

1-1-1938

Sermon Study on Jas. 4:13-17

Theo. Laetsch

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Laetsch, Theo. (1938) "Sermon Study on Jas. 4:13-17," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 9 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol9/iss1/4>

This Homiletical Help is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Sermon Study on Jas. 4, 13—17**Eisenach Epistle for the Sunday after New Year**

While the *Expositor's Greek Testament* states that vv. 13—17 "form an independent section entirely unconnected with what precedes or follows" (p. 462), Dean Plummer in the *Expositor's Bible* very definitely and clearly establishes the connection between our text, the context, and the one thought underlying the entire epistle when he says: "Worldliness and want of humility are the two kindred subjects which form the groundwork of this portion of the epistle. This fourth chapter falls into three main divisions, of which the third and last is before us; and these two subjects underlie all three. In the first the arrogant grasping after the pleasures, honors, and riches of the world, in preference to the love of God, is condemned. In the second the arrogant judging of others in defiance of the divine law of charity is forbidden. In the third arrogant trust in the security of human undertakings, without consideration of God's will, is denounced. The transition from the false confidence which leads men to judge others with a light heart to the false confidence which leads men to account the future as their own is easily made; and thus once more, while we seem to be abruptly passing to a fresh topic, we are really moving quite naturally from one branch of the main subject to another. The assurance which finds plenty of time for censuring others but little or none for censuring self is closely akin to the assurance which counts on having plenty of time for all its schemes, without thought of death or of the divine decrees. This, then, is the subject before us — presumptuous security as to future undertakings. The future is God's, not ours, just as to judge mankind belongs to Him and not to us. Therefore, to think and speak of the future as if we had the power to control it is as presumptuous as to think and speak of our fellow-men as if we had the power to judge them. In both cases we assume a knowledge and an authority which we do not possess." (Vol. VI, p. 618 f.)

V. 13: "Go to now, ye that say, Today or tomorrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain." *Go to now*, or as we would now say, Come! Come, now! In classical Greek this imperative has assumed so completely the force of an interjection that it retains its singular form even when used, as it is here and 5,1, with a plural. It occurs in the New Testament only in the two passages mentioned. *Now* establishes the connection with the preceding context, adding another instance of sinful presumption. *Ye that say*. Who is addressed, the ungodly or the brethren of v. 11, the Christians, to whom the entire epistle is written? If we compare the language of vv. 11. 12 with that of

our passage, we find that vv. 13—17 is no more scathing in its rebuke of a sin quite common among the Christians than vv. 11, 12, directly addressed to the brethren. The sin of arrogant planning is no greater sin than that of arrogant judging; both are in reality incompatible with Christianity, both are a result of leaving God out of consideration, and both are sins besetting also Christians, against which a warning is therefore always in order. While writing this passage, James may have been thinking of the trafficking Jews, the enemies of the Church, though we know that his readers, too, who were believers in Christ, were chiefly, if not exclusively, Jews, chap. 1, 1, and as such especially inclined to the national and racial sins and failings of their people. Nor is this sin of presumptuous planning of business or of any other activity a sin altogether peculiar to Jews, as experience teaches. "The Jews were (and, for that matter, still are) great traders, and no doubt there were merchants enough to whom the apostle's description applied. But this is not a folly restricted to one class or profession. Pleasures and all sorts of occupations are planned just as these traders planned their traveling and trading" (Lenski, *Eisenach Epistle Selections*, p. 175), hence are just as sinful.

Today or tomorrow. Some of the best manuscripts read *and* instead of *or* to indicate that the journey lasts exactly two days, "today to set out, tomorrow to arrive" (*Bible Commentary*). If we read *or*, we see the readers choosing between the days, picking after due deliberation the one appearing most suitable to their plans. In both cases they act as though they were complete masters of time, as though both today and tomorrow were under their full control; they choose one out of two not because one is more uncertain than the other, but because of two certain things one offers better opportunities than the other. *We will go.* The manuscripts are about equally divided between the future indicative and the aorist subjunctive. There is little difference in the meaning. The indicative would be the volitive future, expressing intention and determination, we *will go*, not merely futurity, we *shall go*, whereas the subjunctive expresses, from Homer down, "what the speaker or speakers resolve or insist on, amounting practically to an imperative, let us go." We are going! That settles the matter. They are complete masters of their actions. Nothing can stop them. They have resolved to do something and that means to them that it is going to be done. *Into such a city*, into this city. The τίνδε points out the object. This whole description fits modern business methods. We see men poring over maps of the territory about to be added to their own, carefully weighing the advantages and disadvantages of certain cities, the railroad connections, other transportation facilities, laboring condi-

