

JAMES 1:19-21 ROOTING OUT ROT

“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”¹

Observing our evangelical Zion, I note that we are infected with a debilitating virus that was once confined to those living in the world. Our humour reflects what we watch on television. Consequently, we are growing increasingly coarse and sarcastic in responding to those about us. We defend ourselves in such a way that it appears that we no longer recognise the enemy. We seem to believe that anyone who does not agree with us deserves our scorn, or even our rage. James addresses the tendency of Christians to bring into the new life attitudes which should have been left in the world. We will do well to review his words and learn how to root out rot in our lives.

ASSESSING THE ROT — Holiness is a concept that is seemingly absent from contemporary religious life. The holiness that is accepted among the saints appears artificial—a pale, insipid imitation of the real thing. Our piety is outward; we substitute religious observance for true holiness. The great tragedy of contemporary evangelicals is that we have what has been described as peg-leg religion—we have to strap it on every morning. And though it gets us around, it is cold and lifeless. Whereas our fathers were once concerned to honour God in all things, we are concerned to grab all the gusto we can, because we only go around once.

Let me pointedly address some of the observations I make concerning the absence of holiness. There was a day when modesty in dress and demeanour was a mark of a young woman’s or a young man’s Christian walk. I know that our grandmothers were somewhat fanatical about their dress, but somehow young women today, to say nothing of many older women, are indistinguishable from the world in their dress.

We attended a songfest for a missionary organisation several years back. A number of churches were represented that evening, with musical groups from each of the several churches presenting music between the congregational singing. I noted the dress of several of the young women from a group that still speaks of holiness as a doctrinal standard for their churches. On their web site, the denomination makes the following statement: “We believe in holy living.” The denomination makes a strong statement on the necessity of a holy life as a prerequisite to enjoying the blessings of God. In order to maintain modesty, female dress is specifically addressed by the denomination.

As a group of young women from this particular congregation arose to present a special number that evening, I noted that each of the girls was dressed more like a common trollop than a representative of the Saviour. Bare midriffs, plunging necklines and skin-tight pants were certainly not the standard of previous generations.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Lest you imagine that I am picking on another denomination to the exclusion of our own Baptist people, let me hasten to state that almost all the young women present that evening, and a surprising number of the adult women, were dressed in skimpy attire more suitable for a bar than for a church. Baptists were overly represented in the crowd on that particular evening, just as I observe the dress of many young women attending services of churches I have pastored who would pronounced themselves to be Baptists.

Perhaps we have forgotten the apostolic admonition that declares, “I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling; likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works” [1 TIMOTHY 2:8-10]. The Apostle specifically addresses women’s dress, as that is an apparent problem.

According to this passage, women are to dress respectably, modestly and with self-control. Women’s dress are addressed by the words, “respectable,” “modesty” and “self-control.” Other translations clarify this understanding of Paul’s words. The New Century Version states, “[W]omen should wear proper clothes that show respect and self-control.”² According to the NET Bible, “[W]omen are to dress in suitable apparel, with modesty and self-control.”³ Yet another recent translation affirms that, “[W]omen are to dress themselves in modest clothing, with decency and good sense.”⁴ Modest dress demonstrates respect—for God and for those of the opposite sex, and self-control.

Commenting on this passage, Dr. Tommy Lea writes, “To dress ‘modestly’ demands that the women dress tastefully and not provocatively. The term ‘dress’ (*katastolē*) describes the outward deportment of the women as expressed in the clothes they wear. To practice ‘decency and propriety’ demands that the women not flaunt their . . . beauty. The former word shows reserve in matters of sex, and the latter word indicates a mastery of the appetites, particularly in matters of sex. The two terms refer to inner virtues.”⁵

The UBS Handbook on this epistle instructs translators, “The first thing then that the women are urged to pay attention to is their dress or *apparel*. There are three qualifiers mentioned before *apparel*: *modestly*, *sensibly* and *seemly*; these three terms are related and their meanings overlap in some ways. *Modestly* comes from a word that can mean “modest” in the sense of well ordered and moderate, hence not excessive, but can also mean ‘proper,’ or ‘suitable,’ or ‘becoming,’ ‘simple,’ ‘unassuming.’ *Sensibly* translates a word that means ‘moderate’ or ‘reasonable’ with the implication that the person is aware of what is best in a particular situation. The third qualifier, *seemly*, translates a word that pertains to being proper or suitable and thus contributing to one’s attractiveness and being respected by others. . . . An alternative translation model is the following: “The Christian women should dress in a proper (or, discreet) way, wearing clothes that are both sensible (or, unassuming), not extravagant in the sight of others.”⁶

