

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JULY 5

GALATIANS 5:16-26

THE BACKGROUND

Prior to 5:16-26 in his Letter to the Galatians, Paul had contrasted two mutually exclusive ways of attempting to be righteous before God. The law cannot make a person righteous, but many try to follow it because it plays to our human pride and builds our egos. It can deceive us into thinking we are better than we are, and we do love to try to show how good we can be. Ultimately, however, the way of law produces a combination of pride, arrogance, frustration, and doubt. The second way, the only true way, is the way of grace through faith in Christ. By grace through faith we receive what we could never achieve by our own efforts. Right standing before God is a gift we accept by faith. That right standing produces freedom, the theme of the previous lesson.

But what do we do with this freedom? How do we exercise it? Do we use it as an excuse to engage in unrighteous behavior? Do we use this freedom responsibly to draw close to God and begin to imitate Him? These two choices we face every day. What will we do with the freedom God gives us in Christ?

Paul had often been accused of being soft, or preaching grace and failing to sufficiently emphasize how a Christian should behave. An honest reading of his letters cannot possibly lead to such a charge. However, Paul often experienced the need to defend himself against such a distortion of his message.

This section of Galatians clearly outlines the behaviors of two contrasting lifestyles. One is the life of the flesh. The second is the life of the Spirit.

1. WALK BY THE SPIRIT (GAL. 5:16-18)

Moving from his warning against impending dissensions (Gal. 5:15), Paul outlined the sure way to Christian goodwill and unity. Living by the Spirit and its antithesis of living according to the flesh present a choice that every Christian must make daily or even more frequently. Paul was setting up a clear description of what we as believers are free to do and free not to do. He emphasized we are not to misuse Christian freedom but rather are to use it properly.

Verse 16: *I say then, walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.*

To avoid the possibility of biting and devouring one another (5:15) Paul commanded the Galatians to *walk by the Spirit*. The word *walk* obviously is an imperative, and we know what that means. Paul's words introduced by the words *I say then* are not merely a suggestion. They are more than sound advice. Paul is definite about the course the Galatians should take.

A second quality of the Greek verb translated *walk* is not so evident from the English translation. The form of the word in the original language indicates ongoing activity. To suppose that we make a one-time commitment to walk by the Spirit and thereafter are free of all temptations not to do so is naïve in the extreme. Daily we must pray for strength to follow God's Spirit.

In the passage for study this week Paul repeatedly used verbs of motion, indicating we must be on the move consistently in order to follow the Spirit (*walk*, 5:16; "led," 5:18; "live," 5:25a; "follow," 5:25b). The Spirit is neither stagnant nor static. He brings life and guides us to real life and service. Being a Christian is not simply mentally accepting a proposition. It involves embracing a lifestyle.

By following the Spirit the believer *will not carry out the desire of the flesh*. This phrase conveys the ethical implications of living by faith and following the Spirit. Remember Paul had been accused of being soft on sin. His opponents viewed his teaching about grace as an invitation to sin. This suggestion was outrageous to Paul, and precisely because the life lived by faith and led by the Spirit is the only way of truly living a fully ethical life.

Verse 17: *For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don't do what you want.*

The main difference between *the flesh* and *the Spirit* is clear in this verse. They are antithetical, each *against* the other. That the flesh *desires* something underscores the act of the will, mind, and emotions involved in this part of our lives. The flesh is not merely the physical body, though that is part of it. It is the place in our lives where sin finds opportunity or where we invite sin into our lives.

We must tread carefully here. Paul would not have us understand that any act of will, any thought or emotion is automatically evil. The Spirit can transform us from within so that our thoughts, speech, and actions truly do honor God. But Paul had tried in his own strength, through the law, through religion, to subdue all impure passions. However, he found the pull of the flesh was too strong. He stated that experience as follows: *you don't do what you want.*

He wanted to please God but found that in himself he was incapable of doing so. Even the very act of obeying all the laws, which he bragged about (Phil. 3:6), created in him a false pride that distanced him from God. He realized that very confidence was simply an expression of willful flesh (3:4). For an expanded description of Paul's struggle, see Romans 7:7-25.

Verse 18: *But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.*

We can understand the antithesis of Spirit and flesh rather easily. The flesh as the expression of the sinful will, mind, and actions is obviously the complete opposite of a God-centered life led by the Spirit. But this verse adds another dimension we must carefully understand for Paul also puts in opposition *the Spirit* and *the law*. Is, therefore, *the law* the equivalent of the flesh? Is the law evil?

The short answer is no. There is nothing evil about the Ten Commandments, for example. The contrast Paul made concerned the means of subduing the desires of the flesh. Do you want to overcome fleshly desire by the law or by the Spirit? The former fails, whereas the latter succeeds.

Let's take an obvious example. I neither murder nor commit adultery. I have, therefore, fulfilled the law regarding these two actions. Furthermore, I can obey these commands in my own power. People who are not Christians are not automatically murderers and adulterers. Paul as a Pharisee is a good example. He kept these two particular laws.

The further question, however, is: Does my devotion to law alone make me the kind of person God wants me to be? I can refuse to murder but still hate an individual. I can refuse to commit adultery but still look at a woman impurely. I can still claim, however, to have fulfilled the law, but the power of the sinful nature or flesh is far from subdued.

Now from a Christian standpoint, I also commit neither murder nor adultery. What is the difference? The Spirit leads me as a Christian to suppress and eliminate hatred. The Spirit guides me to regard women properly, not as objects of sexual fantasy. These further things I do because of the relationship I have with God through the indwelling Spirit. I am answerable to the Spirit in a way that I am not answerable to the law. The Spirit, in this way, helps me fulfill the just requirement of the law (Rom. 8:3-4) or the law's full intention.

We can summarize the difference in the following way. The Spirit-led life is God-centered, while the law-led life is self-centered. The Spirit-led life derives its strength from God, while the law-led life derives its strength from the

individual. The Spirit-led life is internal and relational, while the law-led life is external and sterile. The Spirit-led life leads to freedom, while the law-led life leads to slavery.

Paul's opponents would claim the concepts of grace and being led by the Spirit lead to unrestrained sin. Paul claimed the complete opposite—that only by the Spirit can we suppress the desires of the flesh and lead a life worthy of God.

2. BEAUTIFUL TRANSFORMATION (GAL. 5:19-21)

To undermine any claim that Paul was soft on sin, the apostle outlined specifically the kinds of behaviors a Christian must avoid. These sins are both actions, as well as attitudes that lead to sinful actions. The works of the flesh are 15 in number, although this list is not exhaustive as Paul indicated by ending the list with the phrase “and anything similar” (Gal 5:21).

Verses 19-21: *Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar, about which I tell you in advance—as I told you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

We can group *the works of the flesh* into categories. Such grouping will help us see how pervasive the works of the flesh are; they affect every area of life and thought. The categories listed on the following pages are not precise, and Bible scholars approach this task differently. In addition some works of the flesh can be attributed to more than one category. Finally, readers are likely to find various translations of these Greek terms and comparison can be somewhat confusing.

SEXUAL SINS. These sins pervert the God-given gift of sexuality.

Sexual immorality. This designation refers to sexual sin in general and the Greek term is related to our English word *pornography*. Sexual sins were particularly common in the pagan cultures of Paul's time. A higher standard of sexual behavior, particularly with regard to faithfulness in marriage, was specifically a Jewish contribution to society that was extended and expanded by Christianity.

