

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

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**Event:** Sunday Service

**Series:** James

**Title:** A Christian introduction to presumption.

**Five realities of presumption that every Christian should know.**

1. The confidence of presumption (13)
2. The ignorance of presumption (14)
3. The replacement of presumption (15)
4. The sinfulness of presumption (16)
5. The partner of presumption (17)

Open your Bibles to the letter of James, written for Christians scattered throughout this world.

Last week we were confronted with the question, "Who are you to *judge*?". Today, we are confronted with the question, "Who are you to *boast*?"

READ James 4:13-17.

Verses 13-15 are a specific example of arrogant boasting. Verse 16, though, is the key verse. It exposes "boasting in arrogance", calling "all such boasting" evil. Verse 17 pushes the conviction even deeper in this timeless principle including a whole different kind of sin too.

But the theme of this section is clearly READ v. 16.

"Boasting in your arrogance."—not exactly a flattering description, and yet, the action of it is quite esteemed in our world, isn't it? We consider those who commit the sin of verse 16 to be type A personalities, leadership material, confident, assertive, able to get what they want. It is, in many social circles and according to some psychological theories, what makes the world go round! News headlines and magazine front pages, facebook and twitter feature these kind of men and women.

Now, boasting of *past* accomplishments is one thing; boasting, as these verses speak about, of *future* accomplishments is quite another thing. This is a special kind of sin. It has no basis for boasting.

It betrays self-confidence, not only for *known past* achievements or *known present* pursuits, but self-confidence about the *unknown* future.

In other words, this is boasting about something one is definitely, completely ignorant about.

Oh, it might be boasting that appears vindicated by the cycles of life and established patterns and trends, but in reality, it is still boasting about something one is objectively ignorant about. When it comes to matters about the future, yes, even the next minute, we need to admit ignorance.

In English, we have a great word to describe boasting about something you are ignorant about. It is the word "presumption". It is not an overly common word, and yet it is not a new word either.

Perhaps a simple definition will help us with a little more precise understanding of this word "presumption". "Presumption is *acting as though* something is true."

It might not actually be true, but, for the presumptuous the actual truth is irrelevant, because, even in spite of contrary evidence, there is a strong personal confidence in the supposed truth. Therefore, a presumptuous person acts as though it is certainly true.

Here is an example. When we as children, planned a birthday celebration that would take place before the actual birthday, my grandfather would accuse us, somewhat jokingly, of being presumptuous—we were planning to celebrate something that we had no guarantee of experiencing.

Sure, the celebration on the Saturday might well be followed with the actual birthday the next week, certainly we've done things like this before and could well expect normal life to continue, but his point was nonetheless well made—it is

presumptuous. Now, a birthday celebration might be somewhat inconsequential to the actual birthday date, but the *heart attitude* often is never inconsequential.

We are often all too guilty of not considering exactly how ignorant we are about the future. You do not know what the next second will hold. Just because every previous church service that started, also ended with a song and a benediction, doesn't mean *this* one will. A plane could fall from the sky in ten minutes time, and end it all another way. You might be called out to some emergency. A whole host of different disasters could befall us.

Job, for example, had his entire, and I mean *entire* life altered in a matter of minutes. Joseph also, on a normal supplies trip to his brothers, ended up a slave in Egypt. Peter, zealously defending the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane ended up denying the Lord a few hours later. The earth's population in Noah's day, working and feasting, and then the Flood arrived.

Now, this is not some scare tactic, rather it is an exposé of our presumptuous hearts.

A presumptuous person acts as though something is true, even though he is fully ignorant. Instead of acknowledging his ignorance, and making his plans in pencil, he digs his mental pen deep into his diary, asserting with confidence what he will all accomplish tomorrow.

Here is another way to understand *presumption*—compare it to *assumption*. Assumption is acting as though something is true, *although admitting ignorance*. Presumption is being so self-

confident that something is true that one's ignorance is not even considered.

The one *assumes* a truth, admitting self to be ignorant, the other *presumes* a truth as though an expert, even though equally ignorant.

The difference, in this case then, between assumption and presumption is sin. Assumption makes sensible plans *assuming* that tomorrow will happen, but knowing it might not. Presumption makes fixed plans *presuming* that tomorrow will happen. There is a not-so-subtle difference. The plans might be the same, but the heart is very different.

This is therefore not an argument against planning, or even against planning to be successful, but it is an argument against *presumption*.

Let's read the passage again.

This is a Christian introduction to presumption.

READ James 4:13-17.