² **The Every Day Bible: New Century Version** (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN 2005)

³ **NET Bible** (Biblical Studies Press, 2006)

⁴ **Holman Christian Standard Version** (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2003)

⁵ Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, **The New American Commentary, 1, 2 Timothy, Titus, vol. 34** (Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN 1992) 96

⁶ Daniel C. Arichea and Howard Hatton, **A Handbook on Paul’s Letters to Timothy and to Titus** (United Bible Societies, New York, NY 1995) 56

Another example of the deficit of holiness among contemporary Christians is revealed through our speech. Language has degenerated among evangelical Christians; we sound like the world. I am not speaking solely of coarse language, though our language does seem to be growing coarser, both among women and among men. We Christians are prone to use sarcasm and vitriol to castigate those with whom we disagree instead of heeding the words of Scripture. In **EPHESIANS 5:1-4**, Paul admonished believers, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

“But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. ***Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place***, but instead let there be thanksgiving.”

This admonition comes hard after previous instruction in the way God expects Christians to speak. “***Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up***, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” [**EPHESIANS 4:29**].

Neither of these observations immediately addresses the lack of gentleness, the absence of civility, or the apparent delight in harbouring hostility that now appears to mark the lives of many of the professed saints of God. In part, this condition exists and is tolerated, perhaps even fostered, because churches are run like business and congregants generally have a consumer mentality concerning church. Church leaders are too often selected, not on the basis of godliness, but because of their stature in the community, because of their business acumen, according to the size of their portfolio, or by other such criteria that are valued in the world. Congregants are loath to commit themselves to a congregation, and churches are reluctant to hold members accountable to the standards clearly set forth in the Word of God. Attendance at a service is more highly prized than is commitment and submission to the Body of Christ. As result of substituting our own values for godly values, we seldom witness church bodies that are regenerate. What we do witness are churches that are run like business with application of the latest psychological techniques to continue to “grow” the church.

Pastors are chosen to be administrators instead of being shepherds charged with the ministry of the Word, protecting the flock, oversight of the church, pastoring the people and providing an example in godliness. Consequently, congregations are often ignorant of the Word and of the will of God, and they are frequently unruly in their deportment and conduct. However, Christians usually feel good about themselves, primarily because they are not held accountable for their behaviour and because they see their own behaviour as good as or better than that of the pastor.

Concerning the consumer mentality of churches, the fact that we change churches whenever we want testifies to the prevalence of that attitude among church members. This is a reflection of society at large, as we are no longer “students” but “educational consumers,” no longer “patients” but “health consumers,” and among the churches, we are no longer “worshippers” but “church shoppers.” Church historians Bruce Shelley and Marshall Shelley have written, “Many people assume that their needs count for more than their loyalty. If their needs go unmet, they are quick to switch to another church, just as they would doctors, grocery stores or airlines to find better service.”⁷

⁷ Bruce Shelley and Marshall Shelley, **Consumer Church**, cited in John S. Hammett, **Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches** (Kregel, Grand Rapids, MI 2005) 156

Early Baptists did not permit such consumer mentality to reign; rather, they held one another accountable. Hammett cites Leon McBeth who notes that in 1728, a member church of the Philadelphia Triennial Association asked for the association to give its advice on the question of whether or not it was proper to allow a member of one church to move his letter to another church, when his residence had not changed. The association answered in the negative, reflecting the idea that church membership is not a matter of finding a place where one's needs may be met, but finding a place where one can obey God's commands with a clear conscience.⁸

Today, commitment to a church is viewed much like commitment to a particular coffee shop or commitment to a particular brand name. If a better offer comes along, or if tastes change, then the individual can leave the former congregation without thought. However, this is not the teaching of the Word of God where we are placed in the church according to the will of God. Our placement is less for our immediate benefit than it is so that we can exercise the gifts God has invested in us to build up the Body where He has settled us. In other words, at least as important as our own growth and development is the opportunity to build others and to glorify God through doing so.

