

Grace Anglican Network, sermon for Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> May 2020

James 4:1-12, “Coming Back to God”

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James begins our passage today by asking a question that every person who's been around church for a while, will ask sooner or later: *Where are these conflicts and disputes coming from?* Am I right? Not many of us I'm sure are expecting that church life will be entirely conflict-free, but there does come a time it seems, in the life of most followers of Jesus, where we start to wonder if His people (the church) are actually any better at dealing with conflict and quarrels and disputes than the rest of the world, and may even be worse at times, it seems.

(v. 1) These conflicts/disputes among you, where do they come from?

And the easy answer, in a way, is to say, “Well, we're a sinful people. Redeemed – yes, but still battling sin (every one of us in different ways), and so the church is inevitably going to be a messy, sometimes painful, sometimes conflicted place.” And James would agree with that, as far as it goes, but it's clear he's not satisfied with that as a final answer.

And to be honest, most of us aren't either. In fact, in my experience “church politics” as we often like to call it, is one of the most common reasons that professing Christians will cite for deciding to leave a church (and try another), or sometimes to leave *the* church altogether, which, of course, is a great tragedy – not to mention the harm it does to the church's gospel witness in the wider world. It's a tragedy indeed.

And I think it's fair to say that most of our so-called “church politics” have little to do with doctrine. Our conflicts and disputes, for the most part, are not really about defending biblical faith and truth. Some are, of course – and they are very important conversations and debates for us to be having – but really, most aren't.

And yet we still find other things to argue about, don't we? To critique, and to become disgruntled over.

And before I come across as sounding too harsh or judgmental, we should be clear that James is not saying there's no room at all in church life for robust and impassioned discussion or debate. For differences of opinion. Even for strong confrontation, *sometimes*. I mean, isn't that what James himself is doing here? And right through this letter?! But, when conflict and dispute becomes a (kind of) defining characteristic of the culture within a church community - well, there's a problem. And we *should* be asking the 'why' question. Beginning with ourselves.

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Notice James doesn't mention what these conflicts and disputes were actually about. I assume that some of them, at least, were about legitimate and significant issues. Others, perhaps not. But James isn't so concerned with that here. He's concerned with what's driving the conflict - with the underlying 'spirit' or attitudes that are at play.

And a confronting reality of the Christian life, is that it's actually possible to be on the right side of an argument, and the wrong side of God. I mean, I think that's one of the implications of this passage. And so, James is saying, park the arguments for a moment, set aside the critiques, the disputes, the disgruntlements - and ask (honestly): where is it really coming from? Even, let's just say, *if you know that you're right* - what is driving you? And, a heads-up, the answer may be a bit confronting.

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Well it turns out James' opening question is rhetorical. He knows the answer. In the case of the original recipients of this letter, they had moved into very dangerous territory, spiritually, of which their conflicts and disputes were just a

symptom. And all too often, isn't this the case, in churches? The contentions, the conflicts, the disputes at hand, are not the real problem. They're just symptoms of deeper spiritual issues. Sometimes, James says, what's driving our arguments and disputes, deep down, is actually our own selfish desires - (v. 1) "the cravings that are at war within us." It sounds dramatic, but it's true. I've heard it said that at the root of every interpersonal problem experienced in this life, you'll find corrupted human desire. And I think, on one level, that's true.

If our hearts were truly right, our deepest desires always firing as God intended, then the kinds of conflicts and disputes that James is talking about here would cease to exist. There would be no wars raging within us, or indeed in the world, if human desire had not been corrupted. But so long as the presence of sin remains, we are easily led by self-serving desires that are so often at play, at least in part, even in some of our most righteous endeavors. It was the prophet Jeremiah who said: the human heart is deceitful above all things, who can understand it?

Sadly, becoming a Christian doesn't instantly sanctify our desires. Oh, how I wish it did! We are made new in Christ, to be sure, graced with new hearts that are receptive to the life-giving and transforming word of God, but we can still be influenced by the world, the flesh and the devil. And that, actually, is what James is wanting us to reckon with here.

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Well, James then turns to issue of prayer. If we're wondering if we might have lost our way in the midst of some argument or dispute, we might start by examining our prayer-life. (In v. 2) "You do not have because you do not ask. [And then v.3] You ask but do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures." He's talking about asking God. About prayer. And from where James is standing, it doesn't matter (so much) what the

dispute is about, or even whether we're right or wrong, if we're not taking the matter to the Lord in prayer - then there's a bigger issue.

Sometimes we avoid prayer, don't we? - we actually avoid asking for God's help, because deep down we know that our hearts are not really right before Him. Or sometimes we *do* pray, but it's in such a way that what we're really doing is trying to recruit God to our own cause. To have God endorse our agendas. And (surprise, surprise) God's not going to comply with that. He doesn't honour those prayers, because in reality what we're doing is actually hardening our hearts towards God. We may be asking, but we're not listening to God. And we've shut ourselves off to the work of his Spirit.

But James reminds his readers and us (v. 5) "that God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us." God is after our hearts. He is not satisfied with cheap, superficial prayers aimed at protecting our own selfish interests. God wants your whole heart (and mine). This is why James blurts out, mid-paragraph (v. 4) - "Adulterers!" It's a jarring accusation, but it's what we are (spiritually) when we actively and stubbornly resist the work of God in our lives, because it means we are giving part of our hearts to some other purpose, power or pleasure.

"Do you not know (James says) that friendship with the world is enmity with God?" Or in the words of Jesus, "We cannot serve two masters."

And I hope (like me) you're feeling at least a little convicted at this point, because all of us do this. Oh, how we need God's grace - all of the time, but especially when we're dealing with change, differences of opinion, tensions, conflicts, and disputes within the church. We need God's grace to reveal the deeper spiritual issues at play, and to lead us in the way of his righteousness. Because, left to our own devices, we will lose our way. We might win the argument, but without God, the damage to ourselves, to others, and to the church will be great.

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But friends, the good news is, that God's grace is available. "God gives all the more grace (James says v.6)." And all-the-more-grace is what we need. And the way into God's grace is, and has always been, repentance and faith in God, through Jesus Christ. It's that simple, and it's that hard. It's hard because it demands a humility beyond what you and I are able to muster in our own strength, but God's Spirit supplies what we need.

And in verses 7-10 - James just lays it out. And if there's one thing that the church needs (always) to do - that our church must do, it's this:

[From v. 7 ...] "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."

And if you're wondering if these verses apply to you. Or to us. Let me just put it plainly - they do. There *is* no time in the Christian life, or in the life of the church when these instructions do not apply (in some way). Sure, sometimes, an individual or a church collectively comes under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, that there is a particularly pressing need to repent of specific sins, or a season of hard-heartedness.

And I think we should think seriously about that. Is the Lord calling us (our church perhaps) into a season of repentance and renewed trust in him?

Whether he is or isn't, still, this is the bread-and-butter of the Christian life. Humble confession, repentance, renewed faith - is like the in-breath and out-breath for the follower of Jesus. We never outgrow our need for God's forgiveness and his grace. And if we want to grow, and mature, and do church

community, and life, and ministry and mission well – we’ve got to draw near to God daily. And submit ourselves to the loving scrutiny of his Holy Spirit.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it’s what we need, more than anything else. To humble ourselves before the Lord our Saviour, so that he will exalt us – in his time, in his way – which will always be for our ultimate good and for *his* glory.

And may we be a people characterized not by conflicts and disputes, but by our humble submission to God and our deep love for each other, as we follow our Saviour on the path of everlasting joy. Amen.