Although verse 17 is much broader in application than the other verses, and even know is seems to speak of almost the opposite of presumption, it is connected tightly to this passage with a "so" or "therefore", so we'll include it under the heading of presumption.

We have therefore, five realities of presumption that every Christian should know.

The first reality of presumption that every Christians should know and that I want to introduce you to, is ...

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## THE CONFIDENCE OF PRESUMPTION (13)

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READ verse 13.

This confidence is such a common occurrence in life that if I were to tell you this is sinful, you would find it hard to spot the thing that makes it sinful.

Verse 14 will help us by showing us that the sinful part is what is *missing* from verse 13, namely, *an acknowledgement of our ignorance about the future*.

But besides that, verse 13 is rather common. How many of you have done something like this this past week, be it in business, in your family plans, daily agenda, or plans for when lockdown ends? How about *this morning*? "Later today we will go through our church order of service, spend at least an hour or so on it, sing, pray, and have some fellowship."

There does seem to be a bit of a particular focus here on the wealthy. Wealthy and successful Christians seem to be in James' mind quite frequently in this letter.

READ 1:9-11.

Chapter 2 used the application of wealth and poverty to address the sin of partiality as well as to address the matter of faith without works.

In Chapter 5, our next passage, those who get rich through exploiting the poor are confronted and exposed.

So here too, those who have the means to make lavish plans and, in the ordinary course of life, are able to execute their plans with great success are once again called to attention. "Come now" you who make such confident plans about the future!

This is not a sneaky set-up to condemn all future planning; rather this is a set-up to expose us who plan for the future through self-confidence and self-sufficiency. It is particularly visible in the proud movers and shakers in the business world, but this is probably true for every one of us who ever scheduled anything.

Before we even expose the sinfulness of presumption, we need to realise that it is a lot more common than we might think at first. Verse 13 describes a very ordinary occurrence in this life.

It is the confidence we naturally assume, or more accurately, presume, about the future. We *will* do this and that. We *will* be successful. (By the way, this is one of the big sins behind the "declare it" and "claim it" chants in paganised Christianity today —presumption, ignorant confidence in the future power of our words.)

The confidence of presumption is the rather ordinary, daily confidence that we all have in our average plans.

With all of us cautiously raising our hands to this summons in verse 13, verse 14 makes us rethink our plans a little.

The second reality of presumption that every Christians should know and that I want to introduce you to, is ...

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## THE IGNORANCE OF PRESUMPTION (14)

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"yet you do not know".

READ verse 14.

Life is short. Just like one day you were born, and the previous day you were not, so one day you will be alive, and the next day you won't. It is a bit morbid, but it is not exactly some new revelation. The most shocking part of this verse is not that your life will disappear on your death-day as quickly as it appeared on your birth-day, but rather that "you do not know" it! We ought to know it!

Job 7:7-10:

"Remember that my life is a breath;  
my eye will never again see good.  
The eye of him who sees me will behold me no more;  
while your eyes are on me, I shall be gone.

As the cloud fades and vanishes,  
so he who goes down to Sheol does not come up;  
he returns no more to his house,  
nor does his place know him anymore."

Verse 16 of Job 7: "leave me alone, for my days are a breath".

Psalms 39:4-6:

"O Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; (cf Ps 90:10) let me know how fleeting I am!

Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you.

Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!

Surely a man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;

man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!"

Psalm 144:2 "Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow."

Ecclesiastes 6:12 "man ... lives a few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow"

Or here, in James 4:14 "What is your life? It is a mist that appears and vanishes".

A mist, a vapour! Like mist is missing at nightfall, present at sunrise, and gone by tea-time, so life isn't, then is, and soon is no more.

I grew up in the Highveld where the mist could get so thick that you cannot see five metres in front of you. And there is nothing you can do about it. You cannot even conceive of it ever changing. And yet, in a mere hour, it can be all gone, and you wonder how it could ever have been so thick.

So is life! Life ends abruptly. Just because a twenty-year-old has had 7300 experiences of going to sleep and waking up, doesn't guarantee that the next sleep will be followed with waking up.

The oldest person alive is apparently 118 years old—it appears long compared to the normal 70 or 80 years old, but it is still quite "a little time" in the grand scheme of things, and yes, the day of departure will be as brief as the day of arrival.

This is life common sense, verified as objectively true by a good number of Bible verse. Being Christians, this shouldn't be a "never thought of it that way before" moment. We should not be *ignorant* of the fleeting nature of human existence.

