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THE PARABLE OF THE TOILET PAPER ROLL  
James 4:13-17

One day while we were visiting friends in Chicago this past August we all took a train from their home in a western suburb into downtown Chicago. We went to do a little sightseeing, but for me part of the fun was the train trip. When Jerry and I were kids, one of the great, exciting highlights of our lives was going on the train to visit our grandparents in Cleveland. We would get on the Santa Fe Chief that would take us from Bakersfield across the country to Chicago, where we would have to change trains. We would catch a New York Central train called The Twentieth Century Limited, which was advertised as the most famous train in the world, that would take us to Cleveland. We did that several times, and for us, it was thrilling. It was a great adventure. In fact, my very earliest memory as a child was of being on a train when I was about 3 years old.

Nostalgia is too weak of a word to describe the feelings I have about trains even to this day. Being in a big train station like Union Station in Chicago, where all the trains are lined up after just arriving or are preparing to leave, the arrival of a train we're going to ride on, stirs up in me powerful feelings of excitement, adventure and some sense, some longing so deep I don't even have a label for it. Curiously, though, as an adult when I ride on the train and go through the big station, it's a bit of a letdown. It turns out to just be a train, a way to get from point A to point B. It's not really romantic or enchanting or exciting at all.

My experience with trains is a reminder of something I strive to keep hidden. Inside, at my core, there is still a little boy who longs for the wonder and adventure that trains once represented for him. There is also a bit of wistful wish that life could fulfill that deep, nameless longing that peeks through occasionally at odd, unexpected times, sparked by any number of nostalgic stimuli. Christmas, for instance, has a very similar effect on me.

All of us have those evocative memories from childhood that are triggered by events, places, smells, sounds, even people, that vary for each of us. Laurie's family went every summer to her grandparents' cabin on Puget Sound near Seattle. She has those powerful nostalgic feelings about that place and the various exciting spots in the woods where she played along with her brothers and cousins. They were magical places they gave names to, like Fairy Land. When we went back there as adults along with our kids and she took us to see these places that were so

exciting for her as a child, she was a bit disappointed. They were just places in the woods no different than anyplace else in the woods. There was nothing magical whatsoever about them.

Unfortunately as an adult life tends to be less full of wonder than it was for us when we were kids. It is mostly routine, as we do many of the same things over and over again without much adventure involved. Don't you wish that life could be more wondrous, more magical, more exciting than it is? Don't you wish that you could finally experience the fulfillment of those longings that we feel, but often cannot even quite identify? Part of the problem for us is that those deep, fleeting longings are God-given. They are actually longing for the kingdom of God. It is only in his eternal kingdom, in the presence of the God who made us and loves us, that those longings will explode into fruition. That is something that we should ever look forward to with eager expectation. But even though we won't experience the total fulfillment of all those longings in this world, life can be more wondrous than it often is for us. In order for that to happen we will have to make a change from the default human thinking about life. We will be pointed toward this change in James 4:13-17.

### OUR LIVES ARE LIKE VAPOR

In the verses prior to this section of James' letter we saw that he took aim at the problem of human pride. In this section that is still center stage, it's just that he looks at it from a different angle. He writes about a different way that pride manifests itself beginning in verse 13.

The way the world does things is to set out a plan and then pursue it, confident in the knowledge that if one has a good plan and executes it diligently that one can make it happen. James depicts someone saying, "I am going to move to LA, start a new business, and have it up and running within a year." James objects, "You proud human, so full of hubris. You don't even know what tomorrow will be like. Your life is like a vapor, a mist that shows up briefly and disappears with a puff of breeze." The image of vapor suggests two things.

First it speaks to the brevity of life. Laurie and I were reading and relaxing on the beach while on vacation. I noticed a cloud up above us. It looked like a rabbit. I pointed this out to Laurie and she agreed. It was cool. This was not just a cloud. It looked like something. It had meaning. Was this a sign? What did it mean? It didn't mean anything. Within minutes the shape morphed into a shapeless mass. And a few minutes later the cloud pretty much dissipated altogether. A cloud is vapor, and often it disappears quickly. And sadly, that's a pretty good description of our

lives. They appear, seem to take on some significance or meaning briefly, but then they disappear.

