



## Sermon Transcript August 12, 2018

### The Gospel According to James The Spirit of our Age James 4:13-5:6

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on August 12, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

**Sermon Text**  
**James 4:13-5:6**

**4:13** 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>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”<sup>16</sup> As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. **17** So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

**5:1** Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.<sup>2</sup> Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.<sup>6</sup> You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

## Introduction

As I reflect on our passage this morning, I feel as though James is writing these words from a local coffee shop in one of our quaint New England towns. I say that because I feel that these two paragraphs capture the spirit of our age. What might that “spirit” be? Charles Taylor, one of the foremost Christian philosophers of our day, has captured the spirit of our age with phrases like “the autonomous self . . . expressive individualism, self-sufficing individualism . . . the buffered self.”<sup>1</sup>

I remember sitting in philosophy class and being quickly lost in lofty terms like these. So in more simple terms, when we talk about “the autonomous self” we are talking about putting ourselves at the center of the universe. In doing so, not only am I the focus of all I do, I am also the one who determines meaning to what I do. When he talks about the “buffered self” he is talking about what “each of us has [for] realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live one’s own way.”<sup>2</sup> We are “buffered” from conforming to something outside of ourselves like society, previous generations, religion or political authority. It is the spirit captured at the end of that famous poem *Invictus*.

*It matters not how straight the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul.*<sup>3</sup>

Tim Keller suggests that this spirit of the age is captured frequently in popular movies and songs. Consider the advice sung to Maria in *The Sound of Music*.

*Climb every mountain,  
Ford every stream,  
Follow every rainbow,  
'Til you find your dream.*<sup>4</sup>

Keller is not suggesting that it was wrong for Maria to leave the convent and to marry. But he said “the song is an archetype of modern thinking and is now applied almost universally to all situations.”<sup>5</sup> If you doubt that to be the case, consider how many times you have heard the advice to “Look within yourself . . . Listen to your heart . . . Be true to yourself . . . Follow your dreams.”

It is the same spirit of the age captured by Elsa, in Walt Disney’s movie *Frozen*.

*It's time to see what I can do  
To test the limits and break through  
No right, no wrong, no rules for me  
I'm free!*<sup>6</sup>

Charles Taylor observes of the spirit of this age, “Rather than connecting with some source outside of us, with God or some other cosmic Good . . . Now the source we have to connect with us is [not outside us but] deep within us . . . We come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths.”<sup>7</sup> This has ramifications on life and society. No longer does “self-sacrifice” for a higher good or the good of others shape us. Rather, the highest value is now “self-assertion” and our own flourishing. Our culture tends to approach all of life with this as the driving force behind what we do.

There are two sections to our passage this morning and they both begin the same way. James introduces them with the phrase, “*Come now . . .*” James 4:13 reads, “*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.’*” James 5:1 reads, “*Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.*” This abrupt phrase is an invitation to stop and take stock of what has become so much a part of our culture that we may not even see it. McNight says that the phrase “*Come now . . .* is not only arresting, but is forceful enough to put his readers on their heels.”<sup>8</sup> “*Come now . . . Come now. . .*”

In the first section of our passage, James invites us to take in and consider how many people walk through life with a sense of self-sufficiency. They live life as though God does not exist, or is inconsequential, or if God exists, he exists to make them flourish. In other words, God exists for them and not them for God. “*Come now* and consider this. In the second section, James invites us to take in and consider the temptation that comes with wealth and materialism, especially in a world that sees “self” at the center of it. In this kind of culture, our wealth becomes a means to indulge ourselves and as a result others are oppressed. “*Come now* and consider this.”

Before we “consider” these things, I want to ask one question of this passage. Who is James talking to here? It appears to me that James is acting like an Old Testament Prophet and he is speaking to the culture. He is speaking to the person who is living life as though God doesn’t exist. He is speaking to the person who is not aware that someday every injustice committed against our fellow man will be judged. He is speaking to the person who may make light of the fact that all of life is lived in full view of God, to whom we must give an account. He is speaking to the people sitting around

him at the coffee shop who are part of this secular culture—this culture that beats to the drum of the “autonomous self.” Next week, he turns his attention back to the church in James 5:7, “*Be patient, therefore brothers.*” He is encouraging the church to patiently endure the suffering that is systemically part of living in this world that has replaced God with self. It is a world filled with injustice and oppression and next week we will hear James call them to humbly be “a colony of heaven in this country of death.”<sup>9</sup>

