

James: Hating Our Enemies

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Date: 25 May 2025

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- [0 : 0 0] I follow an Instagram account called Language Nerds. It's quite funny. Lots of plays on different languages and things.
- ! It once posted a post about terms of endearment from different countries around the world translated into English. And whilst we might use terms like darling or love or sweetheart in the UK, in France they might call each other my little flea.
- In Japan the equivalent is my egg with eyes. In Indonesia, my little elephant. In Chinese, my diving fish swooping goose.
- Italy, they call each other my little microbe. And in Flemish, my little round thing. I'm not sure how I would respond if I was called any of those.
- But at least none of those are quite as bad as James' nickname. Now James is a disciple that we are looking at today. One of the twelve. One of the first four disciples called by Jesus.
- [1 : 2 2] One of two disciples called James. James. Now we might distinguish between the two Jameses as James the greater and James the lesser.
- Not to do with height or status but probably to do with worth or status but probably to do with age or height. But back in Jesus' day, Jesus nicknamed James and his brother John as the sons of thunder.
- I've often wondered why did Jesus call them the sons of thunder. Was it because they had really bad anger issues? Was it because they had iffy digestive systems?
- Or perhaps more likely, it was to do with their passionate, zealous, impulsive natures. As well as their sometimes stormy personalities.
- And James is rarely seen independently from his brother John. And we first encounter them whilst they're out fishing with their father Zebedee.
- [2 : 2 8] In Matthew 4, when Jesus invites them to come and follow him, we read that they immediately leave behind everything. Their boat, their father, and they go and follow Jesus.
- They're compelled by the call of the Son of God. They leave everything that they know behind in order to follow him, learn from him, and become more like him.
- Throughout the gospel accounts, we learn that James is one of Jesus' inner circle. One of his three best friends along with John and Peter. And because of his position within the twelve, he was able to see amazing things that Jesus did.
- Like turning water into wine. Walking on water. Feeding the multitudes. Healing the sick. Raising the dead. Calming the storms. But he also was witness to the transfiguration on Mount Tabor.
- He saw him raising Jairus' daughter from the dead. And he was part of the not-so-prayerful prayer crew in Gethsemane, the night before Jesus died.
- [3 : 3 9] Over three years of public ministry, James, along with the other disciples, followed Jesus as he encountered the last, the least, and the lost.

As he changed lives, challenged the status quo, and ultimately gave his life for the salvation of all people. James got to see the incarnation of God's love in action on a daily basis.

And that would have been utterly life-changing. But, in our first reading that Anthea read for us this morning, we hear that even in following the Prince of Peace around for three years of his public ministry, James still had that fiery temper that got him nicknamed one of the Sons of Thunder.

And the passage tells us that Jesus knew it was nearly time for him to be crucified and go back to heaven. And so he sent some messengers, probably James and John, ahead of him to go and scout out in the nearest Samaritan village, a place to get ready for him.

Probably some sort of lodgings for the night. However, on arrival, the messengers find out they don't want Jesus there. Jesus and his motley crew are not welcome because they're heading to Jerusalem.

[5 : 01] Now, the Samaritans and the Jews had drama between them. Because the Samaritans were this denomination of Jews where they'd intermarried with non-Jewish colonists from the north.

And they didn't believe that they should have to go to Jerusalem to worship Jesus. They didn't believe that the prophets had been divinely inspired by God.

So they just stuck to the first five books of our Old Testament, the Torah. So there was this judgment and animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans.

And this particular village had rejected Jesus and his disciples from staying there. And as we read in verse 53 of our passage, the people didn't welcome him there because he was heading to Jerusalem.

I wonder how I would feel if I was planning to stay there but wasn't allowed to because of my beliefs. A reality that is true for so many people across the world.

[6 : 05] Perhaps some of us would feel some sort of sympathy with James who had this sense of injustice and desire to call down fire from heaven from anyone who dared to ostracize or persecute Jesus.

But I wonder if Jesus knew that this was going to happen. It wasn't unlike him to take a longer route around on a journey to meet people who were in need of counter with him.

So perhaps Jesus intentionally went out of his way on this route in order to try and bring some peace to a situation of hostility. And we see that Jesus is so unfazed by the situation.

