

The Twelve Apostles: James

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 January 2020

Preacher: Alasdair Macleod

[0 : 0 0] Mark chapter 3 from verse 13. We find these words, And Jesus went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him.

And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, so that they might be with him, and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.

He appointed the twelve, Simon, to whom he gave the name Peter, James the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James, to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, sons of thunder, Andrew and Philip and Bartholomew and Matthew and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus and Simon the zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, He is out of his mind. We've had three readings this evening, and the three readings are to put some context into the focal point of our service this evening, as we think of one of the twelve who is named in this list here in Mark chapter 3.

We're going to be thinking this evening of the man who's listed for us in verse 17. He is James, the son of Zebedee, whose more well-known brother John was the author of the Gospels, and the Gospel of John, the letters, as well as the book of Revelation.

[1 : 3 7] So we're going to be thinking about James this evening, and to begin with, I want to think about James and his nickname. Now, by all accounts, the study of nicknames is part of a wider study called onomastics. I had no idea about that recently, but we do now.

Anyway, they analyse nicknames as to where they came from and why. And nicknames are a rather strange thing, are they not? Because nicknames are things that people can acknowledge that they possess, how other people refer to them, or they can completely ignore them.

They can be names that people are proud of, they can be names that have been attached from childhood, or they can be names that are given, as it was for James here, in adult life. What was James' nickname?

Well, it's a nickname given by none other than the Lord Jesus himself. Because James, along with his brother, were given the nickname of the Sons of Thunder. Now, it doesn't take too much imagination for us to try and figure out what kind of personalities they had if they were the Sons of Thunder, but just in case we needed a bit more evidence, the term Thunder here could be translated equally accurately as rage.

So we're dealing with an individual here who is a passionate, a zealot, a passionate man who is zealous and has this great driving force within him.

[2 : 5 5] That is James. And James is the one whose hot temper and some of whose outbursts we have read.

There's others that you will find in the New Testament as well. And we're given a glimpse into how Jesus deals with somebody with that particular type of character.

One of the great things about studying the Twelve Apostles is that you find all the different types of characters that you can encounter in this life. You can find those like Peter, who are the shoot-from-the-hip type characters, those who speak before they think, those who are up front and ready to be of service.

And then you find the complete opposite almost in his brother Andrew, who's very much a background character. Andrew's a guy whose great characteristic, as the New Testament teaches us, is that he wants to introduce people to Jesus.

And he doesn't do it in a flashy way. He does it very much in the background. You have John, the apostle of love, obviously changed by the power of Jesus' impact on his life because he begins as a son of thunder, but he becomes an apostle of love.

[4 : 10] And then you've got James, again, someone passionate, someone zealous, someone whose temper might sometimes get the better of him. And yet these four individuals, along with the others who are listed here, they're molded and they're shaped and they're used by Jesus Christ in his service.

And so any analysis of these individual apostles is not done from a high lofty position. Sometimes you see these pundits in a sports program, in the studio, telling what people should have done and why they should have done it.

That's not why we're looking at somebody like James this evening. We look at James this evening because in looking at James, we see how the Lord deals with somebody like James.

And we see how the Lord deals with some of James' positive characteristics as well as some of the ones that need work to enable James to be the person that Jesus wants him to be.

Because ultimately, every one of the people of God want to be the person that Jesus wants us to be. And there's lessons for us this evening as we study what the Bible tells us about James.

[5 : 19] Let's get a few details clear in our minds, first of all, as we begin, though, and remind ourselves that James was a remarkably common name in that culture. Last year, we were told the two most popular names in Scotland were Noah and Mohammed.

Two most popular boys' names of children born in the country, Noah and Mohammed. Well, if that's 2019 in Scotland last year, well, back in the culture that Jesus was born into, the name James was very, very common.

So even in the sense that out of the 12 that are listed here, there's two Jameses. You have James, the brother of John. You also have James, verse 18, the son of Alphaeus.

You also have later on James, the brother of Jude. And Jude was a half-brother of Jesus, and so James must have been a half-brother of Jesus as well. And so you've got three Jameses that have a significance within the New Testament, and it sometimes confuses people when they just have the word James mentioned.

Well, which James is it? But there are three Jameses. Tonight we're thinking of James, the brother of John. Well, what do we know about James? Well, we know that he came from Galilee.

[6 : 31] Similar to Peter and Andrew, they came from Galilee. So did James and John. Like Peter and Andrew, James and John were fishermen. They were in a small fishing business, perhaps in a cooperative, and they worked in some kind of cooperation there.

We know something about his parentage. We know that his father was called Zebedee. His father is mentioned seven times in the Gospels, which give to us a sense that he was a man who had prominence.

