

**SERMON – 6/7/26****'Jealously or Zealously?'**

James 4:1-12

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?” (James 4:1)

I want to begin this morning by offering two words to help us as we consider this morning's passage from James. They are similar words in the way they sound and there are certain similarities to what they both mean. Also, both of them can have both positive and negative meanings depending on the context in which they are used. So let me stop beating around the bush and tell you what the words are.

The first one is jealous and the second is zealous. You can also make them into adverbs – jealously and zealously. And they also both have related nouns – jealousy and zeal. My dictionary speaks about jealousy in negative terms referring to upset or anger because someone has something or is interested in someone that you want. But it also talks about jealousy more positively in terms of being careful or protective of something or someone. My dictionary describes being zealous as being enthusiastic, excited or eager about something, but that could be either a positive or a negative depending on the circumstances.

I wonder if you can think of something or someone you feel jealous over and whether you think of that as a positive or a negative emotion? And I wonder also whether you think you experience zeal for anything and whether you think of that as a positive or a negative?

One of the questions I was asked at my ordination and which I repeated when I was inducted at Kinross and again when I became one of the team ministers in the united charge was this: Are not zeal for the glory of God, love to the Lord Jesus Christ and a desire for the salvation of all people as far as you know your own heart your great motives and chief inducements to enter into this holy ministry? It's a great question and it always makes my heart burn within me when I think about it. It's asking

about my motivation for doing what I do as a minister, and that is the issue that James is raising for us in today's passage.

Throughout the letter James has been pointing out that what we think and what we believe and what we read and what we listen to all work themselves out in the way we live and he very much echoes a strong theme in the Old Testament, that of the two ways to live, one seeking God and the other turning from God, one like a tree planted by streams of water bearing fruit in season, and the other like chaff being blown in the wind. Jesus takes up the same theme urging His followers to choose the narrow way that leads to life rather than the broad way that leads to destruction, asking us, as we have sung in the service this morning to 'Seek first the Kingdom of God.'

In this letter we have already heard James ask us: 'Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig-tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? (3:11-12) We read last week what he had to say about 'earthly wisdom' and 'heavenly wisdom' (3:15) and this morning we see a couple more examples of the same process.

Firstly he suggests that fights and quarrels among us come from the 'desires that battle within us' (4:1) and from that there are all kinds of consequences: he writes: "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." (vv.2-3) Perhaps you recognise that kind of internal battle in yourself – when you are wrestling with difficult things internally you probably find that those difficulties have an impact on the way you behave towards others and perhaps you get into fights and quarrels without even intending to.

And the second description James gives us in this passage of the reason we get caught up in fights and quarrels is more theological. He echoes the Old Testament prophets who called Israel an 'adulterous people' and he suggests that if we put our all into friendship with this world we will make an enemy of God

and that the outcome of that, far from being a peaceful and quiet life in this world will actually lead us into fights and quarrels.

What he is trying to get us to think about as followers of Jesus is our motivation in life which takes me back to where I started with our two words, jealous and zealous. Because these two words can describe a positive or a negative motivation they are good examples for us to use in taking a long hard look at ourselves.

If in a negative way we allow jealousy to control our relationships with one another we will find that our interactions will in turn be characterised by anger and upset, slander and judgment. If we allow ourselves to be zealously motivated by unhealthy attitudes, that's when we will find our lives marred by fights and quarrels.

But if in a positive way we guard our faith in Christ jealously and take care to seek first God's Kingdom, and if we zealously seek to honour God in the way we live day by day, James is saying that we will experience God's favour and the fulness of life that Jesus promised.

Right at the very heart of today's passage from James is a verse that the translators all have a struggle with but which I think actually gives us the key to grasping the key message of this section. In most translations you will find a couple of different alternatives offered for verse 5, both of which could be reasonable representations of the original. One translation understands it to be describing something of God whereas the other sees it as applying to ourselves. The first speaks about God jealously yearning or longing for the spirit He has caused to dwell in us, while the second speaks about the spirit that God has placed in us envying intensely or being filled with fierce desires.

It really depends whether you understand jealousy here as a negative or a positive. Personally, I think James is more likely to be describing God's positive jealousy for us and for the spirit He has placed in us (whether that is *our* human spirit or whether it is the Holy Spirit whom He has caused to dwell in us), than he is to be describing the negative jealousy that too often burns with fierce envy in us as human beings and causes so much mayhem around us.

And the reason I am drawn to that interpretation is because it echoes a beautiful verse that is hidden away in the closing pages of the Old Testament in the prophecy of Zephaniah. It's a favourite verse of mine to pause and reflect on and it reads like this: "The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing." (Zeph.3:17) Isn't that a lovely image! God is with you. God is taking great delight in you. God is rejoicing over you with singing (and what a wonderful song that must be!) That's what I think James is talking about here when he writes about God longing or yearning jealously for the spirit He has placed in us. And that is why I think this is the message we need to take from today's reading.

How much more we have to learn positively from God's nature than we do from criticising the negatives of human behaviour of which we have all too much experience? How about we really begin to learn what it is to be motivated by God, by the ways of Christ's Kingdom, and the gentle longing zeal and jealousy of the Spirit, and to let that motivation really transform our lives? Maybe we would find ourselves rejoicing over one another with beautiful songs rather than getting sucked into conflict.

And so we return to where we started in the opening verse of the chapter: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" Perhaps that is too often the way of the world, and perhaps too often our experience of life, of family and friendships, or work and social interactions – bad actions motivated by bad attitudes. But James offers us another way to live, a better way to live: "Submit yourselves then to God," he exhorts us. "Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Come near to God and He will come near to you... Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will lift you up." (v.7,8,10)