**Sovereignty of God in all things** 31/12/23

Read Luke 12:35-48, James 4

Text: James 4:13-17

Psalms: 135, 121old, 127, 72old

In March 2020 the borders of our nation were closed; flights in and out of the country stopped overnight. Thousands of people were prevented from fulfilling plans they had made for an overseas trip- including me! After this State borders closed and thousands more had to abandon planned travel. Suddenly, we all lost control of our travel; we could not even leave the suburb. Many found this loss of control frustrating, and some despaired, as cries went up for more counselling services. We are thankful that we are now free to travel once again although Covid is still around. In India I was reminded that Covid meant more than lockdowns and loss of freedom and control of one’s life; I met two men who had lost their wives through Covid.

All this was a reminder that we are not in control of our lives. It was a reminder of Proverbs 27:1, ‘Do not boast about tomorrow for you do not know what a day may bring forth’, and of what James writes here in verse 14, ‘You do not know what will happen tomorrow’. He says this while warning Christian business men and women not to speak of plans made without seeking the Lord’s will. We are not in control of our lives, but someone is. The Lord whom we are worshipping here today is sovereign in all things. He rules over his creation for good. Sure, bad things happen like the pandemic and other disasters, but God is powerful to work all things together for God to those who love him (Rom 8:28). Do you believe this? Do you believe God is sovereign in creation and also in redemption? This is the essence of the truth we preach as Reformed doctrine.

**1. Stop ignoring the Lord in your planning**

How is this topic related to the rest of this chapter? James begins this chapter calling brethren in the church ‘adulterers and adulteresses’, because love for the world, and things of this world, was becoming greater than their love for God and God’s people. Let the words, ‘God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble’ reverberate in our ears all through this coming year and for the rest of our lives. Let us humble ourselves before the Lord and he will lift us up. You can strive hard, working day and night to get ahead in this world but you will do so in vain unless the Lord is with you. ‘Unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain who build it’ (Ps 127:1). Is this a song you will remember in 2024?

Much of what James teaches us relates to our tongue because this little organ in our mouth boasts great things and slanders many a neighbour, even brothers and sisters in the Lord. ‘If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body’ (3:2). ‘Is it true, is it kind, is it necessary’- let us ask this question before we speak. Remember, words come from the heart, as Jesus says in Matthew 15:19: ‘Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts… false witness and blasphemies’. Evil thoughts give rise to evil words, as we see in verse 11, and to planning our lives as if we were in control rather than the Lord.

‘Come now, you who say’ signals a new section, but note the word ‘say’; later we will find the word ‘boasting’ (4:13, 16). James speaks of a businessman or woman who travels from town to town selling their wares; nowadays we can do all this from the comfort of our home using the internet. In the Bible we read of Lydia being a seller of purple from the city Thyatira- Paul met her in Philippi (Acts 16:14). It was common for Jews and others to make detailed plans regarding their business and making money, and some Christians were adopting such worldly ways. Some were saying they would go to such and such a place tomorrow, as if they were in control of time and travel. They would spend a year in this place buying and selling and making a profit, as if they were in control of the supply of their product and of the buyers, and that a year into the future!

James reminds Christians who have fallen into this trap that they do not even know what will happen tomorrow. They may fall sick, fire or flood may destroy their product or put a stop to their travel. In reality, they had no certainty whatsoever that their plans to make money would come to pass. In reality, their very life was in God’s hands. Their life was but a vapour, hardly a blimp in the history of the world. Job was brought to this realisation when his life was suddenly thrown into turmoil, not through any fault of his own (Job 7:7). The rich fool in Luke 12 tragically failed to realise this reality as he built bigger and bigger barns to store his harvest. James’ warning to businessmen applies to every situation in life, to everyone who makes plans for their life without consulting the Lord.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with making plans, of course. We do not wake up each morning and wait for a sign from the Lord telling us to go to work. If we have a job we go to work as a matter of duty and necessity, and we do our work as unto the Lord (Col 3:23). We wake up on Sunday morning and go to worship as a matter of duty and necessity also. It is not wrong to plan a holiday, and book travel and accommodation in advance. But it is wrong to ignore the Lord and his will in such planning. It is wrong to follow your pagan friends in saying, ‘I go where I like, when I like, and do what I like’. It is wrong for you to think you are in control of your destiny, and to tell your children the same. This may be what they are taught in school, but you must teach them to seek the will of the Lord in their lives, just as you do. You must remind them of Proverbs 27:1, and of what James says here in verse 15.

“Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that’” (4:15). God in his sovereignty has purposed or willed whatsoever comes to pass (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q7). His sovereign will and purpose extends from the whole world to you and your life, and for eternity. You do not know what tomorrow may bring, but the Lord does! You should understand this when you pray, ‘Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’. Paul tells us not to be conformed to this world but live with renewed minds, that we may ‘prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God’ (Rom 12:2).

While James writes, ‘Instead you ought to say’, he does not want us to make this a meaningless ritual or mantra that we attach to everything we say. It is good to remind ourselves, and others, of our dependence upon the Lord by saying, ‘If the Lord wills’ or, ‘The Lord willing’, or *Deo volente* for those who speak Latin, but Paul does not say this on all occasions (Acts 18:21, 1Cor 4:19 cf. Acts 19:21, 1Cor 16:5,8). It was of course, his constant prayer, as it was of our Lord Jesus, to be doing the will of the Father at all times: ‘Father, not my will but yours be done’ (Luke 22:42).

The sovereignty of God in all things, including in the lives of his people, is a fundamental teaching of the Bible that is sadly neglected or twisted in much preaching today. Too many people are asking God to conform to their will rather than asking God to show us his will, his good, pleasing and perfect will, as he promises to do when we ask (Rom 12:2). Are we listening to the voice of the Lord or to the voice of Satan as we live day by day, month by month, and year by year; we do not even know if we will see tomorrow. And when the Lord does speak, be it through a pandemic, an illness, or maybe a war, do you listen and remember what we are learning today?

**2. Stop arrogant boasting**

‘To make plans without considering God’s plan is the same as arrogantly claiming to be in full command of the future’. James accuses these rich, or want to-be-rich, brethren of arrogance in making their plans without reference to the Lord whom they worship (4:16). They sounded just like worldly people as they boasted of their plans to make money. They had a business plan that assured them of making a profit. There is nothing wrong with having a business plan, but there is a huge step from plan to actual profit. Models and theories are one thing; reality is another. This huge step is under the control of almighty God, the God whom you ignore to your peril. God obviously controls the weather, controls your health and that of your family, and controls everything relating to your life. To arrogantly boast of your plans is to ignore the Lord at best, and to thumb your nose at him at worst. ‘All such boasting is evil’ and sin (4:16, 17).

Sins of omission are somewhat challenging, even to Christians. I was listening to a rabbi on the radio counselling a woman who felt guilty about things she had failed to say or do. He must have been old because his advice was to change the slide in her mind, to flick over from this negative slide to positive-thought slides. As Christians, we recognise sins of omission and we repent of them just as we do sins of commission; repenting before the Lord is much better than trying to change the slide in your mind! In the parable about the servant being watchful for the coming of his master, the servant who knew his master’s will and did not do according to his will, ‘shall be beaten with many stripes’ (Luke 12:47). You know God’s will for your life so do it! God will is your sanctification; that you abstain for sexual immorality (1Thess 4:3). God’s will is that you worship him in spirit and truth- are you doing this?

Giving up our pride is not easy. Pride and selfishness keep us from listening to the advice of others, and even from listening to the word of God regarding how we must live. The truth of Proverbs 3:34 is there for us to learn: ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’ (4:6). The rabbi made no mention of pride, humility, or grace. As Christians, we know God is sovereign in all things and we know the good we are to do (4:17); the Lord has given us his commands.

Here in the closing verse of this chapter, James is probably referring to the sin of failing to acknowledge the Lord in your planning, the sin of ignoring God in such matters. But what he says reminds us of the reality and the seriousness of sins of omission. We tend to focus on sins of commission, things we have said or done in disobedience to the commands of our Lord, as with the sin of speaking evil of a brother in verse 11. But failing to do what the Lord commands us, like failing to acknowledge him in all our plans and all our ways, is also sin. Having recognised our sin, let us repent before the Lord and ask for forgiveness, and for help in drawing nearer to him today and every day. ‘Draw near to God and he will draw near to you’ (4:8). What a wonderful promise from the Lord. Will you take hold of this promise in 2024 and beyond?