Verse 14, "yet you do not know". But, presumption acts as though one is *not* ignorant. Presumption pretends to be informed and in charge. Presumption acts as though the previous six successful plans are more reliable to predict the future than the previous six thousand years of "life appears and then vanishes".

The *ignorance* of presumption is rather striking. You can boast of your plans for tomorrow all you like, but you have absolutely zero guarantee that you will be alive tomorrow. We make plans, rarely sparing a thought for the possibility of not being around to see the plan take place. Like the foolish successful businessman of Luke chapter 12, you heap upon your successes even bigger plans not knowing that you too could die the same night.

You can think you are fully in charge of tomorrow, but it is all just pretend—you actually have no clue.

If COVID teaches us anything, let it teach us that tomorrow is not guaranteed. Many, in perfectly good health a year ago, died of COVID. Everyone, one way or another, had to change, and even cancel, numerous plans because of sudden national regulations that completely altered that day's tomorrow.

In verse 16 the sin of presumption is called "boasting in arrogance"—boasting in things that you claim to be an expert in, but in reality are *ignorant* of.

No matter how many times you have planned and executed your plans, one day you won't be able to do so, and you have no idea what day that will be. You can plan for tomorrow, assuming it will come, but you can never *presume* upon your planning as though you *know* what tomorrow will bring.

"you do not know what tomorrow will bring."

You might have knowledge of the past, you might have knowledge of your plans, but, "you do not know what tomorrow will bring". You might have guesses, probabilities, aspirations, and hopes about tomorrow, but you do not have *knowledge* about tomorrow.

Presumption acts as though one has verifiable knowledge of tomorrow, but the only thing you can know with certainty about tomorrow is that you are truly ignorant about it. Presumption looks with confidence at the future, but it is an *ignorant* confidence.

You and I, at the very least, should plan saying "I'm *not really sure* what tomorrow will bring, but *I would like* to do this and that."

Following James' somewhat conversational tone, this moves us along to the next lesson.

The next reality of presumption that every Christians should know and that I want to introduce you to, is ...

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## THE REPLACEMENT OF PRESUMPTION (15)

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Just like every other sinful practice, God always gives us the replacement. Up to now presumption has not been called out as a sin—it will in the next verse—but already we know that it is not a good thing.

Presumption is such an ordinary confidence, and evidence of so much ignorance, that God first gives us the replacement before calling it out for the sin that it truly is.

Here is the replacement.

READ verse 15.

Put off arrogant boasting of the future, put on submission to God's will. You see here that the problem of verse 13 isn't the planning, but the ignorant confidence. Here in verse 15, in the replacement, we are still planning to do this and that, but there is a humble submission to the will of God and there is a clear acknowledgement of the brevity of life.

Verse 15 has both the replacement of verse 13, and the replacement of verse 14. The "do this or that" is the same. But the presumptuous will of man in verse 13 is replaced with the will of the Lord, and the ignorance about tomorrow in verse 14 is replaced with the most basic prerequisite for your tomorrow, namely, being alive!

We plan *in submission to God's will*, and we plan *acknowledging the uncertainty of life* for tomorrow.

Just look at the wording of this replacement for presumption. First, "if the Lord wills". This is a familiar Christian phrase.

It is straight from the prayer that our Lord Jesus taught us:

"Our Father in Heaven  
hallowed by your name  
Your kingdom come,  
*Your will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.*"

We confidently pray that! We perhaps even pray in those exact words every day, and yet, we get up and live as though it is our kingdom, not God's, that we asked for, or it is our will to be done, not God's, or we act as though God's will is for heaven, and our will is for earth, and the two never really meet. Instead, we should mean *every* phrase and *every* word of the prayer our Lord Jesus gave us.

"If the Lord wills, and if the Lord's kingdom needs it, and if I here on earth will submit to the Lord's will as the angels in heaven do, then I will do this or that."

You might wonder perhaps if this is literally a phrase that we need to add to our diaries each day! That's not a bad idea!

I don't think adding a set of words is the point here, for these words, like the Lord's prayer, can easily be recited without any real awareness of the significance of such submission. But still, it is not a bad idea!

In 1 Corinthians 4:19 Paul did exactly that! "I will come to you soon", he writes, and adds "if the Lord wills".

Jesus, in his full humanity, did something very similar in the Garden of Gethsemane, didn't he? "Not my will but yours be done" he prayed to the Father.

Perhaps Jesus' example is a good transition for us to the next phrase in our text. You see, Jesus prayed "take this cup from me" acknowledging that his human will would want to live the next day and be in favour with the crowds.

