

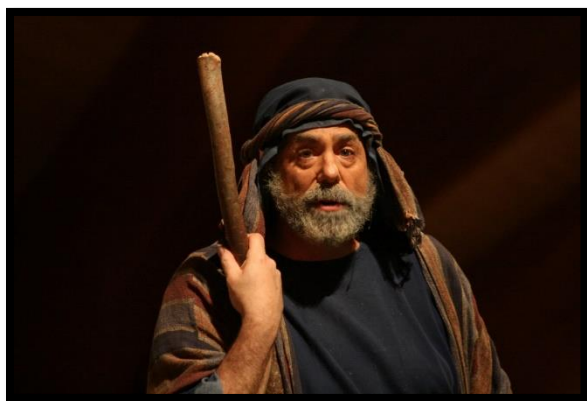
James: The Apostle of Passion

Luke 9:51-56, Matthew 20:20-28

Online Sermon: http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page_id=3567

Do you have passion to serve the Lord? You know the kind of passion that is so strong that you cannot and will not contain your desire to serve God no matter what the cost! Are you like Abraham and are willing to “GO” not knowing where the Spirit might lead you? Are you like Moses or David and are willing to face any “GIANT” obstacle in life because you truly believe that God moves mighty mountains? Or are you like the church of Laodicea neither hot nor cold? The Oxford Dictionary defines passion as a “strong and barely controllable emotion”¹ for a very good reason. While passion for Christ is necessary to jar us free from becoming spiritually complacent in our walk with God, not all passion leads to holy living. Having passion to legalistically demand others to follow one’s “superior” knowledge of God’s law or church traditions does not make one holy but merely a good Pharisee. Wanting to see the wrath of God fall on unbelievers does not make one holy but angry and wishing like Jonah to do anything it takes to try and keep God from extending mercy to others! While a lack of passion leads to spiritual complacency, the wrong kind of passion leads to unholy acts! Today’s sermon is going to focus on the life of Apostle James who learned firsthand that passion is only good when focused on the will of the founder and Perfecter of one’s faith, Jesus!

Background on James



James’ family lived close to Bethsaida where he and his brother John had a fishing business (Mark 1:21, 29), with Andrew and Peter as likely partners (Luke 5:10).² James’ father’s name was Zebedee (Matthew 4:21, Mark 1:19-20) and most likely his mother’s name was Salome (Matthew 27:56).³ Because Zebedee had hired servants and Salome often cared for the needs of Jesus (Mark 15:40, Matthew 27:55-56), James most likely grew up in a relatively prosperous middle class home.⁴ His father Zebedee was not only well to do but also had enough status that his brother John “was known to the high priest.”⁵ Walking beside the Sea of Galilee, Jesus called James and John who immediately left the boat and the fishing business (Matthew 4:18-22). James is always listed in the top three names of the apostles, along

¹ Taken from the following website: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/passion>.

² Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Peter, The Apostle.” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1659.

³ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, 1089–1090.

⁴ Donald A. Hagner, “James (Person).” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 617.

⁵ John F. MacArthur Jr., [*Twelve Ordinary Men: How the Master Shaped His Disciples for Greatness, and What He Wants to Do with You*](#)

with Peter and his brother John (Matthew 10:2-4; Luke 6:13-16; Acts 1:13-14)⁶ who were part of Jesus' inner circle.⁷ James was the first to suffer martyrdom (Acts 12:1-2), slain with the sword by Herod Agrippa I at about AD 44. Eusebius recorded a tradition that the guard or possibly the accuser of James was so deeply affected by his witness that he became a believer during the trial and was beheaded along with James.⁸

Leadership Style - "Sons of Thunder"

Unlike his brother John who is mentioned frequently in Scripture, there are precious few accounts of James.⁹ What little that is known about James is significant. For example, James



and Peter's leadership styles were very similar. Like Peter, James was part of Jesus' inner circle of three who alone got to accompany Jesus in the raising of the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:37; Luke 8:51), to witness the transfiguration of Christ (Mark 9:2; Matthew 17:1; Luke 9:28) and to accompany Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33).¹⁰ Also, like Peter who was often brash, clumsy, hasty and impulsive; James could be described with similar traits such as "zealous, thunderous, passionate, and fervent."¹¹ James was so passionate that Jesus gave him and his brother John the title of "Boanerges"

(Mark 3:17) which meant "sons of thunder."¹² James lived up to this title for what little is mentioned of him in Scripture focuses on the Lord's rebuke for impetuous speech and for seeking positions of honor in the kingdom.¹³

⁶ George W. Knight, "[Andrew, The Apostle](#)," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 87.