Moral impurity. Literally, the Greek word refers to both physical and moral uncleanness. The term was particularly important in Jewish society with its concerns for ceremonial cleanliness. A person could engage in a wide variety of behaviors that would render him or her unclean. Though

any type of uncleanness is included in this word, it came to particularly denote sexual impurity. The individual engaging in sexual impurity is unfit to stand before God.

Promiscuity. Though this word denotes sexual excess, it refers generally to the lack of any restraint and lack of self-respect. To practice promiscuity is to engage in shallow pleasure without regard to limits and to cease to care what other people think, much less what God thinks, about such loose behavior.

These first three works of the flesh focus on sexual sins. Paul was not implying these sins were worse than any other sins. Rather the priority of these three sins in the apostle's list probably was because of the corrupt sexual mores of the first-century Greek world. People that came to Christianity from a pagan background had a vastly different understanding of sexuality than a convert to Christianity from Judaism. For this reason, Paul often addressed these concerns first.

RELIGIOUS SINS. These sins relate to the manner in which we regard God or a lack of regard for God. More generally they deal with spiritual power in the negative or evil sense.

Idolatry. We get the English word *idolatry* directly from the Greek term. This common pagan practice was particularly offensive to persons from a Jewish background because the idolater worshiped the creation, not the Creator. When a pagan worshiper converted to Christianity the worshiper accepted the challenge of embracing monotheism [MAHN oh thee IHZ uhm (th as in thin)]—the recognition and reverence of the only true God—as opposed to the bewildering worship of various gods and goddesses.

Sorcery. The Greek term is *pharmakeia*, from which we obviously derive the word the English word *pharmacy*. Originally, the term referred to the practice of mixing potions, which, if they were successful in healing (or poisoning) a person, were thought to possess magical qualities. The attempt to manipulate evil spirits or forces is obviously ungodly for it represents turning from God.

Factions. We get the English word *heresy* directly from this Greek word. The Greek verb from which the noun is derived literally means “to choose” or “to select.” I have grouped this term with religious sins because it came to be specifically applied to choosing religious ideas or practices that were not in line with accepted teachings.

SOCIAL SINS. These sins tear at the fabric of a community. They break down interpersonal relationships.

Hatreds. This work of the flesh is general in nature and refers to enmity and hostility toward another person. The highest Christian virtue is love characterized by selflessness.

The word translated *hatreds* is the opposite of love. It describes an attitude that wants the worst for another person. Love builds up. *Hatreds* tear down.

Strife. This word developed a wholly negative connotation and refers to quarreling and wrangling. Those who practice strife can find or create a problem in almost any setting.

Jealousy. The English word *jealousy* as well as the word *zeal* are derived from the same Greek word. Originally the word could have either a good or bad connotation, for we can be zealous for good things. Seeing excellence in another person can inspire others to follow, or it can become the occasion for jealousy. It is the latter attitude Paul intended here. The term describes wanting what another person possesses. At the root of jealousy is an attitude of ingratitude for the gifts we have from God.

Outbursts of anger. This word describes passionate outbursts of anger or hostile feelings. Outbursts of anger can leave wounds in a family member, friend, or fellow church member that never heal.

Selfish ambitions. A person can either seek to serve because of a pure motive or because service brings attention and a sense of self-importance. The latter motivation is intended with this term. The word originally meant “to work for pay.” It came to describe a person seeking political office for personal advancement only.

Dissensions. The term refers to forming exclusive groups in the church and tending to foster an elitist mentality. This factionalism tends to be judgmental of other people and leads to a critical atmosphere in which the “in” members tear down others. Paul apparently saw this particular danger in the Galatian church (Gal. 5:15).

Envy. This word describes the negative feeling that arises from excellence or happiness in another person. It is similar to the word *jealousy*. This work of the flesh is the opposite of rejoicing with those who rejoice. It is grief or jealousy over another's good fortune.

Drunkenness. I include this sin under the social heading because it often occurs in groups and has a devastating effect on the social fabric. While consuming alcohol is not expressly forbidden in Scripture, *drunkenness* is uniformly condemned. It is a particularly serious vice because it compromises a person's ability to think clearly and can lead to all manner of evil.

Carousing. This term refers generally to riotous feasts and the orgies that might accompany them. Paul may have had in mind the festivals for Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and intoxication, known as Bacchus to the Romans.

In the New Testament, *carousing* is always linked to the sin of drunkenness. Carousing encompasses various kinds of impure and gross conduct.

Paul concluded this section with the summary words—*and anything similar*—to indicate his long list was not exhaustive. Grace is not an invitation to sin. Those who are enslaved to the works of the flesh demonstrate they are not heirs of *the kingdom of God*. Paul's point is clear: if we are led by the Spirit, we will not desire to consistently and repeatedly engage in sinful acts and attitudes. Rather, we seek to avoid those things that displease God.

3. DISPLAY ALL THE SPIRIT'S FRUIT (GAL. 5:22-26)

Israel was portrayed in the Old Testament as a vineyard that was to produce godly fruit. That image served Paul as he sought to describe the character the Spirit produces in the believer's life. Once again, we can attempt to categorize these qualities as we did with the previous list, with the understanding that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Each one is an expression of God's grace in our lives.

Verses 22-23: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law.*

SPIRITUAL GRACES. The first three expressions of the *fruit of the Spirit* focus on inner attitudes a Christian is to maintain. In many ways these graces are the foundation for all the other expressions of God's presence.

Love. Love is the highest Christian virtue. Paul wrote elsewhere at length about it (1 Cor. 13) and stated it is to be our priority. The Greek word translated love is *agape* [ah GAH pay] and is one of four basic Greek words for love. The other three have an element of self-interest. That fact is not necessarily bad, but it is simply the case that the one loving expects something in return from the object of his or her love. Not so with *agape*. This word, particularly as it developed its meaning in the context of the New Testament, has only what is best in mind for the recipient and expects nothing in return. God's love for us is described with this word in the New Testament and underscores the remarkable sacrificial quality of His love for us. Equally remarkable is that this term is used in the New Testament of the kind of love we are commanded to demonstrate to one another (see John 15:12). Obviously, we cannot duplicate the Divine level of love, but we can allow God's love to flow through us so that we become agents of His love.

Joy. A most interesting quality of this word is that its root

is the same root as the word we translate "grace." Grace and joy are intertwined, and this fact helps us to realize why Paul was so insistent on grace as the way to live the Christian life. Law can never produce true joy. The experience of God's grace can. Joy as the fruit of the Spirit must be understood as independent of temporal circumstances.

Peace. Each fruit of the Spirit is characterized by the positive presence of a Divine quality, not just the absence of unpleasant circumstances. That fact is clearly evident with peace. Peace is not merely the absence of conflict, in fact, it does not rule out conflict. Peace means having a sense of wholeness with God. From Him we draw our worth and to Him we look for approval. In Christ we have it.

SOCIAL GRACES. The next three fruit of the Spirit are more oriented to our interaction with others. These qualities were particularly important for the Galatians who were in danger of biting and devouring one another (Gal. 5:15).

Patience. Paul used two different words in his letters for patience. One focuses on patience with circumstances. The other, the one used here, focuses on patience with people. Like all the fruit of the Spirit, this quality is reflected perfectly in God who has been infinitely patient with us. One important quality of this patience is the reluctance to take offence. The Christian should not be easily offended nor complain about every grievance.