He's unfazed by the rejection. But James and John, on the other hand, they're angry. They ask, Lord, should we call fire down from heaven and destroy them?

Can you imagine? For three years they've been following Jesus around. They've seen him. They've been listening to his teaching and learning from him. Trying to become more like him.

[7 : 16] They've seen him encounter Samaritans before with grace and truth and love. They've even been told before that if a village rejects them, then shake off the dust from your sandals and go to the next village.

What did they think Jesus was going to say? Yeah, that would be great, thanks. That would save me some energy from cooling fire down from heaven to destroy them. No. In fact, Jesus turns to them, rebukes them, and then carries on to the next village.

And I love Eugene Patterson's translation of rebuke in the message version of the Bible.

He calls it exposing our rebellion. Jesus' rebuke wasn't about shaming James and John, but about showing them that they weren't walking in the right way yet.

Bringing them into alignment with his own heart. Following Jesus as their rabbi was about learning from him, becoming like him. Calling down fire on the enemy wasn't Jesus' way.

[8 : 27] But shaking off the rejection was much more his style. And I think this is probably where the great Taylor Swift got her lyrical inspiration. When she said, haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate.

Baby, I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake. Shake it off. I shake it off. Woo-hoo-hoo. It's no surprise then that the first parable that Jesus tells after this situation is the Good Samaritan.

And you may or may not be familiar with the teaching story where an expert in the law asked Jesus what one must do to inherit eternal life.

And Jesus says, well, what does the law say? The expert in the law says, well, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

And love your neighbor as yourself. But the expert continues to try and challenge Jesus and says, but who is my neighbor? And Jesus launches into this parable, this teaching story of a man, probably a Jewish man, who is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho.

[9 : 40] When he's attacked by bandits, he strip him, beat him, and leave him half dead on the side of the road. And as he lies there, a priest comes walking by, sees him, and goes out of his way to walk around him.

Next comes a Levite, who, again, sees the man, half dead, on the side of the road, sees him, walks around him, and walks on by.

These two people who are supposed to, you know, help people. And then comes along a Samaritan, a man whose people hate the Jews.

And this Samaritan sees the man, has compassion for him, and so he tends to his wounds. He takes him to an inn, pays for his rehabilitation on return.

When Jesus is telling this story, he's speaking to a bunch of people who are so set in their ways, their rules, and their social history, that it might not have been surprising to them that the priest and the Levite walked around the guy in order to stop themselves from being made unclean.

[10 : 49] But it certainly would have been surprising that this Samaritan man cared so much about the Jewish man. Why? Because the traditional teaching had been to love your neighbour and hate your enemy.

But Jesus was incredibly counter-cultural. In fact, in the Sermon on the Mount, there's a whole section that was devoted to loving your enemy. Jesus says, you have heard that it was said, love your neighbour and hate your enemies, but I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

That you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good. He sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others?

Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. In other words, love everyone.

[12 : 03] Even those who are difficult to love. Even those that we disagree with. Even those who've hurt us before. Because loving all people is what makes us different from everybody else.

As Jesus said, anybody can love people who love them. Anyone can love their own people, but when we can love those who hate us, when we can love those who hurt us, when we can love people who make our lives miserable sometimes, that's when we're doing things Jesus' way.

And it's by this kind of love, loving people no matter who and no matter what, that kind of love is what Jesus tells us will show people that we belong to him.

Going back to the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus tells us that it's, the good neighbor is the one who had mercy on the man. Being a neighbor isn't necessarily about living in proximity with someone.

The point Jesus is making is that we're all members of the same home. We are all each other's neighbors. And we must love and care for each other despite differences of opinions, despite beliefs, despite each other's ways of doing things differently from our own.

[13 : 27] If you're like me, you may well be sitting there thinking, well it's easy to love people who love me, people who treat me well, people who make me feel good, people who encourage me, people who make life better.

But how are we supposed to love those who hate us? How are we supposed to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us? We need an example, don't we?

And we don't have to look much further for our ultimate display of loving those who've hurt us. Jesus on the cross gives us a really good example.

Because as Jesus hung on the cross, he looked upon the people who mocked him and spat on him. People who scorned him and beat him. People who called for his crucifixion whilst they called and demanded for the release of an unworthy criminal.

