

SERMON FOR 23RD JUNE 2013 – JAMES 4 verses 1 – 10

Let me begin by reading James 1 verses 7, 8:

“Those who doubt should not think that they will receive anything from the Lord – they are double minded and unstable in all they do.

From the outset, then, of this letter James is concerned about a condition that he describes as “double minded”. I suppose that double minded could also be translated “half hearted” – and both are dangerous spiritual conditions that we very much need to be aware of and guard against.

James throughout his whole letter is urging the Christians he is writing to live wholeheartedly for God – the overriding concern he has is that HE EXPECTS AN AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN FAITH TO PRODUCE AN AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN LIFE.

That challenge is there in every chapter - and as we have now reached Chapter 4 we have the following questions before us:

- Are we going to be double minded or single minded?
- Are we going to be proud or humble?
- Are we going to be a friend of the world or a friend of God?

Let us then work our way through the first 10 verses of Chapter 4 starting with the opening sentence(this would have been up on power point – but no techie!):

Chapter 4 verse 1:

“What causes fights and quarrels among you” (put up on a slide)

It is a good question – a good question to ask individuals, families, those in the work place, and even nations.

But here James is addressing the Church:

“What causes fights and quarrels among you – the type of quarrels and fights that leads to division and even factions developing?

James does not only ask the question but he also gives us some answers.

There are two – the first being:

“Because of your wrong passions and pleasures” (James 4 verses 1 – 3)

“Don’t they come from the desires (or that could be translated the passions) that battle within you”.

It seems there were power struggles where people were very much trying to get their voice heard and get their particular way in a particular situation. And disagreements and divisions are often the fruit of envy and petty jealousies – is that not true?

What James seems to be saying to us is this – where there is fighting and quarrelling – which is the public problem – there always has to be a private cause. The problem is on the surface – but the cause is always below the surface.

And that cause are the passions that are under the surface – the desires that James says are battling within.

The heart that says “I want what they have got – I want recognition – I want my view to be heard and heeded. If the main desire and passion is “What is in this for me – what about my pleasure and my gratification” and that goes unchecked then inevitably there will be conflict.

Now, I want to say that there are perfectly legitimate and healthy desires that God has planted within us - passion for the right things is a good and Godly thing. The problem comes when our passions are tainted and touched by selfish desire, covetousness and envy – that is what produces sin.

It is the same with pleasure. We can easily think that there is a close connection between pleasures and sin. But let’s be clear – pleasure and obedience can be perfect and totally complimentary partners.

The problem comes when our hearts are drawn to the wrong things for the wrong reasons at the wrong time and in the wrong way. It is not pleasure that is wrong – it is rather what we find pleasure in!

Let’s go back to that opening question:

“What causes quarrels and fights among you – don’t they come from the desires that battle within you”

Remember back in Chapter 3 when James wrote so clearly and challengingly about the tongue and the power of our words.

Where does the problem of boasting, of lying, slander, empty speech, destructive words come from? Is it literally the tongue?

No – it is the heart - for as Jesus also declared:

“Out of the overflow of the mouth the mouth speaks”

Now in Chapter 4 we have the same theme and truth. The source of conflict comes from the desires that battle within – in other words it is the problem of the heart.

It is interesting that the secular and political answer is to say “the problem is out there” – if you change the structures then that is the solution.

That is not the scriptural answer. The scriptural answer is that the problem lies within – it is in the heart – that is what needs to change.

Two famous books – one by RM Ballantine called “Coral Island” – the other written by William Holding called “Lord of the Flies”

Have you heard of those?

Two similar books – but two very different perspectives and outcomes.

Both books are about boys who get stranded on a desert island. “Coral Island” is a great adventure where Jack, Ralph and Peterken battle together against all sorts of opposition – it is perfect harmony among them and at the end they survive and sail happily away.

It was written at the beginning of the 20th Century when there was real belief and deep hope that man could live in perfect harmony.

But then came two world wars and following those came “Lord of the Flies”.

That is the same theme - three British schoolboys land on a desert island – Jack, Ralph and Piggy.

But this time there were power struggles leading to destruction and blood being shed.

What Ballantine set out as a romantic view of human nature, William Golding corrected as realism.

Unless we are realistic about our hearts we will never begin to understand the world we live in.

And unless we acknowledge that for us all it is our hearts that have to change we will never begin the Christian life and we will never recognise that we need help to change and grow.

So, James says that the internal battle of desires has an external manifestation of quarrels, fights and division. Public problems will always have private causes.

Now, I want to say I am not pointing any fingers at you or particular groups here at the Mission. I am immensely grateful for the gentleness and peaceableness among us and the unity that comes out of that.

We need to keep working and praying for that peace and unity and see we all have a part to play in maintaining it. And that must include constantly examining our own hearts and looking at our own inner motives, passions and desires and making sure we are not the source or part of any quarrelling and division. Let us not leave our hearts unchecked or unexamined.

The second reason for the fights and quarrels that James draws out is also related to the heart – we have it in verse 4:

“You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God”

So, here his answer to the question of what causes fights and quarrels among you ...

“Because of your wrong priorities...”

What does he mean by “friendship with the world?”

By the “World” James does not mean this created order in which we live - he is not referring to God’s good creation but rather the thinking and heart attitude that is in rebellion against its creator.

What do you think he means by “friendship with the world” – and why is that enmity with God.

How does it show itself?

(TALK TO YOUR NEIGHBOUR!)

So – what does he mean by “friendship with the world”

I think it means friendship with its standards, ambitions, thinking and values – when these become more appealing than our commitment to the upside down values of the kingdom of God.

James is characteristically clear and blunt.

We cannot be friends with the world – following its trends, desiring its praise and favour, shrinking from its criticism and ridicule – and maintain our friendship with God.

