

# Week 4 - The Vapor

**Series:** What is a Follower of the Way?

**Preacher:** Phil EuBank

**Date:** September 6, 2026

**Primary Scripture:** James 4:13-17; 5:1-6

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## **Key Principle - Developing others will require sacrifice, but none of it's yours anyway.**

Good morning, Menlo Church, and welcome back. As we begin our ministry year together, we're talking about what it means to reclaim the way of Jesus in our lives. Not just more knowledge, but more reflective about whether our daily decisions parallel the way Jesus calls us to live.

If you are joining us at one of our Bay Area campuses, in San Mateo, Mountain View, Menlo Park, or Saratoga, we are so grateful you are here today. And I hope you have already found a community of people who are excited to get to know you and help you find next steps here.

We have spent three weeks in this series already, breaking down the Kingdom Qualities that make a follower of Jesus more than just someone who knows a lot about Jesus, but someone who goes in the direction of Jesus with their life.

Last week we got a picture from James 3 about what it looks like to be a Thoughtful Witness; be sure to go check it out if you missed it. Today we are going to talk about what it means to be a Sacrificial Developer, the fourth and final profile of our series.

Before we dive in, I am going to pray for us. If you have never been here before or heard me speak, before I speak, I pray kneeling. I do that in part to remind myself, and to remind us, that one of the reasons we are willing to be sacrificial developers is because Jesus sacrificed for us. So wherever you are in your faith today, would you pray with me? PRAY.

If you ask anybody how they got where they are in life, you are going to get a story with a hero somewhere in the middle. And it is not because we're all super arrogant. It is actually just how our memory works.

We tell our life backward, and as we tell it backward, every accident that happened, all the providence we experienced that was beyond our control, slowly slides into becoming a decision.

Even without realizing it, every time I tell people how I got to Menlo, it comes out more impressive than it was. Maybe you're a founder, and you've heard that old movie trailer voice guy in your head, "in a world where there was nothing but an idea and a garage..."

Maybe it's the house you bought the year before the market went insane that becomes an instinct you were smart enough to act on. The parents who read to you at night, the teacher who stayed late to help

you, the country you happened to be born in, the body that kept working. None of that stuff makes the cut in the final story. It isn't that interesting, and it isn't rooted in you.

None of us do this consciously. We just end up with a version of our lives where, when we tell the story of it, we are the hero. We did it. And if we did it, then it gets added to our legacy over time.

These are conscious edits; they're just part of the way I think and live my life. Nobody signed up for any of this, by the way. It's all the daily inputs that get incorporated into the life we live. It is all around us in our culture.

For James, the brother of Jesus in the first century, it is a problem. But for us today, especially when it goes unnamed and just felt, it feels more like a feature of our culture.

Author and scholar Christopher Watkin says the one thing we should never do with a gift is pretend we bought or made it ourselves. We receive existence. We receive meaning. We receive love. Being creative with what we have received doesn't make us any less recipients.

James is about to tell a story about a business trip, and it is going to feel like it is about somebody else. I would caution you, though. Don't run too far ahead.

James has been building this idea about getting the stuff you want, and some of the reasons why we don't. And then he pivots to a business trip. Think about this a little like our diagnosis. He is diagnosing his reader as the self-made entrepreneur. Specifically as it relates to their time and their talent.

### James 4:13-17

*DC. "Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit. Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."*

After reading that, it can also be easy to assume that everything we value in our life, or everything that makes us good at our life, just got indicted.

But here is the thing. Scripture over and over again praises prudence. We get these snapshots of the ant that stores, or Joseph in the Hebrew Scriptures preparing for a famine with granaries.

Provision is commanded in our lives, not permitted. We are called to actually do work. And generosity requires capacity. You can't give what you have never built. Wealth isn't the problem. Planning isn't the problem.

James isn't even indicting this entrepreneur because they want to go, to trade, or to make a profit. The problem is what they don't do. Remember what he said? 'If the Lord wills.' That is the part he wants us to remember. There is no factoring of God's will into their plan at all.

The context gives us this sense that their motives are at least mixed. It doesn't mean your plan, your business, your work didn't factor in God. But given where James is in chapter 4, he is talking about people who may even be followers of Jesus, and this has just fallen off the map.

This rests on a prideful assumption rooted in rugged individualism. So much of that seems like a new idea back then, but it is something hardwired into our cultural formation today.

When James asks the question, "What is your life?", it is this idea that it is a mist. It is a fog. But that fog is making lifetime commitments. Maybe you've thought, what is my life? It is like James is just saying, \*spray\*, this is your life. You think it is all durable. You think everything you have will last. And it is not.

See, the problem is that the entrepreneur is answering the question, "What is my life?", by showing a calendar, rather than talking to his or her Creator.

When James says we should be saying, 'if the Lord wills,' he is not suggesting we are casting a spell. God doesn't need us to say that. He already knows.

