

## James 4:1-10 Sermon

We're continuing our fairly brutal journey through the letter of James this morning. I say brutal, because, although James is actually fairly forthright and generally easy to understand, he just tends to punch exactly where it hurts. It's almost as if, as someone who clearly cared about reflections on what makes a person's life a wise one, he's thought about it, observed, and knows the kind of things we all struggle with. Today, it's all about our struggles when it comes to balancing our love of God and our love of the world. And it'll be no less brutal than any other week.

You'll remember, this is Jesus's brother, James, writing to a load of churches and Christians who have been dispersed across a large area, probably by persecution. They are under pressure to compromise, to accommodate their beliefs in accordance with the places they now find themselves. And it has been this balancing act that James has been talking a lot about previously, saying our faith must affect the way we live, even if that's uncomfortable. It is not enough to just privately believe and then do what we like and what society expects of us – faith without works is dead.

So, today, James spots what is a ubiquitous problem in churches – infighting. It is truly sad that this is the case. That James seems to know that this is a problem across the whole swathe of churches is just awful. And yet, in the nearly 2000 years since this was written, nothing has changed. So many churches fall out about things. So many PCC's are driven by argument and strife. So many congregations harbour private grudges, or gossip. Part of me wants to say that St John's, particularly in its PCC and leadership doesn't suffer as badly as other places – which is very true and I'm immensely grateful for it – but I don't want us to be completely off the hook so we don't hear and respond to what James has to say. I also want to acknowledge my own failings in some of this stuff – none of us is perfect, especially me.

But why is it that churches tend to be so ridden with conflict, when on the surface, we should be the last people to be so? We're used to the fact that many committees and local organisations struggle with internal rankles, but as a church we should be better, surely!

Here we get to James's real argument. Effectively, these conflicts and disputes, for James, are from our real and ongoing struggle to juggle our passions for our world and our passions for God. Let's briefly run through the reading. James puts it down to our cravings – the Greek word being where we get hedonism from – our own pleasures, enjoyment, lusts and ambitions. We know from experience the way ambition, or the need to be heard, or the need to succeed or be seen to succeed, or pride, can get in the way of team working. Any office politics will remind us of all that. These are all things that are at war within us individually and within our relationships. They lead us to act in ways which are not healthy – even causing James to use the language of murder, pulling from Jesus's teaching that anger can really be murder in disguise.

James addresses our frustrations that we can't get what we want. That might be a car, or a house, or a holiday, or it might be something really healthy, like a new mission idea, a food bank, or a donation to a particular good cause. However, for James, it's the way we go about it that causes the problem. We end up damaging relationships to pursue our own ends, not necessarily because our ends are bad, but because we are frustrated, passive aggressive, manipulative or bullying. There's something about the need for ongoing prayer, but there's also something in the reading about asking wrongly – making bad requests of God for material things to flaunt over others. James, in the Greek, isn't mincing his words – what our translation cleans up into 'asking wrongly' contains a Greek word for dirt or excrement.

James calls us adulterers because all this boils down to wanting it both ways at the same time – wanting the good for God, but that good all getting mixed up in our own love of limelight, or conversely our love of being seen to avoid the limelight. Or our love of control, or the hubris of thinking we know best and everyone must submit to our good opinion. James uses this language of unfaithfulness to reflect the restless unfaithfulness of all our hearts where we get mixed up in motivations and actions which aren't pure. We may want to serve Christ, but that can get mixed up in a sense of entitlement – that others should notice and be grateful. We may want to use our skills, but we are angry if we aren't thanked properly. We may have a great idea, but we need people to hear it and agree with it, and take it personally if they don't.

None of this is doctrinal. None of this is about arguing over a point of theology, though there would be issues of pride, entrenchment and failure to love and forgive there too.

This is all about the people we are, deep down. It's all about the fact we all try to live as dual citizens – citizens of God's Kingdom, but within limits, and citizens of the world at the same time. It's the same issue of accommodation to the outside culture that James's original audience experienced. None of us ever fully give ourselves away to God completely. Even for vicars there's the difficulty of distinguishing God's calling from personal ambition. Put completely bluntly, the church would look very different if we weren't so busy trying to balance the competition for God and the world, and we'd be so much more relaxed as people. But instead, we try to live a double-life all the time – James calls that adultery, and talks of God being jealous for the whole of us, not just the bit we like to offer.

It feels impossible. Personally, I can see how this dual-living happens all too easily, but the way out feels much more difficult. James, towards the end of the reading, goes into remedy mode – submit to God and resist the devil. Draw near to God, in all the things he's talked about so far in the letter – care for others, controlling our speech, wisdom and prayer. Cleansing and purification – the rooting out of anything where we find ourselves being driven by our own desires or the rooting out of our split personality which tries to serve both God and the world. One way of doing that is to be reflective – some people journal, others choose to deliberately examine their day in prayer each evening. James talks of lamenting, mourning and weeping over our double-mindedness. And perhaps most importantly, he talks of humility, not seeking our own rights or position, but instead adopting a posture of receiving from God. It's a whirlwind moment from James, and one to go home and ponder.

Of course, the flip side to all of this is the danger of spiritual abuse, where the church can treat people how it likes and just tell them to submit humbly, ignore them, and abuse peoples' good will and generosity. So hear what I'm about to say very carefully, because I don't mean it like that at all.

Pulling this from James, and applying to myself as much as to anyone else here... If you are currently nursing a grudge, angry at a decision, hurting because you feel you've lost power or influence, irritated at the demands placed upon you by the church or by God, doing things from duty rather than from love and feeling increasingly bitter therefore, or engaged in dispute or bad feeling within the church; then please think carefully about this passage. Try to get beyond the immediate issue and ask whether some of it at least comes from this sense we all have of split loyalties to the world and ourselves rather than to God.

I'm more than happy to talk it through with anyone. I think it is brutal. Adopting a prayerful reflective practice feels really daunting. The only real solution is outright surrender to God, which probably, deep down, none of us is comfortable with!

Finishing, let's remember God's grace to us. God gives grace to the humble, James says, quoting Proverbs. Let's come to God, admit our failings, and ask for God's forgiveness and his power to be clearer in our loyalties. Humanly, it's impossible, but by grace, through God we can be transformed into his own people, loved by him, bought by Jesus, and fit for God's Kingdom. Amen.