And yet, it would be short sighted of us if we came to this passage today and only saw what James had to say to our culture—those outside of the church—gathered around him in that local coffee shop. The truth of the matter is that we are more influenced by the mindset of our culture than we realize. John Starke wrote about the challenge the preacher has in preaching to this secular age. On one hand, he says, that when you preach to your neighbors (as I think James is doing here), you are preaching to a group of people who are skeptical about religious commitment because it “intrudes on their self-sufficiency.” But at the same time, the people in the pew often view their church commitments as “enhancements to their flourishing.” In other words, we even use our religious faith as means to “serve us” and we lose sight of the fact that at the center of our faith is a call to sacrifice and serve God and to serve others. Starke concludes by saying, “This may not be a conscious or explicitly stated condition. But it is the way hearts are formed in the West today, whether or not someone is religious.”<sup>10</sup> So, with that in mind . . . *Come now . . . Come now . . .* pull up a chair next to James—grab a cup of coffee—and let us consider these things.

### **Responding to the Spirit of Self-Sufficiency**

The first thing that James wants us to stop and consider is the foolishness of the spirit of self-sufficiency. To make his point, he refers us to the merchant who says rather confidently, “*Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.*” The problem here is not that the merchant is making plans for the future. Rather, the problem is that the merchant is operating independently of God and acts as though he is in control of time and success. And so, James responds to this merchant by reminding him, “*yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.*” He is reminding the merchant that he has no control over his life.

This really gets to one of the core issues of life. I know it sounds rather simplistic, but it sets the tone as to how you will walk through life. Will you keep before you the distinction between the Creator and the creature? In other words, will you remember that God is God and you are not? This will determine whether or not you live in humble

dependence upon God or foolishly independently of God. It is amazing how easily we blur that line, or try to erase that line and forget how all of life is to be lived in humble dependence of God.

In case you forget why you need to depend on God, James asks, *“What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”* The Bible is full of illustrations like this to describe the transitory and fleeting nature of our lives. In Hosea 13:3 our lives are compared to the morning dew that quickly fades and the chaff on the threshing floor that blows away with the wind and it is like smoke that quickly escapes from the window. That is our life! Who do you think you are? The older you get the more you realize how quickly life passes from one generation to the next. It is completely out of your control and you do not know how many days you have.

And so James brings a corrective to the outlook of the merchant. He says, *“Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’”* If the Lord wills, I will see you tomorrow. If the Lord wills, we will go into town. If the Lord wills, we will conduct our business for the next year. If the Lord wills, we will prosper. This doesn’t mean I shouldn’t plan. It doesn’t mean I don’t need to work hard. But what it means is that while I pass through this thing called life, I do so with humble dependence upon God for everything. Jeremiah 10:23 says, *“I know, O LORD, that the way of human beings is not in their control, that mortals as they walk cannot direct their steps.”* This keeps me from boasting too much in my success. And it also keeps me from getting too anxious in the difficulties of life. In fact, this is what Jesus uses in Matthew 6 to remind us not to get too anxious over the struggles of life. He asks, *“And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?”* So the one constant that is to carry us through life is humble dependence upon God. That is why we daily pray, *“Give us this day our daily bread.”* I am to live every day in dependence upon God.

To live independently of God is utter folly and arrogance. He writes, *“As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.”* This arrogant spirit is the essence of original sin. Bill Muehlenberg writes, *“The essence of the Fall, and of all sin, is personal autonomy – the idea that we do not need God, that we can pretend we can live a life totally apart from God, and that we in fact are the center of the universe. That rejection of reliance upon and complete dependency on God is the height of what sin means – a radical independence of God and his standards.”*<sup>11</sup> R. C. Sproul makes a distinction between freedom and autonomy. We are created with freedom, but not autonomy. He says, *“Full autonomy belongs to God alone. Man’s freedom is within limits. In the Eden situation he enjoys freedom, but it is not unlimited freedom.”*<sup>12</sup>

We stand and we sing our national anthem. What is the climactic part of our national anthem when people begin to cheer? It is when we get to, “O’er the land of the freeeee .....

