

Who Sets the Agenda?

James 4:13-17

If I understand the story correctly, a guy name Hank took a job as a landscape contractor. His first assignment happened to be on a farm outside of town. Well Hank didn't know much about landscaping and he knew even less about farming, but he had his job list from the boss, so he figured he could handle it.

The first task on the job list was to blast out some stumps with dynamite for the farmer. Well, he didn't want to appear to be the rank amateur he knew he was. So he pretended to have a casual kind of nonchalance and expertise. Since the farmer was watching he went to some length to measure out the fuse and set the dynamite - just as if he really knew what he was doing.

But his problem was he really didn't know how much dynamite would be just right to do the job. When he was all set up he breathed a prayer that he had enough dynamite packed under the stump, and yet not too much to blow them all to kingdom come. The moment of truth came. Hank looked at the farmer with a knowing look of what he hoped came across as confidence and pushed down the plunger.

The stump rose high in the air with a resounding boom and arched magnificently over towards his company pickup truck and landed right on the roof of the cab, demolishing it.

The farmer turned to Hank and said "Son - you didn't miss it by much - just a few feet. With a bit more practice you'll be able to land those suckers in the truck bed every time."

Too bad his job list didn't tell him how much dynamite to use. It helps, doesn't it, when the directions are clear? It helps when the details are all spelled out on the task list that we get. If the truth be told, some of us are list people and some of us wouldn't know a list if it hit us in the face. Let's just take the poll: **How many of you are list people?** You know what I mean, don't you? You make lists for everything.

- You have grocery lists.
- You have to do lists.
- Some of us make lists and give them to our spouse. They are called "honey do" lists.
- What they should be called is "Divorce maker" lists.

But some people are list people, I had on professor in college that we called Marty the List Man. Every one of his lectures were lists. The point is that lists and agendas are all just a part of our lives. Whether they are formal and written down or informal and simply worked out in our minds. We all have lists; which are nothing more than mini agendas for our lives. The question I have for you today is: **Who makes up the agenda?** For some we feel that our boss makes up all the agendas. For others we feel that our spouse (or even our kids or our parents) make up all of the agendas. But typically the majority of the agenda is made up *by us*. Can we just admit that? The majority of our agenda is made up by us. "But that," says James, is a recipe for disaster, such is the lesson we find in **James 4:13-17** ... Prayer

For most of us - if we will admit it - our agenda is basically set by us, but our need is to discover how to live by an agenda developed through submission to God. So, let's look at that. Let's look at how to let God set the agenda.

1) I want you to notice the first piece of the puzzle to letting God set your agenda, and that is simply the **rationale for letting God set your agenda.**

Why is it that we should let God be the one who sets the agenda in our lives? Well, James gives us two reasons.

A) The first is this; the **uncertainty of the future.** vs. 13-14 says, "***And now I have a word for you who brashly announce, "Today—at the latest, tomorrow—we're off to such and such a city for the year. We're going to start a business and make a lot of money." You don't know the first thing about tomorrow. You're nothing but a wisp of fog, catching a brief bit of sun before disappearing.***" What is James saying? He is saying, "We have no idea what the future will hold for us", because the future is always uncertain. I look back over the years I have spent as a pastor. If you had asked me when I first started out what I thought would happen to me, what I expected to occur in my future, I would have never even come close to what has happened.

The future is always an uncertainty, says James. We have no idea what is going to happen. I don't think that James is dogging on planning here. I don't think he is being a type B, phlegmatic who says, "Live with no thought for tomorrow, *Sa leve!*" I don't think that's it. I think he is talking about setting your agenda as though you know exactly what is going to happen in the future, and as though that future depends on your agenda.

We don't know the future, Oh we make think we do, but we don't. *Did you know that the British Parliament declared in 1878 that **electric lights** may be "...good enough for our transatlantic friends...but unworthy of the attention of practical or scientific men."*

*Did you know that President Rutherford Hayes said of the **telephone** in 1876, "That's an amazing invention, but who would ever want to use one of them?"*

*Did you know that Darryle Zanuck, head of 20th Century Fox in 1946, suggested **TV** had a very limited future: "People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night."*

*Did you know that in 1977, while serving as president of Digital Equipment Corporation, Ken Olson said, "There is no reason for any individual to have a **computer** in their home."*

James says the future is uncertain. That alone is reason enough to let God set your agenda. Cemeteries are filled with people who never expected to end up there when they did.

