

Practically Christian

Applying James Today

Phillip A. Ross



Practically Christian—Applying James Today

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ISBN: 978-0-6151-7667-3

Edition: 4.15.2014

Published by
Pilgrim Platform
149 E. Spring St.
Marietta, Ohio 45750
www.pilgrim-platform.org

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Printed in the United States of America

In the hope of restoration

BOOKS BY PHILLIP A. ROSS

- The Work At Zion—A Reckoning, Two-volume set*, 1996.
- Practically Christian—Applying James Today*, 2006.
- The Wisdom of Jesus Christ in the Book of Proverbs*, 2006.
- Marking God's Word—Understanding Jesus*, 2006.
- Acts of Faith—Kingdom Advancement*, 2007.
- Informal Christianity—Refining Christ's Church*, 2007.
- Engagement—Establishing Relationship in Christ*, 1996, 2008.
- It's About Time!—The Time Is Now*, 2008.
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- The True Mystery of the Mystical Presence*, 2011.
- Peter's Vision of Christ's Purpose in First Peter*, 2011.
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- The Religious History of Nineteenth Century Marietta, Thomas Jefferson Summers*, 1903, 2012 (editor).
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

IT IS THE RARE BOOK THAT is the product of only one person. This is not that rare book, for I am indebted to many people for their gracious help.

First, I have fed upon two classic Protestant Reformers in my study of James, John Calvin and Matthew Henry. My indebtedness to them is foundational.

I have also leaned upon my friend Gordon Keddie. Americans are not likely to know of Gordon. He's a Scot who was serving a church in State College, Pennsylvania, when I was in that area. Keddie is better known across the British Commonwealth. His book on James, *The Practical Christian*, (Evangelical Press, England, 1989) has provided great insights and challenges. I am indebted to him for his work. Unfortunately, you won't find his books at your local Christian bookstore. But in these days when the Internet is all the rage, his work can be found through an Internet search, or through Evangelical Press.

I also want to thank the people of Putnam Congregational Church who first heard these chapters as a sermon series on James. Since its first preaching I have refined some of this material to make it appeal to a wider audience, though for the most part it remains much as it was first heard.

When publishing became more of a reality I asked various friends for their consideration and comments of the manuscript, and made

various adjustments to it related to their comments. That has been an enriching and helpful process.

Rev. David Brand (Charlottesville, Virginia), Dr. John Gilmore (retired, Cincinnati), Dr. Jonathan Gold (Wheeling, West Virginia), Dr. James E. Martin (State College, Pennsylvania), and my friend Angela Longheinrich have each and all contributed to this work. Thank you all for your patience and understanding, for your time and careful reading, for your friendship and thoughtfulness. Thanks also to my wife, Stephanie, who continues to love and comfort me in my ministry in spite of the difficulties. Thanks also to Dr. Douglas Vickers, who recommended that I make the effort to publish my work.

INTRODUCTION

JAMES WAS WRITTEN TO CORRECT A church that was going astray in the early years of Christianity. From James we learn that the gospel is intensely personal, that it is not just a matter of signing a pledge or joining an institution.

The gospel, James reminded his readers, is a practical way of life. And where the actual living of that way of life is *not* demonstrated in the lives of Christians, the Holy Spirit must be presumed to be absent and the faithfulness of such people called into question. The gospel is not just a head belief, nor a heart-felt experience. It is primarily a way of life. Initiated through the grace of God alone, the gospel is not the gospel apart from its actual, behavioral manifestation in the lives of believers (James 2:14).

This book seeks to shine the light of Scripture into the darkened recesses of the contemporary church by shining the light of James into the hearts of its contemporary readers. This is an intensely personal work in the sense that it attempts to get at issues that few people (or preachers) are willing to talk about, but are essential for the gospel to take root in our lives.

As such, the following pages will provide a critique of the contemporary church from a biblical perspective, that of James. Many beliefs and practices of contemporary Christians and their churches will be found to be short of the biblical mark. As James has been grist for my mill, so I offer this as grist for yours.

Rather than a straight-forward commentary on James I have put together various thoughts and tangents that have been inspired by James in the midst of ministry. My objective is to help people see that James is applicable today in the same way that it was when it was written.

I pray that the Lord will use my efforts as He sees fit, and that you will see the gospel anew and our contemporary biblical challenge afresh.

Though the original edition was first preached in 1995, and published in 2001, it still has application. Indeed, the application is not mine but belongs to Scripture itself. Thus, it will always have application. I pray that it will be useful for you.

Phillip A. Ross
Marietta, Ohio

SURVIVING TEMPTATION

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.
—James 1:2-4

A young Christian was asked what she did when she was tempted. “When Satan knocks at the door of my heart,” she replied, “I simply ask Jesus to answer it.” She went on to explain that when Jesus answers the knock of the tempter, Satan says, “Oh, excuse me. I seem to have made a mistake. I was looking for someone else,” and leaves.