Kindness. The Greek word translated kindness appears twice in Romans 2:4 to describe God's attitude toward us. His kindness is intended to lead us to repentance. That fact helps us understand how this word applies to Christians. We will be tempted to respond to evil with harshness. People around us might even encourage us to do so and say we are justified in so doing. They may be right. But by being kind we are making it more likely that our adversaries will see the light of grace.

Goodness. This term describes a person who engages in good works. It conveys the ideas of benevolence and generosity toward another by going the second mile.

PERSONAL GRACES. The final trilogy of the fruit of the Spirit are some of the personal disciplines that make for consistent Christian conduct.

Faith. This word can refer to Christianity as "the faith" (Gal. 1:23). It also can refer to the belief, trust, and commitment by which we respond to Christ's offer of grace (Eph. 2:8). As a fruit of the Spirit, Paul was referring to faith in the sense of faithfulness or dependability. A Christian is to be reliable and to be someone whom others can count on to act with

high integrity.

Gentleness. This word is difficult to translate. It is often translated "meek" (see Matt. 5:5 KJV). It describes a person who is teachable. This person is unlikely to overreact to a challenge but is accepting and not insistent on getting his or her own way. Gentleness is not weakness but rather is strength under control.

Self-control. Paul's use of athletic imagery in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 helps us understand the meaning of this word. It describes an athlete's personal discipline in training. While the body may protest against the exercise, the athlete is devoted to a higher goal. For the Christian, this word means we are free from self-interest. We are, therefore, able to resist the temptations of ease or convenience (genuine service is often hard and inconvenient) and devote ourselves to serve God as He desires.

Verse 24: *Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*

We do not defeat the power of the flesh or develop the fruit of the Spirit in our own strength. However, this work of God requires our participation.

Verse 25: *If we live by the Spirit, we must also follow the Spirit.*

The counterpart to suppressing the temptations of the flesh is the active commitment to *live by the Spirit* and to *follow the Spirit*. We never "arrive" this side of heaven. To claim to have arrived is to become vulnerable to pride.

Verse 26: *We must not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.*

This verse reveals some real or potential underlying problems in the Galatian church. It reflects Paul's earlier concerns (Gal. 5:15) and looks forward to instructions for relationships within the church (6:1-10). If we are not careful, we can *become conceited*, proud of our "mastery" of the fruit of the Spirit. Such pride leads to the unhealthy critiquing or *provoking* of one another. All members following the lead of the Spirit prevents division in the church. If we let the Spirit guide how we live, we will exhibit characteristics that please God.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JULY 12

GALATIANS 6:1-18

THE BACKGROUND

Each of Paul's Letters typically divides into two main parts. The first part concerns theological matters that were connected with the specific situation at the particular church he was addressing. The second part is practical application of the theological foundation he has laid. This description is certainly not hard and fast, but it does generally hold.

This two-part division applies to Galatians. Paul wrote at length about the priority of grace and engaged in a running battle with opponents who claimed works were a mandatory prerequisite for salvation. Paul's specific purpose in Galatians was to spell out how a person is saved by grace, not by works. His parallel purpose was to reveal how grace was manifested in good works. He turned to that purpose in the previous chapter with the section on walking in the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-26). In the closing chapter, Paul took the principles of love, joy, peace, and other fruit of the Spirit and provided specific examples of these expressions of the Spirit's presence.

The apostle's major point in Galatians 6 is that a Christian is personally responsible for developing the kind of lifestyle that matches genuine Christian theology or belief. This emphasis is a final and powerful response to the opponents' claim that grace alone leads to unrestrained sin. In reality, the grace-filled life leads to personal responsibility for attitudes and actions.

Before we delve into the final chapter of the Book of Galatians in this week's lesson, let's observe the way this emphasis prepares us for the remainder of this quarter's lessons from the Book of James. Those who have claimed that James emphasizes a theology of works as opposed to Paul's theology of grace have missed an essential connection Paul made in his Letter to the Galatians. There is no contradictory theology between Paul and James. Faith and works are vitally connected by both inspired writers. The writings of Paul and James are complementary. Galatians 6 provides some specific, though not comprehensive, examples of how Christians are to behave in a responsible manner. The Book of James will provide additional examples.

1. SUPPORT SYSTEM (GALATIANS 6:1-5)

Paul forcefully presented the necessity of Christian responsibility in this section. It is both personal and social.

Verse 1: *Brothers, if someone is caught in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual should restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for yourselves so you won't be tempted also.*

The exact meaning of *caught in any wrongdoing* is a bit elusive. The Greek verb translated *caught* also means "detected," "overtaken," or "surprised." Therefore, the verb could indicate that a Christian had inadvertently fallen into sin or that the sin was not premeditated. On the other hand, it may mean that one Christian had been discovered to be involved in sin by a fellow Christian. Either application is appropriate. If a work of the flesh is present, Christians have a responsibility to address the problem.

Some interpreters have regarded the phrase *you who are spiritual* as an expression of sarcasm. In other words, Paul may have been indicating that "those of you who think you are spiritual" should take some action. This interpretation assumes the presence of a group of Christians characterized by arrogance and conceit, who supposed they were better than others. Paul certainly encountered such an attitude in his ministry, particularly among the Corinthians, but that interpretation is not supported here.

With the designation *you who are spiritual*, Paul more likely was referring to those who genuinely walk by the Spirit. Interpreted in this manner, Paul was emphasizing the responsibility of Christians for one another's spiritual development. We should look out for one another and not engage solely in private devotion and personal spiritual development. Those whose lives demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit have a responsibility to take the initiative in seeking restoration and reconciliation with those who have been caught in wrongdoing.

The aim of those who are led by the Spirit is to *restore* the offending brother or sister. This form of discipline assumes three constraints. First, it should begin privately. Though not explicit here, going first to the offender privately reflects Jesus' teaching (Matt. 18:15-17). To share a matter publicly risks alienating, not restoring (see Prov. 17:9). This approach rules out gossip.

Second, the confrontation must occur with *a gentle spirit*. The Greek word translated *gentle* is identical to the eighth fruit of the Spirit ("gentleness"). The word often is

translated "meek," and implies the mastering of anger and the unwillingness to resort to power.

Third, humility is essential. The *gentle spirit* also implies teachableness, and that emphasis is particularly important here. Whatever the offense, we must recognize we have either done it also or are capable of it. If you are arrogant, censorious, and condescending, you may *be tempted also*.

Verse 2: *Carry one another's burdens; in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*

One of the chief responsibilities we have as Christians is to help *carry one another's burdens*. This responsibility is an expression of Jesus' commandment for us to "love one another . . . as I have loved you" (John 13:34).

Note carefully the nature of the *burdens* we are to share with others, for on the surface this verse seems to be at odds with verse 5 that indicates everyone should carry his or her own burden. The Greek word translated *burdens* in verse 2 indicates heavy pressure, not the day-to-day responsibilities of living as a Christian as in verse 5.

The phrase *the law of Christ* is interesting in light of Paul's emphasis on grace throughout this letter. The apostle meant that caring concretely for one another does, in fact, *fulfill* the purpose for which Christ saved us. This is the law or commandment we should follow (for example see John 13:34).

Verse 3: *For if anyone considers himself to be something when he is nothing, he is deceiving himself.*

The previous verse focused on the Christian responsibility to help carry another Christian's burden. This verse focuses on the burdened Christian's need to allow another Christian to help.

When a Christian is weak, either because of a burden or because of wrongdoing, he has a choice to make. Such a believer can either consider *himself to be something*, or he can let someone help. In the former choice *he is deceiving himself* and prolonging the pain or deepening the wound. In the latter he has allowed an opportunity for healing and growth.