In Psalm 39:5 David wrote, “You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of years is as nothing before you. Everyone is but a breath, even those who seem secure.” Psalm 102:11 laments, “My days are like the evening shadow; I wither away like grass.” I think the evening shadow is a great image. Very late in the day when the sun is low on the horizon our shadow seems huge. It is such a long shadow, it makes us look like we are really big. But within an hour it disappears completely. The Psalmist says that’s exactly the way we are. We may strut our way in this world thinking and appearing like we are something really big and important, but in the briefest span of days we have shuffled off the stage of this world.

According to the Social Security Administration, if I should live out my expected life span, I have already lived 80% of my life. And worse, I’ve lived the easiest part. I should expect it to get harder from here on out. Laurie likens life to a roll of toilet paper. As you get near the end it seems to run out a lot faster because the roll is a lot smaller. But at least the toilet paper roll doesn’t have its parts break down. It’s not the one staring at buying Depends someday down the road and maybe having to respond to all those invitations you get in the mail to buy hearing aids.

In our bedroom Laurie and I have a picture of the two of us that was taken on our honeymoon. On occasion I look at that picture and think, “where did those two go?” Yes, that was 38 years ago. It was so long ago it was still the 1970’s! It was before Ronald Reagan was elected President, before home computers, before the Internet, before cell phones. But the thing is, it seems like that has gone by way too fast. We had kids, and those kids are now adults who are married and starting to have kids of their own.

Laurie and I baby sat Cara and Ella recently. It took all our energy and attention to handle the two of them. It was a taste of that phase of life that Toby and Anna are in right now. With two kids under the age of two life is so demanding and draining. It is exhausting and confusing because you don’t get enough sleep and you’re never quite sure what’s going on with these two little kids. It feels like it is going to last forever. But now looking back on those days it feels like it lasted seconds. You blink and it’s gone.

I find myself now thinking time is passing way too fast, and I wish I could somehow freeze it, or at least slow it down so I could savor it. But time keeps

rolling by, and if anything it feels like it's speeding up. We're getting closer to the end of the toilet paper roll for sure.

Second, the image of us as vapor depicts the absolute uncertainty of life. Vapor neither knows nor controls what will happen from one moment to the next. Neither do we. We don't have a clue what will happen tomorrow. Laurie and I have had some reminders of that recently that I've told you about. I think about our recent adventure in the Midwest. Before we went on that trip Laurie's brother, Scott, who had lined up a place for us to stay at the home of a friend in his little town of 1300 people in Minnesota, warned us the house was older and had no air conditioning. Plus we would be sleeping in a double bed. We weren't sure we wanted to do that. Another alternative was for us to get a room in a hotel some 20 miles away in the town in Iowa where his daughter's wedding was going to take place. We looked at that and were surprised at the price. We debated about it, but then decided it was silly to spend \$300 just for a bed to sleep in for 2 nights when we could have a free place to stay. It was only for 2 nights. We had no idea what was going to happen. That seemed like a reasonable and wise decision. Had we known it would lead to a close encounter with a bat in our room in the middle of the night and subsequent rabies shots we would have eagerly spent the \$300 for the hotel. Way better than the more than \$2000 that little adventure cost us.

Vapor doesn't control much of anything. It lasts for only a brief time and has little to no power. And James reminds us that is actually part of the human condition. George Washington Vanderbilt II was the grandson of Cornelius Vanderbilt, and heir to the Vanderbilt fortune. He was in Europe and booked passage on a new, luxurious ocean liner for his trip home. However, a friend talked him into not going just yet, so he changed his plans. The ship he had originally bought tickets for was named the Titanic. Yes, life is uncertain indeed.

## OUR LIVES ARE RULED BY GOD

In verse 15 James says when we talk about what we're going to do we should say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." We should always acknowledge that God is the one who rules. God is the one who is in control of what happens. He determines outcomes, so whether we live another day, whether our plans come to fruition or not, is all in his hands.

This is a watershed assertion. Our culture insists that all that exists is the material world, and outcomes are determined totally by a combination of human action and random chance. It claims James' insistence that God not only exists but acts to bring about events is nothing more than childish superstition.

James, though, was adamant about this assertion about the nature of life. He goes on to say that our boasting in our “arrogant schemes” is evil. His point is not merely that boasting is evil, or that our plans themselves are evil. The point is the arrogance of thinking that everything is up to us is what is evil.

