

Sermon for December 31, 2013 – New Year’s Eve

James 4:13-17 (NIV84)

Theme: “God willing”

- 1) Without it, our plans are meaningless and sinful
- 2) With it our heart and life are set on the right course

¹³ Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." ¹⁴ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶ As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

A long time ago, a friend of mine once asked me: “Why do you always say: ‘God willing’ whenever you plan something? It seems like you are leaving some doubt as to whether or not something is going to happen. Why not simply say that you are going to do this or that, and then you won’t have any weasel room to get out of your plans.”

I explained to her that it has nothing to do with trying to weasel out of anything – but it has to do with acknowledging the truth that no amount of planning or work guarantees success without the Lord’s blessing.

“Well, that’s a given,” she said, “but you don’t have to say it all the time.” I replied, “My saying it all the time reminds me never to take this truth for granted: without the Lord’s will and blessings, all my work and plans are in vain.”

As we look out into the fast approaching New Year, many of us have already started to make plans. Some youth in the congregation are planning what college to attend after graduation. Other members are possibly looking at a career change. I know of at least one member who is planning on getting married. My family and I have already set a date for a family get-together. Making plans is fine and good – as long as you don’t forget to say: “Lord willing.”

With St. James as our guide, let us explore why this phrase is so important: “**God willing**” 1) *Without it, our plans are meaningless and sinful* 2) *With it our heart and life are set on the right course*

Part One: Without it, our plans are meaningless and sinful

Our text begins: ¹³ Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money."

There’s a reality show on T.V. called “Shark Tank”. In this show, real life entrepreneurs have to pitch their business ideas to investors. I have only watched a couple of episodes of this show, but one thing is clear – investors do not want to hear any hint of uncertainty. They want to know your well laid out plans. They want to know when and where you are going to be and how much money you are going to make. If an entrepreneur pitches an idea saying: “I “hope” that this or that will happen.”, the investors will immediately jump on that and verbally berate the entrepreneur for either not doing proper planning or for not believing in his product – either of which is reason enough for them not to invest.

This is the way of the world: “It’s up to you to plan and make your dream a reality. Keep your vision before your eyes and do everything to make it real. If your plans don’t succeed, you only have yourself to blame.” This type of visionary thinking is very popular in the business world and seems to be taught in every public class room and on every athletic field of America. . . “It’s only if you believe in yourself, it’s only if you pursue you goals as if they were reality, that you can achieve anything.”

Wow, that seems like some powerful stuff, and it seems to work too! I mean, look at Steve Jobs what he did with Apple. Look at what Vince Lombardy did with the Packers, what Bill Gates did with the Microsoft. Look at all those successful investors on Shark Tank who lived by this motto; maybe there is something to it.

And so we are tempted to plan, pursue, work and achieve – all the while forgetting something incredibly important: *Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.*

Without the Lord’s blessings none of our plans succeed. We might be planning to go on a vacation, only to have disease strike. We might be planning to pursue a job, only to have the company we were applying to work for go bankrupt. We are not in control of our destiny – God is, and we are only acting like fools if we don’t acknowledge it.

But there is even a greater danger than not merely having our plans pan out. That danger is having all our plans actually work, of succeeding in all we put our mind to – but for what end? “*What is your life?*” James asks, “*You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.*”

All those investors in Shark Tank are financially successful, but to what end? What is their life? In a moment they could become like the prosperous farmer in the parable Jesus told. Do you remember that story? A farmer was blessed with an abundant crop. What did he do with that blessing? He made plans – none of which thanked or included the LORD. His plans were to retire, to take life easy, to enjoy the fruit his labors. What happened? He died that very night. All his work and plans were for nothing. His entire life was a meaningless existence.

And here, dear Christian, is the greatest danger in forgetting the LORD in our plans. If our plans fail, we will at least be inclined to repent. But if we succeed in all our endeavors – in all our plans we made without the LORD - then what? Then we will be tempted to make more and more plans without the LORD. We will be tempted to make ourselves instead of the LORD the center of our lives. We will be tempted to become like the prosperous farmer in Jesus’ parable, who had it all and died – whose life was as meaningless as a mist that appears for the moment and goes away. Worst of all, we will have become like one who gained the world, and yet forfeited his immortal soul.