B) The other reason for letting God set the agenda is the **fragility of life**. Notice vs. 14: **"You're nothing but a wisp of fog, catching a brief bit of sun before disappearing."** Not only is the future uncertain, but life is unstable. We really are a mist that comes and goes. I had somebody ask me the other day: How many funerals have you performed. I couldn't even guess the number of funerals I have performed, a lot. What's the point? The point is that people die all the time. In fact, anybody want to guess how many people will die in our country in the next year?

- In our county: 4,902
- In our state: 292,193
- In our country: 2,424,605
- In our world: 58,293,000

The point is that life is very fragile, and the future is very uncertain. And that alone is rationale enough for letting God set your agenda.

2) So notice with me now; **the road to letting God set your agenda.**

James then begins to show us how to let God set the agenda in our lives. He gives us three signs along the road:

A) It begins when we **recognize the sovereignty of God**. Notice vs. 15: **Instead, make it a habit to say, "If the Master wills it and we're still alive, we'll do this or that."** The NIV uses the phrase; **"If it is God's will."** God is sovereign and I am not. James says that God has a will, it is a perfect will. Do we believe that God's will is perfect? Do we?

- Do we believe that God's will is; loving?
- Do we believe that God's will is; what is best for us?
- Do we believe that God's will is; going to bring about the maximum joy in our lives?
- Do we believe that following God's will is; going to bring us the best job and the greatest spouse, and the maximum fun, and the sufficient provisions?

Then why don't we live like it? We need to learn that God is sovereign, and that sovereignty is a generous sovereignty. God is not the biggest bully on the block. He is the best parent in the universe. He is the best friend. He is the best benefactor.

The road to letting God set the agenda in our lives always begins with a proper recognition of the sovereignty of God, the generous sovereignty of God. *I read the other day about a man whose only motivation was luck. He believed everything good in life was a result of luck.*

And so he tried to make a living by gambling in the lottery, and one day he actually won. Somebody asked him how he did it.

He said, "I was smart and I was lucky." Pressed for further details, he said, "I like the number 7. I think it's a lucky number. I figured two 7's would be luckier than one, so I multiplied 7 times 7 and put all my money down on number 48 and I won!"

The friend said, "But 7 times 7 is 49, not 48!"

The man replied, "I know, that's the lucky part."

Folks, **do you believe in luck? Or do you believe in the sovereignty of God who holds all things together?** Step number one in getting down the road to letting God set your agenda is to recognize the sovereignty of God.

B) The second is to **realize the humility of planning**. What I mean by that is this: You still make plans, just make them very humbly. Notice vs. 15 again: **"Instead, make it a habit to say, 'If the Master wills it and we're still alive, we'll do this or that.'"** You still make plans. You put your best effort into planning for your future, your family's future, your church's future. You do the work of strategic planning. You dream the dreams, but you humbly make sure that they are God's dreams.

You follow the vision, but you humbly make sure that it is God's vision. You pray about your family: I think our family needs to do this in the coming year; but only if it is your will, God." You make your plans, but then you humbly submit them to God. And by the way, do you know what that means? That means, you don't go **irate** if your plans get altered or cancelled. *I heard about a gun shop owner who faced a woman one day whose plans had been altered a few too many times by her husband.*

She told the shop owner: "I want a small revolver for my husband."

The shop keeper said, "Ok. Did your husband give any indication of the make or the model that he prefers?"

She said, "No, he didn't. He doesn't know yet that I'm going to shoot him."

The point here is that the way we learned to let God set our agenda is that we stay focused on God. We recognize his sovereignty. We hold our plans with humility, and then we stay focused on God.