But, Jesus, at least in his humanity, didn't see the sunset the next day, did he? He died that next day.

So here in verse 15, "you ought to say, if the Lord will, *we will live* and do this or that". When last have you added *that* to your plans?? [Casually] "If I am still alive tomorrow, I want to be at work a little earlier before the others who are also still alive come in." "If God wants me to live tomorrow, I'll finish the painting in the bathroom." "If the Lord wills, and I stay alive for it all, I'd like to finish my degree, find a decent job, get married, raise a family, buy this or that, support a missionary, start a business, retire at age sixty."

We presume, not only on our ability to execute our own future plans, but we even presume on *living*! "If the Lord wills, *we will live* and do this or that."

You see, the future planning of "doing this or that" is the same as verse 13. But presuming on the fulfilment of your own plans has been replaced with submission to God's plans, and presuming on the gift of life has been replaced with an acknowledgement that life is like a mist, here for "a little time", "then it vanishes".

The replacement for presumption is to submit your will to God's, and to realise that life is a gift from Him, not a right that you are entitled to.

The fourth reality of presumption that every Christians should know and that I want to introduce you to, is ...

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## THE SINFULNESS OF PRESUMPTION (16)

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Verse 16 is the key verse in this passage.

It is not the hypothetical story-telling of verses 13-14, or the exhortation of verse 15; it is a clear *definition* of presumption and a clear *denunciation* of presumption.

READ verse 16.

This verse is not against all kinds of boasting, there are other verses for that (Jer 9:24). This verse is an exposé of "boasting *in your arrogance*, all *such* boasting is evil". "boasting in arrogance"—that is presumption. All presumption is evil.

It is evil to boast of being an expert on something that you are ignorant of. You agree with that in all other areas of life, don't you? You would fire a guy who got hired because of his loaded CV only to find every qualification was faked and he has no idea what's going on. You would be afraid of a surgeon who claimed to be the best in town but never went to medical school. You would report a teacher who never passed matric. You would argue that it is morally evil for another person to make great boasts of his skills and abilities if he is in reality a complete ignoramus.

You and I do the same when we make plans for tomorrow as though we are experts on the future, and masters in success.

Nobody is an expert on the future, except the Lord.

Proverbs 27:1, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring."

Ecclesiastes 7:14,

"In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him. "

My favourite verse on this reality is earlier in Ecclesiastes, but it ties all of these verses in James together, so I've saved it for the conclusion today.

The point is, you and I are not experts on the future, so let's change the ways we go about our plans for the future.

Also, nobody is a master in success. We have very successful people in this world, but nobody is a master of it. Only God is.

In Deuteronomy 8, Moses warns the people of one day reflecting on their *past* accomplishments and thinking it was all their own successful skills.

Deuteronomy 8:17-18,

"Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.'

You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth"

The same for our *present* activities, Psalm 127:1,

"Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain."

The same is true for our *future* successes as James 4:15 already said "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

All past, present, and future success is because of the Lord.

In other words, no human being is an expert on the future, and no human being is a master on success; only the Lord is. Therefore, it is morally evil to boast in proud planning as though you know the future and how successful you will be.

Verse 16 is really the product of the previous three verses. Verse 13 was about human *confidence* in future plans. Verse 14 was about human *ignorance* about the future. Verse 15 offered the necessary *replacement*. So if you *add* the confidence of verse 13 to the ignorance of verse 14 and remove the replacement of verse 15, then you have verse 16.

"confidence" + "ignorance" without a "replacement" = arrogance.

"confidence" + "ignorance" = arrogance, and *boasting* of such arrogance is evil and needs to be replaced with a godly alternative.

We need to understand the sinfulness of presumption. Presumption is morally evil, because it is a creature boasting of things that belong to the Creator alone.

Presumption is morally evil, because it is a human being arrogantly boasting of something he is truly ignorant about.

As confident as presumption is, it is wrong.

We are too ignorant about the future to place too much confidence in our future plans.

We need to replace our presumption with submission to God's will, and with knowledge of the brevity of life.

We need to see presumption as a sin.

We already have the replacement of it in verse 15, so the topic is wrapped up nicely already, and yet James adds one more verse. We know that verse 17 is connected to this passage, because it is linked with the word "therefore", or "so".

So, the last reality of presumption that every Christians should know and that I want to introduce you to, is ...

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## THE PARTNER OF PRESUMPTION (17)

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READ verse 17.