Keller adds that the “home of the brave” is often drowned out as an afterthought once we have celebrated the main theme of our culture—freedom.<sup>13</sup> What does it mean in our culture to be free? In this post-modern culture it has come to mean that nothing has a rightful claim on us, and we may live as we see fit. Charles Taylor says that our culture is guided by this principle, “everyone should be free to live as they desire as long as they do not harm anyone else.”<sup>14</sup> That is the fallacy of absolute freedom. That is the fallacy when freedom is confused for autonomy. Freedom from God brings harm and ironically leads to unhappiness. Jonathan Haidt did a study on what brings true happiness. He concluded that the way we define freedom is actually corrosive to a culture. He wrote, “An ideology of extreme personal freedom can be dangerous because it encourages people to leave homes, jobs, cities, and marriages in search of personal and professional fulfillment, thereby breaking the relationships that were probably their best hope for such fulfillment.”<sup>15</sup> It is the same thing Tocqueville observed about America’s commitment to individual freedom. He wrote in his book *Democracy in America* that the commitment to individual freedom can grow “cancerous” and undermine the ties of family, neighborhood, and citizenship that it “ironically threatens the survival of freedom itself.”<sup>16</sup> That is because true freedom is not freedom from God.

That is the spirit of our age when it comes to God. It is an arrogant self-dependency—freedom from God—that “buffered self” that simply tells us to look within ourselves to determine our steps. And yet at the end of the day, this arrogant spirit is corrosive and cancerous to the well being of our culture because we were created to enjoy the freedom that comes when we live in dependence upon God.

I am struck by his concluding thought on this matter, “*So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.*” It reminds me that it is easy for us to get caught up in the spirit of this age and adopt the mindset of our culture without realizing it. So first of all make sure you are living in prayerful dependence upon God. Don’t be presumptuous about tomorrow and don’t lose sight that God is God and you are not. But I think there is an even more subtle way the spirit of this age creeps into the practice of our faith. It has to do with how we approach God. Colin Hansen says that the key question for Christians living in this “secular age” is “Does God get to be God?”<sup>17</sup> I think we often approach God on our terms and for what we expect him to do for us. But the opposite of self-dependence is to bow before Jesus as Lord. God is not our cosmic butler. Rather, as Jonathan Edwards put it, “God is about God, not us.”<sup>18</sup> And so Jesus says that if you really want to find your life, you need to lose it. You need to follow Jesus.

## Responding to the Spirit of Self-Indulgence

When I first came to this passage this week, I wondered what the connection was with the passage we just looked at, if there was any connection. Obviously, it begins with the same invitation from James, “*Come now . . .*” But besides this literary device, what brings these two passages together? It is a passage that begins rather abruptly, “*Come now you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.*”

Obviously, it is the rich who are the focus of this passage. Though, money did play a role in the previous passage. It was the “wealthy merchant” who anticipated spending time in a nearby town to turn a profit. Now it is the wealthy farmer at the center of our passage. But the issue is not just the wealth of the farmer. But with wealth comes power and with power often we find corruption and oppression. We read in verse 4, “*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.*” And then he adds, “*You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence.*” It sounds rather contemporary, does it not? Clearly these words could be written from any coffee shop in any of our towns.

So what is the connection with the previous passage? I see the Great Commandment bringing these two passages together. What is the Great Commandment? It is what Jesus said when asked what is the greatest of the commandments. You know it. It is part of our mission statement. Jesus said, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.*” This is the essence of the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments tell us how to love God and the remaining six how to love our neighbor. This is the outline of the Lord’s Prayer. The first three requests tell us how to hallow the name of God and the final three how to love each other. This too is the connection between these two passages.

Self-dependency replaces the love of God with the love of ourselves. When that happens, self-dependency becomes self-indulgence and instead of serving others, we look to others to serve us. What greater example is there of this mindset than how we approach wealth and power and relationships with others. British philosopher, Alain de Botton wrote a book called *Status Anxiety*. That title alone describes the “anxiety” of our culture as we each are trying to climb the ladder of success because ultimately in our culture that climb defines us. He said, “This is the new weight on the soul . . . Success or

failure is now seen as the individual's responsibility alone . . . It puts emphasis on independence and self-reliance. But it also means that society adulates winners and despises losers, showing contempt for weakness."<sup>19</sup> In this kind of a world, individual interests are more important than the interests of others and consequently we approach wealth and money as a means to advance ourselves.

There are a lot of statements about judgment in this passage. The rich are warned to "*weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.*" Like Jesus, James tells them that these riches have a shelf life and these treasures will not last. "*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.*" Perhaps the most vivid of all the statements of judgment is found in verse 5, "*You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.*" Certainly, with wealth comes the temptation to forget God and to become self-reliant. Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 6 to remind the wealthy of this temptation. But it is not money itself that creates this problem. It is the sense of self-sufficiency that often comes with wealth that becomes the root of our self-indulgence. He says in the final verse, "*You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.*" It is a reference to the injustice and the oppression of the poor that emerges in a culture that is self-sufficient and self-indulgent. The issue isn't money. The issue is the spirit of the age and it is on display through the window of our wealth.

