

INTRODUCTION TO JAMES

People of God, I am going to begin a series on the book of James. Given the recent controversy, I believe it is past time to hear the timely wisdom that James has to offer us in our day.

Many think James is the NT equivalent to the book of Proverbs, in which James provides timeless abstract truth nuggets for us to pull out at various times. But this is not true. James was written to address a very specific problem happening in the early church. And that circumstance is going to help us understand how to better interpret this book to our situation today. Today I am going to give you an overview of James, and beginning next week I will start moving verse by verse through the book.

SO YOU WANT TO CHANGE THE WORLD?

I'd like to begin therefore with a quote from Leo Tolstoy, the Russian Novelist who penned *War and Peace*.

“Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.”

The big theme of the NT is how God through Christ is making all things new. But the problem is that after Christ ascended into Heaven, nobody seemed to understand just exactly how that was to happen.

We know that the Jewish establishment also sought to change the world for their benefit. By attaining and maintaining religious and political power and control, and through the accumulation of wealth and power and influence, and through other political

machinations, the Jews were in a constant power struggle with their own factions as well as with Rome. While often times opposing Rome, it was common for the Jews to also use Rome for their own ends to get rid of rival powers in their own factions. As in the case of Jesus, for example.

Thus, the Jews quest for power and influence, mimicked that of Rome. Rev. 17 even depicts Jerusalem as the Harlot who rides on the Beast which has seven heads and ten horns, which is a symbol for Rome. Both Jews and Romans dealt in the currency of blood and money and power, and were all filled with political ambition and zeal, killing anyone who got in their way. And this is how they related to one another, in a dark struggle of mimetic rivalry.

There was another group in Israel at the time of Christ who also adopted these practices. They were called the Zealots. The Zealots were assassins, sicarii, dagger men who would kill Roman officials in broad daylight and in presence of a packed crowd. And after killing the man they would pretend to be one of the passersby who joined in the wailing and commotion.

They would kill in the name of God in order to break the power of Rome over Israel. The rulers in Jerusalem would allow the zealots to hide out in the temple, which is why Jesus called the temple a Den of Robbers, or more accurately, a Den of Insurrectionists.

Zealotry was common during the time of Christ, and recruitment was most especially high among those who were the poor and oppressed in the land. Those who did not have political power,

and who were constantly under the boot of Roman power were recruited to fight against Rome.

The Lord Jesus spent time among these poor, disenfranchised, and oppressed people. He himself was one of them. He had experienced the threats of Roman power even from when he was just a baby. Jesus knew of the plight of his people who were being oppressed by Rome on the one hand, and also extorted by the Jewish establishment on the other. He cared deeply for these people, and he even selected one of his own disciples from among them – Simon the Zealot.

While not Zealots themselves, the spirit of Zealotry filled the two Sons of Zebedee, James and John. In them we likewise find men who were filled bitter anger, wrath, and violence toward those whom they deemed to be enemies of God's kingdom.

On one occasion, these Sons of Thunder, as they were called, responded to the Samaritan's rejection of Jesus' ministry by asking Jesus if he wanted them to call down fire from heaven to consume them for their insubordination and rebellion. Jesus rebuked James and John for their rage (Luke 9:54).

These men were tired of being disenfranchised, tired of foreigners occupying them in their own land, tired of having no political control in their own land, and they wanted to see the kingdom of God established on earth. And these disciples were perfectly fine using force and violence and anger to make sure they got it. And now that the Messiah was there, they were ready to split some heads if needed.

What do we expect? They had all been told from childhood that the Messiah would come as a great military leader who would use political force to liberate his people. He would fill the streets with the blood of the Gentiles. This was the common understanding in the day.

We even see the apostle Peter resorted to violence when in the Garden of Gethsemane he cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant Malchus as Jesus was being arrested. And there Jesus said these famous words – *He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword.* Political Zealotry was therefore prevalent during the time of Jesus and the early Church.

ANOTHER DEN OF ROBBERS

Before the Lord Jesus ascended into Heaven, he spoke to them about the kingdom of God. The disciples asked him if it were at this time that he was going to restore the kingdom to Israel. He told them *“It was not for them to know the times and season the Father has fixed by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon you. And you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria and the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:3,7).

The Spirit of God was going to be poured out on them in power? Well you know what the saints of old did when the Spirit came upon them, don't you? When the Spirit of the Lord was upon Othniel, he went to war. When the Spirit of the Lord was upon Gideon, he fought against the Midianites. When the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jephthah, He fought the Ammonites. When the

Spirit of the Lord was upon Samson, he killed all manners of Philistines.