tions, distances from other important cities, water-power, etc., and finally triumphantly pointing out one city: This is the city! There we will go! They are masters over the various cities; all lie before them as their rightful territory. The world owes them a living. The world is their own. They have only to choose, to select, what to them seems the most important and promising spot, which part of the world, which city, is to be privileged to serve them, to be honored by the establishment of one of their emporiums. *And continue there a year.* And we will do, or, let us do, there a year. To do is used much in the same sense as the English phrase to do time, to spend, to pass a certain time in a certain activity. We will spend a year there. Not only today and tomorrow, but the whole year is at their command and disposal. They are absolute masters of time. Time's chief purpose is to serve their objects and aspirations; it is at their service, even as a slave must obey the will and whims of his master. *And buy and sell, ἐμπορευσόμεθα;* we will go into, toward, go a-trading, open an emporium, a market, a branch office. Cp. chap. 1, 11, the rich man shall "fade away in his ways," in his travels, in his trafficking. Already Calov calls attention to the extensive traveling of the Jews. Aquila, born in Pontus, Acts 18, 1, meets Paul in Corinth, where he had lately come from Italy, 1,200 to 1,500 miles removed from his native state; with Paul he journeys to Ephesus, Acts 18, 18; a few years later he is back at Rome, Rom. 16, 3, and again some eight years later at Ephesus, 2 Tim. 4, 19. Christ speaks of the omnipresent Jew, compassing land and sea, to make one proselyte, Matt. 23, 15, usually combining with this purpose the quest of gain, of making money. The Jew was known, feared, hated, throughout the length and breadth of the Roman Empire as a keen, shrewd, heartless business competitor, a master at obtaining gain, at getting the best of a bargain. Being Jews, the readers of this epistle were in special danger of remaining, or again becoming, like their brethren according to the flesh, from whom they as Christians differed so essentially in spirit. Hence the need of this impressive, forceful warning against presumptuous, arrogant planning, against leaving God out of consideration, against regarding His gifts, His creation, time, opportunity, success, as absolutely within their own power, at their own disposal, to be used by them as they saw fit.

And get gain, καὶ κερδήσομεν. Note again their determination. They will make money, they cannot fail. They are masters and shapers of their destinies, builders of their fortunes, molders of their fame and riches. To get gain, to make money, to profit, to secure dividends, that is their sole object in business, their life-work. That determination does not stop at child labor, at sweat-

shop methods, at looking for loopholes for the purpose of circumventing unfavorable legislation, at non-payment of government taxes, at ruthless suppression of competition, at lockouts, at murder and bloodshed. Dividends must be paid, even if every dollar is tainted with the sweat of underpaid labor and every cent with the blood of overworked women and children, Jas. 5, 1—6. The three conjunctions "separate the different items of the plan, which are rehearsed thus one by one with manifest satisfaction. The speakers gloat over the different steps of the program which they have arranged for themselves." (Plummer, in *Expositor's Bible*.) Is not gain, success, pleasure, rather than God's will very frequently uppermost in our planning for the future? Do not the plans of Christians often ignore the royal law of love and take into consideration only their own interests?

"Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away." V. 14. The Vaticanus omits $\tau\acute{\alpha}$ and $\gamma\acute{\alpha}\rho$, and hence some commentaries connect the two clauses: You do not know what the life of tomorrow will be. The sense is not materially changed. The translation of the English Bible is favored by most manuscripts, and there is no reason to change it. $\text{O}\tau\iota\nu\epsilon\varsigma$ indicates a certain quality, "of such a nature as." Their very nature precludes the possibility of knowing, understanding (*sich auf etwas verstehen*). No matter how carefully man lays his plans, no matter how shrewdly he considers all eventualities, he is of such a nature that he does not understand the things of tomorrow, does not know what sudden changes may arise, what unforeseen events may happen to ruin all his plans. The apostle at once proves his statement. For what, of what sort, kind, is your life? $\text{Z}\omega\eta$ designates the nature, the essence, of life, life as existence. The very nature of the readers' existence makes it impossible to know the things of tomorrow. *It is even a vapor.* According to most manuscripts not $\epsilon\sigma\tau\acute{\iota}\nu$ but $\epsilon\sigma\tau\acute{\epsilon}$, ye are. The second person makes the statement of the apostle much more forcible and to the point. Not only your life, but you yourselves are a vapor, a symbol of all that is weak and transient, easily destroyed. The slightest puff of wind will hasten not only its passing-by, but its end. Aquila translates the "vanity" of Eccl. 1, 1, etc., by the word $\alpha\tau\mu\acute{\iota}\varsigma$, the word used by James in our passage. Like a vapor, man *appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away.* Note the two present participles, very effectively picturing the vapor that is man coming into view, a thin, flimsy vapor; and this coming into view, this appearance, lasts only a short while; after that, even before it can solidify, even before it can possibly change its vaporous nature, that vapor man is already in the

process of disappearing — and then? Gone, vanished, and the place thereof shall know it no more, Ps. 103, 16. What folly for man to plan and prepare for the future as though he were master of it! How necessary is the constant repetition of this well-known truth lest the spirit of mortals become proud, self-content, presumptuous, forgetful of God. For this reason Scripture does not tire in dinning this commonplace in our ears lest we forget, lest we forget. Cp. Job 7, 7; 8, 9; Ps. 39, 4—6; 102, 3, 11; 144, 4.

“For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live and do this or that,” v. 15. The apostle does not mean to say that we are to use the name of God continually, that we are not to speak of any plan without mentioning the name of God, much less that the mere repetition of this formula would be sufficient. That would, as Robertson correctly observes, get to be cant or mere claptrap. (*Practical and Social Aspects of Christianity*, p. 220.) The point is rather that our hearts and minds should be filled with God. God should be the element in whom consciously we live and move and have our being. “The thing that matters is for us to have the right attitude of heart to God, not the chattering of a formula. God does not have to be propitiated by a charm or amulet. God should be the silent partner in all our plans and work, to be consulted, to be followed whenever His will is made known.” (Robertson, *l. c.*, p. 221.) Then it will be quite the natural thing that this mind filled with God finds expression for its thoughts in words similar to those used by the apostle, Matt. 12, 34. Then these words, whether used frequently or rarely, will be the expression of our inmost mind and heart, pleasing to God and man. “Paul frequently spoke of his plans, sometimes mentioning God, as in Acts 18, 21 and 1 Cor. 4, 19; 16, 7, but also with no mention of God in words, as in Acts 19, 21; Rom. 15, 28; 1 Cor. 16, 5. But always Paul felt that his movements were ‘in the Lord,’ as in Phil. 2, 24. He never left God out of his life.” (Robertson, *l. c.*, p. 221 f.) Calov: We should always think of God’s providence and our own mortality. The *Bible Commentary* quotes Stier: “Our calendars give the longest day and the shortest, the fasts and the festivals; but no calendar gives the Last Day.”

The very fact that James speaks of future plans here proves that not every solicitude for the future is prohibited. It is God’s will that we provide and plan for the future; cp. Prov. 6, 6—11; 24, 27, 30 ff.; 30, 25; 31, 15 ff.; the examples of Joseph, Gen. 41, 39 ff.; of Christ, John 6, 12; 13, 29; of the apostles, Acts 11, 29; 23, 17 ff.; 27, 10, 21, 33, 34. “Such solicitude only is forbidden as either hinders us in seeking the kingdom of God, Matt. 6, 33, or has its origin in lack of faith in God, Matt. 6, 30, or instead of following, takes the precedence over, the care for the kingdom of God, Matt. 6, 33,

or finally disregards God's providence and blessing, Jas. 4, 13." (Calov, *Biblia Illustrata*.) In planning for the future, let us not forget God; let us place Him where He belongs, first in our thoughts and first in our plans, Ps. 17, 5; 37, 23; Prov. 16, 1; 20, 24; 21, 31; Jer. 10, 23.