Even Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night He was betrayed, said that if there was another plan that could bring salvation to humanity, that is the one He would like to pursue. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.

That is the mental training we do when we say, in our mind, in our heart, in our prayers, or even out loud, if the Lord wills.

It is the practice of framing our plans as questions rather than an assertion. It is a way of putting Jesus into the heart of what we are doing, of reminding our own heart that we are not God. What we do is always secondary to our submission. James highlights a group of people who are high information and low transformation.

He talks about whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it. For him, for her, it is sin. Man, that stings. They are condemned not simply for what they did, but for what they knew and postponed. We know better, and we are held to the standard of our knowledge.

That is a sin most of us have never confessed. That we are more spiritually educated than activated. James knew this personally. He had decades of experience being close to Jesus without following the way of Jesus.

For some of us as Christians, it is easy to listen to another sermon, to pick up another book, to listen to another podcast. All of those are good things. But we forget that applying the last one will have far more power than just consuming the next one and applying neither.

James is giving us a snapshot of what the culture gives us, and a diagnosis that we are, without realizing it, self-made entrepreneurs. In the next section, he gives us the prognosis of that diagnosis. If we are self-made entrepreneurs, we will become the sole beneficiary. Specifically, with our treasure.

## James 5:1-6

*DC. “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.”*

This is a passage that’s easy for us to think of someone it applies to, as long as they aren’t us. There are people in our minds we think are rich or wasteful. The joke is that you can ask any income group what it means to be rich, and they will describe the income group just above them.

And to be honest, this isn’t even just about individuals. This can be about organizations. This can be about churches. We do this with buildings, reserves, and staff, and call it stewardship, and we can become a church that is the primary beneficiary of its own generosity.

James is describing someone in whom all the resources that have come in over the course of a lifetime flow into one account, with one name at the top, and then flow nowhere else.

The problem is not necessarily that so much has been made or gained. The picture he is painting is of riches that have rotted, garments that are moth-eaten, gold and silver that are corroded, even though gold doesn’t corrode. He is highlighting that the wealth has sat somewhere so long that it did something it isn’t supposed to be able to do.

They were the wrong investments. What this person was trying to accumulate in status and in security could never be gained by being the sole beneficiary of their own illusion of being a self-made entrepreneur.

Not only that, he talks about wages that have been kept back through fraud. This person has not even been ethical with the people who work for them. Profit that required somebody else’s loss, and he never had to look at it. The harvesters were there the whole time, working for him.

And then the cries of those people reached the Lord of hosts. In other words, our Heavenly Father found out, even though nobody else seemed to.

One of the things that makes the Dead Sea so dead is that there aren’t any moving currents, inflow without an outflow. The water just sits there, stagnant and diseased. The same thing can happen with us if we keep receiving but never giving; it all becomes about us.

Without realizing it, we have been living in a place where luxury and self-indulgence feel good, where they have fattened our hearts in a day of slaughter. In other words, future judgment is coming. This whole picture being painted about his life feels great, until it doesn’t.

Today we have gotten soft in some of the same ways. You have heard before that possession is nine-tenths of the law. But how often do we live like possession means permission? Permission to do whatever we want with whatever we have. James is saying we are stewards; that actually we don't own anything.

We might not have piles of gold, but we have piles of last year's trends. Lifestyles that just keep creeping, where the ceiling of our travel expectations five years ago became the floor of them today. Where the friction most of the world has to live with, we optimize or upgrade out of.

I want to give you a sense of how sacrifice and living with it are really worth the investment in our lives. Because what James has been showing us, and what I hope sticks with you, is that developing others will require sacrifice. But none of it's yours anyway.

The illusion we sometimes find ourselves in is that we have all these things, all this status, all this stuff, all this security, and the only question becomes how much of what is mine do I give to others.

But when I realize I don't get to keep it, that it is not mine, that it was a gift, and that even the things that were my own effort were inside providential circumstances God allowed into my life, whether I am a Christian or not, then I can understand that this kind of sacrifice for developing others might be worth it.

Hear me out, you are already sacrificing. Everybody is sacrificing. The only question is what are you sacrificing for? Who are you sacrificing for? And will it be worth it?

I want to give you a picture of what a sacrificial developer does. James gave us the diagnosis of the self-made entrepreneur and the prognosis that such a person becomes the sole beneficiary of a life that is rotting beneath them. Let's look at what a sacrificial developer is all about.

The first one is that a sacrificial developer is open-minded. Now, this isn't open-minded about what's true. This is open-minded about what's next. The entrepreneur's plan that we saw in James chapter 4 wasn't wrong. It was just closed. It was sealed. There was no place for God to get in.

What James says is that when we say, 'if the Lord wills,' it's an invitation for God into our plans. So here is a challenge. There is some decision in your life right now, personally, professionally, relationally, that you have maybe already made in your mind.

