



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## God As He Is, Or As We Want Him?

James

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### Introduction

1. H. Richard Niebuhr once gave a “withering depiction of the gospel of liberal Christianity,” declaring that “it depicts a god that without wrath ‘brought men without sin, into a kingdom without judgment, through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.’”<sup>1</sup>
2. Reflecting on that, Richard John Neuhaus observed that it’s hardly surprising that some “people came to dismiss the idea of God, not because it is implausible but because it is superfluous . . . and boring” (Neuhaus, 115).
3. We need to stretch our minds to think about that as a reminder of the ease with which we try to domesticate God, seeking to make him fit our expectations as we assimilate with society.
  - a. We see the problem repeatedly in Scripture. For example, see Jeremiah 44.
    - 1) ca. 600 BC: Forced to accompany those who sought to escape Babylon’s invasion by going to Egypt, Jeremiah kept warning about their idolatrous ways and lifestyle (vv. 1-14, 20-30; see especially vv. 2-5, 7, 11, 13-14, 22-23).
    - 2) Inserted between his warnings is the response of the unfaithful Israelites: they defended their ways to Jeremiah (vv. 15-19).
    - 3) They wanted God as they wanted him, and used their “good life” to defend their ways.
  - b. We see it in a different way in forms of Christianity where believers focus exclusively on images of Jesus like a tender shepherd and lover of children and don’t also see him as a fierce judge who will call his churches to account and give them needed assurance to withstand the hostility of mighty political entities (see Rev. 1:12-17; cf. 2:16).
4. How do you like it when someone decides they know *all* about you based only on one set of experiences with you? It’s hard to imagine that God appreciates it either. Why do we persist?
  - a. Our human nature, in two ways: we struggle to grasp the infinite; obedience rubs us the wrong way.

<sup>1</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, “Can An Atheist Be a Good Citizen?” in Eric Metaxes, ed., *Socrates in the City: Conversations on “Life, God, and Other Small Topics,”* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 115.

- b. Our time's over-emphasis on pragmatism: we are in a hurry to get to the application and don't want to be bothered (and bogged down) with the theory.
  - c. The failure to see just how practical a more complete and deeper view of God is.
5. Which brings me to . . . James. Yes, down-to-earth, tell-us-how-to-live James. Do not miss this: his demands (+ 50 imperatives) are built on a developed understanding of God.

### BODY

#### I. What James Intends — and Assumes.

- A. With a reading of all of James in mind, here is what I would say James is doing.
  - 1. Writing to *believers under duress*,
  - 2. James urged *a response of decisive commitment to unwavering faith* that
  - 3. recalled *the giving nature of the Creator God*, author of "the wisdom from above."
- B. Notice how much James brings God into his demands, as seen in these few examples.
  - 1. God is one, unique in all respects (2:19).
  - 2. God is pure, neither corrupt nor corruptible (1:13ff.).
  - 3. God is unchanging, never vacillating like people do (1:16-17; cf. 1:5-8; 4:8).
  - 4. God is always concerned for those who are so often neglected, even by people professing worship and praise (1:26-27; 2:1-7; 5:1-11).
  - 5. God is the source of all that's good and right, the way things work best (3:13-18).
  - 6. God is uncompromising: friend or enemy, allegiance or adultery (2:23; 4:4).

#### II. The Practicality of God.

- A. The heart of James's exhortation — and climax of the writing — is in 4:4-8, where the call to a decisive commitment is most forcefully stated.
  - 1. To be friends with the world (κόσμος, *kosmos*) is to be adulterous and thus at "enmity with God" (v. 4).
  - 2. It is to reject God's claim on us, his "jealous yearning over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us" (v. 5).<sup>2</sup>
  - 3. Ultimately, it is a failure to replace pride with humility (v. 6), to submit and draw near to God (vv. 7-8a; note the appearance of "God" in all three verses).
- B. How practical is this call to God-centered commitment?
  - 1. Consider vv. 8b-10 where James tells the church to get right and be humble.
  - 2. Why is that so important? See vv. 1-3 and the ugly actions and attitudes behind them (attitudes which, in turn, trace back to the demonic wisdom in 3:14-16).

### CONCLUSION

1. You may remember this story from James Michener's book, *The Source*:

Michener tells the story of a man named Urbaal, who was a farmer living about 2200 BC. He worshiped two gods, a god of death and a goddess of fertility. One day, the temple priests tell Urbaal and others to bring their sons to the temple for sacrifice if they want good crops. Urbaal

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<sup>2</sup> I think the ESV translated v. 5 correctly, that "God" is the subject of the sentence, and "spirit" in view is the human spirit. I am aware of the difficulty of the passage and the other translation possibilities; I have dealt with the matter more in my series on the entire epistle of James, "Double-Minded No More."

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wants good crops, so he obeys. On the appointed day he drags his wife and boy to the scene of the boy's "religious execution" by fire to the god of death. After Urbaal's son and several others are sacrificed, the priests announce that one of the fathers will spend the next week in the temple, with a new temple prostitute whom they put before them. Urbaal's wife is dismayed as she sees a desire cross his face that is more intense than any she had seen before, and she thinks he is out of mind when he lunges forward to carry the priestess into the temple. She walks from the temple, alone, with her head swimming. She thinks, "with different gods her husband Urbaal would have been a different man."<sup>3</sup>

2. What's your view of God? How serious are you about seeing him as he is, not as you want? Do you do what he says? Show us the answer to these questions, and we can tell what kind of person you are.

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<sup>3</sup> This illustration is adapted from Erwin Lutzer at [www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/w/worship\\_shapes\\_life.htm](http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/w/worship_shapes_life.htm), accessed 3/10/10. The quoted line from Urbaal's wife is from Michener's *The Source*, 140, at <http://books.google.com>, accessed March 10, 2010.