Don't you think that perhaps in the early church, somebody, somewhere would have said something like, "We have the power of the Spirit of the Lord upon us now, let us be like the saints of old and go kill our enemies."

And apparently it was not uncommon for zealots to join the ranks of the early Church. So this new movement which was gaining adherents quickly was a perfect place for Zealots to hide out, who sought to bring about political change through violence and murder. And they got their chance to begin to influence the church fairly early on. All it took was for some persecution.

After the stoning of Stephen, Acts 8 says there arose a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and the saints were all scattered and dispersed throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the Apostles (Acts 8:2). The stoning of Stephen could have happened only a few months after Pentecost. Many Christians in Jerusalem were forcibly displaced from their homes because of the Jewish persecution.

And in Acts 11:19 we are told that those who were dispersed because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch. And it is to these persecuted and dispersed Christians that James writes his letter, when he says in 1:1, *To the Twelve Tribes in the Dispersion*.

You could imagine, could you not, how easy it would be for this new church to have to deal with members who were quite angry about the situation which they found themselves in. Anger and hatred and political zealotry could easily be stirred up within the members of the Church against their Jewish persecutors.

Peoples' fathers and husbands were being killed. Houses were destroyed. Whole lives completely torn apart. Forget people just slandering them on the internet, these Christians lost everything. Again, I ask, how commonplace do you therefore think it could have been for the early Church to listen to some fiery preachers who advocated retaliation and violence and murder in order to attain influence and power to get back what they have lost, and to establish the kingdom of the Lord Jesus?

This is exactly the setting in which the Book of James was written. James, the Son of Zebedee, who was one of the Sons of Thunder wrote this book to fellow Pastors (whom he calls, my brothers) who were dispersed from Jerusalem through the persecution after Stephen's death.

NO! NOT LIKE THAT!

“To these frustrated Christians James does not say something like ‘You are not called to change the world, that's never going to happen, concern yourself with spiritual things.’ He does not say ‘be content to proclaim the message of individual salvation and the promise of heaven. Don't worry about social and political issues.’

“Rather, he tells the distressed Christian community, especially the brotherhood of leaders, about how they should go about being Jesus's agents of change and chiefly warns them against the dangerous temptations that dog the people who want to change the world. James counsels patience and maturity (1:4; 3:13-18) in the face of their childish, petulant anger and violent aggression (1:20; 4:1-4).

“Heated speeches (3:1-12) and acts of violence motivated by anger (1:20; 4:1-3) will not produce the righteous Kingdom that Jesus had promised. And neither will another tactic these believers were prone to: sucking up to their oppressors with the hope of appeasing them. That also is a perilous temptation motivated by anger at their perceived impotence compared to the riches and power of their enemies (2:1-13).

“What stands out in this letter is the passionate anger of these persecuted Christians, and anger that has led to supremely foolish talk and action. They are being lured by their unrestrained desire to sinful exploits that bring forth death (1:14). They are full of rampant malice (1:21). Their actions reveal that they have become judges with evil thoughts (2:4). The public talk of their leaders encourages exasperated members of the body to curse people (3:1-9).

“They are harboring hateful zeal and political ambition in their hearts (3:14). Their fervent desire for justice is leading to wars among their members (4:1). What they ‘covet’ drives them to fight and engage in violent aggression (4:2), and such behavior is motivated by their unrestrained passions (4:3). In short, they have

become Christian zealots. They are proud and therefore double minded (1:8; 4:8). They even boast about the business of violent resistance in which they are engaged (4:16).

A BETTER WAY

“Drawing on the teaching of Jesus, especially for Matthew's gospel, particularly in the sermon on the mount, James council's patience in the experience of these severe trials, a steadfastness under trial that leads to maturity (1:2-4) as well as the royal crown that Jesus promised to his disciples (1:12). He commenced to them the mature instruction, the instruction that brings freedom (2:25).

“They should not follow the worldly religion of their persecutors, but practice pure and undefiled piety, especially as it manifests itself in caring for the marginalized and needy, the afflicted orphans and widows (1:26-27). This is the royal law, according to the scripture, to love and show mercy. Genuine faith will always behave this way.

“It is not their fiery speeches and talk of strength of their faith that evidence is true trust, but how their actions manifest obedience (2:14-18). The vindication they long for will be theirs if they have a living, active faith that accepts the sacrifices that need to be made and works to help and protect those in danger from their enemies (2:18-26).