People who nailed his hands to the cross. And as Jesus hung there on the cross, he looked to heaven and said, Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.

[14 : 46] We don't always know why people hurt us. Maybe it's an intentional behavior, but maybe it's just how they've been taught to behave. Maybe they think they're right and they don't understand that we see things differently.

Or maybe it's an overflow of a heart that's been hurt already. An overflow of something else going on in their lives. When I think about some of the times that I've been most hurt by people, it's the not knowing why they hurt me that hurts the most.

But someone once gave me some really good advice. You see, we can't help but feel compassion for the people that we pray for.

So we must pray for our enemies. Because when we pray for people who've hurt us, when we pray for our enemies or whatever we want to call them, there begins to be this connection between us and that person.

And by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can't help but love them. It doesn't diminish the situation. It doesn't make it all go away just like that. But it does help us to move towards love, forgiveness, mercy.

[16 : 01] And I suppose that's what Jesus knew when he looked to the Father and asked him to forgive everybody present at his crucifixion. Those who, by the way, represent each and every one of us here.

People who have rebelled against God, who've hurt him, whose sin Jesus bled on that cross. And when he told the disciple who asked him how many times he should forgive the person who hurt him, he responded not seven, but 77 times.

Meaning that we have to keep forgiving, forgiving, forgiving, forgiving until it doesn't hurt anymore. It's not about letting people walk all over us nor is it about pretending that stuff doesn't hurt because stuff does hurt.

But as disciples of Jesus we have an opportunity to respond differently, to be counter-cultural, to choose to repay hatred and opposition with love and kindness.

forgiveness. We have the chance to demonstrate God's grace to people who very may well have not encountered it before. We have the chance to forgive and befriend people who others might have rejected, cancelled, completely given up on.

[17 : 28] James didn't quite have a grip on this when he asked Jesus if he wanted to cool down fire from heaven to destroy the Samaritan village.

But Jesus rebuked him, exposed his rebellion and persevered with Jesus' with James' discipleship. And by the time that we encounter James in Acts 12, James was ready to die for Jesus.

There's an early church historian called Eusebius who said, the man who led James to the judgment seat for trial, when he saw him bearing testimony, was moved and confessed that he himself was also a Christian.

They were both therefore led away together and on the way he begged James to forgive him. And James, after considering a little, said, peace be with thee, and kissed him.

And thus, they were both beheaded at the same time. James had once been nicknamed one of the sons of thunder for his zealous, slightly stormy disposition.

[18 : 46] He made mistakes. He wanted to destroy the ones who rejected Jesus. He was rebuked by Jesus. Like all of us have probably been at some point and will be because God's good discipline is good.

But he kept going. He kept following Jesus' example, following his teaching. And by the time he was killed, 11 years after Jesus, he led the man, the very man who was involved in killing him, to faith as well.

love. So, James, loving our enemy. It's not easy, is it?

We all know that. We know it's not easy, but it is our calling. It's what Jesus asks of us. And I don't know what the situations are in your lives right now.

Whether you have your own personal enemy, someone who's making your life really tough, someone who's hurt you, someone you're finding it hard to forgive, perhaps. Or maybe like James, there's a situation that makes you feel a sense of injustice and anger, politics, war, persecution, perhaps.

[20 : 02] Whatever it is, Jesus has given us the greatest gift of all, a life transforming, spirit moving gift.

And that's prayer. He gives us what C.S. Lewis called the dignity of causality, the ability to be involved in the unfolding of his plans in our actions, in our prayers.

And so I guess we're left with the question today. Are we ready to get on our knees and be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer?

Are we ready to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us? Are we ready to choose the Jesus way, no matter what the cost?

Let's pray. Father God, all of us here will have our own sense of an enemy, someone who's hurt us, disappointed us, let us down, something going on in our lives that is stealing our joy, making life tough.

[21 : 23] But you, Jesus, are the ultimate example of what it means to forgive, to love our neighbour and to love our enemies.

show us what it looks like, what it means to love our enemy, how to forgive that person and to keep on forgiving until it doesn't hurt anymore.

Help us to choose your way, Jesus, because your way is so much better than ours. And in your way, Jesus, there is freedom, there is release.

Thank you, Jesus. Amen.