

James 4:13-17

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[0 : 0 0] I've been following a new team this season, the Pride of Pitt Medden. Now, most of you are thinking, what is that? Well, the Pride of Pitt Medden is for Martin United, and I have become a supporter.

Some of you will know why, and if you don't know why, well, I leave it just there as a wee mystery. So it's been a stirring start to the season for Martin. Five wins on the trot, 17 goals scored, into the second round of the Iron Brew Cup with a glamour overseas tie away to Coleraine, just around the corner. And you may find this difficult to believe, but it's true that they're actually thinking about chartering a plane to head over to Northern Ireland for that particular match.

But then on Saturday, Fort Martin endured what we might describe as a reality check against the might of Wick Academy. It was all going swimmingly. We went one nil up, and the second goal just seemed to be only a matter of time. But then it went badly wrong. A couple of defensive lapses, and we were soon staring at the cruel face of defeat. And I can just imagine what the Evening Express headline tomorrow might be like. League leaders humbled by the boys from Cate Ness, or something along those lines.

So as I say, I think we could call that, for that Highland League team, a reality check. We're maybe not quite as good as we thought we were. But it's not just football teams that need the occasional reality check. We all do. And James, very accommodatingly, provides us with a reality check in the verses that we've read this evening. So let me just outline how I intend to consider the material in these five verses in James chapter 4. First of all, I want to notice what he says about what some of us say, the manner in which we express ourselves. And we might describe that as, for many of us, our current reality. But then James highlights what we forget. And that maybe is what we could call the reality check, as we are reminded or encouraged to consider those things that we sometimes choose to forget about. But then in these verses, we're also told what we ought to say and recognize. And that really speaks of what we might call an unchanging reality. And then finally, in the final verse, we have what we ought to do.

And that might perhaps be described as a challenge to forge a new reality. And now that may all sound a little bit cryptic at the moment. But as we go through each of these things one by one, hopefully all will become clear. First of all, James identifies what we say, or what we sometimes say, or the manner in which we sometimes express ourselves. What I'm describing as our current reality. There in verse 13, how does James address his readers? Now listen, you who say. So he's imagining those who are reading this letter who express themselves in the manner described or something similar to the manner described.

[3 : 2 6] And what is that? Well, these people, they speak in this way today or tomorrow. We will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business, and make money. Now it's clear that James here doesn't presume, he doesn't claim that everybody who's reading the letter speaks in this way, or has these kind of attitudes. But he does seem to presume that it's fairly prevalent among his readers as Christians, that this is the way that they express themselves. That's their current reality, maybe our current reality. But what do these words that he imagines people speaking, what do they reveal?

I think when we look at the words that James imagines people saying, I think we need to distinguish between activities and attitudes. First of all, the activities described in this imaginary conversation, it's just regular stuff. Today or tomorrow, we will go to this or that city.

That's people planning their diary, what they're going to do this week, next week. We all need to do that. It's about people planning journeys or traveling from A to B or whatever it is that their work or recreation will take them from one place to another, just regular stuff. It's about people working and prospering and making money. Those are the activities that these people are speaking about. And of course, when we look at each of them, we see that they're all perfectly legitimate. There's nothing wrong in and of themselves of any of the things that are being described. To the contrary, these are good things to do. It's good for us to plan. It's good for us to travel as opportunity affords. It's good for us to work and to be rewarded for our labors. All of this is not only necessary, it is good. So, there's no problem with the activities. But there does seem to be a problem with the attitudes that accompany these activities. And the one overriding attitude that seems to characterize those who are speaking in this way is that of pride. They seem to be suffering from a proud attitude to life. Now, pride is a problem that James has already addressed in just the previous verses. Then in verse 6, we were thinking about this a couple of weeks ago. As James reminded his readers of what is said in the book of Proverbs,

God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. But then in our own little section here that we're looking at this evening, James goes on to very explicitly say that the problem that these people have is indeed pride. Because then in verse 16, he goes on and he says this, as it is, so you people who are speaking in this way, he's still speaking to the same people, as it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. And so, very clearly, James says, this is the problem, not the activities. The activities are fine. By all means plan, by all means travel, by all means prosper, by all means make money. But the manner in which you're doing it, the attitude that dominates your thinking as you do these things is one of pride, of boasting and of bragging. That is the problem. And of course, pride is such a core problem that we have as human beings. I'm sure everybody here will have been aware of the death of Aretha Franklin in these past days. And no doubt you've read tributes or obituaries or heard people on TV speaking about her, about her talent, about her life, and different opinions expressed.