Verse 4: *But each person should examine his own work, and then he will have a reason for boasting in himself alone, and not in respect to someone else.*

Again, if we do not tread carefully, we appear to find an idea here in contradiction with another idea in the same paragraph! Paul appears to promote *boasting in himself* after he had just prohibited considering oneself to be something.

Actually, Paul did approve of *boasting in himself* but only after a critical evaluation of one's *own work*.

The key word is *examine*. The Greek word means "to test" or more specifically "to prove." Far from resulting in narcissistic pride in one's ability, this self-examination should lead us to submit our thoughts, attitudes, and actions to the law of Christ. An important part of burden-bearing and burden-sharing is to hold one another accountable to God's high calling in our lives. We find a further warning in the words *not in respect to someone else*. We must resist the urge to compare ourselves with other Christians.

Verse 5: *For each person will have to carry his own load.*

Honest evaluation is necessary because each Christian is expected to *carry his own load*. The word translated *load* in verse 5 is different from the word translated "burdens" in verse 2. That word indicated a long, heavy pressure. The Greek word translated *load* is the same word Jesus used to describe the light burden He offered as opposed to the burden of the law (Matt. 11:30). It indicates the daily responsibility each Christian has. In this context, part of our responsibility is to restore stumbling Christians and to minister to the needs of burdened Christians.

2. FAMILY TIME (GALATIANS 6:6-10)

Christian responsibility is not nebulous. It must be expressed concretely, and in this section Paul outlined some specific instructions for Christians as they seek to do good for others.

Verse 6: *The one who is taught the message must share his goods with the teacher.*

Some interpreters have considered this verse to be a bit of independent direction unconnected from the surrounding context. This conclusion is not necessary. Paul had addressed generally the topic of fulfilling the law of Christ, and his direction here to support the *teacher* is one expression of that law.

The *teacher* referred to the leader or pastor of the church in that time, whose main responsibility was to teach the message of Christ. The church was still a developing organization in the first century. The churches in Galatia were young. Paul still had much to teach them about the work of a church.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus had taught that the worker was worthy of being supported (Matt. 10:10), and Paul rightly interpreted that principle as including church leaders.

Today the term *teacher* includes all church staff personnel. To *share . . . goods* would be one way students in the first century could demonstrate support for their teacher.

One final reason for Paul's exhortation in this verse may be the presence of the false teachers referred to as Judaizers [JOO day eyes uhrs]. They most likely did not share Paul's reluctance to personally ask for money, and they may well have been siphoning off support that should have gone to the true teachers of the gospel.

Verse 7: *Don't be deceived: God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows he will also reap,*

With this verse Paul moved into a deeper reflection on the reason for doing good. The reason should be obvious to his readers, and this teaching was a common theme in the Old Testament. Therefore, the Galatians should not *be deceived*, or they should stop being deluded.

The obvious nature of the teaching is also clear from the next phrase, *God is not mocked*. The word translated *mocked* literally means "to turn up one's nose in contempt." To ignore the command to do good is to attempt to ignore a basic truth, and such behavior is an offense to God. Payday will come.

The specific teaching in this verse deals with the law of the harvest. *Whatever a man sows he will also reap* is an agricultural principle with a spiritual application. God has so arranged life that we ultimately get what we deserve. Many may object that often an evil person appears to be doing well and enjoying the blessings of life. But that objection is myopic. The eternal consequences are so sure and appalling I would not begrudge a wicked individual any days of ease on earth. That person's eternity will be quite different, for the law of the harvest stands.

We must be careful not to interpret this important spiritual principle solely in a negative light. In addition to being a warning, it is also an assurance. To get what we deserve means those who are in the practice of doing good can rest assured of God's blessing, even if that blessing is delayed. The principle is firm and unchanging, and we can therefore take heart that the good we do is not overlooked or lost in the shuffle.

Finally, we must keep in mind that Paul is talking about rewards here, not about salvation. None of us is deserving of what God has done for us in Christ. All who truly accept Him as Savior will spend eternity with Him. However, even believers must appear before the judgment seat of Christ,

where we will reap the results of the good or evil we have done (see 2 Cor. 5:10).

Verse 8: *because the one who sows to his flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit.*

The general principle of the previous verse is specifically applied here and contrasts the end result of the works of the flesh with that of the fruit of the Spirit (see Gal. 5:19-23). To live in the flesh, or sow to the flesh, ensures a harvest of *corruption from the flesh*. The word translated *corruption* is vivid and indicates a putrid rotting of dead flesh. Flesh was never intended to be eternal. This mortal coil is manufactured for a limited life expectancy. Anything we invest in it is subject to a limit.

God also created an inner being in every human, and that being is designed to last forever. Only if we live in and by the Spirit of God will we experience eternal life, a life not defined exclusively or even mainly by the number of its years but by their quality. That eternal quality and quantity of life begins the moment we accept Christ by faith. Thus eternal life is the present possession of all true believers although Paul most likely had in mind here the consummation of that salvation.

Verse 9: *So we must not get tired of doing good, for we will reap at the proper time if we don't give up.*

The promise of this eternal reward, along with the temporal rewards of serving God, is the reason we should *not get tired of doing good*. For those who seek to do good sometimes the needs can seem so overwhelming a person wonders where to start. Add to that reality the fact that the good people do often seems to come unraveled or is ignored, and discouragement is understandable.

Someone may ask, "What is the use?" The use is that *we will reap at the proper time*. The law of the harvest applies no matter how we feel, and that fact is a good thing. God will never overlook the good you do. The Greek language has two words for time: *chronos* [KROH nahs], which refers to the chronological measurement of time, and *kairos* [KIGH rahs], the word used here. The latter word indicates a God-appointed, opportune time, a time that He has specifically chosen for an important event.

Paul underscored the need for perseverance with the final reminder *if we don't give up*. God is not being unfair here, He is simply enforcing the law of the harvest. If we choose to ignore that law, we cannot complain about the consequences.

Verse 10: *Therefore, as we have opportunity, we must work for the good of all, especially for those who belong to the household of faith.*

The Greek word for “opportune time” is translated *opportunity* in this verse. God sets before us certain opportunities to participate in His work. As Christians we should never seek to limit the amount of our good works, otherwise we are in the same category as the Pharisees who desired to carefully define the neighbor whom they were obligated to love and serve. True Christian service looks for opportunities, not limits.

We are to *work for the good of all*. Without question, however, we have special opportunities to work for the good of *those who belong to the household of faith*. One reason for these special opportunities is because of their proximity, but we also have a special responsibility at this point. We are to take care of one another in the church.

Paul instructed the Galatians to be good to others, particularly to those who taught them about Christianity as well as to other believers, and to consistently do what is good.

3. BOAST IN CHRIST (GALATIANS 6:11-15)

Paul’s concluding paragraph is a summary of the main themes of the letter. It is unusual in that it contains no personal greetings as was his habit.

Verse 11: *Look at what large letters I have written to you in my own handwriting.*

The practice of dictating a letter to a secretary was common in Paul’s time, and he certainly may have employed this method for Galatians. Also common was the practice of the writer taking stylus in hand for a few closing remarks as Paul appears to have done here. The phrase *look at what large letters I have written* has often been interpreted to indicate Paul had an eye problem. However, the *large letters* may have simply been his way of emphasizing that what he was about to write was urgently important.