It is here that we come to grips with the real significance of these verses. James points out that God’s will is the crucial element in all things. His will determines what will or will not happen. Proverbs 16:4 says, “The Lord works out everything to its proper end, even the wicked for a day of disaster.” Proverbs 16:9 says, “In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.” That is exactly what James was saying. You can make all the plans you want, but God determines what will happen, not you. Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” He even determines the roll of the dice! Hmm, maybe God has it in for me, then, because I always seem to lose at Yahtzee. Just kidding. That Proverb is obviously a proverbial saying intended to remind us that God is in control of everything.

In Daniel 4:35 King Nebuchadnezzar correctly said, “All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He (God) does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’” Ephesians 1:11-12 says, “In him (Christ) we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.” God works out everything according to the purpose of his will. Not just a few things, but everything is controlled by him.

I think often people miss the point of what James is saying here. Did James mean we should not make plans? That wouldn’t make any sense. To do anything in life you have to make a plan and if it involves other people you’re going to have to talk about it. No, James is not condemning planning ahead. A common understanding of this is he’s telling us that when we talk about our plans we always need to tack on, “if the Lord wills.” But surely he means more than that. Just failing to say, “if the Lord wills” doesn’t seem like something so terrible it should be called evil, does it?

James is saying way more than that. He is talking about a mindset, one that is human centered rather than God centered. It is a mindset that leaves God out of the picture. What matters is what people do, what I do, and God is irrelevant. I decide what I shall do in the future and it is totally up to me to determine the outcome. It is pretty much the attitude of our current culture. This is what James says is

arrogant and evil. He is calling on us to put God at the center of life, to acknowledge that he will determine the outcome.

As we were driving through miles and miles of corn and soy bean fields in the Midwest it occurred to me that our urban dominated culture can easily get away from the mindset James is exhorting us about. If you're a farmer there are some things you're going to be clear about. You can do everything right. You can prepare the soil properly, you can buy the best seeds, plant them correctly, fertilize them, keep weeds and pests away, doing it all right. But you don't control whether it rains in the necessary amounts at the right time. You don't control whether some devastating hail storm or tornado comes through and ruins your crop. You don't control if some dreaded plant disease destroys your plants. You actually cannot make those seeds germinate and grow. All of that is in God's hands.

Living in the city, somewhat removed from nature, we tend to become ever more human centered. Everything is about what people do. If we need water there is a human system for delivering it. If we need food we go to the grocery store and buy it. Increasingly we think humans control everything and can make happen whatever needs to happen. All of life is centered on humans and what we do. James calls us back to see that God is at the center of all things, and we forget that at our own peril.

## IMPLICATIONS

### A GOD CENTERED FOCUS IMPACTS OUR MORAL CHOICES

When we put God at the center of life then the central question in life becomes what does God want me to do? How does God instruct me to live and to relate to other people? This becomes the basis for a truly good life, for God tells us to love and serve others, to treat all people with respect, to honor their dignity as a person created in the image of God, to treat them the way we would want to be treated. To live with kindness, patience, integrity, love and gentleness.

Consider the implications when we do not put God at the center. There really is no good rationale for any moral code or for any self sacrifice apart from the presence of God. In a human centered, God-absent society, there can only be a moral code that boils down to "I do what is best for me and whatever I think will serve me."

This has some disturbing implications. All of us have been horrified by the terrible massacre in Las Vegas just a few weeks ago. One truly unsettling aspect of this is the fact that no knows what that man's motive was. We are, by now, all too used to the tragic scene of yet another attack on innocent crowds of people. All of them are

horrifying and evil. But at least with terrorist attacks there is some sort of rationale. It is twisted and obviously evil, but we can understand it. But this horrific attack appears to have been senseless. There is no discernible motive. Sadly, we have seen this happen now at schools, theaters and other innocuous venues on way too many occasions.

When this happens yet again there is the usual knee jerk political response that we must enact gun control laws. That is a discussion worth having, but it is way too shallow. Guns have always proliferated in our nation, but these kinds of senseless massacres of innocent people have not. Something has changed. People are wringing their hands and asking why this is happening repeatedly. The problem with the gun control response is even if you could limit guns you have not solved the problem of why. You haven't addressed the issue that to do what that man did there had to be a terrible black sickness in his heart, and controlling guns can never deal with that. Why is it there, and why does it seem that there are more and more people who have that sickness?

