



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## God: Real in the World We Live In

James

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### Introduction

1. We began part one with Richard Niebuhr's "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. We observed that Niebuhr's statement is a good reminder of the human tendency to try to domesticate God, to make him fit our expectations and satisfy our wants.
  - a. We illustrated the recurring problem in Scripture from Jeremiah 44:15-20. Refugees from Judah in Egypt responded to Jeremiah's denunciation of their assimilation with culture and embrace of other gods besides Yahweh (see Jer. 7:3-4) by declaring their intent to ignore him. They especially cited their prosperity to rationalize their choice.
  - b. We also noticed how many in modern Christianity focus exclusively on images of Jesus like a tender shepherd and lover of children to the neglect of depictions like that of him as a fierce judge who will call his churches to account (see Rev. 1:12-17; cf. 2:16).
3. Why is it so easy to limit God? There may be other reasons, but three stand out.
  - a. Human nature: we struggle to grasp the infinite; obedience rubs us the wrong way.
  - 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.
4. The epistle of James challenges all three of those factors. The writing is as pragmatic as any Bible book, but James also grounds his teaching in an understanding of God that relates right thinking about him to every practical problem the book addresses.

### BODY

- I. (Reviewing) James's Call to Allegiance to God.
  - 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

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by 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.

3. recalled *the giving nature of the Creator God*, author of “the wisdom from above.”
- B. We get a sense of his focus on God simply by surveying the occurrences of his names.
  1. “God” (θεός, *theos*): 16 times (Jas. 1:1, 5, 13, 20, 27; 2:5, 19, 23; 3:9; 4:4, 6-8).
  2. “Father” (πατήρ, *patēr*): 3 times to refer to God (Jas. 1:17, 27; 3:9).
  3. “Lord” (κύριος, *kyrios*): 8 times to refer to God the Father (Jas. 1:7; 3:9 4:10, 15; 5:4, 10-11; (4 times definitely or probably refer to Jesus [1:1; 2:1; 5:7-8]; 2 others probably refer to the Father, but are ambiguous [5:14-15])).
- C. All of James’s practical corrections and exhortations come down to this: will we choose God or the world?
  1. To be friends with the world (κόσμος, *kosmos*) is to be adulterous and thus at “enmity with God” (4:4).
  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 exchange pride for humility (v. 6), to submit and draw near to *God* (vv. 7-8; note the appearance of “God” in all three verses).
    - a) Notice his repetition of “double-minded” (δίψυχος, *dipsychos*) (1:8; 4:8).
  4. James saw the strong either-or choice as the way to overcome attitudes and behaviors caused by devilish, worldly “wisdom” (3:14-15; 4:1-3).

## II. How James Saw God.

- A. The reason many miss the *theology* of James is because he does not do a *study of God*, but instead assumes and applies a basic Jewish understanding of the *nature of God*.
  1. “Israel openly asserted that this one God made the world and everything in it, that this one God had elected a people, and that this one God providentially cared for them . . .”<sup>3</sup>
  2. “Jewish monotheism can be characterized as
    - a) “*creational* (it was Yahweh who created the world),
    - b) “*covenantal* (it was Yahweh who had given the promises)
    - c) “and *providential* (it was Yahweh who was directing the course of history), . . .” (Newman, 413, emphasis mine).
- B. We will notice only these examples from James 1:2-18.
  1. 1:2-5 — trials will happen, and are helpful for growing strong faith; but, we need help to face them, so we should seek wisdom<sup>4</sup> from the God who gives without reservation (v. 5): creates, made promises, and provides.
  2. 1:12-15 — when we remain steadfast despite our trials, God keeps his *promise* and gives the crown of victory (v. 12); we count on this because the *creator* God doesn’t do evil.

<sup>2</sup> I think ESV translated v. 5 correctly with “God” as the sentence subject and with the “spirit” in mind being the human spirit. I am aware of the difficulty of the passage and other renderings of it, and have dealt with the matter more elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> C. Newman, “God,” *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, 413.

<sup>4</sup> “Wisdom” is a major theme in James. It was also associated with God in creation in the OT and Jewish thought.

3. 1:16-18 — how can we be so sure? God *always* gives good gifts, is *always* consistent, and brought us into this new life as surely as he created the old; accordingly, we trust him even through our darkest trials.

### CONCLUSION

1. Did James have the sense that our likelihood of growing in faith and service increases as our understanding of God deepens and improves? I think he did.
2. Notice how he begins the last paragraph we studied: “Do not be deceived . . .” KJV has “err”; NLT has “led astray.” “Deceive” is a derivative meaning of the Greek word, *πλανᾶω*, *planaō*, from which our word “planet” comes.<sup>5</sup> James is calling for us to stay on course. How do we do that? By recalling, and (by implication) seeking to imitate the consistent, non-wandering nature of God.
3. The key to staying on course is to see God clearly and take him seriously.

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<sup>5</sup> The word was so used by the ancients because they observed the planets were stars that wandered.