The response to all of this is not to look outward or inward to get our cues for life. But rather, we are to look upward. What really matters is God and how I am related to God. And unlike the spirit of the age where individual achievement defines us, we have to come to realize that I can not "achieve" my way to God. It is not my personal performance or my own moral effort that gets me to God. Rather, in order to get to God, I have to trust in someone else other than myself. I have to trust in Jesus who was able to love God and love others the way I am not able—he lived for me—and then he died for me to absorb the judgment of God for me. This is at the heart of our faith. There is no self-reliance when it comes to knowing God. My reliance is in Jesus. And once you remove self-reliance, you remove self-indulgence. Because now life is not about my own advancement. Rather, it is about serving the common good with whatever God has given to me. The issue is not so much about how much God has given me. When it comes to material things, he may give me much or he may give me little. But whatever I am given I am to use it to serve God and to serve others. So Jesus is the antidote to the spirit of our age.

## Conclusion: Come Now

James says to us *come now* . . . and consider these things. While the “spirit of this age” is one of self-dependency and self-indulgence, what spirit is controlling your heart? No doubt, we live in this world and in this secular culture and we can’t escape it. It brings with it difficulties and challenges that are out of our control. And so next week you will hear James encourage the church to faithfully endure through it all.

But let us not forget how easily it is to begin looking like the culture around us. The messages of our culture are sung to us in popular songs and celebrated through movies and books and other forms of media. The philosophical underpinnings of our culture are reinforced in our educational systems and celebrated in our politics. The spirit of the age is in every corner of culture and it is hard not to be impacted by it.

So what can we do? Resist the spirit of self-dependence by living a life of humble dependence upon God. Start by being prayerful. Pray the Lord’s Prayer and don’t presume that you are in control. Remember that God is God and that each day is a gift to be received with gratitude and humility—an opportunity to serve God in all that you do. Keep the gospel in front of you because it trains us to imitate what God has done for us. What is that? He gave himself for us. And so we give ourselves to others. Instead of being self-indulgent—we are self-giving. Instead of self-assertion being the prime motivator of our lives, self-sacrifice becomes the tone of our lives. And God uses us to bless others.

*Come now . . . Come now . . .* Ponder this tomorrow when you step into the coffee shop to get your cup of coffee. The people you see there need to see Jesus through you.

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- <sup>1</sup>Charles Taylor *Sources of the Self* (Boston: Harvard University, 1989)
- <sup>2</sup>Charles Taylor *A Secular Age* (Boston: Belknap Press, 2007) 475
- <sup>3</sup>William Earnest Henley, *Invictus* 1875
- <sup>4</sup>Sung by the mother abbess at the close of the first act of the musical *The Sound of Music* by Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein, 1959
- <sup>5</sup>Tim Keller *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018) 120
- <sup>6</sup>Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez, “Let it Go”
- <sup>7</sup>Charles Taylor *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, ON: Anansi, 1991) 26
- <sup>8</sup>Scot McKnight *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 2011) 368
- <sup>9</sup>Eugene Peterson *A Memoir: The Pastor* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2011) 110
- <sup>10</sup>John Starke “Preaching to the Secular Age” in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* ed. Collin Hansen (TGC, 2017) 42
- <sup>11</sup>Bill Muehlenberg “The Grievous Sin of Autonomy” Blog Post *Culture Watch* <https://billmuehlenberg.com> April 10, 2014
- <sup>12</sup>R, C, Sproul quoted in Muehlenberg
- <sup>13</sup>Keller, 97
- <sup>14</sup>Taylor *A Secular Age*, 484
- <sup>15</sup>Jonathan Haidt *The Happiness Hypothesis: Putting Ancient Wisdom and Philosophy to the Test of Modern Science* (London: Arrow Books, 2006) 133
- <sup>16</sup>Quoted in Keller, 106
- <sup>17</sup>Coling Hansen “Hope in Our Secular Age” in *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* ed. Collin Hansen (TGC, 2017) 6
- <sup>18</sup>Quoted in Hansen
- <sup>19</sup>Alain de Botton *Status Anxiety* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004) 45-72