There is no one simple answer to that question. There are a number of factors including the glorification of violence in our media, both the news and entertainment media. But there is a factor that few people are talking about. Philip Rieff was an eminent sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania, a man of Jewish heritage, though not so much faith. He was the leading expert on Sigmund Freud. However, over time as he studied our society his perspectives on things changed. In 2006 he published a book titled *My Life Among The Deathworks* that was an insightful analysis of our culture and where it is going.

Rieff identified two factors at work in our culture that we must pay attention to. He showed how the academic, art and media elites in our society have been, for many decades now, on a dogged campaign on two fronts. One is to remove the sacred from our culture altogether. In other words, to not only not have God be the focus, but to eradicate him completely. The other goes hand in hand with it. The effort to erase God totally has been and continues to be centered on a total assault against the nuclear family.

The effects of these twin attacks are devastating. Removing the sacred removes the restraints from the very worst of human impulses. In fact, it fans the flames of them. It creates an emptiness that fills us with pain, frustration and anger. Furthermore, since the family is the place where we establish a sense of identity, gain security, learn to control ourselves and learn how to love, when the family falls apart the effects are awful. It leaves people with the deepest of wounds, with

an agonizing lack of identity and value, with terrible insecurity, with hearts filled with pain, and when there is pain there is howling anger and bitterness. At some point, maybe at many points, that anger must spill out. Rieff said those elites are subversive agents of destruction and are “better understood as terrorists.”

I recall 3 decades ago preaching a sermon in which I described some of this in detail and said, “the result of all this inevitably will be an increase in violence in our nation, especially senseless violence.” Sadly I am afraid this is what we are seeing, and unless there is a change we should expect it to continue and even increase.

We can all shake our heads at our culture and perhaps miss the more personal implications of this. The point Rieff made is that when a culture removes the sacred, in other words, does not put God at the center of life, the results are devastating. The same is true of our individual lives. Failure to have God and his will be the focal point, the determining factor in all our behavior and choices, will have destructive effects in our lives and the lives of others around us. So we must make God the focal point of every moment of our lives.

#### A GOD CENTERED FOCUS IMPACTS OUR VALUE

Let’s go back to what James said about our lives. They are a vapor. What significance does vapor have? How meaningful is it? It is not significant at all. It has no deeper meaning nor value. It’s just there for a brief period and then it disappears, and no one cares.

That is us when we fail to put God at the center of life. If there is no Creator, then we are, as our cultural elites insist, mere accidents. We are not made in the image of God, we are pure matter, atoms and molecules absolutely no different than an aardvark or a piece of wood. I mentioned last week that while we were on vacation one night along a sidewalk we saw the largest snail I’ve ever seen. What is the meaning of that snail’s life? It has no meaning. When it passes off this mortal coil it will not be mourned.

With no God as the focus that snail and I are much the same. I’m just a little more advanced version of that creature. And I have no more meaning, no more significance than that snail. But the human psyche cannot bear that. Philip Rieff said in his book, *The Crisis of the Officer Class*, “we simply cannot live as if life were meaningless, without purpose.” Humans cannot bear it.



The great news is that with God at the center we have enormous significance. Everything about our lives is filled with meaning. We have a purpose in life and we can live out that purpose in every single thing we do. Laurie recently had a cold, so I pitched in to take care of meals. By which I mean I went one night to The Habit and got us burgers. Actually I did more than that, but it was kind of cool to think as I was driving to that restaurant, “There is meaning in this. I’m doing this to love and serve my beloved wife. By loving my wife I am obeying God and giving him glory.” I could rejoice in fulfilling the purpose for which I am on the planet. As I ordered the teenage gal who took my order was unusually lively and friendly. She seemed to genuinely be enthusiastic about her work. As a way of trying to encourage another human being because that’s what God wants me to do I told her she was a delight to order from, that I really appreciated her cheerfulness and her enthusiasm. She just beamed. I felt good because I was in a small way living out the meaning of my life.