In one of the tributes that I was reading online, the author was commenting on how Aretha Franklin responded to criticism that was periodically directed to her because of her weight. And some people considered that she was heavier than she should be. Why anybody would challenge somebody on that front, it doesn't seem a very nice thing to do. But the interesting thing was what we were told about, how she responded to that criticism, if you wish. And she is reputed to have responded, and I quote, who hasn't a weight issue? If not the body, certainly the big head. And, you know, I had to smile.

[7 : 58] And of course, that's true, isn't it? That is a real problem for so many of us. That's our weight problem. Some of us may be in other parts of the anatomy as well, but a big head. And this is the problem that James is identifying. You know, by all means travel, by all means plan, by all means prosper.

But don't accompany that or don't allow that to be motivated by this proud, bragging, boastful attitude about how successful you are and how wonderful the plans that you have are.

This is the problem that James is addressing. Pride, a proud attitude to life, to the future, to our plans and projects, and long for prosperity. And so, this is, for many of us, if we're honest, our current reality, we are guilty of this proud attitude. And a necessary corollary of this proud attitude is that God is squeezed out of the picture. Now, we can still go to church, maybe even be involved in ministry or service in one way or another, but when it comes to life and to big life decisions. God's opinion is not sought and His will is not followed. So, that's, for many of us, perhaps, our current reality in greater or lesser measure. So, that's the first thing I wanted us to notice. But the second thing I want us to notice about what James says is what he identifies as what we forget, what I'm calling the reality check there in verse 14. Why? You do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You're a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

So, there are two realities that we tend to forget about, is what James is saying. We forget about the future and we forget about ourselves. So, first of all, what is it that we forget about the future?

Well, we forget about the fact that we don't actually own the future. We don't even know what will happen tomorrow. Never mind further down the road. And it's true. We don't know what will happen tomorrow. You don't know what will happen tomorrow. I have no desire to be morbid or callous, but it is sobering to just reflect on how tomorrow can hold for any of us that which we wouldn't have imagined for a moment. How many of those who sadly lost their lives in Genoa just in this past week, how many of them imagined when they woke up that morning that in the course of that day they would tragically plunge to the abyss and into eternity that very day? You see, we don't know what tomorrow holds.

[10:51] And so, so James is saying, you know, you need a reality check. You're thinking about tomorrow and about next year and about the houses you're going to build and the businesses you're going to set up. But remember, the future is not in your hands. I was just reading, I think it was just yesterday, an article in The Independent. It was actually about Tiger Woods, but you'll find it difficult to work out what the connection is with the quote, and I'm not going to bore you with explaining it. But I will just read what it said within that article. And I just quote word for word one paragraph.

from that article. Last year, a study by the Federal Reserve Banks of the United States and Australia discovered that despite the growth of elaborate computer models, statistical analysis and available data, economists' ability to forecast future trends was getting worse, not better. Indeed, economic predictions are no more reliable now than they were a century ago. And then it summarizes the matter in the, in this paragraph regarding the future or rather reading the future. It turns out is a mug's game. See, we don't know. We don't know what tomorrow holds. Even the experts with all their data and all their computer simulation programs can't tell us what is going to happen tomorrow. Nevermind beyond tomorrow. And this is the first humbling reality check for those of us who are proud to be reminded of this reality concerning the future. You have little knowledge and virtually no control of what the future holds.

In the words of Solomon, as we read in Proverbs chapter 27 and the first verse, Do not boast about tomorrow for you do not know what a day may bring forth. So, a reality check regarding the future, but also a reality check regarding ourselves and who we are. James poses this very deep question to his readers. What is your life? Then he gives the answer. You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Now, I think at the outset it's important to stress that what James is highlighting is not the intrinsic value of life, but the transitory nature of life. Your life is of great volume and no greater evidence of that than that the Father gave his only Son to redeem your life. Our lives are of great volume. Let that be very clear. Our life in terms of its volume is not to be equated to mist or a puff of smoke as that word can be translated. But what James is saying is that our life is fleeting.

