

Faith in Action - Friend or Foe

James 4:4-10

You adulterers!!!! You unfaithful creatures,You call yourself Christians....

Feeling encouraged. I'm reading from the book of James...nice guy, has a real way with words, not the sort of person you would want come across when you are not feeling too good about yourself, but if you are looking for an accurate assessment of where you are at, he's your man.

Oh by the way I am reading from the book of James Chapter 4:4.

Over recent weeks we have been looking at the book of James, James is Jesus' little brother and his book is a real reality check for us as we walk the Christian journey. He doesn't beat around the bush, calls a spade a spade and we see that in James 4

James 4

⁴You adulterers! Don't you realize that friendship with this world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again, that if your aim is to enjoy this world, you can't be a friend of God. ⁵What do you think the Scriptures mean when they say that the Holy Spirit, whom God has placed within us, jealously longs for us to be faithful?

As we have gone through the book of James he has addressed a number of very practical issues within the church, showing favouritism, fighting and arguing, controlling your tongue, having wisdom, managing your anger.

Now he changes perspective. This isn't so much a practical issue but a theological problem that he sees in the church. He introduces it in a very dramatic way with his cry "you adulterers," "You unfaithful creatures". His concern is not that we have been unfaithful with each other, but with God. His concern was that we have become friends with the world, and as a consequence we have become the Lords enemies.

James obviously wants to grab his reader's attention - and I think he would have succeeded. His start is intended to shake the reader and awaken him to his true spiritual condition, and that is spiritual unfaithfulness. Throughout the bible the relationship between God and humanity has been represented by the marriage relationship, and as far as James is concerned the people, us, have been playing around.

Be Holy – be salt and light

Throughout the bible there is teaching about Christians being Holy, which means being separate, set apart. Some groups have taken this to mean complete separation from the world, there was a recent doco on TV about the Gloriavale Christian

Community. This is a community that has taken being holy, being separate to the extreme.

But what is James and the others on about when they say this sort of thing? And how does this teaching line up against what Jesus teaches when he says for us to be “salt of the earth”, implying that we need to be mixing with the world so that our saltiness gets into every aspect of life, acting as a preserving agent, stopping the rot and preserving the goodness that is there. Is this one of those biblical contradictions that people talk about? What is James trying to say?

Since the beginning of the Church, Christians have been struggling with the tension of how to be in the world but not of the world. James here plainly tells us not to be friends with the world, otherwise we become an enemy of God. That can have far reaching ramification on how we live as Christians. We need to make sure we understand exactly what James is saying here and in order to understand that maybe the first question we need to ask is what does James mean when he uses the word "World" in verse 4?

He could mean one of three things

- (a) It can denote the universe.
- (b) It can also mean the world as the sphere or place of human life, the earth.
- (c) or more likely in this context it stands for humanity, and specifically the aspect of humanity that is in rebellion against God. The other additional thing that is interesting is that implies that rebellion against God is normal, hence the call to be Holy, set apart.

James Paul and John all use the word “World” to refer to the system of ‘evil’ controlled by Satan. It includes all that is opposed to God on this earth.

With that definition of the world, friendship with the world means hatred toward God.

I wonder what James would say if he was standing up here preaching looking at the people of Otumoetai Baptist. Do we have an overly familiar attitude toward this world? It very easy to point the finger at others, but what about you.

Every Christian works with this tension of being in the world but not of the world.

The basic theological question is, **"What is the Christian's relationship to the world?"** If the world is evil, and under the rule of Satan, you might conclude that non spiritual work/secular work cannot bring glory to God. If, on the other hand, "this is my Father's world," our work may be blessed and considered spiritual in and of itself.

Some have tried to categorize the various approaches to the problem of the Christian's relationship to the world; these are:

1. Christ against culture

This group rejects cultural claims and establishes the monastery. The world is fallen and completely corrupt, the Christian should consider it the enemy and strive for holiness apart from it. Let me say something controversial, this is sometimes the reason that parents choose home schooling or a Christian school for their kids. There are other good reasons to choose these options, this is not one of them.

The problem is with this holy or separateness attitude is that we have this tendency to take our sinful natures into the monastery and we cannot escape the fallenness of our environment because we are part of it. These Christians would support evangelism and, perhaps, social action, but only during brief forays into the world, returning into the monastery when finished.

The Church is in danger of doing this to a lesser degree, busying ourselves in the church, all our living is done within the church community and we don't rub shoulders with the world at all, we become a holy ghetto. This is something that we as church leaders wrestle with, to make sure we don't have so many church expectations that there is no time to be salt and light with the unchurched.

The other end of the spectrum is

2. Christ of culture (liberal)

This group feels that the Christian will bring culture into perfection. Education, Christian philosophy, reform to Christian living, all these things can eventually restore culture. Christ is fitted into culture. Man's conflict is with nature, not God.

The obvious problem with this view is the failure to take sin seriously. A fallen world cannot be redeemed, saved, made right by man's work. Education will not save the world, No matter what our politician might say good economics will not save the world. The liberal theologians attempt to recreate God in their own image.

3."Christ and Culture - in tension." This group sees the issue between God and man not Christ and culture. Man must work in culture, and because of the universal nature of sin within our culture here lies the tension.

Here is an issue to get your mind around. Today we live in an age of tolerance it's all part of being politically correct.

What are some examples of today's tolerances?