He was a man who had connections back in that day. So much so that when James's brother John followed Jesus after his arrest, John was given access into the high priest's environment because of his connections with Zebedee.

But it's not simply James's father that we know. We know that James's mother was called Salome. And she was one of those, in Matthew chapter 27, one of those women who supported the ministry of Jesus out of her own means.

That's what the Bible tells us. So certainly his mother had a living faith in Jesus. We don't know at the time of Jesus walking on the earth whether Zebedee had.

[7 : 51] We may surmise that he perhaps came to have some kind of faith, but we don't know that for definite. But certainly Salome did. So that's his parentage. What else do we know about James?

Well, James was one of the three of the apostles who were closest to Jesus. He was one of the three that saw things that the other nine didn't see.

And so he was present along with John and Peter when Jairus' daughter was raised from the dead. He was also present that day that Jesus invited them to go to a prayer meeting.

And they went to a prayer meeting up on a mountain. And in that prayer meeting, they saw a sight of Jesus that they'd never seen before because the glory of Jesus began to radiate from him as if the veil was lifted and his true identity revealed.

As they went to that prayer meeting, they saw a glimpse of Jesus they'd never seen before. As an aside, if there's ever an incentive to go to a prayer meeting, then surely that might be it, to see glimpses of Christ that we've never seen before.

[9 : 04] So James was part of that triumphant that saw these things at the Mount of Transfiguration. He was also with Peter and John on the Mount of Olives asking Jesus about the future.

and he was also there in Gethsemane when Jesus is asking for prayer. And they're overhearing some of what Jesus is praying but they're falling asleep.

And as he comes back and there's the marks of the blood on his forehead, James was one of those who witnessed what took place. So we know something of his background, where he was from.

We know something about his career beforehand. We know something about his family. We know something about how he had close access to what Jesus was doing in this world. And we also know something about James that marks him out.

What was that? Well, he was the first one of the apostles to lose his faith or to lose his life for his faith because he was the first to be martyred out of the twelve here.

[10 : 14] We read that in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. And to satisfy, to somehow ingratiate himself to the Jews, James, who at that point was one of the leaders of the church, was arrested and he was killed.

So these are some of the base, bare details of James' life. Let's just dig a little deeper and think about his character. I want us to notice first of all that he was indeed a passionate and a zealous man.

How do we know? Well, we get a glimpse of this from the episode that we read from Luke chapter 9. In Luke chapter 9, there was that Samaritan village to whom Jesus had sent messengers that he was going to be passing through and this village together had decided they wanted nothing to do with Jesus.

They rebuffed the messengers of Jesus. They rejected Jesus. And as Jesus was prepared to show grace and to show mercy as he fixed his attention on getting to Jerusalem.

So James, along with his brother John, decided to show no grace and no mercy as they responded to the Samaritan village.

[11 : 33] And so they come to Jesus and they are demanding that these people be dealt with. They're demanding that these people, because of the slight that they have put against Jesus, that they are destroyed.

and they come and they've got this anger is almost bubbling up within them at the whole notion of people reacting to Jesus in the way that they've reacted.

Now there would be a degree of culture that would have fed into that bubbling internal rage. Because we know back in the day that the Jews and the Samaritans, they got on as well as the Jews and the Palestinians in our generation get on.

In other words, they didn't. And so that would have fed part of the bubbling rage that was within. But nonetheless, they come to Jesus and they're asking Jesus whether or not that we should call down fire from heaven and destroy them.

And I suppose if we were to interview them afterwards and say, well, what on earth was going through your mind at the time? Why were you reacting in that way? They could turn around and say, well, do we not have biblical precedent for this?

[12 : 44] Can we not say that we are doing a similar to what Elijah was doing? And as Elijah called down fire from heaven to show these people who God was, then surely we're doing exactly the same here?

That may have been an answer. And it may have been part contributing to what they were thinking. But even if it was part of the answer, there was a degree in which they were really missing the mark.

because they seemed to have the impression that they had the ability themselves to call down fire from heaven. Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven?

You're going to call down fire from heaven, James? John, do you think that's at your disposal? Of course it wasn't. And so Jesus turned around and it says here in Luke chapter 9, verse 55, he turned and he rebuked them.

Now it's a good job they didn't call down fire from heaven because Acts chapter 8 tells how some of these Samaritan villages, how they came to hear the message of the gospel and to be transformed by it.

[13 : 51] And so what do we encounter here? Well, we encounter somebody passionate and zealous. Now the Bible teaches us about passion and zeal.

The Bible teaches us that zeal without knowledge is a very dangerous thing. The Bible also teaches us that we're not to be lacking in zeal. We're not to be lacking in spiritual fervor.

