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Growing Into Maturity
James 4:11-17

Stop Trying To Play God

This morning as we continue in our study from the book of James, we come upon a section in which James sounds a warning to us, which I would summarize as “Stop trying to play God.” I have told you over and over as we have looked at this series, that James is concerned about our spiritual maturity, about growing us up as Christians. And in the section that we are going to look at today, James gives us an important lesson in becoming spiritually mature. He tells us to stop trying to play God.

I don’t know if there is a more important lesson in learning to live in a healthy way, a balanced way, and an emotionally liberated way than this lesson of stop trying to play God. To know your limits. To know who you are and who God is. The original temptation offered back in the Garden of Eden to Adam and Eve was the temptation to play God. Those of you who know that ancient story back in the book of Genesis know that the serpent came along to Adam and Eve and presented them with the simple temptation, “You shall be as God. You will be like God.” Friends, I am afraid that day after day and moment by moment we succumb to the temptation to try to be like God, to act like God, to play God.

You say, “Well, how is it that I would want to play God? When do I do that?”

How many parents, spouses and friends try to play Savior? Isaiah 43:11 says, “*I, even I, am the Lord and apart from me there is no Savior.*” God tells us that he is the Lord and apart

from him there is no Savior. And yet, parents, spouses, friends say: No, I think I will take on the role of Savior.

There was a woman who was the wife of a professional. She was the mother of many children. Her husband was an alcoholic and her children followed suit. Most of them became drug addicts or alcoholics. This woman had a deep faith, but her life was filled with monitoring her family, keeping most of them dependent upon her. Most of her children lived with her well into their late 20's. Even though she was over 60, she served them faithfully, did all of their laundry, fixed spectacular meals every night. She rescued them from the consequences of their addictions by paying their speeding tickets, by hiring lawyers to deal with their legal troubles every time their abuse got them in trouble. She ran interference for her husband with his firm. She protected her children from coaches and teachers. She changed churches four times to protect her kids from judgment. The ultimate crisis came for her when, despite all of her efforts, she couldn't any longer control her addicted sons. They ended up going to treatment centers or halfway houses. Then she had to face the hole in her own soul. She became sick and lost weight. She became depressed. One time she was even suicidal. Everything valuable about her was outside of her—her attempt to rescue and fix. This woman had lived her life pretending that she was the Savior.

Some people would call that being a good devoted mother. Oh, she was admired by so many people. And yet, the psychological community was on to something when they labeled her behavior addictive. They have said about such people that they are co-dependent. She feels responsible for rescuing and fixing.

Years ago in our small group leaders training manual, I developed a set of contrasts between playing Savior, in which we feel responsible for others—children, friends, spouses, parents—and acting like a Christian, in which I see myself responsible to other people.

When I believe that I am responsible for another person, I feel that I must fix them; that I must rescue them; that I must control them; and that I must protect them. Your 25-year old son is not able to consistently hold a job or drinks too much or is making a bad decision regarding their love life. Parents who are Saviors have to leap in to fix and to rescue, to make the choices for their children. Friends feel responsible to fix their friends.

I must fix this other person's feelings because they are depressed.

There must be something wrong with me as a small group leader because I am not able to fix all of the people in the group.

I can't fix this person's marriage.

When I am responsible to another, I don't try to fix them or control them or rescue them. I see my role as to encourage them, to share with them, to confront them at times with the truth. But always decision making and the ultimate responsibility for how life goes rests with them, not with me. I am not the Savior. I care for them, but he cures them. I share with them, but he saves them.

How many good Christians really impede the salvation process that God would work in their spouses' lives and their children's lives by trying to manipulate the process of salvation and work it or overwork it beyond God's timing and God's plan at the moment?

Well, my spouse is unsaved, so I will leave Bible verses pinned to their pillow. Oh, that will be a great encouragement when they lay down at night and the last thing they see before they drop off to sleep is "You will die in your sins unless you also repent."

