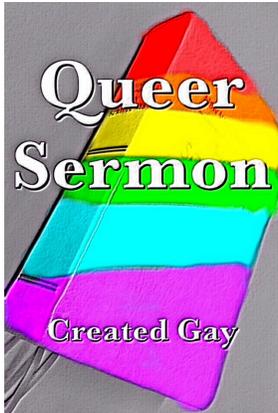


CREATED GAY



The Oil of Love

by Gary Simpson

The book of James was written to the Jewish Believers who were living outside of Israel. These Jewish Believers in Jesus were facing persecution.¹ As sexual minority people, we share a common experience of oppression, persecution and discrimination with the Jewish Believers for whom the book of James was written. In some respects, James is very much a book for our community and for any other oppressed community. These early Christians were descendants of slaves and freed slaves living in the Roman Empire. Jewish people have traditionally struggled to maintain their language, culture and religion. Rabbi Hayim Donin describes Israel as a tiny nation struggling against absorption and assimilation.² I suspect that few other groups of Christians faced a more difficult struggle to maintain their language, culture and faith than these early Jewish Believers in Jesus of Nazareth.

Members of minority groups adopt the values of the larger society. Because society may look down on a minority group, members of that minority group may come to look down upon themselves too.³ In some cases, we are looking at internalized societal self-hate. That means some people actually come to hate themselves, because society hates them. As members of sexual minority groups and their allies, you can imagine how unhealthy self-hate is. We have been there as a community and as individuals. On the Internet, I read examples of what might be internalize self-hate among some Jewish people that deeply disturbed me.

While I don't think I need to describe this for trans, gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, and queer Christians, reviewing this information might be of help to people who are visiting today. The feeling can develop that one either deserves all the bad things that happened or that one does not deserve good things. People who have internalized self-hate may be prepared to settle for second or third best, because they have such low self-esteem.

The book of James was written to Jewish believers. Some of those early Christians may have been struggling with self-hate, because they knew their families had been carried off into slavery. They might have even come to think of themselves as deserving to be slaves.

James is a valuable book. In the Talmud, the story is told of Rabbi Judah. The emperor sent him a valuable diamond and asked for "a token of friendship." The emperor received a Mezuzah, which is a very decorative container that holds a short verse from the Torah. Jewish people often have a Mezuzah on the doorway of their homes.

The emperor complained to the Rabbi that the value of the gift he received in return from the Rabbi was not much compared to the value of the diamond. Rabbi Judah responded, "There is a difference between my gift and thine. That which thou gavest to me I must watch and guard lest it be

¹ Luder Whitlock, Jr., et. al., eds. *New Geneva Study Bible*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1995), 1958.

² Hayim Donin. *To be a Jew*. n.p.: Basic Books, 1991.

³ "Self-Hating Jews, Self-Hatred." *The Peace Encyclopedia*. <<http://www.yahoodi.com/peace/selfhatred.html>>.

stolen from me; but this which I send will watch and guard over thee, even as it is written, 'When thou walkest it will lead thee, and when thou liest down it will watch over thee.'"⁴

There is no need to fear the book of James. Like the piece of the Torah found in the Mezuzah, James guards us and keeps us. The book of James when understood in the context of God's love, does not condemn.

James 2:14-26 (KJV) What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.

25 Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

There are people who believe that these verses tell us how we are saved. Some people might not feel comfortable looking at the passage, until we discuss that. So, we will start by discussing verses 21 to 26.

Verses 21 to 23 do not say that we can somehow earn salvation. God is not petty. The Eternal Companion cannot be purchased by our cheap works. Verse 23 is about Genesis Chapter 15. In Genesis Chapter 15, God makes a deal with Abraham. In that contract, God promises to make Abraham's descendants into a nation. By faith in God, Abraham is justified. **Genesis 15:6** And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness. Before humanity, Abraham was justified when he offered Isaac as a sacrifice. There are some who claim that Abraham's faith is proven or "justified by his outward obedience." But his works were not what earned his salvation.⁵

John McNeill describes an ancient application of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. He says Augustine made the point that chastity does not get anybody into heaven. The wise and the foolish virgins were equally virgins. Only the wise virgins had oil in their lamps. To Augustine, the oil symbolized "warm human love." The foolish virgins were not able to get into heaven, because they were "cold and distant" and thought moral perfection could get them into heaven. Augustine felt there was only one way to get into heaven and

⁴ H. Polano (translator) *The Talmud*. (London: Frederick Wayne, n.d.).

⁵ Whitlock, et. al., 1961.

that was through love.⁶ The Holy Spirit comes into our lives and God's love in our lives is what gives us the "warm human love" that Augustine discusses. In the context of God's love, we can discuss the rest of the passage.

Verses 14 to 17 show that our faith does not touch the world, unless we put faith into action. Today, there are people in the city who have no home and who do not have enough food to eat. Our having a double portion of potluck and eating our hearts out is a sign of faith, but it does nothing to show those who do not know that God cares about them.

Spiritual piety does not touch the hearts and souls of people, unless it is demonstrated in a practical way. The young man who contacted me with a broken heart does not care about my theological understanding. The broken-hearted man only wanted someone to sit with him, in silence, as he ached. Some day, that practical act may open the door for spiritual discussions. We cannot teach the head when the heart is hurting.

As a church, we study the Word. To the core of our beings, Protestant Christians are people of the Word. Our study of the Bible needs to go hand-in-hand with practical service for God and with social justice.

Any congregation that wants to grow and to make a difference in the world needs to focus on something bigger than the local church, something outside of itself. Study alone and inward focusing only on our needs results in us seeing only our own personal and congregational flaws. Like some teenagers who spend a lot of time looking at themselves in the mirror, we may find it difficult to find anything nice in our own reflection.

Study of the Bible and of theologians that never shows its fruit in practical ways is dead faith. Focusing only on study of the Bible and theology can result in congregations becoming divided along feel logical lines. But congregations that have a strong focus and serving humanity do not pick at them sells very much. When we are partners in service, partners and sharing the Word in practical ways we tend to be more united.

I wonder what James would say to a queer church. I wonder if it go like this.

- What good does it do when an LGBT teenager is homeless and we say, "Chin up. It will get better"? Our words do not house or feed the teen.
- What good does it do when unarmed Black men are killed by the police and we say, "Just at the wrong place, at the wrong time"? Our sentiments do not carry a #BlackLivesMatter sign to a peaceful protest.
- What good does it do when indigenous women go missing and are found murdered and we chalk it up to "life style"?

The call of this passage of James is for us to be the kind of Christians who can both articulate the faith with our hands, with the things we do that change the world, and with our theological statements. To God's queer tribe, the challenge James gives us is to be the hands and feet of Jesus, by working to reduce all forms of prejudice, discrimination, powerlessness and poverty.

⁶ John J. McNeill. *Taking a Chance on God*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 123-124.

