

July 17th 2011: The Essence of Self-control: James 4:1-10

Turn with me to James 4:1-10. My first reaction after reading this passage was of sorrow and sadness, for it is not addressed to non-believers, but to Christians. To people who have made a commitment to follow Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. I felt sad for James, who had to write such harsh words to a church under his care and control. I felt for God who gave His own self for these people who were so unwilling to submit to Him. And I felt for the Christian church today for we are still prone to the same problems.

The passage is split into two very definite parts. In the first 6 verses James roars at them because of their behavior. Behaviour which seems to be out of control and particularly prevalent amongst the rich. And as James writes it seems to me that his greatest concern is that they won't hear what he is saying. That their pride, self-centeredness and stubbornness will be a blockage to the voice of the Holy Spirit in their ears. That they will fail to accept the perilous position they are in before their Holy and Almighty God.

Listen to this passage again as it is presented in the Contemporary English Translation, and concentrate on hearing the pain and frustration that James expresses:

¹Why do you fight and argue with each other? Isn't it because you are full of selfish desires that fight to control your body? ²You want something you don't have, and you will do anything to get it. You will even kill! But you still cannot get what you want, and you won't get it by fighting and arguing. You should pray for it. ³Yet even when you do pray, your prayers are not answered, because you pray just for selfish reasons.

⁴You people aren't faithful to God! Don't you know that if you love the world, you are God's enemies? And if you decide to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God. ⁵Do you doubt the Scriptures that say, "God truly cares about the Spirit he has put in us"? ⁶In fact, God treats us with even greater kindness, just as the Scriptures say, "God opposes everyone who is proud, but he is kind to everyone who is humble."

Now James is heavily exaggerating here in order to make his point. He doesn't mean that they are physically killing to get what they want, but they

were prepared to kill relationships in order to gain power or wealth. They were past caring who they hurt or destroyed in order to make money.

William Wilberforce in his fight against slavery in England in the 18th Century had the same problem when he tried to convince Christian slave owners to support the abolition of slavery. They were happy to turn their back on the terrible things that were happening to slaves because their own businesses were benefitting from slave labour. Then they justified their position by stressing that their slaves were really well looked after. It was only when those men began to see that as Christians they must accept all as Christ accepted them, and began to change their business' and support Wilberforce, that the pendulum began to swing the anti-slavery way.

Then in verses 7-10 James tells them about the way forward. The way of repentance and submission. The way of return that will lead to their elevation once more into the place of God's favour and blessing. Here is the **Essence of the Self-control** they need, and we need to practice in order to please God. And it all begins with one major direction at the beginning of verse 7:-"Submit yourselves, then, to God."

Self control here is obviously more than controlling one's temper or sticking to a diet when you have a craving for chocolate. It is controlling that part of us....that sinful nature that Paul calls the 'old man'...which is constantly threatening to derail our Christian walk, witness, and example. It is something that we must practice in order to be holy as God is holy, and it is only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. There is no way you can achieve this type of self control in your own strength. That's why it is listed as part of the fruit of the Spirit. And like every part of the fruit of the Spirit, it will only become part of our lives when we are serious about our relationship with God.

That's what James pleads for in verses 7-10, and the Message paraphrases it in the following way:- James 4:7-10(The Message)

7-10 So let God work his will in you. Yell a loud no to the Devil and watch him scamper. Say a quiet yes to God and he'll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life. Quit playing the field. Hit bottom, and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over.

Get serious, really serious. Get down on your knees before the Master; it's the only way you'll get on your feet.

So this spiritual self control—this allowing God to work His will in you—is what makes us different to those around us who have not chosen to follow God's way as we have. It will give us a higher standard of purity in the big things of life like how we honour marriage and refuse to accept the world's view of it as an outmoded and restrictive institution. A view about pre-marital and extra marital sex that is laughed at by many.

Purity in our business dealings, in the way we fill in our tax forms, and the priority we put on paying our bills so that no one is adversely affected by the delay. Purity in our awareness of the issues of injustice in our society where we support the businesses that are trying to right the wrongs.

Purity in the use of our money

Purity in the use of our time. Knowing that God has given us just this life to use in some way for His purposes. To decide to make an impact for the sake of righteousness in this world. To pray more and to use every opportunity to pray with God's people. To prioritize such times over things that can so easily be rescheduled.

The above list can so easily be added to, but the point is that spiritual self control is needed to make it happen, and the pathway to gaining such control is listed here by James.

It begins with the decision to totally submit ourselves to God. We must want God to be in control of our lives and be prepared to surrender our all over to Him.

Then we are to deliberately resist the devil, and the promise is that he will flee from us. What power God has put into our hands and just how weak the evil one is shown to be. We can triumph over the power of temptation by resisting the devil and standing firm in our faith. James has no qualms about seeing the devil as the presence of evil in this world. In his time he saw the devil encouraging people to value money over helping their neighbor and the same still occurs. But I feel that the devil gains his greatest triumph over Christians today by encouraging us not to care about the oppressed, or the un-evangelised, or the homeless, or the helpless. And perhaps he's other great ploys are to convince us that any wrong we do isn't that bad compared

to others, and we don't need to worry about doing such and such, because someone else will do it instead of us, or even better than us. The point James is making is that we have God on our side and therefore can choose not to allow the evil one to lead us into sin.

In complete contrast, whenever we draw near to God says James, He is there with us in a moment. In times of decision, of stress, of attack, a simple prayer draws forth an inner sense of the presence of Almighty God.

But even as we draw near to God so there is something He desires of us. Openness and repentance. Even as the priests would wash their hands and feet before they dared to approach Almighty God with their sacrifice, so we should avoid rushing into God's presence without first seeking spiritual cleansing. Indeed the closer we come to God the more we become aware of our sin and our shame. The more we understand the hurt it causes our Father—the pain and hurt He bears yet again for us.

To purify one's heart is not enough says James. We must see the seriousness of our sins and want to overcome it. There is a need for us to mourn and to weep as we feel deep within, the penalty Christ bore for that thoughtless word, that unkind act, that silly curse, that fall into sin.

I recall sitting and watching the Passion of Christ some years back, and I had heard beforehand how people were appalled by the brutality pictured in that production. How they felt that the intensity of Christ's suffering should not have been brought to the fore as it was. And as I sat in that cinema and saw it for myself I too felt appalled, but not by the vividness of the portrayal, but by the knowledge that my sin caused God the Son to bear the stripes that made me whole. I left that cinema and avoided talking to anyone and for at least 30 minutes I could not utter even one word. For I realized that He suffered not only for my sins before my conversion but for every sin I will ever commit. That alone is enough to make me yearn daily, for this spiritual and physical self-control that will cause me to become more Christ-like until that moment when He will finally lift me up to dwell with Him forever.