Or you bombard your parents with Bible verses the moment you get saved. You write them a 10-page letter. How many Christians have done that? Write your parents a 10-page letter telling them why they are all washed up. Why their whole understanding of church and God is completely off. And what you just learned as a freshman in college is

what they need to hear. Maybe it is what they need to hear, but we care for people and he cures them.

To not play Savior means that you trust him enough to patiently work in someone else's life. What we are going to find as we study, James says, is that playing God is destructive in all dimensions. To take just the example that I am beginning with, playing Savior, being a Savior when you are not is exhausting. It is tiring trying to fix someone who doesn't want to be fixed. Trying to control everything and protect from all of life's harms. It is exhausting. You have to be a really big person to be a Savior.

It is not only exhausting, it is anxiety provoking. Call it concern if you will, Moms say it is just maternal instinct, but if you are not free, if you are constantly wracked with guilt, if you are fearful, if you are not relaxed and at peace, you are probably slipping over into the Savior syndrome.

Or men, so that it doesn't sound to you like I am just picking on mothers, you play Savior too when you think that you always have to come up with the solution, the answer, the exact fix for your wife's or girlfriend's problems. She shares something with you and you immediately have to be Mr. Fix-it, Mr. Home Improvement. You believe that in all circumstances you are right. Saviors always have to come up with the answers for every single problem and always have the exact appropriate advice. But when we know that his job is to cure and our job is to care, well, we can begin relating to a person rather than devising the answer. We can; perhaps, men even share a feeling for a moment [but only a moment!]. I know you are depressed. I know you are upset. I am concerned about you. Rather, than reach for the solution, we reach for the other person.

You are not only doing damage to yourself, do you know that people who play Savior and who play God create resentment in others? Folks do not want to be controlled

by another person. They don't want to be fixed. Have you noticed that? Moms, after serving so much you produce a child that just kicks away from you. Why? Because no one wants to be smothered that much. Or, if they allow it, they become completely dependent and emotionally immature forever. We do damage to people when we try to play God.

And, of course, perhaps worst of all we not only sin against ourselves and sin against and injure others, when we try to play God, we offend him. God doesn't like it when we try to replace him! In the text that we are going to study today, James echoes the message of the book of Isaiah which says, "To whom will you compare me, says the Lord?" In other words, how dare you usurp my role and believe that you are competent enough to play God. You are not. And when you try to do it, you just make an awful mess of everything. Isn't that your experience? I have called today's message simply, "Stop Trying to Play God." James 4:11-17. Let's pray.

"Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?"

"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.' 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. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."

Now, in this first section in vv. 11-12, James clearly tells us that our problem with slander and speaking against others is a problem of playing God when he says in v. 12, *"But there is only one Lawgiver and Judge. The one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to*

judge your neighbor?” You are trying to play God. You are trying to be the Lawgiver and the Judge.

Let’s look at the text more closely to see what James is opposing and why he is opposing it. He picks up the theme of the tongue again. Over and over and over we have seen in the book of James, the seriousness of sinning through our speech. We have rank orders of what sins are really terrible. And typically we place sins of the flesh—temptations to homosexuality or temptations to extra-marital sex or pornography—those things are usually at the top of many Christian lists. But James keeps hammering away at a sin that is socially acceptable and barely raises an eyebrow in most Christian churches and in most Christian communities. That is sins of speech. He spent a whole chapter, 3, talking with us about our tongues and now here again he speaks to us about slander in v. 11. “Brothers, do not slander one another.”

Friends, real simply, we must start ranking sins of speech up there with very serious sin. Paul in the book of Romans, as he describes what culture is like as it moves away from God, and he does that famous spiral down, departing from God, sinning sexually and exchanging natural desires for unnatural ones. As he talks about society spiraling down and the characteristics of such a society, he mentions sins of speech. That along with violence and murder, Paul says, they are gossips, they are slanderers, God-haters.