The consumer mentality that has infected modern church life leads those in attendance to adopt a position that permits them to take whatever benefits are available from a church without investing their lives in building the church. They view the church much as they would Zellers or The Bay, shopping there whenever there is a sale or as long as the product offered is sufficiently attractive, but always willing to shop elsewhere when a better sale is announced. So, they are willing to take whatever they can from the church of the moment, but when a better deal comes along, they will vote with their feet and shop elsewhere.

The examples of entrenched rot among the churches are by no means exhaustive, but rather representative. Frankly, church health in the modern experience is dismal. We have been ungodly so long that we have grown accustomed to the darkness. Modern churchgoers are intoxicated with Babylon. When a call for holiness is issued, or when the festering wound is exposed, the reaction witnessed too often reveals our love with the world instead of leading us to godly repentance.

I am hard-pressed to know whether this consumer mentality results from the exaltation of self-esteem in modern society, or whether the emphasis upon self-esteem has led us to the consumer mentality. What I do see is that the emphasis upon personal pride is well nigh endemic in modern society; and the churches are grossly contaminated with this deadly sin.

General knowledge is woefully absent from graduates of modern schools. Math and science scores have declined significantly during the past several decades. Vocabulary is declining among recent graduates. Despite being unable to think or to compete on the world stage, we have a generation that feels prouder of their ignorance than any previous generation.

This pride in what we are has infiltrated the church. Vast numbers of modern churchgoers are doctrinally ignorant and uncertain what they believe, yet they feel good about themselves. Moreover, they are assured that they can tell the preacher what he should say, because they know how they feel! Consequently, church business becomes a search for what makes us feel good instead of being a search for the will of God.

⁸ Cited in Hammett, op. cit.

Woe to the church that dares attempt to impose loving discipline or that expects commitment from those wishing to take from the services without giving of themselves. Modern congregants have too much self-esteem to permit themselves to be held accountable. Research shows that criminals have the highest level of self-esteem—defined as entitlement without achievement. Sound familiar? That's a kid. They want ice cream and ponies, without having to work for either. Is it any surprise that when you stop saying “no” to kids, what you're left with is Charles Manson in Osh Kosh B'gosh. Is it any wonder that when you stop pandering to the fallen desires of modern churchgoers, what you have left is Herod the Great in ecclesiastical garb?

ADDRESSING THE ROT — “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires.” God does not tell us merely to reject what is wrong; rather, He always encourages us to replace what is wrong with that which is healthful and good. To be certain, we need to “put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness.” However, we are also urged to “receive with meekness the implanted Word.” The fact that we have difficulty recognising the rot demonstrates how far we have wandered from the truth.

Consider the positive steps God provides in order to address the rot that threatens community among the people of God. James provides three specific requirements to provide an environment that will support the righteousness God requires. They each require an exercise of the will as individuals take control of their senses.

The first requirement is that each individual must be *quick to hear*. Perhaps we cannot explore every possible permutation of this particular injunction, but we can lay the groundwork that will permit us to begin to build ourselves up in this most holy Faith. Those who are quick to hear will heed the admonition of the Word. They will attend the preaching of the Word, determining the veracity of what is said through comparing Scripture with Scripture. Luke commended the Bereans as being more noble than were the members of the synagogue in Thessalonica because they “received the Word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if” the things Paul was teaching was true [ACTS 17:11]. In a similar manner, each Christian should be eager to look into the Word to see for himself or herself whether the things declared from the pulpit are true.

Recently, I was informed that a woman was complaining that I had taught wrong doctrine for years. It is easy to condemn a preacher when he is not present. However, that same woman often sat under my preaching without uttering a word. If I have been errant in my doctrine, she should have had the courage and the courtesy to point out the error I was teaching. If she knew I was wrong and permitted me to teach error, she is condemned because of the many people that have been turned aside from the truth. If she knew I was wrong and refused to confront me, her love is flawed because she did not wish to inconvenience herself to correct me. When Priscilla, together with her husband Aquila, heard Apollos teaching inaccurately, they took him into their home and “explained to him the way of God more accurately” [ACTS 18:26]. If she disagreed and was silent, she should now remain silent or stand exposed as craven. Being on the receiving end of her wicked accusations gives me a measure of understanding of Jesus’ query of those who came to arrest Him. You will recall that the Master asked the mob, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me” [MATTHEW 26:55].