⁷ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, 1089.

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¹⁰ Donald A. Hagner, 617.

¹¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., 79.

¹² Donald A. Hagner, 617.

¹³ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, 1089.

Impetuous Speech

The first glimpse of James and John “earning” their title “Sons of Thunder” is found in Luke 9:51-56. Luke tells us that when it was the appointed time Jesus resolutely set out for



Jerusalem, the designated place¹⁴ of His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension to God’s right hand (Luke 22:69).¹⁵ Jesus chose the quickest path from Galilee to Jerusalem which meant going through Samaria.¹⁶ Before arriving at a Samaritan village Jesus sent messengers (who were probably some of the Twelve disciples) to secure lodging for the night.¹⁷ When the villagers found out that Jesus was going to Jerusalem they refused to welcome or help them. Upon hearing this the “Sons of

Thunder” asked Jesus if He wanted them to call down fire and destroy the Samaritans, just as Elijah did.¹⁸ Jesus responded by rebuking James and John and then going to another village which was most likely Jewish.¹⁹

To unpack this event let’s first look at why the people of the Samaritan village were so hostile towards the messengers. When Assyria conquered Israel in 722 BC (2 Kings 17), the



prominent and influential people were exiled, and the land was resettled with the poor of Israel and the pagans and foreigners that were loyal to the Assyrian king (2 Kings 17:24-34).²⁰ The Israelites intermarried with the foreigners and ended up trying to fear the Lord while embracing foreign gods (2 Kings 17:33).²¹ This blended race called the “Samaritans”²² created their own priesthood, temple and sacrificial system. The original site of their temple was on Mount Gerizim.²³ In their view God should only be worshipped on

¹⁴ Walter L. Liefeld, “[Luke](#),” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 933.

¹⁵ Leon Morris, [Luke: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 3, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 198.

¹⁶ John F. MacArthur Jr., 81.

¹⁷ Leon Morris, 198.

¹⁸ The ending of this verse “just as Elijah did” is not found in all manuscripts of the Bible.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ D. A. Carson, “[The Gospels and Acts](#),” in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 2095.

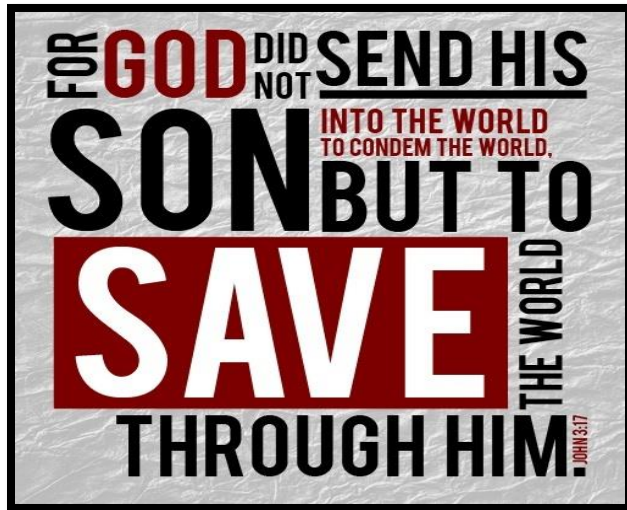
²¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., 81.

²² D. A. Carson, 2095.

²³ John F. MacArthur Jr., 82.

this mountain for it was the place where Abel built the first altar and God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.²⁴ The Samaritans were hostile to anyone passing through Samaria to go to Jerusalem to worship God! Therefore, most travelers going to Jerusalem would often cross over to the East Bank of the Jordan River to avoid entering Samaria where they would be hassled and, in some cases, put to death.²⁵

Even though the people of the Samaritan village were hostile towards the messengers, did this really justify the “Sons of Thunder’s” request for the fiery death of an entire village?



The reason why James and John made this request was due to the prevalent, Jewish belief that the Samaritans were a mongrel race²⁶ of fools and idolaters!²⁷ They had broken God’s command to not intermarry with foreigners (Deuteronomy 7:3) and had formed a “religion” that worshipped many gods! James and John may have thought their request was justifiable considering Elijah’s calling down fire on the Samaritan king Ahaziah’s men in 2 Kings 1.²⁸ While there was passion and great faith in Jesus in their request, James and John received rebuke because it went against Christ’s mission to save, not to judge the world

(John 12:46-47).²⁹ He who has no pleasure in destroying the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11) had come not to condemn the world but to save the world through Him (John 3:17)!

²⁴ Robert T. Anderson, “[Samaritans.](#)” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 946.