Several weeks ago, I told you that in the book of Romans, as well as in Ephesians, Paul says that it is because of sins of speech that God’s judgment is coming. Paul to the Corinthian church says in 2 Corinthians 12:20, *“I am afraid when I come to you that I might not find you as I want to.”* Paul checks out the church and if the apostle Paul came to our church would he say, “I am afraid that if I visited you, you might be as I want you to be because I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, slander, gossip, arrogance and

disorder.” Now, he goes on and lists sexual sins, but it is interesting that over and over again the Bible prioritizes sins of speech in a way that we would not in America today. We need to take our cues in terms of what is important from God’s word.

What is slander? When James says, “Brothers, do not slander one another” what is he talking about?

In the Bible it doesn’t simply mean speaking false. Slander is not simply speaking falsely about a person. It is literally speaking against a person through unloving criticism, through negative judgments. Just speaking against a person whether it is true or false, according to the Bible is slander. For example, in the Old Testament you see Moses being slandered [that is the word that’s used] and in the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, it uses the same Greek word as we find in James, Moses is slandered when his brother, Aaron, and his sister, Miriam, speak against him to the community because he married an African woman. Moses married an African woman, a Cushite. There has been a lot of modern scholarship done around this about whether Moses had an interracial marriage. It is considered very likely that he did. You can check out Numbers 12 on that. But his brother and sister speak against him. They also speak against his unique leadership in the community.

You say, “Well, what is wrong with speaking against someone?”

Well, James tells us what is wrong with it. It is a breach of love. He tries to help us understand the kinds of relationships that we should have especially with other Christians by saying to us, “Brothers, [v. 11] do not slander one another.” We have a family relationship. And then he goes on and says, “Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges...” and the New International Version is unfortunately very misleading here. It is not judges him, but judges his brother...Three times in one verse, James says don’t you understand that you

are in a family relationship with this other person, if you are a Christian and they are a Christian. And unless you restrict it to the Christian community, this business of speaking against, James expands it in v. 12 and says, “Who are you to judge your neighbor?” The standard applies to all that you should love. You should love your neighbor as yourself. It is about a breach of relationship of love.

I want to describe one specific way that we play God in speaking against people. That is by exposing their flaws before others. You say, “How do I commit this sin of slander, speaking against someone?” When you expose a person’s faults, their mistakes, their shortcomings, their sins to another person, you slander them.

There is a great illustration of this back in Genesis 9. I want you to see this. It is a wonderful illustration of the sin of exposing. It literally involved an exposure. In Genesis 9 after the flood, it says, *“Noah, a man of the soil preceded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of his wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father’s nakedness and told his two brothers outside.”*

He was a broadcaster. Hey, dad’s inside and he is drunk. Broadcast his father’s nakedness, his father’s shameful condition.

But it goes on to say, *“Shem and Japheth, Noah’s other two sons, took a garment and laid it across their shoulders. Then they walked in backward and covered their father’s nakedness. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father’s nakedness.”* Shem and Japheth covered their father, protecting him.

You know, 1 Peter 4:8 says, *“Love each other deeply because love covers a multitude of sins.”* Let me ask you a personal question here. Are you a person who often broadcasts to someone else, maybe a co-worker or friend, do you often broadcast other people’s flaws and mistakes, their shortcomings, things you learn about them that are negative? Are you a

broadcaster or are you a coverer? Do you expose others or do you cover them? Love covers a multitude of sins.

Love always protects in 1 Corinthians 13. It always protects. Always watches another person's back.

You say, "Rich, why is exposing playing God?"

Because in God's role as judge, he will bring everything to light on the last day. It is the Lord's role to expose all flaws and all corruption and all sins. Luke 12:2 says, "*There is nothing concealed that will not be revealed or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight. And what you have whispered in the ear in the inner room will be proclaimed from the roofs.*" God's role as Judge is to expose. To shout from the housetops what is hidden.

You say, "Is there no place for exposure? Investigative reporting? Whistle blowing?"

