

Text: James 4:1-10

Sunday 23rd February 2020

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

When my wife and I lived in Edinburgh, we had at that time a group of friends who were studying medicine and so from time to time Gill or I would be asked to help these medics prepare for their examination tests. This would usually involve us pretending to be a patient who had come in and needed examining and diagnosing. Thankfully it didn't require anything invasive or something that would give me the shivers (because I'm not good with medical stuff), but the process helped them learn a structured way to identify symptoms, discern the underlying situation, and finally consider a solution.

In his letter to these scattered congregations, James has again and again been like a doctor – highlighting the signs, diagnosing the situation and offering solutions. In many ways his earlier material has been building to this portion of the letter; as someone needing to share some bad news, he has been gentle and affirming, often calling them “brothers and sisters”, but at the same time, James has wisely not dodged the issues either. Along the way, the good doctor has hinted at the underlying issues, building to our passage this morning, because today the good doctor has to break the hardest of news and once more, he begins with signs that something is wrong.

James writes: ‘What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You

covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.’ (James 4:1-3)

Here, James highlights horizontal signs and vertical signs that there is a deeper problem. On a horizontal level, James sees the disharmony within these scattered congregations, he sees fellow Christians fighting and quarrelling with one another. James even goes as far as to say that they ‘kill’ one another. There is precedent to suggest he could literally mean murder. But equally, the adultery that James speaks of in verse 4 is metaphorical, so it is also feasible that James is not being literal. As his brother and Lord had said: ‘You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “You shall not murder, and anyone

who murders will be subject to judgment.” But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment...’ (Matthew 5:21-22)

Whether James is being literal or figurative, there are horizontal signs that something is deeply wrong within all these congregations. As one commentator wrote: ‘it is a depressing commentary on church life that James can write to a scattered people (1:1) and make the same general comment on all alike.’ Similarly, one philosopher said: ‘I have often wondered that persons who make boast of professing the Christian religion – namely love, joy, peace, temperance, and charity to all men – should quarrel with such rancorous animosity, and display daily towards one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than the virtues which they profess, is the readiest criteria of their faith.’ (17th century Jewish philosopher Spinoza)

So, let me pause here, and ask: are there fights and quarrels between us here at Brightons? It would be naïve to assume there aren't some issues – after all, James says that they arise because of the 'desires that battle within you' (4:1) – and all of us have desires. These desires that James speaks of are not necessarily bad desires, the word is neutral in the Greek. But, when coupled with our messed up, self-focused, sinful nature, these desires get twisted and it leads to the kind of things James has written about: self-interest, unhealthy words, false wisdom leading to cliques and disunity.

So, do we have underlying issues here at Brightons? We may appear to be well on the surface, even healthy, but is there anything going on underneath? Are we allowing anything to fester?...

What are the things that we are allowing to create distance between ourselves? James says that the horizontal sign of disunity may point to something unhealthy underneath.

But James also, in these early verses, speaks of a vertical sign of a deeper problem. He wrote: ‘...You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.’ (James 4:2-3)

Clearly, James is speaking about prayer, and what he is saying is that our twisted natures even impact our spiritual lives. Prayer could and should be a solution to receiving the desires of our hearts, as the Psalmist reminds us (Psalm 37:4), but even when these Christians do pray,...

their prayers are going unanswered because they ask it with wrong motives, our sinful nature twists those desires into something that is all about ourselves and as such the answer from heaven is 'no' or 'not yet'.

We know from the Lord's Prayer what **to pray:**

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

(Matthew 6:9-10)

Our prayers are to have a focus on God's name, on God's kingdom and His will, such that the motives for prayer and the things we ask for corporately in prayer, should seek the glorifying of God's name and the extension of His kingdom upon the earth.

So, again, let's pause and ask: where are our corporate prayers not being answered? Now, James is not giving a fully worked out reason for unanswered prayer, so please, please, if you are in a hard place at present and you are not seeing answer to prayer, do not automatically assume it is due to you asking for things out of wrong motives. James is simply highlighting that alongside very unhealthy dynamics within these congregations, they are also not seeing answered prayer as a gathering of God's people. An example might help.