Verse 12: *Those who want to make a good showing in the flesh are the ones who would compel you to be circumcised—but only to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.*

Paul’s opponents in Galatia were most likely false teachers known as Judaizers who promoted the law as necessary to salvation. They used circumcision as one of their chief points of application. Paul exposed their faulty theology and their motives. He insisted salvation was by grace through faith

alone and perceived the false teachers were attempting to *make a good showing in the flesh*. This phrase may be a reference to the legalists’ boasting about the number of circumcisions they could report to their superiors or supporters. Church leaders, true and false, have too often connected statistics to ego.

The phrase *to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ* appears to refer to Paul’s experience of enduring rebuke and beatings from local synagogue leaders. The legalists could avoid this repercussion by pointing to their insistence on circumcision. Paul refused to compromise the gospel of grace, even for his personal safety.

Verse 13: *For even the circumcised don’t keep the law themselves; however, they want you to be circumcised in order to boast about your flesh.*

Paul’s parting comment about the Judaizers included the fact that even these legalists who insisted on circumcision did not *keep the law themselves*. They were using the Galatian Christians as a means to an end.

Verse 14: *But as for me, I will never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*

Following Jesus means denying oneself (Mark 8:34-35). The self-assertion and promotion of the legalists highlights the fact that self was in the center of their motives. Paul, in contrast, would only *boast about . . . the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*. The motive for Paul’s work is clear, but in what sense was the world crucified to Paul and Paul to the world? Crucifixion means death; therefore, the world’s values no longer motivated or attracted Paul.

Verse 15: *For both circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing; what matters instead is a new creation.*

The question of whether or not one was circumcised was meaningless. The condition of a person’s physical flesh has nothing to do with matters of the Spirit. Altering the flesh did not result in a *new creation*. The presence of Christ creates a new person (2 Cor. 5:17), and that is *what matters*.

Paul, in summarizing the message of his Letter to the Galatians, condemned the pride of false teachers, saying a Christian could boast only about what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Being responsible Christians includes avoiding selfish motives in what we do.

4. SEEK PEACE (GALATIANS 6:16-18)

Verse 16: *May peace be on all those who follow this standard,*

and mercy also be on the Israel of God!

The benediction of *peace* was offered to *those who follow this standard*. The *standard* is grace alone. The division is once again clear. Law and grace do not go together in salvation. The meaning of *the Israel of God* is uncertain. Most likely it refers to all of God’s people redeemed in Christ.

Verse 17: *From now on, let no one cause me trouble, because I carry the marks of Jesus on my body.*

Unlike his opponents, Paul bore physical scars of serving Christ. His plea that *no one cause him trouble* is probably a closing reminder to the Galatian Christians not to be so easily seduced by the next charismatic teacher. Paul’s qualifications to guide them were evidenced by the scars he bore.

Verse 18: *Brothers, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.*

This benediction of *grace* underscores once more the theme of the letter. Paul’s concluding paragraph included a call for peace. The path of grace leads to peace. To that end we join in Paul’s final prayer: *Amen!*

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JULY 19

JAMES 1:1-18

THE BACKGROUND

Letters in the New Testament often include answers to questions posed by specific first-century Christians. We can infer the questions and discern the background of a letter by carefully analyzing the contents of the letter. What we often discover, and especially so with the Letter of James, is that the first Christians faced many of the same challenges and had many of the same questions we have today.

James's first audience obviously was experiencing some kind of trials or persecution, and he was concerned to clarify what this persecution meant and how believers should respond to it. Does the presence of trials indicate that faith is deficient? Do trials come from God? If so, can we trust a God who lets us suffer? James addressed the topic of trials in the opening passage of his letter.

A second topic with which James dealt is the Christian view of wealth. This subject, like that of trials, is also of concern to Christians in every generation. Is wealth a blessing from God? Is it something we should seek? Does possessing wealth present any particular challenges? The early church often had poor and rich people side by side in the congregation, and this economic disparity could create friction. James addressed the issue of possessions and wealth throughout his letter.

Christians in the first century, as well as believers today, also were concerned to live in ways pleasing to God. How could they deal with ever-present temptations to sin? How could they resist enticements to impure living? What was the source of temptations? What resources do Christians have for facing and surviving temptations?

What about blessings and the good things that happen to us in life? Are they all from God, or do we, by some cleverness or goodness of our own, earn or create these gifts by our own power?

In this opening passage—James 1:1-18—James addressed the various major themes presented in the preceding paragraphs. These themes run throughout his letter. His answer to the various questions with which he dealt is that wisdom from God is necessary to handle life's challenges in all their varied forms.

1. WISDOM IN DOUBT (JAMES 1:2-8)

James was the half-brother of Jesus, and this fact must have been so well-known among his readers that James did not think it necessary to state the obvious. His self-designation “slave” (1:1) is not unusual, but it is highly significant. None of the apostles sought to lord authority over their fellow Christians. Instead, they emphasized their service to God. The Greek word also can be translated “servant,” but the term “slave” underscores both the absolute necessity of obedience, an important theme in James, and ownership by God. All Christians belong to God and are thus obligated to obey Him.

Verse 2: *Consider it a great joy, my brothers, whenever you experience various trials,*

A major challenge to faith is the trials we face. James presented a unique perspective on trials and underscored the necessity of wisdom in understanding how faith and life work. Rather than undermining faith, trials, when responded to in the right way, can actually strengthen our faith.

All Christians face *trials*, or problems and times of difficulty that test one's faith. Sometimes trials come to us specifically because we are Christians, and that reality was certainly often the case in the first century. Trials for that reason also appear to be becoming more and more common not only in the world in general today but also specifically in 21st-century America. Trials come in a variety of forms. They seldom leave us unchanged. How we respond to them will make us either better or bitter.

James commanded that we *consider it a great joy*, an imperative. From a worldly perspective this response does not make sense. From a biblical perspective, it does. We can choose joy as our response to trials. Trials may affect our outward circumstances, and often they do. An illness may weaken us physically. Financial reverses may lower our standard of living. A relationship crisis may leave us feeling betrayed and alone.

In Christ, however, the trial cannot affect our *inner* well-being unless we allow it. In Christ, we have the option to respond by embracing joy when trials come upon us. Joy is possible because it is a result of God's presence in our lives and the confidence His presence gives us. As believers, our relationship with God is eternally secure. No trial need disrupt the fellowship a believer enjoys with God. In fact, the trial can be an occasion for stronger fellowship, and that brings greater joy.

Verse 3: *knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.*

A trial is a *testing*, and the word used here clarifies the nature and purpose of a trial. The Greek term rendered *testing* also can be translated “proving.” As a precious metal is refined or proved by fire, so also our Christian character is strengthened and purified by trials. There is no other way.

One benefit gained from testing is *endurance*. The Greek word also can be translated “patience,” and that element is an important aspect of its meaning. In this regard it is related to another Greek word also translated “patience.” The difference between the two terms is that the other word typically indicates patience with people, while the Greek term used in James 1:3 refers to patience with things or circumstances.

Verse 4: *But endurance must do its complete work, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.*

Endurance also implies open-ended commitment. This theme is important to James. A journey started must be a journey finished. James described the end result of endurance with three words or phrases. First, the Christian becomes *mature*. The Greek word also means “perfect” or “fulfilled.” It envisions a person or an object becoming what it was intended to be. Thus Jesus expects us to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48). Such maturity includes unblemished living and undivided loyalty to the Lord.

