

The Places You'll Go

James 4:13-16

Dr. Seuss once wrote a poem entitled: “The Places You’ll Go” And part of it goes like this:

“You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose.
You’re on your own.
And you know what you know.
And YOU are the guy who’ll decide where to go.”

Like all of Dr. Seuss’ works, this is a cute poem. It tells children that they have potential. They have feet in their shoes that enable them to go places. They have brains in their heads & they “know what they know”. And thus, as time goes on, they’ll be able to decide what to do with their lives. Granted, they’ll need some guidance, but they can figure out a lot of it all on their own.

This is an uplifting and powerful message. You have ability and talent. You can stand on your own 2 feet. You can make your own decisions. You’re not some mindless robot to be programmed. You’re not an animal that can be trained to roll over and play dead. You can think. You can reason. And you can come to your own conclusions.

I agree with all that. And yet... when I first read the poem it made me uneasy. I put in amongst my illustrations of how a person ought NOT to think. And I think what made me uneasy was that it’s terminology seemed eerily like what I’d read in James 4.

Look at what James tells the people of his day James 4:13-16... “Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.”

These folks had brains in their heads (they were businessmen who made money). They had feet in their shoes (they could travel to distant cities). They had a direction they had chosen – they’d made decisions and planned ahead. And they made those decisions because “they knew what they knew” so THEY were the ones to decide what they’d do.

Now, this was a pretty good business plan. They had everything figured out... (pause) Or almost everything.

When were they going to set out to do their business? (“today or tomorrow”)

Where would they do it? (“this or that city”)

How long would they be gone? (“spend a year”)

What were they going to do? (“do business”)
Why? What was their objective? (“to make money”)

It was a decent business plan... but it left one thing out.
What had they left out? (God!) God was nowhere in their plans. And God wasn't happy about this. He condemned what they did as “evil” and “boastful”. God implied that they were proud and arrogant men.

Now, as I was studying this text, something struck me as odd. God condemns these men (in James 4) as proud and boastful, but it didn't seem to me that what they were doing was all that proud or boastful. When I think of a proud/boastful person I visualize someone who goes around saying things like: “Hey, look at me! I'm pretty good” “In fact, I'm so good, I even surprise myself sometimes.” “You don't know how lucky you are to have me around.” “I'm so good that I don't think you folks could hardly survive without me around”

Now, that's a proud person. They might not say these things/ but that's how they come across. You can tell they're proud because they figure you NEED them. They see themselves as indispensable.

I read a cute poem that talked about people like this:

“Sometime, when you're feeling important
Sometime, when your ego's in bloom
Sometime when you take it for granted,
You're the best qualified man in the room.
Sometime when you feel that your going,
would leave an unfillable hole,
Just follow this simple instruction,
and see how it humbles your soul.
Take a bucket and fill it with water
Put your hand in it, up to your wrist.
Pull it out and the hole that's remaining,
is a measure of how you'll be missed.
You may splash all you please when you enter,
You can stir up the water galore,
But stop... and you'll find in a minute
that it looks quite the same as before.
The moral of this quaint example
Is do just the best that you can
Be proud of yourself, but remember,
There is no indispensable man.”

Proud people think of themselves as indispensable. They don't need anyone else – they are self-sufficient. In their every word and action you can tell: They don't need you. They don't need me. And they don't need God.

THESE are the people we think of when Scripture says:
"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." James 4:6 They're so obviously proud and self-centered that this must apply to them.

But now, the thing about pride is that it kind of sneaks up on you. If you were a proud person, you probably wouldn't realize it. Scripture tells us "The heart is deceitful above all things..." Jeremiah 17:9

If I were a proud person, I probably wouldn't realize it. I wouldn't think of myself as being proud. I'm not proud, it's the other guy/girl who's proud – not me.

And these folks in James 4 probably didn't think of themselves as proud and boastful either. They were just self-sufficient. They didn't need anybody else (let alone God) to tell them how to run their business, they could do it all by themselves. They didn't think of themselves as proud – but God said they were.

And frankly, for a while, I had trouble figuring out WHY God called them proud. Then it occurred to me what God was saying.

You see – in their plans – these businessmen didn't even think about God. They were probably religious men (James was, after all, written to the Christians of his day) but "God" was something they did on the weekend. That was church... this is business. When Church was done, they'd put God up on a shelf and they only intended to take Him down when they really needed Him. But – for the most part – they didn't NEED God.