And so in that sense there's the passion and the zeal that the people of God ought to exhibit is something that comes from an intense emotion within us that compels us to act in a Christ-like manner.

And so zeal in that sense, passion for the things of God in that sense is not the reserve of the extrovert as opposed to the introvert.

Or it's not the reserve of those who perhaps are slightly more hot-tempered than others. Because passion and zeal for the things of God is something that ought to be in my life and ought to be in your life as well if we have a living relationship with Jesus Christ.

[15 : 04] the thing about passion and zeal is it can be quite evident in other people when we connect with what is their passion and what they are zealous about.

And so for some people it might be politics, other people it might be sports, it might be music, it might be business, it might be money, it might be their family, but as soon as you get onto that topic of conversation, it's almost as if you see something in their eyes.

It's almost as if you see I am connecting with this person beyond a mere superficial, but I am connecting to something that goes right into the core of who they actually are.

Because everybody is passionate and zealous about something. It's a question of what is that passion and zeal focused on. For the people of God, that passion and zeal that it has a focal point in Christ Jesus.

And that passion and zeal that we have that needs to somehow be evident, that when people speak to us about Jesus, it's very different to speaking to us about other people, that they should see something about us, that they know they're connecting with the one who is the most precious individual in our lives.

[16 : 27] You see, as people see that, it challenges them as to where they are with regard to God, but it's also a challenge to us. I mentioned this morning how our culture tells us that if we are to have faith, you know, if we are to have faith, then we need to make sure it's private, don't we?

Don't be going telling people about your faith. Don't be going trying to convert other people. Just leave them to their natural religions. Leave them to their no religion if that's who they want to be. Just leave people alone. You've got your own thing, fine, good for you.

Leave everybody else to theirs. Well, the problem with that as we spoke of this morning is that that's not what Jesus allows us to do because Jesus commands us that as we go we make disciples whatever we are.

What marks the Christian faith as been different from any other of the main religions of the world? Well, there's many things. We could talk about how children have been transformed and how they're dealt with in cultures, how women have known freedoms, the human rights, and all these things come ultimately from the Christian faith.

But another thing that marks the Christian faith out is that it transcends boundaries. Where Buddhism and Hinduism are largely in the same part of the world, where Islam is largely in the same part of the world that it began, the Christian faith is always on the move because there is no boundary that a human can put in place that can somehow halt the message of the Christian faith.

[17 : 54] Because a language barrier doesn't halt it, and different cultures don't halt it, and different nations can't halt it, and so the Christian message, Christian faith, has always been on the move.

And so even in our generation, it wouldn't be that long ago that people would have talked about deepest, darkest Africa. Well, probably the highest proportion of Christians in any continent in the world today is found in Africa.

we think of South America and think how they were either racked up with superstition or almost the worst forms of Roman Catholicism with an idol worship, and yet the transformation in South America with people coming into evangelical churches by the hundreds of thousands is remarkable.

China, they throw the missionaries out in their vain attempt to extinguish the Christian faith, and they reckon there was maybe about four to five hundred thousand, maybe some estimate six hundred thousand Christians at that point.

They got rid of the missionaries. What do we have now? Anything up to a hundred million Christians in that country. The Christian faith, it transcends barriers. And so when we share the Christian faith, there is no barrier that is erected that the message of Jesus cannot overcome.

[19 : 14] But that's where the kind of challenge comes in because if we are passionate and zealous about Jesus and people see it and we share, we tell them about it, it puts us on a crash course with some folks.

So what do we do? Do we pull back? Well, no. Because it's our, he is our passion. That our zeal based on the knowledge that God has given to us of him is what drives us.

And so there's a challenge for us tonight, for all of us. There's a challenge for all of us who have a faith. The challenge might be for you that you need to somehow turn up your zeal.

Because you don't seem to care enough. Now don't get me wrong, I know in your right spiritual mind we care enough. But where you're at tonight, that zeal, that passion, that needs to be turned up, doesn't it?

For others, it's the opposite. It almost needs to be turned down. Because zeal without knowledge can be very dangerous. And at times when our zeal and our passions are over what they ought to be, then it crosses a line into being unnecessarily offensive.

[20 : 30] And instead of it being the offense of the gospel, it's the offense of our conduct. And that's two very big things that are very different there. And so the question tonight is where is your zeal? Where is your passion? Where some people in this world will have that passion for animation for their work and for their family and for the latest plot that's unfolding on East Enders or Love Island or whatever else it might be, the people of God are different.

Because the people of God have a passion for Jesus Christ. Always remember, the most authentic, loving individual who walked on this earth had zeal.

