

# The Delusion of Self-Sovereignty

*Series on the Book of James*

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**Bible Text:** James 4:13-17

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Only in second grade and Anna was already believing the delusion of her own sovereignty.

Little Suzie came home from school and said to her mommy, “Mommy, we he to wear party dresses tomorrow.”

Mommy said, “Well, Suzie, is there a party tomorrow?”

She said, “No, mommy. Anna told us that all the girls have to wear party dresses tomorrow and I don’t want to be the only one who is not wearing a party dress.”

Anna, the self appointed queen of the playground already a sovereign in her own eyes.

If you are a parent you have encountered the delusion of self sovereignty. If you are a husband or a wife you have encountered the delusion of self sovereignty. It is a deception that grips us all.

Although this passage was written in its original form to addressing the temptations that were there in the rapid growth of business and economy, many people say, to Hellenistic Palestinian businessmen, this is a passage that is just modern in its field.

I was saying to Phil Ryken earlier that it is as if a pastor was thinking, what are the things I would like to say to my people about the dangers of the philosophy of western culture? This is very apt for us, apt for us as we sit in the heart of this city on the rise, apt for us as we live in western culture, form fit for us as we are influenced by the philosophies and the values that are around us.

What I want to do this evening is break apart this passage for you and talk about the six dangers of self sovereignty. And in a real way those are a very important critique of the culture that we live in. Let me read the verses for you again.

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.<sup>1</sup>

The first words of verse 13:

“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’”<sup>2</sup>

Words said with such self assurance, words said with such authority. Here is the first danger of self sovereignty. It puts me in the center of my universe. That is the inertia of sin. Sin pushes us toward the center of the universe. That is one place where God and God alone is meant to be. Wasn't that exactly the temptation to Adam and Eve? You can be like God. You can have his position. You don't have to live dependently. You don't have to live submissively. You can live in the center of your world.

I think I have shared with you before that for four years of my life I was a kindergarten teacher. I still with the memory of those years. One of the parents in the classroom came one day and said, “I would like to use the classroom for a birthday party for my daughter. Do you mind?”

And I said, “No, that is fine as long as you invite everyone in the classroom that is ok.”

Well, that day about a half hour after classes were over we were invited back into that classroom. It was a bit of a birthday kingdom by then. And we were all sitting around one table and at the end of the table was the position for the birthday girl. And before her were an inordinate pile of gifts. Everybody else sitting around the table had a little zip lock bag of party favors, two Tootsie Rolls, a piece of gum and a plastic whistle that probably wouldn't make it home. The purpose of party favors is to remind you that it is not your party.

Little Johnny at the end of the table got that very quickly and he was directly across from birthday girl and he would hold up his measly bag of party favors in front of his face and then he would look down the table like this and harrumph. Johnny was making quite a scene. He was looking at that and this and didn't like his place in the universe.

Finally a parent, having enough of Johnny's harrumphing walked down, knelt down in front of Johnny and turned his little wooden chair toward her and she waxed theological. She said, “Johnny, listen to me. It is not your party.”

Truer words could not be said of our lives. If I could say this reverently, brothers and sisters, you life, this universe, is not your party. You have been invited to the party of another. And everything in this universe, every gift you have been given, every physical

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<sup>1</sup> James 4:13-17.

<sup>2</sup> James 4:13.

thing you would see is meant to celebrate the existence and the glory of another. And I must always say it is all about you. Everything I have. Everything I am, everywhere I will go, everything I experience, it all is one big sign that points to your existence and your glory.

We have been called to a practical and functional godward life. You have got to recognize that the sin in your heart pulls you in another direction, pulls you towards the center of your universe and you have been called to give everything that is you and yours in the celebration of the glory of another. God and God alone is meant to be at the center of his universe.

Let me read again verse 13.

“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.”<sup>3</sup>

Here is a second danger of self sovereignty. It is suddenly driven by the purposes and pleasures of material acquisition and material profit. Now hear this? It is not wrong to want to be successful. It is not wrong to have things. It is not wrong to make a profit. Hear this, brothers and sisters. It is wrong to have your life shaped and directed by that. It is wrong to have your heart ruled by that. And I want to say tonight as your pastor I am deeply persuaded that one of the huge and weakening temptations for the modern church of the Lord Jesus Christ—and it is here at 10<sup>th</sup> Church as well—is materialism. We live in a culture that says it is all about the here and now. It is all about the size of your pile of stuff. And it is so easy to buy into the bigger and better agenda of western culture that has nothing to do with the spiritual values to which we have been called. And you may be deceived by this temptation because you look at your life and it seems like you are staying inside of God’s boundaries. It seems like you are obeying his law, but in subtle ways growingly your heart is being given away to something other than him, other than his truth, other than his call in your life, other than the agenda of his kingdom.