C) And that really is the third step in the process of letting God set the agenda. **Retain the focus on God**. James tells us that when we fail to let God set the agenda we easily slide over into bragging and boasting - which is simply a way to put the focus on our selves. Notice vs. 16: **"As it is, you are full of your grandiose selves. All such vaunting self-importance is evil."**

When we brag, says James, the focus is on us. When we boast, we do so to make ourselves look better, we attempt to put the focus is on us. And that won't work, says James. Not if you want to get on God's agenda, because I have found that the way to keep yourself on God's agenda, rather than try to get God on your agenda, is to keep the focus on God. That means you praise rather than boast. That means you honor him rather than brag about yourself. Because, James says, boasting and bragging is evil. And evil is definitely something you want to avoid. Oh, how all of us need to take a lesson from James about boasting; about trying to make ourselves look better. *I heard about a major who was promoted to colonel and received a fancy new office. As he entered it for the first time, sitting in the nice new chair, a knock came at the door. He said, "Come in," then quickly picked up the telephone receiver as a corporal walked in.*

"Just a minute," the colonel said to the corporal. "I have to finish this telephone call."

Then the colonel began speaking into the mouthpiece: "Sorry about the interruption, General. Yes, sir, I will take care of that. Yes, I'll call the President after I finish talking with you, General."

The colonel ceremoniously put the telephone down, turned to the corporal, and said, "What can I do for you?"

The corporal replied, "Well, Colonel, I just came in to connect your telephone."

If you want to get on God's agenda - then make sure you let go of all attempts to make yourself look better; all of the boasting, all of the image control, just **let it go**. That is if you want to get on God's agenda.

3) When it comes to living on God's agenda, it begins with the foundation for letting God set the agenda, and it continues with the road for letting God set the agenda; and it ends with; **the result of letting God set your agenda.**

All this talk of letting God set your agenda, leads James to a critical thought. It's a thought that I think we usually miss in this passage. That thought is this: When we set our own agenda, there are all sorts of good things that God intends for us that we miss. According to James, when we miss those, or skip those, or just down right refuse to do those, that actually is sin! James 4:17 says, ***In fact, if you know the right thing to do and don't do it, for you, is evil.*** Again the NIV says ***sins***. How many of us even think about getting up in the morning and praying, "Lord what is on your agenda today?" Maybe we don't do that because we don't want to know the "good" we ought to do. That's possible.

It's possible that the reason we don't pray each morning, "God what is on your agenda for me today, because that's all I want to do." Maybe the reason we don't get up and pray that ways is because we really don't want to know "the good" that we ought to do. More likely, however, we don't do it because of all of the other "things" we plan to do that already occupy our agenda... But in either case, we fail to ever pray: "Lord what is on your agenda today?" Most of us spend our days trying to get God on our agenda. What James is telling us is that we need to spend our days getting on God's agenda.

The result of letting God set the agenda is simply this; freedom from sin. That is the exciting thing here. When I let God set the agenda he leads me in paths that keep me from sin. When I humbly make "God inspired" plans, he puts me on a path that leads to righteousness and keeps me off the road that leads to sin. This is great news. Part of the key to living a life free from the power and the destruction of sin is simply *letting God set the agenda.*

So here's the question: *Who filled out your "to do list" for tomorrow? You or God? As I understand it, just two days before Thanksgiving, an elderly man in California called his son David in New York and said, "I hate to tell you this over the phone, but I'm leaving your mother. Forty-three years of misery is enough."*

The son was shocked and began barraging his father with questions. The old man cut him off and said, "Son, I'm sorry but I just don't have the energy to talk about it anymore. Please call your sister in Chicago and tell her what's happening."

Well, within five minutes the phone rang and it was the daughter. She blurted out, "Dad, don't do anything until I get there! I'm calling David back and we'll both be there by tomorrow night."

The father agreed to his daughter's plan and then hung up the phone. He turned to his wife and said, "Okay, they're coming for Thanksgiving. Now what do you want me to do to get them here for Christmas?"

We are much more controlling about the agendas of our lives than we realize or want to admit, however, if you want to experience the blessings of God; if you want to know freedom from sin. Then get your life on God's agenda. So again, here's the question: **Who will set your agenda tomorrow;** you or God?