"But now ye rejoice in your boastings. All such rejoicing is evil," v. 16. *But now*; now rather; as things are, however. *Ye rejoice, you glory, in your boastings*. The word *ἀλαζονία* is found only here and 1 John 2, 16. In the Septuagint it is used, e. g., Wisdom of Solomon 5, 8: "What hath pride profited us, and what good hath riches with our vaunting brought us?" 4 Macc. 1, 26; 2, 15 it is used side by side with covetousness, envy, pride, and lust of power, and in 8, 19 it is called destructive. Plutarch informs us that *ἀλάζων* was the term used for such as regard themselves richer and more energetic, possessed of greater initiative, than they are in reality and promise what they cannot fulfil. We may render the word, arrogance, vaunting, presumption, that cock-sureness, that braggadocio, which may become so obnoxious as to be nauseating to the unfortunate victim who cannot rid himself of his tormentor. The term describes the know-it-all, who is constantly speaking of his successes, of his business acumen, his shrewd foresight, his penetrating knowledge of market conditions, to whom the future is an open book, who smiles down every attempt to advise or warn him, for whom the word failure is deleted from the dictionary. The apostle uses the plural, as it is simply impossible for these men to confine their boastings to one time; they are continually swaggering and every time overwhelming one with the multitude of their vauntings. Christians, especially successful Christians, Christians who have met with few reversals, whose life is apparently a series of successes, are often afflicted with this tendency. They look upon themselves as self-made men, and they want every one to know it; they are always ready to give advice, are constantly hatching new plans for the future, always know exactly what is wrong with the congregation, the pastor, the less successful man, the world at large; they are always ready to prescribe their panacea and are sure of results if only their advice will be followed. *All such rejoicing is evil*, says the apostle. Every glorying of this nature is wicked. There is a glorying which is pleasing to God and is demanded by Him; cp. Ps. 56, 5. 11; 59, 17; 92, 5; 115, 1; Is. 4, 25; Jer. 9, 23. 24; Rom. 5, 2. 3; 2 Cor. 12, 5. 9; Gal. 6, 14. But to glory in one's own cock-sureness, in one's own vauntings and arrogances, is wicked, not originating in God but instigated by the Wicked One, Satan. It is a boasting wicked in itself since it is not in keeping with God's will, leaves out of consideration the Ruler of the universe, and puts man in the place of God;

wicked, since it will make man a partner of wicked, boastful, vain-glorious Satan, who ever was, and ever will be, a vaunting spirit, Gen. 3, 4, 5; 1 Chron. 21, 1—4; Job 1, 9—12; 2, 4, 5; Matt. 4, 3, 6. 8, 9. It is a characteristic of the workers of iniquity that they boast themselves, Ps. 94, 4, "cause themselves to talk," because they love to hear themselves talk. Christians, whose flesh is as proud, self-satisfied, and vainglorious as the flesh of the unbeliever, are in danger of yielding to the temptation to let their flesh speak, to glory in their own accomplishments, in their own resourcefulness, and to forget the humility befitting God's children, Ps. 115, 1. They need to be warned time and again not to become guilty of this wicked sin of glorying in their own boastings lest they deny God and say, "Who is the Lord?"

"Therefore to him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin," v. 17. *Therefore*, these things being so, says the apostle, drawing the conclusion from what has been said. Some commentaries refer this verse to either the entire epistle or at least to chapters 3 and 4; others restrict its reference to vv. 13—16. We grant that v. 17 is in keeping with the tenor of the entire epistle, a warning against externalism in religion, words without corresponding deeds, knowledge without adequate action. It is a general truth and may be applied to every preceding admonition, and in fact to every admonition in the Bible. Yet in this very chapter the apostle several times applies a general truth to the specific point under consideration; cp. vv. 5, 12; also 2, 10; 3, 2 a; 5, 8 b. 9 b. 16 b. Moreover, "vv. 13—15 constitute a unit in a marked way. Here a sin of omission is described in a concrete and detailed way." (Lenski, *Eisenach Epistle Selections*, p. 179.) The apostle means to say: You know now what is good. You know that you ought to put your trust entirely in the Lord and not to glory in your own ability. You know that, if you leave God out of your plans, your planning, which may be otherwise perfectly justifiable, and your glorying, which, if it has the proper object, will be pleasing to God, your planning and glorying will become wicked, because you have omitted something the Lord requires besides the mere outward act. Hence it is sin, missing the mark of perfection required by God. And being sin, being evil, the omission of anything demanded by God, the failure to do the least good prescribed in the Law, ought to be scrupulously avoided by Christians, who are begotten of Him, with whom there is no variableness neither shadow of turning, who does only that which is good and constantly does all that is good.