By and large, most congregations in the Church of Scotland are praying something like: "Lord, we long to see children and families back amongst our congregations." On the surface, a very reasonable prayer; on the surface, surely a prayer God would want to answer, yes?

But are we asking this with unmixed motives? How much is that prayer being asked because we want to feel successful and healthy; or that we hope for our congregation or denomination to have a future; or simply because the place is less full than it used to be? But does God care about any of that? I know God cares for families coming to faith and finding life in all its fullness through Jesus, but I'm not sure I see anything in Scripture which supports those other prayer motives. So, maybe we don't see answers to our corporate prayers because we're asking them with wrong motives, we're not necessarily asking them for the sake of God's name and Kingdom.

James, the good doctor, has identified two signs, so now he breaks the bad news, now he brings the situation **out into the light: 'You adulterous people, don't you know**

that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?’ (James 4:4-5)

The situation that James highlights is a grievous disloyalty. Drawing upon the language of Scripture, which describes God’s people as His bride, James says their behaviour and twisted motives are adultery and friendship with the world. This temptation has always lurked at the door for the people of God and so God often sent prophets to His people, **such as Jeremiah:**

“...like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me,’ declares the Lord.” (Jeremiah 3:20)

Like Jeremiah, James is warning these congregations that their flirtation with the world has consequences on their relationship with God and that God has no wish to settle for such disloyalty. As verse 5 reminds us, God loves with a jealous love, His desire is for His people to be wholly and unreservedly His.

Often, we think of jealousy as wrong, and for human beings it often is for it leads to the fights and quarrels that James mentions. But with God, who is perfect in nature, His jealousy does not stem from insecurity or selfishness. God's jealousy is a secure jealousy, which seeks what is best for you and I by guarding our hearts from disloyalty. He is jealous for the affections of our hearts for we are the bride of Christ. He wants us to run from the things that lure us away from Jesus, and one of those things is friendship with the world.

Now, to our ears, this sounds a bit extreme or a bit odd. But we need to remember that friendship in James' day meant identifying with their standards and priorities. Friendship was a life-long pact between people, people with shared values and loyalties, and James is simply saying that such friendship with the world is incompatible for Christians.

He's not alone in saying this, Paul said much the same, John too, and it was **Jesus who said, 'Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.' (Mt. 10:37)**

From James to Jesus, the point is not that it is wrong to love others, because Jesus clearly taught us to love our neighbour...

The point, however, is about who and what has the ultimate authority in our lives – is it God and His Kingdom values, or is it the values of the world? James has been trying to make the point throughout his letter that there are substantial differences between the values of the world and the values of God: instead of favouritism of self, sacrificial love is the way of God's Kingdom; instead of religion in words only, we're expected to partner in God's Kingdom purposes; instead of words that lead to death, we are to speak life.

Doctor James has diagnosed that the reason for the disorder and fractiousness within these congregations, is that at heart they have aligned themselves with the values of the world, rather than the values of God. They have acted in an adulterous manner, they have been grievously disloyal.

Now, it's unlikely these congregations were aware of the issue, it's unlikely they consciously choose to disown God and follow the world; more likely they identified as Christians and yet they got sucked into a dubious way of life.

And that's a bit of a scary thought: that genuine "brothers and sisters" in Christ, have the potential of to twist our desires so selfishly that we end up committing a grievous disloyalty towards God, we end up grieving God and arousing His jealousy, because we turn our backs upon God, even unconsciously.

I wonder, friends, does this make us stop and take stock? In the areas where we have disagreement, in the ways that our desires are not being met, in our unanswered prayers,...

is there the possibility that these things are happening because we do not have the priorities of God? And as such, are we then grieving God? It's a scary thought, it's a thought should make us sit up and take stock: are we showing grievous disloyalty to God?

