

WHAT IS YOUR LIFE?
JAMES 4:13-17

INTRODUCTION:

What is your life? This question can provoke many different responses in our day. When a college newspaper gave students an opportunity to publish their definitions of life, they received some tragic and revealing responses. One student said, "Life is a joke that isn't funny."

Another said, "Life is a jail sentence for the crime of being born." Still another defined life as a "disease that afflicted the earth in its old age for which death is the only cure." How do you define life?

James raises this question in the context in which he is contrasting two views of life. Like the wisdom section of the Old Testament he presents a foolish approach to life in contrast to a wise approach to life. The foolish approach to life is one that does not give to God His proper place; the wise approach to life is one where life is lived with God in His proper place. He couches his presentation of these two approaches to life in the context of a businessman. The businessman will reveal whether he is walking foolishly or wisely as he looks toward the future.

As this graduating class of high school seniors comes to this important milestone in life, this is an appropriate question for you to ask-what is my life? How you answer this question is more important than any question you have faced or will face in your final high school exams. It is more important than any question you will face in the pursuit of a college education. It deals with the very essence of who you are and who you will be. What is your life?

I. The answer of the worldly wise.

James is contrasting the wisdom of this world with the wisdom of God. In his view the wisdom of this world ends up being folly. The wisdom of this world causes a person to say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." That statement reflects an understanding of the nature of life itself. That statement is actually an answer to the question, "What is your life?"

1. Life is owning things - the more things you have the more life you have.

In this statement quoted by James it is obvious that the ultimate goal of the person is making money. He is making all of his plans for the future based on what he thinks will be most profitable for him. When he has done everything he plans to do it is so that he will "make money." This is a view of a life that is very much acceptable in our day.

Many high school graduates will go to the university and will make their decision concerning a major and their career choice, based on one criteria - how much income will it produce? How much money will I make? Such a view of life comes from this world not from the kingdom of God. Jesus, our Lord, exposed the emptiness of such a view of life when He said, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed: a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). He followed that word of warning with his familiar parable about the rich fool. Because the farmer thought that life consisted in owning a lot of things, he made all of his plans for the future based on that assumption. His plans were to build more barns, buy

more fields, and keep on expanding his capacity to increase his income. But when things seem to be going at their best, then God called him into an accounting. Death overtook him and he lost everything that he had been accumulating. Jesus called this man a fool! The world would say he was a prudent businessman, but Jesus says that anyone who sees life as consisting in the acquiring of the things of this world is acting very unwisely.

2. Life is mine - I can do what ever I please with it.

This is another part of that same approach to life. The statement James quotes reflects this kind of understanding. The businessman is approaching life as though his life belonged to him, and he is free to do whatever he chooses to do with his life. He makes all of his plans concerning the future as though he were sovereign and responsible to no one. He plans to begin his trip on a certain day and to go to a certain city and stay for a certain period of time, and to enter into a certain business enterprise so that he can make money. At no point does he reflect any kind of understanding that he is accountable to God for his life. It is a "this world" kind of philosophy.

3. My life is mine - I must make careful plans for my future.

This man who is speaking in our text would have been right at home in our contemporary setting. Since he sees his life as belonging to himself, he knows that he must make careful plans and the right decisions so that he can get out of life what he wants out of life. He must not allow anyone else to make those decisions for him. They must be his decisions. It is His life so he will make the choices.

This is the kind of counsel that the world about you offers to you as young people and graduating seniors. It keeps saying to you, "You can set your goals and achieve them. You can make your dreams become a reality. You should decide what you want to be, and go for it. This worldly wisdom appeals to human pride and a sense of self-importance. But James indicates that this kind of counsel reflects worldly wisdom. It is ok for this world, but it ignores the world to come.

4. My life is nothing - it has no significance or importance.

You ask, "What is my life? Who cares!" Unfortunately this is a view of life that some in our world are offering today. It is the opposite of that reflected by the worldly wise one in the discussion of James. Yet, it comes from the same worldly source. You can find students with this outlook on life on every high school campus. You can find them on every university campus. They are usually intellectually bright and would seem humanly to have a lot of promise. But they have come to an understanding that life is meaningless and has no significance. In order to dull the pain of living with emptiness they often turn to illicit sex, drugs, alcohol. In far too many cases they finally turn to suicide. Such a view of life is the result of the naturalistic approach to life. One that excludes the presence of a personal God in the world.