And I would ask you. What right now is claiming your heart? What is the good life? What are you after? What brings you joy? What are you willing to work hard for? What is the golden dream that you hold in your heart and your mind? Have you been deceived? Perhaps our closets are way fuller than they should be. Perhaps we eat way more than we should. Perhaps we spend way more than we should. Perhaps we live in bigger houses than we should. Perhaps we have been deceived. Perhaps we have bought it that somehow, some way, satisfaction, life, happiness will be found here. It will never be found there.

Now each of us needs to pray. I am serious about this, brothers and sisters. We need to pray for protection from this subtle sin of materialism.

I want to read a quote from John Piper. This is a bit of a radical quote. That is the warning label. “The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison, but apple pie. It is

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<sup>3</sup> James 4:13.

not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but endless nibbling at the table of the world. It is not the x-rated video, but the prime time drivel of triviality that we drink in every night. For all the ill that Satan can do, when God describes what keeps us from the banquet table of his love it is a piece of land, a yoke of oxen and a wife. Don't be offended ladies. The greatest adversary of the love of God is not his enemies—oh, this is very important—but his gifts. And the most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of earth. Now hear this, for when these things replace an appetite for himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable and, because of that, almost incurable.”

What this evening owns your appetite? Does Jesus own your appetite? And because Jesus owns your appetite and you find your identity and meaning and purpose and greatest joys and pleasures in the pleasures that only he can give, you live in light of this world, in relation to this world with open hands. Or is your appetite owned by the things of this world and you live with closed hands grabbing for more and holding on tightly to what you have been given?

Oh, how sad it is in the face of God's love and the glorious gifts he gives us to crave the gift more than the giver.

Look with me at verse 14.

“...yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.”<sup>4</sup>

The third thing, the third danger of self sovereignty is that it denies mystery. When we put ourselves in the center of the world, when we act like we are more in charge of our lives than we actually are, we deny how little we actually know and understand about our own lives. We act like we know much more than we actually know.

Reflect with me, brothers and sisters, how much your own life is a mystery to you. No one in this room could have two decades ago written you into this room this evening. It is not that you just don't know what next year will bring. And it is not maybe that you don't even know what tomorrow will bring. You don't know what the next moment will bring. And, you see, when you act like you know more than you rely on that pseudo wisdom rather than on the sure revelation of the Word of God. Owning your limits, owning mystery drives you to the Word of God because your life is formed not on what you can figure out, but on what God has revealed. You are not there depending on the tea leaves of your own prognosis. You know your prognosis is unreliable. You have been surprised many, many times. And so you find your security in the revealed wisdom of the Word of God. It gives you tracks to run on. It directs you. You are driven there by your humility. You are driven there by the mystery of your own life. You are driven to the wisdom of a sovereign God who knows everything from origin to destiny, who has written your story, who is in control of the plot of the great redemptive story. And his Word reveals to you how to live inside of the plot of the story you will never fully understand.

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<sup>4</sup> James 4:14.

Have you humbly embraced the mystery of your own life? Have you embraced the wonder of it all? Have you ever considered, brothers and sisters, how massively different your life would have been if you would have been born in a slum in New Delhi in northern India or if you had been born in an impoverished village in medieval Europe or if you had been born on a wagon train heading its way out to the pioneer northwest? Imagine how little we actually control of our lives, how small our power is, how wide the mystery is all around us.

Hear this. Biblical rest is deeper than human understanding. Biblical rest is trust in a person, Jehovah almighty, the Lord. I will never fully understand. He is my rest. And because he is my rest, I can live in the middle of mystery and be at rest. In fact, it is wholesome to affirm the mystery. God is everywhere around you.

Stay with me in verse 14.

“What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”<sup>5</sup>

Fourth thing, self sovereignty forgets eternity. I think one of the most dangerous elements of the philosophy of western culture is that it has no eternity. And if there is no eternity, brothers and sisters, the entire ball game is changed. If there is no eternity, perhaps it is about the here and now and perhaps it is about how much comfort and how much power and how much control and how much affluence and how much pleasure and how much self oriented whatever I can acquire, because it is all about now and I don't know how long now will be.