Yeah, yeah sometimes corruption and sin in families, in a church, in a workplace, in a factory, in the government—sometimes it needs to be exposed and brought out for the sake of healing, for the sake of justice, for the sake of the greater good. But can you honestly say that much of your discussion as you share the mistakes of another, the stupidity, the flaws, the folly of another person, can you honestly say that it is for the greater good? Is it to eliminate corruption, to bring healing? If it is, OK. It is an act of love. But I can't honestly say that in my life. Most often, when I am engaged in speaking against, I am just being a broadcaster.

I am personally convicted by these words here. I can't say that I am serving the purpose of Woodward and Bernstein, that I am going to blow the whistle on Watergate. It is just slander.

And we pretend to be God by setting our own standards. James goes on and says, *“Anyone who speaks against his brother and judges him, speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.”*

Here is the logical flow of his argument. We speak against our brother, we are judging our brother. When we judge our brother and slander him, we are breaking the law, the commandments of God. God commands us to love our brothers and sisters. To love our neighbor as ourselves. But when we say, “No, I am not bound by that commandment. I don’t have to submit to that law” then we are setting ourselves apart from the law, outside of the scope of the law, in fact we are standing in judgment over the law. We are saying, “I know better than God.”

Oh sure, God tells me to love other people and to not expose and broadcast their faults, but I know better. I have a right to set my own standards, totally apart from what God says.

Friends, how often do we do that? We pretend to be God by setting our own standards. Not listening to or submitting to the standards of God. That is just one opinion. I realize that God says that, but hey, I feel differently. Every time you come upon a statement of Jesus, a commandment of God, and you say, “Well, that is fine, but I feel differently. This is the 90’s and after all that was written a long time ago. They didn’t understand the complexity of modern life or all the things that I have to contend with in my particular circumstance. When God wrote this, he wasn’t thinking about me. I fall outside of this command.”

What we are doing is judging the law. Sitting over it and saying like a judge, “No, that law doesn’t apply here. There is an exception over there. I can carve out a loophole.

There is a technicality and that technicality applies to me. I know more about lives that God does. I know what will make for a successful life, a healthy life, a good life.”

Sure, it says that you are not supposed to live together before marriage. But our finances are such that we really can’t afford to have two separate residences. She is out of work or he is out of work and this is the only way. We are so busy that we can’t see one another except at night. We live a distance apart. We really love each other and it is OK to have sex because we are planning on getting married. We have so many different ways to say that we are above the law. We sit in judgment over God’s law.

Sure, it says this, but I really don’t care. That is the bottom line, friends.

Oh, I do care, but I am the exception.

Yeah, I know it tells me to be honest in my business practices and to tell the truth and that God hates false witnesses and lying, but you don’t know what it is like out there. If you want to maintain a competitive edge in business, there are just some things that you need to do.

Boy, we are surely not only able to avoid the force of God’s law, but set up our own standards. How many times have we looked down on others and spoken against other people because they didn’t conform to one of our standards. If we were pressed, we would have to say that this standard is not derived from God. It just happens to be my opinion, how I feel. I have a standard of cleanliness and this person violated it by their foul looking house. She is not a good housekeeper, certainly not as good as me and, therefore, I can speak against her. Where did you get this standard from? It’s my opinion.

I will tell you where else we get stupid standards from. From our experiences and our pasts. Again, not from God’s word, but from our experiences. Dads putting the

pressure on their sons to play sports because, “I played football and, by golly, I don’t care if you are only 115 pounds as a High School junior. You are going to play football too.”

We set up all kinds of pressures on our kids to perform because we were able to perform at a certain level. They have to follow in our footsteps, like it or not. They are going to do what we did.

Oh, I don’t put that kind of pressure on my kid.

Really? Would your child say that?

You have to be like me. You have to hold my views. You have to have my temperament. There is a big one. We set up standards based on our temperaments.

