

Oh, James. If you haven't before, go home and read the whole thing. It's like 5 chapters, so it won't take long. I say this because James is a mostly clear set of instructions for how Christians should live. It's the kind of letter we all need to review, but it's also the kind of thing the church really should've been trying to live out for millenia. Part of me just wants to read James right now and call that my sermon. I mean look at it. "Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind." In other words, I don't know how many different ways to say this, and I'm not sure how many more weeks I can stand to talk about it (or how many y'all can stand to listen to it). But come on. I've said it ad nauseam, and I'll say it again. I don't see how what passes for so much of Christianity today can actually be called Christian with a straight face. So, I'm gonna let y'all percolate on that on your own. But before I set you loose on James, I want to remind you to read it with as little bias as possible 'cause, depending on the biases of the news you listen to, you may be predisposed to hear wisdom in your candidate and wickedness in the other. Try to set your preconceptions aside, search for the truth (not the supposed "truth" you like but the real thing), and then read James.

Instead, today I want to share a different scriptural idea: the antichrist. Now, you should know that just like there were many who bore the title of Messiah before Jesus came along, there've been many who've borne the title Antichrist. "Messiah," by the way, is Hebrew. "Christ" is basically just the Greek word used instead. So an antichrist is an inverted messiah, one who subjugates and exploits the people in the name of himself instead of liberating them in the name God. Think of it this way: if you're a Colgate Hockey fan, every team you play against is an anticolgate. But Cornell is THE Anticolgate. When Colgate plays Cornell, you don't abandon Colgate and decide to root for Cornell instead because there's a chance they might make the stock market jump. So, the Antichrist, the big bad from Revelation, probably referred to the Emperor of Rome who was the primary exploiter of God's people back then. But we've carried the idea forward and now many fear the return of the Inverted Messiah as much as they long for the return of the true Messiah. But wherever you land on what the future holds, whatever you believe about powers and principalities, it's helpful to know how the Antichrist is described. Either it gives us a roadmap of who to watch out for, or it gives us an archetype illustrating what evil does.

The word Antichrist shows up in John's First and Second Letters. Second Thessalonians, Matthew, Daniel, and Revelation describe a similar figure though they use different names. Those are the main places we find the "man of sin," the "false prophet," the "beast of the sea," the "deceiver," and my personal favorite, "Little Horn." Whatever you call him, scripture says he'll be one who lies to gain power, he'll scoff at laws, he'll exalt himself above all other people and every one of the gods, and he'll declare himself to be the only one who can save the people. He'll be followed by those who refuse to love the truth. Jesus says this false messiah will lead many of the faithful astray. Some say the Antichrist is the Devil, but scripture points to him more as a tool or a sower of evil than the actual Devil himself. The Antichrist'll also be difficult for many to recognize. He'll rise to the heights of power and have an army of dedicated followers. They'll wear his mark on their foreheads, Revelation says, though what exactly that mark looks like is unhelpfully never described. Could be a tattoo, an implant, a hat, a pin, an armband, who knows? During the time it takes for people to recognize his true identity, he'll cause all sorts of disruptions, seek unprecedented levels of control, and strip freedoms from growing numbers of people the longer he's allowed to reign. Where the people once pledged their hearts to God,

they'll turn to him instead. Where they once gathered to worship Jesus, they'll worship him instead. Where they once loved their neighbors, they'll send the most violent of their ranks to silence any opposition instead. The Antichrist will receive a head wound that heals, he'll utter "haughty and blasphemous words," he'll discount the teachings of the true Christ as weak and naive. He'll be nearly impossible to fight and bring down, and what few supporters he has that show skepticism'll either fall in line or lose their own power. They'll claim he is without sin, or if he has sinned, it was either insignificant or necessary. When he's in power, all will be chaos. He'll take the livelihood of the people, especially the poorest, and pile them around his throne. And maybe most telling, he will eventually lose, but it's a long, hard road to get there.

That's how the Bible describes the Antichrist. I've told you nothing beyond that. If you feel your face flush because church is getting too political, I'll remind you of three things. One, again, I'm just relaying what scripture says. Two, it is one of the Antichrist's goals to sway you away from scripture in favor of his teachings. And three, I have said no names. If you've identified somebody from this description, you've identified an antichrist. Also, if you're feeling a little smug, remember that The Antichrist doesn't preclude other antichrists running around, and we've all seen plenty of those pop up regardless of party affiliation.

Now, I'm not big on the End Times. The Rapture, those Left Behind books, and the various millinerian theologies don't do much for my spiritual life. I don't fear a coming Antichrist, the Mark of the Beast, or giant scorpions sent to pick off the faithful remnant. But I do hold to the teachings of Christ, which fundamentally means rejecting any antichrist. In other words, the Antichrist's job is primarily to discount the teachings of Jesus and to convince his followers that other things matter more. Should we seek Christ in all persons and respect the dignity of every human being, or should we claim that that's a nice sentiment but it doesn't pay the bills? Should we welcome little ones and bring God closer into our lives, or should we force women to suffer in search of desperate maternal and prenatal care? Should we hammer our swords into plowshares, or should we share AI generated pictures of a triumphant Jesus with rippling muscles, bandelier belts, and assault weapons?

Look at James again, then when you leave this place, look around you. What is pure, what is peaceable, what is gentle and willing to yield? Where do you see mercy? Can you spot hypocrisy? When the people of old needed to suss out who was a real prophet and who was false, they had a very simple test: you will know them by their fruits. Resist them, and they will flee. Love them, and they will crumble. Defy them, and their rotten fruit will be laid bare. Say nothing or do nothing, and they will thrive.

I'll say one more thing and then sit down. History has shown us all sorts of arguments as to why the way of Christ supposedly isn't up to the challenge of governance: Love doesn't save the economy; Jesus doesn't care about our retirement accounts; Serving foreigners is bad for business; Sharing a common cup threatens the social hierarchy; War is the only way to solve conflict; and on and on. You've heard 'em all. Antichrist arguments undercutting the power of the Gospel always, always lead to oppression and often to the attempted eradication of those on the margins. Remember that. We are not just talking about theology or scripture or the long tradition of the church here. We're talking about human lives at risk because some are willing to overlook evil in exchange for dubious promises.

Much of my life, I've been told I'm not allowed to call out other Christians for their unchristian behavior because I don't know what's in their hearts. I have seen their fruits. Maybe there was a time when "you don't know what's in their hearts" was true, but I'm not convinced. I'm beginning to think that thread has always existed to give refuge to the wolves in sheep's clothing. Maybe it wasn't meant to, but it has, and it still does. Put another way, I'm tired of tiptoeing around other people's feelings when they'd rather see my friends killed than to actually follow Christ. So maybe it's time to call those wolves what they are: Antichrists teaching Antichristian quote-unquote values.

People of St. Thomas', while powers and principalities swirl around us and our world continues to flirt with evil, we all need to go read James, and when we're done, ask ourselves, "who do I really serve?"