Second, we become *complete*. We obviously lack certain Christian graces and may have even been negatively impacted by trials. Through endurance, however, God works to bring us to the completeness He intends.

Finally, the phrase *lacking nothing* emphasizes total sufficiency for the task. Each trial, if handled with faith and endurance, reinforces our ability to withstand the next trial. God fully equips us not only to survive but also to grow through trials.

Verse 5: *Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives to all generously and without criticizing, and it will be given to him.*

The Book of James is a book of wisdom, in the great Jewish tradition of wisdom literature. It is the New Testament complement to the Old Testament Book of Proverbs. Not surprisingly understanding what James meant by the term *wisdom* is key to understanding the book.

Three elements associated with biblical wisdom help

us understand its nature. First, wisdom is a gift from God. Thus James encouraged his readers to *ask God* for this gift. Wisdom begins with proper fear or respect for the Lord (Job 28:28).

James underscored God's desire to grant wisdom with two important terms. First, God gives wisdom *generously*. He freely gives wisdom to all Christians who ask, not only to those of a certain class, status, or intellect. The phrase rendered *without criticizing* means that God is not demeaning or condescending in giving the gift of wisdom. He does not reprove us for waiting so long to ask but rather is glad to fulfill such a request, for it makes us more like Him.

A second characteristic of biblical wisdom is that it is practical. Someone has defined wisdom as the practical application of eternal knowledge to a life situation. Wisdom involves knowing the way life works. It includes knowing how to relate to people and to respond to situations as the Lord would have us to relate and respond. Thus we find guidance in the Book of James concerning such subjects as how to manage wealth, how to control our tongues, and how to regard people who possess less than we possess.

Paul focused on the way grace changes our hearts. James emphasized the way grace manifests itself with our neighbors. These two ideas are not mutually exclusive at all.

Verse 6: *But let him ask in faith without doubting. For the doubter is like the surging sea, driven and tossed by the wind.*

A third characteristic of biblical wisdom is that it is slowly acquired. The phrase *let him ask* translates a present tense verb and indicates ongoing action. Our request for wisdom should be ongoing, for our trials certainly are. God continually grants wisdom as we seek it.

The word *faith* can refer to believing the right doctrines about God, trust in God's promises, and perseverance in spite of difficulty. The last two meanings apply particularly in this context. Throughout his letter, James connects faith and action. Here, asking for wisdom must be grounded in the confidence that God will act.

The alternative is to ask with doubt. This lack of confidence reveals a fundamental uncertainty that God Himself is faithful. James already assured his readers that God grants wisdom willingly and even enthusiastically, but if we doubt then we are questioning God's character and the truthfulness of His Word.

Doubt may arise because God grants wisdom slowly. Our chronic impatience leads us to wonder if we will ever have wisdom, and so we give up on receiving it at the very time God is granting it. We fall back then on our own insight and are at the mercy of a score of self-centered passions and misgivings. We become like *the surging sea, driven and tossed by the wind*. Imagine a small boat lacking the ability to chart a sure course on a stormy sea. This vivid image of a directionless life is the complete opposite of the confident life of wisdom God wants to grant His children.

Verse 7: *That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.*

To continue the nautical illustration presented in the discussion of verse 6, a doubting Christian lacks the rudder of trust in the Lord and perseverance in the face of trials. Instead of being guided by faith, the doubter is at the mercy of the churning and uncertain waves of circumstances. That person has no hope of arriving at any predetermined destination.

For this reason the doubter *should not expect to receive anything from the Lord*. The point is not that God is withholding His blessings. The point is we have not charted a course in faith that leads us to the safe harbor of His blessings. God has revealed through James the way we should chart a course through trials. We must have faith and wisdom. We cannot neglect this teaching, miss the Lord's blessings, and then turn around and accuse Him of being stingy!

Verse 8: *An indecisive man is unstable in all his ways.*

The *indecisive man* is literally a person of "two minds," one centered on his own insight and doubts, the other trying to live as God desires. Torn between the flesh and the Spirit, a doubting Christian is reduced to chronic uncertainty and unhappiness. God calls us to unquestioning loyalty and total submission. The alternative to His way renders us *unstable*, displaying a lack of stamina in our commitment to Him.

2. WEALTH AND WISDOM (JAMES 1:9-11)

James had a special concern for poor individuals throughout his letter. He observed that people of lower socioeconomic standing could be overlooked by others in the church. Such neglect does not honor God. Thus James sought to nullify class distinctions by directing wealthy persons to focus on God, not their riches.

Verse 9: *The brother of humble circumstances should boast in his exaltation;*

We can hear many echoes of Jesus' teaching in James's Letter, and in this passage we are reminded of Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount concerning wealth and the temptation to focus on earthly riches (Matt. 6:19-24). James tried to neutralize the allure and power of wealth for both poor and rich individuals. Wealth can be a problem whether we have nothing, a great deal, or anything in between.

This strategy for *the brother of humble circumstances* means that he *should boast in his exaltation*. In other words, an economically poor Christian should not seek the status or comfort of wealth but should instead focus on the fact that he or she is God's child through faith in Christ. As a child of the King, a Christian is heir to a spiritual kingdom and riches that make earthly wealth appear laughingly paltry.

Verse 10: *but the one who is rich should boast in his humiliation, because he will pass away like a flower of the field.*

Neutralizing the allure of wealth for the *rich* comes from focusing not on exaltation, but on *humiliation*. Recognizing the brevity of human life should humble us before God. Focusing on the brevity of life underscores the fact that riches are exceedingly temporary.

James was an excellent teacher, obviously having learned from the Master. He used the imagery of a flower to illustrate the fleeting and fragile nature of our physical lives. A flower looks beautiful and is alluring, much like wealth, but soon it *will pass away*.

Riches are a temptation for both rich and poor people. The temptation for the rich is obvious for they can become greedy. The temptation for the poor, however, is envy, and that also is dangerous. The sins of greed and envy halt our spiritual growth, and they have no economic barriers.

Verse 11: *For the sun rises with its scorching heat and dries up the grass; its flower falls off, and its beautiful appearance is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will wither away while pursuing his activities.*

The brief parable in this verse reminds us of Jesus' major teaching tool. James used the technique here to illustrate that a *rich man* can become so consumed by the pursuit of wealth that he *will wither away while pursuing his activities*. Focusing on wealth causes our lives to atrophy little by little. James reminded believers that only their relationship with God, not their wealth, is eternal.

3. WISDOM TO RESIST (JAMES 1:13-15)

Verse 12: *Blessed is a man who endures trials, because when he passes the test he will receive the crown of life that He has promised to those who love Him.*

The term *blessed* echoes Jesus' Beatitudes. It refers to a joy or happiness that is independent of circumstances and grounded in God's faithfulness. The believer who is faithful to God through trials receives God's blessing. Such a believer views trials as occasions for endurance, rather than as reasons for questioning one's faith or God's goodness.

The reward for faithful endurance is *the crown of life*. We are blessed in the present with greater endurance and deeper faith. We also look forward to the eternal blessing of heaven.

Verse 13: *No one undergoing a trial should say, "I am being tempted by God." For God is not tempted by evil, and He Himself doesn't tempt anyone.*

The nature of the *trial* in this context is slightly different from that in verses 2-4. There the trial was any challenge in life. In verse 13 it is specifically the incitement to sin. It raises the question, "Is God the source of my temptation to sin?" James's response to the question is unequivocal: *He Himself doesn't tempt anyone*. The explanation for this statement occurs in the prior phrase, *for God is not tempted by evil*. The point is that God has nothing to do with leading someone to embrace evil. God is not the author of evil in your life, nor can He be blamed for your falling into evil.