Religions, Sexual activity, sexuality, marriage, drinking

Here is an article I read from Maxim a few years ago about cultural and religious tolerance

“Tolerance” and “inclusion” are the catch-cries, which sounds very reasonable, until you realise that multiculturalism and tolerance are ultimately mutually exclusive. When pushed beyond a certain point they are, in fact, at war with each other,

Certainly, more and more is tolerated than once was. The Bill of Rights Act lists many grounds on which people may not be discriminated against. But one of the jobs of the law is to define where something ceases to be tolerated. If everything is tolerated, nothing can be ruled out. America was not prepared to tolerate the behaviour of the terrorists who destroyed the Trade Centre on September 11. But in between the extremes of complete tolerance and terrorism lies a vast middle ground, which is still being fought over.

The Human Rights Act gives each person the legal right to express his or her culture, although at the moment we still put limits on that.

For example, male circumcision is tolerated, yet we have deemed that female circumcision is too barbaric to allow, even though it is the cultural practice of millions throughout the world. It might be the cultural norm for a Muslim to marry four wives in his home country, but we do not permit him to do so here. We are not quite that tolerant yet.

Culture is not simply the strange clothes people wear on special holidays, or the songs that they sing at a cultural festival. Culture is what shapes our view of life. It is the deep things that we believe, and it governs the way we act. It is not whether I believe the All Blacks are superior to the Wallabies. It is more whether I genuinely believe that someone who commits adultery should be stoned to death.

Human rights are becoming a very powerful force in New Zealand law. As they expand in the name of tolerance and inclusion, they are challenging our culture in many ways. Perhaps it will not be long before every culture except New Zealand culture is permitted to express itself.

Tolerance is a real danger, and yes we Christians have often protested about some very important issues, and hence are often labeled as intolerant, and in today’s society that is not a complement.

But then us Christians need to be careful

Here is another comment on tolerance I read:

No way! There's no way any self-respecting, decent, evangelical Christian would tolerate same sex marriages, nor fornicators, people who commit adultery (under Jesus' definition), liars (of word, deed or lifestyle), cheats, those who blaspheme God's name by claiming he's done something when he didn't.

Come to think of it, let's not tolerate hollow marriages either - those ones where the two have become two again, where they fail to meet their God given responsibility to meet each others needs.

While we are at it, we better not tolerate gossips either, because they are not going to make it into heaven.

Hello? ... hello? ... is anybody there? ... hello?

We live in this world, and we live in tension. We are supposed to be in the world but not of the world.

What is James saying through this passage?

James is saying STOP playing around with the world, Stop playing around with the devil.

He is saying that the person who deliberately chooses to be a friend of the world, by that choice become an enemy of God. That is something to reflect on.

Grace

James is saying “You adulterous people, you guys are pathetic, you call yourselves the bride of Christ, friends of God, look at you” James comes across as harsh and condemning but then he softens and reveals something totally amazing.

⁶He gives us more and more strength to stand against such evil desires. As the Scriptures say, "God sets himself against the proud, but he shows favour (grace) to the humble."

What a relief. James understands we live within a tension.

He tells us that God is tirelessly on our side. He never gives up in respect of our needs; he always has more grace at hand for us. Grace is his favour, undeserved kindness and He always has more and more to give. Whatever we may be deprived of when we put self first, we cannot lose our salvation, for there is always more grace. No matter what we do to him, he is never beaten. Even if we were to turn to God and say 'what I have received so far isn't enough,' he would reply, 'Well you may have more.' 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.

But.....

Responsibility

But Grace in God, has a reciprocal relationship in man. James having pointed to God's sufficiency, points on to our responsibility. Read v7-10.

⁷So humble yourselves before God. Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you.

⁸Draw close to God, and God will draw close to you. Wash your hands, you

sinners; purify your hearts, you hypocrites. ⁹Let there be tears for the wrong things you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. ¹⁰When you bow down before the Lord and admit your dependence on him, he will lift you up and give you honour.

That little word “So” is a vital word to look out for, “So’s” “Therefore’s” “Buts” they are often crucial words and in this verse it is no exception. The Bible not only tells us what is true but also how to respond to what is true. Here the truth is a super abundant supply of grace. The response is an obedient walk with God, remember the bike illustration, it needs two pedals to work properly, hear the word, do the word. and so James spells that out.

Just because the ‘Spirit of God’ James talks about in verse 5 fills us, it does not mean instant and effortless sanctification, ie Holiness, perfection." The benefits of “*grace and more grace*” are ours as we walk the journey of “*obedience and more obedience*”. The God who says, “*here is my Grace to receive*” says in the same breath, “*Here are my commands to obey.*” Maybe we can change the chant of the pedals from hear the word, do the word to Grace and obedience.

In this passage James points out that the overriding factor to our receiving of God’s grace is to be humble. God gives his grace to the humble. Then he gives a series of commands to obey, that we don’t have time to look at in detail. These spell out the terms of a humble walk with God.

- Resist the Devil – v7
- Draw close to God – v8
- Wash your hands... Purify your Hearts – v8
- Grieve mourn and wail – Repent – v9

James then summarises in verse 10 (read)

¹⁰When you bow down before the Lord and admit your dependence on him, he will lift you up and give you honour.

God is not a tolerant God; yes he is patient, but never tolerant of sin. He is perfectly just and sometimes that can seem harsh. But God is forgiving.

Let’s go back to James opening – you adulterers! That’s pretty harsh, isn’t it, but maybe if we are honest, many of us here play around with the world. Not all the time, but we have the occasional fling. God is a jealous God, and wants you for his own. Are you God’s friend or are you God’s foe?

Even though we may have the occasional fling, I know there are a whole lot of you whose desire is to walk humbly with God. We are going to gather around the communion table and this is a time for us to take a critical look at our lives.

Some of you might come to the conclusion that you are messing with the world too much and you need to do something about it. James knows what he is on about and I would encourage you, as we take communion and have a short time of worship, to follow his instructions. Submit, Resist the devil, Draw near to God, repent and clean up your act, and as you do you will receive God's grace.