

ONE OF THE STRIKING THINGS about the Letter of James is the vigour of the language that it uses. Consider the following:

“From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts. Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? . . . Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?” (4:1-5).

The choice of words here is staggering. Were the brethren really fighting, lusting and even killing? And if not, why talk like this?

So problematic is the language that there are at least three different options for interpreting it:

- 1 The brethren were literally doing these things (though this is hard to believe).
- 2 The ‘ye’ refers not to the brethren but to their Jewish opponents, the Judaisers. However, James is not writing to them, so why call them ‘ye’?
- 3 The language is chosen to wake us up to the forces of human nature that are in all people, including ourselves as brothers and sisters. The enmity, warring and lusting is what has grown out of Genesis 3 (which the language echoes).

I favour the last approach: that James is describing what humans are like, and that we too, even though we have accepted Christ, have the potential to behave in this way unless we are very careful.

Notice the word families James chooses. The language of fighting:

- wars, fightings, war (v. 1)
- kill, fight, war (v. 2)
- enmity (NIV, ‘hatred’), enemy (v. 4)
- resist (v. 7), destroy (v. 12).

The language of lust:

- lusts (v. 1)
- lust, desire (v. 2)
- consume, lusts (v. 3)
- adulterers, adulteresses (friendship, friend) (v. 4)
- lusteth, envy (v. 5).

All this is very apt in talking about sin and human behaviour; man’s potential for animosity, violence, coveting, materialism and uncontrolled appetite (sexual or otherwise). These are some of the most powerful

forces and motivations which can be awakened within each one of us. Thought about like this, the passage is a remarkable depiction of the power of sin.

But the vocabulary cake can also be cut a different way. All the action is frantic and extreme, and much of it revolves around the axis of push-pull. Humans tend to be all about ‘me, me, me’, so James uses the language of grabbing, desiring, having, obtaining, receiving and consuming. By doing so he captures eloquently the unbridled and self-centred human appetite.

For me, the most incredible thing about the passage comes in verse 6, when James makes a sudden contrast. If this grab-and-get human nature is as strong as James indicates, what can be done about it? The verse explains: “But He giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble”. The ‘taking’, which is so characteristic of man, is transformed by the ‘giving’ of God. Notice that the verb ‘give’ is used twice and is the direct opposite of all the grabbing, having, lusting, fighting, obtaining and consuming that dominates the first five verses. God’s concern is with others, whereas man’s has been only with himself. Man has thought it his right and duty to get as much for himself as he possibly can, with no concern for anyone else. God’s grace, utterly transcendent of all this, is neither deserved, nor is there automatic title to it.

In short, every word of that short sentence may be emphasised: **But** (contrast God with man) **He** (only He, this is not something we would or could have done) **giveth** (give versus take) **more** (God’s grace is more powerful than human sin, and we know how powerful *that* is) **grace** (a concept which originates with God and not man; He shows us what grace is). The whole principle is then backed up with an Old Testament reference, just as the principle of man’s sinfulness had been in verse 5.

What then of our behaviour now, in the light of all this? The effort and intensity we once put into self-seeking (all those verbs of action from verses 1-5) must now be put into seeking God and withstanding sin. We must respond to Him in another series of verbs that involve equal effort, action and commitment: “Submit yourselves . . . to God”; “Resist the devil”; “Draw nigh to God”; “Cleanse your hands . . . and purify your hearts”; “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up” (vv. 7-10).

Mark Vincent