

James and John—Sons of Thunder

Mark 3:17

December 16, 2012

Introduction

Every day we see on the news of some people killing others because of their zeal for their religion (any religion). We often associate zealousness as a bad trait because we think such attitudes as unthinking and intolerant. The intellectual world often views zeal as a mindless devotion to an ideal. Zeal could be either good or bad depending on the person and how s/he uses expresses such zeal.

There are zealous acts recorded in Scripture and people often misunderstand some of the acts of zeal recorded as automatic approval from God. We need to keep in mind that not everything recorded in Scripture is in fact an approval by God. Such times, it is a record of human being's failure to live up to the righteous standards of God. We can judge rightly if such actions are honoring God. We will look at several instances of zealous acts that are not approved by God.

2 Kings 10:16-17 *Jehu said, "Come with me and see my zeal for the LORD." Then he had him ride along in his chariot. ¹⁷When Jehu came to Samaria, he killed all who were left there of Ahab's family; he destroyed them, according to the word of the LORD spoken to Elijah.*

(Background: Ahab had angered the Lord by killing Naboth for his vineyard. The Lord pronounced judgment against the whole family of Ahab, telling him that none of his family will live. After Ahab's death, Ahaziah reigned for 1 year before dying. Joram took over as king. The man Jehu was responsible for coming after the whole family of Ahab and killing them. However, Jehu's zeal went beyond God's mandate.)

2 Kings 10:11 *So Jehu killed everyone in Jezreel who remained of the house of Ahab, as well as all his chief men, his close friends and his priests, leaving him no survivor.*

God did not approve of Jehu's actions beyond the killing of Ahab's sons.

Hosea 1:4 *Then the LORD said to Hosea, "Call him Jezreel, because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel."*

2 Kings 10:31 *Yet Jehu was not careful to keep the law of the LORD, the God of Israel, with all his heart. He did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam, which he had caused Israel to commit.*

He killed all of Ahab's officers, friends, and priests. His actions were beyond what God had asked. He was self-seeking, worldly, and ambitious.

Paul says that having zeal without knowledge is a very dangerous thing.

Romans 10:2-3 *For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. ³Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.*

Remember Paul consented that Christians be imprisoned and killed before he encountered Jesus Christ.

Philippians 3:6 *as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.*

Zeal without knowledge or obedience is always bad and leads to awful consequences; however, there is zeal that God approves. We are to have zeal in the Lord. We should be quick to defend our Lord's honor with truth and love. We should not have to be passive in our defense for the gospel.

Our Lord Jesus demonstrates such zealousness for the Lord that we should emulate.

John 2:12-17 *After this He went down to Capernaum with His mother and brothers and His disciples. There they stayed for a few days. ¹³When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple courts He found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵So He made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; He scattered the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶To those who sold doves He said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn My Father's house into a market!" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for Your house will consume Me."*

What a scene that Jesus makes! We must remember that Jesus controls His anger. He does not let His anger get away from Him. He wants God's glory to be evident in His house, not marred by some worldly marketplace that will ruin people's impression of God. He was zealous for God's holy name.

Psalms 119:139 *My zeal has consumed me, because my enemies have forgotten Your words.*

We love God and His words—we become so excited and passionate that we want to defend His honor and teach to people. We become mad when people ignore His words and teachings.

Mark 3:17 *James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder*

James and John are two brothers that have great zeal for God, but it was not the right zeal. Our Lord has to mold them and teach them to have the right zeal. He calls them the Sons of Thunder—both a mild rebuke and an encouragement. Our Lord can use anyone for His glory.

I. James, Zeal Under Control

Note: What do we know about James? Almost nothing. He is never mentioned alone in the gospels, always with his brother John. He is listed first, which is implied that he is the older brother. We know that he is a fisherman by trade, and that his father has a successful business because he has money to have hired help. There are few instances where the gospels record James and John's actions and we will examine both men together then separately.