Christians that are growing in holiness will seek every opportunity to learn. They will not be content with merely attending the service of the church, they will read the Word for themselves, studying to know and to understand the will of God. Paul's admonition to Timothy is not restricted to preachers when he says, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the Word of truth" [2 TIMOTHY 2:15].

In the words of the Apostle, "If anyone teaches other doctrine and does not agree with the sound teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and with the teaching that promotes godliness, he is conceited, understanding nothing, but having a sick interest in disputes and arguments over words. From these come envy, quarrelling, slanders, evil suspicions, and constant disagreement among men whose minds are depraved and deprived of the truth, who imagine that godliness is a way to material gain" [1 TIMOTHY 6:3-5].

Godliness is demonstrated when the members of the congregation reveal that they are *slow to speak*. James will later admonish his readers, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" [JAMES 3:1]. However, in our egalitarian world, your thoughts are every bit as valid as my thoughts. Truth is decided by what we feel instead of through submitting ourselves to the revealed truth of the Word. Consider how many people clamour to be heard, imagining that their feelings are the final arbiter in any dispute.

I especially appreciate the way Kenneth Wuest handled this verse when he was preparing his expanded version of the New Testament. "Stop becoming many teachers, my brethren, knowing that we shall receive a more severe sentence of condemnation, for with reference to many things everybody stumbles [makes a mistake, goes astray, sins]. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, this one is a spiritually mature man, able to hold in check also his entire body [JAMES 3:1, 2]"⁹.

The spiritual heirs about those whom Paul warned Timothy remain among us to this day. "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions" [1 TIMOTHY 1:3-7].

Arrogant members demonstrating their ignorance on almost any subject may be readily witnessed in almost any congregational business meeting, where the individuals are quick to speak and slow to hear. The tragedy arising from the presence of such individuals is that congregants frequently assume that they are truly well versed in the truth, though they are utterly ignorant of the will of God. Some of us have witnessed an individual who confidently asserts his qualifications to lead the congregation, arrogantly stating his position on almost any subject to the detriment of the people of God.

Again, each member of the congregation is urged to work to be *slow to anger*. Families must live together, and living in close proximity to one another creates friction. Friction can lead to tension. However, we must encourage one another to be patient and gentle, even with those who are irritating.

⁹ Kenneth S. Wuest, **The New Testament: An Expanded Translation** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1961)

The Apostle Paul urged Christians in Thessalonica to “admonish the idle, [to] encourage the fainthearted, [and to] help the weak.” Then, he added this qualifying warning, “Be patient with them all” [1 THESSALONIANS 5:14]. The idle are to be admonished, to be held accountable to fulfil the ministry God gave them; but our admonition must be with gentleness. Though we may grow weary with the fainthearted, we must nevertheless be patient with them as we encourage them. The weak can leave us drained as we expend our energies on them. However, we must train ourselves to be patient with them as we make every effort to build them in the Faith.

What James is delivering to his readers is nothing short of practical Christianity. There is nothing theoretical in his words. Rather, he is providing teaching that may be immediately applied. Whether we continue as people of the flesh, or whether we become spiritual people, depends upon whether we receive the words that James has given us. People of the flesh are jealous and always stirring up strife; spiritual people seek peace without compromising the Word of God [see 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-4]. Worldly people make accommodation to appease their own immediate and personal desires; godly people seek to please God in all things [see TITUS 2:11-14].

This is what is worldly, what is fleshly, what is ungodly. “All bitterness, anger and wrath, insult and slander must be removed from you, along with all wickedness” [EPHESIANS 4:31]. This must be done, because ungodliness is rooted in your attitude; ungodly attitudes merely reveal the underlying attitudes that have contaminated our lives. The words that follow are the result of an ungodly heart, not the cause for ungodliness. Again, Paul has warned Christians, “You must also put away all the following: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language from your mouth” [COLOSSIANS 3:8].