Parents, do you realize that a lot of clashes that you have with your children are purely based on the notion that you have the ideal temperament and your child doesn’t? I see in myself, and I see in others, so much emotional immaturity because we are unwilling to accept a temperament type different than our own. What makes us right and the determinant of what is right? We play God.

James says not only do we set up our own standards by judging the law, but also ultimately we are guilty of usurping the place of the one lawgiver, even God. Verse 12: *“There is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?”*

Let me quickly tell you what is not being condemned here when James commands us to not play God. I am afraid that many people read statements like “Do not judge” or hear a condemnation of judging and really fall off the knife’s edge that we always have to walk on if we are going to walk in truth. All biblical truth must be held in tension. When we start pushing something in an unbalanced way, we fall off the knife’s edge, we fall into another error. There is usually error on both sides of the road.

Let me tell you what the Bible is not condemning when it says don't be a judge. We live in a time when principles and truths don't matter a whole lot. There are times like this in history where principles and truths don't matter. Go to England before World War II, every body who was in the elite establishment, all the intellectuals, everyone in government, had a mood of appeasement. Don't speak out so harshly, they said to Winston Churchill. Don't speak out so clearly and forcefully against Adolph Hitler. Churchill, you are a warmonger. You are an angry person. You just like conflict. Let's play nice with the Nazis. It was an age of appeasement. Churchill would have been accused of judging, of being too harsh.

We live at just such a time in America in the 90's. You saw that in this election campaign. To raise issues is to be mean-spirited. Can't we just get along? Can't we just be tolerant? Forget about principles, forget about discernment.

That is not what the Bible is commanding here. The Bible never says to us to just be flabby in judgment. That every view is just as good as every other view. There are things that we are called upon to judge. We are called upon to judge right doctrine. Titus 3:10 speaks to us about heresy. 2 Timothy 2 we are talked to about heresy. We are called to judge right doctrine.

Jesus tells to be aware of false prophets. Again, it requires discernment and discrimination, judgment to see falseness in teaching and prophecy. We are told to test the spirits.

Some people have so bought into the mood of our age, this flabbiness, and this age of indulgence that they become willing to accept anything that goes by the name of Christian.

Oh, that author says that she is a Christian, so when she says that she was embraced by a light and that light talked to her about reincarnation. And it talked to her about karma and past-lives and all of that, it must be Christian. She said she is a Christian.

No, we must discern error and truth and be sensitive to shades of meaning and principles. The Bible doesn't tell us to put all critical faculties on hold. What is it talking about, then, when it says, "Don't judge?"

It is talking about a kind of spirit, a kind of heart, in which an individual becomes hypercritical and looks for flaws and faults. Delights in finding error. The judgmental person is not a person who tests things. It is a person who is looking for error and wants to find it in another person. It is the person who listens to teachings with a hypercritical ear. That phrase wasn't exactly the way I would phrase it. Combs over manuscripts and over tapes to find the one problem, rather than hoping for the best, delighting in the best. The judgmental person delights in the worst.

We judge not only by being hypercritical, we judge by fitting others into a box. There are no grays. I recently had a pastor apologize to me. He said, "Rich, I was told by another pastor in another city that you were not open to the things of the Holy Spirit and that you really didn't like to pray for people. But I have watched your ministry over the last year and that is entirely false. You love to pray for people. And when you pray, often the Holy Spirit comes."

I said to him, "Well, I can understand how that was said of me. I really have a value of teaching the Bible and emphasize that when I go to conferences. There are a lot of folks who would want to fit me into a box and say, 'Well, if he has this view, he must be an opponent of renewal or an opponent of a move of the Holy Spirit in our day.'"

We do that with each other. Everything must be black and white. We squeeze someone into a box and try to chop off all the limbs that are hanging out and all the parts of them that don't quite fit in the box. No, we are all entirely like this. We don't like grays.