There are two applications of this verse to our topic on presumption. The first, and superficially more obvious, application is that if you know that it is right to submit your future plans to the will of our Lord, and you still boast in your arrogance about the future, then you are sinning. It is somewhat redundant at this point, but probably worth repeating here.

Christians *know* better.

We *know what is right*. We are *informed* about our ignorance about the future. We *know* the Lord. We *know what the right* way to plan for the future is. Although sinning in ignorance is still sin, sinning with *knowledge* is understandably worse.

So, Christian, since you *know* what the right way is to plan for the future, be sure to do it that right way.

Go to bed each night with the knowledge that "if God's wills, you will live tomorrow." Wake up that new morning with a prayer that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Make your plans, but add some fine print to the effect of "not my will but God's be done." To get you into this mindset, verbally add the words "if the Lord wills" when you speak of your future intentions.

Doing what God forbids is sin, but *not* doing what God commands is also sin. Sins of *omission* are as sinful as sins of *commission*.

But there is another point of application here in verse 17 too. Verse 17 is the opposite of presumption in two key ways. The first is the change from ignorance to knowledge. The second is the change from doing all kinds of things, to failing to do anything.

Presumption is *not* knowing but boasting of *doing*. Verse 17 is "you *do know* the right thing, but *fail* to do so."

Verse 17 is not about presumption, but about *apathy*. Apathy—the sinful partner of evil presumption. We *know*, we just don't lift a finger.

It is the opposite of presumption—not in the sense of the replacement for presumption, but in the sense of the same sin in the opposite way.

The sin of laziness is like that too, right? Some lazy people do nothing, other lazy people are really busy people, but still don't do what is important to fulfil their responsibilities. Same sin, but opposite expressions.

The same here. Presumption is boasting of all you will do even though you are completely ignorant about the future. Apathy is being informed of what the right thing to do is, but throwing up your hands in the air in a hopeless fatalistic "what will be, will be, I'm not expert".

This is also sin. It is evil to act as though you are the master of your fate [Invictus], but it also sin to do nothing when you know very well what you ought to do.

Verse 17 is really the safeguard against going from one evil extreme to another sinful extreme in how you think about living life one day at a time on this earth. We should never presume in arrogance on what we will all do in this life, but we should also never just aimlessly cruise along.

God has given us work to do. We need to excel in what He gives us to do. Yes, always know that tomorrow might not come, or if it does come that the Lord might have a different plan, but, as Ecclesiastes 9:10 says,

"Whatever your hand finds to do, *do it with your might*, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going."

You don't know what tomorrow might bring, but you do know that one day you too will go to Sheol—death. You can't work, or think, or act upon you knowledge and wisdom if you are dead, so make the most of what you get to do while still alive.

Boasting in your ignorance is evil, but apathy in your knowledge is also evil. God has given you responsibilities to fulfil. He might remove you from this world tomorrow and then you no longer

need to fulfil your earthly duties, but as long as you are alive, obey all that God has commanded you.

*You know* that it is right to provide for your family as far as you are able, so get a job, start a business, work hard. *You know* that you need to outdo one another in Christian fellowship and love, so study the one anothers, and make a plan to fulfil them.

*You know* that you are not God, but that He is, so walk humbly before Him in all you do and plan to do.

Tying this all together to the big picture of the book of James, we can say this: True Christians know that life is short. We will therefore no longer boast in ourselves or sit around doing nothing, but will exploit this life for what is good and right.

I've mentioned that there is still a verse in Ecclesiastes that needs to be mentioned.

TURN to Ecclesiastes chapter 3.

(James has many parallels to the teaching of Jesus and to the book of Proverbs, and we certainly cross-referenced both the words of our Lord Jesus and the book of Proverbs today, but these verses are very much infused with many nuggets from the book of Ecclesiastes).

We've already seen a few of the cross references from James to Ecclesiastes, but here I think is what lies at the core of today's text.

Ecclesiastes chapter 3 begins with a poem on about time as this earth experiences it. For example, verse 2, "a time to be born, and a time to die". But look at the commentary after this poem.

READ Eccl 3:10-14.

God has given you things to do. He will make everything work out just fine in His own time. He has made us as eternal beings, but in such a way that we are actually ignorant about tomorrow.

A wise man and woman will therefore perceive that it is good to be happy and do good as long as we are alive, that we should enjoy and excel in what this life offers, for it is God's gift to us.

For only God's will is fixed, and we need to submit to Him.

We know that life is short. We will therefore no longer boast in ourselves or sit around doing nothing, but will exploit this life for what is good and right. That is our duty before God.

Amen