We are taught in the Word to seek to focus on that which is good instead of that which is evil or wicked. Paul encourages Christians to replace the evil with the good. “Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practise these things” [PHILIPPIANS 4:8, 9].

Godly leaders are a blessing in that they provide an example for us to follow. This is the reason we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” [HEBREWS 13:7]. Again, the writer encourages Christians, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will give an account” [HEBREWS 13:17].

Do they adhere to the truth? Then you follow their example. Do they seek to make peace without compromise? Then, follow their example. Do they endeavour to walk in the Spirit? Then, follow their example. Do they seek your welfare and the benefit of the entire congregation? Then, follow their example. We have no warrant to follow those who are self-serving and who are always operating in the flesh, controlled by their rage. To follow such people is foolishness of the gravest sort.

Watch the leaders of the congregation and consider whether they are quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger. If that characterises them, then you will do well to follow their precedence. Are they considerate? Do they seek what is best for the entire congregation and for the glory of God? Do they hold their anger in check even when falsely attacked? Give thanks for such leaders and follow their example.

REBUILDING OUR ZION — “Put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word.” We have birthed a new congregation, and we can be a congregation like all the other congregations—run as a business and fostering a beggar mentality, or we can determine now that we will seek to discover what pleases God and courageously do that which is pleasing in His sight. The decision is ours. My prayer is that we will choose to do what is pleasing in the sight of the Lord.

I am under no illusions. Already, New Beginnings Baptist Church has detractors and critics that speak ill of us. We can either attempt to answer every critic, in which case we will have no time to fulfil the ministry God has assigned to us; or we can determine that we will live godly, holy lives that silence those who think to do us evil. It is my goal to keep the goal of honouring the Lord Jesus before each member of this congregation, both through what is preached, but urging each one to live a holy life.

This means that this congregation must be prepared to be a church, and never slip into the routine of going to church. This means that we must not only insist upon a regenerate church membership, but that we must invest our lives in one another to ensure that we hold one another accountable to become all that Christ intends us to be. I do not demand perfection of any of us; but I do expect honesty. When we fail, when we sin, I expect that we will be honest and quick to confess that sin and to turn again to walk in the way. When others become aware of our failure, I expect that we will lovingly hold one another accountable, gently encouraging the wayward to return to the path that leads upward and to glory.

I am not greatly impressed by what people say they believe; but I am mightily impressed by how people live. Those who say they are followers of Christ, though living indistinguishably from earth dwellers, reveal through their lives that they know nothing of the grace of God. Those who humbly seek to walk according to the Spirit demonstrate that He is at work in their lives. James will address this issue shortly when he writes, “Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” [JAMES 3:13-18].

We are enjoined to strip away all that defiles us in the sight of the Lord, and to receive the Word. James will continue on from this point urging us to receive the implanted Word. That is, we must act aggressively to rid ourselves of that which is filthy and wicked, preparing our heart to receive the Word. The fruit which is to be grown in a prepared heart is the patience called for in the opening verses of this chapter. James is continuing a theme, then. To receive the Word with meekness is to accept it, acting on it as God wills. Those who argue with the Word, or who resist the Word, give mute evidence that they know little either of the will of God or of the Word of God. Those who receive with meekness the implanted Word do not endeavour to twist it to conform to their own imaginations. Those who argue the Word from various points of view demonstrate their ignorance at best and their lost condition at worst.

At issue is whether we demonstrate that we are seeking God, or whether we reveal that we are pursuing our own desires. James is calling us to seek God with our whole heart. The life of a believer is transformed by the presence of God's Holy Spirit, and thus transformed; the child of God grows ever more like the Father.

And that is our invitation to you. To receive the life that is promised in God's beloved Son, to confess Him openly as Master of your life, to follow Him, identifying with Him in baptism as He commands, to place your life in the fellowship of this church, whatever the Spirit of God is calling you to do, do it now. The Word of God calls each person to repent and believe the Good News that Jesus has offered His own life as a sacrifice for sin. And though He was buried, Jesus the Lord conquered death and rose victoriously from the grave.

The Master invites each of us to life in the Son of God with these glorious words, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. For it is with the heart that one believes and is declared righteous, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." The Word of the Lord declares that "everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved" [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13, author's translation]. Believe this message and be saved. Do it now. Amen.