

“D.V.”: Yet Another New Year's Resolution

James 4:13-17 (text); Proverbs 27:1; Daniel 4:35; Luke 12:18-20

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Beloved congregation of Christ: Last Sunday, a few days before we welcomed the New Year, we heard God's Word preached to us by Rev. Brian Najapfour. His exhortation to us was the faith and determination of Daniel's three friends that the LORD is able and willing to deliver them from the fiery furnace. But if it was not the LORD's will to deliver them, they will still worship the LORD, not the king's idol-god. For us today, in spite of all kinds of trials, afflictions, and persecutions, we are to worship the only true God of the Bible, and then say, “But if not...” – if it's not God's will to deliver us from our sufferings, we will still worship and serve him.

Today, on our first worship service in this new year 2014, we will meditate on a related New Year's resolution: “D.V.” I will tell you later in this study what D.V. means to Christians, especially to Reformed believers.

Our text is in the epistle written by James, also known as James the Just, the brother of Jesus. In the early church in Jerusalem, James was the leader, as seen in his presiding over the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. James was addressing mainly Jewish converts to Christianity, evidenced by his addressing them as “twelve tribes of the Dispersion.” He was not a dispensationalist, but believed that the true Israel on this side of the cross is the church.

The main theme of his epistle is living out one's faith, being a doer and not just a hearer of the word. A secondary theme arising from this emphasis on the good fruits of faith is the socio-economic conflict between rich and poor, so that there were divisions in the church. James rebukes the wealthy for their worldly wisdom instead of godly wisdom. They oppress and discriminate against the poor. They have selfish, godless pride, as we can see in our text, when they say, “Tomorrow, I will go to another place and make a lot of money.”

But is it always wrong to make plans for the future? To plan a career even while in high school or college? To think about future marriage? To save for a car or a house or for retirement? To plan to start your own business?

This Lord's Day, our theme is, “D.V.: Yet Another New Year's Resolution” which we will meditate upon in two points: (1) “We Will Go...”; and (2) “If the Lord Wills...”

“WE WILL GO...”

Some of these believers that James is addressing were probably merchants or businessmen, traveling to do business or for pleasure. They say, “*Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.*” What does this statement show about their attitude? They think they are in sole control of their lives and business. When business is good, they don't need God. They will go to God only when business is bad and they need supernatural help. Even though they believe God, they don't need him, they don't trust in him. They like deists who think that God is a “divine butler” at their beck and call.

They have selfish pride. They don't want to submit to God, so James says in verses 6-7, "*God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God.*" Later, he reminds them, "*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you*" (verse 10). Humility is difficult for these businessmen who are successful and wealthy. This is why Jesus tells us that it is almost impossible—a camel going through a needle—for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

They deny that they are mere creatures under God's authority. In saying, "Today or tomorrow, we will go and make money," they are presuming that they are like God who know the future. We are not to think presumptively like them, because we too are mere creatures. Only God is sovereign over all things and through all time, and no one and nothing can affect him, as King Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged in Daniel 4:35:

All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"

When pride sets in, we are to take stock of who we really are before God: mere finite creatures before the Almighty, Sovereign Creator. We can make all the plans we want, but ultimately, it is God who controls our whole life, and even the whole universe. This is why Proverbs 27:1 says, "*Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.*"

This is also what James quotes in verse 14, "*yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.*" And then he adds, "*What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.*" No one knows the future. Not even those so-called prophets who make predictions about wars, disasters, and even the end of the world.

It is not only that we cannot know the future. We also cannot know our own life's ending. James says we are just mist. Like grass that withers. Like flowers that fade. Like dust in the wind. Our lives are like these earthly things that disappear so quickly. Even those who are rich and famous today will not be remembered a few years after they die.

David knew this: "*Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow*" (Ps 144:4). In Psalm 39:4-6, he says that man's life is "*fleeting, a few handbreadths, a mere breath, a shadow,*" and that "*man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!*" And Moses says we are "*like a dream*" and "*like grass*" (Ps 90:5-6).

Not only do we fade from memory very quickly. Movements often are also mere passing fancies. Does anyone under 30 years old remember the Promise Keepers? Or even the Purpose Driven Church? Or the Prayer of Jabez? The Passion of Christ? Even the once-famous Purpose Driven Life is almost unheard of today.

Mist. That's what we creatures really are. Here today, gone tomorrow. So those who think they are in control of their lives are called fools in Scripture. Jesus tells us about an example of a fool. His Parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12:18-20 is about this rich man who, one night, looked at all his riches, and planned to be richer. Then he said to himself, "*Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.*" But he didn't know that on that same night, God would

take his life, saying, *“Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”*

King Nebuchadnezzar was another prime example of this foolish pride. He looked at his magnificent palace and all his great buildings and arrogantly declares, *“Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?”* (Dn 4:30) As soon as he spoke these words of proud autonomy, God judged him by making him live like a beast. And when God gave him back his senses, he acknowledged God's authority and sovereignty over him (Dn 4:35).