²⁵ Craig A. Evans, 164.

²⁶ John F. MacArthur Jr., 82.

²⁷ Craig A. Evans, 164.

²⁸ John F. MacArthur Jr., 86–87.

²⁹ Ibid.

Seeking a Position of Honor in the Kingdom

The second glimpse of James and John “earning” their title “Sons of Thunder” is found in Matthew 20:20-28. In this passage the mother of James and John requested that her two sons



be given positions of honor in the kingdom. Since it is probable that Salome was the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus, this made James and John cousins of Jesus.³⁰ While Salome may have felt their “familial” connection with Jesus entitled her sons to receive special honor, many scholars believe this request was hatched in the minds of the “Sons of Thunder” when having heard that each of the twelve apostles would one day sit on the twelve thrones judging the tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28).³¹ Driven by worldly ambition James and John were not satisfied

with just sitting on one of these thrones but wanted the most honorable ones next to Christ Himself. Jesus then tells them that these positions are not His to give but will be appointed by His Father in heaven.³²

Lest we think too little of James and John, verse 24 tells us that upon hearing of this request the other ten apostles were indignant with the brothers. This created a debate amongst the twelve apostles that carried on right to the table of the Last Supper (Luke 22:24).³³ This



shows that their indignation with the “Sons of Thunder” was out of jealousy and not holy humility.³⁴ Jesus handled this dispute by reminding the apostles that the values of secular society are not to be applied to serving in the kingdom.³⁵ While self-importance and exercising authority over other people was the key to worldly success, becoming a servant to all was the key to succeeding in the kingdom of God! James took these words to heart and according to tradition preached the Gospel message in Spain and was so successful that

he caught the attention of Herod I and became the first martyred Apostle!³⁶

³⁰ Robert H. Mounce, [Matthew](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 189.

³¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., 90.

³² John F. MacArthur Jr., 91.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ R. T. France, 296.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Donald A. Hagner, [“James \(Person\).”](#) ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 617.

Lessons on Passion

From Apostle James much can be learned about passion. First, to be a servant in God's



kingdom one must have passion to go when and where one is called! James and his brother John upon being called immediately dropped their nets and became fishers of men (Matthew 4:18-22)! What would have happened to either of these men had they made excuses to Jesus such as “my dad needs me,” “its not the right time in my life” or “I am not qualified”? Too often we make excuses to not serve God and as a result our spiritual life tends to be neither hot nor cold! To those at the church of Rome Paul told them to not be lazy but instead to passionately serve the Lord with all their hearts (Romans

12:11). It truly is an honor to serve He who has comforted us in times of trials and tribulations (2 Corinthians 1:3-7) by serving those made in His image (Genesis 1:27)! While venturing into the unknown future can be quite frightening from a human point of view, we are to passionately go and serve in God's kingdom with the full knowledge that He has prepared us to accomplish whatever He calls us to do (Ephesians 2:10)!

Second, having passion to legalistically demand others to follow one's “superior” knowledge of God's law or church traditions does not make one holy but merely a good Pharisee. While requesting to smite down those who do not follow Scripture might seem to



align with God's justice it does not consider His mercy (Matthew 9:13). While we are not to teach others to break God's commands (Matthew 5:19), neither should we assume we alone can receive the infallible interpretation of divine words through the specks of sin within our own eyes (Matthew 7:3)! Since anyone can take Scripture out of context to justify any kind of sinful living, interpretation must be done with fear, trembling and much prayer. Also, from James and John we learn that the truth does us little good if we do not put the divine words we learn into action (James 1:22)³⁷!

Had the “Sons of Thunder” took to heart how Jesus treated the prostitutes, tax collectors and even the Samaritan woman their thoughts towards the villagers would have been to give them the message of the Gospel rather than that of condemnation through fire!

³⁷ I realize this passage was written by James the brother of Jesus, not the apostle James but I use this verse here because of its relevance in relation to apply God's word in our lives.

And lastly, we learn from Apostle James the importance of servanthood. Each person has been given spiritual gifts to accomplish the divine role God has assigned to them. Even



though James and John were given the title “Sons of Thunder,” we must not lose sight that both were called by Jesus as apostles and part of His inner circle! This was a great honor and responsibility that came with the expectation they would lead with servant hearts! If you have been called to be a leader of God’s people never forget you are not “in charge” as those who lord their positions over others but are given the privilege to point out the will of God while serving His people. Having a servant’s heart means the reward of serving God will

not be money, fame or power. Motivation to serve is not to be based only on what we will receive, crowns of righteousness, but on what we already have received, eternal life!