While the apostle in this connection applies this truth to presumptuous planning, we must not forget that it is a general truth, admitting of many applications, a truth taught elsewhere in

Scripture, Matt. 23, 23; 25, 41—45; Luke 19, 20—26. James does not mean to say that ignorance of the Law will excuse the person failing to do the will of God. The *Expositor's Greek Testament* refers to Acts 3, 17 and 1 Tim. 1, 13 as "the converse of this, namely, doing what is wrong in ignorance," and adds, "in which case it is excusable." A closer reading of the passages adduced will show that neither Paul nor Peter regards ignorance as an excuse for sin; but the one speaks of a sin committed in ignorance as a sin to be repented of, the other as something that stamps him as the greatest of sinners. And the sin of those who crucified Christ, though a sin of ignorance, was a sin for which Christ asks for forgiveness on the strength of His suffering and dying for this very sin. There is no "excusable" sin, though there are degrees of wickedness, of guilt, of responsibility, Luke 12, 47; John 9, 41; 13, 17. "Some have suspected a direct reference to Rom. 14, 23. We can scarcely assume so much; but the correspondence is very remarkable, and St. James supplements St. Paul. 'It is sin to doubt whether a thing be right and yet to do it. It is also sin to know that a thing is right and yet to leave it undone.'" (*The Bible Commentary*, on Jas. 4, 17.)

We here read a warning that is in place at all times and under all circumstances; a warning against that spirit of self-satisfaction which rests before it has reached perfection, which is content with having done some good, though that good may be far from being the best within one's power and still farther removed from that ideal required by God; that easy-going Christianity which obeys God in such matters as seem necessary to the Christian, but omits, neglects, thoughtlessly overlooks, other matters, which do not seem so important or which demand more energy, more fervency, a closer attention to details, a stricter adherence to principles offensive to the flesh; a Christianity that praises God on Sunday, that calls upon Him in the day of trouble, but relegates Him into the background in matters pertaining to business, to the affairs of daily life. I could give more, I could and ought to devote more time to reading Scripture, to personal evangelism, to working out my own salvation with fear and trembling, but why exert oneself, why do what others do not do who are regarded as good Christians? Says Robertson: "The good is enemy of the best, and the bad is enemy of the good. Down the steps we go to the bottom of the ladder." (*L. c.*, p. 225.) Onward, upward! 1 Pet. 1, 14—16; Phil. 3, 12—14.

James is not a social reformer, but a preacher of God's Word, Law and Gospel. He is not satisfied with mere social uplift; his object is not to establish an era of good feeling and brotherly relationship within the community, irrespective of its relationship to God and Christ; he is not advancing and advocating a higher

code of business ethics to be enforced by local, national, international chambers of commerce or business associations. His epistle is not addressed to the civic authorities nor to the community at large; he writes to the brethren, who like him have been regenerated by the Gospel, 1, 18, brought to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, 2, 1. These he admonishes to manifest their faith by good works, to prove that their faith is not a dead conviction, a mere intellectual knowledge, a faith of the head and mouth, that it is rather a living faith, enabling them, urging them, constraining them, to do good works, to keep themselves unspotted from the world, its sinful pleasures, customs, and business methods.

Very fittingly this passage has been selected as the Epistle for the Sunday after New Year. The grace of God in Christ Jesus, which stands ready to forgive all our sins, to protect and guide us throughout the year, is a sanctifying grace, Titus 2, 12. Gratitude toward the God of grace must permeate our inmost being, our very thoughts and plannings for the future. At the beginning of the new year we lift our hearts and eyes to our Father in heaven and ask Him, Our Father who art in heaven, let us never forget Thee in our planning; let us ever commit all our ways to Thee; let us ever strive for perfection.—*How shall We Enter the New Year?* Shall we enter it like the vainglorious children of the world? Shall we enter it as children trusting in their heavenly Father?—*The Apostle's New Year Message.* A warning against vainglory; an admonition to humility; an exhortation to perfection.—*Two Dangers Threatening Every Christian:* planning without God; knowledge without deeds.—*Forgetting God in Making our Plans.* That is a common practise; that is foolish; that is sinful.

TH. LAETSCH