Another example of this foolish pride is a famous 19th century poem written by William Henley entitled *“Invictus.”* We all learn these two most famous lines in high school, not realizing how it encourages us to become autonomous fools:

I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

In this new year, we are to humble ourselves before God, acknowledging his control over our lives. Since our lives are but a mist, and we do not know anything about tomorrow, we are to trust in him and accept our absolute dependency on him.

We are to be wise and plan ahead, but as Christians, what is to be our attitude when we make our plans?

“IF THE LORD WILLS...”

James was not condemning being rich, doing business, traveling, or making money. What he was condemning is doing all these things without depending on God for the success of their plans. God condemned mankind in Noah's day because they were going about their daily business – eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage – without giving a thought to the sovereign God.

What is a Christian to say as he plans for this new year? James has the answer in verse 15: *“If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”* Since we do not know what tomorrow brings, and since our lives are but a mist, we are to acknowledge that God is sovereign over our plans.

The letters *“D.V.”* in our New Year's resolution is from this verse. It's an abbreviation of *Deo Volente*, which means *“God willing,”* or *“Lord willing.”* Some people even like to write *“D.V.”* after stating their plans. This is good practice, and it is Biblical practice. Before he left them, Paul says to the Ephesian elders, *“I will return to you if God wills”* (Ac 18:21). Again, he tells the Christians in Corinth about his desire to see them again, *“For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits”* (1Co 16:7; see also 1Co 4:19). The author of Hebrews desired to make his readers more mature in the faith, but adds, *“And this we will do if God permits”* (Hb 6:3).

When we add, *“Lord willing”* to our speech, it can be a powerful witness to others. We show to them that we acknowledge that we don't control our own lives, but that we trust and depend on God's will and provisions. But sometimes, saying this becomes a pious, meaningless cliché. There are many people in the Bible who made plans without saying *“D.V.”* So it is not important that we

always say this. What's important is that we know – and acknowledge – that it is God who works all things for us.

Not only did they make their plans without God in mind, but they boasted and bragged about their successes, *“As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil”* (verse 16). In being boastful, they were worldly people with a worldly attitude, which James also condemned as *“enmity with God”* (verse 4).

There is only one kind of boasting that is not evil. And that is boasting in God, as Paul says, *“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord”* (2Co 10:17). He boasts about God, not about himself and his successes. Again, *“But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Gl 6:14). Paul boasts about how Christ saved him from sin, death and God's wrath by his willing sacrifice on the cross.

Lastly, in verse 17, James reminds us how we are to live our lives in 2014: *“So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”* This is a stern warning against the sin of *willful* omission. This we commit when we know what God's will is, but we ignore it. Having a worldly attitude leads to a godless lifestyle, contributing to the willful neglect and brushing aside of God's commandments. God's Word then becomes just a nuisance to be set aside.

But James 5:5 warns us about this godless pursuit of wealth and pleasure, *“You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.”* Those who live this kind of life will suffer the same tragic end as that of the rich fool.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Your plans for 2014 must be made with an added aspect, *“D.V.”* *“Lord willing.”* These words must be engraved in your hearts and minds in this new year.

Every New Year's day, we all wish each other blessings for the coming year. But because of sin in this world, there is no avoiding the prospect of disappointments, sufferings, afflictions, and even persecution. You may lose a loved one through death. You may lose your job. Strained relationships with your spouse or children or parents or friends may come. Serious illness may befall you.

What will happen then to all your plans and dreams for 2014? If you did not include God's will in these plans, loneliness, anger, bitterness, and other bad feelings may take over your life. But if you always have *“D.V.”* in your mind, humbling yourselves before God, trusting in his providence, by saying, *“If the Lord wills,”* then you have peace and joy in all your circumstances. You know that the Lord is with you through all things, good and bad.

How is God always there with you and for you? Through his Holy Spirit. Those who believe in Christ are united to him through his Spirit. We are united to Christ in his death on the cross. He also had *“D.V.”* in his speech. He taught us to pray to the Father in heaven, *“Your will be done on earth, as it is heaven.”* When he prayed in the garden before he was arrested, he knew that the Father would pour out his the wrath on him in the next several hours. So he prayed, *“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done”* (Lk 22:42).

“Not my will, but yours, be done.” May this also be our prayer as we partake of the bread and cup today. AMEN.