

James 4.7-8

⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you.

Father God, would you please help us to draw close to you and would you draw close to us; that we might hear you speak and respond in faith. In Jesus name, Amen.

When I was at school we used to play a game where you joined hands with another person and tried to bend their hand backwards. If you succeeded and bent your opponent's hand back so far it hurt, they could say, "submit" and you had won.

Its strange the games children play!

"Submission" in our culture today has many negative overtones.

It has the connotation of being weak, defeated, and open to being abused.

Perhaps that's why not many brides choose to use the word in their wedding vows!

And yet here in James 4.7-8 James says to submit to God.

Why?

The letter of James was probably written by the brother of Jesus, who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension.

He hadn't believe in Jesus during his brother's lifetime, but Jesus' death and resurrection seem to have convinced James of Jesus' messiahship.

The letter of James presents itself as a collection of sayings and exhortations; often almost randomly put together; a little like the book of Proverbs

"Submit yourself to God" says James.

Why?

Because says James in the preceding verse: "God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble".

Submission to God, for the Christian, is not about weakness, defeat and loss of free will.

Far from it.

Submission is a recognising of who God truly is and who we truly are and ordering our lives accordingly.

When we grasp the awesomeness of God,

When we understand that we are mere human beings, dependant even for our lives on God's grace,

Then the most reasonable thing in the world is to submit to God.

Why would a young aspiring sprinter given the chance to train with Usain Bolt not submit to his guiding hand?

Why would a new army recruit not submit to the orders of a great general?

Why would a human being made in the image of God, designed to find her joy in a relationship with God, not submit to his gracious, benevolent authority?

Of course, there is something in each of us that makes us want to be masters of our own destiny – that is the essence of sin.

But sin is deceptive; we will never make as good a job of our lives by “making it up” according to our whims and fancies, as we will if we live in obedience to the One who made us, loves us, and desires our highest good.

In the case of us and God, submission is a joy.

As we get to know who God truly is we will all the more want to please him.

As we experience the joy that being His brings to our lives we will see it as pure folly to jettison God's will for the fleeting pleasures of sin.

So, writes James: “Resist the Devil and he will flee”.

Do you believe in the Devil?

Many people have swallowed a caricature of a small red, horned cartoon character with a long tail and a pitch fork... and they dismiss the devil as figure of fun.

Others dismiss the devil as a throwback to a more credulous and unscientific past.

But Jesus believed in the Devil; after all he experienced him first hand in the wilderness.

And why would we not when we see so much evil all around us? The devil advertises his existence vigorously!

In his letter, Peter writes: "Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour." (1 Peter 5.8)

The devil is not an equal and opposite force to God.

He is a fallen angel set against God's good plans.

But he is a defeated enemy, crushed by Jesus upon the cross.

His destiny is not to rule hell, but rather to be thrown into it and suffer its consequences.

He is thrashing around in these last days between Jesus' ascension and Jesus return in glory seeking to cause as much damage as he can and to win as many people for hell as he can.

And us such he must be resisted.

Jesus has given authority to his Church to stand against the devil.

He has given us the weapons we needed.

We simply must use this authority and these spiritual weapons.

And do so with the confidence that Jesus has already made victory sure.

What are these weapons that God has provided for our use in resisting the devil.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to

proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ *With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.* ¹⁷ *Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.* ¹⁸ *Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.*

The way to resist the devil is primarily through prayer.

We can pray for people and situations.

We can pray for God's love and Christ's light to shine in the dark places of this world.

But, we can resist in other ways too.

We can tell the devil to push off. When I feel particularly under attack or tempted I'll tell the devil, in Jesus name, to go away.

When I pray around the parishes I tell the devil to get out, and all his minions – always in the name of Jesus.

We can also resist the devil too by the positive decisions we make.

Every time we make a positive choice to do good, we strike a blow against him. This might be as we work on our own character – choosing to watch or read edifying things instead of dubious ones.

This might be as we make the effort to do an act of kindness or charity, Or to speak words which build up rather than tear down – to make a difference in the lives of those around us.

It might be as we chose to give money to organisations which support the poor or suffering – people we can't do something for ourselves but who we can help through supporting others.

I know that military language is not very popular in the Church these days.

But I do want to impress upon you – there is a war going on.

It's a war with only one outcome. Christ will (has) won.

But there are battles which need to be fought and we are supposed to be on the front line fighting them.

Finally, in our passage to learn and live by for today, James writes: “draw close to God and he will draw close to you.”

What a wonderful promise of God; that as we draw close to him he will draw close to us.

For all of us crave intimacy.

To know and be known.

To feel cherished, secure, and above all things loved.

Augustine said to God, “You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you”.

Other have said we are made with a God shaped hole and we are incomplete until God fills it.

Sadly, so many people seek intimacy in all the wrong places.

Others expect human relationships to provide *all* the intimacy they need – and this is of course idolatry – replacing something of God with a human substitute.

Human relationships are a good gift to us from God, but they can never fulfil us in the way that a relationship with God can.

It is when we get our relationship with God right that our human relationships fall into place – and flourish as God intends.

How might we draw near to God?

The answer is of course the same today as it has always been: through spending time with God – in reading the Scriptures to hear his voice and in prayer to listen and speak. Its through pursuing other spiritual disciplines – fellowship, fasting, giving, retreat from the world in silence and engagement with the world in service to name just a few.

It may take a bit of time, trial and error to find the way of doing these which works best for us.

I’m an extrovert and an activist. I find it easiest to pray on the move, stimulated by the sights and sounds around me. I find the energy created by praying with others enlivening. I want to sing and shout as I revel in God’s presence.

Introverts may find it easier to pray alone, or if in company in silence.
People of a more passive disposition might prefer to sit quietly.
Silence is golden!

It does not mean that we shouldn't try things we find harder.
Indeed, there is often much to be gained from praying against our type rather than with it.

I need to find times to be quiet as well as to be active.

Conversely, I'd suggest its good for all of us to pray aloud in groups. Its an act of love and service to our brother and sister Christians – when we pray out loud in a group we encourage others through our prayers, making them prayers of the group rather than just the individual.
How encouraging it is to sit next to someone who is praying for you, or about a concern you have shared. Sometimes in their prayers, knowingly or led by the Spirit, they may pray something which God uses to touch your heart or speak into your life.

Have you ever sat next to someone praying for you and suddenly something from what they say really strikes you?

If not, then you probably haven't been praying enough with other people!

Go get someone to pray with you during communion. Join a homegroup where you can learn to pray with others. Just sit and pray with a friend.

Our drawing close to God is not something we selfishly do for ourselves, but something we do for ourselves, something we do on behalf of others, and something we do together.

In doing so we find joy, and we help others to find joy too.

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May we pray....