Verse 14: *But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desires.*

The real responsibility for evil lies with the individual, and we suffer the consequences. James provided a clear illustration of the way sin operates in our lives. Our *evil desires* are the source of our trouble. The phrase *drawn away* means "lured." We follow something that appears to fulfill our *evil desires*. The verb *enticed* focuses on the attractiveness of the lure.

Verse 15: *Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death.*

The progression continues as the *evil desire* leads to the *sin* itself. Sin then leads to *death*. Now that we have the full sequence before us and see clearly where sin leads (to death) we can return to the original question and rephrase it. Would God do anything to lead us to death? The obvious answer is no. God is the Author of life, and the entire Bible is concerned to reveal His desire and plan to redeem us.

This passage, James 1:13-15, focuses on personal responsibility for sin, and that is why James emphasized God is not responsible. It also accounts for the reason James did not refer to Satan here although he later would in 4:7.

To prove that temptation does not come from God, James described it as a process that begins in a person and involves desire, sin, and death. Since God is not responsible for our temptations, we can look to Him for wisdom to resist them.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JULY 26

JAMES 1:19-27

THE BACKGROUND

Three main concepts in the first section of the Letter of James are important but can at first seem somewhat vague. “Wisdom” (Jas. 1:5), “the message of truth” (1:18), and “firstfruits” (1:18) need to be illustrated. Remember the theme of our study this quarter is “A Walk To Remember,” and this unit on James is entitled “Walking Every Day.” The emphasis is on the walk or the practice of faith.

What does it mean in everyday life to hear the message of truth, to live the message of truth, and to be the firstfruits of all God’s creation? The theme of practice or behavior is always at the forefront of James’s Letter and accounts for a major difference between his style and that of the apostle Paul. Most of Paul’s Letters begin with theological truths and then shift in the closing chapters to practical application. Paul’s arrangement is that of laying a foundation and then building on it. In contrast James’s Letter has a theological framework he developed throughout the letter and to which he repeatedly attached practical application.

The call to be careful with speech and anger is the first application with which we deal in this lesson (1:19-21). The concept in verse 18 of being God’s firstfruits leads to the consequent demand to be rid of “all moral filth and evil excess” (1:21). The fact that we are God’s special possession means we must reflect His holiness.

The second section of this study (1:22-25) contains what may be the key verse in the entire letter—verse 22. Genuine belief is characterized by right actions. James’s use of the phrase “law of freedom” (1:25) is reminiscent of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians and illustrates the thematic relationship between the two writers and undermines any notion that they contradict one another.

James’s use of law is a strong reminder that our response needs to be obedience. We are not discussing God’s suggestions here but rather His law. In the final section (1:26-27) James turned to practical applications of obeying the law with several illustrations. Two of them, attending to the needs of both orphans and widows, highlight his emphasis throughout the letter on caring for poor individuals. The final exhortation to moral purity is also a consistent theme.

This lesson underscores the need for a consistency of

belief and action and is a direct challenge to hypocrisy. We encounter in these passages James’s intent for all believers to align outer action with inner belief. He challenges us to be genuine, and the way to be genuine as a Christian is to understand and live by what the Bible teaches.

1. THE POWER OF GOD’S WORD (JAMES 1:22-25)

This section contains a succinct summary of James’s major theme—practicing God’s Word. Most any commentary on the letter will contain words like faith and action, or faith and works. The practice of God’s Word is the proof of the presence of God’s Word.

Verse 22: *But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*

James was the half-brother of Jesus, and, not surprisingly, throughout his letter we clearly hear echoes of Jesus’ teaching. All the disciples who wrote New Testament letters reflect Jesus’ teaching, of course, but James had lived with Jesus for a number of years.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus drew a sharp distinction between those who talk about faith and those who put faith into action. We know true followers of Christ by their fruit (Matt. 7:20). Merely calling Jesus “Lord, Lord” says nothing about the true state of a person’s heart (Matt. 7:21-23). The closing illustration of the Sermon the Mount concerns the distinction between those who hear and do the words of Jesus and those who hear but do not follow through (Matt. 7:24-27).

James’s passion for action comes from Jesus’ passion for action. James directly reflected the summary theme of the Sermon on the Mount with the oft memorized phrase *be doers of the word and not hearers only*. The *word* is the totality of Jesus’ teaching along with its emphasis on right living. The *word* is sound theology, but it must not stop there. Later in the letter, James allowed that even demons believed, or had the correct theology, but they certainly did not live out that belief (Jas. 2:19).

The true disciple cannot separate hearing and doing. Good theology involves practical living, and that is the point of this verse and the main theme of the entire letter. Being a follower of Christ is not merely agreeing to a list of principles about His origin and nature. We are to be like Christ, and He certainly did not set up a desert retreat where people had to go and listen to Him. He was constantly involved with people. He healed, taught, encouraged, corrected, and

engaged in good relationships with people. He not only was good, He did good, thus giving us an example to follow.

While James rejects the notion of right belief without right action, he would equally reject the notion of right action without right belief. We must never misconstrue James’s Letter to indicate that as long as we live a good life, then all is well. The good life about which James wrote is grounded in Christ, and only by learning about His nature do we understand the authority He has to command us to live the right way. Jesus had more to say about life and especially eternal life than simply listing ways in which we can be good people. We do not have the option of choosing the ethics but ignoring the theology.

Without question James’s specific warning concerns those who claim to be believers but do not live the right way. This error is serious. The phrase *deceiving yourselves* implies being blinded to one’s true state. A hearer-only is not right with God. We must combine right belief with right living, and right living with right belief.

Verse 23: *Because if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man looking at his own face in a mirror;*

James used an illustration of a *mirror* to underscore the absurdity of hearing only and not living out the Word. Looking in a mirror provides an accurate picture, and if something is amiss, it should be fixed. The phrase *looking at his own face* underscores the intention. The translation of the Greek phrase is difficult. Literally it is “looking at the face of his *genesis*” (the literal Greek word). The word *genesis* can mean origin, so the meaning might be that we are to look at the face God originally wanted us to have. We see that we have fallen short of that image. That is a difficult interpretation, but it is consistent with one of the main meanings of the Greek word written in English as *genesis*.

A second and more likely interpretation relies on understanding *genesis* to mean “existence.” In this case, we are to look in the mirror and accurately see who and what we are, warts and all. The implication is that we should move as quickly as possible to fix what is wrong with the image.

A *hearer of the word* looks into the mirror of God’s Word, and sees accurately what he or she looks like. Will this experience be a catalyst for change?

Verse 24: *for he looks at himself, goes away, and right away forgets what kind of man he was.*

The hearer-only observes himself or herself. The mirror portrays the condition of the observer accurately. The

observer has seen the contradiction between hearing only and living in ways that do not honor God. But instead of using the image as a guide to change behavior, the observer *goes away, and right away forgets what kind of man he was.*

The clear implication is that the hearer-only has the capacity for change but lacks the will to do so. The Christian life is not impossible. Living the right way is not too difficult to understand, but it can be hard to practice. The specific behaviors James described are relatively simple. They include such actions as visiting the needy, staying away from sin, and watching one's speech.