It's transitory. We're here today and gone tomorrow. And to be brutally honest, many of us, once we are gone, soon forgotten. Here's a wee task for you. All of us here have got four great grandfathers. Now, if you're very brave, you can do this. Well, you don't need to be brave to do this, but part of what I'm going to ask you to do, try and see if you can put a name to your four great grandfathers. So, just their first name. I'll give you like 20 seconds, because if you don't know in the first 20 seconds, you're unlikely to work out if I gave you longer. So, the names of your four great grandfathers.

If you know the four names, this is where you need to be brave, you can raise your hand. I don't, so I'm just, I'm telling you how to raise your hand. I'm sure you know how to raise your hand. Does anybody know the names of their four great grandfathers? Some of you are being just humble. Oh, Cassia, well done. So, anybody else? There's always one smart Alec, isn't there? Yeah.

[14 : 52] Now, you say, well, oh, another one. Well done, Taisa. Oh, Sheila as well. Good. So, we've got three. Okay, very good. So, are we getting the names? Excellent. But, nonetheless, the vast majority of us don't. Now, let's just think. Now, these people were just a few decades ago living and walking and going about their business. Their blood is coursing through your vein. They are significant in your life history, and yet you don't even know their name. You see, we're here today and we're gone tomorrow. That is the reality of human existence. It is fleeting. It is transitory. And this is the second humbling reality check that James brings to the proud and the boastful who are so full of themselves and of their own importance and of all their plans and projects and success.

One of the commentaries I was reading that was addressing this little passage, it was an older commentary, and so the language was rather antiquated, but also quite quaint in its antiquity.

And in answer to the question, what is life? The answer given was, altogether untrustworthy in duration, which is a rather grandiose way of putting it. But that's true. Our lives are altogether untrustworthy in duration. Will they be for another 10 years or 20 years or 30 years or one day or two days or three? We simply don't know. Jesus, of course, tackled head on the folly of failing to grapple with these two realities in his parable of the rich fool that we read. And of course, you remember that the sobering conclusion to that parable, but God said to this man who was planning all his great projects, you fool, this very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself? So these are the things that we forget. This is the reality check that has been brought to our attention. But then thirdly, I want to notice what we ought to say and recognize what I'm describing as an unchanging reality. We see that in verse 15. Instead, you ought to say, if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that. This is the unchanging reality. God is in charge. God is in charge of the future and he is in charge of your own life. Eternity to him is one great present, which in all its length and breadth, with all its events and all their relations to each other, he surveys at a glance without movement or effort. God is eternal. We are transitory.

But he is eternal. The future is in his hands. And the God who knows and determines the end from the beginning is in absolute and gracious control of your life and future, whether it be long or short.

And so it's maybe worth trying to get your plans in sync with his. Now, of course, the mere repetition of these words, if it's the Lord's will, the mere repetition of the words could become nothing more than the mouthing of an empty formula. The issue isn't so much saying the words, though there's a place for verbally expressing this reality. But the core issue is to live in the light of the truth that the words express.

[18 : 27] John Calvin, in commenting on this verse, speaks of how, and he speaks about the apostles, but it could be true of others, the apostles held it as a principle fixed in their minds, this truth. So, even if they weren't forever actually mouthing the words, they held it as a principle fixed in their minds. And that's the challenge for us, that we would hold as a principle fixed in our minds that what is important is God's will and being in sync with his will. That's what we ought to say and recognize, this unchanging reality.

But finally, what we ought to do, forging a new reality or turning over the page to a new reality. Notice what James says in verse 17. Anyone then who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it sins. What do you make of what we've considered so far about what is often true of us, about the way we think and the way we plan? What do you think so far of the reality check that James has brought to our attention? Does it ring true for you? Are you guilty, perhaps quite subtly, of boasting and bragging about tomorrow and living your life and making your plans with little reference to God? What ought you to do? Well, you ought to do the good that you ought to do. It's a bit of a tongue twister there.