As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.

Yes, foolish and sinful are all the plans undertaken without the LORD. Foolish and sinful are even the best, most successful plans that people brag about. Oh, how the LORD must cringe when he hears all the talk about what we did and accomplished – forgetting to give Him all the glory. How it must break his heart when He hears Christians brag about earthly success – like how much money they made, the new toy they got for Christmas, the new career they are pursuing, the new boyfriend and girlfriend they have and how all these things are making them truly happy; all the while not mentioning Jesus’s sacrifice for our sins, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, the fellowship of the saints, the gift of the Holy Spirit and all the other spiritual gifts that make us eternally happy. How it saddens the Lord – even to the point of angering him, when we don’t involve him in our planning, invoke Him in our pursuits, and thank Him for all that we have at present and will have in the future.

¹⁷ *Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.* “Lord, have mercy on us for all our sinful planning – planning that did not involve you or ask your blessing. Forgive us for Jesus’ sake, and let us understand that our lives are completely in your hands – that every good and gracious gift we have comes from you.”

Part Two: *With it our heart and life are set on the right course*

The Lord hears our prayer of repentance and forgives us for Christ’s sake. All our sins were placed upon Jesus and crucified with him. Jesus’ resurrection shows that our sins are gone for good. *As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us* (Psa 103:12 NIV’84). We are at peace with God.

More than that, he wants to instruct us as how to proceed – how to make proper plans and resolutions for the future.

St. James writes that instead of filling your head with worldly, visionary planning, *you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.*

Now please understand Scripture correctly. It isn’t implying that the difference between proper and improper Christian planning is merely adding the phrase “God willing.” “Lord willing” is not some magical incantation that the LORD hears and immediately accepts regardless of how thoughtlessly it is said. No, saying: “God” or “Lord willing” means that we truly want the will of the LORD to take place. It also means that we sit down and think what the will of the LORD is.

And what is the will of the LORD? It certainly is not that we live physically rich and easy lives. What is it then? It is that Jesus’ saving name is glorified in this world. God’s will is that we, his dear children, love and trust in Him above all else because of the love He expressed in saving us for our sins and calling us to faith. God’s will is that the Gospel take first and center place in our lives – that we don’t merely try to fit the LORD in our busy lives, but that we fit our lives into the LORD. God’s will is that we place our relationship with him above all career choices, relationships, family, leisure; that we place him above everything.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I am not saying that God wants us all to be monks or nuns, or that it is sinful to pursue a career or make plans for engaging in some sort of leisure. What I am saying is that, instead of asking the question how “I” will benefit from such plans, we should prayerfully ask God: “Lord, How can my plans glorify you? How can my career choice give you glory, as I use the talents and gifts you have given me to find my place in this world? How can I glorify you with my marriage – letting it be an example of the forgiving love you have for me, and showing the world that children are a treasure to be cherished? Lord, how can I glorify you with my leisure plans – enjoying your creation and the family you have given me, so that I am refreshed to work hard at my vocation – knowing that I am not working merely for money, but for you – that, no matter what my occupation is (be it farmer, plumber, machinist, factory worker, teacher, etc. . .) you are working through me to provide needed food and service in this world.

Fellow Christians: Saying “Lord willing” certainly means that we will include the LORD in all our planning. It also means that we will remember Jesus own encouragement when planning: ³¹ *So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'* ³² *For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.* ³³ *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* Mat 6:31-33 NIV’84)

Brothers and sisters in Christ – children of the One who guides all history: by all means set goals and make plans for the coming year, but remember to submit all those plans to the Lord’s will. He loves you dearly and wants what is eternally best for you. With His Gospel on your mind and salvation in your heart, you can be sure that whatever course your life takes, the LORD will direct it to accomplish your eternal happiness. Amen.