“The brothers who are leading the community need to tame their tongues and stop encouraging ‘cursing’ (3:9, 10) and the ensuing

unspiritual, demonic behavior it necessarily encourages (3:15). The harvest of justice and the peace they so long for comes when disciples of Jesus make peace (3:1-18). They must resist the devil's temptation to stimulate the growth of the kingdom by force and respond in kind to the apostate Jewish oppressors. Stop boasting about these insurgent forays into the enemies of the church. They are not called to be Christian zealots and to engage in aggressive violent behavior (4:1-12).

“Do the right thing (4:13-17). Be patient and trust in the prophecies of our lord, knowing that the theocratic fully rich Jewish rulers, who trust in the gold and silver of the temple and their glorious priestly garments, will be judged in due time (1:9-11; 5:1-9).

“Remember the Lord of hosts will not long endure those who have selfishly lived gloriously on the land and have refused to honor the Apostolic harvesters that Jesus has sent into the fields as his servants (5:3-5; cf. Matt. 9:37-38, 13:30). Your oppressors have not repented of murdering “the righteous one” that did not resist them (5:1-6).

“Just like in the days of the prophets, know that the righteous lord is at hand and he will judge his enemies. Be patient and stop swearing oaths that bind you to unrighteous, conspiratorial retaliation (5:7-12). Instead, take care of the wounded and sick, forgive those who have allowed their passions to get the better of themselves, and above all, like Elijah of old, pray for deliverance and heavenly reign to bring about the harvest you desire (5:13-

16). Finally do your best brothers to heed my advice in this letter and turn back those who have sinned in these matters (5:19-20).”¹

This is what the book of James is all about.

WHAT ABOUT US?

The book of James, has much to teach us about our situation today. For although we have not been driven from our homes, Christians in America have been driven out of our place of prominence in the public square.

Christian morality is publicly ridiculed. Moral degeneracy also fills the land. Those who want to murder babies are given full permission from the state, but those who protest the murdering of children get thrown into prison.

Our political leaders are corrupt beyond comprehension. The economy is broken. Entertainment is filthy. Statues of our heroes and founding fathers are being removed. A new rival religion has taken ownership of the public square. The government is weaponized against law abiding citizens, while criminals roam free.

On top of all that the Christian Religious establishment is thoroughly corrupted, and continually compromises with the spirit of the age. There are known FBI agents at work who have

¹ Jeffrey Meyers, *Wisdom for Dissidents: The Epistle of James*, 5-6.

infiltrated Christian ministries and who are spying on those kinds of Christians who are getting uppity.

The political dialogue between people is at a fever pitch, it is one of perpetual enmity and strife and division. The Angry Red-Pilled guys spout off from their social media pulpits with angry and inflammatory rhetoric that does not at all bring peace. Those who are supposed to be leaders in the church are using their tongues to set on fire the whole body with the fires of hell. While the leaders who are supposed to be leading the way are compromising this way and that.

It seem inevitable that at a time lie this book on Christian Nationalism would be written. Thus, there is all sorts of talk in our circles about how the great need of the hour is a Christian Prince – one who is going to overthrow the wicked and establish justice in the land. Whenever he comes, I heard he will be giving free helicopter rides to all the commies.

Some people are talking about how we should have no enemies to the right, which means that that they deem to be to their left is an enemy. And they will treat them as such. But this is because they have been treated like enemies, too. And the guys who are to the left are filled with just as much zeal which leads them to persecute and slander members of the church as the guys on the right who get angry about it. And so now everything is political, even the church.

No one knows how to talk to each other. Everyone is angry and at each other's throats. Political tensions are so high in the country

and in the church, every day there is a new story which serves as the new Shibboleth. Depending on which side of the narrative you take depends on which people are going call for whose head.

The Culture wars are very much real, People of God. And Christians and non-Christians alike are all fighting over the corpse of America right now, seeing who is going to be the next group to take control and wield power for the benefit of their own group.

And sure, in many ways the culture wars are just extensions of real spiritual war that is going on. But how does Jesus teach us to fight spiritual wars? Remember, the Lord Jesus said, *“everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; and whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, “you fool” will be liable to the hell of fire.”*

And yet here in this congregation we have been called to the carpet because there are those of us for whom anger, insulting, and cursing, and murder in the heart is an everyday practice on social media.

I get it. You want to change the world. You want to see wickedness end. You want to see the righteousness of God actually make real changes in the world. You want to contribute to that change and not feel like your life hasn't been worth something great in the midst of the battle of our day. And you are angry that you have no political power right now to enact your will upon the situation. I get it.

But murdering people in your heart, cursing those created in the image and likeness of God, including your own Christian brothers and sisters in the process, will not produce the righteousness of God you are looking for.

Indiscriminately spraying inflammatory remarks to Christian Ministers and others online does not produce the righteousness of God. You will not change the world for good by constantly painting yourself as a victim in order to justify unrighteous anger and vile cursing within you.