Do you remember that episode that John records for us in chapter 2 of his gospel? Jesus takes a whip of cords and he goes into this temple and he's overturning the money changers tables.

He's causing carnage in many ways, chaos. Why? Because zeal for the house of God, zeal for the house of God had eaten him up. And so James is zealous here.

His zeal needs to be turned down. His zeal, his passion needs to be honed. It needs to be moulded into being the effective instrument and leader of the early church that he's going to be.

[21 : 45] But at least the passion was there. At least the zeal was there. He had it. It needed to be moulded. And so he's not a crank. He's not abnormal in that sense.

If we want to think of the Bible, go to the Old Testament and you've got Elijah or you've got Nehemiah. Think of the passion and zeal these men had. Think of John the Baptist in the New Testament. And then let's think of ourselves and think where is our zeal, where is our passion this evening for the things of God.

It's very interesting as we think of James and the way in which Jesus would deal with James, we realise that our Saviour deals with each of us according to our need.

There's an incident told about John Knox classed as a firebrand and the voices of today that have the attention of the media would be dismissing John Knox as one of the worst Scots that's ever been in our history when in actual fact he was almost unsurpassed as a Scotsman in our country.

And yet he was a man who was passionate, he was a man who was zealous, and yet in a very unique way God taught him. It's recorded in some of the biographies of John Knox that he had a series of correspondence with a very well versed Christian lady who struggled with her assurance.

[23 : 13] And her assurance would really be up and it would be down, it would be all over the place. And this was not just a letter back and forth, this was a long correspondence that Knox had with this individual that he cared for and he was trying to encourage and trying to remind her of the truths of God's word.

That whole process, one writer says, that whole process brought out in Knox a humility and a sympathy that helped balance his strength and his vigour.

It's a very interesting statement. It's very interesting the way God uses different things in different lives to mould his people to be the way he wanted. James had zeal, he had passion, it would be turned down, it would be moulded, it would be used by God in just the right way.

What else do we learn about James? Well, we learn that he was an ambitious guy, he was loyal. In our opening reading Mark chapter 10 we have the first of two episodes where James and John come to Jesus and ask for special positions of authority close to him.

Jesus, we want to give you whatever we ask. Well, what's that? Well, one of us to sit on your right and the other one to sit on your left. Well, Jesus' answer was quite clear, they didn't really quite understand what they were asking.

[24 : 41] There were certain things they could share with Jesus, there were other things they couldn't and these positions were for those whom God had prepared these positions. The rest of the disciples were raging, they were furious.

You wonder why, given the fact they spoke so often about which one of them was the greatest, were they just annoyed that James and John had got in there first asking for these positions, we don't know.

But whatever was going on in the background there, Jesus reminded them that the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve. So James comes to Jesus, he's asking for this position of authority and we can pinpoint a lot of things that James got wrong there, along with his brother John, but there's one thing he got right.

What did James get right? he wanted to be close to Jesus Christ. You see, that's what was right in the request.

He needed to learn that being close to Jesus Christ was not at the expense of others, or it was not trampling other people to get to that position, but if you strip away some of the error that was there, there was that nub of good that was present.

[25 : 54] Just as when you strip away some of the overzealous elements of his character, the good element was there, he had a passion for his saviour, just as he had this desire for his saviour, because he wanted to be close to Jesus.

And in so many ways, that can be a barometer of our spiritual temperature tonight. In two ways. Number one, how close are we to our saviour?

And number two, how close do we want to be to our saviour? And of course, it's not the case of we want to know the closeness of Jesus in these moments of crisis, when things come out of nowhere and they knock us and we don't know what we're going to do and we justifiably cry, help Lord, because we don't know how else to respond to things.

But where is our heart tonight? Was it not Paul who so often spoke about wanting to be with Christ?

He wanted to know Christ, he wanted to be with Christ. James here, even although there was that, things that needed to be worked on, the heart of the matter is he wanted to be close to his saviour.

[27 : 09] do you want to be close to Jesus tonight? Or are you among those who think, I just don't get it. I just don't get what is so attractive about Jesus.

Why is it that people would place their entire hope for life and for death and for eternity in this guy who lived all these years ago?

I mean, I've got nothing against him, but following him? I just don't get it. You just don't get the fact that almost two billion people in the world tonight look to this Jesus as their hope.

You just don't get the fact that there's something so compellingly attractive about Jesus that when you encounter him you stop searching for anyone or anything else because the searching for meaning, for understanding, for satisfaction, for contentment, it ends when we meet Jesus.

And if you think that's a statement that's a bit over the top, think of the Christians that you know. Are they seeking for some other saviour or for some other message or for some other religion?