- Unharnessed zeal

Luke 9:51-56 *As the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. ⁵²And He sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for Him; ⁵³but the people there did not welcome Him, because He was heading for Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them just as Elijah did—Some Gk manuscripts have this?" ⁵⁵But Jesus turned and rebuked them, ⁵⁶and they went to another village.*

- Situation
 - Traveling through Samaria
- Conflict

- Animosity between the Jews and Samaritans
- Samaritans refuse Jesus hospitality because He is heading to Jerusalem the last time. They do not approve of the Jews worshipping at Jerusalem (They worship at Mt. Gerizim).
- Wrong attitude
 - James and John ask Jesus to allow them to call down fire from heaven like Elijah
 - Fire comes down from heaven because of judgment of God against Ahaziah
 - The disciples have no power to all down fire from heaven
- Jesus' rebuke
 - Jesus comes to save men from their sins
 - Jesus is in effect telling them to cool it with their vengeance against their slight against Jesus
 - James and John were zealous for Jesus' honor—that is admirable, but they did it without love and consideration for their eternal state
 - Appropriate zeal is that we be angry at the world's rejection of Jesus, but we continue to share the gospel and pray that they come to the light
- Unfocused ambition

Matthew 20:20-23 *Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of Him. ²¹"What is it you want?" He asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at Your right and the other at Your left in Your kingdom." ²²"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. ²³Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from My cup, but to sit at My right or left is not for Me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by My Father."*

- Request for place of honor
 - James and John wanted the throne or at least the closest proximity to the throne (Mark tells us that they came up with the request themselves)
 - They asked their mother to ask Jesus for them—she agreed
 - Let's give these brothers some credit here—they are asking a rejected and despised Man for a position in His kingdom! This is faith!
 - However, their eyes were fixed on the temporal earthly kingdom—not heavenly
- Jesus' promise
 - If you want glory—then you will suffer prior to that
 - I have no kingdom on earth to grant you left or right positions
 - Fix your eyes on heaven for that is where you will reign
 - Before all that—you will suffer
- Zealous for the Lord

Acts 12:1-3 *It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ²He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.*

- This is the only time James is mentioned alone
- James is killed by the sword (beheaded or pierced through)
- Why? The implication is that James is saying and preaching things that Herod did not like
- James' death was a political expediency
- He is the Son of Thunder!

II. John, Anger to Love

Note: I will talk about John briefly because I've talked about him often enough when we went through the Gospel of John and the letter of 1 John. We know that John is called the apostle of love, but we need to remember that Jesus called him the Son of Thunder as well. He loved, but he was also a thunder of truth.

With John, it is all black and white. There is nothing in between. He does not tolerate false teachers and asks us not to fellowship with them or invite them into our house (**2 John 10-11**). When he was with Jesus, he was ambitious, insensitive, and passionate. His time with Jesus changed him—in the gospel of John, he never identifies himself, but calls himself the one that Jesus loved. It was a declaration of grace of how the Lord Jesus could love a man such as him. There is one such lesson that the gospels record of him speaking, and it was a lesson that carried with him for the rest of his life.

- Unloving zeal

Luke 9:49-50 *"Master," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in Your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us." ⁵⁰"Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."*

Mark 9:38 *"Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in Your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."*

- John was mad that someone else was driving out demons
- It is interesting is that this man was successful in doing so (because Jesus seems to imply that he has the authority to do so)
- This is an example of sectarianism—rebuking someone for ministering in Jesus' name, but not part of the group
- Jesus' rebuke stung John (and the disciples—as they were complicit in John's stopping someone)
- Jesus is in effect saying—you do not know what God is doing, and he is of God

*If you meet him again, let him go on quietly in the work in which God owns him. If he were not of God, the demons would not be subject to him, and his work could not prosper. A spirit of bigotry has little countenance from these passages. There are some who are so outrageously wedded to their own creed, and religious system, that they would rather let sinners perish than suffer those who differ from them to become the instruments of their salvation. Even the good that is done they either deny or suspect, because the person does not follow them. This also is vanity and an evil disease. (Adam Clarke's Commentary of the Bible—**Mark 9:39**)*

- John learned that lesson well!
- When he was an old man, he would preach "My little children, love one another."
- John learned how to balance his zeal for the Lord with love
- He was a tender-hearted man who did not compromise in truth.

Conclusion

Zeal is fine for Christians when it is tempered by love. Zeal for truth without love for others is brutality. Love for others without zeal for truth is destructively sentimentality.