Those of you who are online, you know that all the right wing dudes call each other King. GM Kings. And when they put out a good meme, they all come to fawn and preen over one another saying, "You dropped your crown, King." But you know what makes a king? Wisdom. Not funny memes. Not pithy biting tweets which own the left. Not angry and bitter words wielded against people we disagree with. Wisdom.

Wisdom that can only be acquired through patient suffering with Christ. We must patiently endure these trials that Christ has brought upon us, and we have to stop trying to fast track our way out of the trials and into positions of power through anger, cursing, violence, and zealotry. *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trial of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produced patience. And let patience have its maturing effect, that you may be mature and lacking in nothing (1:3-4).*"

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast/patient under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God promised to those who love him.

Do you know who the blessed man is that remained steadfast / patient under trial and received the crown of life? Jesus naturally. But you know who else? Do you know what the word for crown is in Greek? *Stephanos*. Stephen, the first Martyr, is the blessed man who remained steadfast and patient under trial.

How did he stand the test and receive the crown of life? He prayed for his persecutors, just like his lord did. He prayed Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. That is how Stephen received his crown of life, by praying for his enemies as they were killing him. If you want the wisdom of kings to change the world, you will not receive it without suffering with patience and with prayer. And God promises the same crown of life to all those who love God, as Stephen did. As Jesus did.

Do you love God? Well, you cannot love God whom you do not see if are not loving your brothers whom you do see. You cannot say you love God and also curse people who are made in the image and likeness of God. A spring of water does not put forth both salt water and fresh water, does it? Then neither shall you who say you love God, and be filled with cursing, anger, bitterness, and zealotry against other people.

Are we in a trial right now? You bet we are. Is the trial our church is in a result of the politics of the age and our own foolishness and anger. Yes, it is. But this is an opportunity for us to learn

wisdom. We all need to learn patient suffering in the midst of this trial, in fact, in the midst of all our trials, of various kinds that God brings upon us. And we must quit trying to fast track our way out of it by getting angry online and flamethrowing everything and everyone, and being involved in foolish controversies of various sorts.

Brothers, kingly wisdom is not acquired by punching left in anger. And neither is it acquired by punching right and embracing the left. The Left is the political powerhouse of the day. And everyone wants to be in good favor with the power players. So it is very tempting for people to want to have worldly power and influence and tenure in the institutions, and a good reputation among the cultural elite. So they suck up to the leftist establishment by denying the bible, embracing egalitarianism, and homosexuality and open borders and all the rest. That is definitely a real problem. And James warns about that too. We shouldn't do that either.

Both of these sinful tendencies are among us today. Either to get angry, or to suck up and show partiality to the ones who oppress us. Now let us ask ourselves a question. Why are both of these tendencies there to begin with? Why on the one hand do we have angry far right red pill based bros, and why do we have the punch right lean left nuanced bros?

Because nobody wants to suffer! Nobody wants to carry their cross with Jesus. Nobody wants to learn wisdom through suffering with patience and prayer.

Everyone is so busy reacting to each other, and to the controversies of the day, in a way in which they think will best alleviate their own cultural and societal discomfort, and give them some advantage over their enemies. Some get angry and curse those who are on their left. While others just cozy up alongside of the left. Both are wrong.

Is that how the Lord Jesus achieved his position of High King of Heaven? No. He humbled himself, and learned obedience through what he suffered, and was exalted for it. But who among us is truly trying to act like King Jesus, by suffering with patience and in prayer learning kingly maturity the hard way? Who of us is seeking to bless our enemies instead of curse them? Who of us is striving to excel in being compassionate and merciful? Judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. For mercy triumphs over judgement. Who among us is manifesting his wisdom in meekness? *Jesus said, Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*

My dear people, the political and religious turmoil of our day is real. No doubt. But while many of us are trying so hard to change it, we are missing the opportunity that God has given us to acquire kingly wisdom to rule in the midst of it, by changing ourselves. God has given us these trials so we can suffer with patience and prayer, so that we can become perfect, we can become mature, and acquire the crown of life to rule well in Christ's kingdom. Thus at the center of James' letter he says this:

¹³ *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.* ¹⁴ *But if you*

have bitter zealotry and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. ¹⁵This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. ¹⁶For where zealotry and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. ¹⁷But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. ¹⁸Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

And only after we have thus learned to change ourselves in this way, will Christ change the world through us. You want to change the world? Then change yourself.

May God grant us his wisdom to suffer these trials with joy, and in all patience, with meekness and peace, so that we too might receive the crown of life. Amen.