It is an incredibly stupid thing to put ourselves in the position of judge over somebody. It is stupid because there is one lawgiver, one judge, who will judge us. We open ourselves up to a harsh standard regarding ourselves when we become hypercritical toward others. Jesus said that we will be judged by the standard we mete out. If we decide to put others under a microscope, then Jesus said that we, ourselves, will be put under a microscope. If we decide to show others mercy and give other people room for mistakes and flaws and faults, then we also will be shown mercy. It is a foolish thing to judge, because we frequently don't know all the facts. And our own views are distorted by our own problems, our own biases, and our own sins.

Let me give you a little illustration here. Have you ever heard the old myth that on Mars there are all these strange canals? That used to be taught in school. There are canals on Mars. Did you ever hear that one? When the Voyager went up several years ago and mapped Mars and sent back absolutely crystal clear pictures of Mars, they found that there was nothing that even resembles a canal. There aren't these lines in Mars and all these canals. Where did this myth come from that on Mars there are these canals?

Well, the 19th Century there was an astronomer named Percival Lowell who studied Mars through the best telescope available at the time. He spent years squinting through this telescope and what he saw were canals. And so he spent years mapping the canals. As it turns out, Lowell suffered from a rare eye disease that caused him to actually see the blood vessels in his own eyes. What he was mapping was his own vision problem.

Do you know, friends, that when you judge other people frequently what you are seeing is your own vision problem? You are looking through your own biases, your own anger, your own hurt, your own prejudices, and the fact that they have threatened you. Why is judgment so foolish? Because it isn't right judgment. Because our condemnation of another person in the church or a parent, a friend is frequently the projection out of our own eye problem and not an agreement with the judgment of God.

And then, finally, we play God by attempting to play ruler of the universe. Verses. 13-17, *'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.' 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. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.'*

You say, "How do I play ruler of the universe?"

Well, by living as if we alone speak. Verse 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.'"* We make plans believing that there is only one voice, our voice—it is you who say, "I am going to do this and this and this..." Where in all of our speaking and in all of our planning is the voice of God?

You know, Psalm 14 says, *"The fool says in his heart there is no God."* *It is the fool that says there is no God. The modern world says that it is the fool who says in his heart that there is a God. But the Bible has the truth when it says, "The fool says in his heart there is no God."* And, frankly, many Christians live as practical fools and practical atheists because we plan and strategize without opening ourselves up to the voice of God.

There was a book written some years ago called *Decision Making and the Will of God* which was one of the truly unfortunate books written by a Christian that shut a generation of Christians off from being open to the voice of God through God speaking to us by a prophetic word or speaking to us through a dream or in an impression, leading us by the Holy Spirit. Using some means other than our reason and the application of the written word to our situation.

It is totally appropriate, friends, to plan, to think, especially if you are in business, you must have a plan. If you are going to get money from a bank, you must come up with a business plan. If you are going to be a responsible parent, you ought to have a will kept up to date. You ought to make some plans for your retirement. You ought to have a savings plan, if possible. But always, in all of the plans, you are saying, “My voice is not the only one. My reason is not the only thing.”

And it is not enough for me to have heard God in the past or to read his word and take it from there. We have a great example of the problems people get themselves into when they say, “Well, I have read God’s written word and I have heard him in the past and so now I will live life based on my voice and my thoughts, rather than trying to stay in touch with God and his thoughts.”

The great example of the problem that we get into when we dismiss the voice of God is Abraham back in the book of Genesis. God promised Abraham a son. He promised that through Abraham’s seed would come a great nation and that Abraham would pass on an inheritance through his son. Abraham heard the promise of God and when it was delayed, he said, “Well, I will take it from there” without consulting God. He took a concubine, Hagar, and she brought forth a son, Ishmael. Ishmael, who became the source of family problems. And then later on, when God spoke and said that he was going to give

Abraham his promise, Isaac, that first choice, Ishmael became a source of never-ending conflict for Isaac and for all of Isaac's descendants.

