

HOW CAN WE BE THE PEOPLE OF GOD: THE ZEALOTS

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Test: Acts 5:33-39

Introduction: Series - 4 parts - Pharisees (legalists); Sadducees (collaborationists and compromisers); Essenes (separationists). Today, I plan to examine a group of radical, militaristic theocrats, known as the Zealots. Luke in Acts 5 referred to a couple of Zealot leaders (Theudus and Judas, the Galilean) in Palestine whose revolt against Rome resulted in not only failure but also in their respective deaths.

As I anticipated this sermon, my initial thought was that it would be an interesting topic on the one hand but probably not overly relevant on the other. Probably most if not all of us here today are a relatively passive people. So we would not choose the role of violence as a way to be God's people. At the same time we live in a world filled with radical believers who are convinced that by politics, and confrontation they can be God's people. In many cases they believe that violence and death are completely justified, even demanded by God.

Ironically, as I began to think upon this sermon I remembered about a year or so ago a three part series on CNN narrated by **Christiane Amanpour** on "**God's Holy Warriors**". Each two-hour program focused upon militant radicals in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. It was a frightening narrative of radical religious movements who exercise enormous influence in our world, and I believe threaten any efforts at attaining peaceful co-existence in both society and religion.

With these thoughts as a background, I want us to examine the group called the Zealots, who were present during the earthly ministry of Jesus.

THE ZEALOTS:

Zealot Beginnings: Like the other three major Jewish sects, the Zealots probably are rooted in the Maccabean Revolt that began about 163 B.C. against **Antiochus IV "Ephiphanes,"** (means "the manifest God" - Jews sometimes referred to him as "Epimanes" - "the insane one") the Greek ruler in Syria. Antiochus had imposed Greek culture, or Hellenism, on his kingdom as a way of solidifying his power. Many Jews had accepted this development, but not all.

The revolt against Antiochus "Ephiphanes" began with an elderly priest named **Mattathias**, who presided in a small village north of Jerusalem named Modein, and who is described in the Apocrypha in the Book of I Maccabees, as having a "zeal for the law of Moses." A Greek military officer instructed some Jewish leaders to offer a sacrifice to the Greek God Zeus. When some Jews were willing to comply, Mattathias rose up and killed the officer as well as some of these leading Jews, who were compromising faith.

Mattathias, his five sons, and others who held the zeal for the Jewish law, headed for the hills of Judea, where they conducted guerilla warfare against the Greeks. Mattathias soon died and was

replaced by his son, **Judas "Maccabeus."** The name of the revolt came from this nickname, which means "The Hammerer."

Judas would be killed in battle, as would his brother **Jonathan**, who succeeded him. A third son, **Simon**, eventually in 142 B.C. gained independence for the Jews, which lasted until 63 B.C., when the Roman General Pompey installed Roman rule over the area.

Zealotry continued. **Judas the Galilean** led a failed revolt against the Romans in A.D. 6, which Gamaliel referred to in Acts 5. In A.D. 66, the Zealots, who claimed Judas the Galilean as their founder rebelled against Rome. They were crushed in a few years. The Roman army marched down the Jordan River Valley to Jericho. They attacked and destroyed **Qumran**, where the Essenes dwelled, and where the Dead Sea Scrolls were produced and preserved. We will look at the Essenes in a few weeks as another option in our quest to understand how to be the people of God.

The Romans marched on **Jerusalem** and in A.D. 70, as Jesus had predicted, they captured and destroyed the ancient holy city. In A.D. 73 at a fortress called **Masada**, south of Qumran on the Dead Sea, the last refuge of Zealots was taken and the revolt was over. Jerusalem would become a Roman city.

What were the beliefs of the Zealots? They were **theocrats** of the first order. They, like the other three sects of Judaism, believed in the rule of God. Unlike the others, they wanted to establish God's rule and kingdom by violence, if necessary. Their response to Roman authority was violence, revolt, and revolution. **Theologically**, they believed in the **Jewish law**, although they used secular means to establish it. They believed that God was their God, that He was on their side, and that they were to establish His earthly kingdom. The Romans were the enemies of the Jews, and therefore, the enemies of God.

The Response of Jesus to the Zealots:

The teachings of Jesus are very clear when it comes to the Zealots. He rejected the way of violence. He taught, "**He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword.**"

He spoke of two kingdoms. He told his followers to "**Render unto Caesar that which Caesar's and unto God that which is God.**" He taught us that **His kingdom** was not of this world but was and is a **spiritual kingdom**. [Christianity has existed, survived, and influenced all types of government throughout its history - monarchy, theocracy, democracy, totalitarianism, etc.]

He taught us to not only love our neighbors, as the law taught, but also to "**Love our enemy.**" **He taught not radical violence but radical love!**

In the **Beatitudes** in the Sermon on the Mount he did not say "Blessed are the warriors." He said, "**Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God.**" He also taught, "**Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth**" (or at least what is left of it after we get through ravaging it for our own good.

By example, rather than rebelling in the Garden of Gethsemane, he submitted to the Jewish and the Roman authorities, and then voluntarily gave His life that you and I might have life. He did not call for rebellion by his followers. He did seek to stir up the masses to overthrow Rome, and even corrupt Jewish leadership. He called upon his followers not to be warriors but to be "witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

After watching the CNN series on "God's Holy Warriors," I asked myself "When are we going to follow the teaching of Jesus and stop following those who determine that violence and warring, and anger, and destruction are the characteristics of God's people."

Conclusions: We live in a very interesting and challenging world. We are not threatened so much by governments, as we are by religious radicals. And this radicalism is not confined to Islamic militant theocrats, but includes those believers of all major faiths who are convinced that they alone know the mind of God, that they alone are God's people, that they alone understand, defend, and practice the truth, and that they are God's people by trying to use the ways of the world to bring about God's kingdom.

[Example of the invasion of D-Day - 65 years ago - Allied chaplain praying for the troops in this holy endeavor; the German soldier asking "sometimes I wonder whose side God is on."]

"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons and the daughters of God."