One challenge all Christians have is this – how do we actually discern what is and what is not worldly?

We are told to be in the world but not of the world – but how do we discern if friendship with the world is tasking a grip?

It is not always straight forward or easy – we can get in a muddle as to what is and what is not worldly.

Looking back here is an example.

In Victorian times Christians would never play billiards – what we now call pool. The reason was that billiard tables could, only be found in pubs – and pubs then were regarded as out of bounds for Christians – so the thinking was that it was a worldly thing to play billiards and a sure sign of a divided heart.

I wonder what the people who served here so faithfully a hundred years ago would make of the fact we have a room dedicated to pool!

In the 1950's Christians had long debates over, other things, woman wearing trousers or lipstick or jewellery. Going to either the cinema or the theatre was regarded as a wrong and worldly thing to do.

That – for whatever reason – has all changed now!

But the points is - surely – that worldliness is much more subtle than any of these issues.

It is possible never to go to the cinema, theatre, watch television – never wear makeup and have jewellery yet be very worldly.

Because worldliness is not about something outward but what is on the inside – it is a heart issue. What is my heart devoted to?

Shouldn't we assess how worldly we may be becoming by looking At these things?

What about my use of time? My use of money? My hopes and ambitions for the future – what moulds and drives those?

How significant to me are my possessions, my position in the pecking order wherever that may be, and what are my priorities.

How we honestly answer these things is a real indicator as to whether friendship with world has replaced devotion to the Lord?

How seriously should we take this?

Well, look at what James says – and this is to people in the Church!

“You adulterous people”

That is strong language! We certainly would take adultery seriously if it was happening in the Church. Yet James is indicating that those who are embracing the attitudes and thinking of the world are “adulterous people”.

I think the original hearers of this letter would have got the point. Being mainly Jewish converts they were very familiar with this kind of language in the Old Testament. The prophets certainly did not mince their words with those who went after the other gods and idols of the surrounding nations.

Here now in the New Testament being an adulterous people is given another perspective – it is when friendship with God is replaced by friendship with the world. So we must take this very seriously.

So – after asking the question “What causes fights and quarrels among you” James goes on to highlight first the passions that fight within us and then those priorities that are more moulded by the world than by the word of God.

At this juncture – we need to ask a question:

“Ok James – you have made the problem very clear.

But can you give us a cure?

Is there hope for us in these battles with our own passions and desires and also the pull of the world with all its attractions?”

James does gives us hope! Where does it begin?

Verse 6 – “But He gives us more grace. This is why scripture says “God opposes the proud – but shows favour to the humble and the oppressed”

It is so encouraging how that begins – “but He gives us more grace.”

Don't despair – when we need it – He gives us more grace – certainly He gives us enough grace.

Is that for everyone and anyone?

Well, yes – but there is a condition.

Can you see it there?

It is given to those who are humble – who acknowledge that they do need it... But the proud, the self-reliant –

those whose confidence is totally in themselves – they will not acknowledge that they need God’s grace and therefore will not receive it.

So – it begins with us simply saying “God – I do need your help – I do need your grace”

Following that we have verses 7- 10 (Read them)

What I find striking about these verses is this.

God does give us more grace and favour and forgiveness.

But aside from acknowledging we do need it – we have our part to play – there are things that we have to be active and intentional about.

Which are, according to James:

SUBMIT YOURSELF TO GOD – bring your heart back under God’s rule and come willingly under his authority.

RESIST THE DEVIL – we won’t stop being friends with this world unless we learn to resist the prince of this world. We are to resist His temptations and deceptions – and we are given the promise that he will flee from us.

COME NEAR TO GOD – and the promise is that we come in submission and humility he will draw near to us. And if you feel you have wandered off too far the truth is that you haven’t. He will not give us what our sins deserve but will welcome us back and draw near to us.

PURIFY YOUR HEARTS, GRIEVE, MOURN AND WAIL – there is a place for tears of repentance. Are we ever grieved at how we have treated God and others – are we serious about dealing with those things in our lives that spoil our relationship with God and others.

Finally...

Humble yourself before God – admit our need and ask for that help.

And when we do that –what is the promise?

He will lift you up.”

So – submit, come near, resist, mourn and grieve, humble yourselves.

Only we can do those things – God won’t do these things for us will He.

But God is active when we are humble before Him – He does promise us grace – He comes alongside us – He is gracious to us – He strengthens us – He is able to lift us up.

See how James underlines how our Christian walk involves two things that must go together:

The Grace God supplies which we must receive.

The commands God gives which we must obey.

In other words -God works as we work!

Back to verse 1:

“What causes fights and quarrels among you”?

When fights and quarrels happen – which they will – let us not accept it but let us be committed – with God’s help, grace and guidance to get it sorted out.

Remember that our aim must be to love one another in the same measure that God has shown us through Christ – unconditional – without boundaries – non-exclusive.

Let’s make this our hearts goal and our deepest desire – and let us continually draw on God’s grace as we do this together.

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS

1. “What causes fights and quarrels among you” (James 4 verse 1)
In your experience (at home, work, wherever!) how would you answer that in just one sentence!
2. James turns his focus upon the church – and he says that the public problem of fighting and quarrelling always has a private cause.
What is below the surface that causes the problems?
3. When it comes to desires (or passions) what are good and healthy and what are bad and destructive? (give examples)

4. What do you understand by the phrase "Friendship with the World"
Why does James describe it as "enmity with God"
5. How should we discern what is, and what is not, worldly?
What are the signs and symptoms that friendship with the world is taking a grip?
6. In verses 6- 10 we have the cure for conflicts and divisions.
We have the promise that God will give us more grace and that He will lift us up.
We are also told of our part (Submit – come near – resist – mourn and grieve humble yourselves).
Would you agree with the phrase "God works as we work"?