Or maybe I recognize that this present life is like a mist that lifts and soon passes away, but eternity will be for millions and millions and millions and millions of years. This is but a moment of preparation for forever.

Crucial to a biblical way of approaching life is to live every day with forever in view. The commands of the Lord only make sense if you have forever in view. The grace of the Lord only makes sense if you have forever in view. The promises of the Lord only make sense if you have forever in view. The kingdom call of service of the Lord only make sense if you have forever in view. Stewardship only make sense if you have forever in view. Sacrifice only make sense if you have forever in view. Holiness only makes sense if you have forever in view.

It is dangerous to forget forever. And if there is none, then I want all the control I can get so I can acquire all that I can acquire in this life.

Verse 15.

“Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> James 4:15.

Self sovereignty fails to live submissively. Let me say this, that James is not encouraging for us a sort of meaningless Christian catch phrase, sort of if the Lord wills. Now I am not saying to you that is not a wholesome thing to say. I think it is a very wholesome thing to say. I think it is wonderful for you to say that with meaning. I think it is wonderful for your ears to hear it. Parents, it is wonderful for your children to hear that. Brothers and sisters, it is wonderful to give that gift of those words to one another. But listen. What James is actually talking about is an attitude of heart where my life is shaped in all of the situations and locations to which the sovereign God has placed me. My life is shaped by a functional heart felt, lived out submission to the will of the sovereign God. And I am ready to pray those radical words from the Lord's prayer.

“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>7</sup>

Would you pray, fathers, thinking about your families, “Your kingdom come, your will be done in my family as it is in heaven”?

Husbands and wives, would you pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done in my marriage as it is in heaven”?

Workers, would you pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done in my job as it is in heaven.”

Students would you pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done in my studies and my academic life as it is in heaven”?

Would you pray, thinking of your physical body, “Your will be done, your kingdom come in my physical body as it is in heaven”?

Would you submit yourself to the sovereignty of your Lord and Savior and King? Or are you nervous, a little bit anxious because there is a way you would like your world to go and you are not sure that your sovereign Lord is going to deliver?

You see, these words must speak of submission of the heart that is at the center of godliness. It is giving myself with joy and rest to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I love my Lord. And I find rest in his will.

And then, finally, self sovereignty is propelled by a wrong definition of sin.

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.<sup>8</sup>

Do you see? It is not enough to reduce sin, your definition of sin down to a set of externalistic behaviors that you must avoid. Sin in its essence, is a matter of what rules

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 6:10.

<sup>8</sup> James 4:16-17.

and controls your heart. And what could be more sinful than the pride and arrogance of self rule in the face of the sovereign will and sovereign grace of God? What could be more ugly than to own my life as if it is my own when I have been bought by a price? My life no longer belongs to me.

It is possible to think you are inside of God's boundaries when actually you are living way outside of God's boundaries, because you have put yourself in the place where only God can be.

Well, I would ask you this evening. Has your life been touched by these dangers? Have you forgotten who you are, put yourself in God's position, being seduced by the here and now materialism of the surrounding world? Where you live every day do you remember eternity? Are you drawn and motivated by forever? Or is there a pride of life that does not fit with the kingdom call of the Lord?

Well, where do we run this evening? Well, we run to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. He came to do his Father's will. With every word and every thought, with every action and every deed, with every choice, he was utterly and perfectly submissive. He was neither seduced by pride nor materialism. He lived a humble life. He was willing to live without many of the things that we would say are absolute necessities. In his submission he was willing to face cruel rejection, physical torture, injustice, the turning of his Father's back. Hear this, brother and sisters. Every act of his submission was for you, because that submission took him to the cross where he would carry the penalty for your sin. That submission took him to a borrowed tomb where he would conquer death. And so I and you can run to him and say, once again, "We seek your forgiveness. We seek your power. We seek the salvation that could only be found in you, because, again and again, we migrate to a place where only you can be. We find rest in the work that you have done for us."

And we say again this evening we need that work this evening as much as we did the first day we believed.

Let's pray.

*Lord, we are people who are easily entrapped, easily deceived, easily seduced by the phantom glories of our sovereignty and the pleasures of the physical world that will never satisfy. In our pride, we act like we know more than we know. We begin to think we have more power than we have. And of all ... and all of that we end up not only forgetting you, we end up questing for you place. Oh, Lord, please forgive us. We run to the cross of Jesus Christ and seek your forgiveness once more. In Jesus' name. Amen.*