[28 : 35] No, because they found in Jesus the one who satisfies. And yes, if you look at my life, you'll see that there's evidently times when my life is satisfied with Jesus and there's other times that because of my own spiritual coldness, I drift and I may cause you confusion, but in my right spiritual mind and the same as in every one of God's people in a right spiritual mind, it's just Jesus.

If you don't see what's attractive in him tonight, ask him to open your eyes and you may see wonders of who he is.

So James was a zealous, passionate guy who was going to be moulded and shaped by Jesus. He was a guy who had a heart for Jesus and even although that ambitious streak sometimes took him a bit far, the heart of the matter was there, he had a heart for Jesus.

The third thing about James and the final thing about James I want us to notice tonight is that James was faithful to the very end. He was faithful to the end.

In Mark chapter 10 when he asked to be at the left hand or right hand of Jesus and Jesus said there's some things you can share, there's some things you can't share. One of the things that you can share is suffering.

[30 : 01] Because every one of God's people will share to a greater or lesser extent that suffering for being a Christian and following after Jesus. And for James suffering was something that came his way.

I would encourage you tonight to read Acts chapter 12 beginning of that chapter just to see what happened. But it was Herod that was in charge. Whenever you hear the name Herod in the New Testament you know good things are not going to happen.

But it was Herod that was in charge and as ever he's trying to boost his own position, his own political popularity and he sees James as a leader.

He sees James as being crucial to the growth of the Christian church. The huge, remarkable, exponential growth of the Christian church.

From a hundred odd at the beginning of chapter 1 of Acts to thousands in Acts chapter 2 and then the thousands are continuing to be added to it. And so this was not any small little campaign that had an initial boost and then would fade away.

[31 : 09] This was growing all the time. And as Herod is given his briefings by the various boffins who would have worked with him, he said well who are the people behind this?

What are they talking about? Who are they talking about? Well they're talking about this Jesus, this guy who died but he's now alive and he's in heaven. But who is it? Who are the ringleaders? Who are the people of influence?

Who, if we can just take out, who will mean that this whole movement stops? And James was the one in their eyes.

James was the one in their line of sight. James was the one who they were given advice. You get James, this leader, this guy who is zealous, this guy who is loving, this guy who is faithful, this guy who is instrumental to the church flourishing at that time.

Take him out and things will be a bit easier. And of course Herod doesn't necessarily need much persuasion that this is a good thing to do and that's exactly what he does. And he has him beheaded.

[32 : 17] And so he's the first of the apostles to lose his life for his faith. And as he, as this zealous, loyal, loving, leader of God's people, we have from church history a record of what took place when he was beheaded.

So it was Clement of Alexandria who records from a man called Eusebius what took place when James was on trial. They couldn't just behead him, he was tried first and then he was beheaded.

But at his trial he gave such a strong, clear, powerful witness to Jesus Christ that it had an impact in the room.

The most notable impact was on one of the guards who had been used to take him from the cell that he was being kept and to drag him to this place where the trial was being had.

And one of these guards heard the strong, clear, powerful witness to Jesus Christ and he concluded he could keep silent no longer.

[33 : 33] And he said, I too am a follower of Jesus Christ. But what was the response to this prison officer, this prison guard? Well he was sentenced to death too.

And so as they were being led out from the place of the trial to the place where they were going to be headed, he turned round this guard and he begged James for forgiveness because we can only imagine just how violent it would have been to be locked up and to be dealt with in that particular generation.

He begged James for forgiveness and James turned round and said to him, peace be with thee. And they embraced and then they were both beheaded.

And so rather than being one who is calling down fire from heaven to destroy, he is one to the very end who is bearing testimony to the saviour who has loved him and transformed his life.

And as he bears that testimony, he is enabled by God to bring another believer to stand up publicly for their faith, to declare Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour.

[34 : 51] So that's James. But you say, well at the very start Alistair, you said, we're not sitting here like pundits in a TV studio, we're here to think about Jesus. And we are. Because Jesus took this hot-tempered individual, Jesus took this ambitious individual, and Jesus took what lay below the surface, that zeal for him, that love for him, and he moulded him into one who would be such an effective instrument in his hand until in his purposes, in his timing, he would be called home.

So we have a saviour who will work and does work within each one of his people, moulding us by the power of his spirit, to make the people that he wants us to be, to be of use in his kingdom as he wants us to be of use, until the moment he calls us from time into eternity, or the moment that he returns in glory.

So where's your zeal tonight? How close are you and I to our Lord tonight? and we pray by keeping close to him, he will keep us faithful to the end as James was.

Amen.