Verse 25: *But the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer who acts—this person will be blessed in what he does.*

You will often hear the misguided idea that James and Paul disagree on some important theological matters. This verse serves as one evidence of their agreement. James shifted the image of looking into a mirror to looking into *the perfect law of freedom*. This phrase echoes closely Paul's words in Galatians (see Gal. 5:1,13-14), and reflects their shared conviction that the law of Christ leads to freedom, not to bondage. The invitation is to look *intently*, to bend over and closely inspect an object.

2. TAMING THE HULK (JAMES 1:19-21)

James chose to begin illustrating genuine faith with two common challenges: the way we speak and our tendency to anger. While we often airily dismiss failures in both these areas, James insisted such failures represent evil that must be avoided.

Verse 19: *My dearly loved brothers, understand this: everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger,*

The writers of New Testament epistles addressed their audiences using a pastoral tone. Even Paul in his exasperation with the Galatian Christians did not neglect to affirm his loving concern for them. James's use of *dearly loved brothers* indicates a genuine concern for the welfare of the family in Christ that he led.

One practical application of the wisdom for which we are encouraged to ask in James 1:5 concerns our speech. This application is expressed in the two-fold admonition *be quick to hear and slow to speak*. Why this initial emphasis on speech?

First, this theme is prevalent in wisdom literature. For a sermon series I once preached on Proverbs, a book classified as wisdom literature, I categorized every proverb and ended up with three typed pages of directions about speech. It is a common theme in such literature. Thus we should not be surprised that the Book of James, a New Testament example of wisdom literature, reflects this emphasis.

Second, the connection between the heart and the mouth is direct and one of the clearest indications of what a person really believes. Jesus taught that the mouth expresses the overflow of the heart (Matt. 12:34). Unguarded words, especially those spoken in anger, reveal a person's spiritual condition.

As for the specific content of the exhortations *be quick to hear and slow to speak*, observe James emphasized hearing over speaking. Someone has said that God gave us two ears and one mouth for a good reason. Silence is often a good option, and such silence is a major theme of Proverbs, where being silent can actually be a sign of wisdom even for a person who is generally viewed as foolish (Prov. 17:27-28). This train of thought gave rise to Lincoln's oft-repeated observation: "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt."

Verse 20: *for man's anger does not accomplish God's righteousness.*

The clear implication is that our anger usually makes matters worse. In our rush to angrily condemn, we are likely to overstate the case, fail to listen and allow for alternate explanations, or spew our abusive speech widely and hurt others. Anger is also one of the main themes of Proverbs because of the damage it can cause in a community.

While the community is usually James's main concern, anger also has a destructive personal dimension we must not ignore. The main person damaged by anger is the angry person. Anger is highly corrosive to the spirit, and it simply must not be allowed to abide in the life of a believer. It is a self-justifying, self-deceiving emotion with incredible potential for damage.

The only way to accomplish *God's righteousness* is by means of attitudes and a spiritual temperament that reflects God's presence. No list of the qualities of God's Spirit within us includes anger. Instead we are to confront unrighteousness with a clean life and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

With James's emphasis throughout the letter on action,

his initial emphasis on speaking and being angry might seem somewhat surprising, but it should not be. Christianity is always lived from the inside out, and our words reflect clearly what is "on the inside." Moments of unguarded speech are windows to the soul. Words spoken in anger often unnecessarily hurt other people.

Verse 21: *Therefore, ridding yourselves of all moral filth and evil excess, humbly receive the implanted word, which is able to save you.*

Therefore is normally a marker of a significant application. Here the application involves *ridding yourselves*, a Greek word that literally means "to take off," as in the removal of clothing. This image is common in Paul's Letters. Paul also encouraged his readers to put off evil and to put on righteous behavior (see Col. 3:8-10).

The specific objects of James's exhortation are *moral filth and evil excess*. The first term can mean literal filth and dirt but gained a moral dimension. It can highlight greediness and this shade of meaning fits well with James's previous emphasis on being careful with wealth and his later extensive return to that theme. However, James also indicated *all* moral filthiness was to be discarded.

The word translated *evil* tends to refer to an evil disposition, in contrast to evil actions, though the latter certainly are included here. The idea of the evil habit of mind fits better, however, with James's emphasis on speech and anger, both of which either reflect an inner state of the human spirit or corrupt the spirit. The term *excess* means "abundance" and refers to the whole expression of evil. One meaning of the word, however, is "remainder" and thus the term could mean we should put off every vestige of evil and not abide with any remnant of it.

After the repentance envisioned by the first part of verse 21, the Christian is prepared to *receive the implanted word*. This exhortation extends James's affirmation of the message or word of truth that results in our new birth (Jas. 1:18). God's *word* is powerful and active, and we must allow it to have its full effect in our lives. While the specific focus for James was probably the gospel message itself, we must understand a wider application of including the entire Bible. God has chosen to implant His full message through Scripture. This fact is a fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy concerning God's putting His law or instruction in our hearts (Jer. 31:33).

3. REAL FAITH (JAMES 1:26-27)

James grounded his words in concrete actions we should take or avoid. In the best tradition of wisdom literature, he provided clear directions we should take in order to have lives that reflect the presence of God's Word. In these two verses, James painted three portraits of genuine Christian belief and action. Together these verses frame the essence but not the totality of "pure and undefiled religion" (Jas. 1:27).

Verse 26: *If anyone thinks he is religious, without controlling his tongue but deceiving his heart, his religion is useless.*

James proposed a three-part test to prove real religion. First, is the person good at *controlling his tongue*? The word translated *controlling* means "to bridle" or "to restrain" (see 3:3). One chief expression of good religion is avoiding the sins of speech. James has pointed out here that the gossip or the hypercritical person who puts down others consistently is a prize exhibit for bad religion.

One of the major themes of Proverbs, a prime example of Old Testament wisdom literature, is speech. Not surprisingly, James, a New Testament example of wisdom literature, also strikes this theme again and again (Jas. 1:19; 3:1-12; 4:11-12).

James had two warnings for the loose-tongued religious person. First, such a person is *deceiving his heart*. The second warning is that if a person claims to be religious but cannot control his or her tongue then that person's *religion is useless*. The word translated *useless* means "empty" or "futile" and is often used to describe idolatry. James suggested that a gossipy Christian is no better than an idol worshiper! Remember, James's theme is an integrated life where right belief results in right living. To continue in sins of the tongue is to deny the power of Christ's presence in our lives.

Verse 27: *Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

If the first test can be construed as the destruction of error, the next two tests are positive constructions of truth. Good religion consists of looking after orphans and widows. These two groups lived on the edge of survival.

Caring for widows and orphans is a consistent theme in the Old Testament. Part of God's law to Moses was that no one should take advantage of these groups (Ex. 22:22). Isaiah

warned God would not be impressed by perfect liturgy at the temple if the worshipers ignored the needs of oppressed people (Isa. 1:10-17).

This test for good religion may seem simplistic. What about sound doctrine? Observe that James is not providing in this verse a complete definition of good religion. Other matters are important, and no one should suppose that by attending to needy people their standing before God is complete and secure. James chose this proof of religion because it is intensely practical and personal. God cares for weak individuals. Such is our responsibility also.

The third test takes us into the realm of moral conduct and involves keeping ourselves *unstained by the world*. We are to avoid being polluted by the rampant sinfulness of a society that is spiritually corrosive. If we are not careful, we end up failing to recognize the seriousness of sin because it is so common. The word *keep* implies constant vigilance.

James defined genuine religion as controlling what we say, helping people who cannot take care of themselves, and demonstrating purity in how we live.