James indicates that those who pursue the wisdom of this world in their approach to life ignore two great realities. They ignore their ignorance and their frailty. They ignore the fact that no one knows for sure what will happen on tomorrow. They also ignore the fact that by its very

nature life is life a vapor that appears only for a little while and then it disappears. Life is by its very nature swift and brief. If you are going to come to a wise perspective on life you must grapple with these two realities - "Your ignorance of the future and the very brevity of life itself.

Is there not a better answer to the meaning of life?

II. THE ANSWER OF GODLY WISDOM.

James reveals the essence of godly wisdom, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." That simple statement embodies the essence of the divine wisdom. It reflects an understanding of who God is and who you are and how you relate to each other.

1. God made me so I am his.

My life is not mine. I am not self-made. I am a product of the activity of a wise creator. I belong to Him because He made me.

To understand this changes everything. My life looks entirely different when I begin to understand that I am His because He made me.

This brings us face to face with one of the central revelations found in the Bible. There is nothing more central to the message of the Bible than the revelation that God is creator.

Everything that exists had its beginning in the mind and the purpose of God. Everything and everyone was called into existence by a personal and wise creator. Once you accept that central

revelation of the Bible, then you can never see your life as insignificant again. If you are the result of the creative activity of a sovereign God then your life has meaning and your life has significance. So you begin in your understanding of life if you view life from a wise perspective, not with yourself but with God.

2. Life is finding and doing the will of God.

This word of James is so revealing. "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

This statement is based on an understanding that the creator has a will. His will is the most important thing of life. His will is sovereign and determinative. So life is found in knowing God's will and in doing God's will.

The statement is based on the assumption that God is the one in control of life. If it is the Lord's will we will live. We live on this earth by His good pleasure. We live today because it has pleased God for us to live today. God is so sovereign over life that He can end a life any time it pleases Him to end life. For us to make assumptions about our future that does not reflect the understanding that God has our future in His hands is a point of folly. The wise man knows that only God knows the future. Only He knows the future because He has control over the future.

This question "What is your life?" has caused me to do some reflecting. I tried to remember when I sat where you sit as a graduating high school senior. It dawned on me that a great number of those who sat with me as a graduating senior from high school no longer walk among us. Our best basketball player died with cancer several years ago. The star of our baseball team

died with a heart attack at least 20 years ago. When I was speaking in Bristol, VA. few days ago a lady asked me, "Didn't you go to Bluff City High School?" When I indicated that I did she said, "I think you went to high school with my sister." When she gave me the name of her sister and I asked concerning her sister, her voice suddenly changed in its tone, she then said to me, "My sister died when she was 31. Why am I here this morning and all of those that I graduated with have already stepped off this planet and in to eternity? Is it because I had a better grip on life than they? No! I am here this morning because it has pleased God for me to live. I will live on this planet only as long as it pleases God for me to live. My life and my future are in his hands.

The other assumption is that what ever we achieve in this life is by divine ennoblement. If it is the Lord's will, we will do this or that." What ever we do in this world we do it by divine permission and utilizing divine resources. So the essence of life is coming to know God and His will for your life, and doing His will. The essence of life is not building a kingdom for yourself but being an instrument of a sovereign God and building His eternal kingdom in this world and in eternity.

Rabbi Zacharias tells about a professor under which he studied who grappled with the answers to this question. This professor contrasted the view up to modern philosophers. Martin Heidegger says that the meaning of life would be expressed by "I know we are all on this ship and that the ship is going down, but I am going to stand on the deck and salute because it looks better." The other modern philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre, said, "No! No! No! I know this ship is going

down, but let's descend to the lower bunk and play a last game of poker. At least we can enjoy life while the ship is going down!" Both philosophers could see no meaning in life because they refused to see a personal God. I contrast that with the view of life reflected in the testimony of Paul when he said, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

What is your life? Your life is an opportunity to come to know Jesus Christ who is life. And then it is the opportunity to live all of your days in service to Him. My appeal to you as graduating seniors of 1996 is that you come to know God as your creator and your redeemer. Then that you live your life in dependence on Him day by day and then that you make it your will to do His will in life, then life becomes a joyous celebration and not a point of meaningless despair.