution. In fact, that can be incredibly annoying, and not only to non-Christians. It’s not a tack-on statement that makes everything better no matter what you say. I knew a gal who was incredibly difficult to talk to because every other word out of her mouth was some sort of charismatic word or phrase, almost like an expletive. If you insert “If the Lord wills” constantly, all it will be is pious jargon.

Don’t just say “If the Lord wills,” but believe it. Give him your plans. It’s okay to want to be married, to want to have children, to want to go to law school or med school or grad school, to get a great job, to go overseas next summer, to get that internship, to be this or that. But you don’t *know* it will happen. Only God does. He may change your heart. You may be infertile. You may have seven kids. You may remain single til you’re forty or get married when you’re 18. You may bomb the entrance exam. You may get passed over for the promotion. You may die tomorrow. It’s great to make your plans. But as far as the cosmic age of the world and your place in it, you’re an infant, you don’t know, you’re but a mist. Really.

So we hold our hands open and ask God to work *his* work in our lives. We need to ask if what we’re doing is God’s will and be open to being wrong. We should consider if this kind of plan is in accordance with the Lord’s will expressed in Scripture for his people.⁶ We get counsel. We seek the Scriptures. We confess our weaknesses. We ask God to give us the desires of our hearts and to change those desires to match his own. We make our plans, sure. But we hold them loosely and aren’t undone if they don’t happen.

Let’s ask God if we should take this or that job. Let’s pray together if we should change schools or move away. Let’s meet to pray and ask God about our children, and even the number of children we might have. These are his choices, not ours. Let’s ask him about our purchases, our eating, our daily life. Let’s come to him and seek to do his will every second of every day.

And let’s know the answers to those questions. Would you be in heaven if you died today? “If the Lord wills” implies that there is a Lord, not just a general entity out there, but the Lord. James says that God bring his children forth like first fruits. He says that Word of God is implanted in his children, so we can look it and direct our ways with it. He says there is mercy for his people who come to him. He says that we can be called friends of God. He says there is a wisdom that is from above that we can understand and know. He says that God gives grace to the humble. That he is the lawgiver and judge, but that he is able to save his people from destruction. He is able.

He is able because Jesus said “Thy will be done.” He looked toward a death on a cross, the worst death he could suffer, and not even for something he had done. And he went to that death with a certain scared courage. He pushed into and toward suffering so we could receive glory and honor.

He became nothing so we could have everything. His body was broken into a million pieces like mist, so we could have substance, be whole and hearty. He took our sin so we could be forgiven and healed. He didn’t just not do wrong things, he did the right things. He had no sins of commission or omission. But he took that cup of wrath for you and for me.

Jesus was forgotten by God. God turned his back. He didn’t answer him when he was crying out to him on the cross. He didn’t take the call. Not out of negligence, but out of punishment. He didn’t because he couldn’t. That wrecked Jesus. It undid him. It rocked him to the core.

So you could be remembered. You who have forgotten God can be remembered because he who always remembered was forgotten. You can be ushered into the very presence of God as his child, as his friend, as his bride.

⁵ Motyer, p. 162

⁶ Moo

Don't wait. Don't forget God today, tonight. Don't put him on the back shelf, like he's one of the 1000 facebook friends, buried down there but he shows up now and then on the newsfeed.

Make him central. Make him everything. Make him your very life. In his life you will find your life. In his death you will find your life.

Why should he let you into his heaven? The answer is true for you and for me today – because of Jesus. That is the only reason, but it is a good one, the best one you could ever have. Trust in him today for your future. That may be for the first time. It may be the first time in a long time. It may be again. It may be in little tiny decisions that you have held for yourself, or it may be in some huge ones that you've been too afraid to give to him.

The good news is that he loves you, even you. Even me. We are not insignificant to him. He is an eternal God and yet he loves us so much. Rest in that good news today.