In faithfulness God dwells in the hearts of believers. When you are living a life of faith, the living Word takes command of your life by means of the written Word. The faithful find themselves wanting to live according to the dictates of the Bible. So, when we let Jesus answer temptation on our behalf, we experience the joy of victory over Satan and his minions and their myriad temptations. Yet we cannot believe that this victory over temptation is a once and for all victory. Temptation continues to sell its wares every day. So, no matter how many victories we have, we will never have enough strength in and of ourselves to stand against Satan. Rather, every time temptation knocks, we must ask Jesus to answer the door.

The Greek word for *trials* is the same as the word for *temptation* in the Lord’s Prayer, “and lead us not into *temptation*” (Matthew 6:13). Can there be joy in trials and temptations as James suggests? According to Scripture there not only can be, but there definitely is. The idea of joy in the midst of trials is found, for instance, in the Beatitudes.

“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11-12).

Christianity is nothing if not joy in the midst of struggle and gladness in spite of personal persecution. The Jews have always been a despised people. The nations of the world have always hated and warred against Israel. Like the Jews, the Christians whom Jesus addressed in the flesh would also be rejected by the world because of their faith—some even by their own families. The stories of Jesus¹ and of Paul² testify to the rejection of the gospel by the world.

We know that this situation—the hatred of God’s people by the world—was not unique to the Jews and Christians of the First Century. Rather, the world has always hated God and His people—and it still does. In all of history there has never been a time of greater Christian persecution (more individual Christians being persecuted) than during the Twentieth Century. More Christians have been martyred during the Twentieth Century than during any other period in history. Why?³ Perhaps because modernity has produced the most materialistic (worldly) culture ever known, and the gospel of Christ has always cut across the grain of worldly, materialistic values.

This means that Christians of all people should feel the tension and stress that is generated by living a Christian life in a fallen world, especially today. Faithful Christians of any stripe, living in a worldly culture, will be at odds with that culture. They will be out of step with society. Genuine Christians will not simply be out of date, not into the latest fads, but they will stand outside of the flow of fads and popular culture altogether. Christians will struggle to not get caught up in worldliness.

However, this is not an endorsement of a retreat-minded, ghettoized, and separated Christian subculture. It’s not that we need to join

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- 1 For more on the rejection of Jesus, see *Marking God’s Word—Understanding Jesus*, by Phillip A. Ross, Pilgrim Platform Books, 2007, Marietta, OH.
 - 2 The story of the rejection of the gospel continues through the adventures of Paul in the book of Acts. See *Acts of Faith—Kingdom Advancement*, by Phillip A. Ross, Pilgrim Platform Books, 2007, Marietta, OH.
 - 3 See *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, Jonathan Glover, Yale University Press, 2000.

the Amish or found some other Utopian commune. Not at all! Rather, it is a call to change the worldly culture in which we live with gospel of Jesus Christ. We are not to retreat from the world. We are to overcome it, or better yet, to overtake it, to overwhelm it with a host of ordinary Christians endeavoring to live ordinary Christian lives. We are to starve the fires of worldliness—greed, passion, lust, gossip, fear, etc.—with a lack of interest in sin.

IN THE CULTURE BUT NOT OF IT

The Greek word *ekklesia*, which is translated *church*, means “called out ones.” Christians are not to shun or spurn the culture in which they live because they are to live *in* it. But neither are they to be captive to culture. They are to be in control of the grip that culture has upon them and their families. Christians are to be *in* the world, but not *of* it (John 17:15), to live in it but not to find their interest or identity in it. Our interest and identity are to be found in Christ.

Jesus said it this way, praying to the Lord for His people,

“While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world” (John 17:12-14).

Christians are to live *in* the world, but not live *as* the world lives. We are to live in the midst of sin, materialism and worldly values—because there is no other choice, but we are not to share those values. Christians are to march to the beat of a different drummer. Christ sets the pace among the faithful, not the world—not television, not Wall Street, not fashion, not popular literature, not success, not institutional growth, not Christian romance novels or end times fiction, but Christ, and Christ alone—and that according to Scripture alone.

In a sense it might be easier to be *in* the world but not *of* the world if you lived as a missionary in a foreign culture than it is to do so in one’s own culture. At least as a missionary it would be clear that your own particular values and customs were supposed to be different from the people around you. But because we in America are in the habit of

thinking that we live in a Christian nation or society we are tempted daily to believe that every innovation coming down the pike has God's blessing. Too many modern Christians are more likely to christen the values of their society rather than stand against them, more likely to succumb to the peer pressure that calls people into conformity to Godlessness than to resist it. Too many people in our churches have never dealt with the clear commands discipleship in, for instance, Matthew 5:30 or Matthew 18:8. Most contemporary churches do not understand or ask for such discipleship commitment.