### A GOD CENTERED FOCUS IMPACTS OUR QUALITY OF LIFE

In the introduction to this sermon I made the statement that there is something we can do to make life more full of wonder and even adventure. What we can do, believe it or not, is make God the focal point of everything in our lives.

How does that work? First, for life to really be full of wonder we need to be at peace. If we have to control everything and make it all turn out the way we want, we will never be at peace. Life will always be on edge, threatening to spin out of control and destroy our hopes, maybe even our very existence. I told you recently about a few unsettling moments we had on an airplane recently. When our landing was aborted, it quickly became apparent that there was something wrong with the airplane. It got very quiet inside that plane. People weren't talking much. They were not relaxed and at peace, nor were we. Actually I think one of the reasons many people dread flying is because it is an unavoidably graphic picture of the reality of life. You're trapped in this metal tube with no way out and what happens to you is completely out of your control. You are powerless to keep yourself safe and totally dependent on others. Any hint of possible threat becomes terrifying.

I was thinking about that incident recently and it hit me. Would I have felt any different had Michael been flying that airplane? It would have made all the difference in the world. I have total confidence in Michael. He is one of the best pilots in the world, and he has proven he is able to handle pretty much anything that comes his way. While flying his F18 as a Marine he had one of his two engines flame out on take off, the most vulnerable moment for an airplane. No problem, he calmly gained control of the situation and got that plane safely back on

the ground. On another occasion while flying a single engine jet trainer the engine malfunctioned again on take off. He calmly assessed both the severity of the problem and looked for a place to safely crash land the plane. Again he was able to bring that plane back safely. He talks about these things like I would describe how I drove to the grocery store yesterday. If I knew Michael was flying that plane we were on I would have rested assured that he would get us safely on the ground.

Yes, life is out of our control, and there are more threats than we can count. But if God loves us unconditionally and has limitless power, is in control of all things, and has promised to bring good to us, then we can rest. We can be at peace, for he will make it all come out according to his wise and good plan.

We're going through this dark world, and for us to live the adventure we need to be at peace. With God at the center of it we can rest. We are not alone. Someone is there, looking out for us, taking care of us. Even when we face the final darkness, death itself, we need not fear, for God will be with us then too.

But there is another aspect to how having God at the center impacts the quality of our lives. It makes wonder possible. The fact that God is present changes how we think about our days. It changes our expectations. God is here! God does things we would never expect. He is alive and active in our world. So we can face each day asking, "what are you going to do today, Lord?" We can anticipate him acting in our lives. If we look for him, if we ask him to work, if we make ourselves available to him and tune our ears to his voice, we will see him work. We will find ourselves on an endless adventure full of possibility, because nothing can limit our God.

A few weeks ago I watched about the last half hour of a football game between Clemson and Syracuse. What is interesting about that is I don't have any rooting interest in either one of those teams. Yet I was riveted to the TV as that game wound down to its conclusion. The reason was that at the time Clemson was the number 1 rated team in the nation, the defending national champion, and an odds on favorite to go undefeated all the way to the national championship game. Syracuse was just a so so team. Yet Syracuse was leading in the game! And they went on to pull a dramatic upset. One of the great joys in sports is the unexpected upset. The possibility of it draws us in and grabs our attention.

Our culture tells us we live in this closed system. The most wondrous thing you can have happen is for the divine to pull the upset, to briefly seem to break through into our mostly routine and predictable life to remind us this world is not a closed system. That very possibility, the chance of a divine upset showing up, makes

every moment of life full of possibility and it makes life far more interesting and exciting. God is here and he is at work. If you look for him you will see his hand moving in your world, and there is nothing more thrilling. I can attest to the fact that at a number of moments in my life God has shown up in unexpected ways, and there is nothing more fun. You can look for God to answer prayers, to work in circumstances in cool ways, to set up divine appointments for you, to give you chances to impact the lives of other people in ways large and small. All you need to do is stay open to his voice, to look for the opportunities he provides, to stay available to him, to watch for him at work. And it means that even this day we could see an upset, so life is never boring. This is where wonder can truly be found in our world.

Francois Fenelon said when we seek God we will soon see him everywhere. He went on to write, "Accept what God chooses for you. This is more important than what you choose for yourself...Day by day give yourself to God. He carries you in his arms like a mother carries her child."