When you plan and leave the voice of God out, what you often do is bring forth in your life Ishmaels—the work of your flesh, the work of your mind, your voice. Maybe you've done that in a personal relationship - “OK God, I'll take it from here” and you've produced an Ishmael. You build a business without consulting God and at the end of the day it is an Ishmael, something that doesn't bring you great joy. It is just frustrating. Or you make a business decision and enter a partnership. You ally yourself with someone, but you really haven't heard from God. It is an Ishmael. It is a source of strife and problems.

The same thing can be true in ministry. You launch out in ministry without being directed by the Lord. You are not provided for. God's blessing is not in it. All you have is anxiety and trouble. Ishmael. We wait to hear the Lord's voice and wait to hear God's direction because God's direction brings with it blessing and provision and peace.

How many of us have come to the place in our lives where we have said, “OK, I have seen what I can produce. I have gone my way and produced my Ishmaels. That stuff doesn't work. It is time to turn and try to listen for the voice of God.”

We not only live as if our voice alone matters, but we live as if our will alone matters. James says here in v. 13, *“Listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city...’* Literally, the New International Version waters it down. It goes on to say, *“...and we will spend a year there and we will carry on business and we will make money.”* Four times the verse says, *“We will do such and such.”* We live as if our will and our determination and our plans are the only things that matter.

This saying, “we will do this; we will do that” is highly reminiscent of Isaiah's quote of Lucifer, Satan, in Isaiah 14 where Isaiah says, *“You say in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I*

will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the Mount of Assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain; I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the most-high God. I will. I will.”

James goes on and says that it is not just your will that matters. It is God’s will. Verse 15, *“Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will we will live and do this and do that.’”*

You say, “Rich, how do I know if I am believing that my will alone matters and not God’s will so that I am falling into the trap of pretending that I am the ruler of the universe, the only Sovereign?”

Well, I would ask you, do you live with a divided anxious heart? Our over watchfulness regarding our children, our over anxiety regarding our future, whether we will be married or not; whether we will have money or not; whether we will succeed or not is rooted in this lie that it is up to us. God and his will is so much in the background, especially in the modern world. God is so removed. His voice is so removed, but also his will, his provision and his protection is so removed that what we see in our age is more workaholism, more addictions, more anxiety disorders, more use of tranquilizers. We do not let go. We have to keep pressing. We do not yield, trusting the results to God.

No, it is that we have to stay on it. That is why I have always loved the little statement by Martin Luther who in contrast to this driven, over anxious, over watchful kind of modern person who tries to rule everything. Martin Luther one day said, “As I sit here sipping my little Wittenberg beer, the gospel is running its course.” In other words, the ultimate success or failure of the universe is with the Lord. Some people think that unless they stay with it or on it and really show concern, they won’t perform well or do well. But the fact is, friends, the greatest crippler of performance and activity is anxiety and fear. You perform best when you are able to trust that the results are in the hands of God. When I

relax, knowing that God is the one who is either going to work this out or not, I can perform so much better than when I think it is all up to me.

This notion that we are in charge, that we run things, it is all up to us, is seen not only in our divided hearts, but also in our debt load as a culture. James here is talking about the sin of presumption and he is saying to us, “Don’t presume on the future.” See, people get into trouble when they don’t listen to James 4:13 which tells us that we don’t know the future. Folks base their borrowing on the presumption that everything is going to work out in the future according to their plans and predictions. Everything is going to work out perfectly. Isn’t that the cause of debt problems and bankruptcies? People presume they know the future and how everything is going to work out. If I take out this loan, I will be able to repay it because I will keep my job and not be laid off. I am going to keep getting raises. I was promised a raise. Business is going to experience an upturn in the future because an economist said it. My house will continue to appreciate as it has been over the last three years. The market is going to continue to go up and up. My health is going to be OK in the future. I am not going to have health problems that will cause me to stop work or bring a lot of bills. No one is going to have an emergency medical need in my family. My car is going to keep working. My kids won’t need braces.