The application of this insight of James is to "count it all joy when you fall into various trials" (v. 2). We are called to apply spiritual joy to our trials and temptations. But how? How does that happen? It seems so contrary to our normal experience.

Biblical application always begins with belief. We must actually believe the gospel. We must trust it and live by it because it is faith and belief that are to be applied to our lives, not Bible stories. Like paint applied to our homes to beautify and protect them from a hostile environment, so faith and Christian belief are applied to our lives for beauty and protection. But applying Christianity to real life situations is much more difficult and complex than painting a house. Where paint is applied to the outside, Christianity must be applied on the inside before it ever shows on the outside. Right belief works hand-in-hand with right understanding.

JOY IN TRIALS

To understand how joy can be applied to personal trials we need to understand the difference between *happiness* and *joy*. Christ calls us to joy, not to mere happiness. It is not that Christ calls us to unhappiness. Not at all! Christ is not opposed to happiness. In fact, Christ provides the only real, lasting happiness that is actually possible. Yet we must understand that human happiness is a by-product of Christ's love for His people and His obedience to God. It is not the main concern of Christianity but is a derivative of it.

The word *happiness* is derived from the root *hap*.⁴ From *hap* we also get the words *happen* and *happenstance*. Happiness is essentially an appropriate response to present circumstances. A truly happy person does not wear a plastic smile. Happiness is an appropriate response to

4 Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University Press, 1971.

one's current circumstances. Crying at a funeral is an appropriate response. Fear in the face of danger is appropriate. Consequently, true happiness involves a range of emotions that are evoked by various circumstances. In genuine happiness there is a balance of joy and sorrow that is appropriately determined by one's circumstances. The downside of happiness is that people who are merely happy live at the mercy of their circumstances. Happiness is like a ship at sea, it is subject to the waves and winds of its current situation. And here is where the joy of Christ takes precedence over happiness.

Joy is the application of Christ's love in all circumstances, no matter what the situation, no matter what is happening. Christians can always lean on the love of Christ, calling to mind the eternal joy of salvation. Christians can call upon Christ's love, trust Christ's commitment, trust the fact that His obedience and subsequent death on the cross has indeed paid the price for the sin of every believer. No matter what anyone may have done (in the way of personal sin), no matter what anyone throws at us (in the way of trials or temptations), we can trust in the love and obedience of Christ. He loves His people and defends the faithful, no matter what. His sacrifice has provided for the salvation of every believer. Here is real joy! Here is joy that is not subject to the conditions and circumstances of the world.

Under the pain and stress of persecution, Christ's love and obedience are triumphant. Under the awkwardness of being called a nerd, or the stress of going against what may be popular, Christ's love and obedience promise and produce true and lasting joy. You see, joy is not mere happiness. Joy does not include being tossed to and fro by worldly circumstances. Joy is claiming personal happiness in Christ, no matter what! Joy is holding fast to the eternal happiness, promised and delivered by Christ, in spite of our circumstances.

Joy doesn't depend upon our circumstances. Joy does not adapt itself to circumstances, but to Christ. Joy claims the happiness of eternal salvation in Christ regardless of worldly and temporary circumstances. Christian joy is applied to life. No matter what life throws at God's people, the joy of the Lord is anchored on the rock of Christ. The Rock holds fast in the midst of life's storms. That's joy!

WHY ARE CHRISTIANS SO DOUR?

London is known for its high culture and worldly satisfactions. A wealthy man residing in a fashionable part of London was consumed with the pleasures and entertainment of high society, eating and drinking at the right places, being seen by the right people.

Encountering a woman he knew to be a Christian at a shop one day he asked, “Why is it that religious people are always trying to rob the world of its pleasures? I enjoy life, and I can’t see why they should be forever trying to take away from me what little pleasure this short life affords.”

He pretended not so much to ask the question, as to ponder out loud in her presence.

“You are terribly wrong,” the aging woman responded, “if that is what you think. Christians don’t want people to give up pleasure or happiness. Rather, we encourage people to receive a greater pleasure, and a greater happiness than anything they have ever known.”

The rest of the day he could not stop thinking about the idea of receiving a greater pleasure than high society provided. After all, he prided himself on having attained the greatest pleasures known to humanity. About a year later, he ran into the woman again, and admitted that his life was miserable.

“It is an empty, meaningless round of chasing temporary satisfactions that always end, leaving me less and less satisfied,” he reported.

He asked her about the joy she had told him about, and inquired about what he must do to receive the greater satisfaction of Christ that she had spoken about.

She took out her Bible and showed him the promises of God and the forgiveness of the Savior. She gave him her Bible, and soon he found the pardon, acceptance, and that joy that he had never known before. It was just as she had said.

The greatest pleasures the world can offer—even the most tempting enticements of Satan himself—cannot hold a candle to the eternal joy of knowing Christ. Do you know what I’m talking about? Are you familiar with that kind of Joy?