- I. So, here's the first clue that you might be suffering from pride:
 - A. God isn't included in your plans.
 1. You don't ask His opinion when you choose a job, or buy a house, or look for a car, or choose a college, or decide who to marry.
 2. Those are YOUR decisions. You've got brains in your head, you don't need His help.
 3. God is something you do in church on Sunday, but the rest of the week, you put God up on the shelf.
 - B. If that's what you're doing - God probably sees you as being a proud person.
 1. Because a proud man/ woman is one who acts or talks like they don't need others... or God.
 2. They are self-sufficient.
 3. They can get by without your help, or my help... or God's.
 4. The pride and boastfulness of the businessmen in James 4 was shown in the fact that they behaved like they didn't need God.
 - a. They had feet in their shoes.
 - b. They had brains in their heads.
 5. But they acted like God had nothing to do with those blessings.
 6. They've forgotten where those things came from.
 - a. Tell me - did you create your feet?
 - b. Did you create your brain
 - c. Who did? (God did)
 7. Every advantage you and I have in this world ultimately came from God.

- a. Your body is a marvelous creation.
8. Granted, it may have it's quirks and shortcomings, and it might not even function very well all the time, but there isn't a scientist on earth that can reproduce the intricate workings of what God has given you.
9. Do you have feet in your shoes?
10. Do you realize that every time you take a step, you use 200 muscles.
11. Do you have brains in your head?
 - a. Do you realize your brain stores 5xs more information than that Encyclopedia Britannica?
12. We have been created in the image of God.
 - a. We owe everything we are and everything we can be – to Him.

II. And this points to another mark of a proud person:

- A. A proud man is an ungrateful man.
 1. They're rarely if ever satisfied, or happy.
 2. Henry Ward Beecher once said: "A proud man is seldom a grateful man, for he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves."
- B. In one of his parables, Jesus tells the story of a rich farmer who decides to tear down his barns so he can build bigger ones.
 1. And Jesus tells us that "God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'"
 2. And then Jesus tells us "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God." Luke 12:20-21
 3. The rich farmer was a proud man.
 - a. He didn't think he owed anything to God - so why be grateful to Him?
 - b. Why be rich to a God who didn't do anything for him?
- C. And by that standard, a lot of people in our world are proud.
 1. They think that what they have is deserved... and that which they don't have is owed them.
 2. When people approach me about being depressed, I'll often ask them to take a piece of paper and write down 10 things for which they are thankful.
 3. Often they'll have a hard time completing the list. Why? Because, at the heart of their problem was an ungrateful heart. They felt that what they had in life was deserved.
 4. Now, if you were to give most people a tablet of paper and asked them to write down the things in life that frustrate them, things that have gone wrong in their lives, etc. they could fill out the entire tablet and ask for another.

5. Why? Because most of us feel that what we “don’t have” is owed to us. Inherently, we are a proud people and our pride keeps us focused on what we have, and what we don’t have, rather than focusing on the God who gave us all good things to begin with.
- D. The business men in James 4 weren’t grateful men because what they plan is all about THEM.
1. They are going to this or that city.
 2. They are going to spend the year there.
 3. They are going to make money. It was all about them... and God is neither consulted nor thanked.
- E. Dr. Seuss’ poem “The Places You’ll Go”
1. tells us: “You have brains in your head.
 2. You have feet in your shoes.
 3. You can steer yourself any direction you choose.
 4. You’re on your own.
 5. And you know what you know.
 6. And YOU are the guy who’ll decide where to go.”

As I told you earlier, the first time I read this poem, it made me uncomfortable. As I read it the first time I even wondered if Theodore Geisel (Dr. Seuss) believed in God. But then I read that Geisel was a dedicated Christian all his life so I doubt that he deliberately intended to flaunt God’s power.

The poem was probably just what it seems: an childhood story meant to encourage children to believe in themselves and that they should decide where they want to go with their lives.

And that’s a good question to ask this morning: where do you want to go with your life? You have feet in your shoes, and brains in your heads. You know what you know and you can decide where you want to go.

So where do you want to go?

You see, this life isn’t going to last forever. James tells us “...You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” James 4:14 Or as Hebrews tells us “... man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,” Hebrews 9:27

One day, an ambitious university student was talking with a wise older uncle. The uncle realized that his nephew had left God out of his plans and so guided the conversation in this way:

"Joe," the uncle asked, "tell me what you plan to do after you graduate from college."

"Oh, I guess I’ll start my career," said Joe.

"That sounds prudent," said the uncle. "What then?"

"I guess," said Joe, "I’ll get married and have a family."

"That’s wonderful," said the old man. "What then?"

"Well," replied Joe, "I guess I’ll make my fortune."

"Good for you," said the uncle. "What then?"

"Then," said Joe, "I’ll buy a country home and retire."

"That sounds inviting," said the uncle. "What then?"

"Well, I suppose," said Joe, "that one day I’ll die."

"That's true," said the uncle... (pause) "What then?"