You are asking people for opinions, but really you just want confirmation of a decision you have already made. Don't just hold the outcome open, hold the decision open.

Most of us hold the outcome loosely, but we hold the decision tightly. And then we call it surrender when the outcome doesn't come the way we want. So what plan have you already made that you are only really praying God will bless? Be careful about that. Be open-minded.

The second thing a sacrificial developer does is stay open-hearted. James talks about the harvesters who were around this man the whole time. He walked past them every day of the harvest. They were working before he was awake. He didn't hate them; he didn't see them.

And their cries never reached him. But their cries reached the Lord of hosts. Even the crises we don't see, God is hearing their prayers.

So notice, who are the people that really make your day-to-day experience better? Maybe it is people on your team. Maybe it is the person who writes a check for you. Maybe it is your teacher, or your regular barista, or the person who drives you around sometimes.

Check to see if they are doing okay. Don't just be nicer. Be attentive. Be open-hearted. Be ready for the fact that if their circumstances are painful, it will hurt you all of a sudden.

It is so easy in our lives and in our culture to have a list of people, like we talked about a couple of weeks ago, who get VIP access to a real conversation with us, and people we just don't want to talk to. This might be you if you've changed the settings in Uber to have the driver be quiet.

How many of us have made our lives so frictionless that we have actually built a world where the thing we want arrives but nobody's face comes with it? It is just waiting for us on the front porch. Be careful about a frictionless life.

God often builds our faith through friction, and we live in a culture that wants to remove that friction without highlighting what else we lose along the way. And then third, be open-handed. What moves doesn't rot. That is James's logic. Everything in his indictment decayed because it sat still when it was meant to move.

When we live open-handed, that is different from generous. Generous is a box that most of us already believe we have checked. There is a percentage; there is an amount that I give. But open-handed is a posture. And it is what happens when somebody asks for help.

This is one of those phrases I say from time to time. I heard it years ago, and it has always challenged me, and you have heard me say it before. Never resist a generous impulse.

We are most interested in ourselves most of the time. So just assume that if you feel that pull in your heart that God is calling you to help, to take a step, assume it is from him. You don't have to be the full solution, but do something.

Often we feel like the person asking for money on the street is someone we can't help because we don't carry cash, so we don't do anything at all. We don't say hello. We don't ask if we can pray for them. We don't bring them an extra sandwich. We just settle for nothing.

That person in your life who maybe needs a blessing this week, that you could send a note to, that you could send a gift card to, that you could make space for a meal with. Stop resisting.

There will be people in your life who require sacrifice. For some of you it will be a little bit of time. For some it will be a bigger amount of time. And for some of you, your challenge is actually not to be a sacrificial developer.

Some of you agree with everything I am saying. And because you don't have boundaries about what you will or won't do, or about the biggest priorities in your life, you are exhausted, and you have just heard me give you a list of more things to do.

If that is you, please hear me. These are all helpful points from the text. But you also need to read the book *Boundaries* by Henry Cloud and John Townsend and settle some of those things in your life, so that you are giving from an overflow rather than from depletion.

I sat in a room a few weeks ago with pastors from our network of churches here in the Bay Area, and we were all talking about loneliness in ministry. And somebody asked the question I had been avoiding. If I stopped doing this job tomorrow, how many of my friendships would make it? I didn't like my own answer.

Because without meaning to, I built a life where almost every relationship I make time for is useful. Either they help me, or I help them, and I can point to what it produced. That is not friendship. Friendship is when I don't need anything from you, and you don't need anything from me.

And it turns out that costs more, because I can't power up into work mode for it. I have to just show up as a follower of Jesus and love somebody well. And it costs my family too, because that time comes from somewhere. So I am not standing up here having figured this out.

I am standing here as somebody who has to open his hands and find out how much of this was ever actually mine. And I already know. None of it was. But here is what I keep coming back to. James does not end on the verdict.

After all of this, after the rot and the moths and the wages and the fattened hearts, he tells them to be patient in the verses that follow. And he gives them a farmer. Somebody who puts something in the ground he can't make grow, and then waits through seasons he can't control.

This was never about whether we will sacrifice. We already are. It is what we are putting in the ground, and whether you can stand to wait for it. So what does it mean to reclaim the way of Jesus in your life? What is a follower of the way?

It is someone who is an Undivided Follower, where God has access to every part of their life. Someone who is an Unhurried Friend, who moves at the pace of love toward people they have nothing to gain from. Someone who is a Thoughtful Witness, whose life is a testimony about a God they love and who loves them.

And it means we are Sacrificial Developers. People who, in a world that tells you to get as much as you can for as little as you give, follow a Savior who said we'll find our life when we give it away.

He is the only one who ever loved me without needing something from me. And He is the reason I can open my hands at all. Would you pray with me?