What if things don’t work out according to your plans? What if your will is not the only thing that matters? What if life doesn’t happen the way that you structure it? If your car gets stolen? Or if your children need braces? Or if you get laid off? Then what do you do with your debts?

I love the fact that when James talks to us about our wills and our decisions and plans, he is not just talking about purely spiritual things. He is talking about money, debt, commerce, and business. And he says, “Folks, lots of you when you take on debt are trying

to play God because you think you know the future when you don't." James 4:13 says, *"Listen those who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to the city and spend a year there, carry on business and make money.'"* Why, you don't even know what will happen tomorrow. You are planning to have your jobs next year, five years, and ten years from now. You don't even know what is happening tomorrow.

You pretend to play God not only by your pretense and knowledge, but also because you pretend to be permanent when you are not. Only God is permanent. He says, "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." Do you understand that your health is a frail thing? Anyone of you who has ever been rushed to the hospital, or ever been called to go to the hospital and stood by the bedside of a loved one or a friend who was in an accident or who had a sudden operation, knows how incredibly fragile, how profoundly fragile life really is. Our health is fragile. Our spouse's health is fragile. We are a mist.

We are not going to be permanently well. And those we love are not going to be permanently well. So viewing things as being permanent is foolish and presumptuous. The bottom line is that it all turns on the will of God and not our abilities to project goals, make plans and put it in our computers.

So what does that mean for debt? I think, practically, what it means is if you are taking out a loan and you don't have in your position the current means to repay the loan, if the money is not in the bank or the collateral in the item is not enough to cover the loan, for example, if your car gets repossessed because you are sick and can't pay it off, or your house is repossessed and taking it back won't pay the loan off, if you are presuming on the future, future employment, future health, then you are doing what the Bible tells you not to do. You are pretending you are the ruler and you are not. If we were to sit down with those of

you in the church that are in debt and find out why you are in debt, in many cases we would discover that you have committed the sin of presumption. You thought you were rulers when you weren't.

Some of you would say, "Rich, if I only took out loans for a house or a car when I have the current means to repay it or they are backed by collateral in the items so that if I don't have the cash to repay it, if it were taken back it would all be paid off and I wouldn't be in debt, if that is all the loans and debt that I took out, then I probably wouldn't be borrowing that much."

That's right. You have it exactly right.

You say, "How do I escape my anxious, divided mind, my workaholism? How do I gain a sense of rest in God's control over everything? To be able to make my plans, but then go about them trusting the Lord, listening to the Lord, not trying to fix everyone and play God? How do I gain this perspective that God really is in control?"

Let me suggest three things in closing. First of all, I would tell you to look at nature. When God wanted to communicate to Noah his great control and his faithfulness, he put a rainbow in the sky. And it is called upon Noah that every time he saw a rainbow it would be a reminder of his promise to Noah to never flood the world again. I think there is something in looking at nature that when you are sitting on the beach and you watch the ocean roll in and out, you realize that underneath all of the confusion and all of the sirens and all the memos and deadlines, all the e-mail and rap music, life is still going on totally apart from me and other people. Look at nature. Look at how one season dissolves into another. Take a walk in the woods and look at nature. Watch the birds or squirrels. Look up at the moon and watch the phases change. Friends, I am telling you that it will help you. It is a witness to God's control. It all points to the Lord.

The second thing I would say is to not only look at nature, but look to the future. Project yourself forward standing before the throne of God and looking back on your life. If you were standing at the throne of God and looking back on your life, don't you think you will say, "You know if I had only known that this is what awaits me, when I had that cancer, when my husband left me, when my dad walked out—if I had only known that this is what was waiting for me, I don't think I would have nearly been so fearful, so controlling, so driven." Look at the future.

And look at Jesus. Read the gospel and watch the way that Jesus lived. Was there ever a man under more pressure who was so at peace than Jesus Christ? All the demands thrown at him, people screaming at him for his attention, pulling on his arm, asking for healing, demanding, hating him, persecuting him and yet he lived in perfect peace because he knew that his father was the ruler of the universe.