Anyone then who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it sins. You need to do, we all need to do the good that we ought to do. Now, what is the connection between this statement, which is, you know, as a standalone statement, one we might be able to say, well, yeah, that's true. That makes sense. That's something we should do. But what's the connection between what James says there in verse 17 with what he has been saying in the previous two or three verses? I think the connection is, or can be understood in this way. James is drawing, in a sense, to a conclusion what he has been saying with a couple of challenges to his readers that find expression in this statement in verse 17. And we could maybe paraphrase what he's saying with a couple of statements that he could say he's directing to us. What he's saying to us, what he's saying to you is, is be honest with yourself. In your busyness, is it the case that you have been leaving much good undone? You see, this is the reality. If somebody's so busy with their travel plans and their business plans and their holiday plans and their retirement plans, that maybe in all of that, you've been leaving undone the good that you ought to do.

And so James is saying, is that true of you? Is there good that you ought to be doing that has been left undone? Because simply there isn't enough time in the day when you've finished with all your other stuff that you're giving importance to. Is it time to rearrange your schedule and start doing the good that you have been leaving undone? But then maybe another connection, connected, another connection with the verses that go before is, James is simply saying this, life is short. So get a move on. You see, life is short. If you spend so much of your life on all these plans and all these great schemes that are legitimate in themselves, but if you do so in a way where that's what dominates, that's the most important thing, well, you're running out of time. If you're thinking, oh no, I'll just get this project out of the way and then I'll serve God. I'll just get this degree finished and then we'll see how we can serve in the church. I'll just, and James is saying, life is short.

You don't know if you'll be here tomorrow. So don't be postponing things for another day, another week, another month until the busyness pass. Rather, take a stop, step back, reassess, take seriously this reality check and say, well, maybe I need to rearrange my life. Maybe I need to rearrange the way I live my life so that I'm able to do the good that I ought to do and that I'm challenged to do in this passage. What is the good that we ought to do? In some ways, it will be different for each of us depending on where God has placed us and the circumstances that we find ourselves in, but there are some common threads. The worship and service of God, the use of your time and gifts and the life and ministry of the congregation that you form a part, the care and attention of loved ones, acts of kindness to those in need, sharing the good news of Jesus with men and women and boys and girls who are without hope and without God in this world. The good that you ought to do. Don't leave it undone. Don't leave it undone. Now, as well as the challenge, we're focusing perhaps on the challenge, but as well as the challenge, James solemnly reminds us of the seriousness of the matter, to leave undone the good that we ought to do. It's not simply an omission. It is to sin against God.

[23 : 56] Anyone then who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it sins. So, what's the deal? What are you going to do with this reality check? God is speaking to you when through James. He says, the very beginning of the passage, now listen. Now listen. And God is saying that to you.

He's saying, listen. Listen to what I have to say to you on this matter. Listen. And as you have been listening, what are you going to do with what you have heard?

How are you going to respond to this reality check that you find in God's Word? Well, I leave that with you. For Martin United had a reality check yesterday, humbled by Wick Academy.

And we'll see how they respond on Wednesday away to Cove Rangers. So, if you needed an opportunity to bounce back, well, it doesn't get better than that, certainly in the context of the Highland League.

So, we'll see how they respond to the reality check. But what about you? How will you respond to this reality check brought to us by God in God's Word? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Word. We thank you that you are a God who speaks to us. And we thank you that you are a God who knows us. You know our failings. You know how we are prone to pride, how we are guilty in one way or another, sometimes oh so subtly to boast and to brag. Maybe not with words that are unpleasant to the ear of others, but in our hearts, boasting and bragging and imagining that we are the captains of our own destiny. And we are the ones who can decide. We are the ones who can determine what tomorrow will hold and what we will do. And help us to see the folly of that. Help us to be reminded of the reality that the future is not in our hands. Help us to be reminded that our very lives are but a mist. We're here today and gone tomorrow. And in the light of that reality, help us to see how necessary and how good it is for us to seek to do your will and that our lives and our plans would be in sync with your will for us. Help us to carefully consider the good that we ought to do that is being left undone.

[26 : 34] We repent of that. We ask your forgiveness for that and pray that we would seriously consider how we can, as of now, begin to do that which we have left undone. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.