James writes this way, not only because it's true, but to help his readers wake up, rub the sleep from their eyes and take a long hard look in the mirror. Yet he doesn't leave them there, **for in verses 6 to 10, James shares with them his solution, the doctor proscribes the medicine, which is a grace-fuelled loyalty.**

He begins by quoting from Proverbs, that God shows favour, His grace, to the humble. The point James takes from the Scripture, is that those who will humble themselves,...

those who can face up to the truth, God will come close and raise them up with His grace. And so, James says, ‘but he [God] give us more grace.’ (James 6:1)

One commentator wrote: “What comfort there is in this verse! It tells us that God is tirelessly on our side. He never falters in respect of our needs, he always has more grace at hand for us. He is never less than sufficient, he always has more and yet more to give. Whatever we may forfeit when we put self first...there is always more grace. No matter what we do to him, he is never beaten....His resources are never at an end, his patience is never exhausted, his initiative never stops, his generosity knows no limit: he gives more grace.” (Motyer, *James*)

He gives more grace. To a bunch of infighting, self-centred proud Christians, God is waiting with more grace. **But to receive that grace, as the Proverb says, we must humble ourselves – or as James puts it: ‘Submit yourselves, then, to God...Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.’ (James 4:7, 10)**

James is calling for fresh loyalty to God, borne out humility and fuelled by grace. This loyalty to God includes: resisting the devil (v7) and coming near to God in repentance (v8-9).

We probably feel a bit unsettled or confused with the first idea, of resisting the devil – we might even wonder what it means? But James has repeatedly raised the idea that what can fuel our poor choices...

is that dominion which is opposed to God. It's just that now, James is being specific and explicit.

In calling us to resist the devil, James is calling us to resist anything that would make us act disloyally towards God. Ultimately, the question is: who is directing the path of our lives? Is it God, or is it something or someone else?

Of course, we get things wrong, and so James calls us to show loyalty to God by also coming near to God in repentance. He writes:

'Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.'

(James 4:8-9)

On the surface, James sounds like a bit of a killjoy, he sounds pretty depressing! **But later he will write**, ‘Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.’ (James 5:13) So, we need to keep in mind the context here, for James is not against joy.

Instead, James is calling us to repentance, that’s what he means by coming near to God and having our hands washed and our hearts purified. Washing our hands is a metaphor for cleaning up our outer life, our acts of wrong-doing.

And the idea of purifying our hearts is another metaphor but this time with regard to our inner life, our inner values, which is why he calls them “double-minded” for they have mixed motives, mixed loyalty.

In both the outer life and the inner life, James calls us to repentance, he calls us to take our sin and disloyalty seriously, which is why we are to grieve, mourn and wail. Once we realise how grievously disloyal we have been towards God, we ought to be upset, we ought to be repulsed by our sin and disloyalty.

Now, it's possible to be so shocked and horrified by our sin that we think we should clean up our lives first and then draw near to God. But friends, that's not what James says to do, because that's the way of self-reliance, salvation by works, and pride.

James says, come near to God first, then wash and purify. We are to come into God's presence, come under His holy influence, and in that place find His grace, His more grace,

so that we are then fuelled, by grace, to live in loyalty towards God.

Brothers and sisters, I've spoken before of being a young man of 19 when I came to faith. I've spoken before of how selfish I was at that time. I think I've spoken about how my actions hurt others though I didn't really care, and quite clearly then, God's values were not anywhere near the top of my priorities, even though I was going to church every week.

But then, in a moment of unasked for grace, God showed up one morning. The morning after the worst choices of my life, God came close to me. He came with holy grace. He came as the uncompromising holy God who showed me the sins of my hands and the impurity of my heart...

He showed me a little of the vast darkness in my heart and that quite literally, I deserved hell because that's who I was partnering with. But God didn't just come in His holiness, He came in His grace, and with outstretched hand He welcomed me into His family because in humility I repented. His love has astounded and captivated me every day since that moment, 18 years ago, and I have never, and will never, turn my back on Him, or forsake His call, no matter the pummelling I get or the risks asked or the ways He calls me into greater likeness to His Son. I am committed to Him, because He has cultivated grace-fuelled loyalty in me, He gave me such grace as I did not deserve even when I had been so grievously disloyal to Him.

Friends, do you know God's grace? When did you last taste His grace?

God stands at the door of your heart this morning, He stands there calling you to come near to Him, to admit the error of your ways and find grace, more grace.

You may be a Christian even, like the folks James wrote to, and maybe you need to come back to the more grace of God, finding and remembering the basis upon which our faith, your faith, stands, the more grace of God.

My prayer is that in the depth of our being we will know that more grace and allow it to fuel the deepest of loyalty to God and the healthiest of dynamics amongst us. May it be so. Amen.